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**Sunday 11 June 2023 to Sunday 18 June 2023**

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Sunday 11 June 2023

**Care of the new believer**

by Tom Brennen

***I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8).***

Read Mark 1:4–11

I came to faith as an adult. The first Christian community I encountered was welcoming, understanding, encouraging and supportive. However, not all of them were like that. I have a clear memory of a time before I was baptised. I was part of a travelling music group that was visiting a congregation when one church member told me: ‘Wrong, wrong, you have it wrong! You can't be a Christian and be part of a church until you repent properly and are baptised.’ Even many years later, I feel the cut of those words.

Baptism is an integral part of being a Christian. In baptism, we receive the gift of faith. We join the community of believers that reaches back into the generations. We join our church mothers and fathers in declaring the glory of God.

Let us never forget: ultimately, baptism isn't our doing – God is at work. As John 15:16 reminds us, we do not choose God; he chooses us.

As God's people, may we act and speak carefully and lovingly as we mentor those new to the faith. May we be that welcoming community where people can safely explore faith as guided by the Spirit. Let us never cease praying for the gospel to bring forth great fruit.

***Lord, we give thanks for your Spirit, who works in all people to bring about faith. May we see the world through your eyes and support those new to the faith. Amen.***

Monday 12 June 2023

**The place of honour in our lives**

by Tom Brennen

***Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life (Isaiah 43:4).***

Read Isaiah 43:1–7

Have you ever been given a place of honour?

The most uncomfortable I have ever been with honour was when I was working as a missionary in the Middle East. As a ‘white-faced Westerner’, wherever I went, I received unearned honour. I would be served first, and at government offices, a path would be cleared. Even at the airport, some people assumed that I was a first-class passenger and should receive special treatment.

As Australians and New Zealanders, we find this very hard. We are pretty flat societies. We are people who find it hard to ride in the back seat of a taxi or Uber. We acknowledge the work of politicians and leaders, but our depreciative humour ensures they never think too highly of themselves.

So how do you react when God says to you, ‘You are precious, you are honoured, and I love you. I give people in exchange for you’?

Do you, like most of us, defer and deflect? ‘Thanks, God, but I know you love everyone, and they are more important than me.’ But God continues, ‘No. I love you. I will give my Son in exchange for you. You are precious to me. You have honour. You are worth the death of my own child’.

To follow our thoughts of baptism from our devotion yesterday, Martin Luther reminds us to remember our baptism daily. Why? So that we recall our preciousness to God. We are washed clean and made new through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. On this basis, we can live our lives abundantly and without fear. While we make mistakes and feel worthless, God gives us a place of honour again and again and again. He relentlessly lifts us up to him when we fail.

As verse 7 reminds us, we were created for God's glory, formed and made for his purposes. Let us live in this reality.

***Father, we give thanks for our redemption through the blood of your Son. Let us live in the reality of our preciousness to you and seek to share your good news with our sisters and brothers across the world. Amen.***

Tuesday 13 June 2023

**We will be your people**

by Tom Brennen

***You shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezekiel 36:28b).***

Read Ezekiel 36:24–28

357: Does that number mean anything to you? I know it does to a friend of mine named Jon.

Jon and I used to play in a church band together. One consequence of growing up in the church was that Jon knew the *All Together* songbooks so well that you could give him a number, and he would know the song name and which book it came from. That was a surprisingly handy skill.

357 in *All Together Now* is the song, ‘Give us hearts to know you’. It came to mind when I reflected on this passage from Ezekiel. The chorus is, ‘We will be your people and you, our God’. The verses of the song beseech our Lord to give us hearts to love, bless, serve, praise and worship him.

The Christian life is full of mysteries and concepts that we have to hold in tension. The devotion yesterday reminded us of how precious we are individually to God. Today, the reading from Ezekiel reminds us that God equally views us as a collective body. We are all his people. And he is God to all of us.

I am either a member of Generation Y or a millennial – depending on who you ask – and I hear that these generations are the most selfish ever. Yet the Bible shows us that selfishness is something that has plagued humanity from the very beginning. Why else did God need to give ten commandments to the nation of Israel, many of which are about looking out for others and discouraging human selfishness?

Our role, as members of God's family, is to seek to have a heart like our Heavenly Father. Furthermore, we have a role to play in helping sisters and brothers in our community to be God's people. To help them be people that bring glory to God. We need our sisters and brothers, too, to allow us to better love, bless, serve, praise and worship God.

Thank God that he called us to be in community and chose us all. We are better together than we are apart.

***Lord, thank you for calling us out of the darkness as a community. Please help us to be your people as a community. Help us to love you and serve our sisters and brothers. Amen.***

Wednesday 14 June 2023

**Full attention**

by Tom Brennen

***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42).***

Read Acts 2:36–42

A note in my study Bible on this passage reminds us that to be devoted is to give rapt attention to that particular thing. So the early Christians gave rapt attention to teaching, being a community and sharing the sacrament of communion and prayer.

