

PASTOR'S BLOG 2019

January 5, 2019 - "Can You Pray 5 Minutes a Day?"



Dear Saints,

Happy New Year! I pray that your New Year is already off to a good start! In seeking ideas for a fresh New Year's message, I googled the history of New Year's. Among the articles I found, one from *Psychology Today*, caught my eye. Author, David Ropeik posited that the motivation to celebrate the New Year is rooted in our desire to survive and that making New year's resolutions is a way to exert control over an uncertain future. I'll agree with half of that.

We all know how challenging it is to keep our New Year's resolutions. In a 2007 British study of 3000 people who made New Year's resolutions, 88% failed to keep their resolutions for the year. That was not surprising but comforting. What was really interesting though was that among the resolutions made by these subjects, the resolution to pray more, was among them.

Ropeik claims that psychologically, people find more 'control' over the fear of death by "affiliating with religions that promise happy endings. Pray more and death is less scary". Granted this article is in *Psychology Today*, not *Christianity Today* but it got me thinking. 'Praying more' is a terrific resolution to make ANY time of year but it still seemed a little vague. So, I'm challenging all of us to create a new daily habit of:

praying each day, for 5 minutes a day, for the next 30 days. 5 minutes may seem like a small amount of time but if you were with us in worship during Advent, you know how long even a minute of silence can be, but how fruitful it was!

One Sunday after 'pondering the meaning of Advent' as part of our Time for Youth and Children, one of our Sunday School teachers asked his students "What did you learn during today's Time for Youth and Children?" Their responses? *"I can tell them the story of Jesus."*, *"Know that God hears your stress and anxiety."*, *"To focus on Jesus and God."*, *"I should ponder about my choices."*, *"Always believe that God is around."*, *"I should ponder about what God does for me every day of my life."*, *"We don't need to gift each other but love each other"*.

Saints!!!, if our kids are getting this from a brief story retold and a minute to ponder about God's activity, just imagine how our lives can be impacted with an intentional 5 minutes each day in prayer?

Maybe we'll feel more in control. Maybe we'll have less fear of death. Maybe we'll even shift from 'surviving' to thriving. But since our future is already certain because of what God did for us in Jesus Christ, maybe we can start to enjoy the present with God, for even 5 minutes a day. That's why the present is called a gift.

Praying for 5 minutes a day with you,
Jen

February 9, 2019 - "A Month of Love"



Dear Saints,

Only 5 shopping days left until Valentine's Day! So...when you just read that, what was your reaction?

Was it "Where did January go?" or perhaps "We've got to make reservations!" or maybe... "Ugh, I never know what to get my spouse". For some Valentine's Day is just one 'perfunctory' holiday that means burdensome card shopping, maybe even perfunctory but hollow flowers (sent or received) or sadness that love seems to have 'left the building'.

You may remember that last year's Valentine's Day was also Ash Wednesday. It set us up for a natural and awesome Lenten theme of "Love and Forgiveness".

Last week in our Time for Youth and Children we explored how to show Love. The kids and youth were mostly stumped, which then surprised and stumped me. But it also inspired me. It means we need reminding of how to show and act out of love, not just Feb 14th but all year long.

So we are going to explore themes of Love all month long (which is supported by our lectionary, in part) since Feb 3rd is 1 Cor 13! You probably know the text by heart or if not, at least a good portion of you had that text read at your wedding, or have heard it at least half the weddings you've attended. The middle section is the juiciest:

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Wow-what a tall order! 15 things that **LOVE** is NOT- and 5 things that **LOVE** IS.

Let's face it- we've all had some wonderful Valentine's Days and we've all had some we'd rather forget or have already blocked out.

But what if...we made an intentional commitment to work towards living out 1 Cor 13 Valentine's Day and every day? What if we refrained from even some of the things LOVE isn't for the entire month? OR... what if we committed to seeking to bear, believe, hope endure...just a little more.? Because dear friends, that's really the call of the Valentine. It's a message you give to another without or beyond the candy, flowers, card, or dinner but it pierces the heart in a way Cupid could only imagine.

