

REVEAL



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THERE'S MORE TO
THE STORY.

The Reveal 2: a 7 week study on John 10-14

Week 1: December 27, 2015

READ - John 10:1-21

Lead

In a trip to Memphis, Tennessee I had it in my head that I wanted to stay at Mom and Pop owned motel. I was recalling a trip in early 2000 when I was doing some training for church leaders across the state of Iowa which meant I worked in and stayed on the edge of many small towns. These Mom and Pop motels were clean, comfortable and friendly. This is what was in my head as I started looking for such a place in West Memphis, Arkansas.

My initial search located several motels that qualified as small and off-brand but were located in what I would describe as an insecure part of town. As I headed into the city on Broadway, I would never confuse it with an avenue in Manhattan with the same name! Exhausted by hour of the night and the length of my travels that day, I did not listen closely to my gut.

As I pulled into this eighteen room horseshoe shaped motel, I should have been suspicious when there were only three cars in front of rooms. Had all the other travel weary guests somehow missed this gem of a resting spot? Nope! After handing over my \$35.00 in cash only to the woman behind the bullet-proof glass, I parked in front of my room to find the key would not open the door.

A fully tatted neighbor came out of his room where there was no car parked and a plastic bag sat alongside the building filled with empty beer cans. After he was unsuccessful in opening my door he told me the last people who were in this room last night probably broke the door. Lifting his leg, he proceeded to kick the door open! As he handed me the key, he said, "There you go." He promptly returned to his room and closed his door.



mistakes and addictions. The Spirit of truth works through us to draw people distant from God and his church close enough so that Lord can whisper words of affirmation, forgiveness and life, calling them to believe and follow. That is a God-thing. This is what God does. We love and initiate conversation. God does the rest.

The works of Jesus also included meeting the needs of people with the resources God gives us and our community. The disciples did not furnish the fish and loaves to feed five thousand people. A boy in the community provided the food. As we see needs in our community, we must keep our ears and eyes open to see what resources our neighbors bring to the table as well as ourselves. God blesses and works miracles when we share what we have for the good of others.

Jesus works also included healing the sick. As we are moved by compassion for all who are hurting, God takes our listening ears, caring heart and prayers offered to do what God does. We pray. God heals however God choses because God is God and that is not who we are. We ask. God works.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you hear or sense the nudge of the Holy Spirit? How has God used you to bless others?
2. As you review the seven "I am" sayings of Jesus, what do you find most helpful for you right now?
3. How are you participating in the works of Jesus? If you are not certain, how would you like to be part of what God is doing?
4. What is God saying to you in John 14? How will you keep this in front of you so that you can ponder it further?

Notes

When I stepped inside the room, it only confirmed what my gut knew all along, this was a good \$35.00 investment affirming that it is always good to trust your God-given intuition! Standing one step inside the door, my eyes did a 5 second scan of the room. The room was neat: the floor was vacuumed, the king size bed was made, but the wall AC/heater had been ripped out of the wall leaving a significant dusty hole AND the broken door had no additional bolt lock and the chain lock was missing.

Feeling overwhelmingly unsafe, I closed the room door, put my bag back in the car, parked in front of the office door where the blinking light announced it was OPEN, dropped my key off, and headed out of West Memphis quickly. In case I had confused my positive experiences with Mom and Pop motels in Iowa with this motel in West Memphis, within one mile of the motel, not one, nor two but five screaming SUV Police cars flew passed me at Interstate highway speed.

It is wise to not over sentimentalize past positive experiences when God-given intuition sends you another message. Fifteen minutes later, I was parked, checked in and safe and secure in a downtown Memphis Hampton Inn. Some doors are better left unopened and doors are important to give us access and keep us secure. Jesus says, *I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture*, John 10:9.

The other metaphor or "I am" statement of Jesus in John 10 is the good shepherd (vv. 11, 14). Shepherds and pasture (food and water) are an important vocation in the Old Testament and were an important part of the life of the Jewish patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph), the great liberator Moses (Exodus 3 describes that it was while watching sheep that he heard the voice of "I Am" or Yahweh to send him to back to Egypt to free the Jews from slavery) as well as King David (1 Samuel 16; Psalm 23). Whether we find ourselves in lush, green pastures or searching for scant vegetation, Jesus the Good Shepherd will lead us if we will open our eyes of faith to look, affixed on his word.

There are two distinct messages in John 10:1-21. The first message (vv. 1-10) affirms that community (or flock) of sheep that are shepherded by Jesus know his voice and follow him. Unlike goats which function more independently, sheep are communal, they hang together. Jesus uses the metaphor of sheep for his followers, not because they do not think for themselves but because they trust and value his voice and direction. We learn to know the voice of Jesus as we read and study the Word of God together. Together we explore and discern how God is calling us to live and respond.

A second word in this first section is that Jesus is the door that opens to life as God intends, full of joy, abundance and purpose. As we entrust our day into Jesus' hands, the Holy Spirit will guide and open our eyes to others who may need our encouragement, prayer, witness or assistance. With God, the possibilities in our day are endless but always a blessing.

It is also noteworthy that there are enemies who want to fleece the sheep! These people are referred to as thieves (*kleptos* in the Greek from which we get kleptomaniacs) and robbers. The story is not clear who these enemies are who go around the door to sneak into the community by another way. What is clear is the intent of the enemy is to do whatever it takes to bring harm and destruction to the Jesus community, the church (10:10). Likely, the action of the enemy is sneaky and subtle otherwise it would be easily seen and detected. It could be as simple as other good activities or busyness that slowly removes the individual or family away from the community of faith and our worship life. Over time, we find ourselves out of the spiritual habit of worship and disconnected from our church community.

On the one hand, we are responsible for ourselves and our family in terms of our life of faith practice (worship, service, generosity, study of God's Word and prayer, witness, etc.). On the other hand, we must be vigilant as a community of faith in keeping our eyes open for our sisters and brothers in Christ. As you notice someone missing from our community, reach out to them. We all need the

5. *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.* John 11:25b-26a.
6. *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* John 14:6b-c.
7. *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.* John 15:5.

Four of the seven statements talk about life: Jesus is the bread of life, the light of life, the resurrection and the life, and the way, the truth and the life. In John 10, Jesus is gate or the way of life who as our shepherd leads and protects us in life. It is in this communal life of Jesus who is the vine to which we all are connected like branches for the purpose of bearing fruit for the sake of the kingdom. These are powerful metaphors that deserve our deep reflection, meditation and discussion as a community of faith.

