

# November 2024

November 3, 2024

**Text: Ephesians 1:3-14**

*“Adopted by Christ”*

What do you “inherit” by being a part of your family?

I have a grand-nephew whose last name is Kennedy. He says that folks always want to know if he is one of “those Kennedys.”

One of my former students is a pastor in the Midwest. His family laments that he did not continue the family tradition of farming.

I read a book by a woman who says that her adoptive mother did not really want her and took her only to satisfy her husband’s desire for a child.

Sometimes, an inheritance is good. Sometimes, an inheritance is uncertain. Sometimes, an inheritance is bad.

When Paul wrote the Ephesians, he said we had an inheritance in Christ. He uses the word κληροδοῦν, which means “assign a privilege.” What is this inheritance? What is this privilege? It is the promise of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). It is redemption as God’s own people (Ephesians 1:14). It is the forgiveness of our trespasses (Ephesians 1:7).

We have been adopted through Christ (Ephesians 1:5) and the gifts of that inheritance are freely given (Ephesians 1:6) to those who believe (Ephesians 1:13).

One thing I noticed in this week’s study text in Ephesians is the way the apostle Paul uses the plural (we, us, our) as he writes of the inheritance in Christ. Community is created! Family is established! We are not related to Christ in isolation. My own faith journey is part of a larger picture.

No wonder Paul describes this as “the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7). Now that is an inheritance worth celebrating!

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

Thomas Langford (*Practical Divinity*, Abingdon) wrote: “Grace is God’s active and continuous presence. Definitely expressed in Jesus Christ, grace covers the entirety of life. It creates, redeems, sustains, sanctifies, and glorifies.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Eternal Parent of love and grace, You have shown in Christ Jesus how You have claimed us as Your own and created a family of acceptance and new beginnings...”

## God’s Gift of Scripture

with **BELTON JOYNER**

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

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November 10, 2024

**Text: Romans 6:1-14**

*“Liberated Through Christ”*

This commentary is being written well in advance of the football season that will be underway when November 10 comes around.

I wonder how the Blue Devils will be doing this time. Did the Carolina Panthers pick up some early season wins? How has the Atlantic Coast Conference season unfolded with the addition of teams from California?

You may be assuming I have slipped a cog or two with all of this pigskin pondering. Here’s what got me thinking this way. This week’s focal text is clearly about competition. It is Death versus Life (Romans 6:4). It is Sin versus Freedom from Sin (Romans 6:11). It is Law versus Grace (Romans 6:14). Who wins?

And in Christ Jesus we know that the winners are Life, Freedom from Sin, and Grace. The apostle Paul assures the saints in Rome (and around here!) that even powerful forces such as Death and Sin have been defeated. As the title of this week’s lesson proclaims: “We are liberated through Christ!”

There was a fellow who hired a man to do some chores around the house. The owner made a list of the things he wanted done. When the hired hand finished the day, he turned in the list. He had only done items 1, 3, and 5. “Why didn’t you do numbers 2, 4, and 6?” “Oh, I only do odd jobs.” (Pause for you to chuckle.)

In Christ Jesus, all of the jobs get done! Our sins are forgiven! Our death has been turned into life! Our bodies become instruments of righteousness!

Psalms 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible – 176 verses. It captures much of the spirit and power of being liberated by God. What is the result of such liberation? Happy! (Psalm 119:1-2). What is the standard of the liberated life? Observing the commands of God. (Psalm 119:8). What is to

comfort us in tough times? The steadfastness of God's love. (Psalm 119:76). How can I know how to walk the best life? God's Word is a lamp to my feet. (Psalm 119:106).

In Christ Jesus, we know the liberation that sets us free. My life then is called to be a life of thanksgiving for such a gift.

***What Someone Else Has Said:***

In *The Hinge of History* (Scribner's), Carl Michalson wrote: "(Jesus Christ) is the revelation of the total God. Where he is, God is."

***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "I give You thanks, Lord Jesus, for Your liberating presence..."

**November 17, 2024**

**Text: Colossians 3:1-17**

***"Hidden in Christ"***

The apostle Paul writes that we are "hidden" in Christ (Colossians 3:3). That means that what is shown in Christ is what the believer also shows. We know it is true when the world gives credit to Christ and not to us. When I show love to my neighbor, I am to be hidden in the love of Christ. The credit for such love goes not to me but to Christ in whom I am hidden.

