



Week 3

exploring
**HUMANITY
& DIVINITY**

A SEVEN-WEEK
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL





FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
OF DECATUR

INTRODUCTION | Before You Begin

It is our hope and prayer this collection of devotional materials will help you on your journey through Lent this year.

The original idea for these entries came from a project for a seminary student at McAfee School of Theology. He and I had long conversations about the intersection of humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus. We wanted to find a way to capture those ideas on paper and put them into a booklet to help others process similar ideas during Lent. So this 7-week long series of devotional entries focuses on just that: wrestling with our humanity trying to transform itself into the likeness of Christ.

The entries throughout the next several weeks explore themes of:

- desire, love, motivation, and emotion;
- purpose and meaning;
- belonging;
- ability;
- security;
- creativity;
- suffering; and
- death and resurrection

The devotional contains one meditation per day, for 3-5 days each week. Each meditation embodies three movements: Learning, Reflection, and Action.

The Learning section of each meditation will consist of either a short personal story framing the theme, a passage of scripture with a short commentary of some sort, a piece of artwork, short imaginative story, or poem. This will lead into the Reflection section of the meditation. This part of the meditation will likely be a guided spiritual exercise in the form of: a written prayer, reflection questions for a journaling, prescribed silence, creation awareness, centering prayer, breath prayer, colloquy, prayer of imagination, etc.. The final part of the meditation will be a step that leads to action, likely either a short prayer, challenge, or the simple question, “What is the loving action associated with today’s reflection?”

It might be helpful to highlight scripture references in your own Bible and to write your responses to some of the reflection questions in a journal. So if you do not have one, it is recommended you get one to best engage in some of the exercises contained within.

Again, it is our hope and prayer these devotions help guide you down a meaningful path of reflection throughout Lent this year. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns along the way, please do not hesitate to reach out to a member on staff.

God bless you on your journey,

Matt Snyder
Director of Communications
First Baptist Church of Decatur

WEEK THREE

Belonging

The goal of this week's meditations is to reflect on belonging and community. One of the impacts of Jesus' ministry was the formation of a new community made up of those who were cast out of society for one reason or another. The poor, sick, meek, mourning, hungry, thirsty, marginalized, powerless, exploited and those kept out of the work of belonging were actively brought into this new community, the Kingdom of God.

Contributors:

Monday, March 25	Bill Neal
Tuesday, March 26	Kelsey Lewis
Wednesday, March 27	Peyton Wade
Thursday, March 28	David Jordan
Friday, March 29	Matt Snyder

Monday, March 25

Written by: Bill Neal

Learn

Since the beginning of mankind, God has seen the importance and frankly, the necessity, of mankind living within communities. It was not good for Adam (mankind) to live alone. And every biblical story following Adam and Eve includes a sense of community where people not only live in proximity to one another but must relate to one another as well. The relationships are not always positive, but there is a relationship, whether it be within a biological family or within a larger community.

Today, in every corner of the world, people want to live in a community where they have something in common with others. They want to feel they “belong” and that others care about them. Few people truly want to be alone all the time, and those that do are generally running or hiding from some bad experience caused by being in the wrong community.

While we have no say over where we are born or live as children, and we may not inherit the best of families, we do have choices early on about how we will relate to the families and larger communities in which we live. And as we grow older, we have a greater say in choosing which communities to which we will belong.

Many who are reading these words have personally chosen to be a part of the First Baptist Church of Decatur family. What prompted us to join? Perhaps we were looking for new friends and we were impressed with the people we met here. We may have felt drawn to God through the worship we experienced here. It may be that this is the place that allows us to best use our gifts for God. It is certainly a venue by which we can become a part of something much bigger than ourselves, and it is a place where we can draw love and support and encouragement from other Christians who serve the Lord Jesus.

What does it mean to be a part of this community, this Christian family? It means we are not alone. We have support and encouragement during the difficult times of our lives and people with whom to celebrate the good times. It means both learning from others and teaching others as together we grow spiritually on this shared Christian pilgrimage. Most importantly, we have a spiritual home, a place we feel that we truly belong.

I have come to love this church. I am committed to serve her with my resources and my talents, including my time. It is an investment in the lives of my fellow Christians and the Kingdom of God here on earth. I am proud to be a part of this community and it makes a great difference in my life, as I know it does for many others.

