



We are Church Together. . .
the Nebraska Synod ELCA

2019 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Dear Nebraska Synod,
Greetings in Christ! We are excited to share with you this devotional for use in your congregation or ministry during Lent 2019 as part of our 'We Are Church Together' Resources.

This devotional is written by members and friends of the Nebraska Synod from throughout our Synod and beyond; including our Companion Synods, Ecumenical Partners and Mission Partners of the Synod. We are thankful to each person who took the time to write a devotion and share their faith in this way.

Please feel free to make as many copies of the devotional as you need to share with the people in your ministry setting.

We pray that this devotional will be read throughout our Synod as a living example that we truly are 'Church Together'.

Have a Blessed Lent,
The 'We Are Church Together' Task Force

‡WE ARE CHURCH TOGETHER‡

Ash Wednesday, March 6th

Ephesians 2:19-22

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

On this Ash Wednesday we begin a journey to our solid foundation, our cornerstone, Christ. On this day/night we are no longer just one single person in God's family. We get to be joined together today/tonight with brothers and sisters in Christ from all over the world. Becoming One Body in Christ. As the ashes are placed on our foreheads or hands, we are marked and claimed as a chosen child of God. Our Lenten journeys will all look different, sound different, feel different, taste different, and that's okay. When we combine our journey's together through prayer, we will have built a space where God can enter and be heard and where the Holy can be encountered through the touch of a cool Palm branch, the caress of someone washing our hands or feet and the horrific sound of a nail being hammered.

Gracious God, come to us this day/night as our journey begins and walk with us we plead. Amen

Martha Atkins

Faiths United Parish, Niobrara

Thursday, March 7th

1 Corinthians 12:27

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Yesterday we were reminded that "we are dust and to dust we shall return." Those words take on a new and deeper meaning for me this year as a new parent. This was the first Ash Wednesday with our daughter Caroline, and hearing those words said for your child really makes you think and take a step back. It's hard not to sob and think about the finitude of life for this little bundle of energy and joy. It's hard not to sob and think about your own finitude of life, and what it might look like if you are not there for your little one. Thankfully that reminder is not the end of the story.

Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection we are a part of something bigger than ourselves and promised the hope of life beyond our human journeys. At the heart of our Lenten journey, is a reminder that even though we all face the realities of death, we don't do so alone. We are all individual Children of God, members of the Body of Christ. But we are also all part of that Body of Christ, which calls us into relationship and holds us fast as the People of God together. Together we bear each other's burdens. Together as communities and congregations, as the Nebraska Synod, and the larger ELCA through mission share we do far more ministry of meeting our neighbors' needs near and far than could ever be done alone by ourselves.

As I look into my daughter's eyes, I am excited to see her life unfold as a Child of God. I am also grateful to know, that she too is part of the Body of Christ—a body that holds one another in love and the promise. And one that is there to celebrate the joys of life together, and support one another on the hard days, like yesterday where death may seem so real.

Gracious God, thank you for creating us in your image, and calling us together as your people and the Body of Christ. Hold us together, and may we continue to grow deeper in our relationships with one another as part of your church together. Amen.

Deacon Timothy Siburg
Nebraska Synod Office

Friday, March 8th

Romans 12:4-5

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

God knows we need each other - and so thanks be to God we don't do this faith or this church thing alone! When it comes to who we are as the church, we each get to bring something unique and worthwhile to the table. Who you are is a gift and we are a better church because you are a part! *You* bring something unique and worthwhile to the table. Praise be to God for *you*! Without you, we would be incomplete.

We also need each other. We need each other's gifts and talents and what makes them unique. Without them, the church is lacking. And here's the scary part: this includes the people who drive us nuts; who maybe we'd rather not count as the "church." But the truth is, we need them. They offer something unique and worthwhile too. We need all of us to be the church and without them, we are incomplete.

So here's my hope for you, today. Pray for the people who are a part of your church. Think pastors, people who sit in your pew, that kind of thing. More so, if someone came to mind who drives you nuts, pray for them too. Pray also for yourself, and give thanks to God for who you are and the uniqueness and worthwhileness you bring. We need each other as a church, and we need you – *because God knows we don't do this faith or this church thing alone!*

Good and Gracious God, you give us the gift of the church and each other. Draw us together as your body in Christ and help us to see that everyone is unique and worthy, and has a place in you, including myself. Amen.

Rev. David Buco
First Lutheran, Avoca

Saturday, March 9th

Ephesians 4:11-13

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

While in prison, Paul writes of God's plan for unity. In order that this unity may occur spiritual gifts have been given to us to be used to His glory. Some are given special abilities in winning people to Christ, some in preaching, and caring for God's people is a special ability of others. Again, these abilities are given to be used to UNIFY the Body of Christ and to build up the faith. The goal is that we grow up and mature in the fullness of Christ, that is, in believing in Salvation and the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We are Church Together-We learn and grow in community. We build each other up and benefit by sharing our faith stories and life experiences. God said, it is not good that man should live alone. We acknowledge we are not good at everything and need each other.

Dear Lord, Help us to recognize our special abilities given by you, and those of our fellow believers. Help us to grow and support each other as we come closer to you. Amen.

Laurie Voss

Hosanna Lutheran Church, Plattsmouth

Sunday, March 10th

Colossians 1:16-20

¹⁶For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

I recently started wearing contact lenses in my middle age because I had to face my stark reality – my eyes were getting older and things that were visible were becoming invisible! With the loving care of my eye doctor, I learned how to get those contact lenses in and readjust to a new way of living ... a new way of seeing.

A new way of seeing is what Paul calls the Colossians to do. They may have become new in Christ through Paul's ministry in recent years, but their vision was aging quickly as they were not able to focus on Christ. Under the power and dominion of the Roman Empire, the Colossians struggled to see that Jesus is the image of the invisible God and firstborn of all creation ... not Caesar. Paul reminds the Colossians that they only need the lens of Jesus Christ in order to believe and see that the invisible God has become visible in Christ, who is Lord of all.

No matter how young or old our eyes are, we are called together as the church to wear our lenses of faith so that we may see the invisible God through our visible Lord, Jesus Christ. Similar to the Colossians, it is easy for us to lose focus on whom we follow. Today's politics, economics, and consumerist culture polarize us as we are divided following different people or agendas. We are called into a new way of seeing as we put on the lens of Jesus Christ that unites us and calls us together so that we may give witness to our visible Lord Jesus Christ.

Loving Lord – We praise you that you made our invisible God visible through your life, death, and resurrection. Empower us to wear the lens of Christ that we may be united seeing our visible Lord lead and guide us as the church together. Amen

Rev. Dr. Sarah Cordray
Luther Memorial, Syracuse

Monday, March 11th

Revelation 22:1-3a

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there anymore.

Monday through Friday we gather together in our center. We come from North Omaha, South Omaha, West Omaha and as far away as Gretna, Fremont, Papillion and Plattsmouth. Our ancestors are from North America, South America, Europe, Asia and Africa. We have come from financial poverty and financial riches. We have come from peaceful homes and violent homes. Together, we have created a space where we all belong. We don't worship together on Sunday, but we are the church. We don't always agree on the number and meaning of sacraments, but we are the church. We don't vote for the same politicians, but we are the church. We practice **compassion** for one another. We practice **honoring** one another. We practice celebrating and renewing our **relationships**. We practice being people of **integrity**. We look for ways to **serve** one another. We practice **teamwork**. Our practices bring the presence of **CHRIST** into our daily vocations, and create the experience of church, in our space known as PACE (Program of All Inclusive Care for the Elderly). Together, we are the church.