Notice how Paul contrasts the life hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:12) with the life lived apart from Christ (Colossians 3:8). Take a moment and look at those two lists. Which one looks like the day you have had so far? Which one looks like the way your neighbors would identify you? Which one represents where your values are hidden? The credit for any such love goes not to me but to Christ in whom I am hidden.

Have you seen the bumper sticker that simply asks "WWJD?" The question stirred by that sticker is "What Would Jesus Do?" Maybe another way of finding that direction is to ask "WWJHMD?" "What Would Jesus Have Me Do?" In my context, with my strengths, with my limitations, with my relationships, how do I show the love of Jesus? The credit for such love goes not to me but to Christ in whom I am hidden.

Today, I went to the bank. Today, I went to a favorite restaurant. Today, I went to the grocery store. Today, I spoke with someone not nourished in the faith. Today, I prayed about a stabbing at a local school. Today, I laughed as a friendly artist shared a funny, new drawing. Today, I exchanged texts with a grandson on his birthday. Today, I read a few poems about the Christian year. Today, I waved at some neighborhood children as they pedaled by on bicycles.

Today, yes, today was just an ordinary kind of day. That is just the kind of day that Christ would touch with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12). We are not usually called to "special moments"; we are called to be hidden in Christ in the everyday moments.

One way to ask yourself about this is to ask yourself: What have I done differently today because of my faith in Christ? That's what it is to be hidden in Christ.

***What Someone Else Has Said:***

When John Wesley commented on Colossians 3:15 (*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Alec Allenson, Inc.), he wrote: "And then the peace of God shall rule in your hearts – shall sway away temper, affection, thought, as the reward (so the Greek word implies) of your preceding love and obedience."

***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Grace-giving Lord, let Your love break through in my living..."

**November 24, 2024**

**Text: 2 Timothy 2:1-16**

***"Receiving and Sharing Christ"***

Do you remember the song "Pass It On"? It begins: "It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing. That's how it is with God's love. Once you've experienced it, you spread His love to everyone. You want to pass it on."

It works both ways. Our lives spread love or our lives spread emptiness. In the verses just after the focal text for this week, Paul advises Timothy that negative lives spread like gangrene (2 Timothy 2:16-17). Which will it be? Living a word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15) or talking an empty lie (2 Timothy 2:16)?

Most of us figure that our lives are not much influence one way or the other. Paul does not give us that much wiggle room. For Paul, the question is not whether or not we shall be influencing others, but what will be the nature of our influence.

How would your community be different if your church were not present? What does your congregation spend most of its time talking about? What standard does your congregation use for making its decisions? Thinking back to the hymn--- What am I passing on?

Often, we do not realize how we have (or have not) passed on the love of Christ. If I name some of those persons who have shaped my spiritual journey, many would be surprised to find their names listed. How about Mrs. Rowland, my third grade Sunday School teacher? What about Blaine and Lois? What about Bill, Susan, and Sally? What about dear family members? What about strangers whose witness I watched from a distance? Who is on your list? And who has listed you as a source of love?

When Paul wrote Timothy, church life was just beginning to take shape. The apostle planted seeds of thanksgiving and encouragement as the community of faith began to shape its life in the manner of Christ. What a good word in 2 Timothy

2:1 – a child strong in grace! Our ability and our willingness to share Christ is not because we are so spiritually strong; it is because of the grace that calls, sustains, and enables us. Thanks be to God!

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

John B. Cobb, Jr., (*Grace and Responsibility*, Abingdon) wrote: "It is the Holy Spirit who opens us to the gift, not the human will....Hence salvation is purely the work of God."

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Thank You, Grace-giving God, that You continue to move in my life that I might be an instrument of Your love. Use me even when I do not know it..."

# December 2024

## December 1, 2024

**Text: Colossians 1:15-23**

***"Jesus Is The Reason"***

As we move into this Advent season, it seems the right time to acknowledge and celebrate the basics of the Christian journey. Our focal text speaks of creation (Colossians 1:16), Christ as God made visible (Colossians 1:15), reconciliation through the cross (Colossians 1:20), the gift of the resurrection (Colossians 1:18), life within the Church (Colossians 1:18), and the ongoing mission and witness of the faithful (Colossians 1:22-23).

Last year, I attended a retreat for retired pastors. I had thought I might be the oldest one there, but, no, Jimmy was there! He was 96 years old and a full participant in the event. I overheard him talking to someone in the hall and Jimmy casually mentioned that he had driven to the event. Wow! Still active! Still learning! Still sharing! I was well-reminded that our Christian experience does not have an expiration. There is no "best used by" date! It is Advent once again, and the story is as rich as ever, and the call to service is as clear as ever.

