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Editor's Letter



Chris Fuller (above) volunteering at Jubilee Partners. Bob Godfrey (right) with Miles Wolff, author of *Lunch at the 5 & 10* and former owner of the Durham Bulls.

“Bird dogs” are very helpful to me. Not canines, but the human ones who “point” to good story subjects.

Good Faith Media advisor Kelly Belcher, a North Carolinian, told me the International Civil Rights Center & Museum in Greensboro was worth a visit. Next, I turned to Greensboro local Bob Godfrey for help. Boy, did he come through.

One of his friends wrote the historical account of the Greensboro sit-ins, titled *Lunch at the 5 & 10*. It didn't hurt that author Miles Wolff has played a significant role in minor league baseball, including resurrecting the now-famous Durham Bulls.

So, we three lovers of the national pastime conversed at the ballpark in Durham. Bob also arranged interviews in Greensboro that I couldn't have done on my own.

While my byline appears on the stories, the bird dogs play an important behind-the-scenes role. Also, longtime friend Chris Fuller

invited me to visit Jubilee Partners in Comer, Ga., where he and his wife Dianne were spending several months as volunteers.

That Christian community's work with refugees impressed me beyond expectations. The story wouldn't have happened — or happened as well — without the bird-dogging of a friend who hosted me and made sure I talked with all the right people.

To all my bird dog friends out there, thanks! To others with potential stories and good contacts, please point me in the right direction.

Executive Editor
john@goodfaithmedia.org

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See page 21 for more information.

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Nurturing Faith Journal provides relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, found inside the journal with teaching resources online, provide weekly lessons by Tony Cartledge that are both scholarly and applicable to faithful living.

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Part 1: Barack Obama (2009–2017)

By Bruce Gourley

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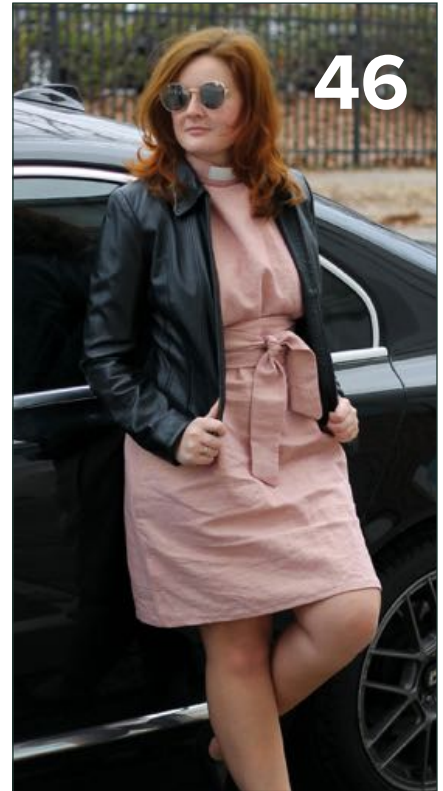
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. The F.W. Woolworth Co. store in downtown Greensboro, where racial discrimination was challenged at a lunch counter in 1960, now houses a civil rights museum. Story on page 6.

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Worth Repeating

“What if Jesus meant what he said?”

— Mennonite pastor Tim Amor (Twitter)

“I can’t explain it, but Trader Joe’s feels like a young adult ministry.”

Podcaster and “aspiring theologian” Mason Mennenga (Twitter)

“We have to dismantle theologies that believe in freedom and love in heaven but tolerate injustice and oppression on earth.”

Author and minister Danté Stewart (Twitter)

“Christians should always be on the side of laying down our rights for the benefit of the vulnerable. This isn’t up for debate.”

Paul Ward, who writes and speaks on trauma-informed ministry (Twitter)

“Christianity in America would radically change if we understood ‘taking the Lord’s name in vain’ as claiming the name of Jesus without doing the work of Jesus, instead of [as] saying ‘O, my god.’”

Austin, Texas, minister Zach Lambert (Twitter)

“The obsession for Christian leaders to be seen as ‘conservative’ is a very American thing. And it’s antithetical to a gospel that topples the old order of things to make way for God’s new creation.”

Joash Thomas, Canada’s national director of mobilization/advocacy for International Justice Mission (Twitter)

“There have always been two Christianities, one rooted in empire and the other resistant to it.”

George Mason, recently retired pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas (Twitter)

“We all can meaningfully work toward the elimination of unacceptable egocentricity through concerted efforts to try to see things from other people’s point of view also — and to search for objective truth.”

Retired missionary and blogger Leroy Seat

“Religions generally regard sacred objects as untouchable. And within the religion of white Christian nationalism, guns are as much a part of our identity as Christianity.”

Sociologist Samuel L. Perry, co-author of *The Flag and the Cross* (Time)

“The greatest triumph of the Religious Right is convincing the majority they are the marginalized.”

Author Jonathan Merritt (Twitter)

The place to go in between issues of Nurturing Faith Journal is:



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NEWS — ANALYSIS — BOOKS —
EXPERIENCES — RESOURCES — PODCASTS

Getting comfortable with uncomfortable truth

By John D. Pierce

“Truth sets us free but is often uncomfortable,” said psychologist Alan Godwin via Twitter.



It was Jesus, of course, who made that claim of the freeing impact of truth (John 8:32). And his life, teachings and death support the broader idea of truth’s uncomfortableness.

Conversely, there are many people today — even those who claim to follow Jesus — who define truth not as fact, but as that which brings them comfort and a greater sense of security.

Their default is set on: “It doesn’t have to be right, just feel right to me.” Personal preferences that produce comfort get embraced as truth.

In recent years, due to an extreme religious/political atmosphere of trumped-up fear and hostile projections onto vulnerable people, Americanized Christianity has gone through a major unmasking.

The thin veneer of gospel faithfulness has been pulled back, revealing a system of beliefs and set of values that simply don’t align with the life and teachings of Jesus.

Objective truth, equally applied justice, compassion for the least of these, and

concern for the common good over personal gains have been widely sacrificed. Beneath the thin, masking layering of false faithfulness is the revelation that following Jesus is not what many (often the loudest) mean when they claim to be Christian.

A political ideology of privilege is preferred over anything that feels threatening to one’s sense of dominance or involves any societal loss — although Jesus said that’s how we gain our lives.

Our secular/religious culture has so emphasized winning at any cost that Jesus’ call for empathy and self-sacrifice goes unheard or at least unheeded. Coming out on top seems to be a greater driver within Americanized Christianity than the biblical message to the contrary.

“Never act from motives of rivalry or personal vanity, but in humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves. None of you should think only of his own affairs but should learn to see things from other people’s point of view” (Phil. 2:3 JBP).

Pointing out this reality — whether by preachers in the pulpit or friends discussing such matters in person or on social media — is not well received. Defensiveness, often mixed with hostility, is the readied response.

This unmasking followed by quick, dismissive reflexes has many of us honestly and painfully asking if those claiming his name actually believe Jesus — or just believe in Jesus merely enough to secure a heavenly Airbnb.

It is interesting, and often disappointing, to watch how simply conveying the clearly stated commands of Jesus are tempered by those called to proclaim such good news and rejected by those who claim to have received it.

The whole spiritual idea of conviction of sin — at the heart of the revivalism that created the prominence of evangelicalism in the U.S. — is gone like the mourner’s bench. Instead, any revealing of the realities of sinful self-centeredness goes unappreciated and gets regarded as an offense.

The quick and harsh pushback to uncomfortable truth includes playing victim and seeking to discredit and silence the messenger. Rather than disproving the realities of this unmasking of sin, the default is often on denying the clear reality of trading Jesus for a contrasting savior.

Church leaders are often squeezed into a vise of seeking to preach Jesus’ gospel while retaining — with just enough vagueness if not appeasement — those who only want to hear something that comfortably justifies their fear-driven, self-serving political ideology.

And, if not, there is a preacher down the street who will do so willingly.

The thin veneer that once covered deep-seated racism, fear and hostility among many professing Christians has been pulled back — and it has starkly revealed the reality that the gospel was not just radical once upon a time. It still carries a price tag.

Yet the knock-off versions of “Christianity” — without the need for Jesus beyond a rote prayer and eternal security — cannot go unchallenged.

The uncomfortable truth is that we are not called to protect our cultural dominance, but to tell the truth and to love God more fully and our neighbors more broadly. **NFJ**

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SITTING IN

Four freshmen launched wide-spreading movement for justice

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

GREENSBORO, N.C. — Chrome-back stools in two long, straight lines form a large L-shaped lunch counter. Their cushions are in alternate colors. But for a long time, their occupants were not.

While money from African Americans was well received at the F.W. Woolworth Co. store in downtown Greensboro, the sitting down on one of those stools for food service was restricted to white persons.

On Feb. 1, 1960, however, four freshmen at historically-Black North Carolina A&T sat at the counter. They were refused service but kept sitting — and then kept coming back and sitting some more.

Others joined their cause of seeking justice and equality. The word spread across Greensboro and well beyond — eliciting similar actions in cities elsewhere.

A new term and technique arose, and a movement was launched.

“There was no word ‘sit-in’ prior to this, but it was very logical,” said historian Miles Wolff, who grew up in Greensboro and wrote the book, *Lunch at the 5 & 10*,

first published in 1970 and revised in 1990.

That logic, of course, had many facets — from the widely ignored constitutional assurance of equality to the reality that this store (like others) served African Americans, just not at the whites-only lunch counter.

Others had attempted to be served there but left after being rejected. On this date, however, the students were prepared to not only sit in but to sit in and sit it out for a while.

FOUR FRESHMEN

“I’ve come to really appreciate what these students did,” said John Swaine, CEO of the International Civil Rights Center & Museum, which occupies the former Woolworth building on South Elm Street in downtown Greensboro.

Joseph McNeil and Ezell Blair Jr. were roommates, as were David Richmond and Franklin McCain. McNeil was from Wilmington, N.C., the other freshmen having finished high school in Greensboro.

“Frank McCain was the go-to guy,” said Cameron Falkener, whose late father Waldo, a successful businessman, was the city’s second Black city council member.

Though just 8 years old at the time, Cameron vividly remembers the dramatic moments when Greensboro’s segregation practices were seriously challenged. The four freshmen would visit his father at the family home where Cameron now lives.

“I’m not in a position to march with you...,” he overheard his father telling the young men. “But we’ve got to get through this color code.”

The current political climate in the U.S., as seen in recent court decisions, said Swaine, indicates that threats to personal liberty are not just for history books.

Expecting the students to be arrested for their nonviolent protests, the elder Falkener added: “You tell them your bondsman is Waldo Falkener.”

After the initial sit-in, students continued marching from campus to the store to occupy the bar stools — despite not being served and often being harassed by racist counter-protesters. When the growing crowds of students would pass the Falkener home, young Cameron would be ushered inside by his mother.

“I’d be peeking through the window,” he said with a smile — describing himself as an inquisitive person.

Less entertaining were the anonymous calls. “I’d answer the phone,” he said, noting that harsh words and bomb threats often came from the other end.

MORE STUDENTS

Swaine’s praise of students extended beyond the four freshmen who bravely began the sit-ins. They were joined by others from their own campus and from Bennett College, a private historically Black school.

Some white students from state-sponsored Woman’s College (now University of North Carolina at Greensboro) lent support too. But it was students at all-Black Dudley High School who picked up the mantle when summer came and many college students left town.

It is a lesson Swaine wants visiting school groups — such as the one from Clover High School in upstate South Carolina, touring the museum on a May field trip — to not miss.

“It was high school students too who brought about this change,” he said.

Swaine hopes current students will not simply learn historical facts at the museum but also see their own roles in advocating for equality that remains fragile.

“People totally underestimate what the 14th amendment means,” he said, noting that “equal protection of the laws” refers to people, not corporations.

The current political climate in the U.S., as seen in recent court decisions, said Swaine, indicates that threats to personal liberty are not just for history books.

“It’s coming,” he wants current

students and others to know. “You better pay attention.”

EQUAL ACCESS

Both tour groups and individual visitors, however, get the needed historical perspective. The tour places the Greensboro sit-ins in the context of a larger movement — hence the name, International Civil Rights Center & Museum.

“This is where the sit-ins took place on Feb. 1, 1960,” senior interpreter and docent Jeanne Dulin tells the newly assembled students. “This is the building.”

She recalls the four freshmen students who “walked a mile and a half” from campus to the downtown store where they sat “two by two” at the lunch counter. Their polite requests for service were ignored or rejected.

But they continued to come and sit — often bringing books to study.

“They were tired of living under Jim Crow restrictions,” said Dulin, making sure the high school students knew that Jim Crow was not a person but a system for enforcing continuing segregation and discrimination even after laws were passed calling for racial equality.

“They ordered coffee and cherry pie,” said Dulin, “but what they really wanted was a cup of freedom, a plate of justice and a bowl of equality.”

African-American students and others in Greensboro shopped at the store — and were allowed to buy food at a stand-up snack bar only. The lunch counter was off limits to them, however, something that failed both logic and liberty.

“This was one of the most profitable stores in the Woolworth chain,” said Dulin.

ECONOMICS

Such profitability was not lost on store manager C.L. “Curly” Harris, a Baptist layman with great pride in the store’s success. He cringed at his Woolworth being called a “dime store” or a “5&10.”

“He liked to point out the \$150 television sets, \$40 watches and other expensive items to prove his point,” writes Wolff.

Notified by one of his employees that



Cameron Falkener, who was just 8 years old in 1960, vividly recalls the Greensboro sit-ins.



Miles Wolff wrote *Lunch at the 5 & 10*, a history of the sit-ins.



John Swaine is CEO of the International Civil Rights Center & Museum.



Docent Jeanne Dulin shares the story of the 1960 sit-ins in Greensboro — putting the events into larger historical context — with high school students from Clover, S.C., who visited the civil rights museum.

the four young men had sat at the counter, Harris instructed: “Let them sit there. Don’t say anything else to them.”

Harris is largely described as a pragmatist who anticipated such moments and sought direction from his corporate superiors. He resented that his store — rather than Greensboro’s businesses at large — was the focus of desegregation practices.

He didn’t want the students arrested, but neither did he seek to accommodate them with food service.

Wolff described the scene on Feb. 1, 1960: “As the doors locked at Woolworth, the [four freshmen] were still sitting at the counter. Finally, about 15 minutes after the front doors had been closed, they got up and left by the side entrance.”

One of them offered a parting word: “I’ll be back tomorrow with A&T College.”

A newspaper photographer outside the store took what has now become a

well-known photo of the four smartly dressed college students who were heading back to campus — now fully immersed in a civil rights protest.

Harris called his regional supervisor — knowing this was just the beginning.

Indeed it was. Thirty minutes after the store opened the next morning, 31 A&T students, four of them women, arrived. Reporters started showing up each day as well, raising the visibility of the sit-ins.

INFLUENCERS

Wolff, who is white, said some people have criticized his book — first written as his thesis for a master’s degree in history at the University of Virginia — for giving too much credit to non-Black supporters of the movement.

The heroes were and are the brave African-American students and other African Americans — not white saviors,

said Wolff a recent interview. “It was their movement.”

As a historian, however, Wolff said his research took a broader look at all the major influencers who stood in favor and in opposition to desegregation.

In his book, Wolff told of eccentric clothing store owner Ralph “Ruffles” Johns, a son of Syrian immigrants, encouraging the four students to protest and coaching them on tactics.

Johns had already stirred the business community, writes Wolff, with chalk art outside his store with messages such as: “God hates segregation” and “Colored and White fountains are not the way of God or of Christians.”

On Feb. 1, 1990, exactly 30 years after the initial sit-in, the four former students who started the movement gathered to recall those events. One of them, Ezell Blair Jr., who’d assumed the name Jibreel Khazan, gave

The struggle for equal access and non-discriminatory practices were just getting started. But a big step had been taken — starting with the courage of four determined college freshmen.

thanks to their parents and the many others who supported them during the protests.

Seeing Johns in the crowd, he added: “Many people thought Ralph was crazy, but he wasn’t. Ralph, I love you.”

In contrast, George Dorsett, founding pastor of Greensboro’s Southside Baptist Church, was chaplain for the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina. Wolff writes that Dorsett was a quiet presence almost daily at the Woolworth store during the 1960 sit-ins.

Dorsett justified his theological opposition to segregation, said Wolff, by claiming that God is “not the author of confusion” and that civil rights advocates stir up confusion.

Many observers, writes Wolff, believed the Klan to be behind the counter protests — as well as threats against city leaders such as Mayor George Roach and City Councilman Ed Zane.

Wolff noted that Dorsett was banned from the Klan in early 1976, after a Senate Intelligence Committee source identified him as being an FBI informant. “He didn’t want to go to jail,” surmised Wolff in the recent interview.

POLITICS

“My mother was more of a politician than my father,” said Cameron Falkener, “and I’ve got pictures of my dad with LBJ.”

Margaret Falkener was “smart as a whip,” said her son. Among other accomplishments, she started the music program at A&T.

One of her students was Jesse Jackson, the student body president who in 1963 helped lead more demonstrations aimed at desegregating other public places such as motels, restaurants and theaters.

Less than a month after the initial sit-ins on Feb. 1, 1960, Waldo Falkener — elected to the Greensboro City Council the year before — was placed by the mayor on a newly-

formed Committee on Community Relations to address the issues of equal access.

The elder Falkener was well known around Greensboro for his business acumen and stylish dress, his son said. Blacks and whites were about equally numbered among the clients of his bail bond business.

On city council, he had successfully argued for the removal of the Confederate flag from Memorial Stadium. Cameron Falkener said he watched it all in youthful amazement.

“I had to grow up really fast,” he said, noting not only his parents’ leadership roles during turbulent times, but also being the youngest of his siblings.

“My father caught holy hell,” said Cameron, noting that many whites told him he was “doing too much” while many Blacks said, “You’re not doing enough.”

While the times were busy and stressful, they were also exciting said Cameron. And the inquisitive 8-year-old had a question for his father back then that he still recalls: “Daddy, what’s going to cause this thing to end?”

“When they feel it in their pockets,” said the elder Falkener. “That’s when they’ll relent.”

“Moral considerations,” writes Wolff, had little to do with the eventual desegregation by business owners. “They were mentioned often enough, but when it came to a solution, money was the deciding factor.”

JUST BEGUN

The accomplished goal occurred as quietly as the initial protests had begun nearly six months earlier. At 2 p.m. on July 25, 1960, three African Americans sat down at the Woolworth lunch counter and were served.

They were not students, however. They were store employees who’d changed into their Sunday best.

Curly Harris was managing his store in the same hands-on, risk management way as

before the protests. He issued a statement to the press affirming that his store would abide by the mayor’s advisory committee’s recommendation to sell merchandise and serve food to all customers.

When students returned to campus in the fall, they put the promise to test.

By that time — the summer of 1960 — 32 other Southern cities had desegregated at least some of their dining establishments, Wolff recorded, often making use of sit-ins. That number rose to 126 cities a year later.

The struggle for equal access and non-discriminatory practices was just getting started. But a big step had been taken — starting with the courage of four determined college freshmen.

Just two of four are still living today, but their legacies continue — especially as young visitors to the store-turned-museum hear their stories.

Docent Jeanne Dulin wants these visitors to do more than learn about those who risked much to pave the way for racial justice.

“Don’t let them down,” she said, recalling the four freshmen in Greensboro, Ruby Bridges in Louisiana, and James Meredith in Mississippi. And then she added: “If you don’t vote, don’t complain.”

Although the movement was widespread and challenges remain, the lunch counter sit-ins played a significant role in the move toward greater equality in American society. The efforts in the North Carolina Piedmont spread quickly and widely.

“The sit-ins were just so important to the whole Civil Rights Movement,” said the historian Wolff. “And students were the perfect group to do this.” **NFJ**



A CONFESSION

Knowing when not to ‘tell it slant’

By Wyman Lewis
Richardson

“I, along with a number of my friends in this church, would like to know if you will commit to keeping this church white.”

That question was asked of me by a nicely-dressed, affluent, elderly man in a church my wife, daughter and I were visiting “in view of a call” more than 20 years ago.

This was a Saturday night meet-and-greet prior to the Sunday morning when I would be officially voted in as pastor. I had been introduced and answered a number of questions already, but this one was asked privately in a corner of the sanctuary.

That terrible question caught me off guard, but not debilitatingly so. Throughout the search process we had encountered a few racist comments, but our overall experience and conversations with the church had given us a peace that these were coming from a small minority of Deep South elderly people who reflected neither the mindset of the church nor even the elderly members of the church at large.

The question was also, if I am honest, a bit exhilarating in a prophetic sense. It

was the kind of outlandish, overtly-sinful, absurd statement that allows us, in response, to thunder from the righteous heights a well-placed, “Thus saith the Lord! Repent!”

Had I responded thus, it would have gone much better for me. Instead, I decided to “tell it slant.”

That phrase was made famous by Emily Dickinson when she wrote:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

It was made famous again for a number of Christian readers by Eugene Peterson in his 2012 book, *Tell It Slant*. It refers to “angling” the truth, we might say, so that recipients are not overwhelmed and overpowered by the blunt-force trauma of assertions flatly delivered for which they are not prepared.

Let me be clear: I had no lack of courage in my reply, at least as I saw it. I looked the questioner in the eye and did not flinch.

The question approached the plate like a poorly placed fastball tailor-made to be smashed out of the park. I felt the thrill of that moment when the words left his lips.

But I did not hit it out of the park.

Rather, I told it slant and, in the case of this brief and strange encounter, that would come back to haunt me.

“I, along with a number of my friends in this church, would like to know if you will commit to keeping this church white,” he said. “Will you make a commitment that you will not integrate this church?”

My response?

“Here is what I will commit to you: We as a church will wholeheartedly obey Jesus’ Great Commission and seek to win every man, woman, boy and girl to Jesus. Integration is a social program. We have something even more powerful than integration: the Great Commission.”

In my mind I had said something strong and plain. In my mind I was shifting the arena of conversation away from secular politics to Kingdom truth.

I am very much in favor of integration. It simply seemed to me that granting validity to his couching of the question in those terms by answering it in turn was missing the greater point that the church has an even higher calling, namely, to be a Kingdom outpost in a fallen world in which all people of all colors can find a family and a home that is Jesus-shaped.

What is more, unlike government-mandated integration, Kingdom acceptance of those of different races should arise naturally and joyfully from redeemed hearts. The church should never need police escorts or legislation for its members to attend — thus, my sidestepping of the “integration”

“In moments of prophetic encounter when the soul of the church and of the people of God is at stake, we cannot afford the luxury of telling it slant.”

comment in favor of “Great Commission” language.

