

REPENT OR RECOVER

If the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, then this must be a time of rejoicing. Right? Lent cannot be a time of sadness – not unless we really don't want the Kingdom of Heaven to come close and be real, or unless we really want to hang on to our own kingdoms and think we can do life better apart from God – and apart from God's Messiah. It is Lent, and we are “dancing in the streets,” as they say – at least dancing on the inside, in heart and soul, because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand ... because the Kingdom of Heaven has come close in the presence of Jesus Christ our Lord in our own lives – and we are invited to come into it, and be part of it.

This is all very true, except for our unworthiness. Whatever our fancy theories about self-confidence, maturity, and becoming adults, the truth is: whenever humans get anywhere close to the Kingdom – anywhere close to real awareness of the presence of God – all pretense of maturity, confidence, or “having it all together” is instantly melted away. Oh yes, God rebuilds the confidence – on entirely new levels – but that's later. Watch Moses at the burning bush; Elijah at the cave; Peter at the great catch of fish; Paul on the Damascus Road. In every case, there is – how would we describe it? – a cringing. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*” That was Peter's response. (Luke 5:8) “*I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips,*” said Isaiah ... I couldn't possibly speak for YOU. (Isaiah 6:5)

These are not exactly the spiritual pantywaists of the human race, either. These are among the boldest we have ever produced. But not with God! So despite the great news – despite being told that the Kingdom of Heaven is now at hand, in our midst, available to us – our joy and excitement are cut by a sudden fresh realization that we are not ready for any such thing. The house is much too messy, and so is the inner dwelling place. We better get the roads ready. We have a few bad habits left over from our last personal reform. And oh dear, if the Kingdom is that close, there's simply so much to do – I'll never be ready on time. That sounds a lot more like the familiar Lent.

Before this Lent is over, we will be talking about switching to the rejoicing, at least the dancing on the inside. We will be talking about the “gifts of the Spirit” that make the Christian Life so incredibly wonderful

and beautiful, regardless of whatever is going on in the world around us. After getting to know Jesus for a while, we simply cannot hang on to the sadness and unworthiness. Not that we lose it, but His glory simply outshines our unworthiness. It is the dance of the Christian Life: Jesus keeps saying, “Come on in – into my Kingdom.” And we stand at the doorway, trying to scrape all the mud off our feet. “Wait just a minute,” we say. And He says, “Hey, come in, you really *are* welcome!” “Well,” we mutter, “just a couple minutes more, and I won’t track so much dirt into your lovely home.”

And that goes on, over and over, on many different levels – until finally we start to pay more attention to *His* love and glory than we do to our own mistakes and flaws. And finally we figure out that with His light and power, He really is not afraid of our dirt and mud. So finally we swallow hard and step in, dirt and all. Even then, we don’t like messing up His beautiful halls. So we keep repenting – changing – letting Him clean us up. But the big choice is over. We would rather have life *with* Him than without Him. And even if the mud is a lot more obvious now than it was outside His Kingdom, that’s just too bad. That’s the trouble with light – beautiful as it is, it does show the flaws.

But we aren’t going to rush to all these conclusions quite yet. We need to lay a little groundwork before going there, or it will just end up being a pretend joy – like when a good salesclerk puts on a smile before going into public. And the real story bears this out. The real world did not instantly rejoice when Jesus came bearing this wonderful news that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

So we may end up dancing on the inside, but we won’t dance in the streets because we still know what kind of battle – what kind of conflict and strife – Jesus’ presence always causes in the real world, and often in our own lives. Whenever Jesus gets near, we repent. That does not imply that repentance is horrible. Actually, when Jesus gets near, most of us *want* to repent. In fact, if people do *not* want to repent, the probability is that they have not yet noticed that Jesus is near. It is hard to see Him, feel His presence, or sense His love or His truth and light without wanting to change – without wanting to move into a higher level of our own living. The one thing every one of us can do, if we want to, is devote the life we have more exclusively to Jesus and His WAY.

That always costs some changes, some prioritizing. Even if it only means that we decide to be more involved with His people – come to the meetings, care more about each other – even that will cost us. Even that would make a huge difference over time, if we really meant it and stuck to it. That would be a huge repentance for some of you. And of course, it can get bigger and more demanding than that. But I don't have to tell *you* this. The reason you keep at a safe distance is because you *know* it might get bigger and more demanding than you would be comfortable with. Having to choose between His LIGHT and our darkness is always tougher than we make it sound.

Anyway, Lent is a time of penitence. I know this, because I read it in a book. People who repent go into a different way of life. And everybody knows that Christianity begins with repentance. “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” And even after we choose this New WAY, in all sincerity and with earnest intentions, we do not perfectly keep this New WAY of living. So from time to time we take inventory, get penitent, and try to correct our direction and our methods – and even our habits and behavior that we so want to have match what we believe and say.

This is all theory, of course. Lots of people spend years in the church of our time and *never* repent – never turn in a new direction; never change their own wills or their own priorities; never spend sleepless nights or prayerful days eagerly longing to draw their lives in line with the will and influence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. It takes a lot of self-awareness – plus a strong desire to change what is controlling our lives in the here and now – or we would not be able to do this. It takes drama, and usually crisis, before we truly realign our lives to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit – before we become truly penitent.

As some of you probably guessed from the sermon title, I am leading up to a question: “Are we a recovering community?” A repentant community? A penitent community? I mean here in this place, in this congregation we call our faith family, are we a recovering community? And recovering from what? Isn't that the classic response? “Are you saved?” *Saved from what?* Do any of us have anything we want to recover from? Or are we as right about everything, and as perfect, as we try to pretend?

If you participate in an AA group, you know you are in a recovering community. You can see the evidence all around you. There are newcomers, to be sure, who aren't sure they buy it yet. But you remember

what Jake looked like, how he acted and talked, and even how he smelled only six or seven weeks ago when he first showed up. And you would have to be intentionally blind, deaf, and dumb not to notice the difference. It is a recovering community, and there is no doubt about it. People's lives are being saved, and after that, the change continues. In an AA recovering community, people are recovering from a time (and a life) when we drank or drugged, or both. Most of us tried and tried to brake the pattern – to put on the brakes without really changing. But nothing worked. Life was horrid and getting worse, though often we spoke as if we were the only ones having fun and all the other people around us were just a bunch of hypocrites.

But in a recovering community, people no longer pretend. It is one of the delights we were not expecting. There is no longer any time for such games. We have seen the handwriting on the wall, near or far, and if *this* program doesn't work, we are dead. And, far worse than that, so is everything we ever cared about, dreamed of, hoped for, or thought we might one day accomplish.

Are we in a recovering community here, in this church? Are those who come here recovering from a time when they did not put Jesus first in their lives? (If you want to get technical: those who did not put *the God who reveals himself in Christ Jesus* first in their lives.) The biblical word for this is "sin." It doesn't matter one whit whether your deeds are good or bad according to the standards of this world. "Sin" means alienation – separation – from God. Good deeds can separate you from God just as fast as bad deeds – even faster, if you believe our traditions. Pride is the king of the Seven Deadly Sins. Bad deeds often lead to repentance faster than the good deeds we are so proud of.

But back to the real question: Have you lived any part of your life when Jesus was not your top priority, not your first concern, not the most important thing in your life? Christianity, after all, is about the relationship between you and Jesus. All the rest is paraphernalia – enhancing or detracting, as the case may be.

I do happen to know lots of people who think they are doing pretty well. They live nice lives, the ocean is beautiful, friends are good, hobbies are exciting. Life is good! Yes, I know. That's what all the drunks say too – right up to the last minute ... when we either die or go into recovery. Denial works that way. I like my life just the way it is, thank you very much. You probably won't believe this, but drunks

even brag about how much they can drink, and they love to tell stories about the last bender they were on. I'm not sure I could believe that, if I hadn't done it myself. But do you know what that sounds like to the ears of somebody who is sober – somebody in recovery? Kind of like what some of you sound like when you tell me how your lives are so wonderful and busy that you have no time for God, or his church, or prayer, or the Bible.

One of the marks of denial is subterfuge – rationalization. Until we are part of a recovering community, we have layer after layer of secrets, pretense, excuses, rationalizations. We hide every manner of need, fear, anger, and passion behind a façade of well-practiced speech, behavior, and mannerisms. Have you ever been to a cocktail party? You can go all night and never hear one honest, revealing, meaningful comment. I grant you, for some people it's a game, and for others an art. And I understand more than I used to why some people enjoy it. If I like to play chess, why can't they like to play "cocktail party"? I am glad it's a free country.

In any case, being honest and open is one of the marks of a recovering community. People *expect* each other to have flaws, quirks, wounds, and scars from former times – even present times – and deep struggles still going on. They put up with a lot from each other – cut each other a lot of slack. Oh, not perfectly. One of them almost put another one through our stained-glass window last week. But how often has that happened in the last fifteen years? And they were mortified; they can't *wait* to fix it. That's a room full of men who say every week, "When I was wrong, I promptly admitted it." So they will turn the error into a deeper learning.

If you do not *expect* flaws, quirks, wounds, scars, and deep struggles in the people sitting around you here, where do you think they came from? You think they were all born with silver spoons in their mouths? Actually, some of them were, but do you really think money saves us? That if you have money, you don't need God? That money makes life easy? What kind of idolatry is that?! If we believed this, we might just believe that it might actually help people to give them money – without also introducing them to Jesus. "You don't need to make any changes in your life, just have some money. Money will fix you." Do you know how many people in AA believe that giving money to a drunk will get him sober?

So if a drunk comes into the AA program, there is almost endless patience. Sometimes, after the picture gets clear, other kinds of help are given – along with the disciplines of the program. It is personal and quiet – one individual, or sometimes two or three pooling resources – but mostly they are just trying to give the program a little time to work. On the other hand, recovering people don't show a lot of patience for those who are still drinking but won't get on the program. Underneath they may have huge sympathy, because they remember how it was. But they don't show it much, because they know sympathy alone won't do any good. They don't even have much sympathy for people who pretend to be on the program but who go right on drinking. They know – really *know* – that ENABLING will *not* help.

Our top mission as a faith community is to help others who want New Life find it. And the only New Life we know around here is LIFE in Christ Jesus. Other groups claim to know other kinds of new life. That's fine. People who go to other places to find new life are no problem to us. We don't need to be in competition. If you want to take your problems to the Lakers, the Buddhists, the synagogue, or the Rotary Club, that's fine. Maybe that's where you will get the most help. Maybe you can hear the truth you need, and find the community you can respond to, better there than here. Not a problem. The need is bigger than all of us. Our job in this faith family is to represent and offer the LIFE *we know* – the Life we ourselves live – and the Lord we ourselves love and serve. Sorry for all the qualifications, but you know how it is in our time.

