



A Lenten Discipline
February 10 – March 27, 2016

Did you know that the average US house size has grown from 983 square feet in 1950 to 1,725 in 1983 to 2,600 in 2015?¹ Yet in spite of this staggering increase in space, the self-storage industry has grown over into a 32 billion dollar industry²! All while the average U.S. household carries \$7,200³ in credit card debt.

Did you know that the sum total of human knowledge doubles every 2 years⁴ (some say every 12 months)? Yet we grow impatient when our google search takes longer than a second, irritated if we don't get an email reply in an hour, and can have hundreds of "friends" on Facebook – yet with all this "knowledge" and "connection" there were 42,773 suicides reported in 2014⁵, making suicide the 10th leading cause of death for Americans.

Similarly, we live in a feverish society of over-scheduled children, over-pressured teen-agers, over-worked adults, over-stimulated "down-time" – yet the number of patients diagnosed with depression increases by 20% per year⁶. Somewhere along the way, we have gotten painfully off track. We have so many options of how to spend our money, our time, our energy, that we are trapping ourselves into a lifestyle that is full of "stuff" but devoid of peace – with staggering consequences to our well-being.

What does this have to do with us – members and friends of Cross of Life Lutheran Church during Lent of 2016? Everything! Over the next 6 weeks, we will seek to simplify our lives – or at least start talking about it. Through small group discussions, worship services, daily e-devotions, and more we will seek to de-clutter our minds, our souls, our homes, our schedules, our leisure time, even our work patterns.

Why? All to make more room for God, to be grounded in that which is most important – faith, family, friendship, and service. Instead of giving up one token item during this season of Lent, we may give up a lot – but we will discover greater serenity, purpose and freedom.

So what's next? Open your calendar right now and block some time to make this a priority. Find time for:

- 15 minutes a day to spend in devotion and prayer
- weekly worship attendance each Sunday
- a *Simplify* discussion group -- check with the church office for the schedule
- Wednesday Lenten dinner from 6:00 to 7:00 and Evening Prayer from 7:00 – 7:30 (*simplify by letting someone else cook for you*)
- one weekend in the next two months to clean out a part of your house (closet, basement, kitchen cabinets, etc.)
- the congregational rummage sale on April 23, 2016 from 9am-3pm to benefit ELCA World Hunger- water wells project.

Through these intentional efforts, we will take small steps to live in the Kingdom of God – experiencing the reign of God in our daily choices. We will move a bit closer to the abundant life Jesus promised us.

Won't you join us? Watch your in-box for more information! May God richly bless you in this time of spiritual growth.

+ Pastor Terri +

¹money.cnn.com; ²sparefoot.com; ³cbsnews.com; ⁴time.com; ⁵www.afsp.org; ⁶healthline.com; ⁷pewresearch.org.

February 10: Ash Wednesday

Today's text: Genesis 2:4-7

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up -- for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground -- then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

Today is Ash Wednesday, a day we are reminded: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return". We receive the sign of the cross in ashes, connecting us to the death of our Lord Jesus on the cross, reminding us what a purposeful life really looks like.

As I reflect on the "dust" of my life, I am acutely aware of the limited time I have here on earth. And I sense the urgency of our call to make each year worthwhile. Rather than simply float through my days of work and rest, I want to make them count for something.

So today I set out on a journey – a journey towards greater simplicity. I will seek to declutter my life by removing that which distracts me, that which pulls me away from what's most important, that which leads me to waste the precious gift of life. Choosing quality over quantity, I will seek to find more peace and joy during this Lenten journey. I pray that you will join me.

For remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

+ Pastor Terri +

Thursday, February 11: Our Call to *Simplify*

Today's text: Psalm 46:10

Be still, and know that I am God!

Have you seen any of the recent TV shows about Tiny Houses? Whether it's Tiny House Nation (my favorite) or Tiny House Hunters, these programs share the stories of individuals and families who are intentionally downsizing – in a big way! Moving into spaces that are less than 400 square feet, they choose fewer possessions in favor of less debt, more family togetherness (literally) and a more simplistic lifestyle.

Now most of the time, I find myself thinking: “These people are nuts.” Which, translated means: “I’m far too claustrophobic to try something like that!” But the concept of choosing to live with less, of having less stuff to tend, of focusing on family instead of housework – those thoughts are intriguing.

So I began reading books on simplifying. First there was an e-book by Joshua Becker, then a hard back by Bill Hybels, then one by Richard Foster, then about 7 or 8 more. (It's amazing how complex simplifying one's life can be!) And after a frenzy of reading, here we are – with a Lenten emphasis called *Simplify*.

In this series, we will look at simplicity from various perspectives and in various areas of our lives: In hopes of connecting with a broad base of church members, we will explore:

- **our relationship to our “stuff”** – how much we own, how much time it takes, how it improves or burdens our lives, what might happen if we give some of it away
- **our spiritual “junk”** – how to give and receive forgiveness, letting go of anxiety, getting honest about coveting, stilling the clutter of our minds to greater experience the presence of God
- **our priorities in life** -- how our work fits in with our core values, where our money brings freedom or more bondage, and the concept of generosity

- **our use of time** -- how we use it, where we invest it, how we waste it, what deserves our attention
- **deeper concepts and radical lifestyle choices** – simplicity as a spiritual discipline, fasting, our relationship with food and God’s creation
- **our connection to the cross** – how living more simply connects us to the sacrificial love of Jesus expressed on the cross.

What are the hoped for outcomes to this journey? We hope to start the conversation about making more room for God in your life. We hope to be more grounded in that which is most important – faith, family, friendship, and service.

Will it look the same for everyone? Certainly not. My challenges will be different from your challenges, my outcomes different from yours. But the desire to please God does indeed please God, so this will be a journey towards greater peace and joy!

So let’s get going – OK?

Let us pray:

Lord God, we are surrounded by so much stuff, so many demands, so vast an array of choices, that we often miss out on your still, quiet voice. Help us to take advantage of this opportunity to choose a more excellent way – to be still and know God.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Friday, February 12: Defining Success

Today's text: Matthew 10:5-10

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food."

When I first imagined being a pastor (in the 5th grade), I had a particularly romantic notion of what life would be like. I would live a simple life, perhaps even sparse. God would provide for my every need, I would be content to have no gold or silver, no bag for my journey, or two tunics or sandals. . . you get the picture.

But then I grew up. I learned that my calling to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ did not remove me from the world, but places me firmly in it – appreciating and struggling with the very same things you do.

I was raised in the 60's and 70's. And while I was firmly grounded in the Christian faith, I was also raised with a hefty dose of work ethic, with a drive to "be all that you can be" (which translated into succeeding materially), with a desire to always pursue more: more success, more things, more money, more influence – more everything.

But that's not exactly what Jesus had in mind for our lives – is it? Jesus was an upside-down kind of guy: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave." (*Matthew 20:26-27*)

So this Lent will be about pressing the re-set button, seeking to return to a simpler time, seeking to submit to the reign of God even more in my life, seeking to discover the abundant life Jesus has in mind for us (rather than the constant quest for *bigger, better, more* that the world offers.) No, I won't be

divesting myself of all possessions or coming to church barefoot. I'm not returning to naiveté – but I am seeking to *Simplify*.

How were you raised to think about success? Are the assumptions you held as a youth still true? What has changed? In what area(s) of your life would you like to press the re-set button?

Let us pray:

Lord God, fill our hearts and guide our steps.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Saturday, February 13: The Role of Possessions

Today's text: John 10:10

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Joshua Becker, in his book [Simplify](#), tells the story of his family's quest to simplify their lives. He begins with this explanation:

Our story begins in suburban Vermont while I was cleaning the garage, my wife was cleaning the bathrooms, and my 5-year old son was playing alone in the backyard. I struck up a regular conversation with my neighbor who commented, 'Maybe you don't need to own all this stuff.'

The juxtaposition was striking. My possessions piled up in the driveway... my son in the backyard... my day slipping away... I immediately recognized something needed to change. My belongings were not adding value to my life. Instead, they were subtracting from it.

When I read this text, a number of images and emotions race across my mind: Saturdays spent in anger because we (myself included) weren't getting enough done on the house, an overwhelming sense of burden at how much I *should* be doing, a sense of sadness that my days with my kids are numbered and I want to cherish the time I spend with them.

What images and emotions run through your mind as you think about how you spend your time? Is this the abundant life offered through the good shepherd, Jesus Christ? I want to *Simplify* my life in order to experience more abundant life.

Let us pray:

Lord God, forgive us for getting so caught up in all our “stuff”, for the many ways the clutter of our lives distracts us from living abundantly with you. Stir your Holy Spirit in us, that we might live more fully in your kingdom, with you reigning over our daily lives.

Amen.

You can find more content from Joshua Becker, at www.becomingminimalist.com.

+ Pastor Terri +

Sunday, February 14: Less Stuff, More God

Today's text: Mark 10:17-27

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye

of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Does Jesus want us to sell everything we own and give the money to the poor so we can enter the kingdom of God?

Certainly not.

Does Jesus want us to take a hard look at our lives to see what we are putting first, potentially ahead of God?

Certainly!

Will either of these actions EARN God’s love?

Certainly not.

Like trying to cram a camel through the eye of a needle, salvation is impossible for human beings. Whether we have many possessions or few, whether we see the face of Christ in others or not, whether we live simply or extravagantly, our salvation is not up to us. Through his death on the cross, Jesus paid the price for our sins, promising salvation to all who believe.

When Jesus said “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”, he was speaking a truth that we all know in our hearts. It is difficult to let God reign (the real meaning of “kingdom of God”) when we have so much stuff to lure us away from what’s most important.

- The more stuff we have, the more time it takes to tend it: clean it, repair it, organize it. . .
- The more stuff we have, the more stuff we want; it can become an insatiable addiction.
- The more stuff we have, or think we need, the more fearful we become about the future: what if I get laid off, have I saved enough for retirement, what if we lost the house, or car, or our lifestyle?

This Bible passage is not about salvation – it’s about putting first things first (following God), because *that* is what will bring us abundant life!

What threatens to pull you away from following Jesus?

Let us pray:

Lord God, there are many things which demand our allegiance, seeking to drive our decisions instead of you. Forgive us. Help us to keep our eyes on you. Help us give up that which prevents us from being your faithful followers – all while trusting in your grace.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Monday, February 15: Minimalism Defined

Today's text: Matthew 19:29-30

Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

We've started our *Simplify* discussion with our “stuff”, our physical possessions.

Why? Because having less stuff will get us into heaven? Because if we give our stuff away, God will give us a hundredfold in return? No. We're starting with physical clutter because all of that “stuff” distracts us from what is most important: faith, family, friendship, and service.

Practically speaking, I'm also starting with my “stuff” because there are only 5 weeks in this series, and I know it will take a number of Saturdays to knock out the clutter in my home (no, don't sign us up for Hoarders, it's not *that* bad.) So I want to have a sense of accomplishment early in this process.

Joshua Becker, author of [Simplify](#), defines “minimalism” through the following aspects:

1. **We will intentionally promote the things we most value.** The heart of minimalism can be summed up in this phrase: *It is the intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of anything that distracts us from it.* This promotion can be seen in how we spend

our time, the artwork that we display, and even the clothes that we wear.