Monday, March 25

Continued

Reflect

Each year the Lenten season provides an opportunity to reflect upon not only my commitment to my Lord, but my commitment to His church. Have I been a good church member? Have I really used my gifts effectively? Have I been generous? Have I been positive and supportive in my relationships with others? Have I reached out to others when they needed help? Have I spent adequate time at church and taken advantages of opportunities to get to know others better and find ways to be of service to them? Have I volunteered for the various caring ministries of the church and participated in mission projects? Have I been friendly and welcoming, especially to the visitors and those seeking a church family?

Act

After reflecting upon what church membership means to you, re-commit yourself to be the best member you can be. Volunteer for something without waiting to be asked. Get to know someone you don't already know. Be regular in your worship attendance rather than coming when it is convenient to do so, or you are "in the mood." Give generously. Make sure that your church is on your regular prayer list and your VIP List (Very Important Priorities).

Tuesday, March 26

Written by: Kelsey Lewis

Learn

One of my favorite stories about belonging in scripture is found in Mark 5:24-34, the story of Jesus healing the hemorrhaging woman. Levitical purity codes in the Hebrew Bible dictated that women on their monthly period were to actually leave town, going outside of the camp until it was over. The Israelites believe menstrual blood was impure – a contaminating agent that was unholy and therefore intolerable. This woman had dealt with perpetual bleeding for twelve years.

All three synoptic gospels give an account of this woman's story but Mark, usually the most succinct, gives us the most details into her background. The passage characterizes her as one who has suffered. And her suffering is threefold:

1. She suffers bodily from what is a likely a painful condition, which persists for twelve years of her life. Despite having seen countless doctors, her condition continues to worsen.
2. She suffers financially, having spent everything she has on failed medical treatment.
3. She suffers socially.

Such a condition would have required her to live outside of the city wall on the literal margins of society, and everyone who came into contact with her would have had to go there too to offer a sacrifice in a purifying ritual and wait until evening to be ritually clean again. The gospel writer would have us know this about her so that we understand the scandal and the audacity of what happens next.

In an act of desperation, she reaches out for Jesus, touching his robe. . . and it works! She feels herself healed inside. As Christ says, it is her faith that has healed her. More amazing still is Jesus' reaction to her touch. I can imagine her fear as Jesus looks around for her and she realizes she has been caught and cannot go unnoticed. But he shows no concern for her impurity.

In a stunning reinterpretation of the law, Christ not only liberates her from her bodily physical suffering, he liberates the community around her from fear of her impurity. He shows us this: It is not her impurity which goes forth onto Jesus, but his power that goes out upon her touch. It is not her impurity that is the contagion, but Christ's power which cannot be contained. Impurity which kept her ostracized for 12 years has no power in the presence of God's holiness.

No matter how far on the margins you are, no matter how unclean or unfit you or others perceive you to be, Jesus is not beyond your reach. In fact he may be closer than you can imagine. You see, a study of this word "suffering" which in this passage is associated with the pain this woman has endured for

Tuesday, March 26

Continued

twelve years reveals that every other use in the book of Mark, and 11 times out of 12 in the entirety of the gospels, reveals that suffering is connected with Jesus Christ as the sufferer. The Biblical author would have us associate suffering with the suffering Servant himself.

As the author of Hebrews writes in chapter 13, verse 12: ***“And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.”***

You see, not only does Christ situate himself so that we may reach him in the city among the “pure” folk, but he comes to us, and inhabits that outside, marginal space with the suffering. That is the power of God’s contagious love over our suffering. God has come down, not to contain Godself to the holy of holies, but as an uncontained, unbridled force, extending far beyond the limits of our social constructs, lighting up the darkest corners of unmentionable pain, even out beyond the city gates where the “impure” and “unholy” reside. In Jesus, God climbs down into our suffering with us and redeems it with God’s holy presence, so that as we reach out, we can be assured that God’s power goes out to meet us.

Reflect

Spend several minutes reflecting on the various sufferings in your own life, albeit personal or corporate. How is the Spirit of Christ with you in those experiences of suffering?

