

HEARING GOD'S VOICE INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S DAY

June 1st, Tuesday

MW	Ps. 80	Judges 6.25-end	Acts 1.15-end
EW	Ps. 81	Judges 7.1-18	Matt. 2.13-end

But the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon... (Judges 6.34a) "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen..." (Acts 1:24)

In Judges God directs Gideon to destroy the altar of Baal and to confront the Midianites. This story is a favorite for children, because Gideon asked God for a sign. Children also ask God for signs, which are concrete, visible and real. The first morning God put dew only on a fleece of wool on the threshing floor, leaving the surrounding ground dry. Just to make sure, Gideon asked for a second sign. This time the surrounding ground was wet with dew, leaving the fleece of wool completely dry. God did not mind Gideon's request for assurance!

How does this story compare with the New Testament passage from Acts, which tells how the disciples selected a replacement for Judas? The disciples prayed for guidance and cast lots. Matthias was chosen. Some interpreters suggest the disciples took the decision into their own hands, without taking the time to discern God's choice. The new appointee, Matthias, was not a key player in the development of the church. Was God's choice the Apostle Paul, rather than Matthias?

What do these stories mean for us? Should we "test" the Lord, as children are prone to do? Should we pray and cast lots to choose leaders? Although the Scripture is not clear whether the disciples' choice of Matthias pleased God or not, decisions about church leadership are important. Let's listen for God's voice and discern where the Spirit is moving. Will we provide God the time and space needed to call transforming leaders for the Church of North India? Will we seek the "child-like faith" Jesus desires and wait on the Lord to lead us?

Prayer: Lord, may our choices reflect the will of God in Christ Jesus who "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...." (Phil.2:6-8) In the Indian context, where the caste system subtly pervades the culture, allow Christians the radical freedom to show that servant leadership can transform the church's witness. Restore to us a "childlike faith" which listens to God's voice. Amen.

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THE END OF HIERARCHY

June 2nd, Wednesday

MW	Ps. 82	Judges 7.19-8.3	Acts 2.1-21
EW	Ps. 84	Judges 8.22-end	Matthew 3

Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:18)

Many people feel the need to get back to the basics of teaching the Bible. Let us challenge one another to "hear the Word of God afresh" and to see the Spirit's leadership. Although the book of Acts is officially called "The Acts of the Apostles," it chronicles the development of Christ's church from the first day when the Holy Spirit was poured out. Although the apostles were instruments of God's Spirit, the Spirit led the way. Are we prepared to hear this radical message?

Peter upset the traditional hierarchy. Just as Jesus challenged the religious scholars and leaders of the synagogue, Peter prophesied that a new kind of equality would emerge in Christ's church. Men and women, sons and daughters, EVEN SLAVES, would be recipients of the Spirit and would prophesy! Although more than 2,000 years have passed, this issue of equality is not resolved. The church itself seems to be hanging onto hierarchy, when Jesus Christ, the Spirit, and the Apostle Peter mandated something different.

These words call us to radical realignment! Does the CNI make room for the prophetic words and deeds of men and women, sons and daughters, EVEN THE SLAVES, upon whom the Spirit has been poured out? I challenge my beloved brothers, Bishops and Presbyters, to swing wide the doors of God's mercy so that prophets will be offered positions of leadership in the church. Where are the voices of women, daughters, and Dalits? I attended the dedication of two Dalit Commentaries for the Gospels of Mark and John, and was surprised when the Chief Guests for that event were not Dalits. How is the church inverting the power of "caste" in Indian society? Do we reduplicate the injustices that have historically defined Indian society, or are we turning things upside down, so that the last DO become first, as the Spirit expects? The CNI "speaks" for the least, but when will the church let them prophesy to the rest of us?

Prayer: God, deliver us from hierarchy! Blow through the CNI Bhavan and put tongues of fire upon the heads of our leaders, so that they will speak in the dialects of our people who hunger and thirst for the bread of life and for living water. Raise up daughters, sons, and slaves, to bring the prophetic words and deeds we all need to hear and see. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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DEATH CANNOT HOLD CHRIST!

June 3rd, Thursday

Martyrs of Uganda (1886)

MW	Ps. 85	Judges 10.6-11.3	Acts 2.22-42
EW	Ps. 86,87	Judges 11.4-28	Matt.4.1-11

But God raised him [Jesus] up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held by its power. (Acts 2:24)

Preaching to the Israelites in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, Peter was inspired by the Holy Spirit to proclaim with authority that the man the Israelites crucified was indeed the Lord and Messiah for whom the entire house of Israel had been waiting! This news cut to their hearts. The people listening to Peter asked him what they should do to make things right. Peter's response was clear: "Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (2:38) It is hard to put ourselves back in the shoes of those first Israelites; however, try to imagine their grief and shame when Peter preached to them. The one for whom they had been waiting is the one they crucified. Peter wasted no time heaping guilt upon their shoulders, but rather immediately offered to them the forgiveness of Jesus Christ through repentance and baptism.

