

..... **Daily Devotions**
Devotions – December 31, 2017 – January 6, 2018
By Members of Pastor John Kuziej's
Lay School Class

Sunday, December 31, 2017

Texts:

Psalm 118:24: **“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”**

1 Thessalonians 5:1: **“Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you.”**

Another joyous celebration of the birth of Jesus has passed and here we sit looking at all our “stuff” and say ‘thank-you’. But what is the true gift we have received and continue to receive every day? Yes, let us not forget the most precious gift given to us through Jesus’ birth this season. Sometimes in our hectic daily lives it becomes so easy to forget to be grateful for all that we have been given from our heavenly Father. But let us also be grateful for the many ways our heavenly Father provides so we grow in spirit to become one with Christ. Make a resolution to set aside some quiet time in our minds and try this exercise in gratitude. Begin with the letter ‘A’ and go through the alphabet, naming one thing that we are grateful for on a daily basis (granted ‘Q’, ‘X’, and ‘Z’ maybe difficult, but that’s okay.) This gratitude list can be done during anytime of day, and perhaps it will help us to get out of ourselves for awhile and realize all that God has done for us and will continue to do. Try this exercise and see if it doesn’t lighten your heart to realize that you are indeed loved by God.

Steve Bergdahl, Eagle River, WI



Monday, January 1, 2018

Text: Luke 17: 11-19

Jesus asked, ‘Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?’

(Luke 17:17)

This text tells how one of the ten men cleansed of their leprosy came back to tell Jesus ‘thank you’ for healing him. And, this man didn’t just say a perfunctory thanks, but fell at Jesus’ feet in worshipful thanksgiving. Were the other nine so excited to get on with their lives after being

healed that they didn't stop to think what an amazing gift they had just received? Or did they focus only on fulfilling Jesus' command to show themselves to the priests so that they would once again be included in Temple worship and be culturally acceptable? It isn't to say the nine were not grateful. They probably were but they did not fully connect with the source of the gift they had been given and, because of that, they missed out on being richly blessed as the one man was when Jesus said to him, "Rise and go, your faith has made you well".

Gratitude is an attribute we are admonished to cultivate. As little children, we were encouraged to say thank you for presents and kindnesses. If our thank yous didn't develop into an attitude of gratitude, we end up missing out on a spiritual gift of great proportion. If we don't have a spirit of gratitude, our relationship to Jesus and others is not what it should be. Gratitude enables us to acknowledge the gifts we have received from God and then make us capable and willing to share them with others.

What is our sense of gratitude? Do we all too often simply mumble thanks when we do not feel we deserve the gift, or we do not think the gift was worth what we deserved? As we begin a New Year let us be thankful for the love of God which can never be broken, and therefore may our grateful hearts serve as a reflection of our love for God.

Anita Foss, Rhinelander, WI



Tuesday, January 2, 2018

Text: Matthew 6: 25-27

“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?”

I have always struggled with worry, even knowing the futility it involves. The toll of this mental stress can, at times, be too much to bear. Like a giant black hole that grows ever larger, it swallows us and shrouds us in darkness. “Don't worry, it will all work out” we are told, as if that will ease our minds. If it were only so simple!

This well-known passage from the gospel of Matthew helps frame our worry (or anxiety, concern, or even fear) as a lack of trust. Showing more trust is a positive response that empowers and brings us closer to the wonderful God who will provide for us. While I am still a grade-A

worrier, scripture passages like this help me see that worry is truly a futile response, a negative reaction to things that are often out of my control. We don't know what the future holds. But I trust that God does and that makes all the difference.

Let us Pray: *Loving God, we thank you for feeding us in body and spirit. Help us to continually trust in your will, as we look to Jesus Christ to be our guiding light on this unknown path of life. Amen.*

Matt Johnson, Rhineland. WI



Wednesday, January 3, 2018

Text: Matthew 5: 1-12

“Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them saying...”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” How many times have we read the Beatitudes and wondered at the mercy of our God who rules the world. Jesus tells us in his Sermon on the Mount that all will be made right before the Lord, every injustice in life.

Recently I have been reading “Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy” by Eric Metaxas. He quotes one of Bonhoeffer’s letters to his brother, “I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously.” Bonhoeffer repeatedly goes back to Matthew 5:1-12 throughout his theological studies to guide him through his own struggles in life.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, thank you for teaching us your ways from the Sermon on the Mount. May your words give us comfort and direction throughout our lives. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Patty Tarras, Clam Lake, WI



Thursday, January 4, 2018

Text: Romans 11: 34

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?”

My wife and I travel a lot by car and to pass the miles we have taken to listening to audio books. Recently we enjoyed a biography about a well-known brain surgeon written by his wife. She wrote that before her husband goes to bed each night he reads from Proverbs in the Old Testament. Upon hearing that my reaction was WOW! Arguably one of the smartest men in the world reads from the same book of the Bible every night.