I will never forget my first moment of shock a few years later when realizing that my “telling it slant” had failed that man and had created confusion in the church. I had no idea this had happened.

I had preached against racism from the pulpit. I had defended the right of some African-American children and adult visitors to be at and in the church. I had, in private conversations, pushed against racist attitudes.

My wife and I had even been disinvited from some social functions because of the stand we had taken on these issues. Then the phone call came.

“Why did you lie to Mr. _____?” asked one of his friends.

“What?” I replied.

“You told Mr. _____ that you would not integrate the church.”

“I most certainly did not lie. What I told Mr. _____ was that...”

But the damage was done. I saw it in that moment. I understood my great failure, and I hated myself for it.

When a similar call came from another person in his circle a few months later the full enormity of my stupid mistake became clear. Here is what I saw and understood in that moment:

In moments of prophetic encounter when the soul of the church and of the people of God is at stake, we cannot afford the luxury of telling it slant. A heart hardened by willful blindness sometimes needs the shocking application of the head-on “Thus saith the Lord!” without the risk of obfuscation that can come with telling it slant.

I had erred in trying to be too sophisticated, too cute with my answer. My mistake in that moment was telling it slant.

Could I go back in time, I would say: “Sir, let me be very clear: I will not rest until every African-American, Hispanic, Asian



and Caucasian man, woman, boy and girl has come to know Jesus Christ and is a welcomed and active member of this very church in which we stand. Be sure to tell your friends.”

To me, that was what I had said. But my belief that this was what he heard was founded on a number of assumptions about shared language and worldview that proved to be tragically faulty.

To be sure, there are times when the wisdom of Emily needs to be kept in mind: “The Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.”

But what if the person is already blind? Then perhaps we should turn from Emily Dickinson to Flannery O’Connor’s advice — which would have served me much better in that unfortunate situation:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock — to the hard of

hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.

To this I now say, “Amen!”

Not long before we moved from that community the church voted in the first African-American member since Reconstruction — as far as I could ascertain from the old minutes. She had told me she was going to join on a given Sunday, but then failed to walk the aisle at the end of that service to be presented for membership.

Following the service I sat beside her in the emptying sanctuary and asked, “Why didn’t you come to join?”

She told me she had had a nightmare the night before in which she joined the church, and I was fired because of it. I assured her I was not going to be fired but, even if so, I was OK with it anyway.

She joined the church the next Sunday. There were no votes against her. There were a few abstentions.

Even so, every vote that was voiced aloud that morning said, “Aye! Yes!” There were a lot of tears that morning. It was beautiful. It was the Kingdom come.

The church, in that moment, did what I had failed to do initially. They told it straight, not slant.

“Yes! You are welcome here! This is your home!”

The last I heard, she was still there and part of the family.

Speak the truth. Speak it plainly. A lot is riding on our doing so. **NFJ**

—Wyman Lewis Richardson is pastor of Central Baptist Church in North Little Rock, Ark. His writings and sermons may be found at walkingtogetherministries.com.

Diving deeper into the ‘Great Resignation’

By Matt Cook

A slew of articles has come out about the church’s experience with the Great Resignation. At the Center for Healthy Churches, we have experienced a significant increase in the number of congregations working with us through pastoral transitions.

Trendspotting in the American church can be over-hyped, but our experience is that the current outflow of ministers from congregational service is impacting thousands of congregations.

While the Great Resignation is a significant phenomenon for many congregations, it isn’t necessarily a uniform phenomenon. Here are some thoughts to help congregations respond to what’s happening.

Part of the Great Resignation is generational. The high-water mark for Baby Boomers reaching retirement age coincided almost exactly with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

While some Boomer ministers initially postponed their retirements to provide continuity to their congregations, a pent wave of retirements is now sweeping over congregational life in the U.S.

Should we call it the Great Frustration? According to the Gallup Organization, the Great Resignation is less a generalized trend toward unemployment in all organizations than a specific response to disengagement in the American workforce.

In other words, the Covid-19 pandemic was more an inflection point than a specific cause of resignations. The pandemic simply put in sharper relief the lack of engagement so many workers felt.

According to Gallup, the keys to engagement include clarity about one’s role, a sense of deep community with others, encouragement and praise, opportunities for growth, and a sense that one’s work is meaningful.

The upside for American congregations

is that many of the factors that lead to engagement in work are things the church is, in theory at least, equipped to offer. Studies indicate that meaningful work, personal growth, and a sense of community are among the predominant factors that lead people into vocational ministry.

On the downside, many ministers are commenting on the growing lack of clarity around what defines success in congregational ministry. Should numerical growth, spiritual growth, community engagement, just outcomes, etc., be the main focus of ministry?

Despite frustrations, ministerial resilience endures. The Hartford Institute asked ministers questions such as “Was the past year the hardest year you’ve personally experienced in ministry?” and “Have you personally considered resigning as a result of the difficulties you’re facing in ministry right now?”

Nearly two-thirds of congregational ministers indicated they’ve never considered another career than ministry, and more than three-quarters didn’t consider leaving their current congregation nor doubted their call to ministry.

This is not an indictment of those who did. Rather this is an indication that, for most ministers, a powerful sense of calling and a deep enough sense of engagement in their current context is overriding the pressures they face.

While such resilience is encouraging, it doesn’t mean we should simply sigh, grit our teeth, and move on. Discontent can be cumulative, and resilience can have its limits.

Here are three suggestions for leaning into this challenging moment:

Prepare to hire young, but do it smartly. We are saying goodbye to a huge generation of older ministers who have given decades of meaningful service to the church. Given the much smaller size of Generation X, there are

far fewer mid-life ministers to fill those roles, which often means hiring young or not at all.

Younger ministers bring energy and creativity. They are often more open to adaptation without a deep investment in old methodologies. Data indicate, however, that simply plugging younger ministers into vacated roles is not enough.

Congregations need systems in place to provide clarity, opportunities for growth, and ongoing encouragement for younger ministers still developing their gifts and expertise. Consider offering a coach or mentor for younger ministers, or both.

Work toward clarity. In the 20th century, the enduring consensus about what constitutes success for American congregations was fairly straightforward: numerical growth.

Our organization believes each congregation has its own unique identity and vision, and staff and lay leadership need to embody that identity and to embrace and carry out the congregation’s unique vision.

One big challenge and opportunity for congregations is to revisit the question of exactly who they are and exactly what God is calling them to do to contribute to God’s kingdom.

Gaining consensus about that has the added benefit of being a powerful draw for gifted ministers when there are staff openings.

Acknowledge the challenges and encourage your minister(s). The root word of encouragement is courage. To encourage someone is literally the act of putting courage into them.

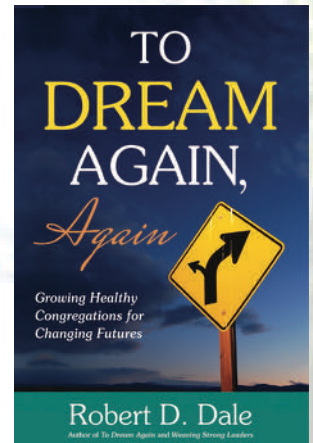
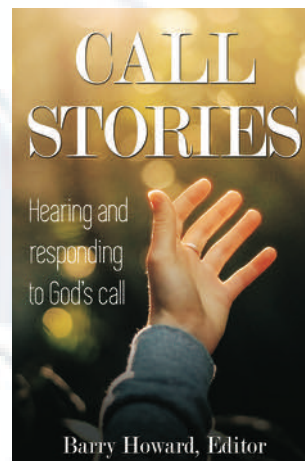
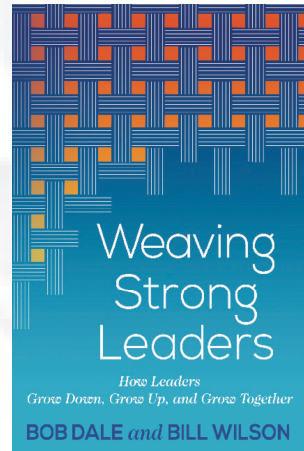
Most of us find time occasionally to say an encouraging word to each other, but I’m suggesting something more substantial and intentional. Minister appreciation days and anniversaries are a good place to start but a terrible place to stop. *NFJ*

—*Matt Cook is assistant director of the Center for Healthy Churches.*



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Being Baptist in Mayberry

By Larry Hovis

What kind of Baptist are you? That's a question many Baptists have been asked more times than they can count.



In many places, the dominant form of Baptist faith is narrow-minded, judgmental, exclusive and non-cooperative. The name is tarnished in many circles.

Recently, however, I witnessed a different kind of Baptist faith. And it was on display in Mayberry!

Actually, it took place in Mount Airy, N.C., the home of Andy Griffith. Some believe he modeled Mayberry on his hometown.

Certainly, the town has taken advantage of that association. Mount Airy is home to the Andy Griffith Museum. Numerous businesses on Main Street take their name from the show. The town even hosts an annual "Mayberry Days" festival.

The occasion for this display of a different kind of Baptist faith was the funeral service for Larry Keesler. Larry had served for many years as minister of music at First Baptist Church of Mount Airy.

In retirement, he became organist for Trinity Episcopal Church. During his time there he learned to love the Episcopal liturgy and expressed his desire that his funeral be held at Trinity, using the full Episcopal burial rite.

Larry's wife, Becky, grew up Methodist. When she married Larry, she became the consummate Baptist. An elementary school teacher by vocation, she held just about every lay leadership position at First Baptist.

In retirement, she served as the *de facto* (unpaid) minister of education, even after Larry moved to Trinity. Becky also

served as moderator of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina, the highest elected volunteer leadership position. Becky gives Baptists a good name.

When Larry died, Becky faced a dilemma. Trinity's sanctuary is small. She was concerned it would not accommodate all who wished to attend the service, especially with Covid restrictions. So, she asked her pastor, Jay Meadows, if the Episcopal Church could come to First Baptist — with Rector Sarah Morris leading the service.

Jay readily agreed. The service took place on a Sunday afternoon at First Baptist, preceded by visitation. It was a thoroughly Episcopal service with processional, vestments for the rector and her assistants, lots of readings from the Book of Common Prayer, and Communion with real wine.

Jay offered the welcome and a homily. We sang all the verses of three hymns. Sarah led every other part of the service except for three Scripture readings.

She read the gospel lesson and also delivered a homily. The two clergy — Baptist and Episcopal — complemented each other, but it was obvious that the guest minister had the major role.

As we drove home, I shared several takeaways with my wife. First, the service was very worshipful. The prayers and readings

were beautiful and theologically sound.

Second, there was lots of Bible. Ironically, the Episcopal service contained more Bible than most Baptist services ... so much for calling ourselves "people of the Book."

Third, this was probably the only Baptist church in the region that would have opened its doors to a church of a different denomination with a woman pastor.

What happened in Mount Airy that day provided a vivid illustration of a different kind of Baptist faith: one that is open-hearted, generous, hospitable, humble and cooperative.

Sometimes when I'm asked the question, "What kind of Baptist are you?" I will reply, "We are the kind of Baptists who play well with others."

That posture was on full display at Mount Airy's First Baptist Church. It bore witness to the God who is above all of our human divisions and factions.

It provided, at least for an afternoon, a foretaste of the beloved community that we will experience when God ushers in "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:21).

It was, for a brief moment, an answer to Jesus' prayer "that they all may be one" (John 17:21).

It was a perfect example of that greatest of all Christian virtues that "does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor. 13:4)

I couldn't be prouder to be associated with this expression of a different kind of Baptist faith. And I wasn't surprised it happened in Mayberry. **NFJ**

-Larry Hovis is executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina

CBFNC

YOUTH BEACH RETREAT

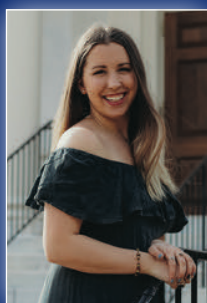


LET'S GET BACK TOGETHER THIS FALL!



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Cooperative Baptist Fellowship North Carolina

Not all sacred spaces have steeples

By Mitch Randall

Chi'chil Bildagoteel — otherwise known as “Oak Flat” — is located 40 miles east of Phoenix, Ariz., in the Tonto National Forest.

Nestled within Picket Post Mountain and Apache Leap, the land contains barren rock spikes, deep canyon walls and greenery sprouts near decreasing wetlands. Animals scurry about the dry lands, looking for water near slow-running creeks.

This small swath of land, just 6.7 square miles, may seem desolate. But there is also something that feels very magical about it.

For the San Carlos Apache Tribe, Oak Flat is a sacred place.

The “sunrise ceremony” is performed at Oak Flat — a coming-of-age recognition for teenage girls. They go through a series of rituals signifying their transition into womanhood.

The teens collect plants from the area that cannot be found elsewhere — believed to possess the “spirit of *Chi'chil Bildagoteel*.” During the ceremony, the girls ask the spirit to provide acorns, yucca, cedar and saguaro cactus that are essential to their culture.

Therefore, maintaining the sacredness of Oak Flat is of paramount importance to the San Carlos Apache people.

Wendsler Nosie is the former chairman of the San Carlos Apache Tribe. He is leading the fight to save Oak Flat.

“[Oak Flat] is the beginning of our being, our identity,” he told *The Washington Post*. “Oak Flat is where the Creator made us



and gave us this land. This is the centerpiece that makes up everything that we are.”

Unfortunately, Oak Flat is being threatened by foreign copper mining operations under the protection of the federal government.

According to numerous reports, in 1950 President Dwight D. Eisenhower reserved the area of “public purpose.” In addition, he placed it on the National Register of Historic Places. Those protections remained in place until 2014.

At that time, *The Washington Post* reported, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), attached a rider to the National Defense Authorization Act that authorized the federal government to transfer approximately 2,400 acres of Oak Flat to Resolution Copper in exchange for about 5,300 acres scattered across the state.

Resolution Copper, LLC, is an Australian

company with a less-than-stellar record on environmental protection. As reported by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC), the company is 30 percent owned by a Chinese business and much of the mined copper would find its way to China.

That’s right, the religious liberty advocacy group — comprising representatives from several Baptist denominational groups — is advocating for the religious freedom of these indigenous people with the same vigor they do for other Americans. Not all sacred spaces have steeples, they insist.

The BJC — with a long and influential presence on Capitol Hill — asked me to moderate a discussion addressing indigenous voices on matters of faith and freedom. This occurred during a luncheon program held in Dallas, Texas, in conjunction with the annual general assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

A part of that conversation focused on saving religiously significant Oak Flat. Apache leaders are not going it alone.

The BJC is part of a coalition of more than 100 religious and religious liberty organizations advocating for the religious freedom of the San Carlos Apache and their sacred land.

Now at risk, the coalition states, are religious liberty, tribal sovereignty and environmental protection of land. They are seeking protection from mining by a foreign company that would destroy recreational lands for all U.S. citizens, as well as an important piece of America’s history.

“Only Congress can permanently save Oak Flat, and BJC supports the bipartisan Save Oak Flat Act (H.R. 1884/S. 915) to protect this sacred land,” BJC leaders posted on the organization’s website,

With so much damning evidence of the irreversible damage mining would bring to this land of religious significance, coalition leaders are asking concerned citizens to contact their members of Congress to encourage support for the Save Oak Flat Act.

More information and additional resources may be found at bjconline.org. [NFIJ](#)

“*Chi'chil Bildagoteel*, which we translate as ‘Oak Flat’ in English, is a sacred site for the Apache, Yavapai, Hopi, Zuni and many other tribes in the Southwest... Protecting the sacred lands of those who first inhabited the Americas is tantamount to protecting the rights of all religious groups and the nonreligious under the U.S. Constitution. We are proud to have rallied religious and religious liberty organizations to this cause.”

—Amanda Tyler, Executive Director
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

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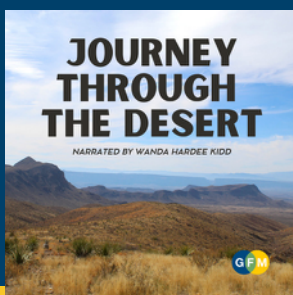


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NOW AVAILABLE: *JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT*

Wanda Hardee Kidd is a retired campus minister from North Carolina. In early 2020, burdened by grief, she left home – alone. A road trip. Just Wanda, her truck camper, and a broken spirit. She found healing in her desert wandering.



God Speaks

By John R. Franke

In my last column, I introduced the idea that the word of God has three forms.

These include the act of revelation itself, the Spirit-inspired witness to revelation in scripture, and the Spirit-guided proclamation of that witness in the life of the Christian community.

I noted it is important to remember that in this understanding we are speaking of three different forms of the one word of God, and not three different words of God. Here I will consider the first of these forms.

The Christian notion of revelation is rooted in the conviction that God speaks. The God of love, our creator and sustainer, speaks in order to establish a connection with us and provide guidance and direction concerning the conduct of our lives.

The purpose of this divine speech is to draw creatures into relationship with their creator and to invite them to share in the love and fellowship of God and to participate in God's life and purposes.

In thinking about the idea of revelation, we need to remember one of the central ideas of the Christian tradition: God is God, and we are not.

One of the most basic assertions of the Bible is the creator-creature distinction. For example, we read in Isa. 55:8 that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and that our ways are not God's.

The Christian tradition has concluded by texts such as this one and others that the infinite God is radically different from finite creatures. This is known as the infinite qualitative distinction between God and human beings.

This difference means that even revelation is not able to provide humans with knowledge that exactly corresponds to that of God. It is vitally important to keep this at the forefront of our minds in



our understanding of revelation, lest we fall into the idolatry of imagining that our thoughts and conceptions of God actually correspond to those of God.

As finite creatures, we are not able to grasp ultimate reality as God knows it to be.

John Calvin, one of the most influential theologians in Christian history, addressed this situation through the idea of divine accommodation. Because God desires to establish a relationship with us, God "adjusts" and "descends" to the limited capacities of humans and "lips" to us as adults do to infants in order to be known.

Apart from such accommodating action, the knowledge of God would, by its very nature, be beyond the capabilities of human creatures to grasp due to the limitations that arise from our finite character.

The accommodated character of revelation points to a human dimension. While this revelatory speech from God is independent of human action, there is, nevertheless, a necessary human dimension that is deeply connected to the idea of revelation.

Because the intention of revelation is to make God known, the process is only completed with the reception of God's revelation by those to whom it is directed.

While it is important to remember that this human dimension is not something contributed independently to the divine act of revelation, it is also the case that revelation cannot be considered in abstraction from the communal and

cultural situatedness that characterizes its reception by humans in particular social, cultural and linguistic settings.

In other words, in the act of revelation God does not break through the situatedness that is part of the human condition. Instead, God has chosen to enter into and participate in the limitations of that condition in the act of revelation as a means of accommodation to the finite nature of human creatures.

In keeping with the conviction that God speaks, we are able to affirm that we actually know something about divine reality even if we cannot know it exhaustively or perfectly.

This means that while God's self-revelation allows us to speak in authentically informative ways about God, we must still acknowledge the inherent mystery and otherness of God even in the act of bearing witness to God through our words.

The early church theologian Irenaeus captured this idea by asserting that while it is true and faithful to say that God is light, it is also true that God is unlike any light that we know.

Our knowledge of God, based on divine revelation, enables us to make descriptions of God that are as truthful as we can make them. However, the infinite qualitative difference between God and us makes our best and most faithful affirmations inadequate when compared to the reality of the divine.

The self-revelation of God is received among diverse communities over long periods of time in a variety of historical and social settings. In my next column, I will consider the implications of this view of revelation for scripture. *NFJ*

—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, and general coordinator for the Gospel and Our Culture Network.

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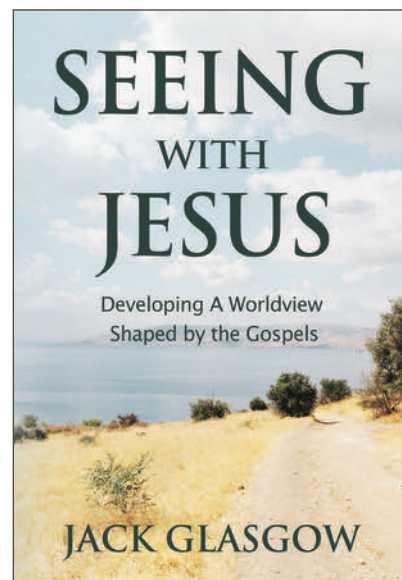
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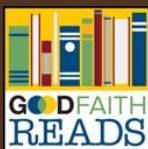


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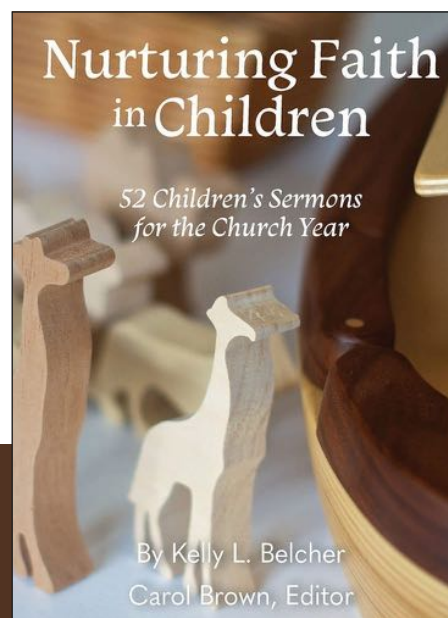
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My Imaginary Interview with Mississippi Public Radio

By Brett Younger

A dear friend recommended me to be a guest on a Mississippi Public Radio show. The host interviews “interesting folks with Mississippi connections.”

My friend thought it would be interesting, because I grew up a conservative Southern Baptist in Mississippi and am now a liberal Congregationalist in New York. I have been waiting patiently to hear from Mississippi Public Radio, but I am beginning to think they have concluded that the good people of Mississippi are not interested in what I have to say.

This has not kept me from imagining how the interview would have gone.

Host: Welcome to our show. Our guest is Brett Younger, who grew up in Benton, Ridgeland, West Point, and Saltillo, Mississippi. His father was the pastor of Southern Baptist churches in each of those cities.

Somehow, after that enviable upbringing, Brett lost his way. He is now the senior minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. During our show today, we will try to understand how something this regrettable happens.

Let me start by saying how sorry I am that you were not able to stay in Mississippi. What do you miss about the Magnolia State?

Brett: College football, high school football, sweet tea, fried okra, Waffle House, Piggly Wiggly, pine trees, people who speak at a normal rate of speed, and driving. Like most New Yorkers, I don't have a car.

Host: That doesn't make sense. How do Knickerbockers get to church, the grocery store and the bait shop?

Brett: We walk and ride the subway.