2. **We will remove all “clutter” from our lives.** This process began with physical items as we moved from room to room selling, donating, and recycling everything that we no longer used. As we did, we realized that simplicity and order brings freedom, joy, and balance. Our home began to give life and energy rather than drain it. As we began clearing physical clutter from our lives, we noticed opportunity to remove other non-physical clutter from our lives: emotional clutter, relational clutter, and spiritual clutter. Since then, we have worked hard to maintain a clutter-free life.
3. **We will decorate in a minimalist style.** Since becoming minimalist, we have removed numerous pieces of furniture and countless decorations from our walls and shelves. What remains is not just clean, sleek, and modern, but also meaningful. The decorations and paintings that remain are the pieces most dear to our souls and lives. As a result, our house draws praise from many who enter and enjoy its simple beauty.
4. **We will use our money for things more valuable than physical possessions.** Madison Avenue has controlled our finances for too long. Since the day we were born, it has told us what needs to be bought, when it needs to be purchased, and what store we should visit to find the best value. When we chose freedom from material possessions, we broke the control that our consumer-driven, capitalistic society has had over us. Suddenly, we have been freed to use our finances to pursue endeavors far greater than those offered at our local department store.
5. **We will live a counter-cultural life that is attractive to others.** We have met many minimalists over the past two years that live a life that is far from attractive to us. They have sold all their possessions to live communally on a farm... no, thanks. They have listed all their possessions on a sheet of paper and determined to eliminate all but 100... no, thanks. Instead, we have determined to live out a rational minimalism that fits our lifestyle and invites others to simplify their lives as well.

The benefits of our decision are unmistakable: more freedom, more impact, more time, and less stress. Since our decision, we have encouraged hundreds of thousands of households around the world to simplify their life, remove clutter, and become minimalist. After all, if this typical family of four in the suburbs can become minimalist, so can you!

What in Becker's comments resonates with you? What seems like it is going too far for you? Is there some part of your home that feels more like a burden than a blessing – that beckons you because it's a mess rather than a refuge? Are you possessing your possessions, or are they possessing you?

Let us pray:

Lord God, give us the energy to tackle the messes in our lives, and to be disciplined enough to maintain it. Help us to be faithful in these little things, that we may experience more freedom and joy.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Tuesday, February 16: Tips to *Simplify*

Today's text: John Wesley

Cleanliness is next to godliness.

(You thought it was in the Bible, didn't you!)

Are we really proposing that de-cluttering your basement will help you grow spiritually? No – not on its own. It is just one part, one step on the journey. The concept is simple, the less mess you have in your life, the less time and energy (emotional, mental, even spiritual) you will have to spend on it. I would love to wake up one Saturday morning free from the worry about how much I can get done that day. Now, obviously, it's going to take a lot of Saturdays to get to the point, but think of the freedom to come! I could spend that time with my family, volunteering with those who don't have a home, cooking meals for those who need a meal. It's just a baby step – but it's a start.

Joshua Becker, author of [Simplify](#) suggests the following tips for simplifying each room in your house.

- **Living Room/Dining Room** – Make a commitment to keep only the decorations that mean the most to you. Too many knick-knacks and photos in one room distract you and your guests from the ones you hold most valuable.
- **Bedrooms** – Look to clear as many surfaces as possible. Keep your drawers and closets free from clutter by removing the items you no longer use.
- **Wardrobe** – A typical person wears 20% of their clothes 80% of the time. Try this experiment: turn around all of the hangers in your closet. After you wear an item, return it to the closet with its hanger facing the right direction. After 2-3 months, you will have an irrefutable, visual representation of the clothes you no longer wear. Donate them.
- **Bathrooms/Linens** – Someone once said, “You really only need two towels or sets of bed sheets. One to use while the other is being washed.” While minimizing down to only two towels may be a bit irrational, you can certainly find inspiration in the thought above to clear your closets of unused linens.
- **Home Office** – Paper clutter is a never-ending battle. You’ll need a filing system. And you’ll need the discipline to use it.
- **Toy Room** Kids need to play. Kids need toys. They just don’t need quite so many. Include them in the purging process – as difficult as it may be at first, they will get used to it. Make sure every toy gets a home and every child knows where that home is.
- **Kitchen** – In the New York Times, Professional Chef, Mark Bittman wrote an article titled, [“A No Frills Kitchen Still Cooks”](#) where he outfitted an entire kitchen for less than \$300. Check out his comprehensive list to be reminded of how few gadgets we really need to cook.
- **Storage Room** – While some argue against the use of boxes in the storage room saying they discourage true purging, I believe they can be helpful in storing things neatly. If you are nervous about the minimizing process, store items in a specially-marked box with the

date clearly marked. After 3-4 months if you had no need for the item, perhaps you can function without it.

Specifically, I'm starting with my closet so I will have a quick success – not just organizing but purging. Start on whatever is weighing you down, but something that can be tackled in a reasonable amount of time.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you have blessed us with so many good things. Help us to be thankful for the many possessions you've placed in our charge, and to be willing to pass them on to those in need of them. Give us the physical health and energy to accomplish these tasks.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Wednesday, February 17: Live Simple so Others Can Simply Live

Today's text: Matthew 25:31-40

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

In addition to the peace and freedom which comes through de-cluttering, I look forward to more closely resembling our Christian calling in relation to my stuff. I look forward to when I can: *“live simply, that others may simply live.”*

To be honest, my lifestyle is so far from simple, that I just need to start somewhere – anywhere. In choosing the closet, I plan to give these clothes to those in need (or sell them in the church rummage sale to those in need and then donate the proceeds to people in need.) Regardless, it moves me one step closer to Jesus’ vision: that when we see people in need, we see the face of Christ and respond accordingly.

This call to live simply would also impact my future choices. Ignoring the world’s call to “retail therapy”, I could buy less and give more. Instead of pursuing particular brands or styles, (not a particular struggle for me, as you can tell by my wardrobe, but an honest lure for many), I could appreciate what I have, augment it in a limited way and use the saved funds for something more consistent with God’s goals for our world. Instead of wasting my time taking care of my clothes, I could spend the time taking care of those with no clothes, or food or shelter.

Let us pray:

Lord God, help us to examine our lifestyle with open eyes, to see how our choices affect the choices of others, to see avenues to choosing a “more excellent way” found in your love. Help us to see your face in those in need and to give to others as you have so freely given to us. Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Thursday, February 18: Money = Happiness?

Today's text: I Timothy 6:6-10

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

As he shares core beliefs which bring peace and joy, Bill Hybels, founder and Senior Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, writes the following in his book [Simplify. Ten Practices to Unclutter Your Soul.](#)

BELIEF #2: I Live Joyfully *Within* God's current Provision for My Life

It is human nature to look for greener pastures, to wish for better circumstances, more affluence, an easier life. We think, *If only I had a better job, a nicer house, a newer car, I would be happy.* Seems logical, right?

According to this logic, people in the United States should be among the happiest people on earth. We enjoy greater wealth per capita than most countries. We have more opportunity for education, medical care, home ownership, car ownership, food availability, freedoms, and so on.

But a 2012 Gallup Poll ranked the United States *thirty-third* in the world on a happiness scale. Having more doesn't increase our happiness. In fact, seven of the top ten countries were in Latin America, which generally ranks low on the typical economic indicators we might associate with happiness. Civil war-torn Guatemala which ranks just above Iraq on the United Nations' Human Development Index, is seventh highest in the world in terms of positive emotions. Despite escalating gang violence that produces one of the world's highest homicide rates and cripples the economy, Guatemalans are happy.

Translation: More money doesn't equal greater happiness.

Hybel later concludes:

Someone fully reconciled to God financially can joyfully accept God's current level of provision for his or her life. That provision might go up or down throughout the course of a lifetime – from plenty to want – but we can be content in both. It is our responsibility to make adjustments so we can live within God's provision and be joyfully content whether He provides a little or a lot in any given season.

How content are you with God's provision for you and your family? How is that level of contentment reflected in your life? *(It seems that a high level of contentment would express itself as a sense of peace, generosity, good work/leisure balance, confidence about the future. A low level of contentment would bring anxiety, stinginess, overworking, worry.)*

Let us pray:

Help us to count our many blessings God and to be content with how you have provisioned us. Keep us from being trapped by senseless and harmful desires that pull us away from you. Bring us the joy and generous spirit which result from contentment.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Friday, February 19: Coveting

Today's text: Deuteronomy 5:21

Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

To covet means to yearn to possess or have something. You know the feeling. You are floating in Lake Lanier enjoying your day in the sunshine when you see a boat just a bit bigger than your own – and think: “Wow, wouldn't it be nice if we had a boat like that one. Or what about that houseboat that just went by, then we could stay on the lake. Oh, but look at that beautiful lake

home – that’s the way to go. Then we could come anytime we want. Oh, but that home is even bigger, that would *really* be great, then family could join us!” So instead of peacefully, gratefully enjoying your simple float in the lake, you spin your thoughts away from contentment down into the black hole of coveting.

God was so concerned about our human tendency to covet that God’s commandment against it made the Big 10! You see, God doesn’t want us to miss out on the gift of life by spending our time *constantly* wishing we had more.

What do you find yourself coveting? Why do you covet those things – for more fun, for prestige, or a sense of success? How does the coveting in your life pull you away from God?

Let us pray:

Lord God, when we compare ourselves to others, we ignore the greatest fact of our lives – that YOU created us, designed us for a purpose, and delighted in your creation. Fill us with gratitude for your many blessings upon us. Drive us towards grace and generosity with others.
Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Saturday, February 20: Consumerism

Today’s text: [Luke 12:15](#)

Jesus said: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Jen Hatmaker, in her book entitled [7 – an experimental mutiny against excess](#) describes how she set out to intentionally give away 7 possessions, each day, for a month – 210 items. While she anticipated that the beginning of the process would be easier than the end, what she didn’t expect was that she would give away 202 items from her own closet – the very first week! Add to

that the items she had recently purged from her kid's wardrobe, and she realized just how over-blown her consumerism had gotten. After finally giving away over 1,000 items in one month, her wrestling match with God came to this conclusion:

A child says "me." An adult says "us." Maturity deciphers need from want, wisdom from foolishness. Growing up means curbing appetites, shifting from "me" to "we," understanding private choices have social consequences and public outcomes. Let's be consumers who silence the screaming voice that yells, "I WANT!" and instead listens to the quiet "we need," the marginalized voice of the worldwide community we belong to.

What if we tried together? What if a bunch of Christians wrote a new story, becoming consumers the earth is groaning for? I suspect we'd find that elusive contentment, storing up treasures in heaven like Jesus told us to. I'm betting our stuff would lose its grip and we'd discover riches contained in a simpler life, a communal responsibility. *Money* is the most frequent theme in Scripture; perhaps the secret to happiness is right under our noses. Maybe we don't recognize satisfaction because it is disguised as radical generosity, a strange misnomer in a consumer culture.

What would radical generosity look like in your life? In what ways do you find yourself thinking as a child ("me") rather than an adult ("we")? How is your purging going? Any "success" stories about letting go of our consumeristic signs of "success"?

Let us pray:

Lord God, we are your beloved children, but you did not create us to remain as children, but to mature in faith, life and proclamation. Open our eyes to see our selfishness. Redirect our lives to be your people in the world.
Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Sunday, February 21: The Heart
What have you done for me lately?

Today's text: Mark 10:32-52

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking."

Sometimes, I am just in awe of the disciples. Not because they are so clever but because sometimes they *really* miss the mark. Here they are, walking to Jerusalem and Jesus chooses this moment to break it to them what is ahead – being mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed. And as if that isn't enough, he says that after three days, he will rise again.

