

Foolish Love



The Love that Transcends All Understanding

Devotional



First United Methodist Church
Downtown Bentonville

Foolish Love

Devotional Book

Welcome to the devotional book that accompanies the *Foolish Love* Lenten study. This study is provided by the people of First United Methodist Church in Bentonville, Arkansas. We have made it available for free to any church or individual, but especially had in mind our brothers and sisters in the United Methodist Church. In this season where we have seen so many of those we love and count as family choose to leave us, and when we have also felt the pinch of diminished resources, we want you to feel the love we have for you and the hope we all share in the resurrection promise of Jesus Christ.

The devotions in this book are all created by people in our church community. We have included people of all ages and perspectives. Our youngest contributors are in elementary school, and our oldest is approaching a century of life. Contributors were sent a passage or two, information on the theme of the week, and a description of the goal of the whole series. They were then given freedom to respond to that information in whatever way they saw fit. Some reflections are a short paragraph or two, and some are artistic responses. All are a gift from one follower of Christ to you.

There will also sporadically be days when we did not produce a devotional, but instead will share with you a passage for your own reflection. Throughout your time with this devotional, we hope that you feel the love we have for you as we all reflect on Foolish Love together. Blessings for your Lenten journey!

Themes for Each Week

| | |
|---|--|
| Ash Wednesday – First Saturday (February 14-17) | What is Love? |
| Week One (February 18-24) | Foolish Love Forgives |
| Week Two (February 25- March 2) | Foolish Love Breaks the Rules |
| Week Three (March 3-9) | Foolish Love is Unfair |
| Week Four (March 10-16) | Foolish Love is Wasteful |
| Week Five (March 17-23) | Foolish Love is Prodigal |
| Week Six (March 24-30) | Foolish Love is Risky |
| Easter Sunday (March 31) | Foolish Love is the Hope of Easter! |



Ash Wednesday Half Week:
What is Love?

Date: Wednesday, February 14 (Ash Wednesday)

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

My first personal experience with these verses was in sorority meetings in college. We read and listened to 1 Corinthians 13 every week, and those words can still take me back to the love and support I felt from that group of young women, my sisters.

Today, as a wife, a mother of grown sons, and a teacher of children, I look more deeply into the meaning of Paul's words. Christian love, the selfless love the Greeks call *agape*, is the basis for all spiritual gifts. It removes the obstacle of self from the purpose of serving others well and is how I work to make choices in my daily life now.

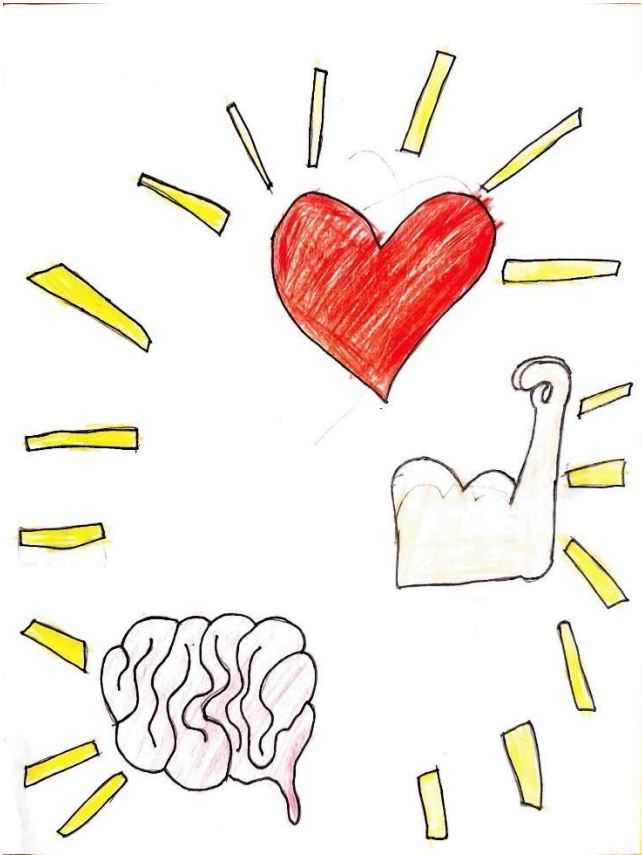
All the ways Paul describes love, not only what it can be but also what it shouldn't be, can show us how to serve others. Our United Methodist Church continues to model Christian love both inside and outside the congregation. Here, I have been invited to join groups studying the Bible or knitting prayer shawls and baby blankets. I have been allowed to serve in worship and work with children. I have seen individuals bring ideas to the church for phone cards for soldiers, support for classroom teachers, scholarships for local high school seniors, holiday gifts for children in need, and food for hungry families. We have repeatedly joined together in Christian love to offer our support through prayer, fundraising, and volunteer hours. These various opportunities were available to all, and one can only wonder how much more we can do together. The joy and challenge of a Christian community reaching out in Christian love is that there is always more to do, more

to investigate, more to offer. And the spiritual rewards are boundless.

- Marjie Lewis

Date: Thursday, February 15

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 6:4-9



- Aidan Weatherford

Date: Friday, February 16

Scripture Reading: Mark 12:28-34

Upon reading this passage I am somewhat perplexed. It seems a given that the greatest of the commandments is to love the “Lord your God with all” that is within you. It is after all the first commandment, expanded beautifully by Jesus in this account, but still undeniably an iteration of the first of the ten.

Perhaps this needed to be interpreted and restated in Jesus’ day as we note the 33rd verse: “To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

That verse reminds us that the processes of practiced religion are secondary to the crux of faith, that being the love of God. Then as today, are we sometimes caught up in legalism and ceremony in contrast to the pure love of God? And of one another for that matter. It is interesting to recognize that none of the commandments specifically tell us to love our neighbor. Six through ten instruct us as to how to *treat* our neighbor (not the least of which is to avoid killing him or her). But none specifically commands that we *love*. But in this encounter in the temple courts with the inquisitive teacher, Jesus defines what love is. To me loving God is the easy part. In today’s strife-filled, divisive politics and even war, loving your neighbor, all your neighbors, can be extremely difficult.

This Lenten season I propose the need for prayer to bring me to a better understanding, to love my neighbors and even further those who would be my

enemies----to do my best to follow The Greatest Commandment and love them all.

- Ted Talley

Date: Saturday, February 17

Scripture Reading: John 15:9-17

These nine verses, consisting of one hundred and seventy-four words, are powerful. Four words caught my attention: *love*; *remain*; *friend*; and *name*. The theme for the passage is *love*—not superficial love, but deep, abiding love. Jesus uses love as a verb, not a noun—it’s active, not something in a Hallmark card, but demonstrated on the cross.

Remain is another important word in the passage. To remain in Jesus’ love implies a beginning, but no ending. To remain is timeless. It’s continuous. It’s always. How do we remain in His love? Jesus gives a necessary condition—obey his commandments. What are His commandments? “Love each other as I have loved you.”

Jesus gives new meaning to the word *friend*. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” In this context, how many friends do you have? Are they friends or are they acquaintances? For how many people are you a friend? Jesus gives a necessary condition to be His friend—do what He commands. What does He command? “Love each other.” (In singing the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” consider the words and remember His commandment.)

Regarding the word *name*, Jesus said, “... so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.”

While serving as UA's chancellor, I'd hear of things being asked for in my name, e.g., "The chancellor wants us to do such and so," when I'd never even thought about "such and so." To ask for something in someone else's name, we need to know what the person would ask for under the same set of circumstances. This calls for intimate knowledge, not just casual acquaintance. It requires us to truly know the person in whose name we are asking.

Notice Jesus used the words "so that" before "whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." "so that" ties to bearing fruit, which relates to the necessary conditions and the rest of the passage, especially *love, remain, friend* and *name*.