Host: How did Mississippi prepare you to be a minister in such a foreign setting?

Brett: The churches in Mississippi taught me to love the Bible — which was written in a foreign setting; God — who crosses state lines; and neighbors — including the ones with accents.

I don't want to brag, and we don't need to make a big deal out of this, but your listeners will be excited to learn that I was a Mississippi state Bible drill champion in 1971.

Host: That is a big deal about which we could have a more interesting conversation than this one, but we'll stick to the subject. What are the differences between your churches in Mississippi and what passes for a church in New York?

Brett: Good churches deal with two important questions, “Where are we going?” and “Who is going with us?”

My churches in Mississippi focused on going together. We were all about being loyal to the team.

Our church in Brooklyn is more concerned with moving in the right direction. “What do we agree on?” is a helpful question, but churches also need to ask, “What are we going to do about it?”

Host: Discerning listeners may think you just suggested that your church in trash-in-the-streets, what-is-that-smell, \$5-for-a-Coke Gotham City is better than the Bible-believing churches in which you grew up. Did you mean to say that?

Brett: Church is a big deal for a higher percentage of people in Mississippi, and that's great. A smaller percentage in New York go to church, but New Yorkers who go to church are serious about it.

There is a lot to love about my churches in Mississippi, but churches in New York are often better at fighting racism, recognizing the gifts of women, and including gay Christians in leadership.

Host: Some of our listeners will think you just dragged politics into what could have been an enjoyable conversation. Before the show, when you were talking to me unnecessarily, you mentioned that in the last election 90 percent of your neighborhood in Brooklyn voted for Biden while your parents' hometown, Mantachie, Miss., went 90 percent for Trump. Why do you think the politics are so different?

Brett: Thirty-eight percent of New Yorkers were born in another country. More than a third of my hometown moved to New York because they wanted a new start and knew they would be given a chance. The same percentage (38) of Mississippians are African Americans.

More than a third of my old home state are the descendants of those who were brought to this country against their will and were not given a chance. New York has its own problems, but we are learning to welcome diversity. Mississippi has amazing gifts, but has often been afraid of diversity.

Host: When people ask where you're from, do you still enjoy bragging that you're from Mississippi?

Brett: Mississippians who moved away know that some of the best parts of who we are are the result of growing up in Mississippi. **NFJ**

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York.



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Youth teaching plans by **Bobby Tackett-Evans**, a veteran youth minister now serving as pastor of three United Methodist congregations in Liberty, Ky.

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 4, 2022

Luke 14:25-35

Counting the Cost

Have you ever tried to accomplish something big, but gave up because it was too difficult? Running a marathon, for example: How close would you get? Or climbing Mount Everest: Is that on your bucket list?

What about being Jesus' disciple? Would you give that a try? After reading today's text, you might change your mind. 🇺🇸

Radical Demands (vv. 25-27)

There's no getting around the difficulty of this text, which contains some of Jesus' hardest teachings and portrays discipleship as something so radical that very few people would even aspire to it, much less attain it.

Our challenge is to dig into the passage without either watering it down or writing it off as unattainable and thus beyond serious contemplation.

Luke observes that "large crowds" were traveling with Jesus (v. 25). His teachings, then, targeted the conglomeration of the committed and the curious, the groupies and hangers-on who had coalesced around Jesus and followed him about. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

Jesus began his teaching in this text by demanding that those who would be his disciples must hate their

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:27)

families – parents, spouse, children, and siblings (v. 26).

What?

How do we deal with such an outrageous statement? Are there any interpretive gymnastics that can save us from believing that Jesus really meant what he said?

A common approach is to suggest that Jesus was using a Semitic hyperbole – exaggerating for effect. Just as we would say "If I've told you once, I've told you a million times" – knowing full well that we haven't come close to a million – Jesus could say "hate" when he really means "love less." 🇺🇸

That, in fact, is the way Matthew puts it in his version of the same story: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me ..." (Matt. 10:37).

So, we are not off base in suggesting that Jesus used the word "hate" in a figurative rather than a literal sense. Jesus consistently taught an ethic of love, calling for his disciples to love one another (John 13:34-35), to love their neighbors (Mark 12:31), even to love their enemies (Matt. 5:43-44).

It's inconceivable, then, that Jesus would want his followers to truly hate their families, though he does relegate them to second priority.

Even understood figuratively, the word "hate" is jarring. It demands love and commitment to Jesus at such a high level that love for family could seem like hate by comparison.

The bottom line, the unavoidable requirement, is that to qualify as Jesus' disciple, one's first commitment must be to Jesus, even if it means leaving family behind.

The second requirement could be even tougher: Luke reports Jesus as saying "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (v. 27, cp. 9:23).

Here we must again avoid the tendency to dilute this demand by thinking of day-to-day burdens as cross bearing. It's common in our language to describe a physical ailment or a live-in relative as "my cross to bear," but Jesus was not talking about being burdened.

He was talking about dying.

Crucifixion was the Romans' favorite means of execution, especially for slaves. To make public examples of those perceived as wrongdoers, the Roman authorities would often force the condemned to carry their own cross, or at least the horizontal piece, to the place of execution.

Jesus wanted disciples who were willing to follow him all the way, even to death. This demand packs little punch for modern readers in countries where Christianity is the dominant religion: we have no sense of what it would be like to face death for the "crime" of following Jesus and refusing to acknowledge the emperor as a god. 🇺🇸

Luke's readers would have known this, however. Some of them lived in places or during sporadic times of persecution when Christians could be hung on a cross or used as lion bait in the arena for refusing to worship the emperor.

The demands of discipleship are hard. Are any of us truly willing to meet them?

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Pointed parables (vv. 28-33)

Luke's account includes two brief parables that are not found in the other gospels. The parables, both in the form of questions, describe quite different dilemmas, both related to the theme of counting the cost. Take note that one or more negating terms appear in each verse from vv. 27-33, emphasizing the difficulty of the task 📌

The first parable asks whether anyone would set out to build a tower – probably a farmer's watchtower from which one could guard crops from predation by either humans or animals – without running the numbers to see if he could afford it. A half-finished tower could be a waste of resources and a source of ridicule by the community (vv. 28-30).

The message is that would-be followers should count the cost and not start what they can't finish.

The second parable is more difficult, because the king in question is already in a tight spot: an enemy is apparently approaching, though still far away, and he must decide whether to march into battle and fight against forces that outnumber him two-to-one, or whether to send an envoy to negotiate terms of peace (vv. 31-32).

The problem here is that the price of peace would almost certainly cost him and his country something: they would have to pay tribute and probably agree to some sort of subordinate status to keep the enemy from invading.

As unappealing as that thought might be, it would be a better outcome than sacrificing many lives in a battle one was destined to lose, and having the enemy invade the country, raping and pillaging as they go.

It's also possible that a king might determine that his soldiers, though outnumbered, were better trained, more

committed, and thus capable of defeating the enemy – but only if the king risked everything by sending them into battle, knowing that victory would come at the high cost of many lives.

Jesus knew that his followers would be outnumbered, and many would die, but still called for a total commitment that risked everything.

The conclusion, in v. 33, is that real disciples must be willing to hazard it all, specifically in terms of renouncing their dependence on worldly wealth.

How much risk is there in our faith?

Words of warning (vv. 34-35)

The lectionary text stops at v. 33, but the literary unit is clearly designed to include Jesus' stern warning of vv. 34-35, where Jesus speaks of salt that has lost its saltiness and has become worthless.

Unappetizing food can always be seasoned with salt, but there is no help for salt that has lost its saltiness – or for disciples who don't live up to or maintain their commitment. Such salt, Jesus said, was good for nothing – not even for killing weeds in the soil or for kick-starting decomposition in a manure pile – and is subsequently thrown away. (For more on salt, see "The Hardest Question" online).

The message is that insipid disciples are likewise good for nothing. Jesus' concluding statement that anyone with ears to hear had better listen was a clear warning against half-hearted discipleship.

What can modern readers do with a text like this? Do we know *anyone* who meets these requirements for discipleship? Anyone who has shown a willingness to forsake their families, forgo all possessions, and carry the cross of risking their lives for the sake of the gospel?

And if we're not in that category, does it mean there is no hope for us?

Perhaps we should acknowledge, as Richard B. Vinson suggests, that it's just too hard for most of us and that we don't qualify as full disciples as Jesus called his first followers to be, but we can still take intermediate steps toward deeper discipleship (*Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Smyth & Helwys, 2008], 497-98).

Discipleship, not unlike becoming more physically fit, is a process, not something we can accomplish all in one go. It's something we grow into. Instead of giving up, if we're already contributing financially to support church and charitable efforts, we could set a goal of increasing our level of commitment, living on less so more ministry could be done.

If we are already giving some of our time to Christian-inspired social ministries that help the poor or homeless, perhaps we could give more – even if it takes us away from our families.

Our admitted failure at becoming the sold-out disciples that Jesus called for – and who were particularly needed in the early years of the Christian movement – does not mean that Christ's grace does not extend to us as we strive to become better disciples and to be, if not yet pure salt, at least good for something.

The danger is to write off these hard words as not really applying to us at all. Too many evangelists and pastors have portrayed discipleship as something that is easy, imploring sinners to walk the aisle, "give their hearts to Jesus," and be assured of eternal salvation – with no mention of the cost of real discipleship.

Jesus sets before us a real challenge, demands so hard that they seem impossible. 📌

How will we respond? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 11, 2022

Luke 15: 1-10

Counting Sheep

Years ago, I read about a woman named Mandy who had lost a chocolate Labrador retriever named Wheeler. She'd had the dog for three years before it wandered away from home when the dog sitter let him out to run while Mandy was out of town. Mandy was convinced the dog had set out to look for her.

Over the next weeks, Mandy placed dozens of hand-lettered cardboard signs along area roadsides. She taped up hundreds of color posters in convenience stores. She mailed scores of letters to area veterinarians. She put ads in several local newspapers, and created enough attention to rate a feature article in the local newspaper.

By that point she had spent more than \$1,000 on the search, and she offered a \$1,000 reward to anyone who found Wheeler (from the *Raleigh News and Observer*, Sept. 11, 1995).

I remember being amazed that anyone could care that much about a dog, especially since she also had three cats and two other dogs, but Mandy searched for Wheeler as if her life – or Wheeler's – depended on it.

Years later, I walked into a local attorney's office on some unrelated business and discovered that the paralegal occupying the outer office was a

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:10)

woman named Mandy – and lying on the floor beside her was a chocolate lab: Wheeler had been found, and the story she told involved some serious celebrating.

Carping critics (vv. 1-2)

Perhaps Mandy would understand our text for today much better than many of us. Luke 15:1-10 consists of an introduction (vv. 1-2), followed by two parables that make the same point but from slightly different angles.

We know that there are actually *three* parables in Luke 15 that make the same basic point, for the story commonly known as “the prodigal son” completes the chapter: Luke has brought together the parable of the *lost sheep*, the parable of the *lost coin*, and the parable of the *lost son*.

Why the apparent overkill? We don't know Jesus' original intent, but Luke organized the parables to suggest that Jesus was deflecting criticism from religious leaders who couldn't understand why he insisted on hanging out with unsavory people as if they were also welcome in God's family.

Some pious critics thought Jesus should relate only to the righteous rather than associating with common sinners. So it is that Luke uses vv. 1-2 to set up the three parables that follow: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

A lost sheep (vv. 3-7)

Jesus first told his audience to imagine that each of them owned a hundred sheep. The Pharisees and scribes might have considered keeping sheep to be a step below their station in life, but they weren't as dismissive of the occupation as some commentators would lead us to believe. Owning a hundred sheep was nothing to sneeze at. 🐑

Somehow the man who owned the sheep managed to lose one of them. Surprisingly, despite the size of the flock, he noticed one missing. Jesus asked, in so many words, “If you were in his sandals, wouldn't you leave the other ninety-nine in the wilderness and go in search of the lost sheep until you found it? And when you had it safe in hand, wouldn't you call in all the neighbors and throw a big party to celebrate?”

We might expect the answer to be “Of course!” But the real answer is that probably no one listening to Jesus would have done that – and few of us would, either.

We'd consider it irresponsible to leave the other sheep unattended, where they could be stolen or attacked by predators or wander away. A smart shepherd would put them in a pen or have someone watch them while he or she went searching for the lost one – or he might end up with only one.

If we found the rambling troublemaker, we'd probably be too angry to throw a party for it. And, if we did host the kind of banquet Jesus described, we'd probably have to kill another animal to provide the food. None of that makes economic sense – and that's the point.

The gospel has a reckless quality

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about it that might seem like foolishness to our ordinary ways of thinking. Prudence would have us prioritize keeping the ninety-nine safe, but Jesus focused on seeking the lost.

God is not like us, and that's good news, because we've all been lost. 📌

Luke turns the parable into an allegory by comparing the shepherd to God: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (v. 7).

The sheep shows no sign of repentance, nor does the coin in the next parable, but that's not the point. The story is not primarily a call for hearers to repent, or even for believers to go out and seek the lost, but an invitation to celebrate with others who repent and are brought into the kingdom. 📌

In Jesus' economy, and that of the kingdom, there is always special concern for the people on the margins and even beyond the margins. Whether the lost are found on the fringes or in the heart of society, all heaven rejoices, and we should, too.

The Parable of the Lost Coin (v. 8-10)

Luke's account adds another parable to illustrate a similar truth. Jesus asked those listening to imagine that they were housewives. Some may have been offended by the thought, but that was not the intent. 📌

The woman Jesus described was not necessarily poor, as often portrayed. She was neither destitute nor overly dependent on a husband. She lived in an ordinary house that probably had a packed earth floor and simple furnishings, which is how most people lived. And, she had 10 silver coins. The word used is "drachmas," each one equivalent to the standard daily pay for an ordinary laborer. Whether it was

left from her dowry or hard-earned by her own labor, two weeks' income was (and is) no small change. 📌

Somehow, the woman lost one of the valuable coins. When she noticed it was missing, she lit a lamp, started searching, and didn't quit until she found it. "Wouldn't you do that?" Jesus asked. "Wouldn't you forget everything else and burn the midnight oil and turn the house upside down until you found the coin?" Maybe they would – depending on how important a drachma was to them.

But then things go strange again. Jesus pictured the woman, having found the coin, as inviting all her women friends over to celebrate. Throwing a party would have required her to prepare food and drink for all the guests, a celebration that could have cost more than the lost-and-found coin was worth.

Again, Jesus asked the question as if the normative answer would be "Sure! That's exactly what we would do!" But it's unlikely that we would. Even if one of us managed to retrieve a lost diamond ring from the sink drain, it's unlikely that we would call our friends to come and celebrate. We might be embarrassed over having lost it to begin with. One lost coin wouldn't be that important to us, but every lost person is important to Jesus.

It's baffling to imagine a woman who would host such a celebration over finding one coin, and there is something that seems equally crazy about Jesus being so joyful when sinners like us turn our hearts to God.

We don't get that excited, but Jesus said the angels in heaven do: "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v. 10). 📌 Again, the main point of the story is not a call to evangelism or a critique of the Pharisees, but

an invitation to join God in celebrating when the lost are found.

What is more, we should not fail to notice that Luke's telling of the parable compares the diligent woman to God. No less than the shepherd of the first parable or the father of the second, the woman in the middle parable speaks of divine love in action.

The kingdom of God is like a party, which Jesus once compared to a wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-2). It's a party to which everyone is invited, where there is no division between the pious and the prurient because we know that we're all sinners and none of us deserve to be there, but that's the way God wanted it.

God isn't like us, but we are challenged to be more like God.

These short but remarkable parables suggest that the joy that comes with our own sense of being found should impel us to seek others who are lost.

We can be stiff and self-righteous if we want to. We can sit on the sidelines like the angry elder brother who got mad when his father had a barbecue to celebrate the prodigal's return, but if we do, we'll miss the party that God has prepared for us. There's little doubt that the people who will enjoy the party most are the ones who brought the most people with them.

Jesus welcomes everyone to his table: men and women and children, saints and sinners and in-betweens. And, as we celebrate the love of a God who cared enough to search us out, we're challenged to join God in searching for others. Ultimately, then, we can also join in the dance of the angels, for with every person who accepts the invitation, heaven goes wild. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 18, 2022

Luke 16:1-13

Counting Coins

Most of us would agree that Jesus was an innovative and effective teacher. He knew that people liked stories and would listen to them, so he did much of his teaching in stories. Today we call them parables. Jesus also knew that people would remember a story better and think about it more if it had a surprise ending, so many of his parables conclude with an unexpected twist. ⤴

A Surprising Parable

Surprises can be fun, but they can also make us uncomfortable. Who wants to read a book where the bad guys win? Or who wants to hear a biblical parable where a crook is congratulated? It just doesn't seem right.

But here it is. We cannot avoid it. Here is a parable Jesus told about a low-down, double-dealing, two-timing scoundrel – yet Jesus held him up before his flabbergasted audience as an example for emulation.

What? How?

We begin by taking a look at the literary setting. Luke is the only gospel to record this parable, and we can understand why. But look at where Luke puts it: Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, knowing that a cross was at the end of the road. His mind was

No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Luke 16:13)

on eternity. He wanted his followers to think in that direction, too.

A group of Pharisees had confronted Jesus about his tendency to hang around with sinners and others less pious than they. In response, Jesus told them a series of parables about being part of the kingdom of God.

He told the story of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son who wasn't punished for his wastrel ways, but was welcomed home with a party.

A troublesome story (vv. 1-8)

From there we come to this troublesome story about a rich man and his crooked business manager. ⤴ Occasionally we hear about a rich actor or athlete who hires a business manager to look after all that wealth, and the manager steals him or her blind. That's nothing new.

The rich man had entrusted the business dealings of his estate to a manager who turned out to be a crook, a man who squandered a great deal of his boss' property (v. 1). ⤴ It's not a coincidence that the word for "squander" is the same Greek word used to describe how the prodigal son wasted his inheritance. Luke wants us to see the connections.

The wealthy man was far too trusting. He failed to check up on his business manager, so he didn't know he was being robbed until someone

blew the whistle – perhaps another employee who hoped for a reward, or a client who was also being fleeced. Convinced of the manager's guilt, he summoned the shyster and told him to put the books in order, turn them in, and clean out his office (v. 2).

As the manager went about updating the accounts, he did some fast thinking. "Yikes! What can I do now? I'm too weak for construction work and too proud to beg. How will I eat when he kicks me out?" (v. 3, my paraphrases). An ancient cartoonist could have put a little oil lamp in a balloon over his head as the manager got an idea: he would offer his boss' creditors such a deal that they'd be indebted to him, and he could go to them for assistance later (v. 4). ⤴

Plan in hand, the tricky thief made the rounds of everyone who owed money to his employer. To the first man, he said "How much do you owe?" He should have known that, of course, but Jesus has him ask the question anyway.

The answer was 100 jugs of olive oil, each containing eight or nine gallons – the annual production of a very large olive grove, painstakingly crushed and then squeezed in stone-weighted olive presses, worth many thousands of dollars in today's currency. ⤴ "Okay," said the sneaky steward, with a big wink, "here's what we'll do. Take your bill, cross out the "100," and make it "50." Don't ask any questions – just don't forget who cut you so much slack" (vv. 5-6).

He asked the next creditor the same question, and the answer was "100 kors of wheat." That's probably about 1,000 bushels, all the wheat

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produced by more than 100 acres, painfully harvested and threshed. “Okay,” said the charlatan. “Here’s your bill. Mark that down from 100 to 80 kors. Don’t ask any questions – just don’t forget” (v. 7).

And so the manager did with all his employer’s clients, Jesus said, and he did it so boldly that the boss knew about it. You would expect him to be furious, to blister the manager’s ears, to try and have the rogue thrown in jail.

Instead, the rich man just laughed. His books may have been doused with red ink, but he knew that his own reputation had risen among his clients. All who owed him money were feeling better about their debts, so he could count on their future business. And, he was impressed at the crooked but clever steward’s resourcefulness. “You’re a genius!” he might have said, “... an evil genius, but a genius nonetheless!” (v. 8a).

A Confusing Commentary (vv. 9-13)

That’s where the story ends, with Jesus commenting that his hearers could learn a lesson from the scalawag. On another occasion, Jesus had encouraged his disciples to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16). The man in this story could teach them something about the “wise as serpents” part. He was wily, and when he saw a crisis coming, he acted decisively to ensure his future well-being. The fact that he did this by dodgy means is apparently beside the point. He used his head, he used the money under his care, and he made enough friends to be sure he’d always have a place to stay.

So, Jesus says, all of us should learn to make wise decisions about our future, and use what has been entrusted to us to lay up treasure in heaven, rather than on earth (Matt. 19:21). This is a difficult verse to understand and there’s no way

around it. Luke has Jesus say, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes” (v. 9).

The reference to being welcome in the eternal homes (literally “tents” as dwelling places) calls to mind the steward’s plan to cultivate friends who would “welcome me into their homes” (v. 4).

But can this be right? Is Jesus suggesting that we use dishonest gain to buy a ticket to heaven, the only eternal home? In the first place, we must understand that Jesus was probably using “dishonest wealth” (or “unrighteous mammon,” KJV) as a euphemism for money of any sort – for treasures on earth. What we own is really “on loan,” as it were, from God. So, there is a sense in which the wealth we have is no more ours than the money used by the dishonest steward belonged to him – and we often use it in inappropriate ways.

If we grant that “dishonest wealth” is a reference to money or material possessions in general, how do we use it to make friends for ourselves so that, when worldly wealth is gone, we’ll have an eternal home?

Let’s think about that. Who lives in God’s eternal home that we could cultivate friendships with? We could name God, angels, the saints who have gone before us. What is one way we can make them happy and gain their appreciation? We can do that by using our money wisely and responsibly, by being generous, by supporting God’s work in all its forms. That does not mean that we buy our way into heaven – it’s just what true believers do. It’s another way of saying we should lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth.

Luke has collected several proverbs on the proper use of wealth and attached them to this verse. Ultimately, they all make the same point. Our earthly

decisions have eternal consequences. At some point in life, we must decide whether eternity is important to us, and to determine what our priorities are.

Jesus wanted us to understand that we cannot serve two masters (vv. 10-13). We cannot be devoted to material gain and serving God at the same time. Those who are wise will recognize that our very life is an extended moment in crisis, for we never know when the jig will be up, when the bills will come due, when our life will be over. How we handle our wealth in the present – whether faithful in much or little – is an outward sign of our inner decision regarding Christ and the future.

Those of us who have had loved ones unexpectedly die – or who have come near to death ourselves – have learned how close our transition to eternity can be. Such an understanding makes a marked difference in the way we look at life, at the future, and at worldly wealth.

