

**Devotions – October 24-30, 2021**

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**Sunday, October 24, 2021**

Text: John 1:14

**The Word became flesh and lived among us...**

I found myself at the bedside of a member of the congregation whom I had grown to know and to love. I knew she was sick as she had been sick off and on for quite some time so I didn't fully realize that this would be our last visit. I wasn't in her hospital room long before she asked me, "Does Jesus hug?" She then put her arms up from her bed and made a circle with her arms as if to hug somebody--but nobody was there. This was a new question for me, and it took me aback at first because I was looking at a hug that was empty. She was hugging the air. I'm sure it was a split second, but it felt like a long time to me before I said, "Yes. Jesus hugs."

The Christmas story tells us that God came into the world--in the flesh. The manger didn't lay empty. Mary didn't wrap her arms around some kind of mysterious or holy air. She held a baby...a baby who cried and nursed and slept and pooped and spit-up. And on the cross, there wasn't something spiritually invisible that only the well-trained or pious could see. Instead, there was a bleeding, crying and suffering man nailed to the tree for the whole world to see.

Here is the thing: God isn't invisible... God isn't air. God came into the world with skin and bones and a heartbeat...God came into the world with a heart full of love and sometimes a face full of tears and so we know that God gives hugs—in the flesh.

Jesus reaches out to show his love through us. Luther tells us that we are to be "little Christs" for one another and so when we need a holy hug we look no further than the face of our brother or sister in Christ. The hug we give and the hug we receive is a hug from Jesus...in the flesh.

After we had Communion together and it was time for me to leave her bedside, she reached out her arms to give me a hug. I stepped into that space between her arms and she gave me a hug (*a big one*) and then whispered in my ear, "I feel Jesus. He is hugging me right now." And I responded, "Me too."

Let's pray: *Jesus, we come before you feeling like all things holy are distant, invisible and far away. Draw us near to one another so that we may see your face, feel your touch and be reminded that you are in the face of our neighbor. Make us more like you. In the name of the living Christ, Amen.*



**Monday, October 25, 2021**

Text: Psalm 23:4

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.**

“Grief is grief,” they tell me. “You can’t compare your grief to another’s grief,” so they say.

Not to unload all my grief onto you during your time of devotion but my cat died this week. He was a shelter cat named “Whiskey.” We got him when he was 7 and we had him for only 3 years. The vet said that Whiskey wasn’t able to breathe and that he was suffering. He said that even the stress of the car ride home (*5-minute car ride*) could cause his heart to go out. My entire family gathered at the vet’s office and we said “good-bye” before they put him to sleep. (*I would add that the vet’s office staff and environment were amazingly comforting considering our situation.*)

My daughter took about 100 pictures and videos that I can barely scroll past when I’m on my phone. My husband stayed with him to give him comfort until he took his last breath. The grief I continue to feel for “just a cat” is surprisingly overwhelming. I know people who have recently lost a spouse or a parent. A friend of mine recently found out she has cancer—again. These are things to grieve and so I think to myself, “Why am I so sad? It’s just a cat.”

We are living in a time of grief because the pandemic has brought us so much loss. I feel it in my relationships as I try to keep friendships that seem to be hanging by a thread due to our differing views on masks or vaccines. I feel it in worship as we have yet to return to something “normal.” My grief or your grief cannot be compared to the neighbor down the street. Whatever grief you feel is your grief and it’s ok.

Brene Brown wrote, “We run from grief because loss scares us. Yet our hearts reach toward grief because the broken parts want to mend.” No matter the dark valley we are walking through we have the promise that God walks with us.

Let’s pray: *Loving God, draw us closer to you. Help us to share our grief with you in prayer and also to share our grief with our pastor or trusted friend so that we have a visible reminder that you walk beside us no matter our pain or grief. Amen.*



**Tuesday, October 26, 2021**

Matthew 22:37-39

**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.**

I’m kind of sick of this verse. I keep hearing people telling me that the best way to love my neighbor is to respect their individual choice (*to wear a mask or not, to get vaccinated or not, to wave a confederate flag, or not, to acknowledge racial inequity, or not, to feed the sick, or not....*). I hope that list made you a little uncomfortable—that was on purpose. I’m sick of the screaming from every direction as if loud and correct go together.

A few years ago, I took a group of high school youth to the area where I grew up (San Francisco Bay Area/Santa Cruz, CA) for a "Vision Trip." One night we went to the Tenderloin Area in San Francisco and met with Pastor Lyle Beckman with the San Francisco Night Ministry. We heard stories and illustrations that helped us to see that we are all just one illness or lost job away from homelessness. This ministry has pastors who walk the street every night to have face to face conversations with anybody who wants to talk. His stories were riveting! And then it was our turn to go out with him. We walked from 10 pm to midnight and then caught the last BART back to Berkeley where we were sleeping on the floor in a church basement.