- John A. White, Jr.



Week One:
Foolish Love Forgives

Date: Sunday, February 18

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:21-24; 18:21-35

Humility. That is a concept that seems to be a bit out of style in this day and age. It is much more “in style” to deflect, deflect, deflect, and point your finger at the other side. Showing humility is seen as a sign of weakness. It has somehow become a negative to admit any wrongdoing; there is a prevailing thought that any admission of wrongdoing is only ammunition that can later be used to attack you. Our world has become a binary where you are either right, or it is someone else’s fault.

In the above passage we see Jesus using a rhetorical technique that he often used: “You have heard it said...but I say.” In this, he would quote some aspect of the law, in this case, “don’t commit murder,” and then would extend it to explain to the listeners other actions that were akin to murder, in this case, simply harboring anger against another human. That seems a big jump from the act of murder, but I believe that Jesus’s point was that harboring this anger created the same type of rift within the community that murder did. If you are this angry with someone, they may as well be dead to you.

Notice that Jesus changes his tune towards the end. For the first half, he is speaking to the listeners about their own anger, but for the second half, he encourages the listeners to take the first step towards healing. Reading between the lines a little bit, I believe part of what Jesus is encouraging is for the listeners to make the first step towards making amends, even if they might have experienced the “bigger” hurt. The healing

and wholeness of the community was more important than any sort of personal grudges anyone harbored. With that said, taking the first step towards healing necessitates a posture of humility. If we are going to forgive and be forgiven, sometimes that means taking an uncomfortable first step and admitting our own wrongdoing. Let us all strive to take these steps and work toward a more loving and compassionate world.

- Wesley Wells

Date: Monday, February 19

Scripture Reading: John 8:1-11

When I read this chapter and re-read it, I was going in a different direction completely. Today it's clearer to me that none of us humans are without sin; therefore, we cannot judge another! Interestingly, when Jesus asked anyone without sin to throw a stone, none could. (Leviticus 20:10 -If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.) Jesus gave her a second chance - why? Do we all deserve a second chance to make things right?

“The greater their sin and deeper their misery, the more earnest and tender will be your efforts for their recovery.” – Ellen G. White

Jesus taught unconditional Love.

Most people know me as the lady with the welcoming smile and a warm hug! Well, there's another side that I've held hostage for more than 20 years. It's a demon, that until this writing I didn't realize needed to be unleashed. When I was asked to write about “Foolish Love Forgives,” without hesitation I said yes. I was not

thinking I'd have to do some soul searching into Marie Hughes Blankenship. No, I'm not an adulteress, murderer, thief, serial killer, or anything like that. But I have harbored hate for a supplier that I was forced to work with and cover up things against company policy because I was threatened by my supervisor. I was close to retirement, I stuck it out until I could retire without penalty, daily withstanding verbal attacks from that "supervisor"! Subsequently, my husband believes that caused my health decline that could not be immediately diagnosed. After many specialized hospital trips to Mayo in Rochester, MN, doctors determined that I had juvenile epilepsy, a rare form for a 63 year-old! After many tries of medications to treat the symptoms, we finally found the correct formula 3 years later. My condition, doctors believe, is irreversible, causing me to be on medications for the remainder of my life. I do not have any long-term memory, sense of smell or taste. I rely on my husband, family and friends to share memories and events with me. I keep journals now of what I'm told as a reminder of events of my past. That four-letter word HATE can cause so much pain and misery, had I used my biblical teachings of the other four-letter word LOVE, I probably would be able to do a lot more things I used to enjoy. As of this writing I HAVE FORGIVEN THAT COMPANY AND SUPERVISOR and unleashed my demon! Do you think I deserve a second chance?

- Marie Blankenship

Date: Tuesday, February 20

Scripture Reading: Mark 2:1-12

The kids in my neighborhood like to play with sticks. We of course use the proper safety precautions, like not aiming at each other's faces. But one day things got out of hand. My neighbor and I both liked this one stick. It was a long and thin one made out of pine that looked like a spear. My friend had that stick for several months, but soon forgot about it and left it outside. So I took it. I enjoyed that stick for a very long time, but one time when I took it outside, he spotted it and demanded that I give it back to him. I said, "No!" but he was determined and tried to take it with force. I fought back, because I thought I could win, being bigger than him. But as we fought, he bit me, and it hurt like the dickens! The pain caused me to realize that this was going nowhere. "Stop!" I yelled. Apparently, I had also hurt him in the process, so he ran inside his house. A few moments later, his mom came out with the stick and broke it over her leg. She explained that no stick was worth hurting someone over. Just like that, the conflict was over, and his mom brought over my mom. We talked it out. As we discussed the conflict, I felt as if my friend owed me an apology. At that time, I would have thought I was the one forgiving my friend, like in the passage. But I soon realized that I was also in the wrong. I could have given him the stick and avoided the issue. I could have returned the stick when I found it. But I did neither. We were both like the paralyzed man who received forgiveness. As Jesus points out, it can be very hard to forgive someone. In fact, Jesus compares it to healing someone's paralysis. But forgiveness is

always worth it. I am very grateful that I have Jesus' example to follow.

- Duncan McCullough

Date: Wednesday, February 21

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:10-19

In Acts 9:10-19, Ananias is sent by Jesus to Saul so Saul may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias doesn't understand and questions why Jesus would do this for a man who was openly talking against him, but Jesus said he had plans for Saul. Although not fully understanding, Ananias does what Jesus asked.

A friend told me I was too nice for my own good and was a fool because I continued to be kind to someone who was not kind to me. Not always though. There were times that I obsessively ran the ugly words from this person through my head and came up with one-line zingers that I would plan to say to get back at them. Sleep was interrupted and I was beginning to talk badly about this person.

I prayed for some relief, but nothing changed. Then one night, as I was questioning why I couldn't forgive this person and just let everything go, I clearly heard to pray for the other person too. I questioned this but did add them to my prayer. At first it felt odd, but in no time, the turmoil inside me was gone, and I was able to forgive them. In fact, I came to understand them and their actions while being true to myself.

Find the courage to listen and follow Jesus even when you have questions, just like Ananias.

- Jodi Burks

Date: Thursday, February 22

Scripture Reading: Luke 7:36-50

I am but a white feathered egret raised up from the mud of West Tennessee. This piece of land wedged between two mighty rivers is my home: the village that raised me. Though I sing a melody recounting stories of my neighbors who mothered me, sometimes I look across the river and weep. Heartbroken by the words said and actions done that have directly attacked my soul and humanity. I've been told to fly away and not put up with this hate. But I tell you hear these words, "They are my family and for that I extend all the grace and patience I have to them." I know deep down that grace may not be reciprocated back to me in this lifetime, but it's not about that.

It's about a mirror.

Hanging on the wall, beautiful and strong.

Bound together by the Spirit reflecting the image of God.

But the wall has quaked, the mirror has fallen, and we have shattered.

Sharp, uncomfortable, unnavigable glass blades strewn on the floor.

We find ourselves amid this dangerous landscape, constantly reminded of how messy we are.

But we do not forget our purpose: what we once were and are capable of now.

While broken and shattered, we are all still reflections of the Divine.

Anger and resentment will attempt to bar us from reconnection and reunion.

But it is not our birthright to remain divided and fragmented.

Through forgiveness we pull ourselves together becoming one in the Spirit.

So, when I gaze across the river or the aisle, I remind myself of the mirror: who we are. Though difficult, I forgive my neighbor for being sharp, a symptom of the shaking wall, not a definition of their soul. When we look to our brothers and sisters truly as our family, we cannot ignore the Spirit that binds us. My village of West Tennessee gave me my egret feathers, but it was forgiveness, freedom from anger and resentment, that granted me flight. And it is with these wings I shall fly back home again and again for as long as I live.