Back to the point: Our top mission as a faith community is to help others who want New Life find it. (Not others who *need* new life – others who *want* New Life.) And just as in any true life of recovery, people must come into the community in order to find the New Life. Even the most brain-damaged drunk ends up knowing that. You have to come to the meetings, participate, and work the steps if you want to stay on the program. It's not a rule of the organization; *life* makes this rule! Whether we like it or understand it or not, God made things to work in this way. Don't argue with me – just show me all the drunks who have recovered outside of a recovering community.

Why has the church forgotten its own truth? If we love Jesus, we *are* “the church” – we come to the meetings, we participate in the faith family, we walk the Path together. Actually, the church has not

forgotten; it has just ceased to be “the church.” Going to church has become a silly travesty of its former meaning and purpose. People even talk about “going to church” on Easter, or at Christmas. You can “go” to a new WAY of Life, for one hour, once or twice a year? No wonder we aren’t dancing in the streets, inside *or* outside.

The upside is: After “going to church” a few times each year, most of these people seem to know far more about the church, its flaws, and its true purposes than I do. How nice for them. But that’s okay; I don’t expect much from them either. What *does* bother me is that it’s not the outsiders who have made this so confusing and unclear. It’s the people on the inside of the church who have made this so unclear in our time. They want to make sure nobody thinks they are fanatics. They want to make sure no friends or relatives think they “*have* to go to church.” And if people visit us here and nobody is working the repentance thing – living the LIFE, doing the penance – or inviting them to come try it too, then how is anyone from the outside ever going to figure it out? They come, but nothing is happening. Or it’s only an entertainment gig. Or it’s just the preacher talking about what it might be like if anybody ever actually decided to try getting sober.

Can you imagine that in an AA setting? All the drunks come to a meeting, but they bring their bottles with them and sit around drinking and talking, and from time to time they all listen to a paid speaker telling pretty stories about what it might be like if anybody ever sobered up.

So then we get people – not dumb people, since they only reflect what they have seen and experienced – who say dumb things like, “I don’t believe in organized religion.” Excuse me? You don’t believe in saving lives? You don’t believe in redemption or transformation? You think you can save lives all by yourself? Or that you can provide all the love anybody needs all by yourself, or make it grow and thrive in a vacuum? Good luck to you. You can *go* to a movie, you can *go* to bed, but you cannot *go* to church. Church is the *ecclesia* – the people of God. You either *are* the church, or you have no notion what church is or what it is about.

Of course, I won’t be able to convince folk who think and believe that way. I don’t really try to anymore. But what about you? You know better! You have actually tasted some of what the church could and should be like. It has even made a considerable difference in many of your lives. Yet even here, we still work at half-mast, because many of

you have not shaken loose from all the excuses, fears, hurts, angers, and disappointments that still cling to you from your past life – the life before you gave your life to Christ.

We *are* moving forward, making good progress. But it would help if we would either cut the anchor chains or haul them up. So we still have need for Lent, and good reason to repent. Only, please don't do it like the play-acting wing of the church usually does it. Don't do it in sadness. Don't make any sacrifices. That only leads to playing victim and feeling sorry for yourself. The New Life in Christ Jesus has never been about such things, and "we cannot get there from here" – not that way.

So please do not give up anything this Lent that is good, right, or important to you – not unless it is getting in the way of something that truly seems better, more important, more true to you. Do not give up anything that you imagine will make you more acceptable in the eyes of this world. Only give up something if Christ is calling you beyond it, or to things even more exciting and joyful. And if you really are in a battle with some demon of magnitude and power – as many of us are – then do not expect to oust it from your life with simple tricks of will-power, or by merely scolding yourself for having the demon in the first place. The demons only leave when Christ is invited in on deep levels of commitment, love, and adoration. But that brings us joy and light and gratitude, not sadness, self-pity, or complaint.

So let us try to stay off the minor and meaningless disciplines this Lent. True repentance invites Jesus to make the changes *He* wants to make in our lives. They will be few, and right at the heart of whatever is holding us back. But we have to spend extra time in prayer for Him to reveal them to us. After all, if they were obvious, we would have already taken care of them. So it will be scary, but in wondrous and exciting ways. Let us go for true repentance – which leads to light and LIFE.

John 15:9-19
Matthew 10:39; 16:25
Mark 8:35
Luke 9:24; 17:33

YOU ARE SPECIAL

Sometimes we get careless, and we start mixing the real events of Jesus' own life with what's going on in our own lives. When that happens, we find ourselves drawn into the story – walking His New WAY – at least to some degree. It is never as easy as some people try to make it sound. It is never as easy as we ourselves thought it would be, when we first began. In some ways it still ruins us for life here on earth. I suppose that's why they call it "conversion." We don't really care anymore about conforming to the ways of this world.

At the same time, we are also aware of the reduction. I don't know and have never met any spiritually awakened person who feels equal to Jesus. Perhaps I just associate with the wrong people. If we grow up in the church – grow up semi-familiar with the biblical stories and teachings – sometimes Jesus seems a rather tame and unremarkable hero. But that's because we have not yet delved into it. Once we get interested in what was going on and who Jesus really is, it is quickly obvious that we cannot match Him. Nobody can.

So there is always the reduction. We have our trials and our suffering, to be sure. We have our temptations and our battles. We try to become faithful and obedient to God. We want to be part of the Kingdom and help to build it up. And it never happens in this world like we want it to, or like it ought to. Some of that is always a result of our own errors, our own mistakes, and something deeper we don't like to talk about. Nevertheless, while our lives and our efforts are serious business to us (for good reason), they are always a far cry from the drama going on in and around the life of Jesus. He carries a stature, a clarity, a purity, an all-out love for God that we simply cannot match. Wonder of wonders, His love for God ricochets back onto us. That might not be the right way to describe it, but it is very meaningful to me. Jesus' love for us always comes directed by God's love for us. Jesus loves God ... and faithfulness to God sends Him to love us. Otherwise, I think Jesus would have ended up just another people-pleaser. Whatever else you see in Jesus' life, *that* you do not see. We do not crucify people-pleasers.

In this love, we are invited to come with Jesus despite all our flaws. Again, we have to qualify that: We are *not* invited to keep all our flaws and go on in our own way, now promised Jesus' forgiveness and approval while we keep our rebellious, disobedient, willful ways. *That* is the Gospel filtered through the people-pleasers. It is promulgated everywhere in our society, but only by the pretenders, the play-actors. It only confuses the careless, and persuades other play-actors.

We are invited to come with Jesus *despite* all our flaws. But it still has to be His WAY. You don't have to track Jesus' story for very long to realize this is true. We are promised that we do not have to match up – we just have to *want* to. If we follow Him and love Him back, He will draw us into the fullness of His Kingdom despite whatever flaws and errors and incompleteness we carry with us. But no pretending. That's still, by the way, a bit hard for us to fathom. That does not make "sense" to our way of thinking. We believe, on very deep levels, that if we do not match up and cannot change and grow fast enough to deserve the Kingdom, then we will be rejected, abandoned, thrown out. We will end up on the garbage dump outside the city walls. [For more on one such dump, see the note at the end of this sermon.]

You don't have to scratch any of us very deeply to uncover this primordial theology that undergirds all the theories we want to believe and try to believe in. And our kind returns to this deeper, natural theology with sickening regularity. That is, however much we praise the Gospel, we go back to the Law like metal drawn to a magnet. Our Christian structures and institutions are heavier into guilt and fear and shame than they are into love and light and release. Clearly the coming of Jesus, and the Life and New WAY He reveals, requires a reprogramming of all our old ways of thinking. To make it worse, they are backed by all our experiences here in this broken realm. No surprise, perhaps, that we don't have to connect very many careless moments together before we revert back to the old, familiar ways of thinking and behaving. Finally we come to see that if we do not pray every day and study some portion of the Scriptures each day, we do not have much chance of following Him or living in His New WAY.

Before this Lent is over, I hope we will be deep into the joy of Lent, and contemplating the gifts of the Spirit. After all, we know that Easter is coming. It is no longer a surprise to us that Good Friday is followed by Easter and Pentecost. The reality is that our Christian WAY is filled with light and joy that are deeper than anything this world sees or

knows. Sometimes we focus so much on our disciplines, and try to stay honest about our struggles and trials and temptations – until we forget to share and declare that underneath it all is a joy and a delight that we would not give up for anything this world can offer. *“Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Hebrews 12:2)

But I didn’t want to just jump to the joy without reviewing the principles and foundations of our WALK, lest we sound like Pollyanna, or go back to play-acting. The world is good at pretending optimism just because that feels better and works better than pessimism – at least on the surface, at least for a little while. The Christian Way has no use for pretend optimism, any more than it has use for pretend love, pretend joy, or pretend faith. Sin is big, and real, and deadly serious. Play-acting only plays into Satan’s hands.

So last week we started at the beginning. *“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”* We touched on the imperative to repent – to be in recovery from our alienation and animosity toward God. Our alienation and animosity toward God, by the way, are what the Cross proves – and proving it is the real reason and necessity for the Cross, whatever you have been hearing and thinking of late. And we must be in a recovering community – a faith family – or we have small chance of real or lasting recovery. We usually call it redemption, or salvation. Only, that kind of thing doesn’t happen for anybody in one experience. When the light goes on, that doesn’t end the journey – it begins it.

To enter the Christian Life, we have to repent – go into recovery. And we have to be part of a recovering community – a church – or the repentance will not last, or go deep enough to reprogram our former ways of thinking and feeling and behaving. We will go right back to our drinking patterns – or in this case, back to our alienation-and-animosity-toward-God patterns – that is, back to trusting ourselves, instead of the Holy Spirit, for the direction and purpose of our lives.

That was last week, the first necessity. This week we come to the second necessity, the second foundational imperative of our WAY. This one is much harder for us to accept. It is also much harder to preach about. It is easier to preach repentance (though we do not like the insult) because when we start talking about it honestly, the veil falls away.

We are *not* perfect ... we *need* to change ... we even *want* to change, if we can find a WAY – and a Leader – we can trust.