When was the last time you could honestly say your church had your rapt attention? More importantly, when was the last time that God had your rapt attention?

Yesterday, I spoke briefly about younger generations being tagged as selfish. These younger generations are also generalised as always being on their phones and technology. As a teacher, I see my students struggle to manage technology use.

But they are not alone. Just last week, outside my school, I saw two of my students on their phones, joined by their parents and one of their grandparents. All five of them were sitting there on a glorious late spring day, heads down, consuming whatever was on their screen. The screens had their rapt attention.

I don't believe that technology is more evil than good. Having a myriad of resources at my fingertips helped me write this series of devotions! But we must be careful.

We must be careful not just with technology but with all of our endeavours. Perhaps our work has more attention than our relationship with God? Maybe our hobbies have more attention than our involvement with our church community? As Matthew 6:21 reminds us, ‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’.

The early church grew off the back of rapt attention to worshipping in word and sacrament, being a Christian community and prayer. What might your life look like if this area of your life had your full attention? What changes do you need to make so that it is?

Start small. Maybe you've fallen out of the habit of weekly worship or daily prayer? Perhaps you've not connected with a fellow congregation member for some time? Perhaps your Bible has gathered a bit of dust? Pick one area and work on that.

You – and your community – will be blessed, I'm sure.

***Lord, forgive us when we give you and your church less than our full attention. Guide us as we seek to live lives that are full and bless others. Amen.***

Thursday 15 June 2023

**Powered by the resurrection**

by Tom Brennen

***Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? (Romans 6:3)***

Read Romans 6:3–11

The Paul Kelly song 'From little things, big things grow' is often used to inspire us to make small changes to achieve great things. It was in that Spirit that yesterday we considered what small adjustments we could make to give God more of our attention. But we also know that those big things that grow are not always good, helpful, or pleasing to God.

I am passionate that, in Christian schools, there is great power in the staff gathering each day for devotion in the morning. I feel blessed that my current school has a fantastic culture of morning worship together. It is valued, vibrant and meaningful. But sadly, there are many schools that no longer have this.

Each story of the loss of morning devotion is unique. Unions demanded compulsory devotion be considered part of workloads, increasing the costs for a struggling school. Well-meaning principals didn't want non-Christian staff to feel uncomfortable. Some felt that forcing people to attend worship was contrary to free will and the gospel. While I suspect no school principal ever said, ‘This isn't an important part of our school’, the many small choices and decisions along the way led us to where we are today. From little things, big things grow.

Likewise, I’ve noticed in myself a leaning toward giving devotions that call us towards positives and avoid calling out negatives. It is more comfortable to be encouraged to be a good person and love others than it is to dwell on the meaning of the very Son of God suffering and dying on the cross for our sins. The first side of the gospel is more agreeable, cleaner and palatable. Few are likely to be offended by it.

When we gloss over the saving work of Christ on the cross, we miss the power that spurs us on to a sincere commitment to service. We should not be rude or proud or deliberately offensive, but our churches, schools and organisations must never lose sight of our baptism into Christ's death. We should speak this message clearly. The Bible verse 1 Corinthians 1:23 calls us to preach 'Christ crucified’.

That is the good news: through Christ's death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven, and we have new life. May we ground ourselves in this reality every morning.

***Lord, through your death, we are saved from our sins. Let us diligently commit to living and sharing this reality. Amen.***

Friday 16 June 2023

**The fullness of life in the Son**

by Tom Brennen

***And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:11).***

Read 1 John 5:6–12

‘Mr Tom, did I translate correctly that you say our salvation has nothing to do with how much we do for our church?’

When I served as a missionary in the Middle East, I taught at a Bible college. It was a great privilege to stand before many people who were hungry to know more about God's word so that they could share the teachings with their people in their language.

While I learnt enough Arabic to get by on the streets, I needed a translator when I gave lectures and workshops to ensure people understood me. I had a couple of great translators, but Solomon was my favourite.

Solomon was not one to smile much. He was earnest and took his job of translating me correctly with great care and diligence. He would translate for me, hour after hour, very calmly, consistently and patiently when I would get excited and forget to pause for the translation from English to Arabic.

The vast majority of my students felt that Jesus' sacrifice was invalid if they did not tithe enough, if their children did not behave well enough, if they didn't wear the right clothes to church, or if they weren't a pastor, deacon or leader.

One evening, I was teaching a subject of the gospel according to John and John's letters, a theme of which is new life, living abundantly and not being bound to rules based on righteousness.

Solomon must have finally had enough that night when he asked me the question I opened this devotion with. On many occasions, I had told the class about the freedom of the gospel and that it is by faith that we are saved. We are to rejoice and live our lives in this freedom. We engage in the church community and do good works in serving our neighbours as an outworking of this but not to get salvation.