How does this speak to us today? We are all sinners in different ways, but God does not want us to waste time heaping guilt on others or stewing in shame within ourselves. Christ has risen and the world waits to hear the good news. If we follow in the footsteps of Peter, we will not spend our efforts "knocking people over the heads" about their sins, but will instead offer a way of forgiveness, so that just as death could not hold Christ in the grave, our sins will not incapacitate us any longer. Let's make haste to bring good news to others and not shrink back from inviting people into a forgiven relationship with Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, speak to us about our sins. Just as you did not leave Jesus in the grave, but raised him from death, raise us to new life and give us the passion to share it with others. You are not looking for "guilt trips" but for hearts of repentance. Help us hesitate no longer and seize the freedom for which Christ died and rose again. We remember the martyrs of Uganda who died in this life for their faith, but even now intercede on our behalf from their heavenly abodes where they will live forever. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

THE SPIRIT MOVES US TO THOSE IN GREATEST NEED!

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF INNOCENT CHILDREN, VICTIMS OF AGGRESSION

June 4th, Friday

Pyari Mohan Rudra (Conv., Pastor) 1889

MW	Ps. 88	Judges 11.29-end	Acts 2.43-3.10
EW	Ps. 89.1-18	Judges 13	Matt.4.12-end

And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2: 47b)

How effective is our ministry? This is a question people are reluctant to ask themselves; however, numbers don't lie. How much of our time and energy is spent on maintenance of the structures and status quo of our churches? How much of our time is spent meeting the needs of people within our congregations and out on the streets?

The apostles wasted very little time making radical changes once the Spirit was poured out with power. The first priority was realigning their fellowship among themselves. They quickly pooled their resources to make sure that everyone had what they needed. They prayed and praised God together, breaking bread and looking out for those in need. The result was an immediate increase in people being saved. "Being saved" means more than finding eternal life; it means being freed from bondage.

The apostles also hit the streets and paid attention to the people there. A man lame from birth was laid daily at the gate of the temple to ask people for alms. Peter and John fixed their gazes upon him and Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." (Acts 3:6)

Many people are asking for "alms" in India. Do we look at them? Do we see the children in rags? Do we look these children in need in the eyes and offer them what we do have in Jesus Christ? It's a risky business, because we may have to inconvenience ourselves, get our hands dirty, or upset some public officials. At the same time the effectiveness of our ministry would grow by leaps and bounds. Do we dare to follow the Spirit into those needy places?

Prayer: Your Spirit is an activist Spirit, Lord, and stirs us to follow. Give us courage to open our eyes to the most vulnerable, so we can ask the tough questions, and give what we do have to those who need it most. Lord, be the advocate for all innocent children who are victims of aggression and get us out of our comfort zones to see their plight and work for change. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

THE POWER COMES FROM JESUS' NAME

June 5th, Saturday

Boniface (Bp. Ev. Mar.) 754

MW	Ps. 89:19-52	Judges 14	Acts 3.11-4.4
EW	Ps. 90	Judges 15	Matt. 5.1-16

And by faith in [Jesus'] name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. (Acts 3:16)

After Peter and John healed the crippled beggar, people crowded around them, but Peter admonished them about the source of the power. It was the name of Jesus Christ which brought health and wholeness to the man. Jesus was the one sent by the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He was sent from the God of their ancestors, but they rejected him in Pilate's presence and chose to release a murderer instead.

As Peter preached about Jesus and his ancestors, the priests, and Sadducees were disturbed. They did not want the apostles to proclaim that Jesus was raised from the dead, so they arrested Peter and John. Why is it that "institutionalized religion fears God"? [Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands. La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.] The people listening to Peter and John heard the word and believed, adding five thousand on that very day.

What are we doing these days in the name of Jesus Christ? Are we walking outside the doors of our churches and addressing the needs of people in our communities? Are we stepping over the people on the streets, or walking on the other side of the road to avoid the needs of people who hunger and thirst for the healing and wholeness Jesus promises for all human beings? When was the last time our ministries of love disturbed the status quo? When was the last time we witnessed Jesus' name restoring sight, wholeness, or granting forgiveness? Are we seeing God's power at work among us? Are we disturbing the peace in the name of Jesus Christ?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, your name is powerful. It is the name above every name which brings wholeness to a broken world. Your name brings healing, hope and restoration to those who long for it. Free us to speak your name and offer that power to others, even when it disturbs the rulers of this age, or the leaders of our churches. Amen.