But the second imperative – which we actually *want* to believe – we do *not* believe. Talking about it doesn't often help people to believe it. While we often pretend that we do not need to repent, when we get honest and real – or get caught in crisis or chaos – it brings us to repentance. But the second imperative we pretend to believe all the time. How can we be persuaded to *truly* believe what we have been *pretending* to believe all along? That is hard. It can be genuinely confusing.

How can I illustrate? I am remembering a woman I once counseled:

Daddy always called me his little princess. And of course he meant it, in a way. But as I grew up, I encountered and got tangled up in the realities of the world outside the home. I discovered that even Daddy had flaws, and didn't always remember to treat me as his little princess. So I realized that the princess thing was mostly a myth. Still, we always maintained the myth. It was a good myth, and comforting. Even when I became a woman and was married and had children of my own, still Daddy would call me his little princess whenever we saw each other. And I would nod, and smile. It was a good thing – a warm thing – and I took comfort and refuge in the myth, even though I hadn't believed it was *really* true for almost as far back as I could remember.

Then one day I encountered the Christ of God. Not instantly, but over time He tried to tell me that I was a daughter of the High King of the Universe – a *True Princess* of magnitude beyond anything I had ever contemplated or imagined. I nodded, and smiled, and pretended to believe it. I had been there before. I knew this game. It was just to make me feel good. It was just to comfort me. But do you think I am fool enough to really believe it? It's obviously far too high and glorious for me to take seriously.

The problem is: If I don't believe it, then way down in the secret center of my life, I am calling the Christ of God a liar. And that means I don't really trust Him – and therefore cannot follow Him. I want to, but I cannot. It requires trust – faith – the Christian Faith.

YOU ARE SPECIAL

Of course, Jesus may not be calling you a Princess. He may be calling you a Warrior, or a Prince, or a Teacher, or a Musician. But whatever He is calling you, the way *He* means it is far higher than anything you have ever imagined or believed was really true of you. To trust and believe Him is the second imperative of our WAY. While some people think that believing in Jesus is about trusting Jesus to be wonderful – or concluding that Jesus is the true Messiah – that is not the hard part at all. That is just a smoke screen we throw up to keep from having to face what trusting Him really means. Jesus confronts us with who *we* really are – **and He always makes that too high!** Watch Him in any encounter the New Testament tells us about. It is also the essence of our primary sacrament of baptism. “*You are my beloved son/daughter. In you I take delight.*” (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22) Oh, I know; that only happened to Jesus. Hey, I thought the whole idea was that we are supposed to *follow Him!*

YOU ARE SPECIAL! There is no way you can live the Christian Life if you do not believe that. You live in a world teeming with millions of humans. The law of “supply and demand” makes us the most worthless commodity on the face of the earth. With population out of control and growing exponentially, perhaps the most “loving” thing I can do is take myself out of here, and leave more room and resources for others. More and more people think so all the time. While you may look around and see a few people who really do seem pretty special, the vast majority of people do not. They do not think themselves very special, so how could they possibly seem very special to anybody else? (Unless, of course, someone is looking through the eyes of Christ. (II Corinthians 5:16))

The sheer fact of the matter is: If you are a Christian, sooner or later it has to dawn on you that you are really special. First and most obvious, the Son of God has died for you. Either you are incredibly special, or He is a total imbecile. Figure it out! Of course, what most people believe is that He died for others but not for them. But then, by definition, they are not really Christians yet, are they? They may like the story, may even honor it, but they have not bought it yet, have they?

You see, it doesn't matter what kind of “low-life” some person might be. If somebody cares about their repentance, about forgiving them – about changing their life, redeeming them, showing mercy and love for them – you end up stuck with an incredible conclusion, and there is no escaping it: They must be enormously valuable – incredibly special. In fact, if you trace and track it with any logic at all, they must have

eternal worth. Nobody is going to die on a cross just to save you for a couple more years. That is not enough return on the investment! And what we know now is that there are, and will continue to be, a lot more people needing this redemption than the first-century Christians ever dreamed. They thought it would all be over in their own generation. Teeming upon teeming millions have come to this planet since then. But if we stay faithful, His LIGHT and LIFE are waiting for all who will receive it. Only, we should stop diluting it, don't you think?

If you are a Christian, it doesn't matter what it looks like on the surface, how many problems are raised by the supposition, or what the world believes or does not believe about it. YOU ARE SPECIAL! Special beyond words to describe it. So is everybody else, but a high percentage of them do not believe it because they do not believe in Jesus yet. If you are special but do not believe it, then you will not and cannot act like it. In other words, the power within you is not yet activated, because it is not connected with where it came from. It will manifest at moments and in some circumstances, for a while. It will also get weaker as time passes, like any battery that doesn't get recharged. You can only stay cut off from the source for a limited time before you start to run down. Creatures are dependent on the Creator. (John 15:5-6)

Since it is so difficult to believe, let me reiterate: You are special – not because it's good psychology; not because you want to be; not because you are looking successful at the moment; not even because other humans say so, though that is certainly good for a small and temporary charge. You are special because God in Christ Jesus loves you. "In Christ Jesus" means that this is the final or ultimate evidence. It pushes us over the line. Why do humans bother to remember and bear witness to Him? Why are there congregations all over the world still studying, praying, and talking about Him? So help me, some of them don't seem to realize it – they don't act or preach like it – but the real truth is: Jesus makes us important. Jesus reveals us in a LIGHT we have never seen before. Jesus does things for us that nobody ever did before. Jesus promises us a future that, apart from Him, we would conclude was sheer wishful thinking.

Jesus is important to us because He makes us special. If we believe in Him, He reveals to us that we really are eternal children of the Omnipotent God. Precisely *because* this is the primary prerequisite to living the Christian Life ourselves, this is the very belief that we doubt the hardest, believe the least, duck the most often. Jesus is great, but

we are crap? That's not what being "sinners" means! Among other things, what "sin" really means is that Jesus keeps telling us we are special ... and we *will not* believe Him. At least not down deep, not where it begins to change the way we think and feel about ourselves, and therefore about everything.

The CREATOR – the One whose power, wisdom, purpose, and glory are beyond all our words – this ONE loves you! That is what Jesus came to reveal. Nothing you could ever achieve, dream, or accomplish could even begin to make you more important or more special than that. In other words, the Gospel of Jesus Christ flies in the face of all human wisdom. We think we are selfish, self-centered, and fixated on our own importance. We think that is what's causing all the mayhem in the world. The truth is just the reverse. We think we have no real importance, and deep within is the suspicion that we are worthless. Though we try to hide this as much as possible, we think it's bound to come to light sooner or later. And when it does, we think we will get thrown away – killed or abandoned. So we desperately pretend and strive, clawing to find some meaning or significance to hang on to. That is where the real mayhem is coming from. That is where the horrid way we sometimes treat each other is coming from. If we are worthless, our only comfort is that others must be worthless too. And since the contest in this world seems to be about who can pretend to be important first and best, then they are the enemy. They must not be allowed to outshine us or the jig is up – and we will be thrown away. You see the problem? It is impossible to love your neighbor *unless you already know that you are loved* – and that it will never run out. (*"Perfect love casts out fear."* (I John 4:18))

We say we believe that God loves us, but it is harder to believe than we say. None of us believe it fully, or nothing in this world could ever frighten us again. The Gospel of Jesus Christ flies in the face of all human wisdom. It doesn't matter whether you were taught to always think of others first, or whether you were taught to take care of number one. What matters is deeper than that. If you encounter the Christ and give your life to Him, your worth becomes infinite because it is connected to His love for you – and *He* is infinite. Then you will take care of number one in order to have more to offer Him and His Kingdom. Or you will think of others first in order to bring them into His Kingdom. And in either case, you will not be so frantic about your own survival or your own personal desires – because you know His presence and feel His caring.

The truth is, people who do not value *themselves* do not value others. Please, I'm not advocating drunk driving, or promiscuity; I'm not advocating murder, stealing, living off of others, or lying as a good and lovely way of life. By the way, nobody who truly cares about themselves does these things. But our world has it backwards and inside out, and always has. Knowing you are special is the only hope you have of rising above the beast. But the world tells us to have high self-esteem in one breath, and tries to shame us for being too selfish and self-centered in the next. And whatever we pretend, the truth is that we do not believe we are truly valuable – until we run into the Christ of God. When His LIGHT connects with our own inner light – the light given us by God when he created us – *then* we begin to believe it.

That still puts us into the impossibly difficult position of having to acknowledge – having to admit – that we are special to Him, not just that He is special to us. And we have to honor and hold on to that no matter what the world tells us, because the world will steal this awareness from us, if it can find any way to do so. Sadly, sometimes it's hard to tell who is trying to steal it more – the world or the church. “Your only value is what you give to others ... Stay in a bad marriage ... Always forgive everybody, whether they repent or not ... Settle for a meaningless job ... Suffering is good for the soul ... God only loves the poor and downtrodden ...” and on, and on. Have we ever connected the life that Jesus lived with His belief in His own mission, His own identity, His own importance? Oh yes, it came from God, and it was connected to His trust in God. But how long do you think Jesus would have lasted in any of His purposes, stances, convictions, or controversies if He had been convinced that His own life was unimportant, or that His own truth was not worth causing consternation and trouble over?

Special people make life special for others. Special people think other people are special. Special people are not sadistic, uncaring, boring, negative, mediocre – and they do not want life to be bad or meaningless for others. Jesus did not kill *us*. We killed *Him!* By all our theories of power and authority and superiority, Jesus should have been the most dangerous person who ever lived. But we see Him healing, teaching, caring, compassionate, humble. Figure it out! Well, He *is* the most dangerous person who has ever lived, but only to our darkness.

My eyes are the only eyes I will ever see out of. My ears are the only ears I will ever hear with. My mind is the only mind I will ever think with. My “heart” is the only one I will ever feel with. I have no other

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possibilities; I have only the possibility to be me. It doesn't matter how unselfish I try to be; the only possibility I have is the possibility to be me. Do you have options or possibilities other than the possibility of being you?

Jesus comes to bring this to its apex. "Trust me – trust God!" You are special beyond anything and everything you ever imagined. Break through! Claim it. You will never see anything the same way ever again ... including those strange, weird humans you see and encounter all around you. And you will end up longing for them to see it and know it too: how special they really are, how much they are loved. You will want them to meet and come to know Jesus. There is no other source of awareness that comes close to touching His presence and His love.

Some of you realize it, but I wish I could tell the rest of you what a short time you have here. And that if you are not "faithful," no one else can ever take your place. Nobody else will ever be the person you were supposed to be. It is you, or nobody. And you are very, very special. If you do not fulfill it, the pattern of the faithful person you were designed to be will be lost here forever. The impact you could have made here will never happen. The world around you will miss out on the gifts and contributions you were designed to provide. The rest of us will never see or know what you could have meant to us, if you had truly followed Jesus.