- Jake Cocke

Date: Friday, February 23

Scripture Reading: John 21:15-17

When Pastor Michelle asked me to write a Lenten devotional, I was taken aback. She could not have known at the time that I was in a state of high anxiety. 2023 had been a tough year at work, and I had placed a large amount of pressure on myself. Over the year it had been building, but I was not aware. I have a very

close friend at work and a few months prior to Michelle's ask, he pointed out that I was not hearing others but rather just listening. I was creating conflict when it did not actually exist.

When I read this passage, which I have read many times over the years, I see Peter's reaction from a whole different perspective. It was the same reaction I was having with co-workers. Peter was hurt that Jesus asked him 3 times if he loved him. Not hearing that Jesus was calling Peter to be the rock that was to build His church. Peter was to be the foundation for Jesus' ministry. But he was only able to hear a portion of the message.

Over the past few weeks while working on the devotion, I have been able to forgive myself for not hearing others. I see where my anxiety was clouding my view of my work world. Jesus knew the reaction he was going to get from Peter. He lovingly asked Peter 3 times to hear Him.

This Lenten season, know that God's Grace is all around us each day. I hope you take the time to not only listen to His calling, but to hear as well.

- Bill Fernandez

Date: Saturday, February 24

Scripture Reading: Romans 5:8

A number of years ago, we sang in a church choir. When Lent came, the choir director said that it was time to get out the sad songs. When someone close to us dies, we do say prayers of sorrow and at the service we may then sing sad songs. Death is something that saddens the heart, for a person close to us will no longer be in our lives. We rejoice in the memories but

miss the companionship and fun that we had. Had we been with the disciples watching Jesus die, sorrow would have been great. This motley crew discovers later that what seems like a tragedy is actually an expression of love for them.

Jesus is crucified with two criminals. God's love for the repentant one shows that love and grace for even those rejected by society and the government. As we practice the imitation of Christ, we also must show love for the unlovable. As I consider the teachings of Jesus, I wonder if there wasn't love for the unrepentant one. Only God knows what was going on in the life and the mind of a criminal. Can we use the guidance of the Holy Spirit to see those persons as God sees them? We will fall way short, but we can let God provide his grace and love for them.

Paul is not watching the crucifixion as he writes this. He is looking back to the whole passion story discussing the meaning of Christ's death while remembering the resurrection. He rejoiced when he learned that the crucifixion was for him and all of those created in the image of God. When we look back at the crucifixion, it is time to get out the happy songs. Let your voice rejoice in the love of God that we see in Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection.

- Tim Pratt



Week Two:
Foolish Love Breaks the Rules

Date: Sunday, February 25

Scripture Reading: Mark 7:24-29; Luke 13:10-17

The scriptures for this week are two stories of Jesus healing. The first is about a young girl and the second about a mature woman. In both passages Jesus broke rules of the traditional Jewish faith of his day. Imagine you were present at these healings as you read –

“From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’” (Mark 7:24-29 NRSVUE)

“Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath

day.’ But the Lord answered him and said, ‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?’ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.” (Luke 13:10-17 NRSVUE)

Yes, Jesus broke several rules in these stories: 1) He had a conversation with a Gentile woman and healed her daughter, and 2) He saw a Jewish woman in the synagogue and called her to him and healed her on the Sabbath. The obvious question is “Why did he do it?” and the answer is “Because he saw their need and loved them.”

Jesus was very clear about love. He taught that the commandments to love God, neighbor and self were the most important. He also taught that love of neighbor included enemies, those living on the margins of society, and those considered unworthy of love. Jesus showed love to individuals and but also to crowds of people that he felt were being harassed by governments or rulers.

Jesus’ kind of love is much more than obeying a command – it is about doing as Jesus did – performing service and action that is done as service to Christ himself. Our acts of love, our acts of service, our attempts at seeking justice and exposing the injustices of the world are all to be done as a service to the Christ that is within each person we touch or serve.

As disciples of Christ we are called to love, to seek justice for the poor and oppressed. We are called to

break the rules of our society and stand up for those in need. Our love must lead us to challenge the systems that allow people to be hungry; that deprive people of health care; that lead to violence and hatred. Yes, Jesus' kind of love may be considered "foolish" but as a disciple of the one who broke the rules of his day, I too have to share that kind of love in my community, nation and world.

- Joyce D. Sohl

Date: Monday, February 26

Scripture Reading: Mark 3:1-6

Personal Reflection

This is the first passage you are invited to read and reflect on yourself. For these self-reflections, you will be given one prompting question. But feel free to reflect in whatever way is meaningful for you.

Question: Have you ever done something that led to someone looking at you with anger, deeply grieved at your unyielding heart? What does it take to restore a relationship in that kind of situation?

Date: Tuesday, February 27

Scripture Reading: Peter and Cornelius

“Bended Rules” a story by Charlotte “Charley” Grant,
age 8

These are some ways in my life that I have bended the rules to show love.

This reminds me that I know we aren’t supposed to talk to strangers because it can be scary, but sometimes I ask my mommy if we can give money to people on the street. She says that is ok because I’m with an adult and helping someone else. And one time my nana and I were driving, and we saw a person have a bike wreck, so my nana broke the law by stopping in the middle of the street with her car to block traffic so no one would get hurt more. Sometimes when I play soccer, my coach and teammates will holler at me to keep going in the game, but if I bump into someone, I like to make sure they are ok and not hurt. It makes me distracted, but I like to be kind. And I got tagged once in tag when someone fell in the muddy water instead of running away. It’s not what other people want me to do, but I like to because I would want someone to help me. Loving people to me is important because I want people to love me and people need love.

- Charlotte Grant

Date: Wednesday, February 28

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:11-19

Issues that existed 2000 years ago are surprisingly relevant in today's world, perhaps because they are rooted in our *humanness* and ongoing need for salvation. After reading Luke 17:11-19, I reflected on today's lepers —people who experience isolation or a sense of disconnectedness for various reasons. That led me to ask myself, '*What can I do when I may not even know someone is suffering from isolation?*'

My search began by considering this week's theme: *Foolish love breaks the rules*. I considered the three types of love: *eros* as romantic love, *philia* as brotherly love, and *agape* as divine or selfless love. This passage in Luke about healing lepers is an example of *agape*. Although *agape* is best demonstrated by God's love through Jesus, we humans can strive for selfless love, which could be as simple as a caring smile or kind word to another. Such a simple action of human connection carries the potential for healing, particularly for one who may be feeling as undesirable as a leper. Foolish love requires one to trust completely, which society may deem foolish. One might say Jesus *foolishly trusted* the lepers would be healed by their own faith before showing up at the priest's doorstep. He certainly knew that lepers were as worthy of healing as anyone. From Jesus' example, I recognize the miraculous potential that comes from treating *all* human beings with basic kindness and respect. Even in situations in which laws or rules restrict the rights of certain individuals for safety reasons, we can still treat them with respect. As God's children, we are *all* worthy of *agape*.

- Marcia Patterson

Date: Thursday, February 29

Scripture Reading: Ruth 1:1-18

One of my best friends and I have been close for about three years; we met back in 5th grade when playing a Kahoot. Through all the years we have been friends, we have had our fair share of ups and downs, but there is one story I want to tell. One day, when I walked into school, I noticed my friend was acting pretty sad. I didn't think much of it then because it was early morning, and I thought she was tired. But she continued to be unhappy throughout the day, and I became worried. I tried to make her laugh to make her feel better, but it wasn't working. After school, I asked her if she was okay. She told me it was nothing and that she was just tired, but I had a foreboding feeling that something was wrong. About an hour and a half or so later, I convinced her to get on a call with me, and I started to ask her if she was okay; she told me again that nothing was wrong and that I shouldn't worry, but I insisted on trying to help her in any way I could. I finally convinced her to talk after I told her that I didn't care what was going on, I just wanted to make sure she was okay. My main takeaway from the passage is that even when people insist it's okay and you know something is up, you should do everything you can to help them. Helping people is something that Jesus spent his entire life doing, so if we can do anything we can to help one person, it could change their life.