O Lord our God, O Holy One, open our eyes that we may see you. Open our hearts that we may serve you. Open our minds that we may follow you. Provide what is needed in wisdom, bread and healing this day. Amen

Rev. Jodi Wangeness
Immanuel Pathways, Omaha PACE

Tuesday, March 12th

Ephesians 1:22-23

²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

I recently finished a bible study titled "The Call", focusing on the life of the Apostle Paul. This study caused me to reflect on how committed Paul was and how much he endured to follow the call of Christ!

Initially, the book made me feel like a slacker. Paul gives up his entire life to help people follow Jesus Christ – shouldn't I be doing something to impact hundreds of thousands of people as well???

However, the book ends with the question “What won't happen if you don't do what God has called you to do?”, and this is where I found my answer. As we are the church together, God calls us to use our gifts where **He** needs us.

I answered one such call years ago, when the churches in our community decided to start a community food pantry. I felt the urge (God's call) to volunteer, and my gift of organization has helped me operate the food pantry for over 20 years. In that time, our community of about 2,000 people has given out over 400,000 lbs. of food! God called us to serve our small community, but we made a big difference to those who are hungry!

God calls each of us to use our gifts to help those He needs us to help. That call may be in our home, church, job, community, state, country, or world. As we are the church together, we each need to listen for the calls we are each individually given!

Loving Lord – As You are the head over all things for the church, help us each to hear where You are calling us to use our gifts to help those You need us to help. Amen

Cheryl Halvorsen
Luther Memorial Church, Syracuse, NE

‡GATHERED BY THE SPIRIT‡

Wednesday, March 13th

Galatians 4:6-7

‘And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Paul writes, “because you are children,” not suggesting we're childish but making the point that believers aren't just slaves who work for a family, but children of that family. The first gift of being a child is that of the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with that awareness; an awareness that we can call on God not just as some distant deity, but as Father—“Abba!” (“Daddy!”) as both Jesus and Paul make clear.

One of the many great joys of being a parent is the memory of our kids being toddlers and their response when they'd see my face across a room. There was an instant of recognition, and then a smile and then a full-bore charge to run and be with daddy. We've all seen it. Having experienced it firsthand as a parent, I wonder if this isn't what God is hoping for us daily—not some structured religious practice but a recognition of God's presence in other people, in events, in nature; and a corresponding recognition and eager charge, in prayer or even a brief pause of gratitude, to the one who urges us to call out “Daddy!”

The gift of the Holy Spirit is that very recognition and that impulse to charge toward God in prayer. And if we all respond to God as Father, we cannot help but see one another as brother and sister. Even those with whom we disagree—or whom we dislike—are drawn closer in the recognition that we are *all* God’s children.

Father, grant us the Spirit to see and recognize you in moments throughout the day and, in our recognition, charge toward you in prayer, gratitude and love not only for you but for all whom you have gathered as your children.

Bishop Brian Maas
Nebraska Synod Office

Thursday, March 14th

John 14:16-17

¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

As I stood at the sink washing Mom’s dishes the day after Dad died, she walked up to me, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and said, “That’s from your dad. He gave me that kiss before he left in the ambulance, and now I’ve given that kiss to you and your brothers and sister, too.” This happened over 25 years ago, and it’s still a treasured memory in my heart. Today’s reading from John comes only four chapters before Jesus is arrested and the arduous journey toward the cross begins. Reading these verses, I’m reminded of my dad’s kiss, and I feel convinced that both Jesus and my dad wanted the people they love to know they are loved and to continue feeling supported by that love throughout their own lives.

Jesus’ offer of the Advocate to be with his followers is a gift that continues to be shared, and it’s a gift that’s shared with us. How do we remind one another of the gift that the Spirit is? In what ways do we set aside time and space to notice the Spirit’s abiding in our lives and in the broader world around us? If you’re looking for resources that support your journey with the Spirit, the Nebraska Synod’s Seeking the Spirit Within and Faith Formation ministries have offerings to explore.

Loving Jesus, help us to remind each other of your love and your Spirit among us so that, as church together, we can remind the world of your love and presence, too. Amen.

Lisa Kramme
Nebraska Synod Office

Friday, March 15th

Romans 8:26-27

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

When talking about personal struggles, I often share the story of my seventh grade year with confirmation classes. Moving from small town Texas to Seattle, Washington; enrolled in a huge middle school where I would constantly get lost; my parents' divorce that sent me back to Texas a few months later to live with my aunt; another short move and then back to where I started to begin eighth grade. A circle of sighs too deep for words amid the joys and challenges of returning home.

That's when I met Hank - Hank Williams (Senior), that is; the 1950's country singer, who sang the blues with such sincerity and believability that I would listen over and over again. "Alone and forsaken by fate and by man, O, Lord if you hear me please hold my hand. O please understand." Hank sang the loneliness and pain that my young voice could not express.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" lamented King David, who also felt alone and forsaken (Psalm 22). King David, Hank, and all of us, sing the blues at times throughout our life's journey. I once read that the shortest prayer is "Help!", a good one to pray when words do not come, remembering that our help comes through the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ, who "intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words."

Prayer: Compassionate and searching God, assure us that when words don't come, you hear our songs of sorrow, loneliness and joy, through the Holy Spirit of Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Kathee Forrest
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Beatrice

Saturday, March 16th

John 14:25-27

²⁵I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Jesus shared a Last Supper with his friends, and He knew that he was leaving them. He knew that the next 24 hours would scatter them in fear. Peter would say stupid things; Judas would do them. Jesus promised them, "...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name..." The Spirit would gather them together despite their fear, and make them courageous speakers of the Truth.

We, like the disciples, are often paralyzed by fear. I was, years ago, as I watched two leaders of my church at worship. They were both married, but not to each other. They sat together Sundays, sharing tender looks and words like newlyweds. I could have spoken to them privately after the service, asking them if they realized what their behavior suggested, but I didn't. I was scared. I spoke to my Pastor, to the Council President, then one night blurted out my concerns at a Council meeting WITH THE BISHOP PRESENT! As one might expect, there was a great to-do, and people got hurt. Eventually, one of the two leaders moved to a different church.

Lots of people in the churches fear confrontation, and we hurt each other because of it. We need to remember that the Spirit is still gathering us together, still teaching us, so that we can speak the truth in love. We can handle situations that arise by speaking TO each other, not ABOUT each other.

“Jesus, may Your Spirit guide us to speak gently, but directly, to each other, so that the Father’s love may spread to everyone around us.”

Sara Pahl-Ramirez
St. Luke’s Lutheran, Omaha

Sunday, March 17th

Acts 15:8-9

⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.

Under the new covenant, God makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile. God is only concerned with a person’s repentance and faith in Christ. Race no longer matters, ethnicity no longer matters. God promises salvation to any and all whom He chooses to call. That is why when we confess faith in Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit. We are all his children; God has forgiven our sins because of our repentance, and justified by faith, we have been granted the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So why is it that we in the church, make distinctions? We give more deference to the wealthy and do not consider the poor member. We hold the singer, the musician, the teacher, the preacher, in more esteem. We gravitate to the better dressed, the charismatic, while ignoring the shy one, the one who doesn’t wield influence. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. During this Lenten season, let us ponder and pray that the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us all and makes us all equal, leads us to become united in love and respect. Look for ways you can draw others into the circle of fellowship. As Christ made the ultimate sacrifice for us, let us look for ways to honor that sacrifice.

Heavenly Father, during this Lenten season help us reflect on Christ’s sacrificial love and look for ways to emulate and honor Him.

PMA Maurine Roller
St. John’s Lutheran Church, Alliance

Monday, March 18th

John 16:13-14

¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Just today in text study we talked about speaking the truth in love and how hard that is. Whether it is to an employee, a child, or a church member, speaking the truth can be downright difficult. Especially in this day and age of *inconvenient truths* and *alternative facts*. Many times, we base our opinions on the facts we hear, but we are coming to learn that one person's interpretation of what the facts are may not be the same as someone else's.