When the apostle Paul wrote this letter, the believers in Colossae were under attack for believing that Jesus was divine. No wonder Paul gives such energy to finding the divine presence in Jesus! It echoes the voice of John who wrote that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). (Don't you like the way the Common English Bible translates that truth... "The Word became flesh and made his home among us." It's a reminder that Jesus lived in our world, in our experience, in our reality.)

As I type these words, I am at a conference center that overlooks a majestic river. Every so often, when I look out the window, I can see the trail left by a passing boat. I may not see the vessel, but I can tell it has been there. When others look at my life, what is the evidence of the presence of Jesus Christ? Is there evidence of love? Is there evidence of peace?

Is there evidence of justice? Is there evidence of joy? Is there evidence of hope?

Each season of the Church Year has its own flavor and emphasis. Advent is a season of expectancy, but when I read these verses from Colossians, I note that Paul uses the past tense and the present tense. Advent is the joy of expecting something that is already real.

What an encouraging word this letter would have been to the Colossian Christians! Its truth is eternal because I hear it as an encouraging word today!

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *Don't Look Back* (Abingdon), William Willimon has written: "More than wishful thinking, biblical hope is a reasonable, confident expectation that's based on the nature and work of God – past, present, and future."

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Come even now, Lord Jesus..."

## December 8, 2024

**Text: Matthew 22:34-40**

***"Love God, Act on God's Word"***

Let me be upfront and honest. When I saw that this week's theme was "Love," I thought, "What can be said about love that has not already been said before? This is not going to be an easy session to write!"

Then, boom! Part of this week's focal text (Matthew 22:34-40) jumped out at me. Of course, Jesus tells us to love God. Of course, Jesus tells us to love the neighbor. But here is what we often neglect: Jesus tells us to love ourselves!

I know I am not always lovable. I know that I do not always think caringly about myself. I know that I have a pretty good list of faults and failures. Yet, here is Jesus calling on me to love this weak, uncertain self!

How about you? Do you love yourself?

I was talking with a clinical social worker recently and asked her if many of her clients were in stress because they did not care very much for themselves. "Indeed," she replied. "Many of us are better at gracious friendships than we are at self-care."

How about you? Do you love yourself?

God does not love us because we are so wonderful. God loves us because God loves us. Remember how Paul described love to the Corinthians? (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) Patient. (Are you patient with yourself?) Kind. (Do you treat yourself kindly?) Truthful. (Do you acknowledge what you do well?) Bears. Believes. Hopes. Endures. (Do you recognize that in this life you are in for the long haul?)

How about you? Do you love yourself?

During this Advent season, it is good to remember



that the Child we await came for us. That's a pretty good reason to love yourself!

#### ***What Someone Else Has Said:***

S T Kimbrough, Jr. (*Divine Mysteries and the Christian Year*, Resource Publications) wrote: "We have many external stimulations for the Advent celebration... However, we sense the meaning of Advent best perhaps when we practice the peace and goodwill which the Savior brings."

#### ***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Help me know Your love for me..."

## **December 15, 2024**

### **Text: Luke 1:46-55**

#### ***"Empowered by the Spirit"***

When I read this week's focal text (Luke 1:46-55), my memory goes back to singing it at a daily worship service when I was in seminary. What tune do you hear when you read "Mary's song of praise"? Think of a hymn tune that matches the tone and spirit of these verses. Do you hear Azmon ("O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing")? Do you hear Hymn to Joy ("Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee")? Do you hear Antioch ("Joy to the World")?

In the chronology of Luke, Mary is singing this celebration before the Christ Child is born. It is the joy of anticipation. It is the joy of promises to be fulfilled. It is the joy of the faithfulness of God. I am left to wonder if I praise God only when I see what God has already done. Mary rejoices because she sees and trusts the promises of God.

"Oh, no," Mary might have said. But, just as her cousin Elizabeth had felt new power from the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41), so the mother of Jesus accepted God's purposes with joy and anticipation. The Spirit can give us the gift of new and saving directions.

Advent is often seen as a season of waiting, but that does not mean that it cannot be a season of joy. (Often, the third candle in an Advent wreath is called "the candle of joy.") There is an expectancy in Advent joy, just as Mary was an expectant mother.