- Elle Grace Brannan

Date: Friday, March 1

Scripture Reading: John 4:1-41

I love this new word game in the New York Times. No, not Wordle - that's so 2022! Connections. There is a grid of 16 words that you must make into groups of 4 based on their connection to one another. Of course it's not as easy as it seems because more often than not many of the words have multiple connections. Then again, some words seem to have no connections at all. Some connections are easy to see, while others make no sense until you see the end result. I enjoy it so much that my youngest son, my brother-in-law and I have a group text where we post our results everyday. You only get 4 chances to make all the connections, so this causes me to dig deeper into the meanings of each word.

I mention this because when I received the topic for this devotional, I could not make the connection. Foolish love breaks rules. What does this mean in relation to Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well. What was their connection? By all accounts it seemed like there should be none. As the woman says at the beginning of the passage, Samaritans and Jews do not associate. One connection that is clear is that they both have Jacob as an ancestor. Jesus is traveling back to Galilee, but why would he choose to go through Samaria? Given what we know about the relationship between the two groups, he could have avoided this route. However, Jesus wants to connect with the Samaritans. Samaritans were considered idolaters because they worshipped other gods in addition to God. When he tells the woman he knows her history, she understands there is a deeper connection happening

here. She first calls him a prophet, but when he tells her he is the One she speaks of, she makes the connection that he is the Messiah. Then she returns to tell the people of her town to come see this man who she thinks may be the Messiah - creating another connection now between her community and Jesus.

So now I return to the connection of words. While these words, foolish love breaks rules, may not connect in the way I find in the game I play daily, when I go to their definition and write it a different way, the connection of those four words speaks to me. Just like they did with the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well. Unwise, intense feelings of deep affection separate us from the governing conduct in a particular situation. Said another way, when we unabashedly show love in a way that allows us to not worry about the framework around it, that is when we find the deeper connection we have been looking for.

- Kelly Rainey

Date: Saturday, March 2

Scripture Reading: Galatians 2:11-16

Cephas was a politician. We see and hear them every day. He was happy going along. With his Gentile friends, he might have a little bacon on his tomato sandwich or put on his polyester-cotton blend underwear. But when confronted by the hyper-Jews who insisted on Gentiles being circumcised to join the Jesus movement, he reversed course. His finger was in the wind, and the wind was blowing a gale. He is, in this passage, called out for his hypocrisy.

He, and we, are reminded that following dogmatic rules is really no help in becoming a follower of Jesus. This is justification by faith. If one truly has faith in Jesus then they follow Jesus. It is not whether one is in church every time the door opens or gives money enough to buy a new pipe organ. Those are all good things and a blessing, but it misses the point that faith in Jesus and living a life of love for our fellow human is what will bring the kingdom of God upon the earth. Feeding the hungry, standing up for the oppressed, caring for the sick, and speaking out when we see the winds of popular opinion billowing the sails of oppression and prejudice is the message of Jesus.

Today there are those afraid of teaching history that does not sugar-coat the events of the past. There are those who would remove books long respected as epic works of literature or broaching topics long considered taboo. This is hurtful to those long oppressed. Many times, this is done in the name of religion. Christianity is liberating, or should be, notwithstanding a history of oppression in its name. The Inquisition, the middle passage slave trade, and the decimation of the Native American tribes (all while praising the glorious name of Jesus) are no different in their hypocrisy than old Cephas. We can do better. It's all in what billows your sails.

- Jim Spears



Week Three:
Foolish Love is Unfair

Date: Sunday, March 3

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:12-13; 20:1-16

Maybe we see ourselves as placing first in God's eyes as people who study scripture, worship weekly, and check off the rest of our Christian to-do lists. Even though we know God doesn't have favorites, maybe deep down we've wondered if all our hard work has earned us a special place in God's heart. But God is so powerful, even though God knows everything about us that does make us special, God does not single us out. And God is so wonderfully complicated that God has the same goal for each of us but gives us each different means to the same end. God seeks to eradicate the categories of "first" and "last". We live in a society that perpetuates poverty and misfortune and simultaneously elevates those who seem to already have everything. Even Jesus fits into one of these categories. Jesus spent his life living with, neighboring, witnessing, and loving the people who were constantly coming in last. But He made the same sacrifice for each of us. We can't earn a higher place in God's eyes. But we can enhance our community, society, and our own lives by giving and loving like Jesus. Maybe instead of striving to earn some sort of first place, we should always work to be the first to act with love. Instead of defying God and seeking to create further division through using labels and rankings like "good" or "bad", "faithful" or "not", we should pray and hope and work to be the first to show the light of God, especially to those whom others are attempting to force into last place.

- Lexie Burleson

Date: Monday, March 4

Scripture Reading: Mark 7:24-30

Reading Mark 7:24-30, I was reminded of a Walmart commercial from several years ago. In the commercial, a diverse group of people - men and women, young and old, multiple races, healthy and disabled, gay and straight, from different economic stations and geographic locations – grab a variety of chairs and transport them anyway they can – on bikes, motorcycles, skateboards and wagons – to a huge table, to share a meal and fellowship together. Playing in the background is the Youngbloods hit from 1969, “Get Together.” You know the song – “Come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another right now.” Walmart titled the commercial “Many Chairs, One Table.”

This commercial illustrates beautifully Mark 7:24-30. Jesus went into Gentile territory to hide from crowds who follow him everywhere. But there is no hiding. In a private home, a Gentile mother with a demon possessed child is on a mission to see Jesus. Already an outsider in multiple ways – not Jewish, a woman and unclean– she will not be denied. She begs Jesus to drive out the demon and save her daughter.

Jesus’ reply seems harsh and anything but loving as he says “First, let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “For it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Not exactly foolish love to call this desperate mother a dog. But she won’t be discouraged and tells Jesus that even the dogs eat the children’s breadcrumbs that fall from the table. “Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

Foolish love is unfair! Jesus should have saved that miracle for a worthy person – a Jew, a man, anybody but this unworthy woman. All she wanted was the crumbs from the table; she had enough faith to know that the crumbs from Jesus’ table would be enough. Thank God that foolish love is not fair! Just as this child was saved, so are we – the undeserving, the unclean. And Jesus makes room at his table for this woman and her child, and for us, for everyone. Just like that commercial, God’s table is big enough! God’s heart is big enough! All are welcome - serving foolish love to everyone!

- Angie Barrington

Date: Tuesday, March 5

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

Have you ever experienced an Eeyore moment? A moment when it was a struggle to feel blessed? “Don’t blame me if it rains,” “wish I could say yes, but I can’t,” “if it is a good morning, which I doubt,” “thanks but I’d rather stay an Eeyore.” As faithful followers of Jesus, we aren’t guaranteed sunshine in our face, but we are promised God’s grace, and a grace that is there for everyone – even an Eeyore.

In Matthew 5:1-12 we hear the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes which describe people who have saving faith and will inherit a place in the kingdom of God. Here, Jesus explains that we are blessed no matter what our current reality is because of the sure future we hold by the grace of God. The Beatitudes reminds us that to be blessed doesn’t just mean “to be happy.”

What is it that the Beatitudes promises? It's not good fortune or prosperity, or personal achievement – but rather the blessing of the Holy Spirit within that provides us with spiritual well-being as individuals and as a community of faith.

This passage provides us with a description of the character of God's kingdom; here we realize that Jesus is not saying only the pure in heart may enter the kingdom of heaven, but God's love is for everyone! What a blessing indeed!

