

Devotions – January 18-24, 2015
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Sunday, January 18

Read: Matthew 16: 13-19

Text: **“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”**

Jesus asked an interesting question: Who do people say that I am? The disciples heard positive views, ‘He is Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist or one of the prophets.’ But now Jesus got to the important question: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ The disciple Simon boldly declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Savior King dear to the heart and faith of Israel. Jesus responded three ways: Simon’s confession was a blessing from God; Jesus gave Simon the nickname ‘Peter’ or rock; and Jesus will build his church on this ‘rock’, and the powers of death (Hades) cannot overcome it.

The church calendar lists today as the “Confession of St. Peter”. We learn from the text that our faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, is a gift from God. Remember how Luther stated it in the Catechism, the explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel,....kept me in the true faith....just as he makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” We ever need to hear the good news of Jesus, trusting the Holy Spirit to do gracious work and keep us faithful.

It is obvious the church of Jesus Christ is made up of imperfect people. It is all too easy to find fault and fear the future. But let us not forget the powerful gift of grace Jesus gives his struggling church: victory over the powers of sin, death, and devil.

Today begins the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”. Travel through even small towns and you will see a variety of Christian church denominations; sometimes churches are within a couple of blocks of each other. In spite of different worship styles and polity we are unified by our common, true faith in Jesus, ever thankful that flesh and blood is not the guarantee of such faith but our gracious God.

Let us Pray: *Almighty God, who inspired Simon Peter, first among apostles, to confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of the living God: Keep your Church steadfast upon the rock of this faith, so that in unity and peace we may proclaim one truth and follow the one Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



Monday, January 19

Read: John 4: 1-6

Text: “**But he had to go through Samaria**”

This year the theme of the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” is taken from the gospel of John, chapter 4, “Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’.”

In this chapter we find Jesus in conversation with a woman at the well. Throughout this week of devotions we will take a closer look at the fourth chapter of John.

Jesus was traveling home. He had been in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. The shortest route from the south (Judea) to his home in the north (Galilee) would mean travel through the region of Samaria. Since travel was by your own two feet, you would seek the shortest way. Jesus was Jewish, and for some Jews Samaria posed a problem. You may be aware that there were bad feelings between Jews and Samaritans. They even had rival temples. The Gospel of Luke even tells of a Samaritan village that refused to welcome Jesus and his disciples, prompting some of them to suggest fire and brimstone from heaven. But Jesus would have nothing to do with such vindictive nonsense.

If Samaria bothered Jesus he could have taken a longer route to bypass the territory. But Jesus ‘had to’ go through Samaria, not for the sake of his feet, but to give the gift of faith.

As the church led by Jesus, we have a common faith and a common mission. This mission will mean we are to go to places we may rather avoid. This could mean on a personal level seeking to heal a broken relationship with a family member or neighbor. As a congregation it may mean seeking to become intentional about seeking to contact members who have been estranged from the church. We are challenged to “go through Samaria” and not choose the way of avoidance. Jews and Samaritans had preconceived judgments about each other, negative and nasty. This is true today about people we don’t understand. We can have wrong ideas about other churches. We can use terms like ‘fundamentalist’, ‘catholic’, ‘liberal’, ‘conservative’ in ways that are unkind, forgetting that in our baptism into Jesus Christ, we are sons and daughters of our gracious God. There are always disagreements over issues, not only between denominations, but within them as well. But let us pray for the courage to “go to Samaria” and even in spite of differences, recognize brothers and sisters our Savior Jesus died and rose again to save.

Let us pray: *Loving Father, we thank you for sending Jesus to reveal that your will is not always the easiest path to take. Grant us courage for ministry not just to take care of our own, but to reach out to others we do not know. Instead of being frozen in judgments, let us be free to follow Jesus, even if it means to go to Samaria. Grant unity of faith and the strengthening of love among your people the church. Amen.*



Tuesday January 20

Read: John 4: 7-15

Text: Jesus said, “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

The Samaritan woman at the well must have had thoughts about the heat of the noon day sun getting the best of Jesus. She was surprised to hear a request for water from a Jewish man. Jesus would have to drink from her cup but the text said Jews and Samaritans do not share things in common. Then Jesus talked about giving her water, a different kind called “living water gushing up to eternal life”. Jesus didn’t even have a bucket. Then she sounded feisty wondering just who did Jesus think he was, someone greater than Jacob, patriarch, grandson of Abraham? The woman at the well was thinking of literal water available at Jacob’s well; Jesus was offering to quench her deeper thirst with the gift he could give, eternal life. This scene is reminiscent of the third chapter of John with the meeting between Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus. Jesus told him to see the kingdom of God one must be born again or born from above, a gift from God. Confused Nicodemus could only think second birth as a reentry into his mother’s womb. Jesus was tired and thirsty and he naturally asked for a drink of water. When one was thirsty on a hot day water was a precious gift necessary for life. Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for such a gift from Jacob’s Well but he would turn out to be the gift-bearer. Jesus spoke of the gift of God, living water that permanently satisfied a deeper thirst. Jesus was not talking about hydration, but the gift of salvation. In the gospel of John this is called eternal life. It is much more than what one can expect after death. Eternal life is fellowship with God, with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. Thirst is a powerful image of longing. The psalmist said our deepest thirst is for God, “As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God. I thirst for God, the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?” (Psalm 42)