So how do we know "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" Whose truth is the real truth? Only God's. And God always speaks the truth in love, especially when it's hard for us to hear. God speaks of grace, of forgiveness, and of love – for all God's children everywhere. Does that mean there are no consequences for our actions? Of course not! Consequences are part of the "truth" and the truth would not be complete without them.

God gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all the truth – into God's truth! This way we are never left alone to wonder what we should do or how we should act. God gives the Holy Spirit to us to help us live into God's truth.

Holy Spirit, come into our lives and help us learn God's truth – the truth that God loves us enough to send Jesus Christ into the world to be our Savior. Help us to speak the truth in love as we share God's truth with everyone we meet. Amen.

Rev. Kathy Montira
St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Pender

Tuesday, March 19th

1 John 4:13

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

When I lived on a dairy farm "in the middle of nowhere", I would enjoy cool walks at night, sometimes when it was really dark, except for the moon or starlight. In the spring, the distant yap of coyote pups made it kind of creepy. There was also the hoot of an occasional owl, and maybe the scuffle of a random raccoon.

Having grown up in an Eastern city with streetlights and traffic noise at all hours, this lonely section of Nebraska could have been scary. However, I found it peaceful, even restful, because of Cindy our Australian shepherd mix who always came with me. She was my security. She was not always right beside me; but just when the yapping or the owl got spooky, here came Cindy, making the corn leaves rustle as she plowed through to join me. She made her presence known and always reassured me.

So it is in the spooky, scary, dark times of life, the Holy Spirit rustles through our burdens and our fears and our sadness. The Spirit also runs beside us in times of rejoicing and thanksgiving and renewal. Jesus left us the gift of the Holy Spirit to remind us we are not alone. Our assurance is in the smiles of loved ones, the messages of friends and even in the rustling of those corn leaves. The Spirit is there to comfort, to strengthen, to share in whatever we may encounter on our walk through life. What an amazing gift!

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of the Holy Spirit's constant presence, our blessed assurance. Help us to show our gratitude by sharing this gift with those we meet along our walk. In Jesus' name. Amen

Karen Hansen
St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Millard

‡SHAPED BY WORD AND SACRAMENT‡

Wednesday, March 20th

John 6:48-68

⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' ⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' ⁵³So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.' ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. ⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.' ⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

"I love Bread..." Oprah Winfrey declares with joy and abandon as she begins an ad for Weight Watchers. And who doesn't love warm bread oozing with butter. First, it satisfies me by taking away hunger. Second, it gives me life in the sense that I get to eat and live, rather than starve and die. But I also think of this when I think of today's scripture from John. Why? Because Christ as the Bread of life does the same. He takes away the hunger of being alone and the feeling of being separated from God. He is our Bread of life that feeds our soul and brings us life through him.

I love that the Bread of Life connects me to other believers, both those gathered with me as well as those of the church at large. Christ as the Bread of life heals my soul and brings me comfort.

And while we, as well as the disciples, may not always understand what Christ wants us to do, he always provides us with what we need. We are invited to walk with Christ and be a part of his life. On Sunday morning as I come to the table to partake of the Bread of Life, I would love to say with as much Joy as Oprah, I LOVE BREAD! I love the life that Christ has given to me. It shapes my life and helps me understand who I am in my walk with Christ. I want to sing and shout and proclaim with great joy, I Love Bread... I love the Bread of Life!

Jesus is the Bread of Heaven for eternal life who will give us sustenance and strength, and by the leading of the Holy Spirit, may we come ready to receive from Father God. Let our hearts and minds resolve to offer him thanks and praise. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Frances Hall
St. Michael's Lutheran Church, Omaha

Thursday, March 21st

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In this reading Jesus gives his disciples his great charge, for them to go out and make disciples of all nations. For them to go out and risk themselves for the sake of Christ, to bring His message to all ends of the earth.

We are called by Jesus in our baptism to risk everything for the Gospel, to go into places that make us uncomfortable, to help those who are different than us, to be neighbors to everyone. Too often people all around us sit on the sidelines waiting to see how a situation will play out so they won't be hurt or ridiculed. We too don't always want to take those risks because we are scared of the outcome. How can we get past this fear we have? What can we do? Look towards the cross for the answer.

Through Christ's death we need not fear because He risked it all for us on the cross. Through His body and blood we are strengthened to go into the world to risk ridicule, scorn and disbelievers to change the world. Let us go therefore as Jesus commanded and have no fear of rejection because Jesus is with us always, to the end of the age!

Father, we give you thanks for the gift you so lovingly gave us in your son. Help and strengthen us to go into this broken and hurt world to bring your message of love and peace to those who need it most. In your name we pray, Amen

Elysia McGill
St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Falls City

Friday, March 22nd

1 Corinthians 11:23-28

²³For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The above scripture is a passage that every Christian should be familiar with since it is used every Sunday we celebrate Holy Communion. These "Words of Institution" used in the Communion liturgy are instructions the Apostle Paul received directly from the Resurrected/Ascended Christ concerning Holy Communion. Along with Jesus' instructions at the Last Supper itself in the Gospel accounts (Matt.26:26-29 [the only actual eyewitness of this original Supper], Mark14:22-25, Luke22:17-20), the Church for almost 2,000 years has followed a synopsis/conflation of these accounts in our liturgy of the Lord's Supper. In its larger context, this account of Communion in 1Cor.11, God showed Paul the "right" way to observe and administer Communion, rather than following the practice of the Corinthian Christians of a social feast where the differences between the "haves" and "have-nots" were plainly evident.

Less well-known are the last two verses. With more churches recovering and following the ancient Christian practice of weekly Communion, a concern is that observing Communion this often might reduce it to an unthinking, automatic weekly ritual. Paul's admonition in verses 27-29 exhorts people to examine themselves before receiving the Sacrament. Certainly no one (by God's standard) is objectively "worthy" of receiving Communion on their own merit. No one deserves to. It is all a matter of God's grace. Our part is to reflect, repent and prepare ourselves. With God's love/favor/mercy conveyed to us through Communion we should try to live in the way God expects of us.

Holy God, we are grateful for our walk with you this Lenten season. Help us to recover and retain a sense of mystery and wonder in the sacred occasions of the Church, chief of which is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, which we remember in Holy Communion. We pray with faith and love in Christ. Amen.

Rev. Robert Schlismann
St. Luke's Lutheran Church, Stanton

Saturday, March 23rd

John 17:15-17

¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

This reading is part of Jesus' High Priestly prayer before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus prays to God to protect his disciples on their journey through life. This prayer is for us as well.

We are called by the saving word in the waters of our baptism to bring the message of God's love in Christ to all despite the risks encountered on our journey. It means living in the world and

not of the world. It means taking the risks of sharing the Gospel truth that has the power to change the hearts of the world around us. As we share that Gospel truth courageously, knowing that through it, God is able to call, save, and sanctify God's people, just as God's grace has called, saved, and sanctified us.

Are you willing to risk sharing the saving truth of God's word to a world hungry and thirsty for the truth? The truth that Christ on the cross opened his arms to all. Through the body and blood of Christ, we are strengthened on this journey in the world even with its risk of sharing God's word to all.

Gracious God, keep us steadfast in your word. Help and strengthen us to share your Gospel truth of your Son, Jesus Christ, in the world. In his name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Sandra Braasch
Salem Lutheran Church, Dakota City

Sunday, March 24th

Psalm 119:105

¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

I remember the first time communion became intensely meaningful for me. I was in college at a weekend retreat on liturgy and worship, presented by Rev. Chip Andrus, a musician and Presbyterian minister who had served in the PC(USA)'s Office of Theology and Worship. Pastor Chip made an impassioned plea that communion ought to be received joyfully with a "hallelujah!" rather a solemn nod and a quiet "amen." It was a feast. A party. Something changed in my heart when I took communion that day, as if a connection with my entire self had been made and I felt the joy of Christ in my whole body and spirit.