As Eeyore once said "a little consideration, a little thought for others, makes all the difference." May you shine your light before others so that they will see your good works and want what you have – the grace of God that gives glory to our Father in heaven.

- Pam Rapp

Date: Wednesday, March 6

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:25-35

Longing and Waiting

As Simeon longed to see the Messiah, I longed for a brother or a sister.

I am an only child. When I was a kid, visiting my cousins was what I liked best in the whole world. I saw the fun they had together – the laughter, the tomfoolery, the companionship, the adventures. I wanted to be part of a big family like that! But my family was just my mom, my dad, and me.

I begged my parents. One day I even told them, "I've saved some money, and I think I have enough to buy us a baby. Can't we PLEEEEEEASE?"

Years before, my father had served in World War II in the Philippines. While there, he contracted malaria and was ill for several months. I didn't know it back then, but because of that disease it was highly unlikely that I would ever have a sibling – regardless of how much money I socked away.

But life went on.

I learned to be creative when I had to play by myself. I learned how to be less sensitive when playing with friends. I learned to listen to what others had to say, to their ideas. And I accepted the fact that I was not “the bellybutton of the world.”

Years passed.

I grew up. I got married and adopted two children. Then I married Lyle and inherited two more. A little while later, Lyle and I had two kids. We had six kiddos! We were a big family!

One day it hit me: my children are the brothers and sisters I always wanted. This is the big family I prayed for when I was little. Here now is the laughter, the fun, the companionship – at last. And it is so very wonderful.

Sometimes God wants us to wait. He puts our prayers on hold – maybe as a reminder that He's in charge, maybe so we don't forget that His timing rules.

Or maybe just to give us extra time to learn what we need to know.

- Marie Clapper

Date: Thursday, March 7

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:16-30

Personal Reflection

Question: In this passage, Jesus lifts up Gentiles as good examples, and that angers the crowd. When have you stood up for someone and faced consequences from people you love and know?

Date: Friday, March 8

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:7-11

We see this principle exemplified every day where people strive to give the appearance of importance and self-promotion. We are fixated on ourselves. Our world encourages and even demands this at times. We're told that we need to be aggressive or assertive and "look out for #1." Our egos and pride prevent us from forming relationships with others sometimes. But the Lord shows us that this is not the right way to live. I love this parable from Jesus about the banquet guests and especially the last verse: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." We should all strive to think of others more than ourselves and to exemplify God's inclusive love to all.

- Janet Wilson

Date: Saturday, March 9

Scripture Reading: Leviticus 19:18

Jesus loved louder than the crowd.

Today, society often goes to extreme efforts to be one voice loud enough to be made out above the noise. Everyone wants to be heard.

During Jesus' day, everywhere he went, he was met with dissenting opinions and hatred. The crowd was loud - people tried to silence him and amplify their own voices. But Jesus . . . He didn't give in and add to the noise. He used his voice, remained true to his path of patience, selflessness, and love - more importantly, demonstrating those same characteristics. He responded to the overwhelming volume of hate with quiet and deliberate acts of love.

Jesus didn't want us to behave like adults.

Jesus never intended us to behave like adults. As Christians, we often hear about having a childlike faith. Jesus' example of humility and trust taught us something about navigating relationships - always loving and forgiving like a child, loving fully. He always loved, always forgave, and, like children who have yet to experience disappointments, betrayals, and selfish ambitions, Jesus believed that other people could love one another the same way. After all, He even forgave the people who killed him. Maybe we could learn something from the innocence of children that kind of compassion, love, and forgiveness that many of us have lost sight of.

Jesus invited everyone.

Examining Jesus' life, we notice he spent considerable time around the dinner table, sharing a meal with others, and with a diverse cast of characters –

outcasts, self-righteous religious elite, rule-breakers, the unclean, wealthy and corrupt and racially diverse. He invited everyone to the table. What a simple concept, and yet, it would turn the world upside-down the same way Jesus turned his around 2,000 years ago! Back in Jesus' time, it would have been inappropriate for a Jewish teacher to teach a female student, engage with chronically ill or disabled, cross ethnic and political barriers. Yet, Jesus—He didn't follow any of these rules. In fact, he went out of his way to break them, giving them a place to belong, treating all with value and respect.

Jesus chose forgiveness – he rose above rage, anger and hate.

Jesus is a great example of peace and love. Despite facing insurmountable controversy and being the target of unjustified hate, how did he stifle his outrage? How did he not hold a grudge? You may recall a group of men spit in Jesus' face, struck him, and slapped him, and yet, he did not retaliate. Today, it's hard to fathom how He swallowed his rage, as every day, we're faced with something new to fight about. Even though our anger is often justified, the animosity has taken a toll on the ability to engage – to really show love to one another. In the face of haters and adversity, Jesus forgave the people who put him on the cross. In the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere — he points us to forgiving one another. Jesus knew revenge or holding a grudge doesn't fulfill, holding on to hatred and resentment only breeds the same. Forgiveness shows love for the one being forgiven and releases resentment for the one doing the forgiving. The choice to forgive — and it is hard at times — is a choice that stops the cycle of hurt and pain.

Perhaps, if we emulated a child-like faith, loved a little bit louder, stop excluding and chose to rise above situations and forgive the world might be a little better?

- Vicki Vasser



Week Four:
Foolish Love is Wasteful

Date: Sunday, March 10

Scripture Reading: Mark 5:1-17; John 2:1-11

As a lifelong sufferer of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, I can certainly relate to the idea of being possessed. Some days, I can't stop thinking about things that feel "wrong" to me, despite knowing that there isn't a tangible problem - it's almost as if my own reasoning faculties are temporarily dulled, and I am forced to listen to a louder voice that tells me what must be fixed in order to avoid some kind of impending doom.

Whatever anguish this man was suffering from in Mark chapter 5, his pain was surely amplified greatly by being ostracized by his community. And yet, in his brokenness, this man ran to the feet of Jesus.

This is what I've been beginning to learn: God loves us in our brokenness. And not despite it; because of it! God loves us immeasurably - far beyond our capacity to understand. And it is when we earnestly and honestly bring our entire imperfect, messy, broken selves to God that healing and transformation are able to happen. When this possessed man fell at the feet of Jesus, Jesus didn't ask him about his qualifications. He simply healed him. This is the nature of God's love! Jesus did not ask anyone to jump through hoops, offer proof of religious membership, perform rituals of purification, or be free of mistakes before healing them. In the Gospels, if someone sincerely approached Jesus for healing, he healed them!

In a society where healthcare is a commodity and some of those in power are targeting access to it by our society's most vulnerable people, this healing ministry of Jesus may seem downright reckless! And yet, this is

the nature of God's love! This is the love that turns everyday water into the very best wine; the love that takes the mundane and transforms it into the extraordinary; the love that heals hearts, mends relationships, and restores community. And all God requires is our willingness to participate - even if we don't know the way. What good news!

- Matt Nelson

Date: Monday, March 11

Scripture Reading: Luke 13:6-9

It is no secret my wife and I raised a daughter who turned to drugs for reasons we don't understand. We love her and always will love her all her life.

I was blind to some of the signs of drug abuse and was very aware of other signs. I did not know how to respond. Drugs were never my thing. The situation continued to get worse as she began to have children. Then one day I said, "Enough is enough!" My wife and I made arrangements to take custody of her children. We continued to financially assist her with food, rent and transportation. Was this right or wrong? Did we enable her problem to get worse? Is this foolish love?

The legal system caught up with her. She spent almost a year in prison. Forced rehab is what I call it. She was released to a facility called Hope Rises that specializes in re-entry programs for women. They helped her find a job that was hard work, manual labor at a window factory. She relapsed this past holiday season for a few days and on her own entered a rehab facility. She has been clean again for ten months. She is

working and paying her own way. I am very proud of her.