BLESSINGS AND WOES

June 6th, Sunday

2 Sunday after Pentecost

Theme: The difference between what the world values and what the God values

M/EW	Psalm 94.1-15	L.S.	OT	Amos 6.1,4-8
	OT Amos 6.1-8		Psalm	107.35-37,39-43
	NT Romans 11.33-12.2		Epistle.	Romans 11.33-12.2
	and/or Luke 6.17-26		Gosp.	Luke 6.17-2

Notice of Barnabas, Apostle on 11 June

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (Luke 6:20-21)

Most people study the Beatitudes as they are recorded in Matthew's Gospel, because they are somewhat spiritualized. In Luke the blessings represent only one side of the coin. The other side of the coin expresses the "woes," which are directed towards those who are comfortable in their present circumstances. Jesus says: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets" (Luke 6:24-26).

These are hard words which directly address the earthly circumstances of our lives. Luke expresses hope for those who are most needy in this life: for those who are materially poor, physically hungry, and emotionally broken. God has something wonderful in store for those who have missed out on the blessings in the present age. Likewise, those who have "lucked out" in this life will be confronted with bitterness.

What do we do with these teachings? No wonder some people walked away from Jesus. Those who have material blessings need to do some soul searching. How would God direct us to use the blessings we have been given? Is our heart in the same place as God's heart? Are we seeking God's will or material comforts? The answers to these questions are crucial. These are God's values, whether we are eager to receive them or not. These criteria will be the rubric God uses to assess our faithfulness.

Prayer: Draw us closer, Jesus, to your values. Instill in our hearts your priorities as we make decisions about what to do with our lives and how to use our resources. Help us to make the necessary sacrifices now, so that we may be blessed in Your Kingdom. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

SPEAKING ABOUT OUR EXPERIENCES WITH CHRIST

June 7th, Monday

MW	Ps. 93, 95	Judges 16.1-22	Acts 4.5-22
EW	Ps. 94	Judges 16.23-end	Matt. 5.17-32

...for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard. (Acts 4:20)

This was a pivotal moment in the life of the early church. Peter and John were arrested for speaking about Jesus' resurrection from the dead, as the power which healed the crippled man. When the rulers, elders, scribes and high priest assembled to discuss the case, they questioned Peter and John, saying: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7)

How would we answer this question? Would we mumble quietly, "it was in Jesus' name," in hopes that they would not hear and would move on to the next question? Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke with authority and boldness, saying the one they had crucified, whom God raised from the dead, healed the man. In fact, Peter declared: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The rulers backed down and found no good reason to punish Peter and John, because they recognized that the man was truly healed and the people were amazed by the sign. Their last recourse was to warn Peter and John "to speak no more to anyone in this name" (Acts 4:17). Unfortunately, Peter and John would not comply with their request. They could not be silent about their experience with Christ.

The best way to spread the news of Jesus Christ comes from sharing our own experiences: what we have seen and heard. Rather than trying to "indoctrinate" others with beliefs, the most powerful witness comes from what has happened to change our own lives. When we speak from our hearts about what we have seen and heard, and how Christ has transformed our lives, families, churches and institutions, it silences our critics. We are not pushing faith on others, but rather sharing the joy which comes from new life in Christ!

Prayer: Lord, open our lips to speak about the ways you have granted forgiveness and new life to us. That is the most authentic witness we can give. And if our experiences with you are few and far between, give us a hunger and thirst to know you better and to love you more, so that words of witness will come freely out of the depths of what we have seen and heard. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

WHEN THEY PRAYED...

June 8th, Tuesday

MW	Ps. 96	Judges 17.1-18.10	Acts 4.23-31
EW	Ps. 97	Judges 18.11-end	Matt. 5.33-end

When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

Can you imagine and visualize the reunion of Peter and John with their friends? When they were released from prison, the community gathered to hear a detailed report of their experiences. As in most cases of persecution, it builds the community spirit of those who are targeted. Instead of intimidating the new believers, their commitments were deepened.

The group immediately lifted their voices in prayer to God, acknowledging God's sovereignty and power throughout history and in their own lives. For some reason, which only God's wisdom can fathom, the God of heaven and earth allowed the rulers of the age, both Roman and Jewish, to conspire together to hurt God's anointed holy servant, Jesus, so that the resurrecting power of God could be revealed.

The disciples were not silenced, but empowered to pray and to increase their bold witness in the name of Jesus Christ. As we confront the powers of this age, communities of prayerful support are crucial components of our witness to Jesus Christ. Peter and John did not quietly disperse after their time of imprisonment and persecution. Their communities embraced them and prayed with them. If we are seeking the power of the Holy Spirit in our midst, we must turn to God and open ourselves to one another. The power of prayer becomes most evident, not when we pray silently and secretly in our homes, but as we come together in communities of trust and strength.