God's Spirit can bring meaning to the past. God's Spirit can bring God's presence into our "now." God's Spirit can bring the joy of tasting a gift that is yet to be.

This season is about the gift that keeps on giving. There is delight in the tomorrow that God promises. Advent joy is almost like a sampler of the fullness of God's gift of Christ Jesus. No wonder we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

May that light begin to shine in the dim places of our journey. Praise God! The Christmas light has begun to shine!

#### ***What Someone Else Has Said:***

*The Methodist Hymnal* (published by the Methodist Publishing House in 1964 and 1966) contained this hymn by Frank von Christierson: "Break forth,

O living light of God, upon the world's dark hour!  
Show us the way the Master trod; reveal his saving power.  
O may one Lord, one faith, one Word, one Spirit lead us still;  
and one great Church go forth in might to work God's perfect will."

#### ***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord Jesus, I taste the joy of Your coming..."

## **December 22, 2024**

### **Text: John 1:1-18**

#### ***"The Word of God"***

Often, when someone will ask me (a retired pastor) if I have preached anywhere lately, I will jokingly reply, "Why, yes! My life is a walking sermon."

The fact that my joke is so far from the truth gives folks a chuckle. But our focal text for this week (John 1:1-18) gives us the truth about someone whose life is the walking Word of God. Jesus' life is indeed a walking sermon! "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14).

If we make Jesus into a sort of "otherworldly" figure, He loses some of His power to challenge and change our lives in this world. But He knew life in this world. Jesus knew the difficulties of human relationships. Jesus knew the stress of keeping a busy schedule. Jesus knew what it was to face new situations, new circumstances. And He lived it all with love!

As I was typing this, I got a phone call from a friend who had just contracted COVID. We had recently shared a three-hour drive to and from a meeting. Her question was: "Do you have COVID? Were we both exposed to it sometime during our trip?" No, I have not got COVID, but it leaves me wondering: When have I been exposed to Jesus Christ? When has my witness exposed others to Jesus Christ?

John's assurance that God knows what it is like to live in this world (John 1:14) is a gift. It is a much needed gift at this time of year. Is there a busier time on the calendar? Last minute shopping. Special family meals. Long distance travel. Unexpected visitors. Lots of church services.

Yet, the Advent tradition is that this fourth Sunday in Advent is called "Sunday of peace." Peace in the midst of this busy-ness. Maybe that is the most blessed gift of the reality that the Word became flesh and lived in this world. As Christ dwells among us, we get His gift of peace. Thanks be to God!

#### ***What Someone Else Has Said:***

In *The Humanity of God* (John Knox Press), Karl Barth wrote: "If (Christ) is the Word of Truth, then the truth of God is exactly this and nothing else. It is when we look at Jesus Christ that we know decisively that God's deity does not exclude, but includes His humanity."

#### ***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Slow me down, Lord, that I might find the gift of

Your presence in the midst of these crowded days. You lived in this world, so You let us know that love even here is possible..."

# January 2025

**December 29, 2024**

**Text: Luke 2:25-35**

***"Salvation Is for Everyone"***

Have you ever been reading the Bible – shall we say, more or less routinely – when suddenly something jumps out at you? That happened to me last Sunday at our Sunday School class. We were discussing Revelation 22:1-5 when my eye fell on verse 2. It told of God's healing (loving, caring for) "the nations." Nations! Plural! It was a powerful reminder that God's saving power is intended for all people.

Sometimes we are tempted to draw a line in the sand, hinting that maybe God's gift of Christ is primarily for folks like us. Look at Luke 2:31: "all peoples." Look at Luke 2:32:

"Gentiles, Israel." The generous gift of God in Christ Jesus is for all.

How does this translate in daily life? Let's try: How about witness? How about mission? How about evangelism? How about proclamation? How about sharing? How about inclusiveness? How about welcome? How about openness? How about service? How about prayer? How about study? How about anti-racism? ...The list goes on. The generous gift of God in Christ Jesus is for all.

Simeon is not one of the best-known names in the Christmas story. Most of us would have a hard time remembering his significance. I find great reassurance in that. For in God's revelation and in God's way of passing on the Good News, our Lord is not limited to the famous and the powerful. As someone once said, "Look at the small print on the list of those called to witness, and you'll find your name!"

We have just finished a season in which we had to decide to whom to give a gift and to whom just to send a card and which ones to skip over. God doesn't skip over. The Christmas gift of a Savior is a gift intended for all. How does my life show that I believe that?