The evaluation of the passage is this to me: as long as the tree has leaves or has not dried out you must fertilize the tree in some form. In our case, the fertilizer was not money; it should have been something different like understanding, caring, praying, or any number of different ways to assist. I still don't know what this best solution should be. Was it foolish love on my part? Yes! I thought money could solve this problem, but it only made the problem last longer. I truly do not understand addiction. An addicted person will only change when they are ready to change. My role is to be ready to help when and where help may be needed. Sometimes that help is listening.

The lesson is do not give up on others. But we all should learn there are many ways to assist others out of extreme hardship. There are better ways to help than the way I thought I was helping.

In the end, I was that dying tree. I was lost. I had foolish love. I didn't have a solution and could not force a solution. I had my wife, a close friend and a Methodist Preacher with a child in the same situation, who all walked with me as I fought my own battles of embarrassment and discouragement. They stayed strong to help me as I cried. They provided me with love. They fertilized the tree.

Ultimately my daughter is winning her battle and I stay strong to encourage her and raise our grandchildren.

- Mark Whitehead

Date: Tuesday, March 12

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:1-9

Do you ever stop to think about who you identify with in a story and why?

Sometimes the author or director of the story will make who you should identify with obvious, but that's often not the case in parables.

Such is the case in our passage today.

There are so many characters we could identify with:

The farmer recklessly sowing their seed...

The seed...

The various kinds of soil, or the preceding vegetation that it produced...

Or even the characters that affect the seeds and vegetation, like the birds, sun, and weeds.

Perspective, circumstance, and season all play parts in this.

That's what makes parables so wonderful. They can reveal something different to us each time we read or listen to them if we're willing to listen.

Yet, there remains one constant in this particular parable. The foolish nature of the agricultural approach.

At least...it seems foolish to us.

You see, we don't know what makes the soil good, or even what kind of seed is being sown. Simply that the farmer is spreading with reckless abandon.

It's sort of like God's love. Sometimes it seems like it's being spread in places that it will bear no fruit, other times it seems it's been taken by another.

Yet, that's the beautiful thing about nature...and God's love. It often defies our expectations and logic.

The bird that ate the seed may deposit it in a new area...which in time may help breed a new wildlife that encourages and promotes a new or diverse ecosystem.

The effects of God's love extend far beyond our ability to comprehend it, and as a result may seem reckless.

Thankfully, God is not concerned with our logic or expectations.

Because the kind of soil we are can change from year to year, month to month, day to day, and moment to moment.

But God just keeps sowing seeds of love.

May we be willing to listen, hear, and accept that love.

- Devin Lyles

Date: Wednesday, March 13

Scripture Reading: John 6:1-13

Personal reflection

Question: When have you seen God do more than you expected God to do?

Date: Thursday, March 14

Scripture Reading: John 3:16

God's Math is not our Math; when zero is a plus.

What adds up to a life well-lived?

Is it living to win?

Creating perfection?

Is drive the hallmark of success?

How much/many trophies will be listed under your name somewhere someday?

We love to get geared up to win contests of any kind.

We even do it vicariously:

Athletic games

Tournaments

Card games

Video games

Arguments

"Must win!"

Must hurry.
Gotta go!
Get around that car (a dehumanized entity.)

Always gathering; more is more.
Or not enough. It's too much!

Stop! Where am I?

Where I am.

Jesus said this is what heaven is. His presence. Being
mindful of him. Letting him complete my emptiness.

(Not necessarily trips to far off places
Not necessarily thrills.
Not necessarily possessions
Not necessarily chasing another person who can love
you or choose to leave you.)

Him. Our place.

I do want Him. I want to enter his courts with praise. I
read his daily personal texts in a rose bloom or a bird's
flight across the field, and praise the Great I Am. I want
to run into him and be safe. And I am.
With food and clothing I want to be content.
Until sweet temptation beguiles me again to live the
other way. A distracted, fractured creature --that I am.
Who can deliver me from the body of this death? Thank
God for saving me through Jesus Christ our Lord!
Christ wants to heal my soul's malaise.

Romans 7:24-25

I go back to The Book to review.

God's winning is more of a serving-dying-giving combination. It is a creative redemption that takes the fractured, making it useful. I deeply believe in this kind of healing.

Warning Label:

Normal life may include personal loss when you least expect it. It interrupts. It aggravates. It begs. It raises your hackles.

Christ laid down his life. So was Christ a loser? He was a delayer because he could see ahead. When he rose and ascended, he was the ultimate winner. And he says join me! Here is the way, the truth, the life. Living is Christ and dying is gain...He came to give us a dying/abundant life... in this sometimes sorrowful, sometimes exuberant lifetime. Through winning? It could happen. But if what I embrace most of all is his presence, losing is not so significant. It loses its sting. So I certainly can run my course--winning or losing. (And by the way, how many trophies or dollars can my cold dead hands hold?)

Dear friend, do earnestly seek for God, for contentment. Even seek generosity. These are essential desires in our hearts that are gifts from God. But practice accepting loss. In love, the Holy Spirit will use the tiny irritating seeds (and finally, the really big ones) to fall on the ground of a ready heart, to crack open, soften and bud. Finally.... fruit grows. Then it feeds others and one's own soul. Do good when it interrupts,

when it aggravates, when you face loss. Take up your cross. Then zero becomes the plus.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son (his everything to us) that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

John 3:16

- Deborah Reynolds

Date: Friday, March 15

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:8-10

Personal Reflection

Question: The woman wastes quite a bit – she wastes a day looking for a coin when she could have worked a day and earned it back, and then when she finds it, she throws a party that likely cost her more than the coin to throw. If the woman represents God, and the coin represents God’s grace, when have you felt God was ridiculously wasting grace on some moment, or on some person?

Date: Saturday, March 16

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

Through all of the messiness of this life, God keeps believing in me, in you, and in humanity.

In Philippians 2:1-11 we are reminded of the length that Jesus and God were willing to go in an effort to not give up on humanity. Jesus actually gave up being equal to God! He did so to feel our pain, sorrows, loneliness, brokenness....

Jesus also came to set the stage for Heaven on earth in a new covenant of love and grace. By living under grace and forgiveness rather than law and judgement, He desired for us to get a glimpse of what truly living in God's presence can and will be.

This passage begins in verse 1 with a challenge requiring our involvement. IF there is encouragement in Christ? IF there is love in Christ? Of course there is!! But God invites us to participate by regarding others as better than ourselves, and valuing the interests of others over our own.

Our responsibility is summed up in verse 5 — we are to adopt the attitude of Christ towards others. Wow!! We see over and over, with servant humility and great compassion, Jesus interacting with the mentally ill, the handicapped, and the broken. We also see him warn of the dangers of pride and legalism, but mostly we see him loving on people who the world has chosen not to love or has even cast aside.

As we strive to be of the same mind as Christ, we must ask ourselves some questions. A few might be: How can I be more humble? Whose interests am I minimizing? Is there someone it makes sense to let go, but Jesus would not?

Thank you, God for setting an example for living.
Thank you for the opportunity to participate in bringing
Heaven to earth. Mostly, thank you for not giving up on
me. Amen.

- Rob Adair



Week Five:
Foolish Love is Prodigal

Date: Sunday, March 17

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 5:38-42

Growing up, I've always not fully understood the story of the Prodigal Son. He does extremely stupid things, wastes his inheritance, and then goes back home and his father immediately forgives him and even celebrates! I've always sympathized with the brother: "The older brother became angry and refused to go in... 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'" I've always thought, "How is it fair, how is it just?"

