

Devotions – February 23-29, 2020

By Evelyn Gathu

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Sunday, February 23, 2020

Text: James 1:27

“What God the Father considers to be pure religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.”

In high school, I was introduced to the poet Edgar A. Guest by Glenda Beck, one of our town librarians. I liked him so much that I read his entire collection of poetry. Though regarded as a rather folksy, sing-song rhyming poet of the past, I fell in love with his work. My favorite poem of his is called “The Cynic and the Doll.” In this poem, a young girl witnesses her dropped doll fall apart and break, and consequently, the whole role this doll played in her young life as an “alive” confidant of all her childhood dreams, secrets, and stories is broken. She is devastated. A cynic scoffs at the girl and berates her tears by saying, “This is a foolish thing you do. There’s merely wax and sawdust there.” Luckily another comes by the weeping child and asks her to “forget the sawdust” she has seen. He implores her to keep her love of dolls and he warns how reason is cold and when it invades “much that’s tender must depart.” He ends the poem with these lines: “’Tis well to love the good and true, But keep your dreams and fancies here, And never grow so wise that you, Are left with naught to do but sneer.”

That poem always brings me to my knees.

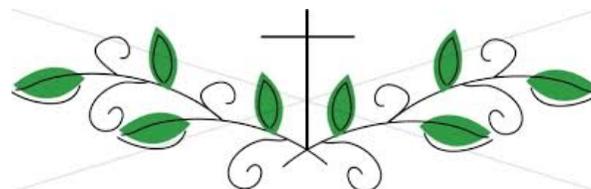
How do we keep ourselves from being corrupted by the world?

It is hard to believe sometimes and have faith when reality and truth can weigh in so heavily and so convincingly. Can we ever love our doll the same once we have seen it broken? I am not sure that we can, but I know that the “another” in the poem and God want us to.

For what it is worth, I recently watched *The Wizard of Oz* for the first time as an adult. They were playing it in our downtown theater, and I took my five-year-old boy to watch it with me. Even though I knew all about the truth behind the curtain—the wizard’s true identity—I enjoyed the show more than ever.

Perhaps we can overlook the truth.

Let us Pray: *Dear God, in these times when reality can be cold and invading, please help us to stay uncorrupted. Let us believe and have faith in you and in beauty and in everlasting hope. Amen.*



Monday, February 24, 2020

Text: Proverbs 3:27-28

“Whenever you possibly can, do good to those who need it. Never tell your neighbor to wait until tomorrow if you can help him now.”

Such sound advice. Easier said than done, right? It was for me.

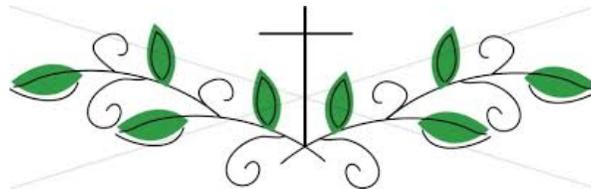
One of my dearest friends asked me for help about a year and a half ago, and I could not help her with what she asked. Looking back, I know I could not help her, but I regret what this action made me do. I felt guilt that I couldn't help her with her request, and that guilt led me to avoiding her. I think I avoided her because I felt she was unhappy with me for not being able to help her. I did not want that topic to come up again, so just like a kid, I avoided her.

Now this was bad business on my part. I should have not let that unfulfilled request cause me to distance myself from my friend. It created a block in our friendship which did keep me from helping my friend in many ways I could have, if I had been available.

My friend died about four months later. I have lost others in my life, but nothing quite hit me like her death. I felt such pain. It was as if someone stabbed me right in the chest, and I felt that way for almost a month after she passed.

This proverb reminds me that we should be present for our neighbors and loved ones, even when it is hard to be.

Let us pray: *Dear God, sometimes we are pulled in many directions to help others when we do not necessarily feel like doing so. Help us to make the time to help our friends when they ask for help, if it is something we can help them with. Amen*



Tuesday, February 25, 2020

Text: Genesis 27:26

“Rebecca said to Isaac, ‘I am sick and tired of Esau’s foreign wives. If Jacob also marries one of these Hittite girls, I might as well die.’”