Money is always to be used, not loved; and people are to be loved, not used. Being at home in the kingdom is so much more important than accumulating wealth on earth. If we believe that, we can’t keep living like the rest of the world.

Jesus wants us to know that we can learn, even from a crooked, low-down scoundrel – but a smart one – that when we recognize the moment of crisis, it is crucial to act decisively and wisely.

The good news of the gospel declares that the smartest decision we can make is to acknowledge Christ as Lord, to repent of our sins, and to devote our lives to following him. That’s living wisely in the present with an eye to the future. We never know when we’ll be surprised. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 25, 2022

Luke 16:19-31

Counting Options

How do you think it would feel to belong to the idle rich – to lie around the pool all day while the hired help brought you grapes and gave you back rubs and kept your lemonade fresh? What would it be like to dress in the finest clothes or sail your private yacht around the Caribbean while a personal chef prepared gourmet meals?

On the other hand, imagine being so poor that you can't even afford clothes, and so sick that they won't even take you in at the homeless shelter. What would it be like to sleep on the street, too weak or disabled to move, praying for someone to toss you some table scraps and too weak to fight off the dogs who lick your ulcerated skin and wait for you to die so they can drag away your skin and bones?

A sad picture (vv. 19-21)

It may be hard for us to imagine either of those extremes, but such is the picture Jesus paints in today's text. It is an ugly picture: a rich man who thinks only of himself and refuses to help the poor, even those who sit outside his own gate, and a poor man whose life is one misery after another. 📖

Lazarus is the only character in

He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:39)

Jesus' parables who was given a name. It is the Greek version of the Hebrew Eleazar, which means "God helps." No one else was helping Lazarus. God was his only hope. The man who had everything remained unnamed, foreshadowing the reversal of fortunes that lay ahead. 📖

The two men lived side by side, except that the aristocrat slept in a soft bed within his comfortable gated home, while Lazarus slept in the street, exposed to the elements, apparently unable to relocate his feeble body (v. 20). 📖

Although Lazarus is named, he is peripheral. The story is mainly about the plutocrat who lived an openly ostentatious life, wearing expensive purple garments and feasting fabulously while ignoring the frail and incapacitated man who was dying on his steps (v. 19).

The text makes a point of saying that what fell from the rich man's table would have been more than enough to feed Lazarus, but the scraps were left for the dogs, who cleaned the floor and then licked Lazarus' sores for dessert – something that must have been as painful to the poor man as it was humiliating. 📖

The men lived only a few yards from each other, and then there came a night when they died near each other. (v. 21). Lazarus' death would have been unremarked, but the rich man's demise would have been surprising news, and his burial would have been an elaborate affair.

A surprise twist (vv. 23-26)

The story began as we would expect, with the rich man. In the second act, however, the poor man appears first – by dying.

In first-century Judaism, a belief had developed that everyone went to the underworld (here called Hades), where they would await the final judgment. It was believed that the dead might enjoy – or suffer – a foretaste of what might lie ahead after the judgment (for more, see "The Hardest Question" online).

Lazarus, however, appears to have skipped this step. There is no mention of him being buried: he simply died and "was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham" (v. 22a). For the Jews, to rest "in Abraham's bosom" was as good as it gets in the afterlife.

The rich man, in contrast, "was buried" (v. 22b), and found himself in the underworld, suffering the same sort of lack that Lazarus had experienced on earth.

No longer in his world of privilege, the rich man felt a burning sensation and longed for a drink of cool water. The parable imagines that the man could look into Paradise and see Lazarus resting (and possibly feasting!) with Abraham, so close that he could initiate a conversation with the illustrious ancestor (vv. 23-24). 📖

From the conversation we learn that the rich man had been aware of Lazarus – he knew him by name – and yet had failed to help him: his was not a sin of ignorance. We also learn, surprisingly, that though he may have learned that his wealth had not followed him to the next world, he had yet to learn

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that social status did not carry over. Although he had done nothing for poor Lazarus, he expected Lazarus to fetch for him. Having Lazarus dip his finger in water just to cool his tongue is almost certainly hyperbole: surely he wanted more than that.

Finding himself in the less privileged position would have come as a surprise to the rich man. He had grown up with a theology that taught wealth was a sign of God's blessing, and poverty was the mark of God's curse – though he had apparently ignored that system's clear instructions for those who were blessed to help the poor.

Abraham explained that the tables had been turned – permanently.

All his life, the rich man had been digging a great chasm between himself and the poor, separating himself from those who needed his help. Little did he realize that the great gap would follow him into eternity. And even less did he understand that, all the while he was digging that ditch of separation between himself and the less fortunate, God was on the side of the poor. Now the ditch was dug and there was no way to cross it, no way to fill it in. He had chosen to live for himself alone, and he had died to spend eternity alone.

A stubborn people (vv. 27-31)

To his credit, the man who had lost everything seemed to have at least one unselfish thought. He remembered his five brothers, who would no doubt be enjoying the wealth he had left behind even as they spoke, digging their own graves in full confidence that they were blessed, and without a clue about what was coming.

Dead but wiser – though still expecting Lazarus to do his bidding – the no-longer-rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his broth-

ers, thinking that if the old beggar should come back from the dead like the Ghost of Christmas past, they would repent and change their ways (vv. 27-28, 30).

Once, again, Abraham's answer was disappointing. He flatly refused the request, insisting that if what his brothers learned from Moses and the prophets did not convince them to obey God's teachings and lay up treasure in heaven by caring for the poor, they would remain unconvinced, even if one should return from the dead (vv. 29, 31). 🇺🇸

So, what is the point? *When we shut out the poor, we shut out God.* There is no more sin in being rich than in being poor, but there is great sin in keeping God's blessings for ourselves alone.

God has always had a special concern for the poor, something that Luke's gospel is careful to emphasize, and the Old Testament instructs God's people to show compassion for the less fortunate. What did "Moses and the prophets" say on the subject?

Deuteronomy quotes Moses as the mediator of God's instruction: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land'" (Deut. 15:11). And this was not to be a grudging minimum: Israel was told to "Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake" (Deut. 15:10).

And what about the prophets? They had much to say, especially Amos, Micah, and Isaiah of Jerusalem. Recall Isaiah's counsel about what God desires: "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isa. 58:7).

To his disciples, Jesus said

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11).

Jesus so identified with the poor and downtrodden that we cannot separate between doing something for the poor and doing something for Christ himself. When Jesus told the story of the great judgment between the sheep and the goats, he said "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

It is not possible for Christ's disciples to truly have the love of God in them and not share with others. The writer of 1 John put it this way: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 John 3:17).

We cannot separate loving God and loving the poor. We cannot dig a moat between ourselves and the poor without also digging a moat between ourselves and God. That is what this parable is teaching us. Like the rich man, we may not believe it until we die. The lure of materialism is strong, but Jesus made it very clear that when we follow him, we recognize that our resources follow, too.

How then do we approach the question of Christians and wealth? The first letter to Timothy closes with a word of advice to the prosperous: "They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life" (1 Tim. 6:18-19). 🇺🇸🇺🇸

Many people love the old hymn "All to Jesus, I Surrender." Do we ... really? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Reminder: the password for online teaching resources is **joy**.

Oct 2, 2022

Luke 17:1-10

Forgiveness and Faith

Have you ever heard a sermon on why you should think of yourself as an unworthy slave? That portion of this week's gospel text is rarely heard from the pulpit, and for good reason. The image of Christians as overworked and unpraised slaves is not only jarring to our sensibilities, but also seems disconnected from our preferred picture of God as loving and compassionate. It's tempting to just avoid the text.

The unpopularity of this teaching may be one reason why Luke is the only gospel author to cite it. The lectionary text is limited to Luke 17:5-10, but it will aid in our understanding to incorporate vv. 1-4 too.

Warning Words (vv. 1-6)

The text begins with a change of audience. After a lengthy and confrontational conversation with scribes and Pharisees (chs. 15-16), Jesus turns to address his disciples. What he has to say, however, is no less disconcerting: Luke 17:1-10 consists of several hard sayings on the hard task of following Jesus.

Disciples need to know certain things and to hear specific challenges, beginning with how our lives affect

So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!" (Luke 17:1-10)

others. Chapter 17 begins with a warning against the danger of causing others to stumble (vv. 1-2). Impeding the faith of a "little one" (*micros*, either a child or a new believer) is serious business – so serious that Jesus said it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a heavy millstone tied around one's neck than to be found guilty of sidetracking another's faith (compare Mark 9:42 and Matt. 18:6).

Disciples must be good stewards of their influence, recognizing that others are paying attention to their example. To lead someone away from Christ rather than toward him is a serious failure.

Have we ever contributed to someone's falling away from the church and from Christ? The knowledge of that can be a heavy load – maybe enough to make us wish we'd been fitted with concrete shoes and left at the bottom of a lake.

Some years ago, a survey asked representative "unchurched" people why they were not Christians. One of the most popular answers was "because I know some Christians." Countless believers have left their faith communities due to interpersonal conflicts or lack of care. Someone caused them to stumble.

The second and third sayings challenge the disciples to be willing to rebuke other disciples when they sin (v. 3), and to forgive them when

they repent, even when they've sinned against them directly or so frequently that their repentance seems rote or insincere (v. 4).

The call to be accountable to each other grows from the terrible consequences Jesus had predicted for those who cause others to stumble. Fellow believers should care enough about each other to call them to account when they are in danger of leading others astray.

The call to forgive, even seven times in a day (Matt. 18:21-22 extends it to 77 times), is more concerned with the offended person's willingness to forgive than with the sinner's willingness to repent. Jesus' command is an emphatic form of the verb, a future tense used as an imperative: "You will forgive him."

Jesus' strong words led the disciples to realize how far they were from living out Jesus' teaching. Concluding that their own faith was not yet strong enough, they responded with an imperative of their own: "Increase our faith!" (v. 5).

As if the twelve weren't challenged enough, imagine their surprise at Jesus' response. On the one hand, it appears that Jesus was implying that the disciples had no faith to increase, or that they had failed to understand faith at all. If they had faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, Jesus said, they could command a big mulberry tree to be uprooted and cast into the sea – suggesting that their current faith was practically non-existent. 📌

On the other hand, Jesus' intent may have been that the disciples didn't need to increase their faith so much as

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to exercise the faith they already had. Who could imagine transplanting a tree from the earth to the sea? But even the tiniest amount of faith, when acted on, could do great things.

Why anyone would want to throw a tree into the sea is unstated and unimportant. The point is that the kind of faith Jesus called for is strong stuff, though apparently not easy to grasp.

Some may find it curious that both hard sayings involve something being thrown into the sea. Disciples who cause others to stumble would be better off if they were weighted down and thrown into the sea, but disciples with mustard seed faith would have sufficient power to uproot large trees and cast them in the sea.

Thankless work (17:7-9)

It was in this context that Jesus told the troublesome parable found in 17:7-10. We are called to forgive without keeping score and to have genuine faith, however small. But even if we are successful, we get no acclamation for it: we have only done what is expected.

The story Jesus told presupposes a society in which slavery was an accepted and commonly understood aspect of everyday life. Jesus' use of an illustration drawn from a servant's life does not mean for a moment that Jesus endorsed slavery: he simply used the well-known institution to make a point his hearers would understand.

The parable presumes the case of a farmer who has but one servant. As such, the slave is expected to do double duty, working as a field hand during the day and as a domestic servant by night. The slave tends the master's farm and then tends to the master's dinner before looking after his own needs. The slave does not expect to be congratulated, thanked, or rewarded for such tireless efforts. He or she has done only what is

expected of a servant.

Slave metaphors don't communicate well in contemporary America, where we abhor the very notion so much that it's hard to get past our negative perception to see the point. But, we may all have known someone who works two jobs and slaves day after day to care for their children – not for reward or praise, but because it is what they have to do.

Or, perhaps we know someone who has been deployed to a combat zone and faces constant danger, not by choice, but because it is their duty.

Jesus expected no more of the disciples than what he himself was doing. He wandered Palestine without a home, taxed himself through constant ministry, and poured his life into the disciples. Beyond what they had yet seen, he would soon take on the role of a suffering servant who would die for the sins of the world – not to receive a reward or the praise of those he saved, but because it had to be done, and he was the only one who could do it.

Thankful work (17:10)

Jesus' disciples were to follow his example. They were to put others above self, live an upright life, challenge one another, forgive one another, and exercise a faith they did not yet understand.

Notice how Jesus subtly switched the story around as he told it. He began by leading the disciples to think of themselves as the slave owner who expected to be served, with no need of showing gratitude. Having led them to see themselves in that position, Jesus reversed the roles and transferred the disciples to the servant's place: "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.'"

The word "worthless" would be better translated as "unworthy." Jesus did

not suggest that anyone is worthless: the point is not that God's servants have no innate value, but that they will always be unworthy of the grace that has been given to them. Their works can never earn a favored place in God's heart. 📖

Thus, the disciples were to see themselves as servants. No matter what God told them to do, or how far God called them to go, their obedience would be only what was expected. 📖

The situation has not changed. Would-be disciples who populate our churches are subject to the same teaching: no matter what Jesus asks of us and how noble or self-sacrificial the task might seem to be, it is only what we are expected to do.

More than 20 years ago, in the poor industrial town of Mabopane, South Africa, I met a woman named Mary Lwate. Fueled by an unending compassion for children – mostly AIDS orphans or abandoned children trying to survive in garbage dumps – "Mama Mary" and a crew of volunteers were caring for 200 girls and younger boys in a 1,400-square-foot house with an attached shed.

Mama Mary's work so impressed visitors that overseas supporters established the Mabopane Foundation to purchase land and begin construction of Ya Bana Village, where children can be cared for in far better conditions. 📖

We may think of notable "servants" such as Mother Theresa or other selfless caregivers we may know personally – people who may occasionally receive praise, but who are not motivated by reward. They realize that the work must be done, and they can't imagine not doing it, with or without a salary or appreciation.

They would be comfortable quoting the words of Jesus: "we have done only what we ought to have done."

Can we say that? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 9, 2022

Luke 17:11-19

Gratitude and Grace

How often do you stop to feel gratitude for good health? Most of us could probably list a few ailments that may slow us down in various ways, but if we're breathing, eating, and sleeping – and able to read a Bible study – we have cause to be thankful.

One who recognizes the amazing wonder of the human body as a gift is more likely to take care of it. Those who rejoice in life's daily blessings as ongoing grace are less likely to be stressed or angry – factors that contribute to cardiovascular disease, obesity, and other health problems. 📖

Have you ever connected gratitude with faith? Last week's gospel lesson raised important questions about the meaning of faith and God's demands on the faithful. It was a heavy text from beginning to end.

Today's text strikes a happier tone, but one no less serious. We see faith at work – surprisingly, perhaps – in the form of humble gratitude for the healing and wholeness that God brings. While we often think of faith as something required prior to healing, in this story the order is reversed: a diseased Samaritan man is healed. Afterward, his thankful heart and recognition of God's work are seen as expressions of faith.

Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" (Luke 17:17)

On the road again... (v. 11)

Luke is the only gospel writer to include this story, and it serves to balance the demand-filled first half of chapter 17 with a return to themes of grace and salvation. If the disciples who were called to live and forgive in ways beyond their human abilities should be considered unworthy servants who had done only as they were told (17:1-10), how much less worthy would be a band of leprosy men who had only heard of Jesus?

With this story, Luke returns to the overriding motif of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, begun at 9:51 and mentioned again at 13:31-35 and 14:25. Luke has Jesus encounter 10 outcast men on the road as a reminder that, despite periodic stops for dinner and debate with the Pharisees, for interaction with the crowds who followed, and for private teaching of his disciples, Jesus has been slowly making his way toward a date with death. This story takes place "on the way to Jerusalem," in a border region where both Jews and Samaritans might be found. 📖

As the story progresses, we note that the disciples fall into the background. Although they were presumably present and witnesses of what took place, all of the action and dialogue take place between Jesus and a group of 10 unnamed and unwanted men.

Ten leprosy men (vv. 12-14)

Careful readers note that Luke had a special concern for the poor, for the sick, and for women, all of whom were easy targets of oppression. Luke not only tells more stories about such people, but he also humanizes them in subtle ways. He does not call the 10 men Jesus met in v. 12 "lepers," for example, but "men who had leprosy." 📖

The biblical term for "leprosy" does not refer to Hansen's Disease, the disfiguring condition known as leprosy today, but to a variety of painful or disfiguring skin conditions. 📖 Jewish law included strict rules requiring that persons suffering from skin diseases – which were considered unclean – had to remain outside the camp lest they contaminate other people. Their primary concern was not infection, but ritual uncleanness.

Leviticus 13-14 contains very specific instructions regarding skin diseases, including the degrading demand that affected persons should make themselves conspicuous by wearing torn clothes and by keeping their hair unkempt. They were to dwell outside the camp and warn all who approached by covering their mouths and shouting "Unclean, unclean!" (Lev. 13:45-46, see also Num. 5:2-3).

The men Jesus met were thus following the rules, having established a small community of their own outside of town. The outcasts kept their distance from Jesus as required by law, but instead of shouting "Unclean," they called out "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (v. 13). 📖

When Luke tells us that Jesus

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“saw” them (v. 14a), he is introducing an important motif of seeing, and what happens when we truly see. When Jesus saw the men, even from a distance, he understood what they needed, and immediately acted to help them.

How do we understand Jesus’ simple command to them: “Go and show yourselves to the priests”? Some interpreters see it as a test of faith, or at least of a willingness to obey Jesus’ command. Others think of it only as the first step required by the law before a person cured of his disease could re-enter society, with other steps to follow. 🇺🇸🇺🇸

This is not the first time Jesus instructed someone to act with the anticipation of a cure, but before healing took place. Earlier, Jesus had told a man with paralysis to stand up (5:25) and a man with a withered hand to stretch it out (6:10). He told a dead man and a dead girl to rise (7:14, 8:54). Jesus’ act of healing and the person’s acting as healed were closely intertwined.

“The lepers were required to act as though doing what Jesus asked would make a difference, even though there was yet no tangible evidence that it would” (John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary [Word Books, 1993], 846).

Without apparent debate, the men decided to do as Jesus said, and “As they went, they were made clean” (v. 14b). 🇺🇸

The healing of any advanced skin disease would have become immediately apparent. No more itching or pain, no more suppurating sores, no more crusty white patches or fiery red rashes, no more awful stench of diseased flesh – they were clean!

One thankful Samaritan (vv. 15-19)

Try, if you can, to imagine yourself among that group of men who had

suffered so long but were suddenly healed. What would *you* do? Really?

Nine of the men continued on their way to find the priest. The text doesn’t say they were ungrateful: perhaps they felt an obligation to complete the assignment Jesus had given them, and to show their cleansed flesh to the priest.

But one man felt an even greater obligation: the compulsion to turn back and offer thanks to the one who had brought about his healing. When “he saw that he was healed” (note the second instance of “seeing”), he first turned back to Jesus before looking for a priest.

Luke’s careful use of language is instructive: the man came back “praising God with a loud voice” (v. 15) as he “prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him” (v. 16a). In this way, Luke connects the man’s understanding of God as the source of his healing with his expression of gratitude to Jesus, an implicit recognition of the close relationship between Jesus and God.

The man could have gone on to the priest and praised God there, or later at the temple, but he felt compelled to address Jesus in his initial prayer of thanksgiving to God.

Luke makes a point of saying “And he was a Samaritan” (v. 16b).

Why would that make a difference? Would a Samaritan have felt freer to delay showing himself to a priest, since he was not welcome in Jewish towns? The Samaritans also worshiped Yahweh and had their own version of the Pentateuch, though they worshiped on Mount Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem (see John 4). Samaritans also had priests, but the newly cured man sensed that his first obligation was to Jesus.

Jesus appeared to be surprised – both that nine men did not return, and that the one who did was a Samaritan. “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none

of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (vv. 17-18).

Jesus’ sharp questions imply disappointment that the nine did not return, along with wonder that the one who did was a Samaritan. As he had previously lamented the lack of faith in Israel (7:9, 8:25, 9:41), Jesus seemed chagrined that only one responded to healing with faith and gratitude, and embarrassed that the lone thankful man was not a Jew.

But in that one who returned, Jesus saw something greater than physical healing: 10 men had met Jesus, but only one had truly encountered him; 10 had been healed, but only one had become *whole*. “Get up and go on your way,” Jesus told him. “Your faith has made you well.”

The Greek word behind “made you well” is the same word that means “saved.” The sentence could have been translated “Your faith has saved you.” The grateful Samaritan found a depth of healing that went beyond that of the other nine.

This text challenges readers on several levels. When we see others’ needs, do we respond as Jesus did, or look the other way? The thankful man’s identity as a Samaritan leads us to think also of the parable of the “Good Samaritan,” who saw a man in need and had compassion while a string of pious Jews crossed to the other side of the road (Luke 10:29-37).

When we see what Jesus has done for us – through healing or forgiveness or the blessings of everyday life – how do we respond? Do we take the time to express gratitude and faith, or do we go on about our business as the nine others who were healed?

What we see – and what we do – can say a lot about the health of our souls. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 16, 2022

Luke 18:1-8

Persistence and Prayer

Have you ever found yourself so tired or worn down that you wanted to give up and quit, but knew that you had to keep going, to “hang in there” even when it was hard?

Think of a runner “hitting the wall” in the middle of a lengthy race. Think of a young mother with two jobs and a colicky baby who wonders how she will make it through another day. Think of an aging man or woman who serves as caretaker for a spouse who suffers from dementia and requires constant attention.

How does one keep going under such extended and trying circumstances? Perseverance requires at least two things: a personal commitment to stick with the task at hand, and a firm hope that the crisis will pass and better days will come.

This theme is at the heart of the parable that involves an unjust judge and a persistent widow. 📖

The setting (v. 1)

The early editors who divided biblical scrolls into chapters and verses began a new chapter with this parable, perhaps because it addresses the issue of prayer, as does the story of the Pharisee and tax collector that follows it (18:9-14).

The account we find in 18:1-8, however, is not a beginning but an ending: it concludes the preceding section in which faith was addressed from different angles (17:1-10 and 11-19), leading into an apocalyptic

I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (Luke 18:8)

address about the Son of Man’s coming to bring justice to the world and full fruition to the Kingdom of God that had become manifest in Jesus (17:20-37, compare Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21). 📖

In the narrative leading up to ch. 18, Jesus insisted that the anticipated coming of the “Son of Man,” a typical messianic expectation among the Jews, would take place suddenly and unexpectedly, as people were going about their daily business.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the early church re-envisioned the Jewish expectation of a messianic age as the return of Christ. So, although Jesus had yet to reach Jerusalem in Luke’s narrative, Luke’s readers would have had Jesus’ post-resurrection identity as the “Son of Man” in mind.