There is still a little of that inside of me. Those who are faithful always should be rewarded for that, BUT now I am pregnant with my husband's and my first child. I can't even imagine not welcoming this little one with open arms if they were to come home after doing even the stupidest of things and apologize and ask for forgiveness. All I can imagine is just being so happy that they are safe and not in danger any longer. That I now have them safe in my care.

Maybe I'm starting to see a little of what God sees when he thinks of us. He doesn't care what we did before and is always ready to welcome us back into the fold. All we have to do is just ask for forgiveness and it is given to us... No questions asked, no additional steps required.

Even further, this is a little like what the second passage asks of us as well: Forgiveness, no questions asked. The harder thing with this is it is asking us to do

this not just for our children or the people we love unconditionally, but for everyone. God does this naturally, but we as humans have to struggle and keep striving to get as close to that as possible. Maybe this could be something we try to improve on during this Lenten season: Who can you forgive today?

- Kelsey Sutton

Date: Monday, March 18

Scripture Reading: Mark 10:17-23

Mark 10:17-23 in the Bible tells a poignant story that illustrates the concept of God's love and the challenges humans face in fully embracing it. In this passage, a wealthy young man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by reminding him of the commandments, to which the young man claims he has kept.

Here, we see God's love manifested through Jesus' response. Jesus looked at the man and loved him.

The phrase "Foolish Love is Prodigal" suggests that when love is reckless and extravagant, it can be perceived as foolish or imprudent. The term "prodigal" typically refers to someone who spends money or resources recklessly and extravagantly, often to the point of wastefulness. Applying this idea to love, it implies that love that is given without caution or boundaries may be seen as impractical or unwise, in worldly views, but that is God's love.

How do we show God's extravagant love to others? The ways are countless; it's about finding a way and showing up that is difficult.

Just like going to the gym, serving the community should become a habit that enriches your life and contributes to the well-being of those around you. Over time, it can become an integral and fulfilling part of your routine, offering not only personal satisfaction but also a sense of purpose and a stronger connection to your community.

In this story the young man shows sorrow at the request of Jesus to let go of attachments that hinder our relationship with God and fellow human beings. This demonstrates the difficulty humans often face in fully embracing God's love, as it requires a willingness to let go of what we hold dear and trust in something greater. It serves as a reminder that while God's love is freely offered, it is our choices and actions that determine our ability to receive and embody that love in our lives.

Ultimately, demonstrating God's extravagant love to others involves being a conduit for love, grace, and compassion in our daily lives. It's about emulating the qualities of love that are central to many religious teachings and serving as a living testament to God's boundless love for all of humanity.

- Marcie Schock

Date: Tuesday, March 19

Scripture Reading: John 12:1-8

How often do you find yourself ruminating about how others perceive you? It may be conscious or subconscious, but it is difficult to ignore the incertitude of how those around us view our words and actions.

Reflecting on this passage from John, I admire how Mary poured expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus, knowing that others may judge or question why she made this decision. Her all-consuming love for Christ overshadowed any reservations she may have had, compelling her in that moment to anoint Jesus with the most lavish gift that she had to offer. Mary dismissed any concerns and acted in service to Jesus, a gesture that can serve as a reminder to each of us that despite how others see us, it is our job as Christians to cast doubts aside and focus on one thing only: how we will extravagantly love God.

It is not always easy to boldly serve God, especially in a world where the term “Christian” can sometimes hold a negative connotation. The Bible teaches us that extravagantly generous, or prodigal, love is not only welcome, but necessary. When I think about my family, I ask myself, “is there anything that I would not do to show my love for them?” The answer is a resolute “no.” My love for them is boundless, and I have no trepidation related to how others might interpret this fact. I am certain that others also feel this prodigal love for their families. Why, then, can it be so burdensome for us to display this same type of passion for Christ? The bountiful love that our Lord gives us is the perfect model for how we should love our families (and others). Moreover, God’s outpouring of unstinting love *for* us demonstrates the love that is expected *from* us in return. This Lenten season, I challenge each of us to consider Mary’s unwavering love for Christ and seek out ways that we can extravagantly proclaim our love for God, no matter the criticism we may face.

- Caitlin Spears

Date: Wednesday, March 20

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:30-32

“This wasn’t part of my plan” I thought as the ultrasound technician turned the screen for us to see and explained that the two blobs we were seeing meant we were expecting twins. My plan was always to have 2 children and we already had one who was 4 at the time. My plan was so secure in my mind that I had already purchased four matching stockings for our family. I left that day in shock. I did not feel prepared or equipped to tackle the road ahead of me. But God was just starting to teach me that certainty cannot be found in my plans, and I had to rely on Him more than ever.

My twin pregnancy may have started with the planting of a small mustard seed by my questioning of God and how I was going to be a mother to 3. But once planted, it grew, and I had to trust God to show me the way. The twins arrived early and spent over 2 weeks in the NICU. Their birth brought people to my doorstep that I did not even know with gifts of food and help. The outpouring of support from our church was overwhelming. I knew God had this even on days when I did not.

God might lead us on a path we didn’t plan for, but God’s goodness never leaves us. Even when I don’t deserve his grace and goodness, He heaps it into my life, and that is love. I certainly had days when I did not feel worthy of this goodness, grace and love, but God showed up every day by the angels he sent, and I felt every bit of His love.

And now, my mustard seed of faith has grown and so have all my children who are now 35 and 30. My mustard seed branches have become so large that I will

now be a grandmother to twins! God has blessed me beyond measure with my 3 children and 4 grandchildren, and I now get to help one of my twins care for her new twins. My cup runneth over with God's extravagant love!

- Connie Anderson

Date: Thursday, March 21

Scripture Reading: Luke 11:5-13

Surprisingly, the words of Luke 11:5-13 that stood out most to me were 'at midnight'. Perhaps that's because at or after midnight, needs become ultra urgent. Those midnight needs tend to repetitiously knock around my consciousness. I haven't knocked on a neighbor's door with an audacious ask, but I do regularly knock on Jesus' door as needs balloon in the dark of night. You too? There's a song by Toby Mac I especially like because it addresses troubles head on in the words "it may be midnight or midday but *Help is On the Way.*" (Check it out, it's worth listening to.) I think that's what Jesus was saying when he reminded the disciples that he was gifting them with Help - the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit exemplifies extravagant love that far exceeds everyone's perception of good gifts.

Jesus reminded the disciples with seemingly everyday examples of how a loving parent answers their child's asks: give a fish not a snake, give an egg not a scorpion; in other words give good not evil gifts. I think He was telling the disciples it's ok to persist in asking, to persist in seeking, and to persist in knocking whatever our needs. Many times I become aware that as I persist

in asking, I become less focused on my ask and more focused on Him to whom I am praying. His extravagant love becomes evident as I experience the gift of His reassurance that He wants only good for me. His extravagant gift of love, the Holy Spirit, will comfort me and guide me. Whether urgent needs are knocking on my consciousness at midnight or midday, He is my Help.

- Sandra Hutchens

Date: Friday, March 22

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21

God's extravagant love for us knows no bounds! He blesses us in so many ways that we can't possibly comprehend. In the story of "The Prodigal Son" we see how extravagantly God loves us. Even when we have shown poor judgment and have not loved him. In "The Parable of the Rich Fool," Jesus shows us that we should not focus our attention on the things of this earth but to look fully on God and store our spiritual treasures in Heaven. Jesus warned his friends about worldliness - an overarching concern for the things of this world. Greed goes hand in hand with this worldliness. A life in Christ does not consist of an abundance of possessions. The rich man in the parable does not even contemplate giving to others, particularly those who are in need. He is a selfish man who only provides for himself at the expense of having made no provision for his soul. At times we make choices and isolate these choices, along with our life, from God and our neighbors. We fail to give our best and share properly with God and others. In addition, we do not reciprocate with extravagant love as we should. We become attached to worldly

possessions and situations. This is a reflection of our fear and anxiety, and this stifles our soul. We really can do nothing apart from God. We fail to involve God in most of our decisions and then wonder why the results of our choices never satisfy, and we have no peace and joy. When we make a conscious decision that Jesus is who he claims to be and understand what he did on the cross for us, this provides the only hope for us in this world and after. Then we begin a life-long process of sanctification that changes us from the inside out. We need to trust God and see how extravagantly he blesses us. We must give richly to God and to others. Our soul is where our focus should be, rather than accumulating worldly possessions which removes all doubt as to our foolishness. We will reap what we sow! Extravagant love. A love so richly exuded that there can be no doubt about the true nature of our heart and our mind. That we obviously, faithfully, and truthfully love God and others!