For many years of my life, I was an overseas teacher. I taught English and Drama primarily, and I taught in all of these places: Michigan, Wisconsin, Taiwan, Syria, Alaska (on a fishing island), Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Venezuela. I have encountered many foreign people, well, foreign to me. However, being in their country I was the “foreigner.” This passage reminds me of something that happened to me when I was living in Syria.

I lived a short block away from a major intersection. One afternoon, I was walking past a taxi that had stopped, and a passenger was coming out of the backseat. I was practically struck to the ground by the smell that came out of that door—lilies. Lilies. The woman smelled like a big lily plant just like the ones that sat on the buffet in my mother’s dining room every Easter all of my life. You know that kind with that unmistakable lavender aluminum foil covering the actual pot. And then I looked at this woman. She was beautiful, young and thin. Her eye makeup was immaculate along with her rosy cheeks and lipsticked lips. Then I noticed how she was covered. She wore a designer hijab, and a long tan trench coat which is the customary dress of the Muslim women in Damascus.

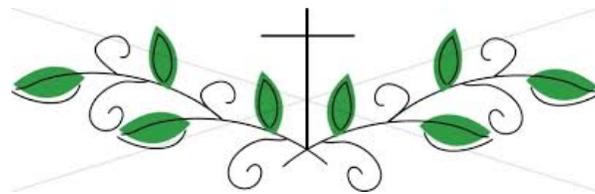
And all I could think after looking at her was, “How can you smell like my Easter?”

As if only Christians could lay claim to the smell of a lily.

I do not think of myself as a xenophobe, and yet there have been times in my travels when I am exactly that. My base thoughts and first reactions sometimes do classify and label others as “foreign,” with all of the negative connotations that word holds.

I know we are to love our neighbors, but I wish that love could come more quickly without preconceived notions, misunderstandings, and/or fear.

Let us Pray: Dear God, please help us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us learn to share this wonderful world you have made with our neighbors. Help us to live in peace. Amen.



Wednesday, February 26, 2020

Text: Leviticus 19:33-34

“Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would a fellow Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”

I think I am a pretty nice person. I would say I am friendly and congenial. I have the gift of gab, and I like people. Even so, sometimes my very own behavior astonishes me. I would like to confide in you, dear readers, a simple story that fills me with remorse.

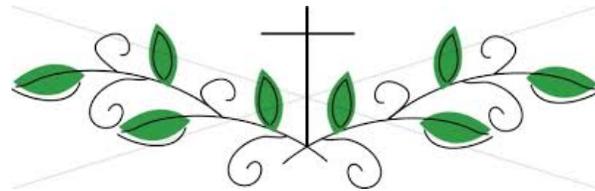
As I mentioned in yesterday’s devotion, I have spent many years living overseas—fourteen as a matter of fact. I know what it is like to feel like a foreigner.

That is why my actions in the following story still surprise me.

One day, in my email inbox, I received a one question survey from Twinings Tea. Now, I am a tea drinker. I have ordered from Twinings numerous times in the past, so that is why I am sure they had my email. The one question on the survey was: Which box do you prefer? They put before me two almost identical boxes of chamomile tea. The box was light blue, and the only difference between the two boxes was, one box had, in smaller print below the English labeling, Spanish labeling. I voted for the all English box. I have regretted that decision ever since. Many, many times living in foreign lands, I would be delighted if the product I bought had English labeling—especially when it came to medicines or beauty products. How could I be so selfish and callow to not extend the same decency to foreigners living in or visiting my very own country?

I have tried to figure out why I did what I did many times. I don't know. Is it because we are so bombarded with the evils of foreigners and immigrants from some of our politicians and news programs? I am not sure. I do know that it is something we have to change in ourselves. And I know if it is easy for someone like me, who has had so many amazingly wonderful experiences with foreigners, to not help our foreign visitors, citizens, and country-mates, then it is something that the average American does without even giving it a second thought. It is against God's commandments, and it is wrong. And I wager it is something most of us have done.