Maya Angelou famously said " I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel"

Make this Valentine's Day and the month that you and at least someone else will remember.

Loving others with you because of Christ,
Jen

February 28, 2019 - "Abiding in God"



Dear Saints,

In Just 6 days we'll be kicking off our Lenten season with Ash Wednesday. Our Ash Wednesday service is like no other. It is communal (in that we impose ashes on one another), it is life giving (in that we have a wonderful, uplifting music), and it is meaningful in that we have created yet another activity having to do with our Lenten theme of "Abiding in God" and bearing fruit. If you HAVE been to our Ash service before, you know it is extremely well-attended. Therefore, we've even done some rearranging so that the end of the service will be in small groups. Come try it – you'll like it!

We've also created all new Lenten Wednesday events based on your feedback. This year we'll begin with a Labyrinth, March 13th. The following Wednesday March 20th, "Planting Vines"; "Soul Yoga" on March 27th; "Speed Devotions" (details to follow) on April 3rd; and finish with a Lenten Painting on Friday, April 12th. Except for the Painting event (\$35 each), all events are free and will conclude with wonderful refreshments and fellowship.

And about our devotional: If you are new to Lent and/or new to our community, we have crafted our own Lenten devotional. This book has 40 offerings written by people within our faith community. Each devotion also includes a scripture and a prayer. These devotions will also be posted daily on our website www.FPCBoonton.org and on our

Facebook page so you can read them while commuting, waiting to pick up one of your kids, or maybe even at work when you need some encouragement! We are printing about 250 copies with the hope that we will all seek out others who might be hungering for something meaningful in their faith journey.

I pray that as the light continues to grow (starting March 10th!) and our days get longer we will find a little more time to spend with God and one another so we can bear more fruit for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Seeking to abide in God with you,
Jen

April 3, 2019 - "Seeking Deeper Roots"



Dear Saints,

One of the blessings of having Lent/Easter so late in the calendar year is that it [more] naturally coincides with the rhythm and evidence of Spring. Since a 'late' Ash

Wednesday and the ensuing time-change we have all been hearing more birds chirping in the morning, seeing courageous hyacinths and daffodils pushing through the cold, wet soil, forsythia bushes wearing green/yellow hues and red buds swelling on trees.

Yet, not all branches, trees and vines will produce newness of life this season; some will have to be pruned/cleansed and discarded so that new growth can take place.

This may feel like a time-worn metaphor if you've been in worship weekly, attended our Lenten Wednesday events and have followed our 'devo' daily. Regardless of whether you are able to 'stay the course' daily or you dip in and out, or you are still in need of Lenten inspiration, the Creator is still speaking.

The beauty of witnessing new life springing up before our very eyes is that regardless of our lingering bad habits and attitudes and our resistance to let go of all that does not serve God, God is still actively inviting us into a deeper Lenten and Easter experience.

That starts with a new set of 'silent vignettes' in **Palm Sunday** to set the tone for Holy week. **Maundy Thursday** has some new changes and improvements to both involve our confirmation class and deepen your experience. **Good Friday** remains deep and dramatic with a powerful retelling of the crucifixion and with trained dramatic readers and powerful music.

I have heard it said that: "a tree without roots is just a piece of wood". Without these Lenten experiences your Easter experience may be pastel-filled but one dimensional. WITH these Holy week events your faith and hope deepens, because you are choosing to connect to the Vine; the Source of all Creation, and to the One in whom ... "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Seeking deeper roots in the Vine with you,
Jen

May 1, 2019 - "Feed My Sheep"



Dear Saints,

Two years ago, on April 29th, we had a church-wide retreat in Reighart Hall. It was a wonderful gathering of people of all ages for fellowship, worship, and discernment. We asked ourselves, one another and God, how and where God was calling us next.