And what is their response? "Hey Jesus, when you get to be king, can we sit at your right and your left hand? You know – ahead of all those other guys!"

Really??? Jesus is facing the greatest sacrificial act of all time, and they are so blinded by their want to have *more*, that they can't see the gift standing in front of them.

Selfishness is a spiritual sickness. Consumerism is a spiritual sickness. Coveting is a spiritual sickness. Our over-abundance of stuff which blocks our experience of abundant life, it's all a spiritual issue. This week, we turn to the heart of the matter – the spiritual issues. May those who have ears (I think that would be all of us) hear!

Let us pray:

Lord God, when we get caught up in “what have you done for me lately”, help us to see your sacrifice for us on the cross. Fill us with awe at your sacrificial love, and to be filled with gratitude at this amazing gift of life.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Monday, February. 22: The Heart Coveting

Today’s text: II Corinthians 12:7-10

St. Paul writes:

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

In this week’s devotions, we look to the soul. In addition to coveting people’s material things, or even someone’s lifestyle, there is a deeper coveting which distracts people from the peace and joy God intends. People want the “life” someone else has – what we perceive to be their great relationship with their spouse, their perfect children, their satisfying career, their great looks or pain-free existence. Even health is coveted: “why do I have to struggle with _____ while others rarely have to go to the doctor.”

This soul-felt coveting is particularly dangerous because it sows the seeds of discontent in our hearts. It keeps us dissatisfied with our lot in life and blocks the promised contentment and deep joy that God intends us to have.

It's also based on a lie. I've been pastoring for 23 years and I have *never met* a person who was free from pain. People may look lovely on the outside, even put on a good show in public, but there's NO SUCH THING as a perfect life. Everyone has *some* thorn in their side, as Paul puts it.

But God's grace is sufficient for us, God's power made known in our weakness. Our call is to be "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ." Not that we would be happy for such calamities, but that in our weakness, we experience the strength of God. And for that, we give God thanks.

When have you coveted someone else's life (or what you perceived their life to be)? How has that shaped your relationship with God? What does Paul mean when he says "whenever I am weak, then I am strong"?

Let us pray,

Lord God, we confess all those times we doubt your love and power when we are suffering. We confess all those ways we push you away in times of suffering, rather than leaning into your merciful arms. Forgive us, free us, bring your peace and contentment to our souls.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Tuesday, February 23: The Heart Forgiveness

Today's text: Matthew 18:15-17

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

In his book [Simplify. Ten Practices to Unclutter Your Soul](#) Pastor Bill Hybels spends a chapter on the importance of forgiveness. He divides offenses into three different categories, each requiring different responses from him as a pastor. For “Minor Offenses”, he admits to having a “get over it” attitude – put it in perspective, let it go and move on. For “Legitimate Wounds”, he seeks to hear them out and offer comfort as best he can. He writes:

The person asks, “So, what should I do? He wronged me. I’m the innocent party. There ought to be justice of some sort, right?”

That’s a legitimate question. And it fits with the common thinking of our world. It’s the Old Testament concept of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Wrong does deserve punishment, right?

The trouble with that sort of thinking is that it doesn’t give the depth of satisfaction the aggrieved person thinks or hopes it will. And focusing our energies on revenge-seeking doesn’t lead to a simplified life. As understandable as it is to want the people who hurt us to pay in some manner, justice-seeking alone never leads to relational peace. There is certainly a time and place for justice, especially if the wrongdoing has legal implications. But at the end of the day, we each must come to terms with what has happened to us, and we must forgive.

Forgiveness is not a simple process. Believe me, I know. It means we fully acknowledge the wrong that was done to us, grieve over what has been lost, and yet eventually let the other person off the hook. We release them. We let them go. Not for their sake, but for our own and for Christ’s.

Hybel’s then examines in detail Matthew 18 in which Jesus outlines what to do in situations when you’ve been wronged: go, go alone, go to restore the relationship, go now, let it go. That is more than we can cover in this devotion; it warrants its own series – maybe next year.

But as it relates to our call to *Simplify*, our call to forgive is critical to our spiritual well-being. What resentments clutter up your soul these days? What relationships are damaged or even fractured because forgiveness has not been

possible? How can you make room for God’s forgiveness to come through you to the other person?

Let us pray:

Lord God, when hanging on the cross you prayed the most powerful prayer of all time: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” You extend your forgiveness to us for the many ways we fail to be the people you created us to be. Work in and through us, that we may forgive those who have wronged us.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Wednesday, February 24: The Heart Forgiveness

Today’s text: Luke 23:34

From the cross, *Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*

Yesterday we explored Hybel’s words about the importance of forgiveness, particularly as it relates to what he calls “Legitimate Wounds”. There are actions, however, that run even deeper which he refers to as “Life-Shattering Injustices” – an “unthinkable tragedy that forever changes the landscape of your life.”

In the face of such an event, forgiveness has two different dimensions, as clarified by Pastor Adam Hamilton in his book [Forgiveness: Finding Peace through Letting Go](#). Hamilton writes:

There is your internal release of bitterness, anger or desire for revenge, and there is the extension of mercy toward the one who has wronged you.

Regarding your release of anger, bitterness and desire for revenge, you must forgive. The more serious the wound, the longer the process may take. But failure to forgive in this sense gives power to the one who wronged you. It is you, not they, who are hurt by your unwillingness to forgive. But in the second dimension of forgiveness – extending mercy to those who have wronged us – *we may actually harm wrongdoers if we extend mercy too quickly.* Wrestling with the hurt they have caused is a part of their redemptive process and for Christians, redemption should always be the goal.

In reflection on Hamilton’s words, Hybel’s writes:

As Christ followers, the first dimension of forgiveness begins right away. Depending on the depth of the offense, the process of forgiveness may take moments, days, months or years. But the second dimension – the act of extending mercy, especially for serious offenses – requires wisdom and discernment, with redemption of the other person as the ultimate goal. Removing the natural consequences of someone’s offenses can actually be harmful to the redemption process. A flippant “I forgive you!” in the face of a significant act of harm prevents wrongdoers from feeling the full weight of what they have done, making it harder for them to experience the redemption that comes from wholehearted repentance.”

Have you ever experienced a life-shattering injustice? Whether personal or corporate (such as 9-11), such radical grievances require intense and complex prayer for forgiveness. It is only God who can provide such forgiveness in our souls.

What grievances cast shadows on your soul?

Let us pray:

Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Thursday, February 25: The Heart Fear

Today's text: II Timothy 1:6-7

For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

To simplify one's life, fear must be faced. Yes, there are some fears that are constructive – like a fear of a car wreck making you drive more carefully in bad weather. But destructive fear can be crippling.

In his book [Simplify. Ten Practices to Unclutter Your Soul](#) Pastor Bill Hybels writes:

Destructive fear diminishes the quality of our lives. It tricks us into believing, beyond what is reasonable, that the world is an ominous and dangerous place. It mutes our joy and robs us of satisfaction. It causes us to anticipate the future with dread rather than exhilaration.

Destructive fear must be stopped in its track or it will undermine the life God invites us to live. History is filled with men and women who said no to destructive fear and changed the world. But imagine if they had given in to the paralyzing effects of fear on their lives.

After referencing people like the apostle Paul, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, he asks:

Imagine yourself, fully aware of the mission and vision God has placed in your heart to advance His Kingdom in this world, yet held hostage to phobias, irrational worries, and destructive fears of failure, harm, or rejection. If you don't fulfill the mission God assigned to you, who will?

What fears hold you back from “fulfilling the mission God assigned to you”? What fears clutter up your soul and distract you from the Shalom God intends us to experience? Did you know that Jesus and angels said some version of “Do not be afraid” 15 times in the Gospels? Seems pretty important!

Let us pray:

Lord God, you are our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Friday, February 26: The Heart Worry

Today's text: Luke 12:22-25

He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

When I consider the spiritual clutter of my life, worry is high on the list. While I try to view it as "advanced preparation for all possible outcomes" – that's just a fancy cover for what it really is: **WORRY**.

I was raised in a family of worriers. When someone is facing a new health diagnosis, we jump to the worst case scenario. When the future is particularly uncertain, our anxiety rises. When we are trying to choose between two options, the potential negatives jump out to us far more often than the positives. To worry is part of my Stagner DNA.

And the only antidote for worrying is trust – flat out, no matter what comes, trust in God. It's a choice – to set aside the anxiety, silence the "what if's" and move forward confident that God is in charge.

And while I'm certainly not an expert at this, here are a few tips to *Simplify* when it comes to worrying.

1. Turn from a Worrier to a Warrior (a prayer warrior that is!).

When my head is spinning with anxious thoughts, I intentionally seek to turn them into prayers. Instead of, “Oh, what’s going to happen to _____.” I think: “Lord, watch over _____.” Use prayer to increase your trust in the one who has the whole world in his hands.

2. Intentionally recall the ways that God has seen you through difficult times in the past.

Before giving the Israelites the 10 Commandments, God reminded them: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” This reminder grounded the Israelites in who they were as God’s beloved children and assured them that no matter what may come, their God was always with them.

3. Read the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms, the Gospels, Romans – to see how God understands our human hearts. Take comfort in Emmanuel, God with us.
4. Talk to people about your worries.

Christian community is a true gift from God – talk to others and work out your worries in the context of real friendship. (See tomorrow for more on friendship.)

5. Serve others.

Intentionally getting out of your head by serving others is an important tool which helps break a cycle of worry and also fulfills God’s command to care for the “least of these”.

Let us pray:

Lord God, remove from us all worries and fears that hold us back from trusting in you. Help us to intentionally seek your peace and then share that peace with others.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Saturday, February 27: The Heart Friendship

Today's text: Proverbs 18:4

Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin.

There is one type of clutter that would not have occurred to me, were it not included in Pastor Bill Hybels' book [Simplify. Ten Practices to Unclutter Your Soul](#). While he spends an entire chapter on friendship, today's focus will be short and to the point: **true friendship is worth the investment.**

Whether it's due to social media, how mobile we are as a society, or just the vast number of options we have in our lives, it is very easy to define friendship in very shallow terms. We've all heard stories of people committing suicide in spite of having hundreds of "friends" on Facebook. It seems that this illusion of "friends", who are actually more like acquaintances, somehow prevents a person from intentionally building deep and lasting friendships.

When I was a child, we had a church group who went camping together 4-5 times a year. All of the families had children around the same ages, the families all worshipped together, learned together, and supported one another. Who was there when my Father died? The camping group. Who do I trust to help take care of my mom, even though she lives alone at the age of 80? The camping group. Who do we sit with when we worship in my home church? The camping group.

These friendships didn't just happen – they were intentionally built. Prioritized. Valued. Why? Because true friendship is worth the investment.

Now, unlike de-cluttering your closet, I'm not suggesting that you remove all acquaintances from your "friend" file. What I am saying is that our experience of God is deeply connected to our experience of Christian community. God often works to support and nurture us through deep friendships. God often guides our steps through the Christian counsel of

others. God rejoices when our hearts work in harmony with others – equipping us to serve and celebrate.

What have you done to facilitate deeper connections with people? How intentional are you about maintaining your existing friendships? How can you foster deeper relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ at Cross of Life? To know and be known (and to be loved anyway) is an incredible gift from God. It's worth the investment. Don't let the "clutter" of too many acquaintances get in the way of building and keeping deep and abiding friendship.