This is the setting for the story of the unjust judge and the persistent widow in 18:1-8: it begins with a call for a prayerful life that does not lose heart (v. 1) despite the injustice of the present world, remaining faithful in the hope of Christ’s return to vindicate the righteous and make all things right. The text closes on the same theme – though not optimistically – wondering if the Son of Man will find any faith when he returns (v. 8).

The parable (vv. 2-5)

With this context in mind, we realize that the parable, found only in Luke, is *not* about getting one’s prayer requests

granted through persistent wheedling of God.

It’s easy to see how one might reach this interpretation: Luke begins with the interpretive statement “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray and not lose heart” (v. 1). The following story involves a widow who wanted something and a poor excuse of a judge who finally gave it to her.

The parable is often compared to Luke 11:5-8, in which a man woke up a friend at midnight and asked for bread to feed an unexpected guest. The grumpy friend tried to put him off, but ultimately gave in to the man’s persistence. While there are similar themes, however, the contexts are quite different.

In this account of an uncaring judge who finally grants a poor widow’s justified plea, we may be tempted to consider it a promise that God will eventually answer our prayers for health, wealth, and responsible children.

Take note, however, that what the widow wanted was *justice*. Ordinarily, cases were brought before a panel of three judges, but a single judge was allowed to rule when the case involved straightforward financial matters. Someone probably owed her money, perhaps a greedy brother-in-law who failed to provide from her husband’s inheritance, or an unscrupulous money lender. The identity of the perpetrator is unspoken and unimportant. The central plea was for vindication in the face of one who had brought hardship and misery to her life. 📖

This is a far cry from the sort of prayer that asks God for healing, for an unexpected check in the mail, or for

a winning lottery ticket. The widow's plea is for justice, even as the prayer of early Christians was often for vindication in the face of those who opposed their faith and made their lives hard.

In days of trial or persecution, believers would need to pray for Christ's return – thus expressing continued faith – and not lose heart.

The parable has two main characters, both of whom are essential to the story. One is not more important than the other. We first meet a judge – whether he was a Jewish official or a Roman functionary is unstated – who is completely unfit for his office (v. 2). 🇺🇸

The second character is a particularly persistent widow who has been wronged. Through the stories he tells, Luke shows a particular interest in widows and their plight. The law provided clear protections for widows, but the law was often ignored. 🇺🇸

Despite the depressing circumstances of the story, Jesus likely told it with a smile on his face because it includes a bit of a joke, a turning of the tables on the self-serving judge. It is yet another example of Jesus' surprising ability to turn unsavory characters into examples for teaching. Earlier, he had held up a dishonest business manager as one who could teach the importance of acting decisively in a time of crisis (Luke 16:1-13). Now, he uses an unjust human judge to provide an insight into the character of the eternal judge.

The text assumes that the widow's cause was just, but her righteous cause had no effect on the self-focused and hard-hearted judge. He persisted in refusing to give her justice, though she was equally persistent in coming to court day after day after day (the tense of the verb indicates repeated action).

This woman must have been quite a character. Perhaps you have

known indomitable women who were determined, aggressive, willing to do whatever it took to accomplish what needed to be done – women such as Rosa Parks, or Mother Theresa, or Ruth Bader Ginsberg, or countless others who have devoted their lives to the pursuit of justice for all, compassion for the least, or the needs of their families.

The widow would not take “No” for an answer, and though the judge kept refusing to listen, she kept demanding justice until she wore him down. Finally, in a brief conversation with himself, the judge decided that he would grant her justice before she exhausted him completely.

The funny part, which rarely makes its way into translation, is that the term translated by the NRSV as “wear me out” literally means “punch me in the face,” or “give me a black eye.” 🇺🇸

We've been told twice that the judge didn't care what people thought of him, so he may not have been expressing a metaphorical concern that her persistent complaints would mar his reputation. Perhaps he was afraid she would actually slap or punch him – or at least browbeat him with her perpetual pleas for justice.

The irony is rich: a powerful judge overwhelmed by a powerless widow's persistence.

The point (vv. 6-8)

With v. 6, Jesus offers an interpretive word. If a mulish magistrate on earth can be persuaded to grant justice, how much more can we count on the Judge of heaven and earth to vindicate those who have put their trust in God?

Remember the eschatological context of these verses: believers may face arduous opposition and difficult days, but they should persist in faith

and prayer, confident that God will ultimately vindicate them when Christ returns.

The translation of v. 7, especially the second half, is very difficult, with scholars debating whether it means that God will be patient (the more natural meaning), or that God will not delay in coming to the aid of those who suffer injustice.

This becomes potentially problematic for those who read this promise 2,000 years later, knowing that millions of believers have suffered and died in the meantime, and the Son of Man has not returned to set things right (for more, see “The Hardest Question” online).

Jesus' teaching about the coming of the Son of Man that preceded this text (17:20-37) did not give a timetable, but emphasized that the end would come suddenly, at a time no one expected, and in ways they did not anticipate.

The question is not when God will come or whether God is willing to vindicate the righteous. The question is whether, when the Son of Man comes, he will find faith (v. 8): that was Jesus' concern.

Will believers follow Jesus' challenge to persist in prayer for justice and to not lose heart? Or when Christ returns, will faith have disappeared from the earth?

The question is an open one. As with many of his parables, Jesus leaves the story unresolved, so that those who hear it – or read it many years later – can decide for themselves how they will respond.

And that is the question the text leaves before us. Whether we meet Christ at our death or upon his return, will he find faith in us? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 23, 2022

Luke 18:9-14

Pomp and Penitence

Have you ever known someone who could, as the old saying goes, “strut while sitting down”? We meet one of those characters in today’s text. He’ll be easy to make fun of and to snicker at – until we realize that we might be more like him than we realize.

On the other hand, have you ever known a truly humble spirit – someone who often makes mistakes, but recognizes his or her shortcomings and readily seeks forgiveness?

We’ll meet one of those people, too, and see if we can learn from him.

The set-up (v. 9)

This story connects to the preceding parable in that prayer is involved, but it also begins a new collection of stories about entering the kingdom of God from a position of inferiority or deficiency. Jesus talks about coming to God through humility (18:9-14), through the simple but limited faith of children (18:15-17), and through leaving everything else to follow him (18:18-30).

Luke has a penchant for tipping his hand with an introductory note indicating his view of the parable’s purpose (see, for example, 18:1), and this one is no exception: “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (v. 9).

Some of those people might

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 18:14)

have been in Jesus’ daily entourage of followers. Some of them might even have been among the disciples – we recall stories of how they sought to impede the work of others who were doing miracles in Jesus’ name but were not part of their group (Mark 9:38), and how they argued among themselves about who should be considered the greatest (Luke 22:24-27).

Some of those people might be reading this text today. Do we ever look sideways at other people in church, quietly judging whether we are more righteous than they? Would we be offended if a notorious womanizer or a young man stinking of beer and the street slid into the pew beside us, head bowed?

We must not let the more obvious point of the parable disguise its hidden subtleties.

The parable can be read in two ways, both with a twist. In Jesus’ day, Pharisees were generally well respected, but tax collectors would have been despised. The unexpected twist is that the righteous Pharisee comes up short and the penitent tax collector goes home justified.

Luke, however, has told so many stories involving both Pharisees and tax collectors that the readers’ view is reversed: we expect by now to think of Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites, and of tax collectors as crooks who are willing to reform when confronted by Jesus. From this perspective, the twist

comes in the realization that we may be more like the judgmental Pharisee than the penitent cheat.

The story (vv. 10-13)

This story, like the one before it, has two main characters, with God lurking in the background. The first person is a Pharisee, a member of a religious party that promoted perfect obedience to every law, including both the written law and the oral law. In addition to guidelines for behavior in the Pentateuch, they sought to obey many additional rules developed by the rabbis in hopes of preventing anyone from violating the more serious laws.

Because we are so attuned to the routinely negative portrayal of Pharisees in the gospels, we usually fail to appreciate their laudable efforts to please God by scrupulously following every jot and tittle of the law. And, we should avoid seeing this story as a broadside against all Pharisees: it was and is entirely possible to follow the law while also treating others with grace and compassion.

In every group, however, there are bound to be those who take such pride in their personal achievements that they can’t help but stand in judgment on those who don’t measure up to their standards. The man in Jesus’ story would have been one of those: one whose outward pride masked an inner insecurity that required him to look down on others so he could feel good about himself.

The other major player is a tax collector, also known as a “publican.” Tax collectors were often Jews who

worked for the Romans on a contract basis, extracting both tax money and personal profit from fellow Jews. This earned them an unsavory reputation as turncoats and swindlers. 📌

How could such a man dare to show his traitorous face in the temple? Indeed, he made every effort *not* to show his face, refusing to look up as he snuck into the temple courtyards to pray in deep contrition.

So, as Jesus tells the story, we have these two men, both standing in the temple, probably at one of the two appointed daily prayer times (9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.). It is likely that we are to think of the popular afternoon gathering, when a lamb would be sacrificed on the altar, incense burned, and priestly prayers offered on behalf of the people.

The Pharisee stood with his head and hands raised to heaven in an overt posture of prayer. His words, however, were not typical for one who seeks God's grace. 📌

Indeed, his prayer of thanksgiving seemed designed to indicate that he needed no grace. He looked upward but prayed sideways, reminding God of how righteous he was by expressing thanks that he was not like other men, who might be robbers or rogues, adulterers or even someone so reprehensible as the tax collector he could see from the corner of his eye (v. 11).

Likewise, he thanked God that he could pat himself on the back for his resolute piety, even to the point of fasting twice a week and giving a tithe from everything that passed through his hands. 📌 📌

The publican, in contrast, stood "afar off," perhaps in a back corner of the courtyard, knowing others' attitudes and wishing to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

The tax collector prayed with his eyes downward, not daring to "look

God in the eye" by facing heavenward. Though he looked down, his prayers were directed upward, offering a simple but abject plea for mercy on a sinner such as himself.

The wretched man's attempt to avoid attention soon fell victim to the depth of his contrition, as he began to beat his chest and perhaps to weep or repeat his brief mantra for mercy, speaking more loudly than he had intended. 📌

The take-home (v. 14)

With v. 14 we find the second of two bookends that frame the parable. Jesus began the parable by saying "two men went up to the temple to pray" (v. 10). 📌 Then, when prayers were ended, each "went down" to his home (v. 14). It's what happened between the going up and the coming down that mattered.

"I tell you," Jesus said – a polite way of saying "*Listen up!*" – "this man (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Here is the switch: the Pharisee thought of himself as so righteous that he needed no help from God because he had attained righteousness the old-fashioned way, as the Smyth Barney commercials used to say, by *earning* it.

But he was wrong. He was blinded by his pride. He didn't realize that his super-righteousness had driven a wedge not only between him and others, but also between him and God. As we learn from the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we can't dig a moat between ourselves and others without separating ourselves from God, too.

The Pharisee's Hall-of-Fame piety had not moved him to love the people God loved, but it had driven him away

from them. As John Nolland puts it, "If grace does not lead to grace, it turns out not to have been grace at all" (*Luke*, Word Biblical Commentary [Word Books, 1993], 877).

We recall Jesus' stories from Luke 15, the ones about being lost and found. Those had been directed against the overly righteous, too, against people who kept themselves apart from those who were both physically and spiritually needy, lest their piety be contaminated. 📌

But Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10) – including tax collectors. And he spoke with divine authority when he pronounced the penitent publican as the one who was "justified" – made right with God.

The story is about two men who show us two different pictures of God. One man had apparently limited God to a theological box constructed by the law, one in which God had to love the righteous and reject the sinner. The penitent publican, on the other hand, recognized that God is free and capable of forgiving even a sinner like himself.

The parable is a warning, as Peter Rhea Jones argues, an admonition that when we approach God, we need to lay down not only our sins, but also our virtues (*Studying the Parables of Jesus* [Smyth & Helwys, 1999], 256). Focusing on our spiritual accomplishments and comparing ourselves to others is a sure-fire way of missing God altogether.

This points to a danger inherent in religion, even to faithful living: we are tempted to become proud of our piety. Sometimes the most religious people can be the most distant from God.

Jesus has framed a compelling picture: two men, two prayers, two outcomes. Where are we in the picture? 📌 NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

October 30, 2022

Luke 19:1-10

Repentance and Refunds

As children, many of us learned a rather inane song about “a wee little man” named Zacchaeus. We might not have been able to spell his name, but we could sing the song.

The little ditty could lead us to imagine Zacchaeus as some sort of leprechaun, smaller and odder than he really was. Zacchaeus may have been “short in stature,” but he was not easy to overlook. In Jericho, Zacchaeus was a big man ... and his encounter with Jesus led to a big change in his life.

Zacchaeus (vv. 1-4)

In Luke’s version of the gospel story, ch. 19 is the final travel episode in Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Like other pilgrims from Galilee, Jesus would have followed a road that wound south through the Jordan rift valley and passed through the city of Jericho, about 18 miles east of Jerusalem and several thousand feet lower in elevation (846 feet below Sea Level).

Jericho is in the midst of a hot and barren area not far from the upper end of the Dead Sea, but blessed with a strong and dependable spring that makes it an oasis known as the “city of palms” (Deut. 34:1-3). Any traveler in the region would stop by Jericho to rest, restock, and replenish water

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

supplies, so it became an important juncture on ancient trade routes.

The tel of ancient Jericho includes a stone tower dated to 8000 BCE, giving it a claim as the oldest city in the world. Today, Jericho is part of the occupied West Bank, a Palestinian city with limited self-government under Israeli auspices. In Jesus’ day, Romans were the occupiers, and visitors were required to stop at a toll booth. To finance their occupation and enrich the empire, the Romans exacted duty fees on the transport of goods from one district to another (Matt. 9:9, Luke 5:27). Jericho was on the border between Perea, east of the Jordan river, and Judea to the west.

While soldiers may have helped with enforcement, the Romans outsourced the collection of taxes to local Jews, granting franchises to the highest bidders. The “chief tax collector” for a given region could then hire other agents to operate the toll stations. The Romans charged tariffs as high as 25 percent of their value on some goods, to which agents could add additional fees to profit themselves.

We can guess who the least popular people in town might have been. Jews generally despised the Romans and resented their occupation, so fellow Hebrews who cooperated with the oppressors for personal gain were ostracized as sellouts.

But Jesus did not snub them or steer clear. He chose a tax collector named Matthew (whom Luke calls Levi) to be one of his disciples (Luke

5:27). He praised a penitent tax collector as a model for humble prayer (Luke 18:10-13). And, he took special interest in the diminutive but wealthy taxman who enters our story today: Jesus took the initiative in reaching out to Zacchaeus, possibly the most disliked man in Jericho.

Zacchaeus’ name is derived from a Hebrew word that means “pure” or “innocent,” but his reputation was anything but. He was the last person one would expect to be looking for Jesus, but the text says he was anxious to see the famous teacher (v. 2-3). Zacchaeus was long on wealth, short in stature, and lost – lost in his social isolation, lost in his business dealings, lost in his sinful lifestyle. Was he looking for a way out, searching for a new life? If so, no one knew – except Jesus.

Try to visualize the scene. We can imagine Zacchaeus wearing robes that are not just stylish and colorful, but also clean. His sandals are hardly worn. Chains of gold grace his neck beneath curly, well-tended hair. His fingers sport expensive rings. He smells good, but no one wants to come within 10 feet of him.

News traveled fast in Jericho, even without radio or cellular phones. Jesus was coming. He had already healed a blind beggar on the outskirts of town. Men, women, and children had come out to see him. Local citizens and traveling pilgrims were pressing against the beleaguered disciples, straining for a touch, a word, a glimpse of the man who had magic in his hands and sunlight in his words.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, too, but he wasn’t tall enough to peer

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over the crowd and he knew the people would never let him through. They might, in fact, use the opportunity to throw a few convenient elbows his way, or to trip him, or to grab the gold from around his neck. But Zacchaeus did not get rich without being resourceful: he ran ahead of the moving crowd and climbed into a roadside sycamore tree. 🇺🇸

Jesus (v. 5)

Now we see Jesus, clad in a simple peasant's robe, covered with dust, making his way through the crowd. He walks with purpose, yet slowly enough for the people to see him, to hear him, even to reach out and touch him.

Like thousands of other pilgrims from Galilee, he is traveling to Jerusalem for the Passover season. The others are going to celebrate. Jesus is going to die. The Palm Sunday road lies before him, Gethsemane is around the corner, and the shadow of a cross looms over it all.

Jesus knows this, and yet he also knows that life is lived in the present tense. He does not overlook the opportunities of today for the worry of tomorrow. On this day, Jesus sees possibility perched like a peacock in a sycamore tree. As the movable mob approached Zacchaeus, the locals may have spit in his direction, but Jesus stopped, letting the disciples trip over their own importance as the crowd swirled about him.

Jesus stopped and looked up, and that one moment was a perfect picture of what Jesus was about: countless others had looked down on Zacchaeus as a traitor who was lower than pond scum. But now Jesus, the only man who truly had a right to sit in judgment on others, stopped and looked up at him. It may have been a long time since anyone had looked at Zacchaeus

without anger, had looked into his eyes, had looked beyond his reputation.

When Jesus looked at Zacchaeus, he saw through the fancy robes and the glittering gold. He saw a small man with big hurts, a wealthy man who was lost in his sin, but longing for the light.

And so Jesus stood there beneath the tree and perhaps he smiled, and he called out "Zacchaeus!" How did Jesus know the man's name? Had someone pointed him out as a great sinner? Had he heard someone curse Zacchaeus by name? The crowd hushed and waited for Jesus to call the publican on the carpet for his many sins, but they were deeply disappointed.

In so many words, Jesus said "Zacchaeus! Come on down from there. I need to stop by your house for a while" (v. 5).

Lost and Found (vv. 6-10)

Zacchaeus gladly welcomed Jesus into his home (v. 6), but his neighbors were less pleased. The same people who had wanted to be close to Jesus were angry that he wanted to be close to Zacchaeus. "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He had gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner'" (v. 7). Jesus neither slowed down nor sought to justify himself. Surrounded by the flock of Israel, he was focused on a lost sheep that was about to be found. We can imagine Jesus laying a hand on the little man's shoulder, chatting and laughing on the way home.

We don't know what they talked about around the table in Zacchaeus' presumably sumptuous home. Jesus' presence alone spoke volumes. Did Jesus confront Zacchaeus with his shortcomings, or simply listen as a broken man poured out his heart?

Whatever it was that Jesus said or didn't say, the experience set Zacchaeus

free from his inner turmoil, his anger, his driving psychological need to get back at the world. Zacchaeus was changed, and he was never the same again.

Out of gratitude for the acceptance Jesus had shown him, and in testimony of a new faith that wanted to atone in some way for past wrongs, the short man stood tall and promised to give away half of what he owned to the poor. Furthermore, he said, "if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (v. 8). 🇺🇸

Noting the outward evidence of the man's inner faith, Jesus remarked "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham" (v. 9) – not just an ethnic Hebrew, but a person of faith. 🇺🇸 Then, to all in the house and to any nosy neighbors who might have been listening at the window, Jesus added "for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save what was lost" (v. 10).

Jesus often referred to himself as "the Son of Man" perhaps as a way to identify with those he came to seek, including us. Marcus Borg, in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, wrote that he spent the first 40 years of his life thinking that following Jesus meant having enough faith, and sometimes that was hard. Finally, he realized that Christianity is not about achieving a certain level of faith, but about a relationship with the same Spirit that empowered Christ, the one who came to seek and save the lost.

We all have a bit of Zacchaeus in us, and we know what it is like to feel lost. Do we count ourselves among those whom Jesus has found? What changes have meeting Jesus prompted us to make? 🇺🇸 N.F.J

Part 1: 2009–2017

BARACK OBAMA

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Planted long ago in Chicago, seeds of a new political landscape emerged ever so slowly. In the late 1920s Saul Alinsky, a Chicago native and sociology student at the University of Chicago, turned his attention to inner city crime in his hometown.

For two years Alinsky studied Al Capone's mob from the inside. Reigning as kings in Chicago, the crime gang perceived no harm from allowing a "college kid" to observe them. From Capone's mob, Alinsky learned of the importance of power on the one hand and personal relationships on the other.

Afterward, as the Great Depression set in, Alinsky took a job with the Illinois State Division of Criminology. Working with juvenile delinquents, he grew disillusioned with the criminal justice system.

Perceiving factors such as inadequate housing, racial discrimination and unemployment as the roots of crime, the young criminologist determined to make a difference in the lives of marginalized people. Years later he turned his attention to "the worst slums and ghettos" on the city's South Side.

He introduced a new concept in addressing society's ills: community organizing. Teaching that residents could "control their own destiny," Alinsky transformed "scattered, voiceless discontent into a united protest."

Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson later

This is the 44th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for *Nurturing Faith Journal*, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.



Official portrait of President Barack Obama. Digital photograph by photographer Pete Souza, 2009. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division.

deemed Alinsky's pathbreaking work as "most faithfully reflect[ing] our ideals of brotherhood, tolerance, charity and dignity of the individual."

ACTIVISM

Not long before Alinsky died, another young activist, Jerry Kellman, arrived in Chicago. A New York-born Jewish American, he trained in one of Alinsky's community organizing schools.

In 1983 he converted to Catholicism in order to identify with, and more effectively work among, Chicago's marginalized Hispanic communities. In time he turned his attention to Chicago's Black communities.

Working for the Calumet Community Religious Conference, an organization devoted to assisting Chicago's South Side Black Church in bettering the lives of local residents, Kellman, in the words of an NPR journalist years later, "fought the fallout

affecting workers and their families as the factories and mills began to shutter" during a new era of declining worker rights.

Some 50 years earlier, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had garnered widespread popularity among citizens by insulating many workers from the worst abuses of corporate America. But unlike the empathetic Roosevelt, Kellman's work among Chicago's poor neighborhoods unfolded during the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan sided not only with corporations and wealthy Americans over and against the interests of the working class, but also with a newly formed, far right, white Christian nationalist movement that demanded a post-Civil Rights era restoration of white privilege through the replacement of inclusive democracy with an exclusive theocracy.

In the larger context of a corporate and religious power play for control of the federal government, Kellman, focusing on Chicago's South Side, realized that an African-American organizer would be able to better relate to Black ministers and residents than he.

Kellman placed ads in newspapers across the nation. A 24-year-old Columbia University graduate noticed the ad in the *New York Times* and applied for the job. His name? Barack Obama.