The following summer I interned with Pastor Chip in the Arkansas church he served, and I witnessed another "click" within one of the youth, Trevor. Trevor and his mother were at Chip's house and Chip was pouring a pitcher of water into the sink. Trevor noticed it and said, "Remember your baptism! That's what you always say, right Pastor Chip? When you pour the water in the font? Remember your baptism!" Chip was elated! As I had made the connection between Eucharist and Christ's nourishment of my whole self, Trevor had connected the pouring of water in his daily life to the remembrance of Baptism, a reminder of our dying and rising a new creation in Christ.

Sitting and eating, pouring water, a child reading aloud – each one a daily, ordinary act that can remind you of God's eternal and extraordinary grace, nurture, love, and mercy, for you. May God's Word present within you bring encouragement and joy to you with every step you take. Amen.

Rev. Steven Neal
St. Mark's Lutheran Church, St. Paul

Monday, March 25th

Mark 1:9-10

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit descending on him.

While Matthew and Luke see the need to establish the heritage of Jesus' family tree, Mark doesn't waste any time: "In those days" he begins. For Mark, everything begins at Jesus' Baptism: "The heavens are "torn apart"; the Spirit descends; and then the voice of God proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved!" There could not be a more profound stamp of approval imaginable for Jesus' coming ministry.

While it's not a full-fledged hobby, I'm fascinated by genealogy. One line of my family tree can be traced back to the 12th century. The house where these ancestors lived still exists, and I've walked in that space. But while family trees undoubtedly define each of us in important ways, it is our Baptism that shapes us--that shapes us to be the people of God.

At my Baptism there is no record of the heavens being torn apart, nor the spirit descending—but it happened! For all of God's children, the heavens are torn apart—life takes on a new meaning and the world is not the same; the Spirit descends, and we are not alone—never in our lifetimes will there be a time when God is not there; and a voice speaks quietly in our ears, a voice saying, "You are my child, and you are loved by Me."

To be shaped by Baptism is to know that we have been called to service, we are never alone, and that we are so very deeply loved by God.

Lord God, Shaper of the Universe, shape us to be your witnesses to a world in need. Challenge us through your baptismal call to make a difference. In Your Name, Amen.

Rev. Mark Grorud
Immanuel Vision Foundation, Omaha

Tuesday, March 26th

Revelation 10:1-2a, 8-11

¹And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. ²He held a little scroll open in his hand. ⁸Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." ⁹So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." ¹⁰So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. ¹¹Then they said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Every parent knows the wisdom of Mary Poppins' adage, "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." The makers of children's medicine get this. Now you can find flavor additives in not only cherry or orange flavor, but bubblegum and watermelon. And who hasn't hidden their pet's medicine in a treat to help it go down better?

After all, what good is medicine if it is not taken in?

God's word is tonic for us, it heals us of our brokenness and sets us on right paths. It has the power to make us new, but it also challenges us to seek the way of justice and peace. In this age of corruption and greed, it can be hard to take. Perhaps it should be! Our sin is, as Luther constantly reminded us, not just good people doing bad things, but the very nature of humanity, and we cannot overcome it by sheer willpower. No, we are dependent on the healing power of God's grace. If we do not receive this word, we have no hope.

This is the Word that we are called to proclaim to the world, and we must know that it will not go down easily. In fact, the bitter resistance we encounter is probably a sign that we are doing it right. So let us speak truth from grace, that all may hear and our world be healed.

Heavenly Father, feed us on your Word, and grant us your Spirit that we may proclaim it in both grace and truth. Amen

Rev. Glen Thomas
St. Matthew Ev. Lutheran Church, Omaha

‡ DIVERSITY AND CHALLENGES ‡

Wednesday, March 27th

Nehemiah 13:1-3; 30-31

¹On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, ²because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. ³When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. ³⁰Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; ³¹and I provided for the wood offering, at appointed times, and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

As we reflect during the weeks of Lent, the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection is seen as how our God turned the curse on human fallen condition to a blessing and restoration. One of the major theological themes in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah are, how God's covenant people were restored from Babylonian exile to a covenant land as theocratic (Kingdom of God) community. The church is a "called out community" and we are gathered together by the Holy Spirit and shaped by word and sacrament to embrace the diversity and challenges. Our God is a God who restores even at times people viewed others as different or diverse or cursed or immigrant (differ in ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, and economic disparity).

Howard Thurman was serving as a pastor in a church for the Fellowship of All people in San Francisco, which was the nation's first intentionally interracial congregation. He summarized the essential message of Jesus for the disinherited in these words, "You must abandon your fear of

each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea-Nea; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your father in heaven.”

As God calls us with a task and challenge, He will empower us with necessary skills and strength to continue our effort to be a church together in this world for a global mission.

God who has died for all, we pray that you equip us to overcome challenges and love all as you called us to be in the church together. Amen

Rev. Inba
Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church, Omaha

Thursday, March 28th

Acts 15:36-41

³⁶After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. ³⁹The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.

After successfully reducing tensions between Gentile and Jewish believers, Paul and Barnabas had a falling out over their own ministry and went their separate ways over it.

Many years ago, my best friend and I planned to start a business together. We were in different jobs in a related industry. She was familiar with the scope of the business, I was familiar with the day to day workings of the job. These qualities were both essential, but our visions were different. It put a great strain on our friendship. We called ourselves sisters of another mother and yet our differing emphases pulled us apart. Thirty years later, she sold her company for more money than I could spend in one hundred lifetimes and spends her time doing charitable work. I am a pastor who would make the same choice again, even knowing that I could have been rich.

My friend and I put hurt feelings in the past and realized God had different plans for our lives. Neither vision was wrong. They weren't mutually exclusive, but we stubbornly let our visions compete rather than compliment.

Paul cares more about the success of the mission and John Mark seems unreliable. Barnabas was more concerned about his former companion. God did not allow their inflexibility to hinder their mission. They (we) just make it harder by expecting others to be of the same opinion rather than accepting that we can disagree and continue to love each other.

God who is greater than any single vision can contain, help us to respect our differences, for you created us all special and have something to teach us through our unique perspectives. Amen

Rev. Karen McNeill-Utecht
St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pender

Friday, March 29th

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³but anyone who loves God is known by him. ⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." ⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as in fact there are many gods and many lords — ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. ⁷It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

In the letters to the Corinthians, Paul addresses many topics. In this reading he gives some advice about how a Christian should act. He is specifically talking about eating food that has been offered to an Idol. Not a current issue, but the message is still relevant.

As a Christian we are given a great deal of freedom. There are many things and ways of being that we can choose ... all of which are quite proper and which are neither encouraged nor forbidden. But Paul asks us to think about how our choices might affect and be seen those around us...not just about ourselves.

As a white foreigner living in Tanzania one is very aware that people are interested and watching. In fact, it seems like one is always "on stage". What one does IS noticed. I try to be sensitive to this very different culture. The bible does not have anything to say about mowing your yard on a hot afternoon wearing only a pair of shorts. I might well do that in Nebraska, but never here in Tanzania. It is more conservative, and some might find it offensive. Same thing with a woman wearing a shorter skirt...they could not understand how a Christian woman could do that. This is not a one-way street however...for example, a woman should probably not publicly nurse a baby in a non-discrete way in the US, whereas it is perfectly proper here.