Let us pray: *Dear God, when we are confronted with "foreign," whether it is with people, food, language, or anything, open up our hearts O Lord. Help us to understand what it must feel like from the foreigner's perspective. Give us the power to overlook generalized prejudices and stereotypes and help us to see people as you see them, as your children. Amen*



Thursday, February 27, 2020

Text: Isaiah 4:1

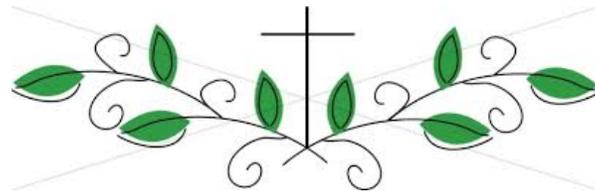
“When that time comes, seven women will grab hold of one man and say, ‘We can feed and clothe ourselves, but please let us say you are our husband, so that we won’t have to endure the shame of being unmarried.’”

I was a single woman for 39 years and eight months. I can relate to these women. There is a stigma surrounding singlehood. Many romantic comedies, such as *Bridget Jones’ Diary* make fun of it, and speaking from the other side—it is not really funny. I think many people would be much more secure with themselves if others were more accepting of lifestyles that are not the majority or mainstream. The women in this passage do not seem to be upset about their status of singlehood, and all the work that it requires. What is upsetting to them is that they have to say they do not belong. I know what this feels like. Listening to all your friends drone on and on about babies, bedtimes, bottles, and even diapers while feigning interest was an insurmountable task. I was out seeing the world, and I would return and meet with friends who would just

question me about why I couldn't find someone. As if it was my entire fault. If God can accept us, why can't others?

This whole passage has made me think of what other nonconformists must go through, in particular the LGBTTQQIAAP (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual) community. My mother and I were having a conversation in the car the other day, and we were spelling out the letters of this initialism, when my son shouted from the backseat, "Bad word Momma!" He thought it was bad of course because we were spelling it! All joking aside, it is very hard to be different in a world that has always revered the patterns of sameness. In the 31st chapter of Mark, we learn we must "love thy neighbor as thyself." By and large, we do not ridicule ourselves or hound ourselves with questions of why we are not like others. We often know that our differences are nothing we can help, so why do we do it to others?

Let us pray: *Dear God, help us to accept others. Let us not shame them for who they are. Help us to love everyone without question or pause. Amen*



Friday, February 28, 2020

Text: Psalm 91:7

"A thousand may fall dead beside you, then thousand all around you, but you will not be harmed."

Text: Psalm 91:14

"God says, 'I will save those who love me, and will protect those who acknowledge me as Lord.'"

Like many of you, as a child I went to Bible Camp. In particular, I went to Fortune Lake Lutheran Bible Camp. One summer when I was there, my cabin and another went on an overnight to Horse Race Rapids just south of Crystal Falls. For those of you who have not been there, let me take a minute to describe the area. It is beautiful, with a winding path down to the water. There are many, many tall pine trees there, and it has very rocky terrain. When I was about 11 years old, my friend Juline and I went to camp together and we went on this overnight. Our cabin pitched our tent as best we could by putting stakes in between the rocky cliffs.

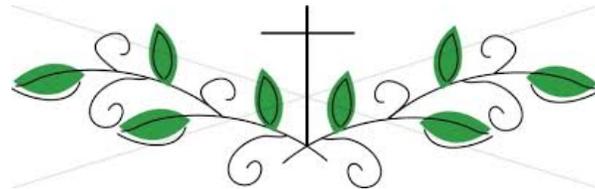
Out of nowhere, there was a terrible storm. A tornado was even sighted near where we were camping. Pine trees were falling all around us. I can still hear the loud bangs of thunder, and I remember trying to keep my cool around my cabin-mates--when all I wanted to do was try to be the camper that was not crying the worst. It was a storm of biblical proportions, and I was right in the middle of it.

I survived. We all did, and Pastor Warmanen came after it was over to collect us and our soaking sleeping bags.

The storm was not the worst part. The worst part was storms have really gotten to me ever since. I see no beauty in lighting like some, only terror. It always brings me back to shuttering in that leaky tent on that rocky cliff above the rapids. With age I've improved, but I still do not like storms.