Prayer: God, prayer is a communal experience which releases the power of your Holy Spirit in our midst. Help us not to "use prayer" as formal bookends to prescribed rituals. Remind us that prayer is conversation poured out to a living God who listens, has compassion and shakes things up in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

THE USE OF PROPERTY AND POSSESSIONS

June 9th, Wednesday

Columba of Iona, (Monk. Ev.) 597
William Carey (Ev.) 1834

MW	Ps. 98, 99	I Chr. 10.1-11.3	Acts 4.32-5.11
EW	Ps. 99, 101	I Chr. 13.1-14.2	Matt. 6.1-18

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:34-35)

These words cut to the hearts of all people who trust in the power of property and possessions to provide personal security for their own families at the expense of God's people. The market economy and capitalist mindset, inherited from our western partners, is a dangerous value system, which has the power to corrupt and destroy. How many of us preach about Ananias and Sapphira on a regular basis? In the earliest days of Christ's church, the possessive spirit took hold of Ananias and Sapphira and it destroyed them.

How much more unsettling it is to hear about church leaders who hold back funds, sell property for private gain, or refuse to vacate church property in an effort to secure their own positions and personal security. These are not small matters. These disturbing, but prophetic verses in Acts undercut the privatization of property and possessions. The greed which drives global capitalism is even worse than the greed of Ananias and Sapphira.

Traditional Indian culture is much more communal and in "tune" with the shared ownership described in Acts. Unfortunately, our culture is moving away from those traditions and plunging rapidly into the abyss of private ownership. We turn a blind eye to the corruption of personal gain in our society and in our churches. This is dangerous business. Peter's words convict us all: "How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" (Acts 5:4)

Prayer: Dear God, the health of our souls and our churches depends upon our honesty to you, the One who knows us from the inside out. Deliver us from the possessive spirit which destroyed Ananias and Sapphira. We do have needy persons among us. Cut away this deadly disease of greed, which contradicts your self-sacrificing love for all people. Instead of our building private empires of wealth and power, show us how to empty ourselves in love, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

EMPTY PRISON CELLS

June 10th, Thursday

MW	Ps. 102	1 Chr.15.1-3,11-16,25-16.4	Acts 5.12-26
EW	Ps. 103	1 Chr.16.37-17.15	Matt.6.19-end

"We found the prison securely locked, and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside" (Acts 5.23).

The temple police reported this unexplainable fact to the high priest, the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel. The apostles whom they had locked up had disappeared from their cells and were found in the temple teaching! Now the Jewish leaders had double trouble. They could not explain the empty tomb of Jesus, nor could they explain the empty prison cells of the apostles. The harder they tried to suppress the witness of Peter and John, the more complicated their jobs became.

The high priest and Sadducees arrested the apostles because they were jealous (vs. 17). The people of Israel were flocking to them in great numbers; even people in towns around Jerusalem were bringing the sick and those with unclean spirits to be cured. The religious leaders were not just attempting to silence Peter and John; they were actively working to suppress the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the "sin" Jesus called unforgiveable (Mt. 12:32).

The work of the Holy Spirit is unstoppable. It is the power which raised Jesus from the dead. It is the power which Jesus described when the Pharisees tried to stop the crowd from praising him. "Jesus answered: 'I tell you, if these people were silent, the stones would shout out'" (Luke 19:40). The Holy Spirit defies human logic and transcends human limits. The Spirit does not respect human boundaries: prison cell walls or denominational structures.

Although we may not appreciate the comparison of denominational structures to prison cells, we must not forget the human origin of all institutions. The Spirit of Christ exits through those walls of limitation as easily as Jesus rose from the dead and as easily as the apostles disappeared from their prison cells. Let us not underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit to disappear from church structures, when we attempt to confine God's power or limit the work of the Holy Spirit among "unauthorized" people. God's Spirit cannot be confined or bridled.

Prayer: “Spirit” (Presbyterian Hymnal, #319, Words and Music by James K. Manley)

**You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes,
from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams,
our women see visions, our men clear their eyes,
with bold new decisions your people arise.**

**Refrain: Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the
wilderness, calling and free. Spirit, Spirit of restlessness,
stir me from placidness, Wind, Wind on the sea. Amen.**

SPREADING LIKE WILDFIRE

June 11th, Friday

Barnabas, the Apostle

**Theme: Thanksgiving for the faith and goodness shown in the
life of Barnabas.**

M/EW	Psalm 1	L.S.	OT	Job. 29.1-16
	OT	Job. 29.1-16	Psalm	1
	NT	Acts 11.19-26 & 13.1-3	2nd R.	Acts 11.19-26 & 13.1-3
	and/or	Matthew 5.13-16	Gosp.	Matthew 5.13-16

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.....for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians” (Acts 11.25-26).

The persecution of Christians allowed for the dispersion of believers to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, where they spoke to other Jews about Christ. However, some new believers from Cyprus and Cyrene also began proclaiming the Lord Jesus to Hellenists in Antioch. “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord” (vs. 21). Leaders in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to see what was happening. Barnabas recognized the grace of God in their midst and reported back to the church in Jerusalem that the Spirit was moving beyond the borders of the Jewish family. Barnabas recruited Saul to come to Antioch to teach the new believers, where the name “Christian” was used for the first time.