Through prayer and conversation with one another, the group split into six main groups for further discussion, prioritizing and planning. Most of those groups have already carried out their initiatives. They ranged from fellowship events like the Summer church picnic and painting parties, game nights, and developing a ministry for more 'seasoned' adults. We are still in the process of trying to figure out how to enact sustainable youth ministry. We've had some traction but are still in need of strong, regular leadership.

The last group was passionately discussing and debating about how to initiate a sustainable hands-on mission within the church and community. Two years almost to the day, the **Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry** will have its Grand Opening this Friday Night May 3rd. Although it has already been serving the community for about a month, this is a time to celebrate and thank the dozens of volunteers who have done the extremely challenging work of bringing this from an idea and vision to fruition.

Last week the Rev Sherm Skinner preached on the post-Easter text in John 21, affectionately called "Breakfast on the Beach". In the course of the story, which is post-resurrection, Jesus asks Peter, three times "Do you love me? , [then] Feed my sheep". This text and the whole of John 21 has been the centerpiece and the driving

force for this mission and all the volunteers; from long and wide community research to the loving labor of power-washing, painting, plumbing, countless meetings, training, and even—yes—crucial inspections. There was response from others in the community who volunteered their professional services, donated plumbing supplies, shelves from a grocer, and meaningful financial gifts.

So please stop by May 3rd from 6-9 pm and celebrate the occasion of this hands-on and visual reminder of Jesus' call, post-Easter, to love him by feeding his sheep.

Celebrating with you,
Jen

June 8, 2019 - "Celebrate All That God is Doing Here"



Dear Saints,

I know this is such a busy time of year with Proms, college and high graduations, winding down the school year, planting our gardens and making summer plans. Our church life is equally as busy and exciting. Each Sunday in June has something special and meaningful to offer. **Scout Sunday 2nd, Pentecost and Confirmation Sunday June 9th, Education Sunday June 16th, New Member's Class June 23rd** and at least half of the new members class (a total of 14!) will be meeting with **Session on June 30th to be received into membership!**

This is a testament to how God is blessing us and how we are responding to God's numerous invitations to love and serve.

Last week I preached on grace. I shared one of my favorite quotes from theologian Karl Barth : *"God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves"*. This has numerous iterations; it means God gives us courage beyond our ability. God gives us hope beyond our own believing. God gives us peace beyond our own anxieties. God gives us community when we feel like we are alone. God gives us resources beyond our own efforts. There is far more to say about Grace than what any one sermon can cover but I encourage you to continue to **Pause**, in the spin of all that's on your calendars, and all that you have planned and recognize that as hard as we work in our jobs, as loving as we are with our families and as faithful as we are in our faith community, what God is doing here, is **PURE GRACE**.

Come **CELEBRATE** all that God is doing here; in the lives of our children, our youth, our confirmands, our choirs, new members, our leaders, and our food pantry.

To quote another one of my favorite theologians (the band ZZ Top) "the future's so bright (we'll) have to wear shades."

Celebrating God's Grace with you,
Jen

July 1, 2019 - "The Bean Pot"



Dear Saints,

July is gloriously upon us! But before we depart for travel, vacations and family events, let's revisit what an amazing June we've had! We celebrated The Lowther Scholarships, and graduating seniors, presented bibles to our newest disciples and gave "Lord's Prayer plaques" to all the students who learned the learning the Lord's Prayer last fall. We also recognized the years of service to all the Chancel and Bell Choir members and honored the Sunday School teachers and youth leaders . Lastly, we commissioned our 4 seniors to Youth Triennium. This was just one Sunday!

June also saw the celebration of Pentecost/Confirmation Sunday when we celebrated our 7 new members. We gifted them with special "Jesus-Baby" tee-shirts that also donned their individual spiritual gifts. We also gave them individual 'bean pots' from the main bean pot which has been growing new bean shoots unsuspectingly since our Ash Wednesday ritual.