The words Jesus spoke as well as the signs, miracles or works Jesus did equally serve as a witness to the way of life to which we all are invited to follow (John 14:10-11). We are called to retell the story of Jesus and to do greater works which are similar to Jesus works but are now greater because he has fulfilled everything he was sent to accomplish through his death and resurrection (14:12). Now that he has returned to the Father, we can ask in prayer so that the Father can be glorified by our works (14:13-14).

What are the works of Jesus that we are to accomplish? First of all, we are to love one another. This love is to be manifest in our words and actions. The new commandment given in John 13 is repeated in John 14:15-21. The Spirit of truth will help us to love in the way of Jesus. The power and character of God are made known in and through us as we entrust ourselves into the power of the Spirit.

Secondly, as we love others, we are to tell them about the love of God in Christ Jesus who offers to all who will listen and follow, a way of life that fulfills our soul's deepest yearnings. Jesus comes to free all who follow from the painful chains that hold us in bondage to our past hurts,

The Spirit will bring to mind much more of what we have read than what we have not read. God's Word speaks truth to our soul to guide our life.

Following up the prediction of Simon Peter's denial of Jesus in John 13:36-38 leaves the disciples on edge. The background music is becoming ominous. There is innuendo of deceptive activity at work in the shadows of the story. For this reason, Jesus says: *Do not let your hearts be troubled* (14:1) and repeats it again near the end of the chapter in (14:27) when he extends his peace to his disciples. This peace is a tranquil and confident soul in God amid the chaos of the unknown.

Jesus tells his disciples not to worry but rather believe in God and in him (14:1). Funerals have made great use of Jesus' words in John 14:1-6. Jesus announces his upcoming departure from this world to return his Father and get rooms ready for us as his followers. That is what Jesus will be doing after he leaves this world. He will return. When he does, Jesus will take us to be with him so we will be together. These are words of great comfort to Jesus' disciples and well as his church.

The sixth of seven "I am" sayings of Jesus continues to reveal more of his identity and the way of life he offers to all who will follow. Review reinforces what we are learning and enables us to see the message of Jesus clearly:

1. *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty,* John 6:35.
2. *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life,* John 8:12.
3. *I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture,* John 10:9.
4. *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me,* John 10:11, 14b.

encouragement to know that someone else cares about us. Let your pastors know as well.

In the second section (10:11-21), Jesus moves from being the gatekeeper who protects the sheep to the Good Shepherd who will die for the sheep. In addition to the shepherd, there is the wolf and the bad employee (hired hand). The Old Testament has a rich tradition of bad leaders in Israel and the need for God or Messiah to come and restore the scattered community of faith. In Jeremiah 23:1-6, *the righteous branch of David* who will gather the sheep we would interpret as Jesus as Christians (v. 5). Meanwhile, it is fascinating to compare the shepherds who drove the sheep away (Jeremiah 23:2) with the Pharisees who drove out of the synagogue the blind man who Jesus healed (John 9:34). Added to that story is when Jesus goes and finds the man who could now physically see and guided him to spiritually see through his confession of faith: *Lord, I believe* (9:35-37). (You can read more about the failure of leadership like shepherds and the need for God to intervene in: Ezekiel 34; Isaiah 40:11; Zechariah 11:4-17). The Jewish community would know these stories and hear them in the background of John 10.

It may be that by the end of the first century in Asia Minor (Turkey) the possible audience to which this Gospel was written the threat of false teachers or leaders may be the reference to the wolf and the hired hands. The text itself does not give us clear indication of the situation or the intent other than to be vigilant in following Jesus and his way of life.

The initial Christian community referred to in John 10 are Jewish Christians. This proved to be a real threat to the local Jewish leaders and this resulted in the action of putting Jews who followed Jesus out of the synagogue (John 9:22). The mission of Jesus is wider in John than simply to be the Messiah of the Jews. The other fold of sheep are the gentiles who have come to believe and follow his way of life (10:16). They all know and follow his voice. Because this is Jesus' mission, it becomes our mission. This is what it means to walk in the way of Jesus as we follow his lead.

A final note on the concept of Jesus knowing the names of his sheep (10:3) and leads them out of the pen into the pasture is reminiscent to me of the naming process of baptism. We are called by name as we are claimed in the waters of the sacrament of baptism. The Good Shepherd leads us out as God's chosen one, as his name's sake Joshua did (Numbers 27:17-18). As he leads we are called to follow.

Discussion Questions:

1. As you think about Jesus as the door or gate of the sheepfold, in what way do you find this image helpful or not?
2. What do you find positive of the church referred to like a flock of sheep and Jesus as our shepherd? How could we strengthen our capacity to watch out for one another as church?
3. There is assurance in the promise that we are known by name by Christ Jesus. What is the value in being known to you? Why are names so important to us?
4. In what way are you getting to know the voice of Jesus better? Or, how are you listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd? He can only lead anyone who will follow. What does following Christ look like for you?

Notes

called the team together once a week at 6 a.m. for the weekly long run. On occasion when I am running, I can hear some of the running tips of Coach Gunner in Danny's voice. That is what I like to refer to as a small but lasting impact on my life.

In John 14 Jesus refers to God the Holy Spirit who he will send to his followers. Jesus calls the Spirit, the Advocate. The Holy Spirit is our helper, encourager, guide and advocate who lives or dwells within in us as followers of Jesus (14:17). We received the Holy Spirit at our baptism into the God of the Trinity through the laying on of hands, anointing with oil and a prayer to receive the Spirit. A prayer to stir up the Spirit's work and power may have been prayed over you if you were confirmed in the Christian faith. This is the Spirit of truth the world cannot receive (14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

What does the Holy Spirit do in our life? Much of what is introduced in John 14 regarding the Holy Spirit is expounded upon in John 15-16. One of the important roles of the Spirit who dwells within us is to teach us (14:26). As our teacher, the Spirit of truth gives us insight, wisdom and knowledge as we need to do the work of the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 12:7-11). The Spirit inspires (a word that literally means to be filled with the Spirit) us to trust and to see how the Spirit is leading us in our day. This trust in return fills us with renewed confidence that God is with us and the Spirit serves as our coach. Once we get our ears attuned to the voice of the Spirit and we follow the Spirit's lead, we will be part of doing the "greater works" Jesus spoke about (John 14:12).

