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**Sunday 23 October 2022 to Sunday 30 October 2022**

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Sunday 23 October 2022

# I’ve got nothing

by Kathy Matuschka

**But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ (Luke 18:13).**

Read Luke 18:9–14

This week, we are focusing on repentance: hooray! As humans, it’s one of the places we least like to go, and being a Christian doesn’t immunise us to this reluctance.

Take today’s reading, for example. If you ask yourself, ‘Am I the Pharisee or tax collector?’, there is no comfortable answer. If you’re the Pharisee, then everyone but you knows you have some significant issues and need to start repenting. If you’re the tax collector, then you are vulnerable. The tax collector doesn’t repent in the privacy of his room, but rather, he declares his sinfulness in a public place. In doing so, he opens the door for others to point their fingers at him, and the Pharisee needs no second invitation to do just that!

The tax collector gets the kudos in this story, but does anyone really want everyone to see them in a vulnerable state like that?

The tax collector isn’t simply playing a socially acceptable, virtue-signalling humility game. Instead, he responds viscerally to the repentance God’s Spirit has worked in his soul.

When God’s Spirit convicts us of the need to repent, we don’t care about others’ judgements. We simply confess to God and say, ‘It was me. I’m the one’, just as the Apostle Paul does in 1 Timothy 1:15.

Today’s text challenges us to fall on our knees and declare, ‘I’ve got nothing, God. Do whatever you want with me.’

Are we ready to go there this week?

**Dear God, I invite your Spirit to help me this week. Work in my heart: expose my self-reliance and remind me of my utter dependence on you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Kathy Matuschka loves gazing at and walking within God’s creation, listening to stories of life and faith, and spending time with family and friends. She serves within the LCA Queensland District as Assistant Director for Ministry & Mission.

Monday 24 October 2022

# Standing (or kneeling) in the gap

by Kathy Matuschka

**I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you (Nehemiah 1:6b).**

Read Nehemiah 1:1–11

When admitting our faults, there are safe contexts and less safe contexts. In some contexts, we have particular customs for acknowledging your failure. For example, in volleyball, it is (or was) customary to raise your hand when you were the one who lost control of the ball. I always understood this to say, ‘This is a team sport, and on that occasion, I let the team down’. If everyone in the team follows this practice, it feels quite safe to admit your fault. Another (recent) custom is to say ‘My bad’ to acknowledge a mistake you’ve made. Perhaps you can think of other examples of ways we admit that we were at fault. I know you can think of examples of how humans avoid admitting mistakes!

In today’s text, Nehemiah has returned from exile to Jerusalem. He finds the walls and gates of Jerusalem have been broken down, and God’s holy dwelling has been compromised. Nehemiah wonders if there is something he can do on behalf of the Hebrew people – something that will make a difference. His choice is to repent.

I imagine Nehemiah being one of the first to raise his hand and say ‘My bad’ – firstly, because he is truly repentant, and secondly, as an invitation for others to consider joining him in repenting Israel’s failure to obey God’s laws.

In his prayer, Nehemiah quotes God’s words: ‘but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them’ (Nehemiah 1:9, quoted from Deuteronomy 30:4).

Words that were spoken in a different time become significant for the Hebrew people in their present brokenness and confusion. So Nehemiah firstly repents, then secondly claims God’s promise of restoration on behalf of the people.

Would you stand (or kneel) in the gap until others join you in repentance? Perhaps you’re already doing this. Will it make a difference? Might it open some doors?

**Holy Spirit, you inspire me to do good, and then I try to take off on my own steam … again and again! I confess the sins I – and my church and nation – have committed against you. For Jesus’ sake, please restore us. Amen.**

Tuesday 25 October 2022

# God will restore

by Kathy Matuschka

**I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite (Isaiah 57:15b).**

Read Isaiah 57:14–21

Yesterday I asked whether our prayers of confession – of our personal as well as our communal/societal sin – might make a difference.

In today’s text, God answers yes, he will restore. God orders that the path back be restored. In the case of the Israelites in exile, he talks about a literal road. But in our case, the road is for our hearts. This road was sealed once and for all on the cross of Christ. We only need to remind ourselves and one another that the road is ready and waiting. It’s open 24/7 and never needs repairing again!

I would like to confess to you that I am not very good at confession. I don’t often stop to think of specific sins I have committed. But I know some of my general themes. I wonder if you can identify with them or if you have others:

* I get an idea of where God may be leading and then run ahead of God’s timing on my own steam as if it all depended on me.
* I fail to recognise how Jesus comes to me in others and get frustrated when they don’t behave how I would prefer them to.
* I rush past or turn away from our planet’s deepest wounds because they are so hard to repair.