Clearly, the Spirit was “ahead” of the apostles. Persecution of believers contributed to the Gospel’s spreading like wildfire to new communities of Jews and to the first reported conversion of Gentiles in Antioch. Even though the apostles had not “imagined” the conversion of Gentiles, the Spirit jumped across that boundary like a wildfire which does not respect property lines, ethnic differences, or religious affiliations. A few sparks catch the wind and ignite in a new location, leaving fire fighters on a wild chase to contain it.

The Spirit of God was working in Jewish believers, former persecutors, Cyprians, Cyrenes and Hellenists. Barnabas was an encourager of believers in Antioch and invited Saul to be part of the adventure. How are we encouraging others when we see the grace of God in their midst? Do we

keep silent, because we are jealous of their success, or do we recruit more people to participate in the Spirit's work, wherever it is happening? The sparks of God's Spirit leap over gates, bushes, and any other obstacles we place in her path!

Prayer: Lord, we thank you and praise you for the freedom of your Spirit to cross boundaries, bringing light and warmth to people of every race, religion, social class, and gender around the world. Even persecution is turned upside down by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. May we never hinder the Spirit's movement, but rather give thanks for her holy fire of love, which has the capacity to heal the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE WISDOM OF GAMALIEL

June 12th, Saturday

MW	Psalm 105.1-22	I Chr. 17.16-end	Acts 5.27-end
EW	Psalm 105.23-end	I Chr. 21.1-15	Matt. 7. 1-12

“...if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 5:38b-39)

When the religious authorities brought Peter and John back in for an interrogation about their “disappearance” from jail and teaching in the temple, Peter explained why they had not obeyed their orders. “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (vs. 29). Peter did not stop there, but testified that Jesus is the Leader and Savior of the God of their ancestors, whom those very leaders had put to death. Peter called them to repent and to seek forgiveness for their sins.

Needless to say, the religious leaders were enraged and wanted to kill the apostles! Fortunately, Gamaliel, a respected teacher among the Pharisees, spoke up to de-escalate the situation. He advised his fellow Israelites not to react violently. He reminded them of other “false” prophets who had risen up, gained a following, and then disappeared. Their movements did not materialize. With the insight of one who listens to God's voice, Gamaliel encouraged them not to lay a hand on the apostles, because if God was working in and through them, the Israelite leaders would be the ones to fail.

The leaders had the apostles flogged and forbid them to preach in the name of Jesus. Otherwise they followed the restraint urged by Gamaliel and set the apostles free. For Peter and John this experience was one more occasion to rejoice and spread the news of God's grace through Jesus Christ, their Messiah. The tide of the Holy Spirit continued to rise every day.

As movements come and go in the life of our churches, let us practice the wisdom of Gamaliel. When we feel threatened by the Spirit of God arising and moving through unauthorized people or groups, sometimes our actions are self-defeating. The Spirit comes to bring life and newness to our churches through unexpected people and programs. Instead of over-reacting, let us give them time to show their fruit. If they arise from the vine of Christ, let's not be hasty to cut them off.

Prayer: “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.” In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

“GIVE TO EVERYONE WHO BEGS FROM YOU”

June 13th, Sunday

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Theme: Evil can only be overcome with Good.

M/EW	Psalm 13	L.S.	OT 1 Sam. 24.8-11, 16-19
	OT 1 Sam. 24.8-22		Psalm 13
	NT Romans 12.9-21		Epistle Romans 12.9-21
	and/or Luke 6.27-36		Gospel Luke 6.27-36

“Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:30-31).

These are difficult words, but they come directly from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It is simple to love people who love us. It is human nature to love our family and friends. That is no credit to anyone. When people go beyond these natural boundaries to love strangers, the agape love of Jesus Christ is revealed.

Every single day in India beggars confront us with their needs. As a foreigner living in India, I wrestled with the problem and asked Indian colleagues and friends, “What is the appropriate response?” The government “line” is that we should not give to beggars, because they may be working for someone else who is keeping the money and using them to get that money, as portrayed in the movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*. I tried to develop the ability to “ignore” the beggars on the streets of Delhi, but my heart and soul never relaxed about that decision.

I asked a social worker in Delhi, “What is the appropriate response?” She said that she takes things on a case-by-case basis. She said that by the time the government addresses the social issues surrounding poverty, those particular beggars will be long gone. She recommended that I give to beggars if I felt led to do so, but she also confided that it would probably not be possible every single time.