Not all the voices we hear in our head come from the Spirit of truth. I have some rude, unkind and judgmental thoughts that flash through my mind most days. This is not God. Do not be deceived. Test the words against the word of Jesus found in the gospels. A second role of the Spirit is to remind us of what Jesus said (14:26). The Spirit rarely reminds us of the word of Jesus that we have not read or studied. Most of us own multiple copies of the Bible but way too few of us spend much consistent time reading and reflecting on it.

Week 7: February 7, 2016

READ - John 14

Coach

The electronic bookshelves of online stores like Amazon are filled with stories of people of impact. There are stories of individuals who have major impact on a country or the world like Malala Yousafzai, the December 2014 Nobel Peace Prize at age 17 for her fight for children's rights in Pakistan even after the failed Taliban assassination attempt. Others individuals gain recognition for the impact they have had in their own vocational field. An example of this would be teachers who are nominated for the yearly "Golden Apple" award for excellence.

As you reflect on your own life, who are the people who have impacted you? The first names that like pop into your mind are the home run hitters who made big contributions to the formation or course of your life. On another level are those double and triple hitters who may have intersected your life briefly but made a difference to you. Finally, there are those individuals who are like single hitters and may never know how they impacted you at all. This group could include a faithful friend who by their consistency has in part impacted who you are. Or, it could include a book that influenced or inspired you, or a person you heard about but never actually met.

The coach that influenced my love and respect for running distance was Gunner. He was the cross country coach for a neighboring school and my friend Danny's coach. What I first learned about training, schedules, stretching, weight lifting and record keeping I picked up from talking and running occasionally with Danny. He taught me what he had learned from Coach Gunner. This was long before running clubs and summer running programs in much of rural Minnesota.

While most rural schools started training for cross country when school resumed in autumn, Coach Gunner gave his team stretching exercises, a weekly schedule for weight training, running and rest. The co-captains of the team

Week 2: January 3, 2016

READ - John 10:22-42

Follow

Challenging times call for courageous leadership. To be successful, a major campaign to overthrow an evil tyrant requires dedicated followers committed to the cause. The hero of the Jewish story to reclaim and rededicate the temple in Jerusalem is Judas Maccabeus. Ever since the despotic ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.E.) took control in Judea, he governed without any respect for the religion or culture of the Jews. In 167 B.C.E. Antiochus ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the temple. He banned circumcision and ordered pigs to be sacrificed at the altar of the temple. This ignited indignation among the Jews. Judas' family stepped forward to lead a rebellion in the name and power of the Lord.

Judas was the son of Mattathias, a Jewish priest. In 167 B.C.E. Mattathias, together with his sons started a revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes. After Mattathias's death in 166 B.C.E., Judas became the leader of the revolt in accordance with the decree of his dying father (1 Maccabees 2:66, part of the collection of books written between the time of the Old Testament and the beginning of the writing of the New Testament called the Apocrypha. It is regarded as scripture by both the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches).

Keenly aware of the superiority of Antiochus' army during the first two years of the revolt, Judas strategy was to avoid any engagement with the army, and resorted to guerrilla warfare, in order to create a feeling of insecurity (1 Maccabees 3). The strategy enabled Judas to win a string of victories. Following a major victory at Emmaus, Judas and his forces finally liberated Jerusalem and the temple in 165 B.C.E. (1 Maccabees 4).

The cleansing and dedication of the temple is celebrated each year by 25 Chislev (Jewish month which falls around November/December). This feast is called Hanukkah or the Feast of Light which is an eight day festival using the eight branched candelabra called a menorah. While the Jewish people had only enough oil for one day of light as they cleansed the temple and built a new altar to the one true God, the story of Hanukkah is a narrative of the miracle of one day's oil supply that kept the light burning for eight days (it took eight days to press and purify the oil from the olives and they only had a one-day supply when they decided to rededicate the temple).

The Feast of Hanukkah or Dedication (of the temple) was the setting for John 10:22-41. From John 7:10 through the end of chapter 10, all these stories are set in Jerusalem. As stated earlier in this study on John, gospels are not biographies but collections of Jesus stories (his actions, teachings and miracles) that had been told and retold in Christian preaching to form followers in the way of Jesus, evangelize Jews and gentiles and direct the mission of the church. While the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke primarily tell stories of Jesus ministry in the northern region of Israel called the Galilee, in John, Jesus mainly works in the Jerusalem area of the southern region called Judea.

There are two huge words that jump out of the page in John 10:22-42. The first word is a combination of a question by the Jews and Jesus reply: I am the Messiah, my works or miracles prove it (10:24-25). Secondly, Jesus announced: I am God's Son (10:36). These are two clear confessions of faith answering the question: who is Jesus? Is it any wonder that the Jewish leaders took up stones to kill him for blasphemy? To unbelievers, these words are a threat. But to all who believe, they offer new life in the name of Jesus.

Like the verses that preceded this reading, Jesus says he has sheep who both hear his voice and follow his way of living (10:27). There are other sheep who do not belong to Jesus because they do not believe in him nor follow him (10:26).

*words, he went out with his disciples...*What follows is Jesus betrayal by Judas, his arrest, trial, death and resurrection stories.

The command to love one another requires time together. What better use of multi-tasking is there than reclaiming the community table to eat and share life stories and encourage each other with the practice of praying for one another. Eating, laughing, listening, sharing our story, these are the ways relationships are built and grow. Good food, good conversation and a good God. That is love in action as Jesus commanded us.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is something that captured your attention as you read John chapter 13? What are you wondering as you think about it? What ideas were sparked in you? John 13 offers subtle differences in how it tells the story of Maundy Thursday. What did you notice? What did you appreciate in this account?
2. We were created to live in community. We need other people and we have something to offer others as we share our story. How can you strengthen the family table as a place to enjoy good food, get caught up with each other and invite the Lord (at least by being intentional to begin with a prayer of thanks and to pray for all who hunger in our world) to be present? How can you help make a family meal happen consistently? If you live alone, who can you share a meal with each at least weekly?
3. How can our church use ideas like an agape meal to strengthen our community? What are some creative ways we can encourage the value of sharing a meal together?

Notes

Lurking the shadows of this chapter is the activity of the devil (13:2) or Satan (13:27) in seeding the heart of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Like Nicodemus who does not want to be noticed when he talks to Jesus in John 3 so he comes at night, Judas leaves the table and it is night (13:30). The story build additional tension when Simon Peter fails to understand why Jesus is washing his feet (13:6-10). Later at the table, Simon Peter does not know who Jesus is referring to who will betray him (13:24). At the end of the chapter, a third misunderstanding of Jesus' words by Peter lead to Jesus foretelling of Simon Peter's denial of him noted by the crowing of a rooster (13:36-38).