Let us pray,

Lord God, when you walked on this earth you gathered friends close to you: Peter, James and John, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Open to us avenues to build deep and abiding friendships and give us the wisdom to make our friendships a priority.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Sunday, February 28: First Things

Today's text: Mark 12:1-

Then he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others."

In his book [Giving to God](#), seminary professor Dr. Mark Allan Powell describes how he and his wife often ask a student to housesit when they go out of town. The student takes care of their pets, tends the plants, brings in the mail, all in exchange for enjoying the space of the house and a full refrigerator (a step up from a dorm room.)

But then he asks:

What if my wife and I were to return from our travels to discover our hired student had changed the locks on our doors and taken up permanent residence in our home? Suppose we confronted him and he said, ‘It’s all mine – you gave it to me.’ ‘No,’ we would say. ‘We were just allowing you to use what still belongs to us. There was no transfer of ownership.’

Dr. Powell uses this modern day parable in much the same way Jesus used parables about discipleship – to make the point that we are not owners of our lives, but simply stewards of them. God has not permanently turned over the keys to this world – just temporarily given us permission to use it, enjoy it, tend it.

Therefore, our lives of stewardship is not doing God some grand favor. It is, instead, simply what temporary caretakers do.

In what ways do you try to “lock the doors” and keep God (the owner) out of running your life? In what areas of your life do you find yourself assuming control, as if you are an owner rather than a steward? In what areas do you find it easier to accept your role of steward?

Let us pray:

Lord God, you entrust our lives, our earth, our relationships to our temporary care. Empower us to be wise and faithful stewards of these gifts, that we would use them to your glory and to further your kingdom.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Monday, February 29: First Things

Today's text: Matthew 6:33

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Instead of reacting to the urgent, we are called to seek first the Kingdom of God, to let God reign in our daily lives. The LifeKeys curriculum book: [Discover Who You Are](#) sheds light on a person's call by examining their God-given gifts. In one of the final chapters, it discusses how to prioritize your time in order to live out that calling. Learning from Jesus' example, they emphasize the following path.

1. **Put first things first** – seek the kingdom of God.

God's intent is not that we go through certain rote, ordained gestures, but that we find a way to escape from the distractions of life in order to spend time with our Creator. *LifeKeys* stresses each person's uniqueness; included in that uniqueness is the suggestion that there is more than one way to be in an ongoing relationship with God. Personality type can help you examine a variety of meaningful ways to spend time with God. (The text then offers a list of spiritual practices for each Myers-Briggs personality type. If you'd like to know yours, [just email Pastor Terri!](#))

2. **Know your mission.**

A well defined mission statement spells out your priorities in a way that leads you to say yes to activities and requests that are right for you. A friend put it this way: "I ask myself this: Given my mission, is this a *good* choice for me, or an *excellent* choice? It's best to leave the good choices for others – the excellent ones are all I can handle."

3. **Know your limits.**

Jesus knew when He and the disciples could handle no more. He understood that the spiritual, mental, and physical demands made on our bodies can only be met if we also find time to rest and replenish the spirit.

Look at the word *recreation*. You need to re-create yourself through activities that bring rest to your body, mind and soul. You may be re-

created through time with a book, prayer, a long hike or a cup of tea with a good friend.

4. Simplify your life.

No one can define simplicity for you, since one person's simplicity is another person's nightmare. Buying the cheapest model bike is not simplicity if long-distance cycling is your means of reducing stress. Choosing secondhand clothes is not simplicity if you feel scruffy or do it only to appear thrifty. And driving a car to its bitter end is only simplicity if the vehicle still safely and reliably meets your family's needs. Any attempt to define simplicity for someone else can quickly deteriorate into legalism. Our point here is this: Take a look at what you have and how you spend your time. See what things keep you from your priorities. Where necessary, simplify.

5. Reflect on those who seem to have enough time.

Your life choices matter to God. Along with your life gifts, spiritual gifts, and personality type, time is God's gift to you. Good works are waiting for you – no one else can do them for you.

As you consider your use of time, the priorities at work in your life, in what ways would you like it to change? What steps would be required in order to change it? What would you give up if you changed the way you have been living? What would you gain?

Let us pray,

Lord God, each day is a gift. Teach us how to use them wisely, setting aside time for you, time for others, and time to re-create ourselves, so that we can be ready to do what you've created us to do.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

P.S. Tomorrow, we switch to Pastor's David's reflections on setting priorities.

Tuesday, March 1: Climbing the Ladder

Today's text: Genesis 28:10-13a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac."

I worked as a manager at BellSouth for more than 27 years. During that time, I was often confronted with the corporate ladder. Not literally or physically of course. But there was a lot of emphasis on achievement and promotions and salary and pay raises. Many of my coworkers operated under the expectation that you needed to take on any project, put in whatever extra hours, give up however many evenings, weekends and vacation days it took to climb as far up that corporate ladder as you could. It was how they measured their success, and it was their top priority.

I recall a boss or two who were frustrated and/or puzzled that I valued my personal and family time more than the value I placed on where I was on the corporate ladder. That's not to say I didn't do good work or that I didn't have a good career. I think I did both. But for me, investing time and energy in my family and in the community of the congregation where we worshipped and served – those were important priorities for me.

In Genesis, Jacob encountered a different ladder. In his case, he encountered it during a time in life when he was faced with some challenges and was literally trying to find his way. And in a dream, God showed him a ladder through which the kingdom of God could be revealed to humankind. It was a ladder that reached to heaven. When we stop and consider it, I think that is the kind of ladder we would really prefer to climb.

There is much that competes for our focus and attention. And our work – even in the corporate world – can be part of the vocation to which God calls us.

However, as we go about that work, our challenge is to keep our priorities in proper order and to remember which ladder out there keeps us connected to the God who loves us.

Take a moment to think about your priorities in life and whether you see those reflected in how you spend your time.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, help us to use the time we have in this life wisely and in ways that further your kingdom. Help us to do our jobs well and to fulfill our responsibilities to the best of our abilities. And as we do so, may our priorities be honorable and right, and may they guide our decisions and actions.

Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Wednesday, March 2: God Provides

Today's text: Luke 10:1-6

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you."

As many of you know, I followed a call to the ministry later in life. I had worked for BellSouth for many years and during that time was very involved in the life of the church we attended. What I came to realize over time was that I enjoyed the "work" I was doing as a volunteer at church more than I enjoyed the work I did for BellSouth. Although it was good, honest work, going home at the end of the day or the end of the week knowing I had written a good article about the company's newest product or I had developed a good communication plan for the

latest employee recognition program – well, it didn't really give me a sense of satisfaction or accomplishment.

However, the work I did for church – whether it was preparing for an adult Sunday School class or preparing to serve as the lay worship leader – I felt energized by those activities and felt like I was doing something worthwhile with my gifts and talents.

So why not just leave BellSouth and go to seminary and become a pastor? There were many factors I wrestled with as I tried to build up the courage to follow where God was leading. But an important one had to do with how much income I needed; with how big a house I wanted to have; with how many material possessions our family needed. Culture and society were telling me that, to consider myself successful in life, I needed to provide a certain level of comfort and opportunity for my family. That's what it meant to be a good provider, or so I thought.

To make a long story short, I left my job at BellSouth and attended seminary for three years. My wife Lynn graciously went back to teaching after being a stay-at-home mom for 12 years. And despite my fears that our lives would be totally disrupted, we have been doing just fine. We made some decisions along the way: we all drive used cars; we been putting off new carpet for many, many years; we don't eat out near as often as we used to; and we've never taken our children to Disney World (I'm actually not too concerned about that one).

When Christ sent his followers out in Luke, he told them to "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." In a similar way, God was calling me to go out into the world and to trust that God's provisions would be enough. It was challenging for me to be that faithful, to let go of that comfort and security. But it has also been a blessing to see how God has provided for us along the way, and to realize that contentment and satisfaction weren't dependent on how much income I earned or how much stuff we owned.

Are there areas in your life where you have been reluctant to follow where God is calling? Take some time today to consider where you find fulfillment in life and

whether there are things in life which you are reluctant to let go of that might be keeping you from taking steps toward a more fulfilling life.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, give us eyes to see the path in life you would have us follow. Give us wisdom to see what hinders us along the way. And give us courage to follow where you lead.

Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Thursday, March 3: Living Your Values

Today's text: Proverbs 30:8-9

Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the Lord?"

As a young woman, Evy McDonald was headed to the top of her profession and to achieving her goal of being successful in life. She had been Director of Education at one of the first Hospices in the country and had directed intensive care and coronary care units. She had a new car, bought a house, and owned 70 pairs of shoes.

Then, during a 12-hour period one day in 1980 she learned that:

- She had a terminal illness and had a year to live.
- Because she was ill and not able to work, she was being replaced at work.
- And her home was burglarized and most of her possessions were stolen.

In the book [Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective](#), edited and compiled by Michael Schut, Evy describes it this way:

In the course of 12 hours I had lost almost everything I identified with. Gone was the dream of being the youngest female hospital administrator. Gone were the material possessions that let others know my status. ... Gone was the sense of success that came not only from my position but also from the quality and amount of my possessions.

With her life in shambles and told she had only a brief time to live, why then did she bother to examine her relationship with money and with her possessions? As a Christian, she wanted to find a sense of peace and meaning for all that was happening to her. But as she reflected on her life, she reached a conclusion that some may be able to identify with:

For many years my life reflected typical mainstream Christianity. I attended church on Sundays, sang in the choir and at times assisted with Sunday school. These church activities fit into and around my professional activities and busy life.... I was a ‘convenience Christian.’ When church activities fit into my schedule, I was willing to participate – but I was unwilling to inconvenience myself or my routine. My life was centered not around God but on work, professional goals, money, promotions, looking good and proving myself.

Evy shared that she was seeking peace in the midst of inner turmoil. Then one morning:

A question suddenly popped into my mind: Who did I want to be when I died? The answer appeared just as quickly: I wanted to be a person who lived her values, understood what service was about and could love herself enough to accept God’s love and love her neighbor. My self-centered and unhealthy relationship with money was a logical place to start learning how to live my values.

As you may have guessed, Evy McDonald beat her illness and did not die. She went on to co-found the New Road Map Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people shift to low-consumption, high-fulfillment lifestyles. We however don’t have to face dire circumstances like Evy did in order to ask ourselves some key questions:

- Are the values we live out in our lives the same as the ones we profess to hold dear as Christians?
- Has the consumer mentality so prevalent in our culture hijacked our lives?
- Or are we aligning our values and spending habits with what we claim to believe?

Let us pray:

Triune God, we are grateful for the blessings in our lives and for the wholeness and salvation you make available to us through Jesus Christ. Help us live lives that reflect your grace and love, so that we might love you more dearly and love our neighbors in your name.

Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Friday, March 4: Money, money, money

Today's text: Luke 16:13-15

"No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God."

One summer when my sons were young, we vacationed in Nashville and took them to see the full-scale replica of the Parthenon with its 42-foot statue of the goddess Athena. My guess is that when many of us think of idolatry, we think of people bowing down to something like that statue.

But in the book [Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective](#), edited and compiled by Michael Schut, the late William Stringfellow rightly recognized idolatry as an act that **embraces some person or thing, instead of God, as the source and rationalization of the moral significance of this life.**

That's saying a mouthful, but I do think money (or the love of it, as it says in 1 Timothy), may be the most common idol in today's culture. And whether consciously or not, it often drives our decision-making and value judgments and definitions of success and failure.

