

Devotions

The Living Word

for the week ahead.



How to Use this Resource

What you have before you is a resource to help you remember to bring the way of Jesus Christ into everyday life.

Each week—on Monday if time permits—we'll distribute this devotional help I'm calling *The Living Word*. It will contain the Scripture readings from Sunday, a transcript of the week's sermon, questions for reflection, and occasionally some suggestions for practicing our faith. This resource intends to extend our Sunday rejoicing into the rest of our week. You can use this resource however you feel it will give you life. Consider adding it to your devotions in the morning, chatting about the Scriptures over dinner with a friend, or even using this in a covenant group or small group.

This week, start by praying this adaptation of Psalm 119, drawn from our hymnal:

Psalm 119.1-8 (UMH, 841)

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

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.
This is the first and greatest commandment.
And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.
Blessed are those who keep God's testimonies,
who seek God with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
but walk in God's ways!
You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
I will observe your statutes;
O forsake me not utterly!

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:*
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

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

6th Sunday after the Epiphany Week of February 12, 2023

The First Lesson: Deuteronomy 30:11, 14-20 (NRSV)

"Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

The Second Lesson: Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSV)

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Questions for Reflection

1. Our reading from Deuteronomy is beautiful. In verses 11-14, Moses contrasts the clarity and availability of God's Law with other religions. Israel's delight is that God has made the life of wisdom — the *good life* — readily available. For many of

Israel's neighbors, the good life was hidden away for the elite, the wealthy, or the ultra-religious. Only the privileged few have the freedom to choose between good and evil, life and death. Common people are left to themselves, bound to their sorry lot in life, praying for mercy. Not so in Israel, the way into life is available for all people. (Compare Job 28 if you want to see another example of this key difference.)

I find that as our world becomes increasingly complex, this idea that there are clear choices before us to be a hard word to believe. Sometimes it can feel like no matter what we choose, we make the wrong choice. We buy clothing off a rack ignorant that the manufacturer exploits their workers. We try to offer a friend encouragement and they only feel more disheartened, even angry at us for offering our advice. The ways of life and death don't seem clearly marked in our everyday life. But suppose God's Word is true. If so, what does it mean for to choose life even in life's complex moments?

2. If Jesus claims to be fulfilling the Law of God given first to Moses and Israel, then how do we understand how the Law appears to change?
3. What remains the same in God's Law between, say, the Ten Commandments and Christ's summary of the Law as loving God and loving people? What is lost?
4. An exercise for the week: take one day this week and at close of day, find a quiet space, center yourself in prayer, asking for God's guidance. Recall what happened that day. Call to mind your actions, intentional and unintentional, the little decisions and the big ones. Evaluate all those actions in light of this week's message. What do your actions reveal about your heart? What in your heart needs healing? What in your heart shines with God's love? (Make sure you celebrate as much as you critique!)



The Sermon

We've made it to the end of Epiphany, the Season of Light. We've followed Matthew's Gospel and explored the wonder of holiness, navigating different aspects of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. We contemplated how Christ calls out to us just as we are, like he called to Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We contemplated how in the Beatitudes the promise of God finds a new center on the powerless and downtrodden — grace draws the marginalized into the heart of God. We contemplated how as we grow in Christ's love, we come to feel as Christ feels, swelling with holy empathy that sends us out towards our siblings and neighbors in need. Last week, we contemplated how God's Law — to love God and to love people — is not first a matter of appearance or duty, but instead is a matter of the heart. Now, as we turn our hearts from Epiphany to Lent, we draw our attention again to *inward holiness*. That is, how our motives, posture, and character reflect our obedience to God's holy law of love. On this there are two things I want to say.

First, Christ calls us to focus our attention *not* on the Law itself, but on our *hearts*. Christ traces all sorts of topics within God's Law. Across all of them there is a central theme: the *heart of the Law is not in how we meet the standard, but in our posture and motives towards God and neighbor*. It is this *deepening* of God's Law that raises the stakes for those who would dare to follow him.

All our wrongdoings and sins begin long before we ever actually lie to a friend, manipulate a vulnerable or confused person, or harm someone in anyway. These actions are simply the sour harvest of a fruit tree plagued by a toxic and decaying root system. When we recall, for example, Jesus's parable of the mustard seed, where the smallest trust in God grows into a mighty tree of

faith, the principle runs both ways: left unchecked, the tiniest seed of pride, lust, or selfishness can grow so tall that it chokes out the nourishing sun, leaving shadow and darkness, producing rotten fruit.