The high water mark of the teaching of Jesus in John's gospel in the issuance of a new commandment for his followers to practice. The new commandment is that they are to love each other in the same way Jesus has loved them (13:34-35). The Latin word for command is Maundy and is the reason why the day prior to Good Friday is often referred to as Maundy Thursday. *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,* (13:35).

The agape feast of washing each other's feet, sharing a meal and conversation and ending with the celebration of Holy Communion exemplifies Jesus new commandment to love each other. In Greek there are three words for love: friend to friend love (*phileo*), erotic love (*eros*) and the pure, God-like love that loves for God's sake (*agape*). Clearly, the teaching of Jesus to practice agape love is more central in John than the other three gospels: Matthew: 8 times; Mark: 5 times; Luke: 11 times; and John: 37 times.

Chapter 13 is a transitional chapter from all of the signs, miracles or works of Jesus in the first twelve chapters of John. From this point forward in the gospel, it is the final moments in Jesus life in the world. Chapters 13-14 appear to be the original story as cast around the Last Supper. Note that at the end of chapter 14, Jesus says to his disciples it's time to go (14:31). Chapters 15-17 are likely added later by an editor as an expansion on the teaching found in chapters 13-14. The instruction of Jesus that it is time to depart in 14:31 fits well with 18:1 which says: *After Jesus had spoken these*

Someone is trying to snatch Jesus' sheep from under his nose but they will fail (10:28-30). In other words, the situation for the church in Western Asia Minor (Turkey) who may have received and read this gospel was challenging. We share some similarities in that respect in our setting.

There was a religion of the state, or civil religion, that confessed that Caesar is Lord for all citizens of the Roman Empire. To confess loyalty to anyone else was an affront to the Emperor. When followers of Jesus confessed Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9) they knew they were risking their lives. In a large metropolitan city like Ephesus, it would have been a multicultural city offering numerous philosophical views of life. Christians and Jews had parted company as increasingly, converts to Christianity were gentiles. The church which met in homes would have been a small percentage of the city population yet growing. Keep in mind that Christianity was illegal in the Empire and faced persecution as a result.

Civil religion exists in the United States as well. Historically, this country had strong Christian roots but there was no time in which all people were Christian and even less that practiced the Christian faith. Today the religious landscape has diversified and an even larger portion of the population practice little or no faith. Our constitution rightfully allows and protects people to think or practice whatever creed they choose.

Civil religion is expressed on our currency: In God we trust; in our Pledge of Allegiance: one nation under God; and in the seventh inning of baseball games: God bless America. While all these statements are nice there is a real danger of confusing patriotism with the Christian faith. We live and enjoy the liberties of a great country which many of our family members have died to preserve. I am trying to step carefully as I attempt to differentiate between patriotism that affirms the core values of the United States and specific policies or political agendas that may or may not be consistent with the Christian faith.

Does God care more about citizens of the United States than citizens of China or Argentina? Is our allegiance stronger for our citizenship in the United States or our citizenship in God's family

called the church? As the U.S. led coalition drops bombs on ISIS in Syria and Iraq, are we praying for the innocent citizens of Syria and Iraq? Are we praying for the churches in both countries? How about our prayers for our enemies (Luke 6:27-28)?

All lives matter because God is the author of all life. Jesus died for the sake of all life. As a result, black lives matter; Muslim lives matter; gay and lesbian lives matter. Again, all lives matter to God. Because God is a holy God, there is a sanctity to life. Life is precious. In this life on earth, we only get to do it right once. We are called to follow in the way of Jesus.

One of the ways we follow Jesus is working for and being an advocate for justice. It can be very challenging to stand up for what is right for others when there is a cost to me. Justice cares about the rights of all people. Jesus had a special focus in his ministry for the sick and the poor. Medical care should be a staple in our world where the sick have access to medicine to get well. Jobs for the unemployed and under employed are vital for poor and our economy. May God give us the courage and the creativity to create new avenues for work.

Another way we follow Jesus is practicing mercy. Actions of compassion are best expressed as we accompany the person with needs and encourage and allow the individual to contribute and do what they are able to do for themselves. Acts of mercy are not intended to create dependency nor rob the individual of their dignity. Rather, mercy responds in love and humility as a request is made and in a way that is possible for you.

Jesus demonstrated justice when a woman was brought to him and the men of the community wanted to stone her. Jesus invited all who were without sin to throw the first stone (John 8). Jesus showed mercy when he healed the eyes of the blind man (John 9).

ate their lavish meal and the poor sat hungry. Following the agape meal, they shared Communion. In other churches it was more of a covered dish dinner or potluck meal where everyone gets to eat equally. Other biblical references to the agape meal are Jude 12 and perhaps 2 Peter 2:13.

Throughout the history of the church there are scattered references to the agape meal up to the Reformation in 1517. By early 1700's, the predecessors of the Church of the Brethren (based in Elgin, IL), the Moravians and the Methodists had reclaimed the agape feast. It is commonly practiced by washing one another's feet as a sign of service, humility and love as seen in John 13:1-11. While pedicures are common among women and even some men, feet are often neglected or abused and become a source of embarrassment. Jesus instructs his followers to continue the practice of washing each other's feet taking the role of a servant (13:14-16).

In addition, a meal is shared among all who are present. It is followed by the celebration of Holy Communion. The practice of the Love Feast is also used on Christian retreats. The Eastern Orthodox Church has a practice of sharing the remaining blessed bread that was not served in the Holy Communion or Eucharistic meal with all who are present at the end of the Divine Liturgy or worship service.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples and at which time he takes the bread and the cup and initiates the meal of Holy Communion at which we are instructed to remember him. In John 13:1 it says that the supper Jesus is eating with his disciples is prior to the Passover. In good Greco-Roman tradition, they are reclining around the table on couches with Jesus (13:23-25). The reference to the disciple who Jesus loved (13:23) is thought to be John, the disciple whose community of followers write this gospel. The only food mentioned at this supper is bread and whatever it is that they dip the bread into in 13:26. While there is no mention of the initiation of the Holy Communion meal in John 13, the misplaced bread of life which is the flesh of Jesus teaching in John 6:51 suggests a sacramental meal.

The table is important as a vessel of food to nourish us, a space to welcome family, friends and strangers and as a place for conversation. In an all too distant time before the advent of television, the table was the place where stories about the day and news from our neighbors were shared. It was a place of laughter and catching up with each other. Problems were solved over food or drink at the table. It was at the table that ideas were shared and decisions made. How can we restore this vital gathering space for our family and neighborhood?