The message seems to be that everyone, and especially a Christian, should remember that their behavior has an effect on those around them. This does not mean you cannot be true to yourself, but humankind everywhere is a diverse lot ... and as you chose your actions should always have the other in mind as well.

Dear Lord...we give you great thanks for our lives and the freedom from intricate laws. Keep us ever mindful to use this freedom well, thinking not only what we want and is OK with you... but also the effect all who surround us. Amen.

Bob Kasworm
Machame Lutheran Hospital, Kilimanjaro, Tanzania

Saturday, March 30th

1 Corinthians 11:18-19

¹⁸For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.

We need not to be colorblind in order to see our differences, we then can celebrate our similarities and differences by getting to know one another without losing our individual identities, all this without fear!

The challenge for the Lutherans Today, seems to be allowing the diversity that is emerging in our churches without the fear of losing our individual identities by listening, curious to ask/to know without bias. This begins with conversation and fellowshiping, listening and talking together.

My bus trip to Minneapolis, MN with the Nebraska Women ELCA to the 2017 Triennial, included a mixed lot from diverse backgrounds and temperaments. We laughed so hard that we were crying and joking with each other as if we had always been friends. One thing we did have in common is our devotion and love as women of faith united by Christ.

I took a leap of faith by leaving my preconceived notions, fears and bias off the bus before we traveled down the road. I was willing to be vulnerable with ladies I didn't yet know. I learned a lot about their Joy as Lutherans which made me feel I finally found what I was looking for in the Lutheran community of faith willing to carry out our Lord's directives. I also learned the game of Pitch!

Every time we saw each other you knew we would not only meet at the table of God's grace and we would later have a game of Pitch, our game is on!

I tell Sisters in Christ with love, "We may not always agree with each other, however with God in the center of us, we can and will accomplish a whole lot despite our differences.

I'm so grateful that God made us different in His likeness with individual gifts to work together in the Body of Christ. Amen

Debra Parks
Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Omaha

Sunday, March 31st

John 14:16-17

¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

Mitakuye Oyasin!

For many, the Lenten journey began with an Ash Wednesday confession, a very hard confession of our sin which recounts, in very blunt terms, the many ways we “have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” We are blessed with an amazing variety of races and cultures in this world, and yet by various means we confine our daily lives to those people most familiar and most comfortable to us. We often miss the blessings of ever-widening circles of fellowship to which we are called. We may even overlook that presence of Christ found in those who differ most from us. It is our sin, but our sin is not the last word.

In the words from John, Jesus’ speech builds to his great mandate that we are to “Love one another as I have loved you,” and he would pray that his people might be One. Around that call and that commandment, Jesus offers a promise and a gift. The gift is the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit who “calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the *whole* Christian Church on earth.” And the promise is, that by the Spirit we are brought together — forever.

Here is a question: What do Betsy Poor Bear, Norman Red Bear, Clarinda Iron Bear, Susie Chief Bear, and Thomas Black Bear — all have in common? Bear? Yes. But another answer is, all these Nebraskans have worshipped with Lakota Lutheran Center and Chapel. It is an extended ministry of the congregations of the Nebraska Synod, and by the Spirit, this community participates in the life of Christ together with you.

Lakota people have a special way to say Amen, which is known to mean “Yes — it shall be so.” For Lakota's, a prayer is ended in the words “Mitakuya Oyasin,” meaning “We are all related.” Jesus has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the unity of the Spirit, may we be bound together as one human family, unbroken, living as an answer to the prayer of Christ.

Holy Spirit, abide in us. Open our hearts and minds to all people, until our knowledge of your love... is made perfect in our love for all your children, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Will Voss
Lakota Lutheran Center, Scottsbluff

Monday, April 1st

Mark 7:24-30

²⁴From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed

first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’²⁸But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’²⁹Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

This nameless woman is an early advocate for justice. She opens the eyes of Jesus to the needs of the oppressed. Her plea is, “See me.” Like modern advocates working for equality for women; people of color; those with disabilities and diverse abilities; our LGBTQ brothers and sisters; she calls for acknowledgment. We must see the humanity in all of God’s children, not just those whom we deem worthy because they are “like us.”

As Christians we do a disservice to one another when we say we are alike in God’s eyes. We are different. We are people of diversity; in color, language, identity, ability. Instead of denying such diversity, we, like the Syrophoenician woman, must acknowledge such differences and still proclaim **all** are worthy of God’s love. We need to see, appreciate, and affirm difference rather than pretend it does not exist. God created the world with such tremendous diversity of life, and we do God an injustice when we do not witness to and truly appreciate all our differences.

As the mother of two young children I am deeply committed to and hopeful for a future where we see the difference as a strength among us. My 6-year-old daughter, Zoe, has Down syndrome. Her 4-year-old brother, Charlie, is on the Autism spectrum. I am sad to say I have not always been the advocate I ought to have been. Since these amazing children entered my life, I have come to realize that all people at times struggle to be seen and heard just as they are. Each of us is a child of God worthy of the same love and the same human rights. For me, that is the true gift of this nameless woman who fights for her daughter to be seen. She knows, as a mother does, that absolutely nothing in the world can stand between a mother’s love for her child and the belief that her child is as precious, as wanted, as needed, as worthy as any.

Gracious God help us to celebrate the diversity of your creation in our brothers and sisters in Christ. Help us to see that while we are all different, you love us all the same. Amen.

Rev. Erin Dunlavy
Grace Lutheran Church, Sutherland

Tuesday, April 2nd

Luke 18:15-17

¹⁵ People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded them. ¹⁶ Then Jesus called them to him and said, “Allow the children to come to me. Don’t forbid them, because God’s kingdom belongs to people like these children. ¹⁷ I assure you that whoever doesn’t welcome God’s kingdom like a child will never enter it.”

The people are bringing their cherished babies for blessing (perhaps in the hope they will survive childhood), but the religious are offended. Why? Is it because children are too noisy? Too unruly? Do we religious struggle with allowing God to be in contact with those who scream and demand attention? Is our God a blesser of the quiet, attentive follower only? Heaven forbid! Who in our world do we find unworthy of receiving our gracious Lord’s blessing? Have

we become afraid to cry out for the blessing we so desperately need? Dear One, there are no appointed guardians of the graces of God. Let the children come. Let the innocent enter the community. Like the gates of God's kingdom, let our hearts open to the cries of the innocent crying out to receive this gift of life.

Soften our hearts to the cries of your children Lord, especially the cries of those we do not understand. Amen.

Rev. Jodi Wangsness
Immanuel Pathways Omaha

+JOYS AND BURDENS+

Wednesday, April 3rd

Psalm 4:6-8

⁶Many people say, “We can’t find goodness anywhere. The light of your face has left us, LORD!” ⁷But you have filled my heart with more joy than when their wheat and wine are everywhere! ⁸I will lie down and fall asleep in peace because you alone, LORD, let me live in safety.

When storms rage, difficulties arise or the pain of loss seems overwhelming, we can find ourselves looking for an oasis of goodness where we can shelter and rest. Perhaps these are times when having a relationship with God is more important than having the Book of Concord memorized. Perhaps these are the times when it becomes necessary for our minds to slip down into our hearts and allow our relationship with our Daddy/Mommy God to enfold us in the comfort of Holy Spirit. Have you experienced the comfort of this loving relationship? Have you built an ark of nurture within to shelter from the storm? Who are the people in your life you can borrow hope and faith from when the chaos of the world threatens to overtake you?

Ark inspiring God, give us the will to create a holy space within to connect us to your goodness when the chaos of life rises. Amen

Rev. Jodi Wangsness
Immanuel Pathways Omaha

Thursday, April 4th

Ecclesiastes 7:14

¹⁴In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them.

One of the dear departed members of my congregation told me more than once that she was looking forward to meeting God face to face because she was going to ask to see the “playbook.”