The thirsty man at the well was none other than the presence of God, Jesus, the gift of God who gives living water, eternal life to quench our deepest thirst. Like the woman at the well, let us ask him, “Give me this water”.

Let us pray: Gracious God, the demands of daily life make us thirsty. You know our deepest thirst is for you and your faithful love. Thank you for sending Jesus, the well of forgiveness, mercy, and life that will never go dry. We pray, “Jesus, ever flowing fountain, give us water from your well. In the gracious gift you offer, there is joy no tongue can tell.” Amen.



Wednesday, January 21

Read: John 4: 16-26

Text: **“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”**

Our Synod has the recent theme consisting of three words: Welcome, Witness, and Worship. Jesus did a wonderful job illustrating all three.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman continue their dialogue. He asked her to call her husband and come back, presumably with him. The woman replied she was not married. Jesus said ‘You are right; you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband.’ This text has been misunderstood to say that the Samaritan woman is immoral and unworthy of Jesus. But

Jesus made no such judgment. There is no condemnation in his voice. Jesus showed that he was able to know her condition. Jesus has welcomed her and his gift of living water, which is eternal life, was ever provided. May the church be wary of jumping to judgments, gossip, and condemnations. The apostle Paul reminded us to “Welcome one another as God in Christ has welcomed you.”

The Samaritan woman was beginning to see Jesus as more than a tired and thirsty Jew; he is most certainly a prophet. It was the prophet’s job to give witness to God. Jesus did say that salvation was from the Jews. This should ever stop the church from intimating that Judaism is an inferior faith! The people of Israel were called and chosen by God to be a light of grace, mercy, and salvation for the world. Jesus spoke of God as her “Father”, a term of loving relationship for her and all who believe. Psalm 103 says “As a father has compassion for his children, so you have compassion for those who fear you, O Lord.”

Jesus spoke of worship as no longer tied just to Jerusalem and its Temple. Jesus has come as the presence of God, revealing the love of God for the world. Worship of God the Father is to be in ‘spirit and in truth’. Later in the Gospel of John the promise of the Holy Spirit was mentioned, to be given after Jesus was glorified. This glorification refers to Jesus completing our salvation through his death, resurrection, and ascension. True worship, guided by the Holy Spirit, brings us to the Father’s gift of the Son, Jesus, for in him is our salvation.

In this week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we pray to respect the mission of other denominations, for we share the common mission of welcoming sinners, and giving witness to the grace and forgiveness of Jesus. We pray for opportunities to worship together, worship in spirit and truth, thankful for God’s love for this world in need, love proven and revealed in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Let us pray: Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit who ever reveals Jesus through the Gospel, calling us to bring our burdened lives to him. Thank you for the good news that we are not enslaved to fears, but we belong to you as sons and daughters. Strengthen us as your Church, to be faithful with our common callings of welcome, witness, and worship. Amen.



Thursday, January 22

Read: John 4: 25-30

Text: **“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”**

I remember visiting an older Finnish-background couple when I served a parish in the U.P. It would not be long when the husband would call out to his wife, “Ma, put the coffee on!” Many good conversations would take place with a pot of coffee on the table.

Good conversation had taken place in the readings from the fourth chapter of John, and it all started with Jesus asking for a drink of water. The woman at the well has moved from an attitude of suspicion to expectant joy. Could this man really be the Messiah? She left her water jar to

return to the city. It is an interesting detail: at the moment she was not interested in water from Jacob's well; a different refreshment was reviving her faith. Jesus clearly identified himself as the Messiah, the Savior-King who would not demand a throne in Jerusalem or Rome, but humbly sit at Jacob's Well and offer to a woman in the midst of her daily chores the gift of living water or eternal life. The woman told her fellow citizens in the city, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" One may wonder just how long Jesus and the woman sat at the well! Jesus knew everything she had done. On the one hand it could be scary to think of conversation with Jesus, the Messiah who knows our past. But as the gospel of John said earlier, Jesus did not come to condemn but to save. Whatever the pain and failures of the past that may trouble us, Jesus' presence is a loving one, bringing the living water of his peace, true healing water.