Let me sneak a look ahead and note that next week we start a series of lessons on "community." God's invitation to community in Christ Jesus is to all.

***What Someone Else Has Said:***

John R. Tyson (*Assist Me to Proclaim*, Eerdmans) puts it this way: "Open-air evangelism, which the Wesleys stumbled upon more or less by accident as they were barred from preaching in Anglican churches, had the notable benefit of allowing them to take the gospel message to where the largest and hungriest crowds could be found."

***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Gracious God, I know You love me so I know that Your love is inclusive of all. Help me to live in such a way that others know that You love them too..."

**January 5, 2025**

**Text: Matthew 28:16-20**

***"We Have Decided to Follow Jesus"***

When Matthew tells the Gospel story, he ends by telling how the story is to be passed on (Matthew 28:16-20). Guess what! It's in our hands. Jesus is still with those of us who follow Him, but His instructions to the disciples (and to us) is to make disciples, baptize, teach, and obey.

I remember being at The United Methodist Church's General Conference when there was a debate about the mission statement of the Church. The final decision (para. 120, *The Book of Discipline 2016*) was: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Some opposed this wording. They argued that lots of us would focus on "transforming the world" and would be slack on "making disciples." Others – the majority, it turned out – argued that disciples are not made unless lives are transformed and the world's values put more in line with our Lord's values. (Which way would you have voted?)

Do you remember when you were baptized? Some folks say they are glad that they cannot recall their baptism, because that means they have been nurtured by the Church since infancy. Others say they are glad that they can indeed recall their baptism because they are aware of a moment of beginning the faith journey. How about you?

In the United Methodist tradition and practice, Confirmation is a moment of personal claim upon the welcoming claim of baptism. Those who have been confirmed are called "professing members." What do you profess?

As we noted in recent lessons, the appeal is to all nations – plural (Matthew 28:19). God's love and the invitation we offer in God's name is inclusive. How do we include others?

The title for this series of lessons is "Jesus' Beloved Community." In that title, the word "Jesus" is written in the possessive. What makes the community belong to Jesus? What difference does that make in our Church decisions and in our personal decisions? I'm going to read that Matthew text again!

***What Someone Else Has Said:***

"This church knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most 'effective' thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith." Thus wrote Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their book *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon).

***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "For this 'together life and witness,'" O God, thank You!..."

**January 12, 2025**

**Text: John 15:9-17**

***“We Are Part of a Beloved Community”***

Back when I was in college, I decided to go out for the track team. This was new for me; my high school did not have a track team, so I had a lot to learn! One of my new teammates invited me to his dorm room and spent a couple of hours teaching me how to get a good burst at the start line. Coach Wilson pulled me aside at practice and showed me how to pace myself in a longer race.

One of my teammates was an Olympic champion. He spent one whole practice observing and encouraging my beginner efforts. I still remember my first “big time” race. I was about to run out of energy when I heard the voice of my roommate in the stands, shouting an enthusiastic “Come on, Belton!” All of this to say: it makes a difference in life’s journey if our community accepts us, weakness and all, and helps us, by example and by teaching, move toward being the fullness of who we are.

That’s a pretty good parallel of the life we live in a Church that hears Jesus’ call that we love one another (John 15:12). The commands of Jesus are that we love one another (John 15:17). The last time I checked I had to conclude that sometimes we get that right and sometimes we get that wrong. Is that what you have observed? Is that what you have experienced?

Jesus says that love bears fruit (John 15:16). We might even say that we have been loved so that we can love. Chosen (v. 16). Appointed (v. 16). Commands (v. 17). We have been loved by God so that we can bear the fruit of love.

It is probably no surprise to you that the New Testament words for “love” in these verses are various forms of the word *agape*. This is unconditional, sacrificial love. Go back over this week’s focal text (John 15:9-17) and notice how many times Jesus uses plural words when talking about love. Even words like “you” are plural words--what we in the South would call “Y’all.” How about this translation: “I am giving y’all these commands so that y’all may love one another.” Christ calls us to be in a beloved community – loved by Christ and loved by one another. And out of such *agape*, we reach out to the world. Amen. So be it!

***What Someone Else Has Said:***

In her book *Inspired* (Nelson Books), Rachel Held Evans wrote, “We must listen too to Rev. William Barber of North Carolina, who though he struggles with a severe arthritic spinal condition and bursitis in his left knee, has marched and preached for decades on civil rights, pressing upon elected leaders and private citizens alike the moral imperative to ‘shock this nation with the power of love.’”