I keep falling into the same traps. To tell the truth, I don’t want to be contrite and lowly because I’m afraid of what I might lose in the material, social world. I’m more interested in God’s high and holy place than the lowly places.

I even use ‘good’ Christian projects to try to elevate myself to high and holy places and stay out of the lowly, contrite ones … but I keep tripping over myself until I admit that I can’t, but Jesus did. End of story.

Thank God that God comes to us wherever we are. Through Jesus, God repairs the road to Godself and to others!

**Dear Jesus, please keep working on my stubborn heart to revive and renew me in your image. Amen.**

Wednesday 26 October 2022

# New shoots producing new things

by Kathy Matuschka

**I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain (Ezekiel 17:22b).**

Read Ezekiel 17:22–24

Yesterday I confessed that I often run ahead of God’s timing and try to bring his promises to fruition in my own steam. In Ezekiel 17, the prophet speaks about the futility of the vassal (puppet) king’s attempts to break free of Babylonian rule by forging an alliance with Egypt.

Now Ezekiel shares a promise that God will restore. God will take a shoot from what currently exists and plant it somewhere new, where it will thrive.

I am quite curious about how God’s restorative gardening might look in our context in Australia and New Zealand today. I wonder if our churches are like strong cedars that may need to be planted elsewhere going forward, as in today’s text.

Some shoots have already been planted. They may look tentative initially but, with some nurturing, will become sturdy and fruitful. I am at an age where I am often not the one having the most innovative thoughts and visions. So I look at generations younger than me and how God’s Spirit is at work among them. I notice that the shoots they choose to nurture are churches as places of welcoming and belonging, of care for the vulnerable both near and far. I see other shoots planted in all age groups: peace-seeking and reconciliation, greater attention to listening to God and each other.

What old shoots do you notice that have been planted in new ways? Are they budding … or fruiting?

**Dear God, thank you that you care for your church like a skilled gardener. Give us eyes and ears to notice the new things your Spirit is nurturing in our communities, and give us the trust to follow the action. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Thursday 27 October 2022

# Renewing the existing trees

by Kathy Matuschka

**Come near to God and he will come near to you (James 4:8a).**

Read James 4:6–17

Yesterday we reflected on new things God is planting in God’s church, and today, we turn our attention to the renewal of existing churches. This can be challenging because of the history that older congregations have. When conflicts and misunderstandings fester, and there are different versions of what occurred and what is needed to fix it, it can sometimes seem impossible that God will renew existing congregations.

The congregations who first heard the Book of James were only decades old. We don’t know what sorts of quarrels and fights the recipients of James’ letter had, but we do know that he had a lot of advice for them about how to live well in Christian community. That advice included grieving, mourning, wailing and humbling themselves before God.

James argues that many of our troubles are self-inflicted, stemming from our reluctance to leave space for God’s will and our neighbour’s needs.

Often instead of grieving and repenting, we argue amongst ourselves. When times are tough, anxiety among us increases, and so too does conflict.

Rather than coming near to God in our brokenness, we hope that we can manage it ourselves. But God knows we keep trying to justify ourselves instead of humbling ourselves at Christ’s cross. God invites us to come near to him (as he is already near to us) in our grief and confusion. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus showed us that this is true!

In our congregations: How do we look for and care for the shoots that emerge on the existing tree? How do we decide which branches limit the new shoots and so should be lopped? The Bible says to come near to God, and God will come near to us. God’s Spirit will help us sort out what things need our repentance.

As we come near the cross, we come nearer to each other. It’s the only place where we can truly meet!

**Dear God, please break through my pride and stubbornness and keep drawing me to you and my sisters and brothers. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.**

Friday 28 October 2022

# Repentance releases new vision

by Kathy Matuschka

**Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time (1 Peter 5:6).**

Read 1 Peter 5:5–11

At times in my life, I have hoped for something special from God. I have had a bit of a vision of what God might do and have charged after it as if I could grasp it if I just tried a bit harder. But it has only been when I got to the point of saying, ‘I give up. Just do whatever you want, God’ that I have seen a breakthrough according to God’s ways and terms.

Do you think that repentance releases new vision and hope?

It’s not that God requires that we repent before blessing us, but more that we seem to keep ourselves as individuals and communities bound by our limited imagination for the new things God will do. So, when the writer of 1 Peter encourages us to humble ourselves so God may lift us up, it’s not about manipulating God but rather about learning to face the limitations of our humanity and turning to God for our vision and hope.

The National Church Life Survey, in which many Australian Lutheran churches take part, tells us that there are three core qualities most indicative of the health of a congregation: faith sharing, empowering leadership and vision.