For two years I wondered and wrestled with this problem. When I visited two medical doctors, who are mission co-workers in Bangladesh, I witnessed the one response that made the most sense to me. Those two individuals rarely left their home without coins and candies to give to every beggar that came across their path. Not only did they give to every child and needy person who asked, they looked each one in the eyes with love and treated each one as a person loved by God. My heart and soul praised God when

I witnessed those two medical doctors obeying the words and spirit of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: But for the grace of God, there go I. Every beggar and needy person we meet in this life is a human being with fears, hopes and dreams like you and me. Prepare us, Lord, to give to others as you have so generously given to us. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

CHOSEN TO SERVE

June 14th, Monday

Basil of Caesarea (Th.) 379

MW	Psalm 107.1-22	I Chr. 21.16-22.1	Acts 6
EW	Psalm 107.23-end	I Chr. 22.2-end	Matt. 7.13-end

Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task... (Acts 6.3)

All of our choosing in the church revolves around service to others. This fact sets the church apart from other political and social institutions, where "office" means prestige and privilege. Deacons are appointed to offices of service, which date back to this first occasion when the early church was growing by leaps and bounds. The Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (vs. 1). The twelve disciples delegated this task to others, so that they could continue to preach the word. They requested "seven" who had good reputations in the community, were filled with the Spirit and had the gift of wisdom.

Those chosen included: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicano, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus. The disciples laid hands on them and prayed for their service to the community. Stephen was described as a "man full of faith and the Holy Spirit." (vs. 5). Except for Stephen, who was singled out for being full of grace power and through whom wonders and signs were done among the people, most of the names are not well known in the church. Their gifts were used quietly to look out for widows and to attend to the needs of the community in a self-sacrificing way.

"Chosen to .serve" sounds paradoxical, but it is a profound statement about the purpose of God's people in the world. Just as Jesus entered humbly, on the back of a donkey, and allowed himself to be sacrificed on the cross for sinners, deacons in the church are set apart not to be exalted, but to be poured out for others. Do our church officers exemplify the "servant spirit?" Are there new types of tasks and people in need to whom the church's attention needs to be drawn?

Prayer: Lord, Jesus, draw our attention to those who are "over-loaded" with work and those who are "under-loaded" with responsibility. Just as the early church recognized the need for specialization and delegation, help us to appoint people full of the Spirit and of wisdom to take on the growing needs of our communities. Raise up leaders... women and men... with the gifts to match the gaps. In Jesus' name. Amen.

KNOWING OUR HISTORY

June 15th, Tuesday

MW	Ps. 108.1-6, 109 (omit vv. 6-20)	I Chr. 28.1-10	Acts 7.1-16
EW	Ps. 110 (omit v. 6), 11	I Chr. 28.11-29.5	Matt. 8.1-17

"Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and go to the land that I will show you'" (Acts 7.2-3).

What was the occasion of Stephen's elaborate recitation of Israel's history? He described the call of Abraham, the stories of Joseph being sold into slavery, as well as Joseph's rescue of his estranged family by bringing them to Egypt during the famine. He retold the stories of Moses leading his people out of slavery. All of this was prompted by jealousy on the part of some who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen. They could not stand the wisdom and the Spirit which infused Stephen's life, so they conspired to falsely accuse him of blaspheming Moses and God.

The high priest and council called Stephen to testify, which he did with power and authority. He explicated their history in perfect detail. As the council looked at Stephen, "they saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). His knowledge of Israelite history set him apart as a student of their faith who had done his homework well and was clearly "called" of God for a special purpose in the community.

The Church of North India is a young church which represents the best of many streams of Christian witness on the subcontinent: the United Church of Northern India, the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, the Council of the Baptist Churches in Northern India, the Church of the Brethren and the Disciples of Christ. The Church Union in North India was inaugurated on 29 November, 1970 in Nagpur. An archives documenting this rich history of faithful service, was inaugurated at the CNI Bhavan, 16 Pandit Pant Marg, New Delhi, to remind us of our rich heritage. We thank God for the witness of our forefathers and foremothers upon whose shoulders our faith rests.

Prayer: Lord, every new generation needs to drink from the wells of spiritual history, so that no one will forget the struggles and prophetic witness which have paved the way for the Christian witness in India. May we immerse ourselves in this knowledge, so that others will see the Spirit at work in our lives, as they saw in Stephen's wise words of witness. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

STEPHEN SPEAKS ON 'HOLY GROUND'

June 16th, Wednesday

MW Psalm 112 I Chr. 29.6-25 Acts 7.17-34
EW Psalm 113, 114 2 Chr. 1 Matt. 8.18-end

Then the Lord said to him [Moses], "Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (Acts 7.33)

In his witness about Moses' life, Stephen retold the story of Moses' call at the burning bush. Even in the telling of the story, Stephen was standing on holy ground, because his witness and authority threatened the church leaders of Israel. His words of testimony became grounds for their picking up stones to kill him, not because he falsified history, but because Stephen was making history and calling the leaders to accountability about their own guilt in putting Jesus to death.

When the Holy Spirit anoints people to speak the truth in love to those who hold power over others, that place becomes holy ground. It is not enough to venerate holy ground and holy deeds performed in the past by saints of old; the Spirit challenges us to speak truth to power in our own time. Pastors take off their shoes to preach the Word of God, because they recognize that the "Word" is a sword of truth which cuts to the heart of those who have ears to hear its challenges and a willingness to follow Christ into dangerous places.