Last Sunday afternoon I came out the Handicapped entrance to lock everything. I was both exhausted but thrilled after leading our next new members class with the Skinners.

I looked at the bean pot and it desperately needed water. Back in I went to the flower room, filled up 2 pitchers with water and watered the pot. In the oppressive humidity I was eager to get into the A/c of my car. But then I saw not one... not two... but about six long beautiful bean pods and more baby ones on the way!!! I was ecstatic. I don't know why I was so shocked but

probably because I have never grown vegetables. I think I was also surprised that they seemed to have showed up 'overnight'. I have been watering the pot when able but not as 'faithfully' as maybe if they were in my home garden.

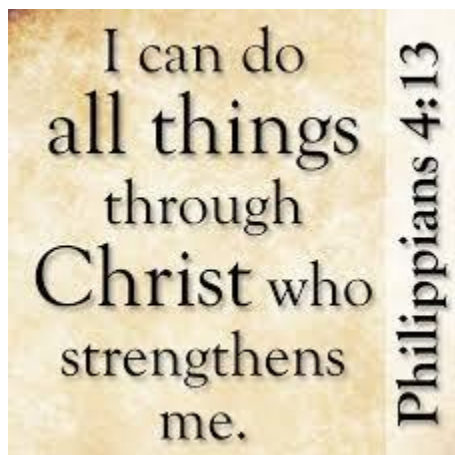
The joy of seeing new growth come from the seemingly dead, dried, hard kidney beans we all sank into dark soil on a cold night in March was thrilling. Then I heard Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3: "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth...the one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose...for we are servants of God, working together, you are God's field, God's building*".

God is clearly giving the growth at the corner of Church and Birch. Not only have we added seven fine young men to our membership, but we are about to add 13 (!) new members as well. They are all amazing people who are eager to add or who are already adding to the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

So, this July as you tend to your own gardens, begin vacation and family plans, don't forget that God has laid a foundation here and because of you, your care, your efforts and your faithfulness we are adding more bans to the pot.

Watching God's growth with you,
Jen

August 5, 2019 - "Christ - Strengthen Me"



Dear Saints,

By the time you read this and/or return to church for the first time after being away, you'll see the nearly completed church offices renovation. I am deeply grateful to the Kelly and (William) Birch families for their generosity to fund this endeavor. We are still completing the finishing touches but already it is a tremendous improvement in cheer and function! We are indebted also to Charlie Maraziti who did the yeoman's share of project management (without ever being asked), Thanks also to Amanda and Lorrie Skinner who helped break down our offices and throw away a lot of junk along with John Crozier who literally watched paint dry, and the Whipple, Yanez and Ambrosiani men who literally did all the heavy lifting. I can't wait for you all to see it.

More importantly, though, I am really glad you were not here to witness the upheaval and all of the emotional swings we went through for the last month. For those of you who have moved, especially recently, or are preparing to move or...send a student to or back to college or housing, you KNOW how stressful it is.

While some of us handle change better than others, very few of us function at our best when our living or working space is in turmoil. And there are always surprises. Unplanned changes, blunders, miscommunications and the like also add another layer of spice to the experience. I'd like to say I was well-prepared, patient and flexible throughout the entire process but there's little truth in that. I wish I had acted more like the scriptures in the artwork on my walls; but alas they were packed away.

So how do you handle the planned and unplanned chaos? What words do you turn to when you're wide awake at 3 AM worrying about all the things you can't control? The one verse that I kept saying to myself (and Sandy and I said to each other) was, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" (Philippians 4:13)

So whatever you are facing or worrying about, choose a scripture that you can repeat and then release all that worries or distracts especially when you are discouraged. I know you do that already but it's a gentle reminder, Christ is with us especially in our places of our lowliest state.