A playbook is a notebook that contains diagrammed football plays. Each player memorizes the plays in the playbook and the coach uses it to plan specific strategies for winning a game. The term has expanded to mean any plan or strategy for a business or political campaign.

I believe that what she really wanted to know was what God's plan was for her life. But that brings up a question – Does God have a playbook for each of us? Are our lives pre-arranged and diagrammed to the tiniest degree?

Some people think so. But the question becomes a lot harder when bad things happen to good people. Are death or sickness or job loss or divorce part of God's plan for you? Is God really using tragedy to make you a better person?

I don't believe that God micromanages every aspect or event in your life. I do believe that in baptism, God named and claimed you, and that you live into God's promise in your own unique and individual way.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes refuses to let us off the hook with easy answers. He tests the limits of what we can know or achieve. You can't know what tomorrow will bring, whether it will be joyful or tragic. All you can do is live this present day fully, knowing that God is fully present in your life. Plans change. God's infinite, death-defying love does not change.

God of my sorrows and my joys, help me to live every single day of my life secure in the knowledge of your love. Amen.

Rev. Ann Sundberg
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Chadron

Friday, April 5th

Romans 12:15

¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

As we explore joys and burdens, this week's scripture verse is found within the section of the chapter labeled: Marks of the True Christian. Chapter twelve provides a distinct list of what we are called to do and be as Christians. In particular, verse fifteen specifically calls us to mirror the expression being expressed; it takes out all the guess work of what to do. This verse binds us together as one body.

So, what is a True Christian? How do we live out Christ through these words? How do we mirror rejoicing and weeping?

For many it is easier to rejoice than weep, isn't it? Weddings, promotions, awards, birthday's, a clean bill of health; it feels good to rejoice with someone. If not, we are reminded that it is about the other and not us. We are to share in the good news as God is abundant, there is plenty to go around. We are free to rejoice for those rejoicing.

But who wants to weep? Divorce, lost jobs, criticism, death, a dire diagnosis; it feels uncomfortable to shed tears, or sob with someone who is struggling. We tell ourselves things like, "I don't know what to say" or, "this is too personal, I can't get involved". Again, we are

reminded that it is about the other and not us. We are free to weep with those who are weeping. Not to take it on, God sent Christ to do that for us, but to acknowledge and name it for what it is.

God, help us look to you as we meet each other where we are in our joy and sorrow, to be one in you through Christ.

Alissa Gunning
Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Lincoln

Saturday, April 6th

1 Corinthians 12:24b-26

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member,²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

What's the first thing that pops into your mind, when you read these verses? For me, "interconnectivity" - that all humans are connected to one another. We have the capacity to connect with one another by sharing our sorrows and our joys. But do we share? Sharing is tough, even with those we love. Am I truly happy with your wonderful news with no jealousies? Am I able to listen one more time to your sobbing story of loss? Do ***I share*** my sorrows and joys with you? If we succeed in truly sharing, even just a bit, isn't the burden lightened?

Tough questions to ask of ourselves: Do I recognize all people as equal children of God? How do I connect with people I see suffering on the news? How do I connect with you as a member of one of those suffering groups when you appear in my community - at my doorstep? Is it easier or harder for me when I am face to face with your suffering? Do I connect and establish a relationship, or do I push away? Why do I push away? Why am I afraid? Do we all not want food, shelter clean water and air, a sense of security, to be loved and to love others? We all have burdens and joys, a range of emotions from despair to jubilation. Let this be the basis of understanding one another.

Oh, Creator of us all, I am overwhelmed by the idea of caring for all your people and for myself. I pray for eyes and an open heart to see the hunger in a person's eyes and belly, not how they are different from me. I pray for ears and an open heart to truly listen to others. I pray for an open heart to acknowledge and understand my own feelings. Remind me that caring means more than burdens-that caring also includes joys. Help me rejoice in the joys of others. And in my own joys. I pray for your help to love my neighbor, for that neighbor to love their neighbor and so forth. Help me reach for my neighbor's hand when it is extended in need, when I need help, and in fellowship. In gratitude for all the gifts we have and will receive from you, we give thanks. Amen.

Sarah Ferneding
St. Michael Lutheran Church, Omaha

Sunday, April 7th

Ecclesiastes 5:19

¹⁹Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil — this is the gift of God.

Growing up I wanted it all – money, power, fame – all of it. I found that I have had to work hard for what I have in life and I don't have any of those things. What I do have is enough money that I live comfortably and can help where it is needed most times in ways that are not monetary. I have learned, over the course of my life, many things which have allowed me to help others through trials in their lives to find the help that they need when they need it. If you asked a 100 people if they knew me, you would probably get 100 people who said, "No." But there are those who do know me and they are not afraid to send others who need to find me, my way.

In all of my growing up years, I struggled and toiled to find my "place" in God's Kingdom. Always, looking around at others to see how I measured up and where I fit. It takes me by surprise each time God shows me where He intends to use me in this life and what He intends to have me do. My response is usually, "Really? I'm not sure I can do that." His response is always, "Yes, you can."

We each are given much in the way of wealth, possession, and power by our loving God. It just doesn't always come in forms that we expect. These are the gifts of our funny God.

Precious Lord, help us to remember that time spent attending to the tasks laid before us is never wasted when done with your joy in our hearts. Amen.

Susan Lauman

Luther Memorial Lutheran Church, Omaha

Monday, April 8th

Galatians 6:1-2

¹My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ²Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

As so many of us have experienced, what begins as a joy can, at times, become tiresome. Our service of Marriage used to observe that even the joy of a family could become a burden. More down to earth, the gardens that are planted with such enthusiasm in the spring can later entail the pressing obligations of weeding and watering, and produce can pile up while we look for time to can, to freeze, to give away. As the poet Robert Frost observed in *After Apple-Picking*, "I am overtired of the great harvest I myself desired."

But we bear our obligations and burdens not by ourselves alone. We cast our cares on the One who cares for us. And St. Paul reminds us that we are also to bear one another's burdens, restoring each other to wholeness, in a spirit of gentleness and humility.

An old proverb says, “Shared trouble is half a trouble; shared joy is double joy.” As we share each other’s joys and bear each other’s burdens, St. Paul says we fulfill the law of Christ. And what is that law, other than the new commandment He gave us, that we love one another?

Son of Righteousness, you restore our souls; grant us your Holy Spirit, that we might walk in gentleness and fulfill your words to us. May we love one another. Amen

Jim Freuhling
Mosaic, Omaha

Tuesday, April 9th

Matthew 11:28-30

Then Jesus said, ²⁸ “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

“Pastor, go ahead and be with your family. That’s where you need to be right now. We’ve got this.” I’ve heard this twice from leaders in our congregation in the time my wife and I have been here. The first time was after hearing on Vigil Saturday that my aunt, who was much more than an aunt to me after my parents died, had passed away in Georgia. Our congregation was true to its word and I was able to take a couple of weeks to travel the 1,700 miles to be with family for my aunt’s funeral and then some just to be there; to be present. It mattered, to me and to our family. Six years later I heard the same phrase from a different leader in the same congregation as my wife was hospitalized and faced multiple surgeries, including an organ transplant when she was near death. I remember those conversations like they happened yesterday even to the point of being able to walk to exactly where I was standing when each leader told me in essence that I would not carry the burdens alone. The last conversation was five years ago and my wife and I remain thankful for the blessings we’ve experienced all along the way.

Jesus doesn’t promise us a burden free life or walk of discipleship but rather that we will not bear those burdens alone. In Christ, we are called not just to help bear the burdens of others but to allow them to help with ours thus making the burdens easy to bear and light(er) for us all.