ROOTS

Born and raised in Hawaii and educated in an Ivy League school, young Barack had little experience in the world of impoverished, inner-city America. Nor did he have much of a background in religion.

But he did have empathy learned from his experience of growing up as a half-white, half-Black child and an increasing conviction for social justice.

His father, Barack Obama Sr., had grown up in Kenya before moving to the U.S. His white American mother, Stanley

Ann Dunham, was raised largely in the American Midwest.

World travelers and intellectuals both, Barack Sr. and Ann had met and then married in Hawaii in 1961, where their son was born two months later.

Three years after Barack's birth, Ann divorced Obama Sr. She then married Lolo Soetoro, a native of Indonesia studying in Hawaii. With his mother and stepfather busy with college classes, a young Barack was largely raised by Ann's parents.

After finishing college, Ann resumed care for Barack, the two soon moving with Lolo to Indonesia, where they lived from 1967 to 1971. In this struggling American-allied nation of islands the family lived modestly in Jakarta. While his mother worked for the U.S. embassy, a young Obama spent days "chasing down chickens and running from water buffalo" and enjoying "street vendors bringing delectable sweets to our door."

In 1970 Maya Soetoro joined the family as Obama's half-sister. One year later Ann, seeking a good education for her son, sent Obama back to Hawaii to live with her parents. Soon afterward Ann and Maya also returned to Hawaii. Obama graduated from Honolulu's Punahou High School in 1979.

MAINLAND

Moving to the U.S. mainland following high school and beginning his college years at Occidental College in Los Angeles, Obama soon transferred to Columbia College in New York, an Ivy League institution. Graduating with a political science degree, he briefly worked in New York prior to accepting Kellman's Chicago job offer.

Soon Obama realized the centrality of religion in the work of community organizing on Chicago's South Side, a blue-collar area newly reeling from the closing of steel mills.

Chicago's Developing Communities Project, for whom Kellman and Obama worked, maintained an office in the rectory of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church. Spending most of his time in the field, Obama worked with dozens of religious leaders and congregations in blue-collar neighborhoods of white, Black and Latino residents.

Later, Obama would recall how difficult it was to connect with people. "Sometimes



Barack Obama with his mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, in Hawaii as a child.

I called a meeting, and nobody showed up. Sometimes preachers said, 'Why should I listen to you?' Sometimes we tried to hold politicians accountable, and they didn't show up. I couldn't tell whether I got more out of it than this neighborhood."

But there in Chicago's South Side a transformation took place.

"I grew up to be a man, right here, in this area," he recalled, years later speaking to a Developing Communities Project gathering. "It's as a consequence of working with this organization and this community that I found my calling. There was something more than making money and getting a fancy degree. The measure of my life would be public service."

The feeling was mutual. Obama found himself, and South Side leaders praised the young man as "dedicated, hard-working, dependable, intelligent, inspiring, a good listener, confident but self-effacing."

He was considered to be polite, civil, and "did not like direct confrontation." He brought people together, building bridges across political divides and uniting Protestants and Catholics in common cause for uplifting marginalized people.

He thought and acted strategically, and got things done. Obama and the DCP "helped win employment training services, playgrounds, after-school

programs, school reforms and other public amenities," among other accomplishments.

NEXT STEPS

For three years a maturing Obama immersed himself in the lives of people and neighborhoods for whom the American dream, never fully realized, was then fading away in a nation of rapidly growing wealth inequality.

Realizing that community organizing ultimately moved the needle but little, he left and enrolled in Harvard Law School, perceiving law as a path for greater change. Even then, he maintained his ties with Chicago, returning in the summers to work in local law firms.

At Harvard, Obama left his mark by becoming the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review*, garnering national recognition and a book offer. Upon graduation in 1991, he returned to Chicago and taught at the University of Chicago Law School.

He also worked on a manuscript that became his personal memoir, *Dreams of My Father*, published in 1995. In addition he led Illinois' Project Vote, a massive campaign that registered hundreds of thousands of African Americans as voters. At the same time, he worked for a local civil law firm and served on the board of multiple prominent Chicago foundations.

Above all, Obama in 1992 married Michelle Robinson, a fellow Harvard law graduate. Their two daughters, Malia and Sasha, were born, respectively, in 1998 and 2001.

With his prominence growing rapidly, Obama in 1996 ran for and won the 13th District state senate seat in Illinois, a district that included Chicago's South Side. He was reelected in 1998 and 2002, in between losing a 2000 race for a congressional seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

As a state senator, Obama continued reaching across the aisle, securing legislation that reformed health care and ethics laws. Other legislation he helped advance included regulations on payday loans and predatory lending, death penalty reforms, and monitoring of racial profiling by law enforcement.

Despite losing in his effort to obtain a U.S. congressional seat, Obama in January 2003 announced his 2004 candidacy for a U.S. Senate seat. Recently he had become one of the earliest public opponents of the George W. Bush administration's intention to go to war in Iraq, addressing Chicago's first anti-Iraq War rally even as the U.S. Congress granted Bush permission to wage war.

Against the backdrop of his candidacy and the controversial Iraq War, the Senate hopeful, his political career on a rapid rise but still not yet having obtained national stature, was chosen to address the July 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston.

It was his big chance. But the successful community organizer, intellectual and U.S. Senator was such an uninspiring speaker that even his closest political advisors fretted.

"He really just wasn't a dynamic speaker," noted reporter Ted McClelland, who early on covered Obama for the *Chicago Reader*. "Stilted. Professorial. He almost sucked the life out of the room."

To make matters worse, Obama had never used a teleprompter.

IN TOUCH

However, Obama was in touch with the political winds, and he tirelessly practiced for the big speech. On the national stage at the DNC, Obama — "uncomfortable" and "shifting his weight" in the words of political advisor Kevin Lampe, who was sitting right next to him — introduced himself to a troubled and divided nation. But soon he settled down and drew inspiration from the crowd's energy.

Matter-of-factly, Obama recounted the humble beginnings from which he came: his Black grandfather living his life and his father growing up in Kenya, the former a domestic servant to the British, and the latter a goat-herder attending school in "a tin-roof shack."

All the while across the ocean his white mother had been born in Kansas, her parents fighting in World War II — he working blue collar and farm jobs before serving in Patton's army, she working on a bomber



Feb. 17, 2010— U.S. President Barack Obama, accompanied by members of Congress and middle school children, waves as he talks on the phone from the Roosevelt Room of the White House to astronauts on the International Space Station.

assembly line — and afterward moving to Hawaii seeking new opportunities.

Both sides of his family had dreams for their descendants, dreams that had been realized in "the beacon and opportunity" that was the United States of America.

"Tonight," Obama declared to the DNC gathering, "we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation — not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy."

As had Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, Obama invoked the Declaration of Independence as the aspirational, inclusive foundation of America's great ideals not yet fully realized.

"Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over 200 years ago: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the

pursuit of happiness.'"

Obama spoke of the "true genius of America" as "a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles. That we can tuck in our children at night and know that they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door. That we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe."

The right to "participate in the political process without fear of retribution" and to know "that our votes will be counted" set America apart.

But the American dream had been wounded, Obama lamented. He spoke of hard-working Americans no longer getting a fair shot amid a corporate-controlled landscape stacked against ordinary people.

Nodding to Reagan's transformative presidency that had begun the downsizing of the federal government in favor of

individual responsibility, while signaling his dream of reversing Republican attacks on government assistance for the poor, Obama noted that “people don’t expect the government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that with just a slight change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all.”

Then Obama offered a robust endorsement of John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate. He rebuked placing individualism above community, calling both equally necessary.

“It is that fundamental belief ... I am my brother’s keeper [and] I am my sister’s keeper that makes this country work. It’s what allows us to pursue our individual dreams and yet still come together as a single American family.”

Then the formerly uninspiring speaker prone to lecturing reached a place he had never before been. His confidence having grown minute by minute, he had become one with his national audience:

Yet even as we speak there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there’s not a liberal America and a conservative America — there’s the United States of America. There’s not a Black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America. The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I’ve got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, and we don’t like federal agents poking around our libraries in the Red States. We coach Little League in the Blue States and have gay friends in the Red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and

In the African-American religious church tradition a young Obama had found a “power” rooted in the social justice teachings of Jesus to “spur social change” and bring “hope” to the world.

patriots who supported it. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

Seventeen minutes after he began, a different Obama beamed from the stage as the crowd gave him a thunderous standing ovation. Many who heard or watched the speech, including veteran political analysts, deemed it among the best they had ever heard.

Jeff Greenfield, political analyst at CNN, called it “one of the really great keynote speeches of the last quarter century.” NBC’s Chris Matthews presciently observed, “We’ve just seen the first Black president.”

A day earlier, Matthews’ words would have been preposterous. But Obama’s speech signified a re-configuring of the nation’s political landscape.

Although John Kerry lost badly to George W. Bush in the November 2004 presidential election, Obama’s call for hope through unity galvanized Democrats and made an impression on many moderate Republicans.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Two years later and with an audacious run for the presidency in the mind of the young, first-term U.S. senator, Obama addressed another audience, this time in the nation’s capital.

For a man who no longer made ordinary speeches, Obama nonetheless dared to venture into treacherous territory: “the connection between religion and politics” and “the often-bitter arguments” therein.

Religion journalist Steve Waldman would later call it Obama’s “most important speech” on faith. The talk echoed much of what Obama had written in his new book, *The Audacity of Hope*, that further laid the groundwork for his presidential run.

The occasion was progressive evangelical Jim Wallis’ Call to Renewal Conference. Wallis — founder of Sojourners, the most influential left-leaning evangelical organization in America — had spearheaded a “Covenant for a New America,” a holistic call, grounded in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, for Christian leaders, people of other faiths and no faith, and politicians of both parties to work together in ending poverty, securing justice for marginalized people, and ending the war in Iraq.

Addressing criticism from some Christian nationalists that “Jesus Christ would not vote for Barack Obama,” the presidential candidate spoke of “the role my faith has in guiding my own values and my own beliefs.”

Obama acknowledged a reality that was decades in the making: the “single biggest ‘gap’ in party affiliation among white Americans today is not between men and women,” he noted, “or those who reside in so-called Red States and those who reside in Blue, but between those who attend church regularly and those who don’t.”

The presidential nominee observed that white religious conservatives “have been all too happy to exploit this gap, consistently reminding evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their church, while suggesting to the rest of the country that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage; school prayer and intelligent design.”

But he did not offer words of comfort

for Democrats who, “for the most part, have taken the bait. At best, we may try to avoid the conversation about religious values altogether, fearful of offending anyone and claiming that — regardless of our personal beliefs — constitutional principles tie our hands. At worst, there are some liberals who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, insisting on a caricature of religious Americans that paints them as fanatical, or thinking that the very word ‘Christian’ describes one’s political opponents, not people of faith.”

Calling upon progressives to recognize the pervasiveness and power of religion in people’s lives, Obama declared “[I]t’s time we join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.”

“[N]ot raised in a particularly religious household” but rather with “a healthy skepticism of organized religion,” Obama talked about how his Chicago work “as a community organizer for a group of Christian churches” led him to “confront his own spiritual dilemma.”

In the African-American religious church tradition a young Obama had found a “power” rooted in the social justice teachings of Jesus to “spur social change” and bring “hope” to the world.

Drawn to faith, and one day “kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side” at Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ “I felt that I heard God’s spirit beckoning me,” Obama recalled. “I submitted myself to his will and dedicated myself to discovering his truth.”

Although he confessed that his faith remained laced with doubts, Obama sounded almost evangelical when he declared, “You need to come to church in the first place precisely because you are first of this world, not apart from it. You need to embrace Christ precisely because you have sins to wash away — because you are human and need an ally in this difficult journey.”

INCLUSIVE FAITH

Obama described his progressive faith experience as “a path that has been shared by millions upon millions of Americans —

evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims alike.”

Sketching many of the nation’s most existential problems — including poverty, racism, inadequate education, lack of affordable access to health insurance, and the unemployed — he observed that “these problems will require changes in government policy, but it will also require changes in hearts and a change in minds.”

Progressives should not “abandon the field of religious discourse” in seeking to address pressing issues, he insisted. But there was a right way, and a wrong way.

In words reflective of his deep understanding of cultural and political dynamics, as well as America’s founding as a secular nation, he declared: “Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God’s will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.”

Those “who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do,” will disagree with setting aside their God’s will in public discourse, Obama continued, but “in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what’s possible.”

He noted, “At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It’s the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God’s edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base one’s life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy-making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.”

Concluding his speech, Obama spoke of his hope for America “that we can live with one another in a way that reconciles

the beliefs of each with the good of all.”

Far from embracing a view of Christianity that focused on an unknowable afterlife, rejected human rights, and denied much of science and other reality, Obama in *The Audacity of Hope* further elaborated on what faith of the future could look like.

Ticking off a short list of his core Christian convictions, Obama ignored dogma and doctrine as he voiced what he was “absolutely sure about — the Golden Rule, the need to battle cruelty in all its forms, the value of love and charity, humility and grace.”

Having framed his understanding of faith as inclusive and in service of humanity for the common good as he prepared to run for president, Obama gave voice to an alternative religious worldview for America.

White Christian nationalists, he well understood, had long followed an exclusive, divisive and authoritarian deity who for centuries had commanded the enslavement of African Americans, and still considered Black Americans as inferior.

‘YES, WE CAN’

As Obama determined to steer America toward mercy and justice, Christian nationalists faced a dilemma. Who among emerging Republican candidates for the 2008 presidential election was committed to further advancing their far-right agenda?

With this question in mind, key conservative evangelical leaders secretly convened in February 2007 in a meeting of the highly influential Christian nationalist Council for National Policy. From Jerry Falwell to Ralph Reed and many others, including allied far-right economists, America’s cultural warriors longed to replace inclusive democracy with a government rooted in white theocracy.

None of the Republican frontrunners, however, made an overwhelming impression. “Many conservatives have already declared their hostility to Senator John McCain of Arizona,” a *New York Times* article noted of the despair among Christian nationalists.

One of America’s most well-known war heroes — who’d recently joined a Southern Baptist congregation — McCain, “despite

Having framed his understanding of faith as inclusive and in service of humanity for the common good as he prepared to run for president, Obama gave voice to an alternative religious worldview for America.

his efforts to make amends for having once denounced Christian conservative leaders as ‘agents of intolerance,’” gained no traction among far-right Christians who were, in fact, agents of intolerance.

Nor did former New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York, “because of his liberal views on abortion and gay rights and his three marriages.”

Although a conservative, candidate Mitt Romney was considered by Christian nationalists as non-Christian (as had the Mormon Church itself for most of its history). Nor was Romney intolerant enough to elicit Christian nationalist enthusiasm due to the “liberal elements of his record on abortion, stem cell research and gay rights.”

Attempts by Romney to convince Christian nationalists that his cultural views had changed made little impression upon a doubtful far right.

Obama, meanwhile, found himself on the defensive due to the outrageous views of the Obamas’ longtime pastor Jeremiah Wright of Chicago’s Trinity United Methodist Church. Over the course of several months during the presidential primary season a series of controversial sermons previously delivered by Wright drew public scrutiny and outrage.

Among Wright’s blatant, unfounded claims was his insistence that the U.S. government had created AIDS as a means of killing Black people. “God damn America ... for killing innocent people,” Wright had at one time said from the pulpit.

Increasingly, Obama distanced himself from Wright, first in a March speech (“A More Perfect Union”) affirming America’s goodness, then in late April unequivocally denouncing the controversial clergyman.

“They offend me; they rightly offend all Americans,” Obama said of Wright’s “outrageous remarks.”

“Rev. Wright does not speak for me,” Obama declared. “He does not speak for

our campaign ... I find [his] comments appalling. I mean it. It contradicts everything that I’m about and who I am.”

“[A]nybody who has worked with me, who knows my life, who has read my books, who has seen what this campaign’s about, I think, will understand that [Wright’s views are] completely opposed to what I stand for and where I want to take this country,” he added.

Within weeks the Obamas resigned their membership at Wright’s church. But by that point, Obama was mired in another religious controversy. In an offhand moment while discussing his difficulties with white, working-class voters in the Midwest and Pennsylvania, Obama observed that such voters “often cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”

Although often true, Obama’s observations provided additional fodder for the far right throughout the election season.

Despite religious controversies left and right, Obama and Democrats at large benefited from widespread discontent over Bush’s Iraq War. In the Democratic presidential primary Obama surprised many by defeating favorite Hillary Clinton, wife of still-popular former President Bill Clinton.

Among the Republican candidates, John McCain — who in a seemingly desperate move, tapped Christian nationalist Sarah Palin of Alaska, a controversial and vocal political novice with limited education, as his running mate — emerged victorious.

Quickly the gloves came off. As Palin berated Obama, Republican-allied, far-right Fox News portrayed Obama as a “socialist” determined to “redistribute wealth” from the rich to the poor. The attacks, however, did little to hurt Obama’s energetic and historic presidential campaign.

Lacking the wholehearted approval of

conservative white evangelicals, McCain badly lost to Obama in the November presidential election. Enthusiastically backed by Black Americans in record numbers and paired with Joe Biden as his running mate, Obama handily won both the popular and electoral vote.

Other than far-right conservatives, Americans broadly and openly celebrated, and many wept tears of joy, in the election of America’s first Black president. In his acceptance speech before a huge and joyous crowd Obama spoke of a new, inclusive future for American democracy.

He began with the words, “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”

And he ended with a call for American unity and progress.

“This is our chance to answer that call,” president-elect Obama declared. “This is our moment. This is our time — to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: ‘Yes, we can.’ Thank you, God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.”

The massive crowd cheered and wept. It was an unprecedented moment in time: a significant majority of Americans had placed their faith in a Black American who had inspired them with his hope for America and had promised to lead their nation toward a greater, more inclusive democracy. [NFJ](#)

MORE THAN FABRIC

Clergy dresses allow women to ‘show up to church as ourselves’

BY STARLETTE THOMAS

“Women can’t wear pants.”

This was my introduction to the church’s history of shaming the female body — and its only commentary on feminine fashion sense. In the Pentecostal Holiness tradition, where I came to faith, we were expected to dress modestly.

Church leaders took their inspiration from 1 Tim. 2:9: “also that women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothing, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God” (NRSV).

My denomination added no makeup, no earrings, no nail polish. In short, you had to be ugly to be godly.

The female body was deemed the cause for the fall of humanity and the source of men’s temptation. Never mind self-discipline or personal accountability: All of that was shouldered by the girls and women, who needed to cover their knees, shoulders and elbows — since the sight of our flesh would lead a man to sin.

Imagine my surprise when I learned women had been wearing pants since the 1800s, the first being Fanny Wright. Pants or pantaloons date to the 16th century and are rooted in comedy. It’s even the name of a character. Now that’s funny!

A piece of fabric that covers the body from the waist to the ankles, it would be just the right length if it were a dress. The rule was no doubt used to enforce gender roles and expectations.

Women were to appear this way while men another way, and never the two shall share clothing. And God forbid if a woman heard the same calling to preach.

Then, once she managed to find her voice after being told to keep silent, what was a woman to wear?



Claudia Grainger models a pink clergy dress complete with collar. Photo courtesy of Magdalene Clergy Dresses (magdaleneclergydresses.com).

SOMETHING TO WEAR

Enter Brittany D.H. Edwards, a minister and graduate of Duke Divinity School, who received the 2021 Addie Davis Award for Excellence in Preaching.

She is the founder of Magdalene Clergy Dresses with the tagline: “Dress like the preacher you are.” A designer and dressmaker, Brittany displayed her artistry at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina gathering earlier this year.

She was hard to miss. In addition to a table full of her amazing wares that included stoles and jewelry, another minister, Claudia Grainger, was modeling a pink clergy dress complete with collar.

I watched in amazement. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

To convince myself, I ordered my own dress in black and white — because buying

is believing, and I believe in my calling. Brittany suggested I wear it when defending my doctoral thesis.

I also bought a stole made of burlap, a reminder of my confession of faith and fit for the Lenten season. With purchase in hand, complete with complementary stickers, I had questions.

Why did you do it and how? Brittany was no doubt speaking to my 17-year-old self who had announced a call to preach that was quickly redirected to the Sunday School room.

While I have served as an associate and interim pastor for seven years, Brittany had given me something to wear when preaching. No more black suits, the unofficial uniform of clergy. Instead, I would wear one of Magdalene’s clergy dresses.

WHY MAGDALENE?

“I read stacks upon stacks of feminist and anti-feminist theology, comparing complementarianism and egalitarian arguments, printing out doctrinal statements and attacking them with highlighters and pens,” writes Brittany on her website’s blog. “But in the end, one woman’s simple testimony convinced me like no erudite theologian could. Her name is Mary Magdalene.

“Mary, who attended Jesus’ tomb to grieve. Mary, who recognized Jesus when he spoke her name. Mary, who clung to Jesus so tightly that he gently reproved her.

“Mary, who received the first ever call to preach the resurrected Christ: ‘Go instead to my brothers and tell them’ (John 20:17). Mary, who obeyed Christ’s voice and preached: ‘I have seen the Lord’ (John 20:18).

“Encountering Mary Magdalene face-to-face, I wondered why Christ would make a woman the first resurrection preacher if he disapproved of women teaching men. I wondered why Jesus would command a woman to share his gospel before any men even knew about it. I wondered how Jesus



Brittany Edwards, founder of Magdalene Clergy Dresses, hosts an exhibit space at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina annual gathering.

could call Mary but not call me.

“So, I went to divinity school and was ordained and began making clergy wear. When I had to choose a name for this ministry, I remembered the woman who knew Jesus had risen before any other human being on earth, the woman who preached the gospel to the disciples themselves, the woman who gave me permission to embrace my own calling.

“With each dress I make, I honor her, and I praise the God who calls women to speak (God’s) name.”

WORK & WITNESS

Next, I asked Brittany: As a theologian, designer and dressmaker, why is it important for female preachers to have clergy wear?

“Many traditional vestments, like cassocks and albs, are designed toward androgyny,” she said. “These beautiful yet genderless garments proclaim from the altar and pulpit that ‘there is...neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3:28).”

Then she added: “But I am a woman, and most days I want to look like one. God

doesn’t ask me to disguise my gender before I minister and preach. Quite the opposite! God called ME, body and soul.”

“My dearest prayer is for all women ministers to feel the same confidence in God’s love for every single part of themselves,” she continued. “If God created you to love pink sparkles and then called you to ministry, why shouldn’t you have a pink sparkly clergy dress?”

Then, I asked: “How can female clergy wear shape the North American church’s view and treatment of the female body?”