In all honesty, I have to confess that I like being comfortable. I like to eat at nice restaurants and take nice vacations. And I like being able to provide these things for my family. All of which requires the accumulation of money. So does that make me a bad person?

Stringfellow, an author, theologian, and advocate for peace and justice, deals with the question this way:

It is the freedom from idolatry of money that Christ offers the rich young man in the parable. Remember, it is not that money is inherently evil or that the possession of money as such is sin. The issue for the Christian (and ultimately, for everyone) is whether a person trusts money more than God and comes to rely on money rather than on grace for the assurance of moral significance, both as an individual and in relationship with the whole of humanity.

How would you describe your relationship with money? When making decisions about how to spend your money, what underlying values and assumptions influence those decisions? Have you ever prayed to God for guidance as to how God would have you spend your money? Challenging questions for us all!

Let us pray:

God of grace, it is our desire to put you first in our lives and to worship only you. But we confess that we are often caught up in the ways of this world. Help us be aware of times when we let other things and other desires become idols that influence the way we live.

Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Saturday, March 5: Take Up Your Cross

Today's text: Matthew 16:24-26

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

Priorities. Motives. Desires. Why do we do the things we do? And why do we put the effort into making changes in our lives?

Atlanta Constitution columnist Lorraine Murray, who writes for the paper's "Faith & Values" section, refers to Lent as a perplexing season. Considering topics like mortality and our shortcomings aren't very popular in our youth-oriented culture that goes to great lengths to conceal all evidence of aging. In a column a few years back, Murray said the following:

Lent reminds us that we really don't know when the big clock in the sky will wind down for us. And if there are spiritual tweaks we need to make, we should not postpone them. It's all too tempting to give up stuff for the wrong reason, as in: 'Well, if I quit eating desserts, maybe I can fit into my new jeans by Easter!'

And as someone who often gives up sweets during Lent, I can attest to losing a few pounds by Easter Sunday. And that's a nice side-effect of fasting, but not the main point. The underlying motivation is learning how to better imitate Christ, who told us to pick up our crosses daily and follow him."

As I was thinking about taking up our crosses and following Jesus as it relates to our efforts at COL to simplify our lives, a friend brought the following quote to my attention. It is from a recent cyclical from Pope Francis:

Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them.

We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the fullest. Jesus was completely present to everyone and to everything, and in this way he showed us the way to overcome that unhealthy anxiety which makes us superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers.

May God help us all as we simplify our lives in order to be more present and attentive with our Lord and with our neighbors.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, may we be more like you. Help us have compassionate hearts so we can be present with the people in our lives, and in so doing, be a witness for you. Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Sunday, March 6: Generosity

Today's text: I Timothy 6:17-19

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

In his book [Giving to God](#), Pastor Mark Allan Powell writes about the joy we discover when we live more simplistic, generous lives. In describing multiple aspects of the joy of generosity, he writes:

First, there is the joy of realizing that everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. Generous, sacrificial giving serves as a constant reminder of this. We give away a significant portion as representative of our commitment to give 100 percent to God by using all as God would want. Such offerings are symbols that take hold of us – we cannot usually give away our money without really meaning it – and so the commitment runs deep and truly affects us at every level. We come to live in an almost constant awareness that we are but stewards, that God is the owner and master of all we are and all we have.

Why is this good news? It is good news, in part, because it inculcates the values of trust and gratitude, driving out the pettiness of envy and greed, and moving us beyond anxiety to that precious secret of contentment that the apostle Paul knew (Philippians 4:11-12).

It is also good news because, quite frankly, God is much better at running our lives than we are: it is *liberating* to learn that we are not ultimately in charge. We have a creator, we have a redeemer, we have a sustainer. We are only stewards living under the rule of God, yielding to the lordship of Christ, listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In our text for today's worship service, we heard of the widow's mite – the woman who gave all she had to live on. Do you use the money placed in your charge in ways that are pleasing to God? Does your offering reflect a faith perspective that you are a steward of these gifts, rather than the owner of them? How does simplifying your life relate to growth in generosity? Have you ever met an unhappy generous person? Which came first, the happiness or the generosity?

Let us pray:

Lord God, you have placed us in a vineyard of richness. Empower us to “do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share”, that we may take hold of the life that really is life.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Monday, March 7: Simplicity's Invitation

Today's text: Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil -- this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

From Joshua Becker's book [Simplify](#):

SIMPLICITY'S INVITATION

One day a fisherman was lying on a beautiful beach, with his fishing pole propped up in the sand and his solitary line cast out into the sparkling blue surf. He was enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun and the prospect of catching a fish.

About that time, a businessman came walking down the beach, trying to relieve some of the stress of his workday. He noticed the fisherman sitting on the beach and decided to find out why this fisherman was fishing instead of working harder to make a living for himself and his family. "You aren't going to catch many fish that way," said the businessman. "You should be working rather than lying on the beach!"

The fisherman looked up at the businessman, smiled and replied, "And what will my reward be?"

"Well, you can get bigger nets and catch more fish!" was the businessman's answer.

"And what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman, still smiling.

The businessman replied, "You will make money and you'll be able to buy a boat, which will then result in larger catches of fish!"

"And what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman again.

The businessman was beginning to get a little irritated with the fisherman's questions. "You can buy a bigger boat, and hire some people to work for you!" he said.

"And what will my reward be?" repeated the fisherman.

The businessman was getting angry. "Don't you understand? You can build up a fleet of fishing boats, sail all over the world, and let all your employees catch fish for you!"

Once again the fisherman asked, “And what will my reward be?”

The businessman was red with rage and shouted at the fisherman, “Don’t you understand that you can become so rich that you will never have to work for your living again! You can spend all the rest of your days sitting on this beach, looking at the sunset. You won’t have a care in the world!”

The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and said, “And what do you think I’m doing right now?”

Now please be clear that we are NOT encouraging you to quit your job, sit back and hope to catch dinner. The Bible has a good bit to say about the importance of work and providing for one’s family.

But this story does pose an interesting question: “What will my reward be?” Is all of our “stuff” our reward for our hard work? Are we working harder than we have to in order to provide for our families, so much so that we have very little time and energy left for our families? Are we missing out on the sunsets of life, the moments of joy sitting under the sun because we are so busy pursuing the material things in life?

To simplify is to make intentional choices about what’s most important and to live out of those core values. How well does your life reflect your core values?

Let us pray:

Lord God, we are blessed by the gift of work and the ability to provide for our families. Help us to appreciate this gift and to approach it with a sense of calling and excellence, even as we seek to keep our work in proper perspective. May your Holy Spirit journey with us as we seek to be your people.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

P.S. Next we look at how we use our time!

Tuesday, March 8: Grabbing the Reins

Today's text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Bill Hybels, founder and Sr. Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, writes in his book [Simplify. Ten Practices to Unclutter Your Soul:](#)

GRABBING THE REINS

Often when people describe their too-busy lives, they make it sound as if the overscheduling *happened* to them unwittingly, like they had no choice in the matter. “It’s not *my* fault. It’s my boss’s fault. It’s my family’s fault. It’s my teammate’s fault.” They truly believe they are mere victims of the very responsibilities and commitments they said yes to.

News flash: *You* are the boss of your schedule. It’s your responsibility to keep command of your calendar – and you must, in order to simplify your life.

Hybels then describes the time in his life when he changed the way he used his calendar. His 3-year old daughter asked him “Daddy, are you going to be gone again tonight?” He describes how that question spurred him to consider what he puts on his calendar, including his non-work responsibilities. He writes:

As I pulled into the parking lot at Willow, I asked myself, Am I looking at this from the right perspective, or not? And then came the clincher: How much do I involve God and prayer and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit when I put

together my schedule? Am I just trying to crank out more work and cram more activity into the same number of hours each day?

He then describes a process of prayer, out of which he came to the conclusion that he needed to spend 4 nights a week at home, rather than in church meetings. He writes:

For the first time ever, I wrote on my calendar four simple letters that changed everything: H-O-M-E. Right there on my work calendar, I filled in four evenings' worth of squares and elevated *home* to the same stature as any other important meeting – any business or ministry appointment, elders meeting, board meeting, ministry meeting, or property acquisition meeting.

Hybels then talks about the power of the calendar, how you can set your priorities through advanced planning. Want to grow spiritually? Block each Monday night for the Men's Bible Study Group. Want to make sure your children grow up in the Christian faith? Mark Sunday School on your calendar *every week*. Want to grow to be a more generous person? Set a recurrent time to volunteer at North Fulton Community Charities. Whatever you want to become, mark out time to pursue those dreams – in your family, in your personal life, in your community.

To simplify means to live intentionally out of your core values. Use the power of your calendar to reflect and even to shape who you want to be.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you bless us with a finite amount of time and give us great freedom in the use of it. Guide us to use it wisely, that your reign would be evident in daily life.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Wednesday, March 9: The Tyranny of the Urgent

Today's text: Matthew 6:25-33

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”

Joshua Becker's book [Simplify](#):

The Tyranny of the Urgent

In 1967, Charles Hummel wrote a book called [Tyranny of the Urgent](#). A man ahead of his time, Hummel describes the tension between two contestants which battle for our time: the urgent and the important. He argues that the urgent things – such as the demands at the office, the demands of other people, and even our own “inner compulsions” – typically trump the things which are important, like regular dates with our spouse, personal solitude, exercise, or meditation.

With incredible depth of insight, he noted that important things are polite; they don't clamor for our attention. They just wait patiently for us to act. In the long run there's a price to pay for this neglect of the important stuff. Like a volcano, there comes a day when the neglected areas of our life explode and wreak havoc. Ironically, we wonder how we missed the early warning signs.

Our temptation is to say, “Well, I just didn’t have enough time to do everything.” Hummel suggests that the lack of time is ultimately a problem of setting appropriate priorities.

Simplifying your life can be more than just removing physical belongings. If minimalism is the intentional promotion of the things that I most value, it is also about deciding what is most important in my life and removing the things that distract me from it. It is about removing the urgent for the sake of the important.

What in your work life demands your attention? What of those demands is important and what is just urgent? What about your home life? Your spiritual life? Your church life? Seeking to weed out the important from the urgent is part of simplifying your life.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you call to not worry about our life what we will eat, or drink, or wear. You assure us that we will be cared for even as you clothe the lilies of the field. Yet we let the daily demands of life take over our thoughts, our time and our priorities. Stir your Holy Spirit in us, that we might hear your calling to tend the important, that our lives would be lived to your glory and to further your kingdom. Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Thursday, March 10: This is your brain on computers

Today’s text: Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.

One area we are called to *Simplify* is our thinking; seeking to focus on one thing at a time, do it well and then move to the next thing. This is the antithesis of multi-tasking, a reality which we all face. But according to the NY Times, multi-tasking has detrimental effects, not only to us as individuals, but to our whole human experience.

[Matt Richtel writes:](#)

This is your brain on computers.

Scientists say juggling e-mail, phone calls and other incoming information can change how people think and behave. They say our ability to focus is being undermined by bursts of information. These play to a primitive impulse to respond to immediate opportunities and threats. The stimulation provokes excitement — a dopamine squirt — that researchers say can be addictive. In its absence, people feel bored. The resulting distractions can have deadly consequences, as when cellphone-wielding drivers and train engineers cause wrecks. And for millions of people, these urges can inflict nicks and cuts on creativity and deep thought, interrupting work and family life.