True evangelism ... true vocatio ... true mission – these are about claiming our true identity in the light of Christ's unearthly love. If we really do awaken to LIFE in Christ Jesus, then God's love, forgiveness, and guidance shift into place, and play beyond anything the books can ever tell. The Spirit's mercy and guidance are everything – apart from which none of us have any chance to find our way through the maze of fear and pride, of personal desires and misused gifts ... to our true destiny.

The reason for Lenten disciplines is not to self-efface. It is to realize how valuable you really are – and to know how easy it is to miss it all, to never wake up ... to end up never having followed the Christ in any real or meaningful way. *That* is what is wrong with being special: if you do not claim and accept it, the loss is inestimable. Many of our kind would rather hide from such light than take the risk of claiming the love of Jesus the Christ, and going with Him into LIGHT and LIFE.

* * *

NOTE:

When Jesus talks about what we call “Hell,” He is referring to Gehenna (*geenna, yeeva, Ge-Hinnom*), the valley of Hinnom, the Wadi er-Rababi – the garbage dump outside the Jerusalem wall. It had an especially bad reputation because of sacrifices made to Moloch there in earlier times, including child sacrifices. Jesus uses Gehenna – a physical place in a physical world, a place everybody listening to Him knew and had seen – as imagery to make a point. *We* turned it into Dante’s Inferno! *We* turned it into a vast theological concept – an early version of a Hollywood horror movie. And by the way, in doing so, we also missed the very thing Jesus was trying to tell us: You cannot burn a soul with physical fire. Hell is not about “hot” – it is about ALONE: lost, alienated, frightened, lonely. It is not about a place – it is about a condition. Life is not about your address – it is about your identity: who you really are, what you have become, what you really care about, value, live for ... and how you live for it. “Go to Hell” means nobody loves you. Or more accurately, it means you do not *know* that anybody loves you.

Matthew 12:43-45
Luke 11:24-26

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It's easy to make a mistake at seventy miles per hour. You don't get a lot of time to decide. The repercussions can be devastating, and deadly – and not just for you. Ambling along a country road on foot or even on horseback, you could make a mistake of approximately the same magnitude, but the repercussions would be so slight you might not even notice them. You might nod off to sleep on the back of a horse and still find yourself safe at home, with the horse waiting patiently for you to wake up, take off the saddle, and do some feeding. If you fall asleep behind the wheel at seventy miles per hour – well, I don't have to explain it to you. It is a concern we carry that our ancestors never thought about.

Today we *live* at seventy miles per hour most of the time, so to speak. It doesn't take much of an error on our part to crash us big time – physically, emotionally, relationally, occupationally ... and oh yes, spiritually. We are making many more decisions each day, and with much less time to ponder them, than our grandparents did. Our intentions may not be as different from our forebears as we sometimes think, but most of us give ourselves far less time to think, pray, ponder, and prepare ourselves to keep our balance, and to keep our values and purposes clear and in plain sight.

The other side of the coin is that we can speed past the gifts, the blessings, and the benefits which the Holy Spirit is trying to give us. I am suggesting that the speed of life today makes some of the disciplines of the Christian Path more difficult and more necessary than ever before. In other words, a season like Lent is more important and more necessary to our well-being than ever before. So are retreats, vocatio workshops, and prayer time each morning when we wake up.

Even so, the principles are not new. The necessities have been there from the beginning. It has always been necessary for those who wanted to follow Jesus – for those who have wanted to walk the Christian WAY – to shield themselves from the outside world – from outside influences – in some ways. We hear the thread and theme from almost endless places in the New Testament. Here it is from Second

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Peter: “*With all this in view, you should make every effort to add virtue to your faith, knowledge to virtue, self-control to knowledge, fortitude to self-control, piety to fortitude, brotherly affection to piety, and love to brotherly affection.*” (II Peter 1:5-7)

Now that’s a formula and a half! Wouldn’t that be a great passage to ponder for an entire Lenten season? Well, one of these years ... I try not to get you into anything too deep until you’re ready for it. (I hope you are laughing!)

This teaching about a house swept clean is vintage Jesus. How curious that it reminds us of the standard approaches most Christians use toward the Lenten season each year – and why most of the time it doesn’t do them any good. You have noticed, I presume, connections between giving up things for Lent and making New Year’s resolutions. They both deteriorate before we barely get started because they are self-help approaches. Lent was certainly never *intended* to be a self-help program. Heavens, how can we be watching Jesus – thinking about The Passion and all it means to us – and still get into self-help antics? Nevertheless, Satan always tries to twist our good intentions to his ends. Satan doesn’t have to fight our evil intentions, only our good ones. Therefore most of our struggles with Satan are about the corruption, or twisting, of the very best motives and intentions within us.

On the inside, we are sincere and conscientious people. We know we are not perfect. Suggest that we should improve, and presto! – if we are not wide awake and full of faith (trust), we are soon engaged in yet another self-improvement program. And bingo! – Satan has us playing in his ball park. We are in charge and we are going to fix ourselves – and mess up God’s design in the process. And then either we will end up discouraged (today I think they call it “depressed”) and feeling worse about ourselves than when we started, or we will be filled with pride and a self-satisfaction that helps us look down on lesser mortals not endowed with the superior character traits that we possess. Doesn’t Satan win either way? Satan wouldn’t still be in business if he were as simple and obvious as most of us would like to think.

Lent can be a marvelous time. It reminds us of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness after His own conversion (baptism). It reminds us of the depth of prayer and pondering it took for Jesus to get clear about

His own identity and His own purpose. Not always, but often we need to get fresh and clear about our own Christian identity and purpose. Lent reminds us of the Christian Path or WAY, which we try to walk all the time but which sometimes gets fuzzy, and we need extra time to refocus. Lent is not laid on us from outside. We want to follow this WAY because we have watched and loved and wanted to follow Jesus. We want Lent to be a time when we open ourselves to receive the Spirit of Jesus our Lord in fresh new ways. This often crowds some things out of our lives that we no longer have room for, that we no longer have time or space for. But that's not the same as "giving things up for Lent." Making more room for Jesus is not the same as clearing things out just to get tidy. Of course, you cannot tell the difference from the outside looking in. But on the inside, if we experience more of His presence, there is no comparison. Sorry if the analogy bothers you, but a spring cleaning is not the same as making love.

Does "giving things up for Lent" sound a lot like the picture Jesus gives us of the man who swept his house clean? We would be hard put to find a phrase that could sound any more like "sweeping your house clean." Get rid of bad habits; drive some of your personal demons away. How is it possible that a Lenten tradition could develop which so blatantly falls into the very trap Jesus warns us about? Do we not know how the teaching ends? Do we not read the Scriptures? Do we not pay any attention to what Jesus teaches us? Actually, the notion of giving things up for Lent *does* come from a wing of Christendom that puts no emphasis on reading or studying the Bible.

Perhaps, then, they have an excuse, albeit a lame one, for being off the mark. "We don't know the Scriptures very well because we never intended to know them very well." On the other hand, what is *our* excuse? Protestants, Puritans, and Congregationalists have always put enormous emphasis on reading and studying the Bible. We have always maintained that the Bible should be the overt rule and guide of our faith communities – outranked only by the Holy Spirit of God in Christ Jesus. And yet, for over fifty years now, our churches have been neglecting the Bible, despite our claim that it is supposed to be our rule and guide, and the central focus of our worship. Almost none of our churches today put any emphasis on Bible study. Even in worship, our denomination uses the Bible in the most cursory fashion, often making it clear that no one should take it very seriously – reading small

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sections, often out of context, and saying nothing about them even after they are read. A few of our churches are wonderful exceptions, of course, or our denomination would be dying even faster than it is.

The vast majority of members in the United Church of Christ do not crack a Bible for months on end. And I kid you not: When I first arrive at one of our churches, very few members can tell me whether Elijah comes before or after King David, or whether Hezekiah is one of the books in the Old Testament. That is far from true *here* any longer. But it is still true of some of you. Some people think they are so smart that they don't have to read the Bible to know everything they need to know about being a Christian. They prove the point, too, but not in the way they think.

When I was a young pastor in New England, most of our sanctuaries were still designed around a central pulpit. It wasn't because our pastors had big egos, though that was *sometimes* true, and we were accused of it far more often than *was* true. We had central pulpits to remind ourselves that the WORD was central, and that preaching the WORD was the most important part of worship. Obviously, liturgical churches don't agree with this. In Catholic worship, it doesn't matter whether there is a sermon or not, and usually there is not. Even if there is a homily, it has none of the stature or import of a Protestant sermon. What is central is the Eucharist – the communion meal.

I was raised, as most of you know, in the East Whittier Friends Church. Do you think there was an altar or a cross? Communion was every Sunday, and consisted of five minutes of silence. Toward the end of my high school days, we moved to Long Beach and joined the First Congregational Church. It had a central pulpit, of course. That was back in the '50s. Emerson G. Hangen was a strong and devoted preacher. He lifted up the importance of the WORD by memorizing the Scripture reading each Sunday. He recited the passage (and often it was lengthy) with fervor and feeling, and often it was the highlight of the service – which was exactly what he intended. “If I have a good sermon – well and good. If I have a poor sermon – I'll try again next Sunday. But as for you: STAY WITH THE WORD.” Of course, the true WORD is never just what is printed on the page. It is what lurks behind that – and pondering what the Bible says is one of the best ways to get to it. But I digress ...

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We then moved to New England for ten years. I saw many Congregational churches there, and nearly all of them had central pulpits. Where I worked and preached – Amherst in New Hampshire, and Paxton and Andover in Massachusetts – all had central pulpits. But a new trend was coming: redesign our sanctuaries so they would have a divided chancel, and then we could make the altar central *and* have a cross. This caused a fight within our denomination. No self-respecting Congregational church in New England would allow a cross in the sanctuary back then. Too Catholic; don't get the focus off the WORD. In the years following, more and more churches remodeled their sanctuaries to have divided chancels, like ours is today. Much better for weddings. So we lost the fight. And then we lost Congregationalism. And then we lost the Bible. And in most places we lost the Faith – and now we are losing more and more of our churches all the time. Of course, as a denomination we've been too busy with important things to notice any of these connections. But then again, maybe there are no connections; it's just the way life happens, and nobody is responsible.