Finally, as you know, each time we return and read scripture, we learn something new. When I looked up the Philippians text, I laughed out loud. Verse 13 says "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me". Verse 14? And I quote; "*In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress*". God is hilarious.

Sharing chaos and new beginnings with you in Christ,
Jen

September 7, 2019 - "Come, Get Plugged In!"



Dear Saints,

We're (almost) back in the saddle. There are many blessings (hidden and obvious) in returning to routines that, by and large, most people and especially children thrive in. However, getting there is easier said than done especially after a season where there is a much more relaxed pace with less rhythm and schedule. This is true of our church activity and formal faith development as well.

Some of you may remember a time when "back to school" also meant "back to church"; when "Rally Day" was not a congregation-wide road race (which is what I thought it was when I was a teen) but a concerted effort on the Sunday after labor day to involve as much of the congregation as possible in Sunday school or other Christian formation opportunities.

While some churches still do this warm turnout, we have realized that 'returning to church and faith formation opportunities' grow more organically than flipping a switch. But maybe it should be.

A few months ago, the overhead light in my kitchen starting acting up. It would hesitate before it came on completely and it seemed to be 'growing in weakness'. Eventually, it failed completely. This wouldn't be so bad except that my kitchen is an 'interior' (i.e., no windows, no natural light).

No problem. I've replaced the 2 fluorescent circular bulbs before. I can do it again. No such luck. It's not the bulbs, it's the ballast that needs replacing. Whilst waiting for the electrician to come, assess, quote and schedule the repair, how many times do you think I walked into the kitchen

day and night and flipped the switch even before I remembered the light was out? I have actually lost count.

My muscle memory was so strong, that before I could even remind myself that the light was out, I had already flipped the switch.

“Muscle memory” can be either for good or unhelpful routines and habits. Neurologist Dr. Daniel Amen talks about the brain and muscle memory frequently including that daily habits build muscle memory. Regardless of whether the habit is ‘life-giving’ or ‘life robbing’ (my terms), he says “The brain is very susceptible to repetition”.

It occurred to me that as fall arrives, we all need to build back up our muscle memory and routines for faith formation. Some of this is committing to daily prayer, regular attendance and mission. Some of this is being open to the new ways in which we as a congregation, are seeking to develop faith formation for kids and adults alike.

If you wanna flip the switch to get the light, you gotta have a fixture that actually works and is plugged into the right power source. Come get plugged into the light that no darkness can ever overcome.

Seeking the light of Christ with you,
Jen

September 30, 2019 - "Serving Bread"



Dear Saints,

This coming Sunday, October 6th is World Communion Sunday. This special day which is celebrated by many churches and denominations around the world was conceived by the Rev, Dr. Hugh Thomson Kerr, a Presbyterian minister, who was at the time also the Moderator of the General Assembly (our national church conference). Dr. Kerr had a vision that if every church around the world, regardless of the regular rhythm of their communion schedule, would celebrate it on the same day, that it might further Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation. That vision was in 1930 just a year after the stock market crash of 1929.

Ironically the concept was furthered by the "Division of Stewardship" at Shadyside Presbyterian in an attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another. (Incidentally, Rev Sherm Skinner's father was also a pastor in the 1960s!)

While it might seem counter-intuitive to see stewardship and communion as partners, indeed, **"Bread Holds Everything Together". This is our theme for this year's Generosity (stewardship) Campaign.**

Bread in all its forms is a gift from God. Unleavened bread was and still is a sign of God's protection and deliverance to the Israelites during their escape from Egypt. Manna from heaven was delivered to the Israelites while in the desert. In the New Testament Jesus feeds the 5000

with bread, becomes for us the Bread of Life, and institutes bread as a symbol of his body broken for us.

As the saying goes "Bread makes the world go 'round". The giving of bread, which is a form of stewardship help us unite and feed our brothers and sisters. Bread is the gift of recognizing we are fed at the table from and by Christ and that no one should be turned away. Bread is also the slang for money.