Offerings of thanksgiving to God for God's provision in the Old Testament did not involve money but food items: sheep, goats, doves, grain and other first fruits from the harvest. It was a sacrifice of thanksgiving as well as an acknowledgment that all we have in life comes from the hand of God. Sometime closer to the time of Jesus, in addition to the temple sacrifice, along came the temple treasury and the giving of money (see the widow's mite: Luke 21).

Jesus gathered with his followers, religious leaders and "sinners" around the table to eat, discuss life, and for Jesus to show and teach about God's love for all people. While stories about Jesus at tables in homes from village to village are few in John, he did his first sign or miracle at a wedding festival in John 2. He called himself the "bread of life" in John 6. Jesus enjoyed a dinner in his honor at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus in John 12. It was around a table that he shared his last supper with his disciples as they ate and talked in John 13. Finally, it was a meal of fish and bread that Jesus shared with his disciples as they enjoyed breakfast together following his resurrection from the dead in John 21.

In the early church, an agape or love feast meal developed alongside the meal of Holy Communion in various cities across the Roman Empire. This agape (pronounced a-gah'-pay) meal was practiced in different ways from church to church. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, it was more of a sack lunch where each family brought their own meal and they ate it in the same space. This led to problems Paul needed to address to the church in Corinth, Greece because the rich

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do you make sense of the idea that God loves the whole world and yet there is a huge economic disparity between most Americans and people living in Third World countries?
2. If all lives do in fact matter, what can we do to help alleviate the strife that exists for anyone who does not feel their life matters?
3. What does it look like if we work for justice?
4. What is one of your favorite ways that Grace Lutheran Church offers mercy to our neighborhood?

Notes

Week 3: January 10, 2016

READ - John 11

Live

Steve's life has been snatched from the jaws of death on more than one occasion. In the summer of 1954, when Steve and his friend Patty were both almost three years old, they were running around the farm yard when Steve saw the horse tank. Whatever possessed him no one exactly knows but Steve climbed into the water tank which led to trouble. Filled with fear, Patty ran to the farmhouse to tell Steve's mom. Running as fast as she could, Steve's mom's found him floating face down in the water. Scooping him out of the water and flopping him on his back, she began to do CPR. From chest to mouth she worked with desperation. Meanwhile, Patty's mom called for an ambulance.

After what seemed like an eternity, Steve responded and began to sputter and cough. Hugs and tears ensued and the siren of the ambulance could be heard in the distance. There would be time for the stern conversation about the dangers of the water tank but this was not that time. Prayers had been answered as Steve's life had been spared. Thank God his mom knew CPR and that Patty knew to go and get help just in the nick of time.

As if one such event is not enough in the life of one child and family, along came the summer of 1956. Somehow Steve talked his uncle into letting him sit in the loader in the front of the tractor as they bailed hay in the ditch. If you know anything about ditches in rural areas they dip along the roadway at an angle. Ditches are often filled with gopher mounds and badger holes which all in all make for a very rough ride.

Steve's feet swung back and forth in loader as they went over rough patches. His uncle tried to keep an eye on Steve as he also looked back to watch the hay go in the bailer. It happened so quickly. Too quick in fact for his uncle to notice Steve flipping out of the loader and into the path of the front wheels of the tractor. It was too late before his

Week 6: January 31, 2016

READ - John 13

Agape

You always knew there was a place at the table when you stopped by at Donna's house. No matter if you were invited over for a Sunday dinner or just stopped by to talk, Donna always had a pot of coffee ready to start, something sweet to accompany it or a plate, a glass and a chair if for you dropped in at meal time. Donna is a pure example of hospitality. She welcomed friends, neighbors and strangers to her table. All were welcome.

Having four children of her own, you could imagine an adequately filled table as the family of six sat down to eat. But Donna's heart and table was too large for only six people! When Lutheran Social Services made it known that there was a need for foster and adoptive parents, Donna and her husband adopted two American Indian children. The hospitality did not stop there. People from the past as well as people they just met found their way to Donna's table. There was never a shortage of food, fun and laughter in Donna's house.

Food and drink is the number one essential staple for life. As if three meals is not enough food for a day, we often find a snack or two to fill in the gaps. The Creation story tell us that God created a lot of food for Adam and Eve, our first parents, before he created them. The story of Cain and Abel reminds us that our early ancestors were hunters and gatherers for food.

From Genesis to Revelation, the stories of the Bible are filled with feast and religious festivals involving food as well as tables for daily meals. From bread, some meat, and curds and milk prepared by Abraham and Sarah for their three angelic guests (Genesis 18), to a roasted lamb and unleavened bread for Passover (Exodus 12), to manna and quail in the wilderness (Exodus 16), to few fish and loaves (John 6), meal time has always been important.

of Jesus. There was in the divine Word something which necessarily offended the natural man, ibid. pp. 431-2. For the many who as yet walk in darkness distant from faith in Jesus, how will see unless someone guides them? Like Andrew and Philip in John 1, we are sent to show the love of Jesus and point others to him.

The Book of Signs, which began with the first miracle of the six stone water jars which Jesus changed to wine at a wedding feast in John 2 now comes to end in John 12: 37. Hence the ministry portion of Jesus work concludes at the end of this twelfth chapter. John concludes the ministry of Jesus with a summary paragraph (12:44-50).

Discussion Questions:

1. What captured your imagination as you read John 12:20-50? Why?
2. Following Jesus requires us to die to ourselves that we may rise anew and bear fruit. What is it about worshiping the Lord that you find most helpful and enjoyable? What would you like to learn or experience in your prayer life?
3. While Jesus desires all people to know and follow him, many in fact still do not believe. Who is God putting on your heart? How are you showing them the love of the Lord? In what way are you planting seeds of faith in their life?
4. What action will you take in response to this reading?

Notes

uncle noticed that he had driven up onto Steve's abdomen. The rest was a blur.

It was a hot mess. Steve's clothes were covered in blood as his uncle ran up the driveway carrying a limp Steve in his arms. Words just cannot capture the shock and horror on Steve's mom's face when she saw her little boy. She saw Steve's life pass before her eyes as she held his lifeless body in her arms and wept. She could only manage to croak the words out in a horse whisper, "The last thing I told you was not to let Steve ride with you on the tractor." Steve's uncle could hardly even nod as his white knuckles gripped the speeding car. Beads of sweat trickled down his uncle's face as he tore across the seven miles of highway to the closest rural hospital.