Speaking of healing water, our baptisms in Christ Jesus call us to repentance every day; a joyful repentance because we can confess our sins and be confident Jesus has forgiven us. John the Baptist in the Gospel of John told his disciples to follow Jesus because he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Let us pray: Dear God you are all-knowing and it is sheer folly to hide our sinful condition from you. In your mercy you have provided a better way: to follow Jesus who gives living water, the refreshing promise of his life and love forgiving all sin and making us new. Thank you for the gift of baptism and the healing grace of daily repentance. Amen.



Friday, January 23

Read: John 4: 31-38

Text: **"My food is to do the will of him who sent me to complete his work."**

Over the years I have known a couple of basketball coaches who told their Middle School teams something like, "I expect you to live, eat, drink, and sleep basketball". In other words basketball is to become an all-consuming priority.

In today's reading Jesus said something similar. The disciples have returned from their food-shopping in the city. They urged him to eat something. Instead of eating whatever they offered Jesus said "I have food to eat that you do not know about." Poor puzzled disciples! They don't see any crumbs in Jesus' lap. So Jesus told them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." Throughout the Gospel of John Jesus would say he was no free-lancing prophet/preacher. He came to do God's appointed work. Jesus gave a summary statement of this later in the Gospel (chapter 12), "I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak as the Father has told me." Jesus' priority is to do God the Father's will. Jesus used another image, the in-gathering harvest, to encourage urgency. The harvest is ready Jesus said, referring to the Samaritan woman and the

people in her city. The followers of Jesus must be ready for sharing the gospel of Jesus' life, eternal life, inviting, gathering, and welcoming people for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was determined to complete God's work. Jesus would complete his work by his death on the cross. At his death Jesus' words in the Gospel of John are "It is finished." This means Jesus has completed his mission: he is the Good Shepherd who has offered up his life for the flock; Jesus is the seed that has fallen into the earth and died, yet will rise again and bear much fruit, and by being lifted up on the cross, Jesus will draw all to himself.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we are thankful for Jesus who completed your will on the cross, revealing love for the world and the gift of new life. As your church in the community, may the Holy Spirit inspire a renewed urgency for the mission of witness. Open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the ready harvest in our midst, people who must hear how much you love and care for them. Amen



Saturday, January 24

Read: John 4:39-42

Text: **"for we heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."**

Members of the church are encouraged to be witnesses for Jesus, but many find this role intimidating. Believe me, pastors do too! We are unsure what to say someone. True, some people are gifted with the role of evangelist. In my first parish a local agnostic would stop by for coffee. He wasn't interested in joining the church, but wanted me to use the church's copier to run off things for his business. On one visit I was surprised to hear him talk about a bus trip where he sat next to a man who shared his Christian faith. He was impressed by the man's passion and compassion. When I tried to tell him about God's love he rolled back his eyes and soon left! We all have the call to be evangelists, bearers of good tidings, from our baptism into Jesus Christ. Do not be discouraged by what you may have felt to be a "poor witness". The apostle Paul said whatever we do for the Lord is not in vain. Just think of the woman's testimony in today's reading, telling people to meet the Messiah, the one who told her everything she did. This may sound like an unusual way to introduce someone to Jesus, but people responded and went to see Jesus for themselves. Her testimony was not something memorized or mean-spirited, she was sincere in sharing what she knew to be good news, the Messiah who welcomed her and gave eternal life.

People came to see Jesus and they asked him to stay, and Jesus was with them for two days. Many more believed because of Jesus remaining and teaching God's gracious word. So may we be encouraged to speak of Jesus and his meaning for us, and invite people to our churches. Jesus continues to teach during the Sunday worship, reaching people through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

Our text ended with the proclamation that Jesus is the Savior of the world. Recently a poster arrived from Lutheran World Relief telling where all the quilts and other kits were distributed in 2014. The poster was large but I immediately cleared the bulletin board. I did so to honor the

parish quilters, for their quilts ended up in any of the nations listed. Quilts are distributed to many in need because we do believe Jesus is the Savior of the world. As this week of Prayer for Christian Unity ends, the distribution of quilts is an ecumenical affair. Quilts made in Lutheran churches are handled and distributed in places where other churches have a presence. Lutheran-made quilts are distributed through the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, and through Orthodox churches. We rejoice in Christian churches working together to minister the compassion of Christ, and we pray that such togetherness and cooperation increases.

Let us pray: Loving God, in our reading today the whole city came out to hear what Jesus had to say. Many came because of the witness of the woman at the well. Give us courage to witness; grant an opportunity to share the love of Jesus with sensitivity and care. We are thankful for all the quilters who share their love for the Savior of the world through their work. Bless the quilters so their world-bound work continues. Strengthen churches throughout the world to cooperate and truly be the presence of the compassion of Christ for those in need. Amen.