Our generosity through stewardship can continue to make the work and the church go 'round.

So come to the table, bring what you can so that everyone can have a taste of Heaven.

Serving bread with you,
Jen

November 5, 2019 - "True Gratitude"



The monthly theme for worship is November is **Gratitude**. I'm sure this is unsurprising given that Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Although Merriam-Webster generally sees thankful and gratitude as synonyms, there are some small but significant differences. Thankful, says Merriam-Webster is "conscious of the benefit received" and grateful as "appreciative of benefit received".

Perhaps I am splitting hairs but I do think there's a difference between naming the 'things' we are thankful for around the dinner table or the 'suped-up' version on Thanksgiving Day and the felt and lingering experience of gratitude. Writer Nick Genovese states "True gratitude expresses "thank you" not only from our mouth but also from our hearts."

Think about a time when you received a compliment, a thoughtful and/or generous gift or an act of care. Likely you responded, "thank you!". That's being thankful. But...to sit and ponder the thoughtfulness, the care, the effort and the person or people behind that gesture that's when the gratitude kicks in.

In that vein, I want to thank you for acknowledging and celebrating pastor's appreciation month along with gift, card and flowers. They are all still on display in my living room! I am also grateful to be sharing mission and ministry with you; for your humor and your heart, for sharing the worry and the work, for your insight and your imagination and for your faithfulness day in, day out.

As you are probably aware by now, Thanksgiving is very late this year, so we'll have 28 days to practice not only being thankful for all God has done, is doing and will do. We'll also have the opportunity each day to sit with, and let the generosity of God's sustaining love, sink in so that whatever Thanksgiving brings; funky relatives, dry turkey or not-your-moms-apple pie, you can be thankful and deeply grateful that you are loved fully and completely for eternity.

Grateful for God's love with you,
Jen

November 30, 2019 - "Finding Hope"



Dear Saints,

The theme for our Advent worship this month is HOPE. This seems like a logical theme for Advent but the fact of the matter is, Advent can be a very difficult time of year and for many, HOPE is hard to muster. It may be that we are feeling a little blue because of the waning daylight. It may be because of the recent loss of loved one, an illness that just won't quit or a painful family relationship, the loss of a job, the constant struggle to make ends meet.

Paul tells us in Romans that "hope that is seen is not hope. But if we hope for what is not seen, we wait for it with patience." (Rom 8: 24-25). Ah yes, Patience. I believe patience, hope and trust are all cousins. It's hard to have one without the other two. Paul goes on to say in chapter 8 that the "Spirit will help us in our weakness". This is excellent news and rather reassuring. When we are struggling to have HOPE, especially in Advent, while being bombarded with all

sorts of media painting the 'perfect Christmas', we are often afraid to admit some of our hopelessness. We all need reminders of God's promise and eventual delivery of HOPE most supremely found in the arrival of Jesus, the Christ.

God's promises to reign down mercy and grace can only be seen and enjoyed in the waiting and the hoping and the trusting. A few weeks ago, you probably know that Loaves and Fishes was seeking frozen turkeys so that every family could be given one before Thanksgiving. Since over 50 families seek hope of food each week, getting 50 Turkeys was a tall order. Initially the stream of turkeys was steady but then it slowed significantly. A 2nd appeal came. Commitments were made but still not enough turkey...

And then, 6 more turkeys arrived. Then 6 more turkeys. Then another 6 more! Then it started 'raining' turkeys!!! Now the challenge was where to store all the overflow. Not only will all families will have a turkey for Thanksgiving but now there's a strong start for Christmas! God's reign came from not only your generosity but from people in town who volunteer at Loaves and Fishes or who know about it!

So, whether you're already seeing HOPE in this crazy-busy and challenging season, or you need reminding of God's goodness, keep looking and trusting and waiting because God does not disappoint. God's grace will reign down upon you for the bible (and turkeys) tell us so.

Waiting, watching and HOPING with you,
Jen