When they pulled up to the emergency back door, Dr. Geason was ready. Steve was taken immediately into surgery which lasted for over four hours. His abdomen was a mess. A large portion of the bowel had to be removed as well as other procedures. Finally, when he cleaned and stitched up, the doctor had done everything he could to try and save Steve's life. He came out of surgery and talked to Steve's parents and said, "I've done everything I can. Now all we can do is pray and wait. It will be a miracle if he lives."

God answered prayers and Dr. Geason's good work was rewarded as Steve received a miracle and lived! Big miracles like this are rare but they do indeed happen. Steve is a walking testimony to the power of God and answered prayer. Despite the strong probability that Steve would never have children, God blessed him with three boys and a baby girl. Steve is blessed!

It's one thing to be dragged twice off of death's doorstep but quite another thing to be called out of the grave! This is the last miracle of Jesus in the gospel of John. Why not save the biggest miracle for last by raising a dead man. This story is one of the more difficult for me to explain to people who do not believe because it is rationally challenging. It flies in the face of historical evidence because we cannot prove it happened. It simply requires faith.

The story of Lazarus is roughly constructed and leaves some questions in its wake. John 10:40 tells us that Jesus and his disciples returned to the place where Jesus was baptized which is Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:28). A subtle segue occurs in the story of Lazarus which moves to his house in another village called Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem, a full days' journey between the two locations. While Lazarus is introduced as a "certain man who was ill" (11:1), he is later identified as the one Jesus loved (11:3). As the reader or audience, we meet Lazarus for the first time in the gospel but it is apparent there must have been a relationship between Jesus and this family that we do not know about.

We also meet the apparently better known sibling *Mary and her sister Martha* (11:1). Not only is the first time meeting both of them but John foreshadows how Mary will anoint Jesus feet and dry them with her hair (11:2; 12:3). As much as Jesus loves this family, when he gets the news of Lazarus' illness, he remains an extra two days. If Lazarus died on the day that the messenger was sent to ask Jesus to come, according to Jewish custom, Lazarus would have been buried that same day. Add in the two days of waiting (11:6) and the fourth day to travel, Jesus and his disciples would have arrived on the fourth day that Lazarus was in the grave (11:39).

As troubling as it may seem that Jesus did not go promptly, it is in keeping with his character as played out in the gospel of John where he says many times that his *hour has not yet come* (2:4; 5:25; 5:28; 7:31; 8:20). Additionally, there was a Jewish belief that the soul of the departed lingered around the grave for three days so that on the fourth day Lazarus was finally dead. From the story of the raising of Lazarus, John moves quickly to the final days in Jesus' life. In other words, the final miracle of Jesus who raises the dead man Lazarus points to the events that lay ahead for Jesus.

You just have to love the dour disciple Thomas. Like Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh, Thomas says to the other disciples after learning that Lazarus is dead and Jesus will be going to his home, *Let us also go, that we may die with him* (11:6).

We bear fruit for the kingdom by practicing the faith as we follow Jesus in our day. John 12 begins with the story of a meal at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus six days before Passover. Mary does a prophetic act by anointing Jesus as Nicodemus will do before laying Jesus dead body in the grave (John 19:39-40). A foreshadowing about Judas happens as well as he complains about the wasted money by Mary on the frivolous act of anointing as he was the treasurer for the disciples and pilfered money from it (12:6). Mary demonstrates her love for Jesus as she anoints him.

Resuscitating Lazarus, which implies he will die again someday, proves to be a problem. Many Jews started following and believing in Jesus because of this sign (12:11). This agitation can only lead to more problems for Jesus down a very short road, the way of the cross. Just one verse later (12:12ff), Jesus enters Jerusalem to begin his last few days of life. While many Jews were now following Jesus and Jewish leaders were trying to put an end to this problem, some Greeks were curious and they *wished to see Jesus* (12:21). The way of Jesus is not the way of luxury or leisure but one in which followers risked their lives (12:25). If you want to serve and follow Jesus, you must be where he is leading you (12:26).

Jesus is the light and we are to walk in his way as children of the light (12:35-36). Darkness will press in upon us but if we keep our eyes on Jesus and his word, we will have enough light with which to follow. The purpose of Jesus death is for the sake of the whole world as he desires to draw all people to himself (12:32). Despite the desire of Jesus for all people to believe in him and therefore to believe in the Father, some eyes remain blinded to revelation of Jesus (12:37-40) quoting Isaiah 6:10.

What do we say about this? C. K. Barrett writes: *Not once only, in the ministry of Jesus, but again and again throughout its history, Israel had been confronted with the necessity of birth from above, only to reject the prophetic message and the Spirit of God. This recurring pattern, detected by the first Christians in the Old Testament, was brought out with unique clearness in the ministry and death*

Worship is not something we go to attend as if we were the passive audience waiting to be entertained or to be spiritually fed. These are old expectations in our American cultural past. Worship is active not passive. It is a spiritual truth that you receive from God as generously as you give of yourself. This applies to our time, open-mindedness, participation in the prayers, the songs, the meal, the offering and the message. Worship is a communal action involving the actions of all individuals gathered in God's presence.

Somewhat similar to worship is the spiritual disciple or faith habit of prayer. Prayer takes several different forms but at its essence is either listening prayer, where we make ourselves open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit or spoken prayer, aloud or silent. The greatest value of this discipline is that it opens us up to God. Whenever we open ourselves to God, good things happen.

How do we practice listening prayer? Like the young boy Samuel, open your hands in a posture of openness or receptivity and pray as Samuel did: *Speak Lord, for I am listening* (1 Samuel 3). As you slowly repeat that phrase several times with a pause in between to listen and wait, notice what comes to mind as you give attention to God. That is one suggestion among many.

A meditation prayer involves reading a Scripture, noting what jumps out at you as you read. Spend some time prayerfully reflecting on what grabbed your attention. God, what are you saying to me in this Scripture? What are you calling me to do in response to this Word? If you read and do this prayer exercise early enough in your day, you can reflect on it as you go about your day.

Whether you are in school, or at work, or retired and going about your day, we can be prayerfully aware of situations in our own day and the life of others for which we sense the need to pray. Bring your requests and your thanksgiving to God. God open my mind to all I have learned as I sit down to take this test. God give me wisdom as I deal with this conflict today. Help me to reflect your love, to speak truth in love, and to listen well to others and most of all to you. These are a few examples to demonstrate how simple petitionary prayer can be.