Currently I find myself reading the book of Psalms for the third time in less than a year. Realizing this, my instant reaction was, “Why am I reading Psalms again? Using a calendar of daily designated Bible readings is the reason for reading Psalms again so soon. Along with the Psalms, Romans was also on my list and when reading Romans 11:34 (“For who has known the mind of the Lord”), the light kicked on! Admittedly, I will never be as smart as a brain surgeon, so maybe God was subtly telling me, “Hey, if one of the most intelligent men I ever created can read Proverbs every night, week after week, month after month, year after year, you can read Psalms again.” A smart person would and should take that advice.

Let us pray: Awesome God, grant us the grace we need in order to know your will, the wisdom to understand it, and the strength to carry that will out. In your Son Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Terry Tarras, Clam Lake, WI



Friday, January 5, 2018

Text: Matthew 20: 13-16

“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I now allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’”

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a landowner who recruits workers throughout the day to work in his vineyard. Before starting, the landowner and each laborer agree on a wage. All the workers stop working at the same time, and all get paid the same, since all had agreed to the same wage. The last laborers were paid first and the first ones, last. Disagreement broke out among the all-day laborers who thought they should receive more because they did more. The landowner did not meet their expectation. The landowner was not fair! However, the landowner had a different opinion: he is generous and, by choice, wanted to

treat each laborer the same, and who are the laborers to question the fairness of that compensation?

“That isn’t fair,” a child wails as she looks at the cake on her plate, ‘he got more than I did!’ . The classic lament of a child who, judging a situation and determining that she got shorted, protested with the judgment of unfairness, the underlying expectation being one of sameness. And now come the words of Jesus in this parable that show the landowner is fair, by a child’s standards, treating one and all the same, no matter how long they have worked. They all get the same size piece of cake. What happened to us that changed our perspective from a child’s view to a laborer’s view of the world? From the expectation of same rewards to the expectation of different?

First, judge not the size of your brother’s cake. We should appreciate with gratitude that which we have received and that which has been given. Our burdens will not be the same in life. Our challenge is to ask what it is that God invites us to do in order to make the best of life’s trials. If we look for the invitation in our unique set of circumstances, we won’t be judging portion size. The first laborers were looking at portion size, looking at other plates of cake, when paid last. But there is a more important reason that the first were paid last. Jesus was talking about the kingdom of heaven, which is nothing less that God’s love for us. In that kingdom, love assumes no judgments or favorites, neither is earned. It is freely and generously given, because that’s who God is. Love is the great equalizer. There are no social strata in the kingdom of heaven and thus the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. Love is the same wage for everyone. And that is fair! Life is not supposed to be fair, but the kingdom of heaven cannot be anything but.

Let us Pray: Thank you, Jesus, for the fairness of the Kingdom of Heaven. Help us to see your invitation in our circumstances on earth and therein find the blessings.

Donna Ahlberg, Iron River. MI



Saturday, January 6, 2018

The Epiphany of Our Lord

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:10-11)

This text, giving us the visit of the wise men, is often visualized by children in our Christmas programs. In my church at Christmas the wise men were played by the youngest children who wore their kingly crowns courtesy of Burger King. We like to sing the carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” But they were not kings, for St. Matthew used the word ‘magi’ meaning astrologers or those who study the stars. Although not found in the gospel reading, tradition gave the wise men names—do you know them? - a good trivial question! The names are fun to say, almost rhythmic: Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar. Their gifts were given meaning: gold for royalty, incense for divinity, and myrrh, an aromatic spice pointing to the cross and Jesus’ death (see John 19:39, Nicodemus brings a funerary mixture of myrrh and aloes for Jesus’ burial.)

The term “Epiphany” means a manifestation or a revelation of glory which caused the wise men to be overwhelmed with joy (literally “overjoyed with joy). The wise men were strangers, non-Jews, coming from some mysterious place in the East, looking for the King of the Jews, so why the joy? In the mystery of grace, the child Jesus must have been revealed to them as their Savior, or as we read in Luke’s gospel, a light of revelation for the Gentiles.

In Luke’s gospel we heard of a visitation by shepherds who reported to Mary the angel’s word of the Gospel to be found in a manger. The good news would not be revealed only for the financial or the fame-fortunate, but for common folk like shepherds. Now in Matthew’s gospel the wise men know the joy of being included in God’s plan manifested in Jesus, for God so loved the world.

We don’t hear of “King of the Jews” again until the cross. Pilate put this title on the cross of Jesus, “King of the Jews”. This was probably meant as mockery, but for the faithful Jesus is indeed king, the king of mercy, the assurance of God’s embrace and welcome, and the rule of steadfast love and the forgiveness of sins. The star of the Gospel word always stops over Jesus, pointing to our Savior, God-with-us, bringing great joy.

Prayer for Epiphany: O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth. Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