By now you may have forgotten the point. The point is that if we pay any attention to what Jesus teaches us, we cannot do Lenten disciplines in the traditional manner. Giving up things for Lent is the cart before the horse. It deteriorates into a self-help program. It misses the real purpose. There are many people who enter Lent year after year and reenact this very teaching about a house swept clean – and end up with more demons than when they started, yet still they don't catch on. In one way or another, most of us have tried it too. So we do not feel superior, just sympathetic. On the other hand, why would we ever allow ourselves to get caught in such a fruitless and counter-productive bootstrap operation ever again? Christ have mercy!

Whether you realize it or not, we are heading toward the gifts of the Spirit. At least that has been my hope since this Lenten season began. But I have wanted to put the gifts in a better context, for reasons I will mention in a minute. If we go directly to contemplating the gifts themselves, wondrous as they are, many people get thrown off track. Over the next two Sundays, we will only have time to touch on a couple of the gifts. But I know you. You are not a WORDless, prayerless community. It will be enough for most of you to open yourselves to whatever gifts you are willing to receive. Meanwhile, one last chance to get the ground ready.

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The gifts are not morals. The gifts are not commandments, rules, or laws. This is an extremely important point. The gifts are not morals, they are GIFTS. I have done sermons and retreats and workshops on “The Gifts of the Spirit” off and on for many years now. What I have noticed, over and over, is that people end up thinking about the gifts of the Spirit in “normal mode.” That’s horrible! We cannot “learn” the gifts of the Spirit like we learn geometry or accounting. Hearing in “normal mode” – that is, in the way we tend to hear and react to most other information we contemplate or acquire “in the world” – will only leave us further off track than ever. Without warning, most people try to deal with the gifts of the Spirit as if they were a list of character attributes they ought to have – and if they don’t have them, then they better rush out and get them. Even worse, we can hear the list of the Spirit’s gifts as a kind of religious report card: a morals checkup; a test of how well we’re doing. If I don’t have these qualities in my life – if they are not big enough in my life – it means I am inadequate, or bad, or wrong. Shame on me! I better shape up before I go to Hell ...

The old construct dies hard, doesn’t it? In truth, these gifts take us *out* of Hell – they release us from our present bondage. And that is not something we can do for ourselves. Not to jump the gun, but the gifts of the Spirit are LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, AND SELF-CONTROL. (Galatians 5:22) Obviously we cannot have these gifts in our lives *and* have bad, boring, or useless lives at the same time. But they are a grace thing. They are *given* to us by the Holy Spirit – as gifts.

If I can find, purchase, produce, or manufacture such things for myself, they are not gifts – certainly not gifts of the Spirit. I don’t mean to imply that you are slow, but do you get it? I have been pretty slow to catch on myself, which is why I am so eager for *you* to “get it.” If we can take care of such things for ourselves, we don’t need Jesus – we don’t need His Holy Spirit. If we can take care of such things for ourselves, then these are not gifts at all. And most of you know very well that the way the church usually approaches the gifts of the Spirit is that they are not gifts at all, and they do not come from the Spirit. We try to turn them into just another self-help program. And where does that lead us? Straight into the teeth of this teaching Jesus uses to try to warn us. Straight into the trap of the seven demons worse than the first. Isn’t that cute!? No, it is Satan.

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What happens when we go after the gifts of the Spirit as if they were something we could get for ourselves? We play-act, of course. We *pretend* we have them. We put them on as if they were spiritual cosmetics – religious makeup. We try to *act* like we have these gifts – try to make it look like we have them so other people will *think* we have them. But smiling all the time doesn't mean we have joy. Do we imagine that it doesn't matter if we really *have* peace, as long as we can get people to *think* we have peace, or as long as we can get a reputation for being “peacemakers”? Or that it doesn't matter if we actually have peace in our homes, as long as we can get people to think that we live in happy homes? Hey, if that's all we're after – the veneer, the makeup, the pretend love, the friendly smile that hides the true venom – then the critics are right: we are just a bunch of hypocrites. They are right to want nothing to do with organized religion.

Well, we all know that there is plenty of pretense in this broken world, but some of us know that that's not all there is. The gifts really *do* exist. The Spirit really *does* want to give us these gifts. The wheat and the tares grow together.

Back to us and our own Lenten devotions: What does the Spirit have to do to get a “date” with us? To get time, friendship, and a setting and an opportunity to give us anything? That is what Lent is really about – saying “yes” to the Spirit's invitation: “Come with me. We need to spend more time together. I have some things I want to give you, but I cannot do that unless we spend some time together. I'm not going to propose in this mayhem you call your life.” The gifts commemorate our bond of love with the Holy Spirit. We accept the invitation – we make and keep the date. We even decide to “go steady” with the Spirit. Just as soon as we do, we are given gifts. Jesus is a great giver, as we should know by now. But I'm jumping way ahead of things, I suppose. On the other hand, the truth is, “The church is the bride of Christ.” So I am not way ahead – I am way behind.

In any case, the gifts all come from the interior life – from our relationship with the Spirit. They are the blessings of knowing the Holy Spirit of our Lord and Savior. Any other approach is merely play-acting, a charade. We don't want the gifts because they are useful in the outer world or because we are trying to impress anybody. We want them because *He* gives them to us – because they remind us of His presence

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and His love. If they sometimes spill over into outer life, so what? It was just an accident – just the overflow. I am certain the Spirit knows that these gifts will bless us greatly, and sometimes help us through very difficult outer circumstances. But we do not receive them or cherish them because they “work” in the world. Sometimes they *do* “work” in the world. Sometimes they make things ever so much more difficult – just like they did for Him, and for all His sincere followers. We receive and cherish the gifts because *He* gives them to us, and because they are so appropriate to who He is, and what He is like. And that happens to be far more important than anything going on in this fickle and broken world.

Back to the house swept clean: “House,” I remind you, is a primordial symbol of the soul. It appears as such in dreams, fairy tales, visions. It is a universal symbol in the language of the subconscious. And clearly that is what it stands for in this teaching. What do we put in the place of any departed demon? Time and life and relationship with Jesus (Holy Spirit). Of course! Only if Jesus comes more and more into our lives will the demons find no room to get back in. Who else could fill such a void – flood our “house” with light and joy – until we have no more desire for demons, or the fake gifts they offer us? Come, Lord Jesus ...

PEACE – SERENITY

I don't know how you began this Lent, but I hope you will end it contemplating "The Gifts of the Spirit." We *could* do even better than that. We could calm our souls, take a deep breath, and actually open ourselves to receive still more of what the Holy Spirit offers us. It is not about what we give up for Lent; it is about what we receive from the Holy Spirit of Jesus our Savior.

I am no Pollyanna, as most of you know. If we receive the gifts of the Spirit, that will change us more, in the long run, than anything or everything that we might ever give up. Nevertheless, Christianity is ultimately the claiming of LIFE – more life than we have ever had before, or thought was even possible before. "*I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.*" (John 10:10)

I know that life is hard. Sometimes we get so focused on the problems, and what we think the solutions are, that we get to seeing little else. There is nothing terribly wrong with trying to solve our problems – unless that turns us negative and we end up seeing life as nothing *but* problems. It's not exactly a false picture. Life really *is* hard – we really do have trials and struggles. We really do need Jesus. We really do need to go into another week with encouragement, and to go on living our lives as faithfully as we can. We really do need to trust God for all the future that is beyond our sight or we'll begin to malfunction. So why would I complain about disciplines designed to help us with our problems?

I complain because, by itself, that picture is so watered-down and tame. I complain because the Christian Life is full of joy and confidence and power so far beyond all the normal descriptions that, even as they tell the truth, they lie. They don't mean to, surely. But do you remember the old expression: "To damn with faint praise"? It's from a poem:

*Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne,
View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
And hate the arts that caused himself to rise;
Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
And, without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;
Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,*

*Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike.
Alike reserved to blame, or to commend
A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend.*

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)
Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot

I do not like watered-down Christendom. I long for a church that will rise above faint praise of our faith, and mere sneering at our doubts. I think Jesus deserves better than timorous foes and suspicious friends. And often, in *this* place, I think I have found such a church. But we will not be one for long if we get careless or go to sleep. Are the disciplines wearing thin? Is the commitment again taken lightly? Are the priorities slipping back into what's comfortable or convenient at the moment?

I do not believe that Christendom can run for very long off of guilt. I don't even think that we can be very faithful to Jesus – for very long, or very consistently – just because we need Him so much. Life is trouble, and there is no doubt about that. But many centuries of prophets preaching and priests absolving make it clear that we cannot rise very far above our SIN – *or* our sins – just because we are frightened, suffering, punished, or persuaded of our needs and shortcomings.

I don't think that John, the author of the Book of Revelation, meant to be so subtle, but most readers miss it. One of the major themes – so graphic that it's easy to get lost in the imagery – of the Book of Revelation is that no matter how harsh life gets, it does not bring people to true repentance. In the middle of the book, Revelation portrays nightmare plagues that make the plagues of Egypt look like child's play. These are not God's doing; they are the result of worshipping the BEAST – of putting faith in overt human power. The world gets torn asunder because people trust satanic promises and principles rather than turning to God. But no matter how bad and obvious the results, people won't repent – they won't turn back to God. Of course, John is setting it up for the LAMB OF GOD to come and lead people out of their suffering and despair. He comes riding in to offer grace and mercy and love – He comes to rescue and to save. Very few realize that this is the message of the Book of Revelation. Actually, very few know that this is the power of Christendom, period. We get focused on the problems, and try to invent our own solutions. Do you want to know what our culture thinks will save us? Watch any television commercial.

Do you wonder where I'm going with all this? We do face and try to deal with our problems. We put disciplines in place and try to get our own lives ordered so that we can be effective – do less harm and more good. Sometimes it even seems to work ... sort of ... for a while. Yet most of us realize that there are powers swirling all around us that are bigger than anything our personal approaches and disciplines can handle. But we try not to think about that very much. Denial has its uses.

In the midst of this reality – this potential chaos and ruin – Christians find LIFE and LIGHT and JOY. True Life is bigger than its problems, or there is no hope for any of us. Focusing on problems, and their solutions, can never bring us to Life. At best, that can only minimize the damage, which will inevitably overwhelm us – unless Life really is bigger than its problems. If we do not find and focus on LIGHT and LIFE, we are doomed to despair and darkness. For Christians, this comes to us in the LIGHT and LIFE of Christ.