The ground where Stephen stood was both holy and dangerous. When servants of God allow the Spirit to speak through them, they become a threat to secular and religious authorities. When Christians in every profession of society dare to take their shoes off and speak truth to power the social witness of the Gospel will grow and bear fruit. India is rapidly developing a cut-throat capitalist character. Will the church take her shoes off and risk advocating for the poor and powerless in the Spirit of Jesus, even if it costs us our lives? Let's not romanticize the cost of being prophets in the 21st century. It may get us killed.

Prayer: Lord, we long to experience your presence and to have the privilege of standing on holy ground, along with the saints who have gone before us. However, we fully acknowledge it may cost us our lives to follow in the footsteps of people like Stephen. Help us to speak truth to power with the assurance that you will never forsake us, whatever the cost. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

WHEN RELIGION KILLS...

June 17th, Thursday

MW Ps. 116, 117 2 Chr. 2 Acts 7.35-8.1a
EW Ps. 115 2 Chr. 3.1-14 Matt. 9.1-17

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do" (Acts 7.51).

Stephen spoke the truth about the leaders of Israel, but it enraged them. When he was filled with the Holy Spirit and gazed into heaven to see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (vs. 55), they covered their ears and rushed him, dragging him out of the city where they stoned him. We are soberly reminded of the fact that more people in history have been killed in religious wars and for the sake of "theology" than for any other reason. We are soberly reminded of India's partition, when because of religion, whole families were murdered. Some killed their own family members to avoid their being dishonored by others. We do not have to look back in history to see this tragic reality. Even in the present in our own country, religion kills.

What can we learn from Stephen's martyrdom and from the on-going martyrdoms being visited upon innocent believers of different faiths around the world? Killing people who are different seems to arise when people oppose the Spirit. As mentioned earlier, the book of Acts is an account of the Holy Spirit, more than it is an account of human saints. The Apostle Paul reminds us that: "The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3.6). Those who specialize in honouring the "written codes" of religion, whether they are Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists or adherents of other religions, dishonour the Spirit within their own traditions when they murder others or condone murder in the name of religion, "goodness," or "purity."

The Spirit of Jesus is known by the unconditional love of Jesus Christ and does not kill under any circumstances. The Spirit of Jesus allowed the Son of God to suffer death as a way to end death. If a person of any religion takes away the life of another, Stephen would describe them as "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, forever opposing the Spirit." As we enter into dialogue with sisters and brothers of other faiths, may we

take the "Spirit" of gentleness with us. The Spirit brings life, not death. And those within whom the Spirit dwells do not kill.

Prayer: Help us to face the facts of our checkered history. Our arrogance in faith has caused endless suffering to others. Humble our Christian communities and give us the grace to love others at all cost to ourselves, for the sake of our witness to Jesus Christ, in whom we pray. Amen.

THE SPIRIT CANNOT BE BOUGHT!

June 18th, Friday

MW	Ps. 118	2 Chr. 5	Acts 8.1b-25
EW	Ps. 119.1-24	2 Chr. 6.1-21	Matt. 9.18-34

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8.18-19)

What a relief! The Spirit cannot be purchased with money. She cannot be corrupted! The people with money and power cannot contain, control or distribute the benefits of the Holy Spirit to promote their own system of patronage. The Spirit moves wherever she chooses to move and actually avoids those people who would attempt to "buy" her influence. The Spirit, like a flood, is a great equalizer! She moves towards the lowest elevation and fills empty places. Those who raise themselves up will not be raised by the Spirit.

History shows that outbreaks of the Spirit have occurred in remote places of the earth. I remember reading about revivals on the remote islands of Indonesia where people were raised from the dead. I have talked with people who have stories about their conversions to Jesus Christ in places where there were no Christians or Bibles. God showed up face-to-face to meet devout Muslims and faithful Hindus who were seeking truth. Some Western Christians are skeptical of their stories, because they do not realize the Spirit has her own logic and often shows up unexpectedly.

The persecution of believers after Stephen's death scattered them to places like Samaria, where Philip proclaimed the Messiah. Many signs of God's Spirit were manifested there. Unclean spirits came out of people who were possessed; those who were lame or paralyzed were cured. There was great joy in the city of Samaria. Clearly, the Spirit led the way to Samaria, because the Jews would not naturally be witnesses there. When news of Philip's experiences reached Jerusalem, Peter and John followed to lay hands on the people so that they would receive the full measure of the Holy Spirit. The Book of Acts is a chronicle of the Spirit dancing into new and unexpected places, but the priceless power of the Spirit is always in the hands of God.