“My whole endeavor, from dress design to color choice to size inclusivity, aims to impact how female bodies are perceived in our churches,” said Brittany. “People often judge women by their clothes, even (dare I say especially?) in church. So, if people will judge us women preachers by our clothes, those clothes might as well be a fully authentic expression of our identities.”

The pulpit, she said, is a vulnerable place — and, for women preachers, the additional burden of self-policing gender expression can be suffocating.

“So instead of hoping our ‘feminine

concerns’ will be heard in the next committee meeting, let’s just show up to church as ourselves,” she said. “Our churches may not want to celebrate God’s design for us until they see the party has already started.”

These dresses are also designed to send a message to the women who are called to preach, she added.

“To all the dear ones for whom I’ve made clothes, this is my benediction: ‘God designed you and called you on purpose,’” said Brittany. “Enjoy who God created you to be.”

Women-led and based in Garner, N.C., Magdalene Clergy Dresses offers more than fabric; it is a sign of more equitable treatment of the female body. Adorned with attire that reminds other believers that God is not giving her the silent treatment in conversations about calling, Brittany’s work speaks for itself.

Women can, in fact, wear pants and clergy dresses. **NFJ**

Starlette Thomas is an associate editor, podcast host and director of the Raceless Gospel Initiative for Good Faith Media.

“Loss” — A sculpture by Jane Mortimer located in Northern Ireland.



IN THE AFTERMATH

Coming alongside those who have experienced great loss

BY BRUCE SALMON

Like others, I have been called to come alongside grieving persons in the aftermath of great loss.

After seminary I was called to a church in suburban Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C. As associate pastor, my responsibilities included the youth ministry of the church.

One night after my wife and I had gone to bed, I received a call from a member of the youth group. He urgently asked me to come to the hospital, where his mother was a patient.

I threw on some clothes and headed out. I was greeted at the hospital by a nurse with a stunned look on her face. She whispered that the patient had committed suicide.

After trying to console the youth, I was

escorted into the room where his mother's lifeless body was still lying on the bed. The woman's husband (the father of the youth group member) was sitting on the floor.

I sat down on the floor next to him and put my hand on his shoulder, but the words would not come. I prayed silently for a long time.

Finally, I stood and encouraged him to stand, and we walked together out of the room so that the medical staff could attend to his wife's body. We had the funeral for her at the church the following week.

A few years later, while serving as pastor of another church in suburban Maryland, I was called to come alongside a family in the aftermath of tragedy. An FBI agent, working on cold cases with the Metropolitan police department, was murdered, along with another agent and an officer at the D.C. police headquarters.

I tell what happened in the first chapter of my book, *Spelunking Scripture: Christmas:*

An ex-con with a record of drugs and weapons charges burst in and began firing a semi-automatic handgun. Before he turned the gun on himself, he killed three people — a D.C. police officer and two FBI agents. One of the agents killed was the son-in-law of one of our most active church members.

The FBI agent, his wife and their two young children had worshipped at our church. I knew them and was asked to go to the home the next morning to help the widow let her children know their father had been killed. I arrived at 8:00 a.m., but the mother had already told them.

The funeral was held at the church with so many people expected to attend that the FBI set up a camera and closed-circuit system to allow for additional seating at the church next door. I met with the U.S. Attorney General and the director

of the FBI in my office before the service.

There were so many police cars in the procession to the cemetery that other drivers pulled off to the side of the road. Eventually, the widow became a very dedicated member of the church and one of our best friends.

A couple of years after that tragedy, a husband and father of three young daughters was murdered at an ATM. His parents and grandparents were active in our church.

Upon hearing the shocking news, I rushed to the home of the grandparents and sought to console them and their daughter and son-in-law who had lost their younger son. We sat together for a long time, trying to come to grips with what had happened.

A deacon from the church who was close to both couples joined us in our grieving. Finally, I closed our time together with a prayer. We had the funeral for their son/grandson the following week at the church.

Another tragic loss happened a few years after that. The husband of one of our most active church members became ill. I visited him in the hospital and prayed with him.

Some days later he was discharged from the hospital and came home. I was hopeful that he was getting better. But then his wife called to tell me that he had died.

He was only 52 years old. I rushed to the house and arrived before funeral home personnel came to take his body. I remained with his wife, knowing that their daughter would soon be coming home from school.

After she arrived home, we told her that her father had died. She began sobbing and rushed into her bedroom. Eventually she came out and we grieved together. We had his funeral a few days later at the church.

A couple of years after that, my wife and I were attending the General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in



Houston. I got a call from one of our deacons that a family in our church had suffered an unspeakable loss.

A father and his 10-year-old daughter had been killed in an auto accident the night before. I called the widow, who had lost her husband and only child, and told her we would catch the next flight back home. We cancelled our hotel reservations, changed our flight schedule, and arrived back in Maryland that night.

The next day I met the widow at the funeral home and offered to go with her to the back room to identify the bodies of her husband and daughter, but she preferred to see them alone. We began to plan their funeral that would take place the next week at the church.

I had planned to be away on Sunday, but I called the guest preacher to say I needed to be there. He graciously deferred so that I could speak on Sunday morning.

The widow, her mother and her sister were in worship as I explained to our stunned congregation during the sermon what had happened. We had the funeral at the church the following Saturday.

After I retired, my wife and I were

visiting some friends in South Bend, Ind. A friend from our former church called with terrible news. His 5-month-old grandson had suddenly and unexpectedly died.

The day after we returned to Maryland, I went to see the parents. They were staying with her parents since it was just too painful to go back to their home without their baby boy. We sat at a table while they talked about their baby, and I took notes for the eulogy.

We had the memorial service at the church a few days later. Every time I would see the mother after that, I would ask her how she was doing. She would say she was doing okay, but I could tell it was a loss that never left her.

I have come alongside many grieving families in the aftermath of great loss — to share in their sorrow and to offer what comfort I could. And I have come in the aftermath of great loss to offer the hope that is ours in Christ.

Because Jesus was raised from the dead, death is not our final reality. The resurrection of Jesus means that those who believe in Jesus will be raised to new life too. As Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 15:22, “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

As I wrote in the Introduction of *Spelunking Scripture: Easter*, “The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of the Christian faith.”

We have the hope of heaven and the promise of eternal life because Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Therefore, death is not the end. Of course, we mourn when someone we love dies. The resurrection of Jesus does not eliminate our mourning. But the resurrection of Jesus can transform our grief into a faith that enables us to carry on.

Coming alongside others in the aftermath of great loss does not eliminate the loss, but it can offer empathy and compassion and hope. **NFJ**

—Bruce Salmon is a retired pastor in Bowie, Md, and the author of numerous books including the *Spelunking Scripture* series from Nurturing Faith. The next volume in this series, to be released later this year, is titled *The Barefoot Eulogist: Speaking a Good Word Standing on Holy Ground*.

Because Jesus was raised from the dead, death is not our final reality. The resurrection of Jesus means that those who believe in Jesus will be raised to new life too.

Proactive Prevention

Confronting the sexual misconduct epidemic in churches

BY CALLY CHISHOLM

A house of worship is meant to be a safe place, brimming with love and respect.

Yet, this is not the reality for those victimized and targeted by persons they believed could be trusted to guide them through life's challenges. It is a stinging betrayal to discover that religious leaders have participated in some of the worst human behavior possible.

People of good faith are confronting abuse wherever it is found. No religious tradition is exempt from accosting the scourge of sexual misconduct.

Those at the forefront of this needed response advise: It is time to be *proactive* rather than *reactive* in churches and other religious institutions.

Sweeping sexual misconduct allegations under the church carpet is not an acceptable response to this abuse epidemic.

THE REPORT

The turmoil that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church was in the news for many years. Hollywood even made an Academy-award winning movie about it called *Spotlight*.

Now the metaphorical spotlight has been shifted to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and its role in preserving a perverse culture of secrecy and shame.

The Washington Post reported in May that Guidepost Solutions, an investigative firm, released a 300-page report following an independent investigation of the SBC.

The investigation confirmed what *The Houston Chronicle* reported in their "Abuse of Faith" series a few years ago, which is that Southern Baptist leaders intentionally silenced and vilified sexual abuse victims and survivors who spoke out against their perpetrators.

Sexual misconduct is not a problem



From left to right: Greg Fay, Vicki Violette and Debbie Long

unique to the SBC and can be found in any corner of our world. This report, however, confirmed what many survivors have been saying for years.

"People often comment after any catastrophe that 'we never thought it would happen to us,'" said Education Minister Vicki Violette of First Baptist Church of Clinton, Tenn. "Those words have been spoken many times in churches after sexual misconduct has been uncovered."

Now, she noted, the Catholic Church and more recently the Southern Baptist Convention are reeling from sexual abuse allegations.

"The bottom line is that sexual misconduct can happen in any church of any denomination, of any size, and in any location," said Violette. "As church members, we need to be vigilant and proactive in protecting our children and vulnerable adults against any sexual abuse."

In addition to contributing to the sexual abuse, SBC leaders repeatedly lied about their capability to keep track of accusations while the hiring and relocation of known abusers continued. Protecting the institution came before the safety of their congregants.

Despite insistence that a list was impossible to maintain, the investigation uncovered an internal document of 703 pastors, church leaders and volunteers accused of sexual abuse and criminal behavior (409 of

whom were believed to have been Southern Baptist-affiliated at one time).

Some see Southern Baptists' justification and promotion of sexist theologies as further legitimizing a culture of victim-shaming that has allowed abuse to go unchecked.

TAKING ACTION

One congregation in East Tennessee is taking preventative action to help break the cycle of silence and violence that unfortunately seems to thrive in church buildings. And, in doing so, they are providing a model for others to follow.

Last year, well before the SBC report came out, First Baptist Church of Clinton, Tenn., voted to form a new standing committee focused on sexual misconduct prevention efforts. The Prevention of Sexual Misconduct Committee (PSMC) will advocate for new policies and procedures and offer educational training for church members and staff.

The committee was not formed as a response to any particular incident within the church, but as a preventative measure against what has been witnessed in other churches and institutions. The congregation is affiliated with both the SBC and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF).

"If there is an incident in the church, we want this committee to initially address the situation, not the ministers or staff, because

that is where allegations have stalled so many times in churches,” said Violette, who serves on the PSMC.

The three-member committee of one male and two females will work in conjunction with other committees to write and enforce policies.

“We felt it important not to have a huge committee because of the speed of actions that would need to occur if allegations are made of sexual misconduct,” said Violette. “In a situation like this, you don’t need eight or 10 people trying to get together for a meeting.”

Personnel, nursery, children’s and youth committees will offer proposed guidelines for the PSMC to review and compile into one document to be presented to the church for consideration later this year. The combined policies, as approved by the church, will be re-evaluated annually for possible updates.

“We decided the committees of the church that oversee certain areas need to have a solid say in the development of the policies,” said Debbie Long, another PSMC member. “What we’ve done now is set up times to meet with them and get those things all aligned.”

In addition to developing stronger policies, the committee has provided educational training sessions for members to learn about sexual misconduct. For easy accessibility, the church invited participation during the regularly scheduled Sunday morning Lifegroup time between worship services.

Ninety people, a significant percentage of the usual church attendance of about 200, attended the sessions.

The first training focused on the statistical evidence that demonstrates how often sexual misconduct occurs, not only in churches but also in other organizations such as Boy Scouts of America. The congregants learned about the effects of abuse on victims and how abuse is able to thrive in churches.

“We had a lot of positive comments,” said Violette. “As we were presenting, you could see by the look on many people’s faces that this was new information for them. As sad as it is and as devastating it is to hear, everyone needs to be aware of this information to protect our children, youth and vulnerable adults.”

Talking about these issues openly can be

difficult for many churches, she added, but this committee believes it is important to be prepared.

CHURCH RESPONSE

Church leadership has been supportive of the committee’s formation and work. And, so far, the overall church response to these efforts has been positive.

“*The Houston Chronicle* articles about sexual abuse in Baptist churches really shed a light on this subject,” said Pastor Danny Chisholm. “And now, more recently, the SBC Report on Sexual Abuse has confirmed what has been going on for a long time. From a local church standpoint, I’m grateful that we’ve been proactive in forming this important committee.”

“It’s a critical step toward education and raising awareness in our own congregation,” he continued. “I’m hopeful that our example may encourage other churches to take similar action.”

The Houston Chronicle’s six-part series about abuse in Southern Baptist churches revealed that in the past 20 years, more than 380 ministers and deacons have been accused of sexual misconduct by more than 700 victims.

Yet those allegations did not prevent churches from hiring known or suspected offenders onto their staffs — continuing the cycle of abuse. *The Washington Post’s* Spotlight investigations of the Catholic Church and the SBC Guidepost report mirror each other in their pattern of accountability avoidance.

Ben Neal, an FBC Clinton member for nearly 15 years and the father of four young children, shared what the committee means to his family.

“This is something we come to expect from schools and other secular places we send our kids,” said Neal. “Churches should be our priority. We are called to take care of the most vulnerable, and children are some of them. I certainly want my church to be looking out for my kids.”

PSMC members hope other houses of worship will consider forming similar committees or updating existing sexual misconduct policies — sooner rather than later.

“I would suggest church leadership

define the skill set — temperament, maturity, experience, education, morals, values, leadership ability, commitment and willingness — needed for [selecting] committee members,” said PSMC member Greg Fay.

Mental health, said Violette, is another important factor to consider when dealing with misconduct or talking about it with congregations.

“Churches need to focus on mental health support also,” she said. “If sexual allegations within a church are proven to be true, the church needs to take responsibility and support the healing and recovery of the victim.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

The SBC annual meeting was held in June in Anaheim, Calif., just weeks after the abuse report surfaced. After tremendous social pressure, members made some effort to right the wrongs of the past.

The convention approved a series of sexual abuse reforms, including a database to track accused ministers. At the meeting, leaders sought forgiveness from those affected by abuse.

Writing for *Baptist News Global*, David Clohessy and Christa Brown called those actions a “first step” — that “if taken largely because of external pressure can be meaningless, or even deceptive.”

“Put another way, motion isn’t necessarily progress,” they added. “Nor does motion alone guarantee or necessarily lead to progress.”

Time will tell the degree to which these initial efforts make a significant difference. But they are steps in the right direction.

Throughout history, powerful men have allowed dangerous people to *prey* on the vulnerable only to turn around and offer to *pray* for the victim without seeking justice or accountability.

A rising chorus, however, is asserting that the time for all churches to step up and proactively protect their people is now. **NFJ**

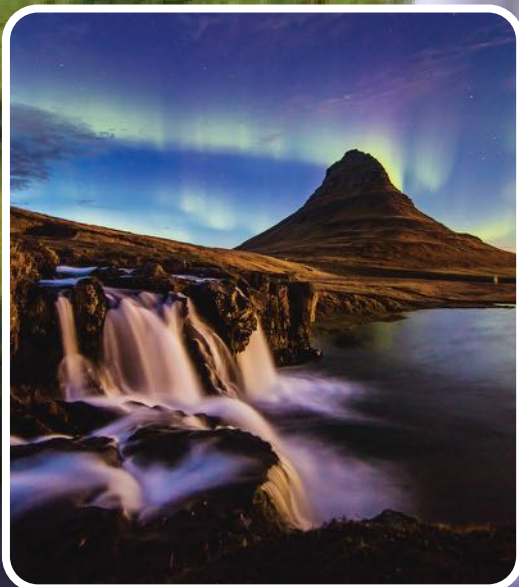
—Cally Chisholm is creative coordinator for publishing and marketing for Good Faith Media. Her father is pastor at First Baptist Church of Clinton, Tenn.

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NO TINY TIMS

Disability doesn't define a person's human experience

BY LIBBY CARROLL

Within the church, it is easy to think about disability in overly simplistic terms. We like to reduce disabled people to sufferers and able-bodied people to philanthropists, or think of disability in terms of illness, deviance or medical abnormality.

Sometimes we frame disability as a moral failing, a symbol of personal sin, or a lack of faith. Unsurprisingly, these narratives insufficiently capture the experiences of people with disabilities and turn places of worship into places unwelcoming to the entire body of Christ.

The “Tiny Tim” approach characterizes how many able-bodied Christians conceive of disability and prevails in many institutions built to serve disabled individuals through Christian charity.

This charity model of thinking about disability reduces people with disabilities to helpless victims of circumstance who require the aid of able-bodied philanthropists. Disabled people are not considered to be people in the fullest sense of the word but are instead seen as objects of pity, much like Tiny Tim.

In her book *Being Heumann: An*

Writer's note: Throughout this article, I use person-first and disability-first language interchangeably when referring to people with disabilities. Disabled people have valid reasons for preferring one form of language over the other. When speaking with or about individuals with disabilities, it is best practice to ask which language they prefer.



Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist (2021, Penguin Random House), human rights advocate and polio survivor Judy Heumann describes her initial pain at being perceived as fundamentally different than her able-bodied peers due to her use of a wheelchair.

“I was confused and heart-wrenchingly sad to the point of numbness,” she writes. “I just couldn’t understand what I had to do to be seen as an ordinary person.”

This feeling of alienation is common among disabled people, and is often the result of the well-meaning behavior of the charitable and able-bodied.

Another way able-bodied people often seek to understand disability is through objective medical terminology, in terms of illness/healing, impairment/rehabilitation and problem/solution. While this language can be appealing in terms of safeness,

political correctness and its sanitary appeal, it too falls short in accurately capturing the experiences of most disabled people by casting disability as a problem.

Many disabled people rightly understand their disability as a permanent part of their identity, rather than a medical abnormality to be treated.

“They were not medical problems to rehabilitate...,” said Heumann. “Accidents, illnesses, genetic conditions, neurological disorders, and aging are facts of the human condition, just as much as race or sex.”

People disabled by chronic illnesses may have a slightly more complicated relationship to medical descriptions of their bodies. As a chronically ill individual myself, I have a variety of medical issues constantly surfacing and shifting that I work to address alongside my care team.

I oftentimes conceive of my symptoms and functional limitations as problems, part of an illness that I would hope to reverse. However, while my specific disability presents medical challenges, it does not reduce my identity to “patient.”

My chronic illness has not constrained or restricted my experience of humanness, a concept unrelated to the ability or disability of my body. Rather, as I experience illness, vulnerability and dependency, I am learning in a new and uncomfortable way what it means to be fully human, just as I am.

“My disability does not lessen my human experience but expands it.”

In this way my disability does not lessen my human experience but expands it.

One final attitude the church takes toward disability surfaces in its language around the topic. Metaphors, analogies and teachings — both subtle and outright — can enforce the pervasive ideology that moral failure, sin and doubt are equivalent to or even cause sickness, while healing is seen as evidence of faith or sanctification.

This view is inconsistent with many gospel accounts of miraculous healings. Consider a story relayed in chapter nine of John's gospel.

Encountering a man blind from birth, Jesus' disciples begin to question him about the cause of the man's disability, reasoning that either he or his parents must have sinned and brought this upon themselves. Jesus rebukes this line of thought, answering that "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

While interpreting this passage, it is easy to assume that the work of God displayed in this man is the healing Jesus performs in the following verses. Only recently have I begun to challenge this

assumption. Perhaps it was not the singular moment of healing, but a lifetime of testament and belief, worship and wonder at an encounter with the living God that shaped this man's story and pointed to God.

Perhaps his reflection of the image of God was not contingent on his healing but was already evident in his humanity that bore witness to the Imago Dei.

Disabled people bear unique — and infinitely valuable — expressions of the image of God. Like any other factor that differentiates, disability is yet another expression of human diversity.

Disability does not lessen or distort one's humanity. The Imago Dei is not so small that it needs to be gate-kept, but instead unifies all of humankind. Disability is something we as the church must embrace to appreciate the richness of the Imago Dei.

Providing accessibility in our places of ministry to people with disabilities is an important first step to gaining the trust of a community that has been wounded by the church countless times. Despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, churches remain exempt from federal regulations requiring accessible

architecture and banning discrimination against disabled people.

At the same time, ensuring accessibility is only the first step in making disabled people feel truly welcomed in places of ministry. Like opening a door, accessibility eliminates a barrier to entry.

However, opening a door does not change what lies beyond the threshold. Our duty is to assess what is happening inside the places of worship to determine whether our theology, rhetoric and practices toward people with disabilities are truly welcoming, as God's love is welcoming to all.

To ensure our places of worship exemplify God's radical inclusivity, perhaps it is best to stray away from constricting models of disability. Instead, we should reexamine the theologies we hold dear in light of God's character and evaluate the fruit they produce.

Most importantly, before rushing to spiritualize someone else's body, we might demonstrate care for their entire being — body and soul alike. **NFJ**

—Libby Carroll, a Baylor University student, served this summer as a journalism intern with Good Faith Media.

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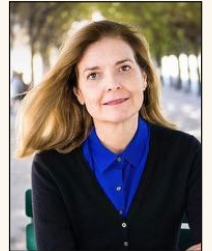
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To learn more about this Jesus-prioritized resource – and how your congregation can participate – visit cbf.net/eyesofjesus.

Something in Common

Jubilee Partners
put justice and
mercy into action

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Just beyond Comer, Georgia's small downtown, unpaved Jubilee Road leads slowly into fields and woods — bisecting a pond where locals enjoy fishing. A bit further, the first of many simple structures appears.

It is a community center called Koinonia — the transliteration of a Greek New Testament word for “holding something in common.” Those who call this northeast Georgia land home, indeed, hold much in common.

Jubilee Partners began when three families — after much prayer and study — decided to leave the communal living at Koinonia Farm in southwest Georgia to start something new.

CLARIFIED CALLING

“We bought the property in 1978 and moved here in '79,” said Don Moseley, who with his wife Carolyn was among the founders seeking to “expand what we were already doing” at Koinonia.

With two other couples, Ed and Mary Ruth Weir and Ryan and Karen Karis — and a total of six children — they pitched their tents within the undeveloped 260 acres of woods, fields and water acquired for \$26,000.

Cow deposits drew many flies — and mosquitos were having a big year during the unusually hot summer of 1979. When fall finally arrived, it was unusually cold. Getting a roof over something was an early goal.

“In December, Carolyn and I, and two kids, moved into a room,” said Don



Don and Carolyn Moseley, along with Tracy Newton (right), share in Jubilee Partners' devotional time. The Moseleys and two other families started the Christian community in northeast Georgia in 1979.

of the community center that was nearing completion. This temporary abode was a welcomed improvement over tent living.

At Koinonia Farm, Don had built a rooftop solar water heater “and other gadgets” — and thought developing solar energy could be a major focus for Jubilee. But soon something else caught their attention.

“There was a report in *Newsweek* about the boat people,” said Carolyn, referring to refugees who fled Vietnam with the humanitarian crisis peaking in the late '70s.