While many people say multitasking makes them more productive, research shows otherwise. Heavy multitaskers actually have more trouble focusing and shutting out irrelevant information, scientists say, and they experience more stress. And scientists are discovering that even after the multitasking ends, fractured thinking and lack of focus persist. In other words, this is also your brain off computers. . .

For better or worse, the consumption of media, as varied as e-mail and TV, has exploded. In 2008, people consumed three times as much information each day as they did in 1960. And they are constantly shifting their attention. Computer users at work change windows or check e-mail or other programs nearly 37 times an hour, new research shows. The nonstop interactivity is one of the most significant shifts ever in the human environment, said Adam Gazzaley, a neuroscientist at the University of California, San Francisco.

“We are exposing our brains to an environment and asking them to do things we weren’t necessarily evolved to do,” he said. “We know already there are consequences.”. . .

A portion of the brain acts as a control tower, helping a person focus and set priorities. More primitive parts of the brain, like those that process sight and sound, demand that it pay attention to new information, bombarding the control tower when they are stimulated.

Researchers say there is an evolutionary rationale for the pressure this barrage puts on the brain. The lower-brain functions alert humans to danger, like a nearby lion, overriding goals like building a hut. In the modern world, the chime of incoming e-mail can override the goal of writing a business plan or playing catch with the children.

“Throughout evolutionary history, a big surprise would get everyone’s brain thinking,” said Clifford Nass, a communications professor at Stanford. “But we’ve got a large and growing group of people who think the slightest hint that something interesting might be going on is like catnip. They can’t ignore it.”

From a spiritual perspective, the dangers of multitasking, of this constant barrage of information and stimulus, is clear. How can we “be still and know God” if we cannot *ever* be still? How can we silence our thoughts long enough to hear God? How do we protect that part of our lives which opens our heart and soul to a greater spiritual connection with God – when we are writing articles (or even devotions), listening to conversations in the hall and checking our text messages all at the same time?

Carve out some technology-free zones in your life, some quiet spaces – or even conversation spaces. Put down the phone. Turn off the TV. Step away from the tablet and see what God might have in store for you!

Let us pray:

Lord God, you call us to set aside our worries and distractions, to focus on the one most important thing: You! Help us to step away in prayer, in retreat, in time with nature, in the simplicity of a family walk. Help us to be still and know you.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Friday, March 11: 5 Hours a Day?

Text for today: Proverbs 14:18

The simple are adorned with folly, but the clever are crowned with knowledge.

OK. You knew it was coming. If we are going to talk about simplicity, we *have* to address screen time – that huge black box in your great room that sucks up *hours* of your time without you even recognizing it. Or perhaps you aren't a TV watcher – perhaps you get sucked into the black hole of Facebook or Pinterest or YouTube or . . . (name your favorite site) instead.

Screen time can be addictive – it numbs our human thought and experience by drawing us into the lives of others. That's the definition of escapism – and a little escapism is a good thing. It's fine to unwind at the end of the day being entertained by the media.

BUT – there is definitely too much of a good thing. According to Nielsen, the average American watches more than five hours of television every day. FIVE HOURS, every day! That's over a 150 hours a month, 1,825 hours a year. So in a 10 year period, the average American will spend 2 of those years watching TV – sitting, staring at a black box, for 2 out of 10 years. (By the way, average Americans only spend 18 minutes a day on organizational, civic, and religious activities. Check this for [the whole picture](#).)

Now, if you're like me, you shake your head and think: "Well, I don't waste *that* much time. I'm sure I only watch an hour or two." So here's the challenge: for the next 2 weeks, (between now and Good Friday) keep a log of your family's TV watching (including video games and leisure computer time). No, it won't make you the most popular parent on the block, but let's do it anyway. Let's see how much of our time we spend staring at a screen.

Then, when we are as shocked as I fear we'll be (myself very much included), it will be time to make some choices. Are we actively engaged in living the life for which we have been created, or are we spending our time watching other people live instead? Is this *really* how we want to use the limited hours of our lives? Is this *really* how God wants us to use the limited hours of our lives?

Let us pray:

Lord God, help us to face the folly of our lives and to be disciplined enough to do something about it. Crown us with knowledge, truth, meaning and purpose, that we will not waste this precious gift of life you've given us. Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Saturday, March 12: The Busy Addiction

Today's text: I Kings 19:11-13

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah heard God, not in wind or earthquake or fire – but in the sound of sheer silence. One has to quiet one’s soul to hear sheer silence.

In an article on [being addicted to busy-ness](#), Dr. Lissa Rankin talks about numbing behavior we use as armor against vulnerability (quoting [Brené Brown’s](#) work). She writes:

And lest you think numbing doesn’t apply to you, because you’re not hooked on cocaine or alcohol, she (Brown) clarifies by saying, “One of the most universal numbing strategies is what I call crazy-busy. I often say that when they start having 12-step meetings for busy-aholics, they’ll need to rent out football stadiums. We are a culture of people who’ve bought into the idea that if we stay busy enough, the truth of our lives won’t catch up with us.”

As a culture, we shame people who are addicted to drugs and alcohol, but somehow we’ve normalized—we even praise—busyness addiction. But are we really doing ourselves any favors by staying so busy?

Facing the Truth

When I get off the hamster wheel of busyness, I’m forced to notice what comes up for me when I’m not busy. . .What’s left in the silence are the things I don’t necessarily want to look at:

- Like my flailing marriage.
- Or the fact that I feel shame around how I’m missing out on some of Siena’s sweetest childhood moments because my job requires travel.
- Or how uncomfortable I am with feelings of boredom.
- Or how afraid I am of being ordinary.
- Or how I tend to feel unworthy and unlovable unless I’m overachieving.
- Or the fact that my mother isn’t getting any younger and I don’t get to see her very often, and I wonder if I’m unconsciously pulling away from her because I’m terrified of losing her one day so I’m practicing what Brené would call “dress-rehearsing disaster.”
- Or how uncomfortable I am with realizing that, although a lot of people online care about what I have to say, I’m not very good at cultivating and sustaining lasting relationships with real people who really know me and love me.

- Or how restless I feel when I'm not making myself feel more worthy by doing something to help others.
- Or how lonely I often feel, even when I'm surrounded by a crowd of people.

If our call to *Simplify* is ultimately about knowing God and being known by God, letting ourselves be vulnerable before God, ourselves and others, is critical. It's time to stop numbing ourselves through our addiction-du-jour: drugs, alcohol, food, TV, busy-ness. It's time for spiritual courage.

Let us pray:

Lord God, in our vulnerability, in our fear, in our restlessness and longing, pour your Holy Spirit into us. Remind our souls that "you formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Psalm 139). Because of your love, we are enough.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

P.S. Some folks apply this call to *Simplify* in even more radical ways. We'll look at those next!

Sunday, March 13: Getting Radical Tiny House

Today's text: Luke 12:16-21

Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Our Music Director Jon Arnold is very interested in the Tiny House movement (his wife says he's obsessed!) Yes, you read correctly – our 6+ foot tall Music Director is interested in living small! Here's a bit of our Q&A:

What's so intriguing about tiny living?

I just find it appealing, the efficiency of space and everything. I like the idea of only using the space that you need. It's not important to be small, but to not over-consume, to not use more than you need.

And why is that important to you?

Humanity is taking over the earth. So much space is taken up by buildings and spaces and storage spaces. In our modern society, success is heavily tied to the size of one's home or one's collection of stuff. If we lived more “tiny”, there would be so much more untouched and undeveloped land, which now is taken up by housing and retail. It's important for me to connect with untouched land because it connects with my soul somehow.

Are there other aspects related to going small that intrigue you?

Once you get down to how much space you need, it forces you to only have the stuff you need. It's an important part of avoiding consumerism, because how much we consume impacts others. It also forces more efficient use of utilities: some homes use single propane tanks or refillable containers for water – you're constantly conserving your resources. Many also run on solar power, so they use renewable energy.

And how does this fit in with your faith?

For me, it comes down to stewardship of creation- our call to take care of the earth that God has made for us. It connects with our call to not worship our stuff, which can be an idol and a vice. But mostly, it goes back to stewardship of creation. This earth is a gift, and I want to take care of it. For me, it's a part of my personal morality and what I feel is important.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you place in our hearts values and convictions about the ways we are called to live. Help us to listen to your Holy Spirit at work in our lives, and to have the courage to follow your guidance. Amen.

Monday, March 14: Getting Radical 333

Today's text: 1 Peter 3:3-4

Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; 4rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight.

Donna Priestly, a member of Cross of Life. She is *always* well dressed, looks put-together, and attractive. And she wears the same thing every day! Black pants, white tops and any number of colorful sweaters and scarves. This simplistic wardrobe came about when her late husband was in the hospital for an extended period of time. She just realized that she didn't have time or energy to worry with clothing – so she chose her basics and moved on to more important things.

Years later, she still gets excited about how freeing it is to keep things simple. She gave away most of her clothes, all but a few important pieces of jewelry, and now simply accessorizes with her scarves. “It’s very freeing” she said, “to get up in the morning and not have to decide what to wear. I don’t have to shop very often, I don’t waste my money on costume jewelry, I just get up and go. The freedom is great!”

With all due respect to those individuals who strongly express their individuality through their clothes, Donna is not alone. *Many* have found such freedom in limiting their clothing options. Freed from taking care of, buying, and storing their clothes, they instead wear just a few items (usually ones they love), and wear them well.

On her web-site [be more with less](#), Courtney Carver describes Project 333, in which one chooses to wear only 33 items of clothing for a 3 month period (underwear, pajamas, and work-out gear don't count.) She writes:

When I created Project 333 . . . My motives had very little to do with clothes. I just wanted some peace.

- I wanted a break from the excess.
- I wanted relief from running late in the morning after trying on several outfits.
- I wanted to feel good in my clothes.
- I wanted to stop obsessing over what I was going to wear to work, to dinner, to an event.
- I wanted to stop feeling like I didn't have enough . . . like I wasn't enough.

The average woman owns \$550 in clothing that has never been worn. We wear 20% of our clothing 80% of the time, and 100% of our wardrobe gets 100% of our attention, emotion, space, and time. Don't you want some peace?

Organizing your closet year after year, or season after season is just a band-aid for a much larger problem. We have too much. We have way more than we need and have been led to believe that we still don't have enough. We don't have the right shoes, a trendy coat for the season, the perfect little black dress, or the latest and greatest handbag. Between constantly comparing, attractive advertising campaigns, and ridiculously low fast fashion prices, we just add, and add, and add. And it's never enough.

You'll never find something to wear that makes you feel beautiful, smart, or loved if you don't believe you already are.

bemorewithless.com

Thousands of people from around the world who have tried the (Project 333) challenge have experienced benefits like . . .

- saving money
- more space
- easier mornings
- more compliments
- inspiration to simplify everything else
- more confidence
- clarity about what really matters.

Those are all great benefits, but the one compelling reason to simplify your wardrobe is simply for some peace. You deserve some peace.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you clothe us with the inner beauty of your love. Help us set aside the foolish ways of the world, to take hold of the life that really is life.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Tuesday, March 15: Getting Radical Food

Today's texts: 1 Corinthians 10:31 and Isaiah 11:6-9

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

*The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

*They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

Our Music Director Jon Arnold shares his perspective on simplicity regarding food.