Epiphany includes readings of the wise men or magi who brought gifts to the house where the holy family was living including: gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:1-12). Early church writers identified how each gift revealed a clue about Jesus: gold was given as the very precious metal pointing to his leadership and reign, like that of a king. Gold has been given its value because of its beauty as a polished metal. The Jewish king Solomon was very wealthy and had many items made out of gold (see 2 Chronicles 9:13-20).

Frankincense was a sign of Jesus divinity. This costly fragrant resin was collected from *boswellia* shrubs that grow in Somalia. It is burned on coals creating incense which was offered to God in the Tabernacle (the God box carried by the Jews during the forty years of wandering in the Wilderness with Moses. This box contained the two stone tablets called the Ten Commandments given by God to the Jews on Mount Sinai, see Exodus 30:1) and next to the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (see 1 Chronicles 28:18). As the incense arose from the charcoal like holy smoke," it became a symbol of prayer rising to God (see Psalm 141:2).

Myrrh is harvested as a gum-like resin from the *commiphora* bush by stripping the bark or puncturing it much like the similar process for frankincense. It is an essential oil that is aromatic. It was used as a perfume (see Psalm 45:8), for making tooth powder and for embalming. This gift was a sign of Jesus humanity and mortality. In John 19:39, the Pharisee named Nicodemus who came to talk to Jesus at night (John 3) reappears in the gospel as the bearer of myrrh and aloes to anoint the dead body of Jesus with these aromatic oils and wrapped him with linen cloth prior to his burial.

In the anointing story of Jesus by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, she uses another essential oil called spikenard which grows in higher elevations in Nepal, India and China which made it very costly (see Song of Solomon 4:13-14). Mary's action would be seen as a loving prophetic act symbolizing Jesus impending death. In Mark and Matthew's gospel, the setting is also the village of Bethany but the home is that of Simon the leper but the woman who anoints Jesus

feet goes unnamed (see Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13). In Luke, the city is unidentified but the home is that of Simon the Pharisee. The unnamed woman is known throughout that area as a "sinful" woman (see Luke 7:36-50).

Here in John which has already had a significant chapter set aside for the resuscitation of Lazarus (John 11), Jesus re-enters Bethany six days before Passover. Jesus is at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The setting is a party to celebrate that Jesus raised Lazarus. Similar to another story about these sisters, while Jesus sits at table with Lazarus, Martha serves and Mary positions herself at Jesus feet (see Luke 10:38-42). On her knees before Jesus, Mary anoints his feet and dries them with her hair. It's on his feet, it's in her hair and it's in the air, the sweet smell of anointing for burial.

It is helpful to keep in mind that there were three different types of anointing used in the East. First of all, there was the common and ordinary use of oil for anointing. Olive oil may be used for the face or body much like we use lotion or facial creams. Leather shields were covered with oil to keep it from drying out (Isaiah 21:5). Scented oil was used to anoint guests (Psalm 23:5) as well as for ordinary use (Ruth 3:3). During times of grief, individuals would abstain from anointing themselves (Daniel 10:3).

Secondly, there was the use of anointing of the sick (Isaiah 1:6; Luke 10:34). Jesus is referred to as the "anointed one" (the meaning of the name *Messiah* in Hebrew or *Christ* in Greek) as he read from the scroll of Isaiah 61 in his hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:18). The disciples of Jesus were sent out two by two to anoint and heal the sick (Mark 6:13). The church was encouraged to continue the practice of anointing and prayers for healing (James 5:13-14).

Last of all, there was sacred anointing the purpose of which was to dedicate or set aside a building, an item or a person for the sake of honoring God. Priests like Aaron and his sons (Exodus 28:41), prophets (1 Kings 19:16), kings like Saul (1 Samuel 9:16), David (1 Samuel 16:1) and Solomon (1 Kings 1:34) and the Tabernacle and its furnishings (Exodus 30:22-29). Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism

The planted seed must be soaked so it can swell and the new life can sprout out of the kernel of the seed. When we are soaked in the water of baptism, claimed by the promises of the Word of God, we die to ourselves and we rise out of the waters freed by the new life given us through Jesus Christ (Romans 6:1-8). We are a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Now we are called to learn from Jesus how we are to live Christian and to practice the faith disciplines that empower Christian life.

One example of how to live Christian is the faith practice of worship. Worship is a verb. It comes out of our relationship with God therefore out of our very being. It is in our very spiritual DNA essence that desires to express our gratitude, our humble love of God and our delighted praise of who God is as it emerges from the depth of our souls. The worship of God does not require emotion but it may at times elicit our emotions as we express our awe and love of God. One of the emotions is compunction which means we are cut to the heart by our shortcomings, our failures in life and relationships and our sin. This resembles a natural healing process of examination, reflection, honest heart-felt communication, repentance and confession.

Because worship is a verb, it calls for and welcomes action. One of the ways worship is expressed is as a community gathered in song. Music enhances the prose of lyrics that exalt and honor God. The melody and harmony adds life and movement to the words. As imperfect as the sound may be that leaps out of our throats as we join the voices of others in song, we experience the joy of our community of faith.

The Psalms, the Jewish and Christian book of worship, speaks of using our bodies to honor and bring glory to God. Words like clap your hands, dance, stand, shout, make a joyful noise, and cry out to the Lord are a few of ways we can worship God. The focus of our mind and heart in worship is on God not what others are doing.

This verse is lived out in the story of Jesus who died, was planted in the grave, and was resurrected. Yet, the fruit he bore is the new life he has freely given to all who believe in his name. As faithful followers of Jesus, we are fruit that has come from the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a gathered community of faith called the church, we are sent into this world to tell others about God's love in Jesus for all people we know and meet. You and I are sent to plant the seeds of faith in the hearts and minds of our family, friends and neighbors.

The graveside service uses this verse as prepare to lay the body of the person we love back into the earth. On Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the beginning of the church season called Lent, the pastor marks the foreheads of Christians and says: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* This is a reminder of our mortality yet God's immortality. The word human comes from its root of humus: or people of the earth. At the graveside the pastor says: *Earth to earth, ashes to ashes and dust to dust.* The Genesis 2 narrative reminds us that we are people of the earth and to the earth we shall return and await the return of the Lord.