Scripture References:

Matthew 6:19-21

2 Corinthians 9:6-7

Matthew 19:24

Matthew 23:27

- Sam Harris

Date: Saturday, March 23

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:12-14

This passage touches on something close to my heart, which is that you should love people as themselves and for themselves, not just because they're rich or popular.

It's saying that you shouldn't love others with a conditional, exclusionary love, but rather an unconditional, inclusive, Christ-like love. This passage gives us the gift of telling us directly something Jesus said, and we should take it as such. Worldly sources will tell us who to love and who not to love, but God tells us in Luke 14:12-14 to love others as He does. You should be open and loving to those whom you have no reason to love. Your care should not come with an ulterior motive. People will spew hate in the name of Christ, but when it comes down to it, His words are what we are meant to live by. His words are not meant to be divisive or manipulative, but to unite.

While people try and decipher our world, our society, and everything that comes with being human, there is one thing we don't need to figure out — who we should love and accept. In God's eyes, we are all His children and we should love each other like family, like His family. In this passage, it says "...if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Though in this life on earth, you may not gain much from being kind to others, you will be rewarded when seated with The Father. People may even make fun of you for associating with those they see as less than them, but God will see your strength and reward you for doing as is His will. If you love others as yourself, for themselves, then you are living and loving as the Lord intended.

- Brooke Tilley



Week Six:
Foolish Love is Risky

Date: Sunday, March 24

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:43-48; 26:14-25, 47-50

Personal Reflection

Question: As we begin Holy Week, who do you most feel like in the story – the crowd, the authorities, Pontius Pilate, Mary, Judas, Peter, Jesus, or someone else, and why do you feel that way?

Date: Monday, March 25

Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:7-9

We build sandcastles

Why?

Is it the pride?

The joy of creation?

Maybe even getting to share our work with others.

But we always know,

that by the end of the day, or the end of the week,

They will be gone.

A flat mound of sand,

just like the rest of the sandcastles before them

Unknown to the rest of the world,

The work and creativity of the massive towers of shining sand,

Now a desolate landscape of sand and sea.

But WHY do we make them?

It's because of the joy of sharing the creation,
the free ticket to a sandcastle museum for others
The feeling, that even though they will be gone,
that all the hard work has paid off,
and that we finished the towers of beautiful,
shining sand sculptures,
fingers sore and worn from the work,
but creation pulses through our veins.
Art for the world to see.

- Alice Clapper

Date: Tuesday, March 26

Scripture Reading: Matthew 10:16-23

How easy it is to foolishly follow Jesus? These verses are not ones that most of us seek out to read. We want to hear about adventures that were had, good news that was spread, and teaching people about loving Christ; just as we want our own lives to be laid out. Jesus needed to warn his disciples of the hard road it was going to be to spread the good news about him. Jesus needed them to put themselves out there, uncomfortably so, to change lives for the better. His disciples had to put themselves in situations they did not want to be in. They had to love foolishly when it came to Jesus, because they saw the bigger picture at the end.

Is it easier to pray with a friend or pray with a stranger? Praying with a friend could feel comfortable, safe, and easy. Praying with a friend might mean that you both already have the same religious view or love

one another enough to look past your differences. Praying with a stranger could bring out so many more emotions like reassurance, fear, investment, empowerment, growth. These are the emotions I believe Jesus was wanting his disciples to have and was setting them up for. Sometimes the road that we need to take is the hard road, meaning it can be uncomfortable, fearful, scary, tiresome, exhausting, relentless, broken, and full of unknowns, but don't we owe to God to at least try?

- Allison Earhart

Date: Wednesday, March 27

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

Personal Reflection

Question: Who is your neighbor, and what risk do you need to undertake to help them get what they need?

Date: Thursday, March 28

Scripture Reading: Matthew 26:36-46

Gethsemane means the place of an oil press. It was an appropriate place for Jesus to go for his final prayers. As the time of his crucifixion neared, Jesus must have felt pressed by the suffering to come. At this time, when he most needed the support of his three trusted disciples, they fell asleep rather than praying with him. His three prayers for the cup to be taken were not answered. His human side wanted to avoid what was to come, but he prayed that he would be able to do what the Father wanted. His disciples, being merely human, let him down.

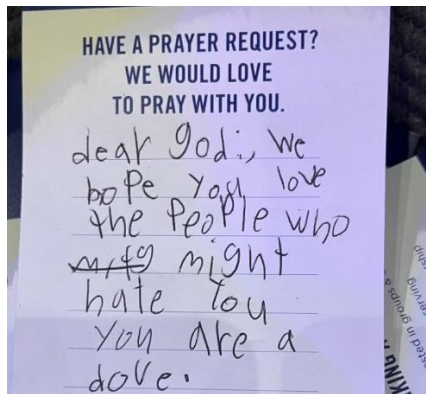
Growing up as a Baptist, I did not know about Advent and Lent, but as an adult, I find the seasons of the Christian year make the holidays, especially Christmas and Easter, more meaningful. During this season of Lent, we, as disciples, pledge to sacrifice something in memory of Christ's sacrifice for us. Too often, we are weak like the disciples in the garden. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Our prayer should be that God will give us the strength to willingly honor our pledge, as we prepare for the joy of Easter.

- Emily Douglas

Date: Friday, March 29

Scripture Reading: Matthew 26:69-75

Foolish Love is Risky...



Hi I'm Peter. I mean I am figuratively Peter. I have been known to say, "If we just left the Jesus out of it more people might come to church." I know you are thinking. "Wow, she isn't kidding... she is Peter! And how are we going to leave Jesus out of church?" Unfortunately for me and many, the church has been a place where Jesus' love was conditionally based on the admission of wrongdoings and a commitment of change. Slowly, I have reentered a faith community, thanks to a church that I describe as simply a safe place. Some would call me foolish for taking the risk and rejoining an institution with a message that caused me lots of confusion and pain.

As an early childhood educator, I always seem to find meaning and explanation on life's biggest mysteries/questions through the eyes of a child. While scrolling mindlessly on social media one evening (when I meant to be preparing for this devotional), I ran across

this picture of a prayer request written in a child's handwriting. It turned out this child's words were all the prep I needed. The eight-year-old child who wrote this was the daughter of an old high school classmate. She sat in the pew with her family in the same church that showered her mom and I in our early, unruly, foolish teen years with acceptance and unconditional love.

I challenge you this Lenten season to imagine yourself as a child sitting in a pew. What might you write? Just like a child we all learn from taking risks. Stop denying your childlike self and write a prayer to share a little foolish love with the world. And what do know? It could be foolish love that keeps us all coming back to church.

- Lauren Floyd

Date: Saturday, March 30

Scripture Reading: John 19:38-42

Personal Reflection

Question: What is the riskiest thing you have done for Jesus?



Foolish Love is the Hope of
Easter!

Date: Sunday, March 31

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Personal Reflection

Question: As we have completed our Lenten journey to end in the joy of the empty tomb, we recognize this is just the new beginning of the story. What will you do going forward to share Jesus' foolish love with others?