Act

Identify one person you know who is going through a difficult time right now. How can you be present with them during this season? Call them, write them, or pay them a visit to let them know you are there for them, and like Jesus in the story of the suffering woman, may the Spirit of Christ be with you to bring them healing and comfort. Amen.

Wednesday, March 27

Written by: Peyton Wade

Learn

A slightly volatile word in our society right now is *privilege*.

The existence of privilege depends on who you talk to. It is debated. For some, our communities are structured around this elusive privilege; it is present everywhere, giving a few a leg up while cutting the legs out from under most others.

For others, privilege is more so a myth, an excuse used to explain the downward situation of those who haven't worked or learned enough. The trend seems to be that those who benefit from privilege are blind to its workings, while those it works against see it clearly.

A book that helped me understand the workings of privilege through my Christian faith is Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. While Thurman is writing a book about Jesus, not privilege, he brings to light an example of privilege by comparing Jesus and Paul. Thurman reminds us all of the station Jesus inhabited in society.

Jesus was a poor, wandering Jew, subject to the rule of the Roman Empire. Part of the good news that Jesus brings is a way to survive on the underside of society and keep human dignity through love. When we realize we are loved by God, we live into our identity as God's children. This is an antidote to fear. When we love ourselves, we boldly speak the truth in every situation; an antidote to deception. Empowered by "God love" and "self love," the impossible becomes possible and we find a redeeming love for our enemies; an antidote to hatred. This is the power of love and the power of Christ.

Whereas Jesus lived on the underside of society by the power of love, Paul had recourse Jesus did not; Paul was a Roman citizen, not a Roman subject. As such, he had societal protection, the ability to request an audience with Caesar. We see him evoke this privilege toward the end of Acts. Here, we finally uncover a concept of privilege.

On a foundational level, privilege is knowing that when conflict comes you will be in the right. Somebody, something, some right, or perhaps just some social norm, has your back. On the other hand, you may be underprivileged if you know that when conflict comes you will lose the conflict. Persons, rights, and norms support the other person, not you.

As a Christian community whose members inhabit a variety of stations and experience a variety of degrees of privilege, we must never forget that Jesus was underprivileged, dwelt with the underprivileged, loved the underprivileged. Jesus calls us to follow him and do likewise.

Wednesday, March 27

Continued

Reflect

Read the following quote from Howard Thurman and his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. When you're finished, spend five to ten minutes journaling what kind of feelings it provokes from within you. Specifically, reflect on what this means for you and your position of privilege in society.

“The opposition to those who work for social change does not come only from those who are the guarantors of the status quo. Again and again it has been demonstrated that the lines are held by those whose hold on security is sure only as long as the status quo remains intact. The reasons for this are not far to seek. If a man is convinced that he is safe only as long as he uses his power to give others a sense of insecurity, then the measure of their security is in his hands. If security or insecurity is at the mercy of a single individual or group, then control of behavior becomes routine. All imperialism functions in this way. Subject peoples are held under control by this device.”

Act

Invite someone outside of your social circle for coffee.

Thursday, March 28

Written by: David Jordan

Learn

You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost ... (Ezekiel 34:4).

Prevailing wisdom generally asserts that no one is truly altruistic; everyone has an agenda or is working some kind of angle for personal gain. And yes, sadly, it is also true we Christians often talk a better game than we play. But let's look at the biblical prophets for a moment. The cause they served and the messages they preached were largely on behalf of the overlooked—those who had no voice of their own. The above text from Ezekiel is a good example. And it is much of this thought and concern that also serves as the precursor to the cause of Jesus:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19 quoting Isaiah 61:1-2).

There was no money to be made or political influence to be peddled by such stances. These were not popular proclamations with those who controlled the power. Consequently, those who proclaimed them often met with less than desirable ends.

Similar perspectives rang out from the voices of Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Micah. And, from the Christian perspective, their combined concerns were best and most fully embodied in Jesus. It has been God's desire from the beginning of Abraham's call (Genesis 12:1-3) that the same should be embodied in us—to humbly carry on the call, the perspective of the prophets, and the spirit of Jesus.

But the Bible is honest as well, and realistic. We hear less about heroes of the faith and those who succeeded with no struggles; we hear more about people like Jacob, Leah, Cain, and Adam and Eve. In other words, we hear about mistake-ridden people just like us.