***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “You have loved me, O God, so now I am set free to love others...”

**January 19, 2025**

**Text: Luke 22:14-23**

***“We Share the Lord’s Supper”***

Holy Communion is one of the sacred moments in the life of the Church. Nevertheless, some very funny and unusual things have happened at the Lord’s Table.

How about the time more people came to church one Sunday than we had expected and those who came to Communion had to break their Communion wafers to share with a neighbor?

How about the time Bailey, a service dog, came forward with his owner and nibbled up all the crumbs that had fallen from the sacred bread?

How about the time the preschooler came to take Communion with her mother, and after eating the bread, the child said, “Yum! That was good. Can I have another?”

How about the time the youth came to the chapel for Communion only to discover that someone had sneaked in and drank all of the grape juice?

How about the time the exhausted, elderly man knelt for Communion, bowed his head for prayer, and fell asleep?

I’m glad these kinds of things happen because they remind us that the Holy Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is part of the regular unfolding of life. When Jesus instituted this sacred meal (Luke 22:11, 14), He did so at a Passover meal, just one of the routines of the Jewish community of faith.

Jesus said to take of the bread and cup “in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). How do you remember Jesus? On the cross? Walking after the resurrection? Laughing at a dinner party? Teaching on the mountainside? Talking to a pagan woman? Going to bat for the poor? Kneeling in the garden to pray? Seeking social justice for those attacked by society? Inviting you to faith? It’s the flow of life – come to the Table and remember.

***What Someone Else Has Said:***

Laurence Hull Stookey (*Eucharist*, Abingdon) has said: “Thus ‘table fellowship’ among those within the church is crucial...Christians come together because the believers by definition are bound together. The congregation, not the individual, is the irreducible unit of Christianity.”

***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “In Your name, O Lord, we come together and You meet us together...”

**January 26, 2025**

**Text: 1 Peter 2:1-10**

***“We Are a Priesthood of All Believers”***

When our retirement home was about to be built, my wife and I drove out to the site to enjoy its construction. All we saw was a pile of lumber. That didn't look like much of a house! But when we came back the next time, those lengths of wood had been put together and we could begin to see the shape of the place where we would live. Peter says that each of us believers is like a stone (1 Peter 2:4) – that doesn't look like much of a house! – but we can be formed together to build a spiritual house, a temple. Together!

There is a story about a foreign dignitary coming to visit the king of Sparta. The Spartan king boasted about the walls of Sparta and the protection they provide. The visitor looked around and saw nothing that looked like walls. “Where are those walls you seem to be so proud of?” The king pointed to his soldiers that stood nearby. The king smiled: “Those are the walls of Sparta. Each soldier is a brick!” Together!

The Bible often draws on this image of building. God promises to bring us a foundation stone (Isaiah 28:26). Jesus is called that very cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6). Our Lord has told Peter that Peter's faith is the rock upon which the Church will be built (Matthew 16:18). We ourselves are living stones (1 Peter 2:5). Together!

Another image for the Church is “a holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5). Usually we think of individual priests, those who offer leadership in behalf of others. Peter has written those who have been exiled (1 Peter 1:1) that their life together has become priestly...going to bat for the empty, showing God's forgiveness to the guilty, sacrificing their resources that others might have what they need, living lives that show what it is to be captured by God, teaching by example and by word what God says to us. Do you see yourself as a priest for God? Together!

This series of lessons has spelled out what it means to be “Jesus' Beloved Community.” Let's notice that punctuation; it is possessive. The community belongs to Jesus. This week's focal text affirms that we are chosen, royal, holy, God's own (1 Peter 2:9). We belong to Jesus. Together!

***What Someone Else Has Said:***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Life Together*, SCM Press) wrote: “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love of God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love from the (brothers and sisters) is learning to listen to them.”

***Prayer:***

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Bind us together, Lord...”

***A Special Thank You***

As we continue praying for the people of Western North Carolina and the Southeast affected by Hurricane Helene, we also extend a thank you to local churches across the conference for sharing your time, gifts, and prayers.

Thank you for the impact you are making!

Visit our Hurricane Helene Disaster Response page to learn how you can help: [nccumc.org/helene](http://nccumc.org/helene)





### 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](http://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](http://nccumc.org/media-center)

Contact: Laura Dallas, [ldallas@nccumc.org](mailto:ldallas@nccumc.org) or 984-257-0981.

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The United Methodist Church  
**North Carolina Conference**



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