Solomon paused, smiled deeply, and turned back to the class. I knew that the Spirit had done his work and ensured that Solomon knew what this abundant life in Christ meant now and into eternity. The weight had been lifted.

Let us never take the profound impact of the gospel in our lives and the lives of others for granted.

***Lord, we praise you for the depth and breadth of the cultures, languages and customs of our Christian sisters and brother across your world. May you protect your gospel so that others can hear it in full truth and power. Amen.***

Saturday 17 June 2023

**Fear isn’t all bad**

by Tom Brennen

***I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14a).***

Read Psalm 139:1–6,13–18

The father of the Lutheran Church, Martin Luther, wrote his *Small Catechism* in response to the low level of understanding of the faith among Christians. He was specifically concerned about whether Christian parents could teach their children the basic tenets of the faith.

When I undertook my confirmation, I recall the pastor reading the explanation of the Ten Commandments contained in the *Small Catechism*. I found it confusing, as Luther starts every explanation of each commandment with the phrase, ‘What does this mean? We should fear and love God’.

I was thinking in my head: ‘Fear? I thought this God welcomed sinners, and we no longer had anything to fear?’ At the time, I wasn't brave enough to ask questions to clarify what Luther was saying.

We encounter a similar idea in Psalm 139, which praises God for 'fearfully and wonderfully' making us.

Pope Francis summarises this so well. He writes:

The fear of the Lord ... doesn't mean being afraid of God, since we know that God is our Father that always loves and forgives us ... It is no servile fear, but rather a joyful awareness of God's grandeur and a grateful realisation that only in him do our hearts find true peace ... the attitude of those who place all their trust in God and feel protected, like a child with his Father.

Likewise, Martin Luther called this concept 'filial fear'. It is the fear of a child who adores their parent and does not want to let them down. It is a call to love, respect, follow, worship and serve.

To the world, saying that ‘you live in fear of the Lord’ would sound strange, as if you were living in oppression and fear of a judgemental God. But for the Christian, living in fear is instead to know God’s good news and desire to serve and love him, knowing that he loves us and empowers us to do so.

This God we worship did come in human form in Jesus, but he is also above and beyond all. We worship a God outside of space and time who made the universe. Who, as the psalm says, literally created each of us in our mother's womb. At the end of our lives, he welcomes us to his eternal reality.

That is what Luther wanted us to teach our children. That we worship a truly amazing God to whom we should bow down and worship in all his magnificence.

***Lord, we worship and adore you in all your majesty and magnificence. May our fear of you always remind us of your enduring love and commitment to us, now and in eternity. Amen.***

Sunday 18 June 2023

**Working with the home crowd**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Matthew 10:7).***

Read Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Jesus is on a roll! Crowds of people are coming to hear Jesus speak as he moves around the towns and villages. Jesus has a real heart for the people who are harassed and helpless. Do you know that harassed and helpless feeling? I certainly do! Wouldn’t it be wonderful to bump into Jesus as he travels around – to hear him preach and teach? Or even to have him heal you and take away those feelings of harassment and helplessness? That would be fantastic!

As Jesus moved about, he felt compassion for those feeling harassed and helpless. We can easily start there. Compassion means having pity that leads us to be merciful or helpful. Instead of sitting in judgement or walking by, Jesus wants us to pause and see how we can help – which may not be so easy after all.

Not only is Jesus conducting that ministry, but he also empowers his disciples to share it. They are sent out to do Jesus-style ministry among ‘the lost sheep of Israel’ – to start with the home crowd. Jesus tells them there is a plentiful harvest and a shortage of workers. Doesn’t that sound familiar?

I wonder what Jesus is telling us today. Should we also be going out to our home crowd to share the good news of Jesus with them? And if we were to do that, who would our home crowd be?

It sometimes feels like I am the lost sheep – the crowd seems to have already moved on from the church and its beliefs and values. Jesus’ message that the twelve disciples were to share is very clear: The kingdom of God has come near. It is up to you and me to share that message within our home crowd. And the good news is that the Holy Spirit can use our words and actions to touch people, draw them closer to God and bask in the awareness that God’s kingdom is near.

***Loving Jesus, thank you for your compassion and healing. Come into my heart and take away my feelings of helplessness and worry. Help me to be compassionate and give me the right words to tell my home crowd that the kingdom of heaven is near, trusting you to help them to understand and come to believe that too. Amen.***

*Colleen Fitzpatrick is a mother of two, grandmother of three and godmother of four. She is allegedly retired and lives in Adelaide. Colleen trained as a social worker, and after working in the foster care program at Lutheran Community Care in South Australia, she became the director and served in that role for 13 years. Colleen serves on a number of boards and committees within the LCA and the wider community.*