About one month after we went to camp that year, I was visiting my aunt and uncle in Racine, Wisconsin, with my mom and sister. A terrible storm came one night. The lightning bolts were loud and close, but nothing beat the lightening of my heart exploding in my chest. I remember how that night I slept with my mom in the double bed, and it was my sister's turn to sleep on the air mattress alongside my side of the bed. I really could not take the storm any longer. It was so hard trying to be quiet in the dead of night when everyone was sleeping, and I was so scared. For some reason, I let my arm flap over the side of the bed. And there, my little sister Emily, grabbed my hand and held it. I was not alone. You cannot imagine the peace that gave me - and gives me still. We did not speak a word, and we have never talked about that night. I will always love my little sister Emily for what she did for me in that moment.

Let us pray: *Dear God, thank you for being with us and protecting us and using others to see and feel your presence. Amen.*



Saturday, February 29, 2020

Text: Philippians 1:28-30

“For you have been given the privilege of serving Christ, not only by believing in him, but also by suffering for him. Now you can take part with me in the battle. It is the same battle you saw me fighting in the past, and as you hear, the one I am fighting still.”

After teaching high school English and Drama for about 24 years, (many of those years were teaching abroad) I returned home last year. Shortly after my arrival, I was fortunate enough to get hired on as the Director of the Crystal Falls District Community Library. Being the Director, my schedule is somewhat flexible, so I signed up to be the first-grade church school teacher. In Crystal Falls it is called released time, as the students are released from school and walked by the church school teachers to the church for instruction. Now, as idyllic as it sounds, it is really anything but. I have in my charge six six-year-old boys this year, all brimming with, let's call it-
-personality. And for those of you not knowing the terrain, the walk from the school down to the church involved many hills of ice and snow (this time of year) and the crossing of three roads.

As Sophia from *Golden Girls* used to say, “Picture it...”

I leave my library job and race to the school to be here at 2:00. I equip myself with my snow pants, boots, mittens, earmuffs, and a jacket to provide the children an example of proper winter wear. I then wait as they trickle from gym class dripping with sweat, only to see them pour themselves into their cumbersome winter wear. Then we head off to church, and we try to leave before the 2nd and 3rd graders because invariably, no matter how much ahead of them we leave, they will beat us because the trek to the church is just one huge adventure of hill climbing, snow playing, and grabbing weapon-like icicles from the church roof, for a six-year-old boy on his way to be schooled in the teachings of the Lord.

Once there, (no one has died on the way yet, but we have come close, we've suffered injuries, we've needed Band-Aids, and I have yelled to keep the kids from getting killed by running into the oncoming traffic) it now being about 2:30, the kids despite my pleadings, often find it necessary to take off all of their winter wear—even the snow pants which they will have to navigate themselves back into in just 27 short minutes. I keep my snow pants on!

Then we join the 2nd and 3rd graders for singing time. The songs are written on the chalkboard, and my little ones just are not terrific readers, as the 2nd and 3rd graders are, so it is more or less me trying to sing as loud as I can while gesticulating the various motions to the song just a bit ahead of the other leaders so my kids can follow my histrionics and fit right in.

Finally, we are released for my lesson which is maybe about 15 minutes, if I am very lucky, and then it is snack, and then it is the marathon back up to school.

And this time it is uphill!

I am always the last one to pick up my own son from Kindergarten once I get there. Did I mention that I carry usually 4 to 5 of their backpacks too?

Battle, you better believe it is a battle! Times have changed; many of my boys are not baptized. They do not know the Lord's Prayer. They have not committed to memory "Jesus Loves Me." All the customary prerequisites that I remember from exactly 40 years ago seem to no longer exist.

But so far they have learned about the birth of Jesus, the Wise Men's visit, Jesus' childhood visit to the temple, John's baptizing of Jesus, and we just learned about Satan tempting Jesus. They have learned it, but I am pretty sure they will not remember it. But my heart does warm when one of them tells me about the "God book" at his Grandma's, and one shared a story about his baptism, and once in a while they even remember what we learned the week before.

To date, it is the toughest teaching I have done.

It is a privilege.

Let us pray: *Dear God, when we sit in church comfortably and peacefully hearing your word, let us remember that there is more work to be done. Then help us to do that work, and to find it a privilege.*