Through my work, I see many congregations realising the sense of vision they had in the past is no longer bearing the fruit it once was. Might growing in a culture of repentance help these three qualities to become stronger?

Are you waiting for a new vision in your circles? Do you think that repentance might help? It doesn’t matter whether we think of repentance as naming specific sins or admitting our preference for self-reliance – repentance is all about our orientation.

**Dear Holy Spirit, keep reorienting me toward the love and hope you have planted within me, and expand my vision of what you will make of this hope. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.**

Saturday 29 October 2022

# God’s heavy hand of guidance

by Kathy Matuschka

**I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’. And you forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:6b).**

Read Psalm 32:1–7

Many psalms start ‘nicely’ but end with an imprecation (curse) on the psalmist’s enemies. It happens more often than you’d think. I think perhaps we feel embarrassed that psalmists might curse other people in God’s word (it doesn’t seem very Christian!), and so often stop reading when we get to the ‘nasty’ verses.

Psalm 32 is no such psalm: in it, the psalmist stays focused on their own sin and their need to repent and doesn’t bring up anyone else’s behaviour. To use Richard Rohr’s words, we might imagine that the psalmist has come to a ‘crisis of limitations’. Rather than pointing the finger at someone else, the psalmist says, ‘It was me’.

Verse four of this psalm describes God’s hand as heavy upon the author. What is it like to have God’s hand heavily upon you? It could be experienced as oppression, doubts or lack of vision and direction. Or it could be a more physical message to your body to stop and listen to God.

It is never fun to feel God’s heavy hand upon us. We much prefer the wind of God’s Spirit beneath us. But in our lives as Christians, we move between these extremes. Thank God that when we feel God’s heavy hand, through Christ, we are free to confess our sins and be forgiven … again … and again … and again.

We pray using Martin Luther’s words:

**Dear God, day after day in your church, you fully forgive my sins and the sins of all believers. By your Spirit, grow in me a repentant heart that trusts in your goodness and mercy. Amen.**

Sunday 30 October 2022

# Lost and found

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount (Luke 19:8).**

Read Luke 19:1–10

Have you ever felt lost?

Maybe not lost in the sense of physical location but a ‘lost in life’ or spiritually lost feeling. Or perhaps you have been ostracised by people and left feeling lost and alone. Maybe you have been directionless in life, drifting with no sense of where your life was going, or perhaps you were heading off a cliff!

Maybe you have lost someone who meant the world to you. For me personally, it has been two years since I lost my mum, and part of me still feels numb and directionless – an emptiness, like something is missing from my life.

Feeling lost is not a nice feeling.

It appears that Zacchaeus is lost at the start of our reading today.

How was he lost? His job as a tax collector for the hated Roman Empire certainly would have made him a social pariah, as indicated by the muttering of all the people in verse 7. Being a tax collector made him ritually unclean – even excommunicated from the synagogues – and outside of God’s mercy. Zacchaeus is lost spiritually and socially.

What is he seeking? Most people who are lost don’t really want to be lost! Verse 4 tells us Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus and discover who he is, but he is too short (and he has certainly fallen short!). Seeking answers, he climbs a tree. To some, this seems amusing: ‘a short loser climbing a tree!’. Personally, I think it is an act of audacity – a brave risk by a desperate man!

How is Zacchaeus found? Jesus sees him. Jesus breaks down the social/religious barrier and speaks to him. Jesus calls him down. Jesus welcomes him. Jesus wants to be with him in the most intimate way – in his home.

How does Zacchaeus react? ‘Look, Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount’ (Luke 19:8).

Zacchaeus acknowledges Jesus as Lord. He acts immediately in giving of himself freely, releasing his wealth to help those in need and making restitution for his misdeeds. It is a stark contrast to the rich man in Luke 18:18–27 (and Mark 10:22), who walks away empty and lost.

How is Zacchaeus saved? Jesus says, ‘salvation has come to this house’. The word here also means to heal or be made whole. Jesus makes us whole!

**Lord Jesus, save us. Fill our emptiness with your love. Grant us your peace. Holy Spirit, show us how we can reach out to the lost with your love and acceptance. Amen.**

Stephen Abraham is a retired Lutheran pastor and musician who served as a school pastor and church planter in Mawson Lakes, South Australia. Stephen retired early due to a spinal injury, leaving him largely housebound with chronic pain (documented by Lutheran Media on its Messages of Hope YouTube channel in 2014). When Stephen can, he still preaches, takes school chapels and serves his local church. He also writes and records personal songs, worship songs and Christian meditations, which he shares on his YouTube channel ([*youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic*](https://www.youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic)).