While walking the streets we saw needles hanging out of peoples' arms. We saw a prostitute leaning into a car window and when the car drove away, she loudly expressed her frustration with the time that was wasted. His identity was hidden by the tinted windows while she had nowhere to hide. And as we walked there were people who waved and said, "Pastor! Good to see you again tonight." There were inside jokes made between him and others that he clearly had built a relationship and trust.

Homelessness, drug use, prostitution... they're all political issues. They're divisive and often get exploited for the politicians' gains. But for this ministry it was just about the people who were hurting and making sure to see their full humanity and treat them with dignity.

With all the politically divisive and polarizing dynamics that we are living in I think sometimes we lose sight of seeing one another's full humanity and treating each other with dignity. We, along with "them" share an identity as beloved children of God. Whether our political beliefs align or not--we all bear the image of God. We are called to step into this identity because all the other labels we wear are shallow and empty. It's this identity that we share that helps us to love our neighbor.

Let's pray: *Jesus, we have unity in you that far exceeds the division in our communities. Help us to see the full humanity in one another. Remind us that your love is boundless and multiplies as we learn to better love one another. May we not be discouraged by the loud voices that come at us each day but guide us to seek encouragement in the whispers of your Word. Amen.*



**Wednesday, October 27, 2021**

Text: Ephesians 4:32

**...and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.**

My husband and I were ordained back-to-back. He was ordained on a Saturday and then I was ordained on a Sunday, and we recently celebrated the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our ordinations. In our first call we were installed in a 3-point parish and so we were installed in 3 worship services. Each time the Assistant to the Bishop said something very powerful that has stayed with me: With the two of us up front and facing the congregation he looked out and said, "Congregation, these are your pastors. They will let you down. They will disappoint you. They will make mistakes. Forgive them." And then he looked at us and he said, "Pastors, here is your congregation. They will let you down. They will disappoint you. They will make mistakes. Forgive them."

Over the years I have heard many people disappointed and disillusioned by their congregation or their pastor. “I can’t believe he said that to me at church!” Or, “She comes on Sundays but the rest of the week she doesn’t act like a Christian.” Or, “I was in the hospital and my pastor never visited me.” Or... Maybe you’ve heard similar sentiments of disappointment. I sometimes wonder if we hold the Christian Community (and pastors and their families) up to some standard that far exceeds the need for Jesus.

Here is the thing: Christians (pastors too) are hurting and broken people in need of love and forgiveness. The Church isn’t made up of people who are perfect or who no longer need forgiveness. Quite the opposite. The Church is made up of people who gather together weekly to hear the story of a God who forgives. To hear the story of The Maker and Owner of the Universe who put on skin out of love for all people. The Church is the gathering of those who likely need to hear that story the most so that they can go out into the world fully aware of their own need for forgiveness and fully willing to offer it to others.

We bring all of our imperfect humanity with us when we worship. And so, of course there will be times when there is conflict or struggle, discomfort or challenges. It’s part of being community—Christian Community. So this is what I carry with me: “These are your brothers and sisters in Christ. They will let you down. They will disappoint you. They will make mistakes. Forgive them.” And for myself, “I might let you down, I might disappoint you. I might make mistakes. And when I do, please forgive me.”

Let’s pray: *Creator of the Universe, you gather us together into one Body of Christ and you give us a safe place to practice asking and receiving forgiveness. Help us to reach out to others to say, “I feel hurt” and “Please forgive me” and “I love you.” Help us to practice this in our faith community, our home, and in relationships with others. Remind us that forgiveness on both ends is the work of the Spirit and that this is a practice that strengthens our faith and builds up community. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*



**Thursday, October 28, 2021**

Text: Romans 6:4

**We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.**

Today is my birthday. Thanks for reading this and sharing in a special day with me. My first holiday in life was Halloween. My mom says she brought me to the door and showed me to all the trick-or-treaters. It’s possible that she thought I was so sweet that she didn’t need to give out candy. I’m not sure the kids in costumes agreed. My next holiday was Thanksgiving and on the Eve of Thanksgiving I was baptized. I don’t remember it, obviously.

My mom remembers her baptism. She was old enough to talk (maybe 5?) and when it was time she got up to the font and she yelled out at the pastor for all to hear, “Don’t get that dirty water on my new dress!” She is a little mortified by that story these days but I think it’s hilarious! She says, “Serves them (her parents) right for waiting so long to baptize me.” I suppose she is right that if she was just a baby she could only have cried and wouldn’t have had the delightful sass on that Sunday morning.

Our baptism story has great impact on our life! Not the details about what we wore or if we cried. Not how young or old we were. It matters not who brought us to the font or whether we made a decision to get ourselves there. It doesn't matter if we get baptized at 40 in Lake Superior by immersion. It doesn't matter if we get baptized on a Wednesday night with a bowl of water. It doesn't matter if we sass-talk our way up to the font. It doesn't matter what we do. The details have no impact on anything (although they're fun to tell). The impact comes solely from God.