We all can and should do better. But the failings of Christian people, all of us human to the core, never dull the flame of God's dream. From each generation, God calls new purveyors of hope and justice. There is much to be done—there continues to be much wrong in the world and in our communities. Too many are left out, too many are too busy to know or understand or care. But God's continual message echoes through time: "You have not strengthened the weak, sought the lost..." Followers of Jesus attempt to emulate his thought and action: "...bring good news to the poor ... proclaim release of the captives..."

Thursday, March 28

Continued

Reflect

I have no words better than my own mother's to express the true meaning—and purposefulness—of justice. Inspired by Micah 6:8, Amos 5:24, and Jesus' overall concerns for justice, she wrote the hymn below. Today, study these words and determine what they mean to, and for, you:

Hear Again the Cry for Justice

*Hear again the cry for justice, hear again the prophet's call,
"Like the mighty, flowing waters, let the streams of goodness fall."
May the words that God has given pierce our selfish apathy
'til, with joy, we turn to live them, 'til we heed the prophet's plea.*

*In a world of sin and anger, in a world where cynics scorn,
Millions weep in helpless hunger, refugees and orphans mourn.
Rise, O Church, to meet the challenge, lift the fallen, help the weak,
Change the laws that breed corruption, speak for those who cannot speak.*

*While we play in mindless leisure, feasting much and wasting more,
Others die, diseased and fearful, plagued by famine, greed, and war.
Yet God's call to right and justice echoes still, across the years,
"Turn from sin to joyful service, wipe away your neighbor's tears."*

*Hear again the words of Scripture, linger long at Jesus' feet.
Let the message grow within us 'til our prayers and actions meet.
May we listen, may we worship, then obey the Spirit's prod,
Doing justly, loving mercy, walking humbly with our God.*

– Diane Jordan

Live today with these words echoing in your heart while you wonder: how can I help God help others?

Act

Pray this prayer: ***Help us, God. Guide our considerations of lifestyle and pleasures; open our eyes to the world around us, both the beauty and the pain. Deepen our concerns; broaden our compassion; use us in kindness and humility to offer ourselves in your name.***

Friday, March 29

Written by: Matt Snyder

Learn

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul reminds the church that its “citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). To someone in the 21st century, we might read over this and think nothing of it, but it is a powerful statement to believers living in a Roman colony in the first century.

The way the Roman empire operated was that when something happened in Rome, it was supposed to happen in all of the Roman colonies. So if Caesar decided he wanted to have a celebration in honor of his great aunt Alba, then the rest of the colonies were expected to have the same kind of celebration.

It was part of what it meant to be a citizen of the Roman empire: you were able to participate in life in Rome even if you weren’t physically there.

The believers in the church at Philippi understood this concept (even the ones who weren’t Roman citizens), so when Paul made the parallel statement that they were “citizens of heaven,” it brought with it that understanding. Just because they were not physically “in heaven” didn’t mean they couldn’t participate in what happens there.

Several years ago I was in Guatemala and wandered into a Westernized restaurant on the waterfront. Upon making small talk with the owner, I learned that although he was a United States citizen, he hadn’t been home in over 25 years! He said the only reason he held onto his citizenship (and his passport) was because of the perks of being a US citizen no matter where he was in the world. And he knew that if anything ever happened to him, he would be taken care of.

It’s no different being a US citizen today than it was being a Roman citizen in the first century. No matter where you end up, you belong to a unique community and culture.

Being a citizen of heaven is no different. No matter where you end up, you belong to a heavenly-minded community and culture. The benefits are endless (eternal perhaps) and carry with them a responsibility to think, act, and live in a certain way.

Friday, March 29

Continued

Reflect

Take 10 minutes and write down what it means to you to be a part of your immediate family. What are some characteristics, traits, values, and ideals you pursue as a family unit? When you're finished, reflect on what it means to be a part of a Christian community. What are characteristics, traits, values, and ideals you're pursuing as a community? How can you do better?

Act

Demonstrate a value of the community you belong to today. If your community values kindness, then participate in a random act of kindness today. Tip your waiter 100%, purchase a meal for a stranger, volunteer your time at a shelter, or write a letter to a service member overseas.



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