As Americans, living in the relatively affluent society that most of us are blessed with, we have so many options when it comes to food. If we choose wisely, that's a great thing! There are so many good choices we can make. On the flip side, there are also a lot of bad choices out there. Luckily, there is growing awareness

of the harmful effects of processed foods, high amounts of sugar, and other nutritional hazards.

“So, how does this relate to our *Simplify* theme?” I can hear you saying. Part of the idea of simplifying is paring down aspects of our lives that have become more excessive than necessary. This applies to what we eat as well. In addition to the plethora of temptation in junk food, we struggle with gluttony. How many times have you judged the value of a meal (i.e. whether you got your money’s worth) on the *amount of food* rather than the *quality of food*? Remember that Romans 12 calls us to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”

Many of you know that I am vegan, meaning I don’t eat animal products (including eggs and dairy) as part of a broader lifestyle choice. Much of my conviction for that is compassion for animals, but a significant part relates to our *Simplify* theme. Remember food chains from school biology? Plants are primary sources of food, but when we try to gain the nutritional benefits through another consumer, much of it is lost. According to [the Christian Vegetarian Association](#), “converting plant foods to meat wastes 67-90 percent of the protein, up to 96 percent of the calories, and all of the fiber.” That seems pretty inefficient, and definitely not the simplest way to nourish our bodies. In fact, meat is often linked to harmful health issues like high cholesterol and diabetes. In 2009, [the American Dietetic Association took the position](#) that “appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.”

Additionally, did you know that [the animal industry is harmful to the environment](#)? A [2006 report from the United Nations](#) found that animal agriculture was the leading cause of climate change and air pollution: even more so than cars. This is because of the energy required to grow food for animals, transport them, and process them. Land used for grazing and production of food for animals [adds up to over 30% of the earth’s land surface](#). If you think about all of the food that is raised just for livestock consumption (37 percent of the world’s harvested grain, 66 percent of what is harvested in the US), so much of that could be used to feed those who are in need.

So, what can we do? We can examine our dietary habits and how they impact our bodies, our mind, and our world; then we can try to make better choices. For example, I recently stopped drinking coffee as a daily habit when I considered how that need for caffeine made me choose between having a headache all day or spending time and money on a beverage. My wife has a dietary rule of thumb to only eat till satisfied (i.e. not hungry), which is different from eating until you feel full. You could cut back on foods that are harmful to you. You could also cut back on foods that may be produced in harmful ways, such as trying a Meatless Monday, eating less meat, or considering going vegetarian.

Let us pray:

Lord God, help us to remember your call to be good stewards of your creation in all that we do. Help us to recognize those things that are harmful to us and our world, and give us courage and strength to change them.

Amen.

+ Jon Arnold +

For more information on vegetarianism from a Christian perspective, check out the Christian Vegetarian Association [website at christianveg.org](http://www.christianveg.org). They have several essays and a [26-minute video](#) with more information.

You can also check out documentaries like Forks Over Knives and Food, Inc. (both on Netflix).

Wednesday, March 16: Getting Radical Ecology

Today's text: John 1:3

"All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. "

Susan Hofer, COL member and chair of Adult Ministry, is an avid environmentalist, gardener and nature lover. In this devotion, she makes it clear that she loves nature because she loves the one who created nature.

Have you ever been on vacation, ever gazed at a sunset, sunrise or midday sky, looked out over the ocean or from atop a mountain? Have you ever been rendered speechless, wide-eyed and mute, by the sheer beauty you see? Look around. See the shades of green, from the wintered evergreen to the spring foliage just peeking out. The variations of blue in a lightly clouded sky, browns, grays, pinks and yellows. Shapes, shadows, highlights. Just be still and look.

My sister once gave a devotion, during which she showed a clay “masterpiece” one of her adult sons had created in art class in elementary school. She explained that she does not treasure this piece because of how it looks; she treasures this piece because she loves the one who made it.

God created our world and everything that is in it. Do we love God enough to treasure His creation? No, I’m not talking about holding on to everything that we own. I am talking of the world around us, the world that is ours for free, anywhere and everywhere, any time and every time. There is so much beauty in our life, beauty that He gave because He first loved.

How can we better care for His world, His creation, the masterpiece we love because He made it?

I don’t know how to solve all of the environmental and ecological problems of our earth and don’t know anyone who could actually do so on this planet. What I do know is that I can take small steps on a daily basis to make a difference.

Without doubt, we have read, heard and recited numerous “to do’s” to improve the planet. But the real question is, “Do I love the Creator of this world enough to help His creation?”

Let us pray:

Our Loving Father, what response could be more fitting than simply, ‘Thank You.’ You created a magnificent place for us to live. Help us, Lord, to appreciate Your gifts and to honor You in how we care for them. Amen.

+ Susan Hofer +

Thursday, March 17: Getting Radical Ecology

Today's text: Psalm 24:1

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

Susan Hofer writes:

We are living on this earth, the one He created; we are the caretakers of His creation. We will be held accountable for how we have protected and used His blessings and gifts. Think about that for a moment because this is a concept to be grasped.

Can I, just a single person, make a difference? I can!

Reduce, reuse, recycle. Designate a day as drive-free. carpool, organize trips to include multiple stops in the same area. Grow a garden. Compost. Don't use herbicides or pesticides. Use non-GMO, organic seeds and plants. Shop local at Farmer's Markets.

Relating to Simplicity, DONATE! Get our "stuff" into the hands of someone who needs it and will use it. Many resources used in production of food, clothing and goods are finite. If we reduce the need to produce these things, we reduce the use of the resources.

There are so many things changing so quickly in our world; so many of those things that are changing spark more changes and consequences yet unknown.

The earth and everything and everyone in it ARE the Lord's! We are stewards of His possessions and stewards of His people. Simplifying give us more time, more rest, more focus, more energy to do what we are called to do – care for His children, His creation, His gifts!

Let us pray:

Lord, You are Lord of our lives, Lord of all we have, and Lord of who we want to be. Guide us, strengthen us, empower us to always see what you are showing us.

Keep Your goals ever before us. Thank You for all of Your many blessings, especially Your Son. Amen.

+ Susan Hofer +

Friday, March 18: Getting Radical Spiritual Disciplines

Today's text: Hebrews 4:12-13

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

I have had several occasions to attend prayer retreats at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers. While you are there as their guest, you have the opportunity to participate in the daily prayer services with the monks. These monks commit themselves to a life of contemplation and silence, and their days constantly alternate between work and prayer. Each day there are at least five prayer services, beginning with Vigils at 4:00 a.m. It is quite an experience to sit in the Abbey Church in the proximity of men who have made this their life's vocation and to join them in their prayers and chanting of the Psalms.

While I confess that I don't always make it to Vigils, I am always surprised at how quickly I adapt to the cycle of their day. It can take a while to mentally slow down and adjust to the silence, but the simple rhythm of prayer and work (actual work for the monks; study and reflection for the guests) becomes refreshing and comforting and allows me to pay closer attention to my walk with God. In fact, when I leave the monastery to drive home, it is quite disconcerting to go back into the busyness and noise of the world.

By now, I hope you have picked up on the fact that simplifying our lives is not just an end in and of itself. In the forward to Marjorie J. Thompson's book, [*Soul*](#)

Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, author and teacher Henri Nouwen makes the following comment about the spiritual need for simplicity:

Our busy lives make it hard for us to create free time or space for God ... (T)he disciplines of the spiritual life are meant to offer creative boundaries to that empty space within and among us, so that we can acknowledge it without fear and allow God to transform there our stony hearts into hearts of flesh. Spiritual disciplines are nothing more and nothing less than ways to create a room where Christ can invite us to feast with him at the table of abundance.

Pursuing the vocation and spiritual discipline of a monk may be a bit radical, particularly if you aren't Catholic! But there are a variety of spiritual disciplines that we can practice in our lives: prayer, worship, fasting, contemplation, self-examination, and hospitality, each with a host of resources available in bookstores and online.

One spiritual discipline in particular that illustrates both the challenge and opportunity that these disciplines pose for us is that of spiritual reading. Marjorie Thompson defines spiritual reading as reading scripture in a way that is "reflective and prayerful" and is concerned "not with speed or volume but with depth and receptivity." She goes on to describe the risks and rewards of reading scripture in this way:

As the "sword of the Spirit," God's Word reveals us truthfully to ourselves and lays us open to radical transformation at those points of our unlikeness to Christ. The simultaneous comfort and discomfort of this nakedness before God's discerning eye is well captured in Psalm 139: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me ... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"

As we seek to simplify our lives in order to create more space from God, we are then challenged to pursue more spiritual discipline in our lives. And it can be challenging. But it can also be a source of transformation and blessing as we grow closer to the God who loves us.

Let us pray:

Lord, you have indeed searched us and you know us, and still you love us and are present with us. Give us the courage to pursue your ways so that we might know you better and love you more dearly.
Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Saturday, March 19: Getting Radical Fasting

Today's text: Matthew 4:1-4, 11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ... Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Yesterday's devotion talked about the spiritual discipline inherent in the life of a monk, whose daily routine alternates between prayer and work. And admittedly adopting the lifestyle of a monk would be a bit extreme for most of us. But pursuing spiritual discipline in our lives can challenge us and transform us in our quest to grow closer to God.

One of the oldest of the spiritual disciplines is fasting, and it is one with which we don't have much experience as modern-day Christians. Although hunger is a reality for many people today, most of us reading this devotion are surrounded by an abundance of food and live in a culture that encourages us to eat for pleasure as well as nourishment. In her book, [*Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*](#), the Rev. Marjorie J. Thompson describes our estranged relationship with fasting this way:

Some of our suspicions about fasting may simply be a rationale to cover deeper anxieties. In a land where food is so abundant that we can both glorify and trivialize it, we have developed a horror of being without it. Advertisements

bombard us with images of food. ... Like the noise we have become accustomed to, or the frenetic busyness of our schedules, food is taken for granted as a constant in our lives. The very idea of intentionally being without it for even a day may threaten some of the unconscious assumptions on which our lives are built. This is precisely why fasting remains so relevant for people of faith today.

Fasting provides a very tangible way of drawing attention to how connected we are to the material world around us and how excessive those attachments can become. As Thompson points out, “How often have we neglected to remember God’s presence when we would never consider neglecting to eat!”

Thompson’s book gives some good tips and advice for people who have never fasted before and would like to experiment with it. I have a copy of the book and would be glad to loan it to anyone who is interested in learning more about it. But Thompson also points out that “fasting” doesn’t have to be about food:

Our society voraciously consumes just about any and every thing: food, drink, sex, drugs, guns, cars, clothing, energy, gadgets, TV, computers, videos, gossip, fads, ideologies, programs, even work and leisure.

Perhaps food is not the issue for you. Perhaps something else distracts you from your relationships with God and with family and friends. In today’s text, Jesus combined prayer and scripture and fasting to overcome his temptations in the desert. All three of these can be tools we can use and through which the Spirit can work in us as we strive to be faithful followers.

Let us pray:

God of all people, you have given us many good gifts and so often we turn your gifts into objects of our obsessions. Fill us with your Spirit, that we might enjoy your creation and your gifts without harming ourselves and others.

Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Sunday, March 20: Connect to Cross – Renunciation

Today's text: II Corinthians 9:7-8

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

In his book [Giving to God](#), seminary professor Dr. Mark Allan Powell describes a time in college when he attended a Christian coffee house where a visiting evangelist was speaking. The evangelist said: “If you really want Jesus to be first in your life, then you need to get rid of whatever is second.”

In response, Powell, a self-professed “Jesus freak”, decided that since his record collection was his most prized possession, that he would give it all away as an act of renunciation – and act of worship of his God. And while he later had great concern for the theology behind what the evangelist had told him (not to mention the ways that many “preachers” have taken advantage of people using such a plea), none-the-less, he does not regret his decision that day. He writes:

Over the years, I have heard dozens of more respectable stories from people who have been moved by their love for Christ to give up something they loved. I remember a couple who had saved money for a cruise and then decided to cancel the trip and use the money to repair a van for a team of traveling missionaries. I know someone who decided (at the store) that she would forgo the large-screen TV she'd selected and give the money to a seminary scholarship. And my heart was touched when my own son called from college one year to say that he wanted us to donate whatever money we would have spent on his Christmas presents to a world hunger organization.

All of these stories have one thing in common: no one I have met who has made such a sacrifice has ever regretted it. Everyone always says the same thing: giving up something I valued *did* something to me – it transformed me, it affected me, it helped me to become the sort of person I wanted to be. And, for what it's worth, I can testify to this myself. It would be easy for me to dismiss the great record giveaway as an uninformed surge of adolescent piety

but I have never regretted it. I gave up something I loved as an act of devotion for Christ and it bonded my heart to him and helped me love him more.

Renunciation is not something we talk about often in the modern church, but it is certainly a part of the Biblical narrative. How could your attempts to *Simplify* be connected to this ancient spiritual practice? Can you imagine yourself intentionally divesting yourself of something you love for the sake for the Gospel? How do you think that might change you? How does that connect with Christ's sacrifice on the cross?

Let us pray:

Lord God, help us to consider the ways we may connect with you on a deeper level to bond our hearts to you. Give us the insight to see our calling and the courage to choose a better way.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

Monday, March 21: Connect to Cross – Humility

Today's text: Philippians 2:5-8

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Humility is not a trait that is held in high regard in this day and age. Think about the heroes in our movies and TV shows. Think about who gets the most attention from the media in political debates and races. Think about the qualities that get the most attention in our sports stars. Humility is likely not a trait to which any of these celebrities and leaders aspire.

Sadly, I often found this to be true in the process through which most churches call their pastors. After graduating from seminary in 2009, I tried to get the attention of numerous pastor search committees and had an opportunity to sit down and talk with a handful of them. These search committees were all sincere and well-intentioned in their efforts. But even given the nature of the pastoral positions they were trying to fill, being humble was not an asset in this process. Generally speaking, they wanted me to toot my own horn more than they wanted me to be humble and self-deprecating.

And yet I am struck by the incredible act of humility shown by the person of Jesus Christ in coming to be with us in the flesh. How can we even imagine Jesus being a part of the Godhead and then taking on the restrictions, the limitations, of human flesh? And our Savior did so voluntarily, even to the point of death, as the passage from Philippians says.

As you consider the magnitude of this act of grace on the part of Jesus, also consider that the Apostle Paul calls us to have that same mind in us “that was in Christ Jesus.” Wow! That’s a tall order and certainly one we can never fulfill on our own. But it underscores for me the need to make more time, to make more room in my life for Christ. And it underscores the importance of this Lenten focus on simplifying and decluttering our lives so we do have space in our lives and in our hearts and in our minds for the Savior who did not hesitate to humble himself for us.

In what areas of your life is it easy to be humble? In what areas is humility a challenge for you? Given our culture’s focus on self-gratification, what are some steps you can take to have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus?

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, help us to appreciate the sacrifice you made for us. As we strive to live faithful to your call, helps us to demonstrate humility and mercy with those with whom we come in contact, and help us to be conscious of when our behavior does not demonstrate your love.

Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Tuesday, March 22: Connect to Cross – Obedience

Today's text: Matthew 26:36-42

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."

Have you ever felt like there was something you knew you needed to do, but you really, really did not want to do it? It may have been work-related. Or had something to do with school. Or it may have involved some situation within your family that needed to be dealt with but you really wished someone else would step up and do it.

Our faith sometimes calls us to do difficult things. Whether it's adjusting a behavior that doesn't represent Christ well, or being loving or kind or gracious to someone who hasn't been kind to us, or following a particular path in life that is challenging in any number of ways, God's call on our lives gives us plenty of opportunities to be obedient.

The account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest shows us the ultimate example of being obedient. It is difficult for us to grasp the concept of Jesus being fully human and fully divine. Nonetheless, we believe that he was so. And as such, it would have been difficult for the humanity of Christ to have faced the suffering and pain of Holy Week. "I am deeply grieved," Jesus said. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me," Jesus prays. But ultimately, Jesus obeyed, and through his sacrifice, wonderful things happen.

For me, following a call to ministry was a path I was reluctant to follow. I didn't feel qualified. I didn't feel worthy of the call. I wasn't sure I wanted the demands and responsibilities that came with it. While reading [Hearing God's Call](#), by the Rev. Dr. Ben C. Johnson, I came across a poem that made an impact on me. It is based on the story in John 3 where Jesus tells Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." And a portion of the poem says this:

Put yourself into the path of the wind, Nicodemus.
Bright leaves will dance before you.
You will find yourself in places
You never dreamed of going;
You will be forced into situations
You have dreaded
And find them like a coming home.

You will have a power you never had before, Nicodemus.
You will be a new man.
Put yourself into the path of the wind.

Being obedient to God's call can be like that. The wind of the Spirit can blow us to some unexpected places and it can leave us feeling disoriented at times. And that can make it hard to be obedient. But know that the Spirit goes with you. And you just may be surprised at where you end up when you are obedient to God's will.

Let us pray:

O God our vision and the light unto our path, we confess that we are sometimes hesitant to be obedient to your call on our lives. Help us to be faithful to you. Give us courage to follow the path that you set before us. And guide us each step along the way.

Amen.

+ Pastor David +

Wednesday, March 23: Connect to Cross – Amazing Grace

Today's text: Colossians 3:15-17

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

While there are many areas in which Lutherans and Presbyterians think alike, one of the most important for me is that both denominations emphasize that we are saved by grace through faith. That God loves us and sent his Son to be with us and provide a way for us to experience wholeness is truly an amazing gift of grace.

That, of course, raises the question, if we are saved by grace, why then do we need to concern ourselves with doing good deeds? To put it in more religious terms, if we are made righteous by grace, why bother with performing righteous acts? And for both Lutherans and Presbyterians, the answer is because these acts of righteousness are the appropriate way of expressing our gratitude to God for all that God has done for us. We do good deeds and we act in loving ways towards others not to earn God's favor, but as a way of saying "thank you" to God.

John Calvin, the sixteenth century reformer who has been a great influence on Presbyterian doctrine, described human works as acts of worship and service. Calvin wrote, "Now he who merely performs all the duties of love does not fulfill them ... but he, rather, fulfills them who does this from a sincere feeling of love."

Lent is a season of self-examination; a time when we look at our lives not so much to despair over our shortcomings but to remind ourselves of how much we need the saving grace that Jesus provides. And during this Holy Week, when we meditate on the suffering that Christ endured and the price that Christ paid in order for us to be made righteous, we are indeed filled with gratitude and stand in awe of the love of Jesus Christ. More than any other time of the year, it brings home the admonition from the Apostle Paul, "And whatever you do, in word or

deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

As we head into Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and as we anticipate the celebration of Easter Sunday, I pray that your worship will ignite in you a wellspring of gratitude. And may that gratitude flavor and enrich all that you do, in word and in deed, as you give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us pray:

Savior of the world, be with us this day. Remind us of the price you paid for us to be made righteous in your sight. Remind us of our need for your grace in our lives. And help us to be thankful in all things and to live gracious and holy lives. Amen.

+ Pastor David +

March 24: Connect to Cross – Maundy Thursday

Today’s text: [Matthew 26:26-29](#)

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

In reference to the crucifixion of Jesus, I once heard a pastor say: “Even if you were the only person alive, Jesus would still have died for you.”

It’s an interesting perspective – that God loves us, each of us, as individuals. I find myself more comfortable thinking in terms of “God so loved the world” or “God came that humanity might have life” rather than the individual. But there are those moments when we feel so distanced from God, when we struggle to find hope and meaning that we need to hear precisely what this

pastor said: “Even if you were the only person alive, Jesus would still have died for you.”

That thought often comes to mind when I am distributing Holy Communion, saying “The body of Christ given for you.” I really mean that. Yes, I say it about 250 times per Sunday, but I do really mean that. God really means that – that this body of Christ was given FOR YOU – out of love for you, out of concern for your salvation, out of a desire to connect with you on a deeper basis.

So much of our society is built on trying to have enough, be enough, or feel enough. In this holy meal, Jesus reaches down to us and says: “Enough.” Because I made you and because I love you, YOU ARE ENOUGH.

To *Simplify* is to celebrate enough – that God’s grace is sufficient.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you invite us to the greatest banquet of all time, a feast of your love. On this night that we commemorate your last supper with your disciples, satiate our hunger with your love.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

March 25: Connect to Cross – Good Friday

Today’s text: Matthew 27:22-56

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build

it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

If you find yourself trying to silence your shame, guilt or self-doubt, just read this passage. Jesus died to free you from your sins. To *Simplify* is to accept that Christ’s reconciling grace is more powerful than any sin you have done. Period.

Let us pray,
Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Grant us peace.
Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

March 26: Connect to Cross – Holy Saturday

Today's text: Matthew 27:57-66

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

Sometimes the only thing you can do is wait and see. In the silence between the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, his disciples were caught up in whirlwind of emotion. They were afraid of being arrested and punished like Jesus. They were grieving the loss of their friend and teacher. They were likely angry at Judas and the course of events. They were confused about what to do next, where to turn. And oddly enough, even though Jesus had told them that he would rise again, there are no recorded words that indicate that they had any hope of it happening. There was nothing to do but wait and see what would happen next.

Uncertainty is not embraced in our culture. We like to have instant information, complete control of outcomes, a crisp to-do list to manage all possible scenarios. But there are many times in life when that's just not possible. All you can do is wait – and trust. I call that time Saturday's Silence.

Let us pray:

Lord God, remembering Saturday's Silence, we ask that you would quiet our souls to trust in you. Just as you brought joy and victory to the disciples on Easter morn, help us to receive your many gifts each and every day.

Amen.

+ Pastor Terri +

March 27: Happy Easter

Today's text: Mark 16

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Christ Is Risen!

He Is Risen Indeed!

Alleluia!

Thank you for your participation in this process.

It has been a joy and challenge to write these devotions (and read all the books in preparation for the season.) But I truly feel called to make changes in my own life.

I pray that this year's journey to the cross has been both challenging and enlightening to you as well. I pray that through our call to *Simplify*, you have been inspired to choose a better way of life, to trust in God's all sufficient grace. I pray that through small discussion groups, you have increased the depth of your friendships within the congregation. I pray that you have taken some time to slow down, to be still and know God. And I pray that your spiritual growth will continue – beyond Lent in the next season of your life.

May God richly bless your Easter celebration!

For He Is Risen!
He Is Risen Indeed!
Alleluia!

+ Pastor Terri +

PS. Some small groups will continue studying this and other topics. If you'd like to join one, just let us know in the church office!