Sometimes we ought to share our JOY. Sometimes we ought to talk about what really keeps us coming here – what really keeps us worshipping and praising God, and caring about each other. Sometimes we ought to forget about being coy or careful – about hedging our bets, or being afraid that people might think we're nuts or conceited or politically incorrect or whatever – and tell about what LIFE in Christ Jesus is really like for us. I mean behind the scenes: on the inside, where the world cannot see – where we truly live, and truly know HIM.

Do you ever wonder about the spread of the Christian church in, say, the first two centuries of its life? History cannot tell us about the inside, only about the outside. The outside was, quite frankly, unbelievable – impossible – at least by all normal, earthly expectations. So what must the inside have been like?

On the outside, a Message was being carried. It was carried by humble, mostly ordinary people. For the most part, they were not very rich. They had no outer authority. No government was supporting them. No religious institution was sponsoring them. And very quickly, they were persecuted, mocked, and defamed by ever-growing coalitions of religious, political, economic, military, and social structures of huge prominence and power in the overt world. In other words, the Christian Faith was spreading like wildfire, but in the most unlikely circumstances imaginable. Against the world's will. Against the "City Hall" that everybody thought you couldn't fight. Against the Roman Empire – and Roman steel.

We can laugh or sneer if we like, but it is pretty hard to deny that this was what happened – at least on the outside. It's very strange, at least from my perspective, that very few people even ask themselves what must have been going on on the inside. None of *us* ever do anything on the outside without some corresponding move on the inside. Does that not make us wonder about *them*? Especially when it turns out that a fairly significant number of these people – these people who heard and bought the Message – preferred ruination, persecution, torture, death ... to giving up the Message. Sometimes the streets were lined with their crosses. Sometimes they were merely ostracized, and couldn't find work to feed their families or give them any chance to make a place for themselves in their society.

What was the Message, that it could have so much power in their lives? Obviously it was more than outer words. It was more than mere theory, or creed, or ideas in the mind. That's the trouble with trying to talk about the spiritual realm, which cannot be seen by the outer world or contained in outer languages. But we *can* deduce a few things. It was personal and relational. For that much smoke, there had to be inner fire! It was personal and relational – and on the inside, the Message translated into some kind of deep, interior *experience*. This experience became more real to them, and more important to them, than anything going on in the external world. Anything!

What was the Message? That Jesus died? That He was crucified? Well, that was part of it. The story cannot be told or known apart from that. But that was going to inspire a grassroots movement of common, ordinary people to turn their lives upside down – risk everything they had ever known – to live a very different way that, at times, would get them beaten, fired, persecuted, tortured, killed? And they had wives, children, friends, relatives – just like we do – all of whom were at risk if *they* were at risk. There is no escaping it: They really meant it – this JOY that was more important to them than anything else in all the world.

What was the Message? That Jesus died? You can believe that if you want to. You won't convince me in a thousand years that this was what lit their souls afire and changed their lives. The way He died may encourage us not to let go of the Message no matter what, but that is not the same as the Message itself!

Now, I have to put this very quietly and lightly. You will hear it if you know the Message, no matter how I put it. And you won't hear it if you have not taken the Message inside yourself – again, no matter how I put it.

What these common, ordinary people were telling neighbors and friends all over the Near East at that time – what they had heard themselves – was this: This guy, Jesus, was sent from God. He is not dead – He is ALIVE! Our world killed Him, but death could not hold Him. If you want to know the truth of this for yourself, go into a lonely, quiet place where there are no distractions, and where there is no hurry. Then send your own soul's earnest probe into the quiet. Then say to the void: "I don't know if what they told me is true, but if You *are* alive – if You are really here and true – I invite You to come to me also. Take my life – guide it and direct it however You will." And then wait ... and see what happens.

The world keeps missing it because it's not on the outside – it's on the inside! Never mind the creeds, the theological explanations, or the organizations and institutions that grew up afterward. It was the experience on the inside that created "the church" and changed the world for those who opened themselves to it. To most of those who truly and sincerely invited Him, He came. What they *experienced* – not what somebody told them to believe, but *what they experienced* – changed them forever.

Now we are going to get further and further from what can be conveyed by human language. But they tried to talk about it anyway, so why shouldn't we? What people experienced was the coming of an interior Companion, who could not be seen or proved outwardly, but who nevertheless was more true and real to them than anything in the outer world. By the relationship they found with this Spirit Being, their lives were never the same again. They were never as lonely, never as frightened, never as angry, never as meaningless, never as discouraged as they had been before. And – wondrous to experience, and unlike any other hope or light in this world – it did not fade with threat, peril, or any of the trials of outer circumstances.

Like some of you, I have known a great many of these people over many years now, and in many different circumstances. I have seen them on their deathbeds. I have known them when they were jobless; when they were divorced; when their children had died; when their

mates had betrayed them; when they had lost all their money; when unscrupulous partners had delivered them unjustly to courts and ruined their lives. I have visited them in prison, and in psychiatric wards where they had been falsely committed by greedy relatives. I have visited them in hospitals and homes when disease would not be healed. The inner Companion does not always protect us from outer injustice or ruin, though I do think He always does if it won't break free will. But He will not break free will – not ours, and not anybody else's either. It would ruin the very purpose of our being here.

Nevertheless, it breaks our hearts when people we love go through such mayhem and injustice. And all of us do go through it, sooner or later, one way or another. But in all these circumstances, and many more, I have heard my Christian friends say, in whatever words they chose to use: “You know what? I still love you. I still love life. I still trust God. I still experience the love and light of Jesus with me – to comfort and to save. I'll see you in Heaven.”

Now shall we talk about the gifts of the Spirit? We do not make them up. We cannot get them for ourselves. But if we invite Jesus into our lives, Jesus brings these gifts with Him. The more we open ourselves to His presence and His influence, the more these gifts are given to us. It does us no good to pretend we have them. And we cannot buy them. Simon the Magician tried that, if you recall. (Acts 8:18) The gifts, like a kiss from the Spirit of our Risen Lord, come when we are ready and willing to receive them.

There are lots of gifts. This passage from Galatians is not a wooden list that defines or limits. But the passage gives us some quality hints. I cannot tell you about all the gifts of the Spirit. I don't know them all personally – not yet. I'm a slow study, even though an eager one, and I am still learning how to open myself to His love. But I do know a little about some of them, and I'd like to make just a few comments about one of them. It will not be an attempt to define. Each of these gifts is bigger than all definition. But if I talk about them, perhaps I can tempt you to make them the focus of your own prayers for the rest of this Lenten season. Even Jesus has to get our attention in order to bless us.

Consider the gift of “peace.” There is a lot that I do not know about peace. Do you understand how unnecessary, even foolish, it is for us to claim that we have fully grasped any one of the spiritual gifts? These gifts come from eternity. None of them are fully known here. We do not

define them; we *open ourselves* to them. Grasping and defining only take us back to the ways of the world.

On the other hand, we can be grateful – we can rejoice in the Spirit’s gifts. In fact, a major hope of this sermon is that you will claim them – that is, admit when you have received them, and talk about them more openly with each other. It is not a pride thing. It is a gratitude thing. And sometimes it’s important for us to tell each other – to let each other know – that whatever we may appear to be on the outside, on the inside we are very delighted with Jesus, and grateful beyond words for the LIFE He brings us.

I do know a little something about peace. This comment does not imply that *you* don’t know as much or more about it than I do. Just sharing what I do know, what I have experienced, what I am incredibly grateful to Jesus for bringing into my life.

Peace, like all of the spiritual gifts, is not connected to outer worldly circumstances. Sometimes it may have influence on us and therefore on the world we are participating in, but “peace” is not about harmony on the outside. If it were, it wouldn’t last for very long and it wouldn’t be worth very much. How long would it take Satan to use my wife to steal my peace, if it were something that fragile and tentative? And five minutes later, when maybe she needs me, what use will I be to her if my peace is gone? Sometimes we call that “a vicious circle.” Satan is very good at it. Yet I have been given the gift of peace over enough time, and in enough circumstances, that I know it is there if I claim it. I have only to turn inside, to where Jesus reigns – not my wife, or anybody else – and there it is, waiting for me.

Sorry, it doesn’t really translate into English, but some of you know very well what I mean. “Peace” in the New Testament is always about PEACE WITH GOD. It is never about peace in the outer world, though some people, even religious leaders, are always trying to take us there. Jesus reconciles us TO GOD; He takes away the animosity between us and God; He brings us peace by establishing the relationship between us and Himself, which then carries over into our relationship with His Father. That’s a small sample of the “theology” we figured out *after* having experienced it. Faith does not come from creeds – creeds come from faith. (A little secret the institutional church has yet to figure out.)

The AA word for “peace” is “serenity.” A synonym is “sobriety.” To an outsider, sobriety means you haven’t taken a drink recently. To an insider, sobriety is a quality of life, and it is wonderful in comparison to our drinking days. But it also gets better and richer the longer we live in the new and different way. I have heard people with twenty-five or thirty years of sobriety talking about working the twelve steps so they can have more sobriety in their lives. I have also watched newcomers, in their first year of sobriety, walk into a meeting, plop themselves down in a chair, and breathe a great sigh of relief. Outside they have lost everything: job, spouse, home, respect, reputation. But here in the meeting they have peace, serenity, sobriety. Here they belong, among people with whom they belong. Here they feel hope and light, because they have come to believe that a power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity – sooner or later, but inevitably. So the outer world looks pretty bleak. But inside they know they are better than they have been for as far back as they can remember, and so life will get better – in this world or the next. Some of them know they are dying. They did too much damage before they found the Way. Yet they rejoice anyway. How is that possible? Has it anything to do with any seeable circumstances or prospects? Hardly.

Have you been there? Not maybe with alcohol or the twelve steps, but have you been there? Peace is a gift beyond compare. And yes, I have been there, on both sides of this particular wire. In fact, even when things seem to be going pretty well on the outside, I never trust that. Life is fickle, and also temporal. You think I want to lose my peace? Start trusting stuff that has no worth or lasting importance? Thanks anyway; I prefer Jesus. Life with Jesus is wonderful.

I really love this church. I think we have some exciting possibilities and prospects if we keep praying and learning and growing together. But if we do not keep His presence – if we do not keep and trust our relationship with Jesus – none of it matters and none of it means a thing. Without the gifts of the Spirit, it will all come to naught. On the other hand, there are Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Catholics who live under ludicrous authoritarian structures – who try to jam their minds into the straitjackets of horrible theological constructs (from my perspective, you understand) – but some of them, despite everything, find the presence of Jesus. Life with Jesus is wonderful. The Spirit of Jesus, our Risen Lord, gives gifts to all who find Him and invite Him into their lives.