There's a paradigm shift here that the Word of God calls us to attend to: when we look beneath our actions, beneath how what we do conforms to the criteria we believe the Law sets in front of us, there is a double movement. On the one hand, if the law is a matter of the *heart*, then we are *free, liberated*, from the particular criteria that once bound us. The content of the Law shifts from prohibitions that bind our lives to wisdom that shepherds us down green pastures, towards well-being and fulness. "For freedom," Paul says, "Christ has set us free." The Law that binds us is dead. The Law before us is the Law of freedom!

On the other hand, every choice we make becomes a turning point where what we do unveils what drives us, what our real posture is towards God and neighbor. "You will know a tree by its fruit," Christ says (cf. Mt. 7:15-20). Every thought, every action, displays whether we are rooted in a posture of love and trust in God or in fear and selfishness. At each and every choice before us we find ourselves at a crossroads where we hear our God of love say to us, "[Now, in this very moment,] I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity" (Deut. 30:15).

The Word of God calls each of us to step back and understand what roots us. He points our attention to our hearts. He invites us to consider *inward holiness*, one of John Wesley's favorite themes. Yet, you'll probably notice, friends, that you can't see much of the root system of any given tree when you look at it as it stands in the forest, neither can we see what's truly planted in our hearts. Our deepest hopes, passions, and drives — including both our bent to pride and selfishness as well as our faith in God and in the world — are planted out of our reach. We can recognize and change superficial things, like how smiling in the mirror in the morning tricks your brain to into releasing endorphins, changing your mood. But a mood is *not* a motive. *Motives, posture, and disposition* are sown into the very core of who we are, largely by outside forces, like our upbringing, culture, background, and career, these slowly till at the soil of our hearts and shape how we carry ourselves in this world. Recognizing what shapes our heart's posture towards the world is one thing, changing that posture is another. Some of us may feel that real change, real healing, and real holiness is impossible. So, if the true meaning of the Law is that we need to look at our hearts, and we can't see our hearts clearly, let alone make easy changes, then what's the point? Does Jesus just want good folks to feel better about themselves and those who struggle like there's no chance of ever changing?

Of course not. My friends, we need not be discouraged. Our Lord does not leave us by ourselves, nor does he fulfill God's law just to watch us flounder. If we were to read a little farther in our Gospel, and I invite you to do so this week, we find that the very first thing Jesus does after preaching this sermon that presents a standard of holiness so high that we all feel is painfully hard to keep, is come down from the mountain and heal a leper. This chronically sick, outcast, and downtrodden person, who's aching and enflamed body prevented them from ever becoming holy, cries out to Jesus: "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean!" Jesus replies, "I do choose. Be made clean!" (Mt. 8:1-4.) Our God chooses to restore us sick and broken people into new life. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). Christ our Lord is the gardener who tills the seeds of trust and weeds our misery from our hearts. He is also the Sun that gives life to our trust in God and leads us to flourish in the radiance of the Father's love — his life the Source of all that lives. The Son of the Living God dwells inside each of us as the Word who speaks by the Holy Spirit to tell us what is good and true and right. He sees our hearts. Our God plants in us the seeds of trust in him that grow into unshakeable faith. *God is the faithful one: our God comes to us, and our God changes us.*

Second and finally, we have a part to play as God works in our hearts. God has set before us pathways, patterns, and practices that help us to deepen our relationship with him. These are pathways towards life. They help us to choke out the seeds of pride and wickedness that have no place in us, and in turn nourish the deposit of holy trust in God sown in our hearts. We call these pathways, patterns, and practices the *means of grace* — another bit of good Methodist vocabulary — and this morning we are invited to participate in the most glorious pathway into nourishing grace: the sacrament of holy communion.

At this table Christ comes to us in wonderful mystery. Somehow in this bread and wine, the grace of God that makes us holy sinks into our bones. As we remember Christ's passion and death, thinking of the last supper, our minds are lifted into the mind of Christ. Just so, we become knit ever closer together into the body of Christ. This wine and this bread become for us the nourishment for our sapling trust in God.

Christ has already planted in us the seeds of trust in God. He chose each of us: he, our God and brother and king, wrapped every one of you in a warm and loving embrace from before the foundations of the world. This Christ, our Lord, invites us to choose the holy life he's set before us. He has come down to us like he descended to the leper. All we need to do is admit our hunger for change. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Mt. 5:6). At the table, wherever your heart is at, whether you feel close or far from God, be encouraged that here at His table God comes to us.

Amen.

Pastor Marty
Newaygo United Methodist Church
6th Sunday after Epiphany