Baptism is a drowning. It's not a cute day to celebrate a sweet baby and eat cake. It's more like a funeral. I know, it's kind of morbid to put it that way. But in Baptism we are drowned to death. Think about the image of water swallowing up our old self. In baptism, death comes first and life comes second. Following our drowning, we are raised to new life with Christ. God does something unbreakable in the water and God's Word. God makes us children of God. God promises that nothing will separate us from his love. God makes us part of the Body of Christ. And God breathes the Holy Spirit into our bodies--gifting us for ministry.

It matters what God does. It matters that God promises us forever. It matters that God calls us to live together in love for the sake of the world. God is like a water faucet of love that is ALWAYS on. And God's Love and Grace is for you and for the world. Forever.

Let's pray: *I give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected me through the night from all harm and danger. I ask that you would also protect me today from sin and all evil, so that my life and actions may please you. Into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angels be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.*  
(Morning Blessing, Luther's Small Catechism)



**Friday, October 29, 2021**

Text: Romans 12:5

**So we, who are many, are one body in Christ and individually we are members one of another.**

It was about a week before everything got shut down due to Covid-19. We had been hearing about this virus and I had told my kids to start keeping their hands clean and not touch their face if at all possible while at school. I think I said something like, "I don't want you to be scared but it's a good idea to start practicing doing things to prevent you from getting sick." Little did I know that hand sanitizer, toilet paper, Clorox wipes and so many other things would be difficult to find for a while. At that time, I had a group of small group leaders over to my house. It was the last time we had company since March of 2020. As I was getting ready (*cleaning our house*) I realized that our dishwasher latch was broken and when I tried to latch it, it would fall forward with a crashing sound. My husband created a solution: duct tape. And so we began to duct tape our dishwasher shut to avoid buying a new one.

That solution was cheap and it was working... until about a month ago when we started to have other issues. So we decided our dishwasher gave us 10 good years but it was time for a new one. I felt like we had lived with a shabby dishwasher long enough so I went to the appliance store in town and I was told that I could not get a



Bosch dishwasher (like the one we had) now or maybe ever. It was shocking. He said that Bosch wasn't able to find workers and materials for parts and that everything was backed up. He said it could be months or longer. Long story short... After many hours of phone calls and online shopping (I even asked my brother in Sioux Falls, SD to buy one for me and I'd come get it later), I did find a dishwasher in a town about an hour away.

Here is the thing... we are all inter-connected. The pandemic reveals this to us in a new (*and unfortunate*) way. Never before have I experienced an inability to buy things that I had money for. (*Clearly money has always been a limitation but not availability.*) We are living in a time when we can see in concrete ways how a crisis in one community affects all of us. The decisions I make affect those around me and vice versa. None of us live in an individual bubble. Trying to buy a dishwasher in a pandemic was a lot harder than I would have liked.

As people of faith this is something we already knew. This is not a liability: this is by design. God desires for us to be inter-connected. For the strong to carry the weak (*we take turns being strong and being weak*). For the empathetic to offer comfort. For the wise to guide the naïve. For the curious to challenge the apathetic. We're in this together. This life and this walk of faith is a communal journey. There is no individual "you" in scripture. Almost every "you" means "you all" and so we journey together as one Body of Christ. I hope we learn through this difficult time the biblical concept of the "we" and the "ours" a little more than the "me" and the "mine."

Let's pray: *Jesus, you gather the scattered. Unite us in our common humanity and our shared mission. Help us to see the asset in one another and the gift you have given us in our interconnectedness. Amen.*



**Saturday, October 30, 2021**

Text: Genesis 2:18a

**“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.’”**

I have the best brother! (*Not to brag or anything—but it's true!*) My children are virtual students right now and have been for quite some time (*too long, really*). And I have gotten to a point where I can no longer help them with their math. I took Calculus in college, so I thought I'd be able to help them through high school but if I'm honest I rarely even understand the question. So I call my brother. “HELP!!! I have no idea what to do!” Having an extra “math teacher” (he is actually a mechanical engineer turned pastor) just a FaceTime away is saving my butt!

Here is the thing... it is not good for us to be alone. Sometimes we feel alone in the midst of a huge crowd. Maybe we feel isolated because of a physical limitation or grief. We may feel lonely but we can't pin-point a reason. Loneliness has physical and spiritual consequences. Loneliness is as bad for you as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. We all need meaningful connections and yet we may hesitate to reach out because we don't want to seem needy or be a burden.

God says, “It is not good for humans to be alone” and so God created community. God desires for us to have meaningful connections in relationships that move from separate and superficial to connected and authentic.

The gift of community includes the young and the old and reminds us that we belong to one another. Maybe today is the day you reach out for your benefit and for theirs.

Let's pray: *Dear Lord, help me to live in Christian community. I pray for those who are lonely, and I pray for deeper relationships in my life. Help me to reach out in confidence that building up the community is part of my calling as a Christ follower. Amen.*