Isn't that the pits? Many of them do so well, in spite of having such pitiful help and support from the systems they live in. And here we have such freedom and such latitude and encouragement to explore and discover and make it all our own, yet half the time we sit on our hands or get sidetracked, or we cannot even be bothered to show up. And sometimes we even forget to say thank you – we forget to give praise and glory to God.

Do we forget because we do not have the gifts? And if we do not have the gifts, is it because we have not invited Him in? And if we have not invited Him in, is it because nobody told us the Message? Or is it because we would rather run our lives our own way?

Please stop trying to turn it all into a thing for guilt or punishment. The punishment is not having Him in our lives. No other punishment could be as severe as that. Life with Jesus is wonderful. And His gifts are beyond compare.

SELF-CONTROL

Last Sunday we alluded to the possibility – ever so lightly, I thought – that the reality of the Christian Life is not found on the surface of life, but on the inside. We become aware of a spiritual realm that is bigger, truer, more real than the physical realm. For want of better words, we live with an inner awareness of a Kingdom that is going on alongside the exterior life. They intersect at moments, at places, or with some people, but the spiritual realm is far greater. It is also eternal. All true meaning and joy come from it. Contrary to some misimpressions of those who talk about it but have never experienced it, this interior life is not individualistic, nor is it experienced in isolation. The bonds of fellowship with others who walk this WAY are powerful indeed and include many people present in covenant friendship all around us, but it also includes many others distant from us, and even some from previous times.

One of the reasons our present culture has so much difficulty comprehending a true and authentic Christianity is that it puts almost all the emphasis on the outer, physical world. Even the church today seems endlessly fascinated and focused on what it can see in the immediate moment. Therefore its life is confined more and more to truth that seems to “pay off” in the physical realm, and immediately. Never mind true character, or the development of the soul. Never mind that the payoff is paltry and doesn't last more than a year or two. As a result, the church is hypnotized, not by its Lord, but by what works in the outer world in terms of attendance, money, fame, and reputation in the world around it. It is not possible to follow Christ *and* be fascinated by the approval, expectations, values, and goals of an external world. There is no patience that way. There is no humility, no loyalty to Jesus, no delight in the presence of a numinous, eternal God ... not that way.

We have tried to look again at the gifts of the Spirit this Lent. But the approach has been different, and probably circuitous for many. I have hoped to make it clearer than ever before that the gifts do not come from this world – and cannot be received without letting go of this world. They cannot be grasped as tools to be used for success or fame in this world. They come from a different realm, and they can only be

used for a life that is tuned to this different realm. *“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”*

Some people will always try to grab for the gifts in what I call “normal mode.” This is not entirely their fault. Little has been done in mainline churches to prepare or train people for the interior life of a different WAY – unless, of course, they are among the few who go to prayer retreats, get into Bible study groups, find a mentor, and make daily prayer and Bible study top priorities in their lives.

From time to time, someone among you will suggest that I am just a lone voice. You explain that you have been in and around the church for a lot of years and have never heard so much emphasis put on prayer, obedience to the Holy Spirit, the interior life, and walking a different WAY – not until you ran into me or Chip or this church. So in the midst of a vast world of real and practical forces swirling all around you, you wonder if this is just an aberration – something that we are making up around here.

I am not at all insulted. But it’s far too high a compliment. I am not a lone voice. Nothing I tell you has originated from me. I try to pass it on to you, always painfully aware that my words are too lame and that my feet are still made of clay. But as you may have noticed, I am not apologetic (and alas, not very humble) about the Message itself – about what I have been given to pass on to you. Now, you may be spending so much time on sports, problems, making money, or running from your inner soul that you don’t really hear me very well. But I am not a lone voice. We could start with Abraham, or with Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah. But let’s start with Jesus. Have you any doubt about His connections with the interior life? Does He seem to you to be living for fame, wealth, or success in the outer world? He even chides His followers, saying, *“If you do things for outward show, you will lose your heavenly reward. If you do things for internal truth, and eternal realms, your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* (Matthew 6:4-18) That is only the briefest hint, but His whole life comes from such a stance.

It’s true that in our time – in our so-called “post-Christian world” – more and more people are saying that Jesus is irrelevant, and the outer world is making more and more moves to deny His identity and influence. But why so much urgency and passion to deny and cover up the influence of a man of no importance? Jesus has always caused division and controversy. Do we expect it to suddenly be different in our time?

If the present culture should actually succeed in getting Jesus entirely out of the schools, out of all the textbooks, off all the coins, out of all the shrines and traditions of our nation – do you really think Jesus would just blow away? Some people fight to keep Him in the public schools or at our national shrines; I'd be happy if we would keep Him in our *churches*, where we might continually pay attention to His Word and His Way.

The internal Way – the WAY of a spiritual Kingdom that Jesus opened up for us – is far too real and too powerful for the popular opinions of a secular world. It may well be true that our nation is heading into decline because it is abandoning Him. Certainly it's true that He gave our nation birth, regardless of what the rewritten history books may be trying to say about it. But *Jesus* is not in decline in our world. There are vast pockets of loyalty and allegiance to Him in our country, whether we are part of them or not. And even *those* are mild and tentative in comparison to the wildfire of conversion and devotion spreading in third-world countries.

But even if this weren't true, if *we* know Him and have discovered the vastness of His true Kingdom, can anything going on in this world offer reason or purpose enough to turn us away from Him?

I am not a lone voice. The voices some of you listen to are very recent, very paltry, and quite alone in comparison to my own. I'm not talking about my voice sounding like I wish it could, or representing Him like I wish it would. But however poorly or grandly I may speak, that's not the point. Some of you think I am out of step with what's happening today – out of step with most other pastors, and with the leaders of our denomination; out of step, perhaps, with most liberal mainline Christendom in our time. Why am I not more embarrassed by that? Why do I not hang my head, apologize, and keep quiet when people accuse me of that?

Well, people who forget the interior life – who minimize or abandon relationship with Jesus and loyalty to Jesus – in favor of what they are accomplishing in the world, in favor of their own logic or intellect – in favor of their own efforts to run life their own way – eventually cut themselves off from the vine, from the source, from the power of the Christian Life. They forget about obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus, and they slowly lose the gifts He once bestowed upon them. When that happens, the church is no longer about Jesus, prayer, the Bible, or living

the LIFE of the Kingdom ourselves. It is about homosexuality, abortion, saving the trees, solving poverty, curing injustice, supporting women's liberation, stopping racial prejudice, being politically correct. I know that such a statement will get me misquoted and misunderstood. But I'm not talking about withdrawing from all the problems or issues of this world; I'm talking about putting the cart before the horse! In deep humility, and in obedience to the Holy Spirit, we are sent into the world. But that's not how we've been going at it of late. Satan has been having a field day. The attitude and atmosphere of the spiritual gifts are not what we sense or feel in the struggles of the church in our time. Christendom in our world today is into endless, Christless fights – at each other's throats – giving lots of time, energy, and money to prove how much we care and how heroically we wage our wars to improve the world ... all while making very little headway, to put it mildly. We are trying to fix things according to our own best schemes and notions, and we hope it will make God very proud of us. But we are not trying to draw people to Christ – who alone can fix or save any of us.

Some of us like getting old. For one thing, we can see the end in sight. Instead of endless years stretching ahead of us in this stupid, dumb-assed mayhem of humans refusing to worship or obey God, we can see the end in sight. Soon we get to join the faithful in a higher, better realm. Though we will miss those left behind, they too will be joining us soon. On the other hand, we don't rush it. That's not faithful either. There is more for us to do and learn here.

Some of us like getting old. It's not as easy to sidetrack us as it once was. It's not as easy to bribe us with false values, or persuade us to trade what builds the soul for that which only builds the body, the pocketbook, or the good will of others who have no idea what they are talking about. When I was a young pastor, I was a voracious reader. I was so eager to learn. Looking back, it was almost an unholy need and urgency. I am still eager to learn; some of you are eager for me to learn as well, and you keep bringing me books. But doing my tax returns recently, I discovered that I don't spend as much on books anymore. Most books don't teach me as much as they used to. Oh, they tell me facts I do not know and endless information I do not know, and it is all interesting. But interesting is not the same as a deep-soul hunger. It is a rare book now that tells me principles I do not know or truth I have not encountered. Reminders are still good, of course.

Among other things, I have read nearly everything written by the saints of prayer down through the ages. I have also read a good many of the modern saints of prayer: Albert Day, Thomas Kelley, Ralph Morton, Agnes and Edgar and John Sanford, John Knox, Elton Trueblood, Joel Goldsmith, Olive Wyon, Sam Shoemaker – the list is long. I have also dabbled more than a little in the spiritual writings of other religions. I'm not trying to be a name-dropper, but some of you look at me funny when I talk about the interior life and the disciplines, and you say, "Where do you get all this?" And you say it like you've never heard of it before, like you wonder if I'm making it up from scratch. And notice, I am not even mentioning the great names down through the ages. No, I am not a lone voice. What seems weird to me is that we live in an age when a lot of folk *are* making things up. A lot of what passes today as sound, age-old Christianity is really quite recent and off-the-cuff, as if a little human logic and a King James Bible were all you needed.

But to get back to the point: It is the interior spiritual life – the relationship with the Living Christ – that has always driven and inspired the best of Christianity in our world. That is what has inspired us, comforted us, given us the gifts that bring us to life – given us our true identity, and our true purpose. And that is what has headed us toward the LIFE beyond this temporal world. In the process, it has sometimes inspired people to make considerable differences in this present world. But that is never the main point or purpose. The people who have made the best and biggest differences in our world have always made them for a realm beyond this world.

So when I read about the lives of the saints, I am never merely interested in the dimensions and plots of this outer world. I always look for the marks of the spiritual world, and the signs of awareness of what's really going on. A few years ago, a man named Richard Marius wrote a biography of Martin Luther. It was a big hit in liberal academic circles. The author is a spiritual idiot. He has almost no comprehension of who Luther was or what Luther was about because he writes without any awareness of the spiritual issues or motives. A man named Heiko Oberman also wrote a biography of Martin Luther. It was profound and powerful. Two authors wrote about the same man, with the same information available. One missed it entirely; one got it deeply, and inspired himself and many others in the process.