Good and Gracious God, we move through life with many burdens and concerns. Help us to recognize those same burdens and concerns in those around us and the willingness to help as we are able. In so doing, we realize that in you, we too will find ourselves receiving the help of caring hands and hearts. In Jesus’ name. Amen

Rev. Rick Johnson
St. Paul’s “Soapcreek” Lutheran Church, Dewitt

‡WE ARE CONNECTED‡

Wednesday, April 10th

John 15:1-5

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. ²He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. ³You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything.

Yes Lord! I understand the need for pruning! Prune away the arrogance and apathy that keep us from loving our culture's Samaritans. Prune away the anger and harshness that prevents holy listening in the midst of disagreement. Cut out and replant in the soil of your Word everyone who swears falsely in your name or curses another on the road. Repot all your children who have forgotten their calling to be peace makers in the world. Wait! You are talking about me?!

Open our eyes to the connections we have to you, creation and one another. Amen

Rev. Jodi Wangsness
Immanuel Pathways Omaha

Thursday, April 11th

John 15:7-11

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

I love social media. Despite these modern connections, many people feel isolated and despondent. In today's passage, Jesus prepares his disciples for his death, a time of isolation and despair. Yet, his words are full of promise and hope. As modern disciples, his words also comfort, support, and direct us today. Jesus invites us to abide in his love." In another translation, the word "remain" is used. As children of God, in this time and place, we remain in the solace of his love.

Jesus encourages us to enter into a conversational relationship with the Father, sharing our needs with him through prayer. We are told "Ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." This is not a promise of a false prosperity gospel. We are encouraged to share with our Father our fears and our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Our Father is happy to fulfill those needs to assure our success in our ministry, whatever it may be. God's Church is fruitful and fulfilled.

As modern disciples, we are a purposeful people. To claim Jesus' promises, we are to keep his commandments. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus commands us to love God unconditionally and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In loving God and others, we find joy!

In this somber, reflective period of Lent, we are not to be despondent or alone. Instead, we are to remain in Christ, look to the resurrection, and share our joy with the world!

Holy Father, teach us to love others as you have loved us; help us to reach out to others, sharing your joy and your salvation; and equip us to be fruitful as we embrace the work of your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Sally Perkins Johnson
St. Paul's Lutheran Church, De Witt

Friday, April 12th

John 15: 12-17

¹²This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Jesus tells us to love one another. That doesn't seem to be very difficult. "Love one another". Well, I can do that. However, the more I think about it, the more I realize that it isn't that simple. Do I actually love my enemies? Do I love those who harm others or make judgments that are unfair? These are not easy questions, are they? Jesus loved all. He had a loving friendship with all of his disciples and we, too, are called into this loving friendship with God.

The love of God is not a superficial love. God loves us so much he gave his only begotten Son in order for us to have life. True friends will lay down their lives for one another. This is real love. Do any of us hold this true friendship in our lives?

God wants us to love one another. We can accept love that is given to us but are we as quick to love in return? Today God is teaching us to love others as he loves them. God loves all people no matter their economic status, education level, body type, religion, denomination or what others think of them. Jesus exemplifies how we should express this love to all peoples.

Loving God, teach us to love as you love. Amen

Deacon Angela Jones
Holy Apostles Episcopal Church, Mitchell

Saturday, April 13th

1 Peter 2:9-10

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy; but now you have received mercy.

Peter wrote this letter to five provinces in Asia Minor where Christians were being persecuted. They were suffering and asked for advice on how to survive under such challenging and dire circumstances. This Epistle was to encourage the Christians who were being persecuted because of their allegiance to the Gospel of Christ. They could only escape this torment by renouncing their Christian faith. Peter's letter gave hope to these "newborn" Christians.

Often when beginning or joining a new group, one is faced with ridicule and opposition. That is certainly the case with Christians at various times in history. Peter too had been persecuted and suffered so he could empathize with these new Christians. Peter reminded them that they were the chosen race. Not in the sense of white, black, brown, yellow, etc., but as a group of cohesive people believing in God and his son, Jesus Christ. They are a royal priesthood where each person is to go out and serve God and their community and tell others about God's "mighty acts." And a holy nation, seen as one body who suffered, was persecuted, and rejected for their beliefs and faith. Belief in God and Jesus Christ is our salvation. Faith brings us closer to God and the opportunity to spend eternity with Him.

Christians are God's people—we are special, we are loved, and we are cared for by God. Through His mercy bestowed upon us as Christians, we are forgiven for our sins. We are able to experience compassion and grace for our lifetime and beyond.

Heavenly Father, thank you for choosing us and loving us unconditionally. You graciously bestow mercy on us in spite of our sinfulness. Continue to grow our faith and show us your marvelous light. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Kathy Becker
St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Pilger

Palm Sunday, April 14th

Ephesians 4:4-7

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

On January 13, 1962, my two older brothers and I were baptized at Chapel #13 in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. My parents, like many young adults before and after them, had grown up in the church, but upon reaching adulthood, had left the church behind. Life for a young couple in the Army, far from home, was not easy, but thankfully through the compassion shown to them by the chaplain on Base, they experienced God's grace and love at a particularly stressful time in their lives and as a result felt moved to have all three of us kids baptized. When we were baptized, my parents didn't belong to any particular church, so for us, there was a real sense in

which we understood the truth of Paul's words in Ephesians 4: 4-6 "*there is only one faith, one baptism.*"

Today, we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Many churches today will also participate in the dramatic reading of the Passion story—hearing once more of Jesus' journey to the cross. But undergirding all that Jesus does as he makes his way to Jerusalem and the cross is God's love for the whole world. On the cross, Jesus put to death once for all the divisions that we tend to let divide us from God and from each other. In Christ, we are all part of one Body and one Spirit. There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. In Christ, no matter what our faith journey may be, we are all connected—we are all one.

Loving God, we thank you that through Jesus you put to death all that separates us and bind us together in one Body and one Spirit. Give us the eyes of faith to see that in Christ, we are truly all one. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Sheryl Kester Beyer
Calvary Lutheran Church, Scottsbluff
Holy Apostles Episcopal Church, Mitchell

Monday, April 15th

Romans 12:9-16

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Today would be my mother's 83rd birthday had she lived. But she was taken from us at the too early age of 57. What, you might ask, does this have to do with these words Paul wrote to the people of Rome? These are words my mother might well have said to us children as we were growing up. In fact, as I read them, I can hear her voice, and it comforts me. She lived out these words, at least she tried to. Life was not easy, but she was one tough cookie. And her faith spoke volumes.

Imagine what our world could be if we all heeded Paul's words when it came to how we treat one another. *This* is the Christian way of acting, *this* is the way Christ would want us to live. Unfortunately, these actions are all too rare in our society and world today. People always looking out for number 1, themselves, instead of the greater good; putting profits ahead of people; and trying to make themselves feel better even at the expense of others. Paul may allude to the sayings of Jesus, and these words can be summed up in the Golden Rule. But they go much deeper than that. When was the last time you tried to outdo someone in showing honor? Every person you look at is made in the image of God, and is loved by God. That alone makes every person worthwhile and worth loving.

Dear gracious heavenly Father, help us to recognize you in all others. Help us to treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve while remaining humble ourselves. Remind us that your love and blessings extend to all your beloved, and that we are to follow your lead. Thank you for this day. Amen.

Rev. Kathy Montira
St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Pender

Tuesday, April 16th

1 Corinthians 12:12-21

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

You are needed. As a connected part of the body, you are needed. And no one can say otherwise. You see, God has connected you, along with everyone else, to His Body and each part is valued and necessary. Equally necessary. God has created each of us – you and me and everyone – to be His children and has arranged us as He chose. What a truth to hang onto in these days of seeming division and polarity. But when God put the body together from different parts, He did it in such a way that the organs would work together in harmony, each doing its part – a *different* part.