The partners' shared response, said the Moseleys, was: “Hey, we ought to help refugees.”

Physically, the infrastructure was not in place to accommodate these people in need. Spiritually, however, the calling was clear.

“Refugees made sense,” said Don of this awakened calling. “It was exciting.”

EXPANDING COMMUNITY

The community's chosen name comes from the biblical “year of the Lord's favor” — the Jubilee Year — Jesus referenced in launching his ministry.

“Jubilee was a year marked by justice and mercy — themes that throbbed at the center of God's good news from the Old Testament prophets to Jesus,” writes Don in his book, *With Our Own Eyes: The Dramatic Story of a Christian Response to the Wounds of War, Racism, and Oppression* (1996, Herald Press).

“We didn't know yet exactly how we were going to put justice and mercy into action,” he writes, “but we recognized that the ancient vision was a good one to keep before us.”

Robbie Buller, who had lived with one of founding families back at Koinonia, came to Jubilee in 1980, just eight months after the first partners arrived.

“I wanted to be a part of a group trying to live out their faith in a comprehensive way,” said Robbie. “And I really dug the people I was living with.”

Growing up in a Mennonite farming community in east-central Nebraska, where “everybody shared the same heritage, religion, cultural identity and ethnicity,” Robbie said he “was eager to experience life different from my own.”

In college, he read varied African-American writers including James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver. “Their writings influenced me a lot...,” he said, “and brought me into contact with my white privilege.”

In response, Robbie taught public school in inner-city Omaha. But he soon wanted to find something more immersive — where people are “living their own lives in response to who Jesus is” while intensely seeking “what God wants those people to do in this world.”

A second motivation, he added, was a desire to live below the poverty level as part of his anti-war conviction that had been heightened during the Vietnam War.

LOCAL RESPONSE

A newspaper headline — “Christian commune being developed” — alerted the rural northeast Georgia community to the formation of Jubilee Partners in the late-’70s.

At best, visions of hippies — doing all sorts of things — danced in the heads of locals. At worst, the November 1978 cultic massacre in Jonestown, Guyana, was top of mind.

So, the partners were quick to prove their good neighbor practices — first by keeping the fishing holes open at no cost. While there was early suspicion, Robbie said the overall reception has been “much more positive than we expected at the beginning.”

Media coverage of Jubilee’s work with refugees put the small town in a positive spotlight. In February 1980, *People* magazine published an article on Jubilee’s compassionate work with Nicaraguan children.

The local reaction, said Robbie, was, “Wow, Comer is in the news.” Later, the CBS news show, *60 Minutes*, had a segment on the Lost Boys of Sudan that featured the hospitality of Jubilee Partners.

The city limits cuts through Jubilee property. Unsure of how their refugee settlement work would be received, the partners built the related buildings on land outside those limits.

However, early on, partners started attending surrounding churches to get to know and share worship with locals. And many forms of hospitality have grown along with the Jubilee community.



A rustic sign with a call to prayer marks the entrance to the Jubilee Partners community.



A community cemetery holds the bodies of former Jubilee Partners, refugees, homeless persons from Atlanta, and those executed by the State of Georgia.

Various teachers, police, EMTs and others who serve the town of Comer are invited to the two-acre blueberry patch each year. Public schools now include Jubilee as a field trip destination — to see their gardening techniques, use of solar energy, and classes that teach English to refugees.

“Local people here, in general, have been very supportive,” said Robbie. “But it took years to build that trust.”

While Jubilee has evolved over the years, so has the small town of Comer — with about 10 to 15 percent, Robbie estimates, of its current population being Karen immigrants originally from Burma (Myanmar).

And, surprisingly, “most did not come through Jubilee,” he said. They are attracted to others from their background in addition to the rural lifestyle they’ve long known.

“They’ve always lived off the land,” said Robbie, noting however that many rent homes for a long time until they are able to purchase. So, Jubilee offers them a place to farm.

“We’ve designated 14 acres to be used by our immigrant neighbors,” said Robbie.

Seven acres are divided into quarter-acre vegetable garden plots, and the other seven are used for raising small animals. A minimal fee is charged to cover infrastructure costs such as fencing and water.



Friday's noontime gathering is dedicated to singing and sharing. Other weekday gatherings involve Bible study. The community worships together at 5 p.m. on Sundays so partners can attend various churches in the area.

REFUGEES

"We've been so blessed by God through all of this," said Don of Jubilee's continuing resettlement work that has brought approximately 4,000 refugees, so far, from at least 39 countries.

The first — 14 Cuban refugees who were part of the "freedom flotilla" — came in September 1980 while infrastructure was still minimal. Other "boat people," from Southeast Asia, would follow.

Year after year, more and more refugees have passed through the welcoming arms of Jubilee Partners — providing challenges and opportunities that could (and sometimes do) fill books.

During a recent weekday community devotional time — which features singing on Fridays — Rachel Bjork asked: "Can we sing 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus' in English and then try the first verse in Spanish?"

Rachel oversees the partners' resettlement efforts, working with various agencies to bring new refugees to Jubilee. She is also connected with shelters that house asylum seekers and churches that work with migrants and others such as sex trafficking victims.

"It's like a close network," she said of

those with whom Jubilee coordinates its hospitality efforts.

Typically, refugees stay for two months and are provided with basic needs along with training in language and life skills. Some others stay longer as needed.

This particular Friday sing-along included a song titled "El Pescador" — which in English means "The Fisherman." When the singing subsided, Don spoke.

"This song always gives me chills," he said — recalling "the 800 Salvadoran refugees we brought over in buses from Texas." They were singing this song.

The lyrics, in English, include: "O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me. And, while smiling, have called out my name. Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me. Now with you I will seek other seas."

"We were all just mesmerized," said Don. "I think that's how Jubilee got this song."

Those 800 Salvadorans, he said later, were all accepted for permanent resettlement by Canada. "So, we went back to Texas to get the next load."

A total of 1,321 Central Americans had their initial temporary resettlement at Jubilee, he said, the "biggest surge" they've experienced.

HOW IT WORKS

Jubilee Partners, Inc. (a nonprofit organization) is a "common-purse" community supported by charitable gifts, mostly from individuals. Some churches contribute also.

"This common pot allows us to keep costs low," said Robbie, noting that no one receives a salary but works in the various areas of needs and services.

Housing, food and medical care are provided to each partner — along with "\$20 in pocket money" each week. A fleet of older, community-owned vehicles serves their transportation needs.

In addition to the weekday devotions and lunch, the community holds a potluck dinner on Friday — sometimes followed by games. Worship time is at 5 p.m. on Sundays.

Leadership has evolved over time to a less-cumbersome model now, said Robbie.

Steve Bjork was recently elected by the partners to a two-year term as community leader. He chooses a leadership team to facilitate what matters they decide and what goes to the partners.

Teams of about three persons oversee various aspects of community life including

gardening, vehicle maintenance, volunteer programs, refugee administration and hosting, and much more.

“Teams can make more decisions themselves now,” said Robbie. “But they can get as much input as needed.”

Currently, Jubilee has 14 partners and three novices — those in the process of entering or leaving the community. Volunteers come for days, months or even a year — sometimes feeling the call to the community fulltime.

DEATH ROW

“Being a public witness against the death penalty has been a part of Jubilee’s emphasis since the beginning,” said Robbie. He and other partners visit those on death row and minister to their families too.

The partners hold a silent vigil in the university town of Athens, Ga., about 20 miles away, each time the state executes someone. Robbie counts 76 executions since Jubilee formed.

A cemetery was created at Jubilee when Cuban refugee Jesús Torres died on Christmas Day in 1980. It provides a final act of hospitality to those desiring to be buried there or have no other place available.

“There are six or seven guys in the cemetery who were executed by the State of Georgia and their families didn’t have the resources to bury them,” he said.

More recently, Jubilee and others created a fund that provides for cremation services so families can dispose of the ashes in the ways and places they prefer, often closer to their homes.

And what does the need for burial help tell you about those who are executed? “They are poor,” said Robbie.

Cemetery plots, dug by hand, have also become the resting place of homeless persons from Atlanta and former refugees whose families wanted their burials back where they were once warmly welcomed.

Those who too often are feared, resented and demeaned find a different response from Jubilee.

“Nothing overcomes the paralysis of fear or the dullness of mind better than going out and acting on our faith,” writes Don in *Faith Beyond Borders: Doing Justice in a Dangerous*

World (2010, Abingdon Press).

“Even the smallest step, taken in love, clears our vision enough so we can see to take another step toward God’s emerging will for us,” he added. “And then another.”

WHY HERE?

“The original draw was communal life,” said Christina Dyck, who arrived in 2005 and is a Bible study leader for the community. Then she adds: “Refugees are what keep me here.”

Living in community can be hard, she confessed, especially during times of transition.

“But it is also life-giving,” she said. “The greatest blessings are also the greatest challenges.”

“They keep on coming,” said Don of younger individuals and families arriving at Jubilee over the years, including a total of nearly 1,000 seasonal volunteers.

“Some stay for a month, others for a year; some decide to become partners,” he said. “Here we are 43 years later, and God has led us all the way.”

Younger persons are drawn to Jubilee as a place to seriously explore what it means to follow Jesus — yet it is that same desire that has long been compelling.

“We wanted to find a place where being Christian is life,” said Blake Ortman, straddling one of the community’s shared bicycles.

He and his wife Sue have been at Jubilee for 32 years, following 12 years as Mennonite missionaries in El Salvador.

“We need to live in a place where people are on the margins of life,” he said. Not to “help” refugees, he made clear, “but to experience life with them.”

Likewise, longtime partner Robbie referenced the context out of which the community was born and named. The biblical “Year of Jubilee” was the designated time in which debts were forgiven and society was reset every 50 years.

Jesus, when launching his public ministry, aligned his purposes with those stated by an earlier prophet. Reading from the scroll of Isaiah, Jesus announced:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to

proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:16-19 NASB).

“Recovering the sight of the blind is about us,” said Robbie of those blinded by privilege and wealth. Having those scales removed requires a different perspective, he said, than top-down “helping” others.

“We learn from refugees and persons on death row whose life experiences we can hardly fathom,” he said. “We wouldn’t have access to such learning if surrounded only by persons with the same backgrounds and experiences as our own.” NFJ



Blake Ortman, on one of the community’s shared bicycles, pauses to discuss what drew him to Jubilee Partners after doing mission work in El Salvador.

Questions Christians ask scientists

Are you a creationist?

BY PAUL WALLACE

A genuinely curious scientific colleague asked that question upon learning that I am a Baptist minister. No, I am not a creationist.

I love science, I teach science, and I do science. I am also a pastor. I teach, I preach, and I attend to my congregation.

I am one of many who hold science in one hand and faith in the other and find no essential conflict between the two. I'm just more conspicuous about it than most people.

My colleague's question reveals an assumption that many people hold about science and religion: that they are not only opposed, but essentially opposed.

In my colleague's mind "Baptist minister" was synonymous with "creationist," and his confusion arose because he knew me as a member of the physics department faculty. How could I take both science and religion so seriously?

This popular idea of the opposition of science and religion has its origin in countless headlines, debates, online resources and books that rely on and amplify the bipolar, easy-to-grasp idea of head-to-head conflict.

Also the Galileo affair, the Scopes monkey trial, and other historical events are often regarded as evidence for a natural enmity between these two ways of knowing. So there must be some



truth to the idea that the religion-science relationship is primarily adversarial, right?

No. There really isn't any. The truth is that conflict sells.

Conflict writes headlines, generates clicks, moves books and makes for memorable history. Only someone who took a course or did some careful research and reading on their own could discover the world of books, stories, videos, podcasts and history celebrating and developing the rich dynamic relationship between science and the Christian faith.

The truth is, a long spectrum of beliefs stretches out between the most strident creationist and the most rigid scientific atheist, and a hundred different perspectives find a home on it.

In fact, you can zoom in on any point, to whatever resolution you like, and find nearly as many viewpoints on the spectrum as there are people who hold them. I would like to survey this spectrum, and eight distinct perspectives will suffice for our purpose.

The first six fall under the heading of creationism, a variegated set of views held by persons who insist that life arose from specific, identifiable acts of divine creation; who rely heavily on certain readings of the Bible to guide them in these efforts; and who reject scientific arguments that contradict their understanding of scripture.

Unlike the final two, these six perspectives maintain, at least in part, some antagonism toward the methodology and conclusions of modern science. Here they are, in order of increasing emphasis on the role of science:

Flat Earth: Some people, living in the U.S. today, believe that the earth is flat. Their belief is based largely upon an ultra-literal reading of Genesis 1 and a deep conspiratorial suspicion of all non-biblical authorities including NASA; virtually all living people; their elementary, middle and high school teachers; and Aristotle, who used a brilliant but simple scientific argument to prove, nearly 300 years before Jesus was born, that the earth is spherical.

Many flat-earth groups meet in bars and in homes, but over the last several years the Flat Earth International Conference has been held in Raleigh, Denver and Dallas. Other public flat-earth meetings have taken place in the United Kingdom, Italy and Brazil.

Geocentrism: This is the belief that the earth is spherical and resides motionless in the center of the universe. Again, adherents of geocentrism tend to be very conservative Christians.

Perhaps the best known geocentrist is Robert Sungenis, an American

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author and filmmaker who leads a Catholic splinter group known as Catholic Apologetics International and who in 2014 produced a full-length documentary called *The Principle* to promote his geocentric viewpoint.

Young Earth Creationism: Here we have the most popular and best funded of all creationist perspectives.

Ken Ham, with his organization Answers in Genesis, is a well-known advocate of this view, which admits a round earth and its motion around the sun but holds that the universe and everything in it was created about 6,000 years ago in six 24-hour periods, conforming to the Bible's literal timelines.

Flat-earthers and geocentrists tend to be young-earth creationists also, but the majority of young-earth creationists do not hold those more restrictive views.

Gap Creationism: Not all creationism is based on a young-earth model. Gap creationism holds to the six literal days of creation found in Genesis 1 but posits a vast expanse of time between the first and second verses of Genesis, allowing for an old earth and for consilience with a larger range of scientific theories than its young-earth cousin. Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart are among the names of better-known gap creationists.

Day-Age Creationism: Perhaps the most popular version of old-earth creationism, the day-age theory suggests that the days of Genesis refer not to literal days but can instead be lined up with certain epochs in cosmic history.

It therefore relies on a metaphorical reading of English translations of Genesis while simultaneously keeping true to its overall timeline. The interpretation of the Hebrew word *yom*, which can be translated as both a 24-hour day and as an unspecified period of time, lies at the foundation of this perspective.

Many people hold this view, but Hugh Ross is perhaps its most well-known defender.

Progressive Creationism: This form of creationism accepts the general cosmic timeline suggested by scientists and microevolution (small, short-term changes within a species) but does not accept macroevolution (large, long-term changes including speciation).

Advocates of this point of view believe species do not appear gradually but are created fully formed in serial acts of divine creation at key points in cosmic history. Progressive creationism may overlap with day-age creationism; they are not mutually exclusive.

The final two perspectives make room for a full acceptance of science, of its methods, and of its conclusions (which they understand to be ever and always tentative).

Theistic evolution: This broad term comprises all views that find no essential conflict between Christian teaching on one hand and the methodologies and conclusions of modern science on the other. This view is taught at most mainline Protestant seminaries and is the official view of the Roman Catholic Church.

Atheistic evolution: Just as it sounds, this view fully accepts evolution and other scientific theories while rejecting the idea of God altogether.

A connection is often (but not always) drawn between the two: if one accepts science, one cannot accept God.

Like many young-earth creationists, those who hold this perspective tend to think less about religion *and* science than they do religion *or* science. For them it is an either/or, not a both/and, proposition.

While creationists come down on the side of religion, scientifically motivated atheists come down on the side of science.

Again, more viewpoints exist outside of these eight, but these might give you a flavor of what's out there. I myself adhere to theistic evolution and write from that point of view.

I love science; it is an intellectual adventure of the first order. The scientific enterprise is limited in scope and prone to error, but it is our best, most dependable means of addressing certain questions.

In the long view it is self-correcting and tends toward reliability. Science, in my view, is one way to love God with all our minds.

We have no reason to run from it or to defend our faith against it. As Galileo wrote more than 400 years ago, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended us to forego their use." NFJ

NURTURING FAITH COMMENTARY

Expansive 12-volume resource will enrich Bible preaching, teaching and learning

BY KIRA DEWEY

Good Faith Media is rolling out the first volumes in a new and expansive 12-volume set that provides insights and illustrations for preaching and teaching.

Written by longtime Bible study writer Tony Cartledge, the *Nurturing Faith Commentary* series will cover every text for every Sunday in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary.

“These volumes are the product of a committed desire to provide quality Bible study resources for Christians who come to the scripture with open minds and a desire to go beneath a surface reading,” said Cartledge. “Our goal has been to provide pastors, teachers, and other Bible students with both academic and pastoral insights in approachable language.”

Cartledge, who teaches at Campbell University Divinity School and also serves as contributing editor and curriculum writer for Good Faith Media, holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies from Duke University.

“From the time we started providing a Bible study curriculum in the *Nurturing Faith Journal*,” Cartledge affirms, “we have billed it as a study that attempts to bring the academic and lay worlds together, to apply critical insights in an understandable way.”

That same approach will be found in the *Nurturing Faith Commentary* volumes.

“I don’t ‘dumb things down’ or take the text as little more than a starting point going off on a topic, as many curriculum writers do,” said Cartledge. “And I don’t avoid texts that are difficult to interpret. I provide options for understanding.”

Cartledge used his spring sabbatical to launch the project.

“It occurred to me that I had been writing lectionary-based Bible studies for nearly 11 years and had been through the three-year lectionary cycle almost four times,” he said. “I thought of compiling those lessons

into a multi-volume set — but didn’t want to leave gaps for texts I had not yet covered.”

So Cartledge has written enough new studies for the project to include a commentary/study on every lectionary text for every possible Sunday in Years A, B and C.

“The project seemed much more straightforward until I realized that every Sunday after Pentecost from Proper 5 to 29 has not four, but at least six texts to choose from,” he noted.

“Proper 19 has seven, including two optional texts for the first reading and one option for the second reading,” he continued. “That meant I’m having to write a lot more material from scratch than I first envisioned.”

Mitch Randall, CEO of Good Faith Media, noted the uniqueness of this project compared to verse-by-verse commentaries on books of the Bible.

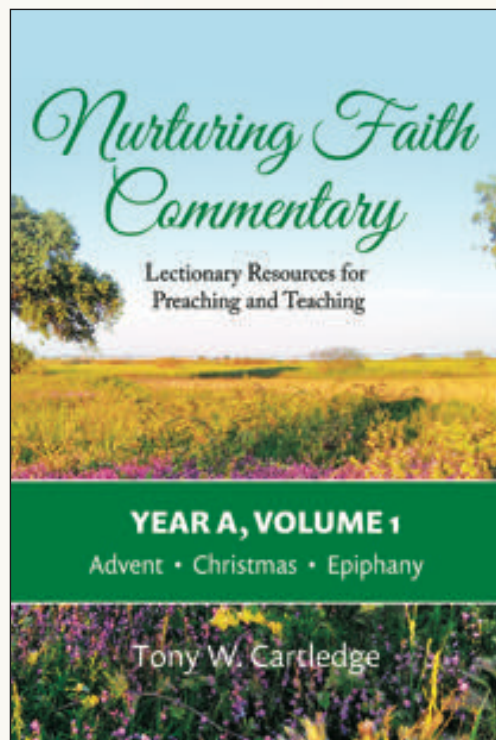
“For years, Tony has written extensively about Bible passages, following the lectionary, and those writings have been extremely well received by subscribers to *Nurturing Faith Journal* who have gleaned invaluable information from his interpretation and application of the texts,” he said.

Executive Editor and Publisher John Pierce describes his longtime colleague as a uniquely gifted person.

“He’s brilliant — not only as a biblical scholar, but with a wide range of knowledge — yet he is warm, humble and caring,” said Pierce. “Tony’s writings are never stuffy or canned. He gives insights and illustrations that are easy to understand and, most importantly, to apply.”

While taking on a project that is bigger than first envisioned, Cartledge continues to roll out the studies that will become invaluable resources to preachers, teachers and Bible students.

“I don’t bring a particular agenda to the



work other than a desire to understand the text and look for ways it might help me and others to be better followers of Jesus,” he said.

“A primary interest at Good Faith Media is to encourage people to see the world and its needs as Jesus would, to have a ‘Jesus worldview,’” said Cartledge. “I don’t use that term in every lesson, but texts from the Old and New Testament alike point — whether positively or negatively — toward the values Jesus taught.”

Nurturing Faith Commentary will be offered individually (in print initially) as each volume is released or by subscription for the entire set. Order details can be found at goodfaithmedia.org and in the next issue of this journal.

A generous gift to sponsor this project was received from Bob and Pat Barker of Fuqua-Varina, N.C. *NFJ*

—Kira Dewey, a student at Palm Beach Atlantic University, served as an Ernest C. Hynds Jr. intern with Good Faith Media.

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At Nurturing Faith, we believe the voices of inclusive people of faith are underrepresented, leaving many feeling isolated. Through Good Faith Media we provide a space for voices to unite and impact the world for good.

We offer an alternative perspective of faith—engaging political, cultural, and societal trends and issues in a constructive manner.



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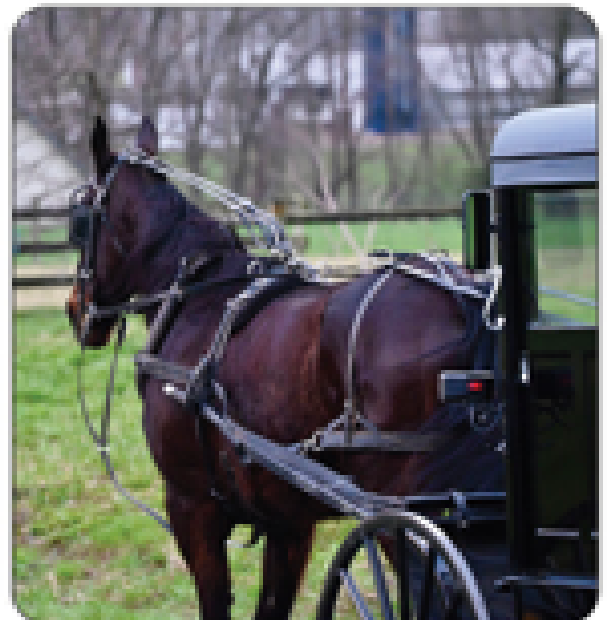
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