Two very brief illustrations:

Teresa of Avila was a nun in the generation just after Luther. Like most of us, she had some hard and harsh situations to deal with when she was young. In some ways they got even tougher when she was older. But somewhere along the way she stumbled into the interior life of prayer – the personal relationship with Jesus. She began to spend more time and more hours in prayer than was usual, even within her Catholic order. This was dangerous. If the Inquisition of her time discovered that she was breaking outside the prescribed, rote prayers of her order – that is, discovered that she was having fun praying, was actually getting in touch with the Holy Spirit, was having ecstatic experiences (which all genuine communication with the Holy Spirit is bound to include) – then she was dead! They would have burned her as a dangerous heretic. But she was cagey enough to elude detection and end up directing her own groups of young women, both protecting them from abuse and teaching them the depths and delights of genuine prayer. She did, by the way, have the help and support of a few more-than-ordinary priests, who knew the institutional church of their time was far off the mark.

Jonathan Edwards was perhaps the most brilliant teacher/theologian to ever come out of America. That, at least, is his reputation. After fifteen years of faithful teaching/preaching/counseling in Northampton, Massachusetts – one of the more prominent churches of his time – he was summarily dismissed from his church. The leader of the coalition that got him fired would later repent and confess how false the charges had been and how unfair the process – and compare himself in deep remorse to Judas Iscariot – but by that time Jonathan Edwards was dead. Having gone from Northampton to be a missionary to the Indians, Edwards had eventually been called to become the President of Princeton University, but by then his health had broken and he died soon after arriving at his new post. Edwards was a man of incredible discipline, who prayed and wrote commentary on the Bible nearly every morning of his life. Though incredibly careful and logical in his thinking, he became the most famous preacher and evangelist of his time (with George Whitefield arguably a close second). His legacy was enormous, both to the church that finally listened to him and to many young preachers who were inspired by him – perhaps most notably Charles Finney (Oberlin College). But this strange, introverted bookworm and writer – who loved his people, but often with little overt warmth –

moved the hearts of people when he preached, though they often couldn't tell exactly why, or what it was that sustained him through all the years of labor, disgrace, heartache, danger. Indeed, he and his family were often in mortal danger from the various wars, uprisings, and Indian raids going on all around them. His letters of comfort to relatives, children, and friends who were in grief or grave danger sound strange indeed to our ears. *It was the interior life!* He was often caught up in ecstasy in his prayer life. So were his wife and his daughter. So were many of the Puritans, who today we love to picture as stodgy and grim and mirthless. As is so frequently true of the saints, what went on in the exterior of their lives was only the tip of the iceberg. What motivated, inspired, comforted, and energized them was life on the inside – life with the Risen Christ.

So once again, shall we talk about the gifts of the Spirit?

Last week we talked about the Message that was converting the Roman Empire in the first two centuries after Jesus – the Message being that Jesus was sent from God: He is not dead; He is ALIVE! Our world killed Him, but death could not hold Him. If you want to know the truth of this for yourself, you must go into a lonely, quiet place where there are no distractions and no hurry. Then send your own soul's earnest probe into the quiet. Then say to the void: "I don't know if what Your crazy followers are telling me is true, but if You *are* alive – if You are really here and true – I invite You to come to me also. Take my life – guide it and direct it however You will." And then wait ... and see what happens.

Jesus comes in different ways to different people. Sometimes it is startling and immediate, like with Paul on the Damascus Road. Other times, a person goes days, even weeks, before they realize that Jesus has responded to their invitation. Sometimes, once we have invited Jesus to be in charge, we are confronted with obvious new directions and decisions. Other times, we don't notice until we look at the wake and realize that our lives have changed direction, but it was so subtle that at first we weren't certain of it. Soon, however, there is no mistaking it. However it happens: If we are truly willing and truly mean the invitation, He will come! Our lives and our priorities will change. Our lives will take on more and more of the flavor and power of His gifts. Only, it will be a power not our own.

Did I forget to mention that we do not get to choose the gifts? That is, we do not get to choose which gift we get next. That's probably obvious to all of you, because the whole thing is in the context of our turning our lives over to Jesus. Nevertheless, one of the most fascinating things for all of us this Lent is the anticipation and excitement of seeing which gift Jesus is going to give us next. If we are not playing games – if we really do meditate and pray for His presence with us, and if we really do open ourselves to receive more of His gifts – there is no way Jesus is going to miss an opportunity like that. We know Him pretty well, and Jesus is neither stupid nor stingy. So if we are ready to take another step – ready to open ourselves to another dimension of the spiritual life – it is not a matter of “if.” It is a matter of when, in what manner, and which gift. Only, He chooses the gift for us. And we suddenly remember: that's how it works with true gifts.

For most of us (not all of us, perhaps, but most of us), if we do not have this gift already, it is doubtless a gift we have not yet been willing to receive. In other words, the gift is not going to come into our lives without a certain amount of disruption. That surprises some people. Why would we not want all of the gifts of the Spirit? Why would we not want to receive them willingly and eagerly? How long do you have to stop and think about *that* one?

Why would I not want the gift of PATIENCE? At the pace we try to live and with all the things we are trying to accomplish ... are you kidding? Do you think I really want Jesus to give me a sane schedule? How could I ever catch up to the life going on around me?!

Do you think I really want the gift of JOY? With all the excuses I find useful and all the people, places, and things I try to blame ... are you kidding? If people suspect I have joy, they might think my life is pretty good. Then what will happen to their compassion? They will stop trying to help me. They will even get jealous and try to take me down. No, no – I have to keep telling them how hard my life is.

There are no gifts of the Spirit that we take easily into our lives. They all crowd out patterns and habits that we have found most useful, and that we think help us to survive.

Last week we talked about PEACE. Today I want to comment about SELF-CONTROL. There is a whole string of incredible gifts in the list given in Galatians 5, and even that list doesn't name them all. Clearly

I am demonstrating the gift of self-control by limiting myself to comments on only two of the gifts. But it is my expectation and conviction that you will be benefited most by contemplating these gifts in your own Lenten meditations. I have only tried to set up some guidelines and approaches that I hope will be helpful to the real thing. And the real thing is always between you and the Holy Spirit.

Why did I choose “self-control” as one of the gifts to comment about? Surely it is one of the least inspired-sounding of the gifts. That, of course, is partly why I chose it. On top of that, it seems contradictory to the entire flavor and meaning of the passage itself. That is also why I chose it. It also closes the list – it is the last to be named of the gifts of the Spirit. Normally we would expect the last named gift to be one of great prominence, almost a carrier and summation of all the gifts. Who chooses the weakest runner to run last in the relay? Certainly not the Apostle Paul.

For all these reasons, I want to comment briefly on the gift of self-control. Self-control in this context does not mean what *we* usually mean when we say “self-control.” If self-control means we control ourselves, how is that a gift of the Spirit? The Spirit makes it possible for us to control ourselves? Well, that’s precisely what most people conclude – if they think about the gifts of the Spirit at all. They think that the Spirit makes it possible for us to get more effective at controlling our own lives. Back to bootstrap religion. Back to us being in charge, only with more rigorousness than ever. Back to “God helps those who help themselves.” Which, of course, would be necessary if the Holy Spirit didn’t really exist or really help us, or if religion were just ethereal encouragement for us to do the right thing – what we know we should be doing all along – but in the end we have to do for ourselves. How often does that end up being the American version of Christianity?

By this time, I should doubtless trust all of you to see through such satanic twists and turns and traps. But I do not. However much regard and pride I may have in you, I have watched too many astute and faithful people get careless with this one. If you get careless with this last gift, it will deliver you back to a self-help operation, and, as Paul says, “*Christ will do you no good whatsoever.*”

First of all, if you help yourself, God cannot help you. God does not help those who help themselves. God is unable to help those who help themselves. As long as you are helping yourself, you are still in charge of your own life. You have not turned will and life over to the

guidance and direction of Jesus' Holy Spirit. Some things that are critical, huge, and essential to the Christian Life are still missing – some things called surrender, obedience, willingness, trusting in God. Why is the Christian Life so rare and so scary to all of us? Precisely because it requires that we give up all our self-help schemes. Precisely because we have to put it all in the hands of God. Precisely because we have to admit our powerlessness – go humble and teachable and willing to die to the old life, meaning all our ways of trying to succeed by our own efforts and hang on to our own plans and techniques.

God does not help those who help themselves. God is unable to help those who help themselves. They will not let God in to manage and control their lives – not really, and not where it matters most. They ask for God's help, to be sure. They do things for God, things they think God would approve of and even be grateful to have done. But doing things for God is not the same as doing what God asks us to do. It is the difference between Humanism and True Christianity. It is the difference between God as our mascot, and us as God's servants.

Self-control is not a gift. Spirit-control is a gift. Spirit-control is a gift worthy to conclude and finish off this list. But there is no "appropriate" word. So, as happens all the time when we try to communicate spiritual truth in human language, Paul chooses a word or phrase that's as close as he can get, and then uses the context and meaning of the rest of the passage to alert us to its true meaning. We have to translate into spiritual dimensions. That's true, I remind you, of all our most important words: repent, redeem, salvation, *Christos*, forgiveness, conversion, gospel, sacrifice, cross. All of these words have taken on meanings way beyond their original earthly definitions. We have no spiritual language; we can only use our earthbound language to point toward higher truth, and hope that others who want to will track the true meaning. No time to go through all of them, but just for a reminder: What does "Christ" (*Christos*) really mean? It means somebody poured oil on your head. It means you were anointed with oil. I doubt if that is the landlocked definition most of you think of when we name Jesus "The Christ." The Christ of God: the one whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit. Well, at least we can track some of the dimensional development, but it is still a long way from somebody pouring oil on your head, even if that's part of a ceremony to name you priest or king. I don't know about you, but when I call Jesus "The Christ," it goes off all the charts of human definition.

SELF-CONTROL

Finally, look at the context. Here is this list of the gifts of the Spirit – gifts Jesus will bring to us if we spend enough time in His presence and open ourselves to His mercy and love. The last gift mentioned does indeed summarize and fulfill the intent of the passage. Last of all, and best of all, the Spirit controls our lives. What a relief! It no longer depends on our power, our intelligence, our determination, or our courage or patience or wisdom. All these things are now provided by the Spirit – if we go open and willing to let the Spirit have His way in our lives. And in case we did miss it, Paul adds, *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* Does that sound like self-control to you? And in case we missed even that, the next sentence is: *“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”* I rest my case. But don’t pay any attention to that. Just go tell Jesus you want His gifts ... and that you are willing to give up anything and everything He asks, in order to receive them.