In this old world we tend to regard likeness as the prerequisite for human dignity. This world claims that if we are different, we have different merit. So we try to maintain the illusion that all of God's creatures ought to live up to some singular false standard to be dignified. Paul in this letter says, no. We are created diverse. Equality of merit does not mean similarity. Just the opposite, in fact. Christ has begun the great work of bringing God's good news of significance to the lowliest places. We are called to live in our diversity, each with their own function, to join in this ongoing work of good news and grace. An eye cannot be an ear. The value it has is because it is an eye and nothing else. And no one can say otherwise.

Gracious God, help me to remember that I am uniquely created and connected to your body to fulfill my part in serving all.

Rev. Paula Lawhead
Nebraska Lutheran Outdoor Ministry

Wednesday, April 17th

Philippians 1:3-11

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Our devotion focuses on Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, where his prayer draws attention to two important things. One is his love for the Gospel of Christ and the other is his caring thoughts for his fellow believers in Christ. We see this pattern in all of Paul's writings and it reveals the secret of his connection with God and other believers.

During this Holy week, as a church and as people of God, when we meditate on Christ's sufferings and crucifixion on the cross, let us pray like Paul to experience that connectivity with Christ and other believers. Praying for others is the first and foremost starting point that establishes the connectivity, both in times of joy and sorrow, and mostly, the act of prayer is invisible to others. As Apostle Paul acknowledged, sharing in God's grace with love is the second and visible part which connects us with each other and as witnesses for Christ. We are already sharing God's love here locally, and in addition globally through various missions. Does this connectivity end with these acts? No. Apostle Paul prayed that our love should overflow with knowledge and understanding (v. 9), to stand "pure and blameless" before God (v. 10), and to yield a "harvest of righteousness" which comes only "through Jesus Christ" (v. 11). Above all, as Apostle Paul prayed, we are connected to God and other believers to give glory to God and to praise Him (v. 11).

Lord Jesus, keep us connected with you and all the believers in church on earth, until you come again. We give you glory, honor, and praise to your Holy name. Amen

Jeba Inbarasu

Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church, Omaha

Maundy Thursday, April 18th

Philippians 2:1-4

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

We are connected.

We are connected to each other in love, compassion, humility and sympathy. We are to take care of each other without being selfish or to gain from the ones we are helping. At the time that I am writing this we are seeing people trying to get into the United States that have lost everything. Fleeing from poverty, wars, drugs and gang violence. All wanting a better life than where they came from.

We today are to love and be compassionate to those people. At one time or another in our lives we have had someone move to where they are now and usually where they go they are cared for by the people that are around them until they can stand on their own and pay it forward to someone else.

We are connected by Jesus's sacrifice and love that we may be forgiven and to show that love to others. No matter where we come from we are to help one another thru the good times as well as the bad times. We are connected as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are not to judge others and accept everyone as they are. We are made in God's image and need to be of the same mind as Christ. Just by doing simple things in our daily life could help touch someone near to us or a great distance from us.

Heavenly Father. Let me always be in your image and to help anyone and everyone in need. Thank You for making me a Child of God. Amen.

Carol Stark
American Lutheran, Cozad

Good Friday, April 19th

Philippians 2:5-8

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

In all our houses there is always a mirror. How often do we check our appearance, before going to a religious service, and paradoxically we do not check how we are spiritually going towards it. How many times do we give more importance to a ritual or custom (where a vase goes on the altar) than to review the experience of which I participate and share. If we consider our countries, or our world, how many countries impose some pretended magical economic recipes to other countries, and do not measure the human factor but their profit... How difficult it is for us to give in.

Paul, imprisoned for being faithful to his commitment to God, shares with joy and faith, to his beloved community of Philippi, this hymn (we could say our first Christian creed -vs9-11-) inviting us to be imitators of Christ.

Jesus who emptied himself of his divinity to assume humanity, emptied himself, became impoverished by us, became a man. He did not cling to be equal to God, but quit the comfort to

come to serve others. Out of love he humbled himself, even as a slave, and was obedient to death, to the glory of God. Not for himself glory.

To be humble like Jesus, who does not think about himself, is to strip us of the ties that prevent us from reaching the other. It's to break selfish ambition. How far should our humility go? Finding fraternal unity is the opposite to looking for one's own interests, but those of others, that is, the disinterested availability among the members of the community. It is prevented by rivalry, vainglory, self-interest. Christian love is not a speech, a recipe, it is the conviction that with the help of Jesus Christ and his Spirit our support, we can share love in community and personal testimony of life, breaking our heads of boasting and corporate labels.

Remember that Christ is judged through us, we are an image of the risen Christ according to our life and conduct. His Spirit activates and impels us today to find and share with our brother.

Are we willing to divest ourselves of that which means a lot to us, for the sake of my brothers?

This leads us to ask ourselves. What will I do for my brother today?

Lord Jesus, help us to love our neighbor according to the circumstances, just as you do.

Jorge Alberto Barrault Booth.
Divine Master Community, IELU, Republica Argentina.

Holy Saturday, April 20th

Philippians 2:9-11

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We hardly ever use the word *therefore* in our everyday speech. Because it sounds rather formal we seldom use it in writing. We tend to call on words like *and, but, yet, and so*. Each of these words has a specific meaning, not necessarily interchangeable. But they are not as formal. The word *therefore* links cause with effect and is a word loaded with possibility, probability and consequence.

Looking carefully at this passage from Philippians, the word *therefore* is a powerful word and Paul uses it skillfully to connect his teaching about Christ's humility to God's action. Because of Christ's humility God gave him the name that is above every name. The phrase *so that* then indicates the desired response of every knee and every tongue. This response connects all of us who are aware of all Christ has done for us. We should be bending our knees and confessing with our tongues all that Christ's humble sacrifice means for us.

Can you picture every knee of humanity bent and every tongue confessing the glory of God through our Lord Jesus?

Henri Nouwen says "Without these final sentences we would never be able to grasp the fullness of God's compassion. God's compassion as revealed in Christ does not end in suffering but in glory."

We celebrate again this most holy of weeks, journeying together, bending our knees at the cross and confessing with our tongues the glory of God at the empty tomb. What an amazing sight and sound!

Lord Jesus Christ, fill us with humility and gratitude as we are reminded again and again that our bended knees and confessing tongues connect us not only to you but to each other as believers. Amen.

Deacon Kathy Paisley
Sheridan Lutheran Church

Easter, April 21st

Luke 24:44-49

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah^[a] is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses^[b] of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

“You are witnesses of these things....” What a whirlwind of events and emotions Jesus’ followers had witnessed in the days leading up to the first Easter morning. Jesus had told them what was about to happen, but it hadn’t made sense. They simply couldn’t understand; at least not by their own power or logic. But now, having been caught up in this story, our loving Lord opened their minds that they might witness to others what they had seen and heard; that they might connect with others through their story. Who are the witnesses to the life-giving power and presence of God in your life? My story of faith includes beloved grandparents, parents, friends; people who endured losses, faced challenges, used their gifts to serve, and loved God and others through word and action. These witnesses have been signs of the Holy Spirit’s presence in my life, helping me to see God at work in my story. Christ is risen, living and active in the world. We are witnesses to that resurrection life and hope and it is God’s work that sends us out. God’s power enables us to witness. We need just to be still. Wait. Listen. Trust that whatever we need will be given by our gracious Father. We have a story to tell; one that connects us to one another and to the love of God that is stronger than death. Alleluia!

Loving God, thank you for opening our minds to know your love, and for giving us strength and courage to be witnesses to that love for others. Amen.

Diane Harpster
Nebraska Synod Office