On another level, John 12:24-26 describes ever so briefly the daily process of discipleship or following Jesus. There are some strong parallels to how Jesus describes discipleship in Mark 8:34-37. While John's metaphor of a seed planted, dying and bearing fruit is more organic, Mark's account is direct: if you want to follow me, you must deny yourself (self-centered ways), take up your cross (it's risky and can lead to persecution and death) and follow (practice the way of life I have taught you). In Luke 14:27-33, Jesus talks in specific about counting the cost of following before starting to follow. In the same way a builder estimates the cost before construction or a President before going to war, following Jesus is not an easy nor comfortable proposition. Jesus referred to following him more like a mountain backroad in West Virginia than an Interstate highway across Kansas (see Matthew 7:13-14).

At least this pessimist is committed to the team and did not run the other way.

After Jesus arrives in Bethany, there is extensive conversation between Martha and Jesus. As they talk about the resurrection, Jesus says, *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die* (11:25-26). As 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 tells us: it's a mystery when but the final trumpet will blast and we will all be transformed as the dead are raised from the grave. Alleluia!

Martha's confession of faith is pure and spot on: *Yes, Lord, I believe that you the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world* (11:27). One of the real values of the gospel of John is its clear witness to who Jesus is and what we are invited to believe and who we are called to follow. It is an excellent gospel to encourage the curious and the spiritually interested to read and discuss with you. The call to believe in Jesus and follow him is presented frequently throughout John.

After Jesus' lengthy exchange with Mary, Jesus came to the tomb and called out loudly: come out! Lazarus shuffles out and is unbound. He disappears from the story until chapter 12 when Jesus returns to their house for a meal. It is curious that there is no account asking Lazarus what he experienced in the grave. CNN would be all over that story for a week.

With hyperbole, the Jewish council exclaimed that if they did not put a stop to Jesus and his signs, everyone would believe in him (11:48). They put a plan in place to kill Jesus (11:53). They spread the word that all Jews in Jerusalem should keep their eyes open for Jesus and report any sightings to them (11:57). Meanwhile, in an out-of-the-way place in the wilderness called Ephraim, Jesus went in hiding (11:54).

Discussion Questions:

1. As you read over chapter 11, what is one thing that captures your interest?
2. What do you find most helpful about the story of Lazarus?
3. In what way can you identify with either the feelings of Martha or Mary?
4. What is God calling you to do in response to this story?

Notes

Week 4: January 17, 2016

READ - John 12:1-19

Anointed

While the twelve days of Christmas begin on December 25 and end on January 5 (they are not the twelve shopping days before Christmas!), January 6th is the feast day of the Epiphany. This Greek word means to reveal or bring to light. The Gospel of John is all about making public who Jesus is by use of his miracles or signs, by the words spoken by Jesus and others which tell his identity as well as the major revelation of Jesus: his death and resurrection.

2. Resurrection is a stumbling block for many to believe in Jesus. The argument from reason says that resurrection whether Lazarus or Jesus is historically unverifiable.
3. What do you find valuable about the story of Jesus rising from the dead? What questions does it raise for you (no pun intended)?
4. If you have any memories of Palm Sunday's past, what comes to mind for you?
5. What could God be calling you to do this week in response to today's readings?

Notes

Week 5: January 24, 2016

READ - John 12:20-50

Planted

Every time I preside at a graveside service for a grieving family, I am reminded of the wedding of our oldest daughter Katie. While this may sound morose, it is grounded in the fact that Katie and Eric's theme verse for their wedding was from John 12:24 where Jesus says: *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* This connection is so strong in my memory because prior to Jody and me walking Katie down the aisle of Reba Mennonite Church, Katie had choreographed and danced with two women to a song based on this Scripture. The dance was dramatic and intense as the seeds were planted in the earth, died and new life emerged.

Anointed, claimed, filled and set-forth for mission: Jesus was anointed for ministry at his baptism and set-forth for his ultimate mission on the cross in Bethany by his disciple and friend Mary. You and I have been anointed and set-forth for mission in our community as well. Perhaps you may not be feeling that empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Point of fact, you may feel distant from God. What in world can I do?

The good news is this: we are saved by God's amazing grace and mercy through faith in Jesus Christ and not based on what we have done or failed to do (Ephesians 2:8-10). Faith is greater than an emotion or feeling. Faith is our willingness to trust the promise of Jesus love, forgiveness and kindness toward us as people who believe in him. God's Word is good and true and can be trusted. Even though it may sound too good to be true that does not change the fact that it is true. The first step is simply to acknowledge that you can do nothing to add or subtract from God's love for you. The second and important step is to come clean about your need and desire for God and put your trust in the promise of Jesus. Because it's about trusting a promise and not a feeling, do not let your doubts and fears get in the way of knowing that you belong to the Lord.

Finally, we have been anointed by the Spirit to serve people, sometimes alone but oftentimes together with others from our church. Our mission is to share the love of Jesus so others can know with confidence that they belong to Christ and his body the church. Together with the Holy Spirit and our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can make a positive change and difference in this world and in the lives of people. *Come Holy Spirit, come. Stir your Holy Spirit within me. Give me ears to hear your voice and the will to follow as you lead and the faith to believe that you can use me, even me. Amen.*

Discussion Questions:

1. As you read and consider the story of the meal and the anointing of Jesus by Mary, what do you take from it as valuable for you?

(Mark 1:9-11; Acts 10:38). To come full circle, this was an epiphany event: Jesus, the Spirit descending like a dove on him and the voice God from heaven speaking "This is my beloved Son."

To be clear there seems to be two different anointing of Jesus taking place. It was at his baptism that Jesus received the anointing of power through the Holy Spirit. As Luke makes known, Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit after his baptism (Luke 4:1). When Jesus was anointed by Mary prior to Passover, her action made it known what lay ahead for Jesus not conveying the Holy Spirit which Jesus already had in abundance.

Jesus' disciples were also anointed with the Holy Spirit. *But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment,* (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first Jewish believers in Christ happen in Jerusalem on a Jewish called Pentecost (Acts 2). Later, there was a gentile Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled the God-fearers in Caesarea (Acts 10:44-48).

What is interesting in this story is that the Holy Spirit filled these eager hearts as they received the Word of God with faith. This happened prior to their baptism and there was no laying on of hands nor anointing with oil, just the Word spoken. God is God and we are not! We cannot limit how and when God chooses to act and pour out the Holy Spirit.

For all of us who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are filled with God. Whether we received the laying on of hands or anointing with oil or were simply washed in the water in the name of the God of the Trinity, it is all the same in the end: we have been claimed and God's presence dwells within us. Empowered by God's anointing of the Holy Spirit, we are to live for Christ, together with our church family as we serve in this world. We are not to worship nor serve under our own power alone or we will fail. Filled by the Spirit, however, our worship can be rich and powerful and our service significant as a witness to Christ.