Prayer: Laughing, joyful God, we praise you that the Spirit cannot be manipulated or contained by human beings who would use her for their own ends. Fill us with the Spirit for your purposes, so that we may join in your dance of good news and reconciliation for all people! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE SPIRIT GIVES DIRECTIONS

June 19th, Saturday

MW Ps. 119.25-48 2 Chr. 6.40-7.10 Acts 8.26-end
 EW Ps. 119.49-72 2 Chr. 7.11-end Matt. 9.35-10.23

Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him [an Ethiopian eunuch] reading the prophet Isaiah... (Acts 8.29-30)

Have you ever received the kind of orders Philip heard that day? Have you ever felt “urged” or directed to go to a certain place at a certain time without knowing why? These intuitions or hunches of the Spirit are real. Sometimes they connect us to people for the first time, as in the case of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

God was working in the lives of both Philip and the eunuch; however, Philip had what the eunuch needed to fully understand the Scripture he was reading. Philip became the answer to the eunuch’s prayers, when the eunuch was ready to receive Christ and be baptized, but had no human connection within the Christian community. My experience of spiritual nudges confirms that God picks us up, as he did Philip, and takes us where we are needed. The only way for God to get us to the right place at the right time is to plant a spiritual urgency in our hearts, which we can either ignore or follow.

My sister-in-law had a strong desire to contact an old friend. She forgot about it. The following Sunday while she was in church, the person’s name came into her mind again. She made a mental note that she would contact that person later. Again, it slipped her mind and she did nothing. Three Sundays in a row the person’s name came to her mind with a sense of urgency. She could no longer ignore it. When the old friend returned her call, it turned out there was a homeless family looking for a place to stay. My sister-in-law has a comfortable home and lives alone. She had been praying for a year for the opportunity to share it with someone who needed it. God’s Spirit made the connections. Within a few weeks she invited a mother with three children into her home. She overheard the mother leading devotions with her children before bed, singing and thanking God for the answered prayer.

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we yield our lives into your hands, help us to trust the spiritual nudges you give us, so that we can be the answer to someone’s prayer. As we grow in faith, it is less about what we need and more about how we can be used for your glory. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

WHO JUDGES THE JUDGE?

June 20th, Sunday

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Theme: “Judge not and you will not be judged.”

M/EW	Psalm 41	L.S.	OT	Job 19,1-6, 21-29
	OT Job 19.1-6, 21-29		Psalm	41.4-11
	NT Romans 14.1-13		Epistle	Romans 14.1-13
	and/or Luke 6.37-42		Gosp.	Luke 6.37-4

Notice of John the Baptist on 24 June

“...for the measure you give, will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6.38b)

This theme has been used by many people in different ways. People who sin freely love this passage of Scripture, because it becomes their “self-justification” for whatever favourite sins they have difficulty leaving behind: smoking, drinking, womanizing, greed, gambling, dishonesty, taking bribes or gossip. When someone challenges their lifestyle, they respond: “Judge not and you will not be judged!”

All people WILL be judged by God and the standard God uses will be determined by the standard we use for others. The people most vulnerable to this passage are people who seek God diligently. People who do try to obey the commandments, raise their children in the church and be faithful leaders of the church tend to be the most judgmental of others inside and outside the church. My own dear father, an elder for many years, a disciplined and dutiful Christian, is one of the most “judgmental” persons I have ever met. God save him from himself. I love him, but I do not love the “measure” he uses to judge others.

It is a fine balance for people who love God to be disciplined and remain obedient to God’s Word, without becoming cold and judgmental towards others who do not. When we realize that God is the ultimate judge, we can take a vacation from evaluating other peoples’ lives. God is wholly just and also merciful and will make righteous judgments of others with perfect wisdom. We can be generous in the measures we use to judge others. In fact, since life is short, most of the time we need our “evaluation lenses” to be focused on ourselves, so that we will not fall short of God’s grace. None are saved but by the blood of Christ. Even our best deeds do not “measure up” to the glory and radiance of Christ. Judge Jesus, we place ourselves and others in your merciful hands.

Prayer: These words in Scripture have served as a smokescreen to conceal sin, Lord, but we want to hear them in a fresh way. These words call us to freedom. We can joyfully “resign from the job” of judging others; that is Jesus’ job. Help us to lay down the burden of evaluating other peoples’ behaviour, so that we can give our best in joyful service to the Living God. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

GOD IS IN CHARGE!

June 21st, Monday

MW	Ps. 119.121-144	2 Chr. 10.1-11.4	Acts 9.1-19a
EW	Ps. 119.145-160	2 Chr. 12	Matt.10.24-11.1

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”.... “Who are you, Lord?”
The reply came: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9.4-5)

The plans of man cannot withstand the will of God. The story of Saul’s conversion is an affirmation that God directly intervenes in history. We read that Saul was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (vs. 1). While on his way to Damascus, he intended to seize people who belonged to “the Way” of Christ, until Jesus Christ revealed himself directly.

Not all of us have such a direct divine encounter; however, God is God and has full liberty to intervene in human history, as needed, but never on demand. Jesus left Saul blind so that he would be fully aware of his own “spiritual blindness” in persecuting the early believers. Jesus laid out a plan for him and for Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, to help Saul resume his life in a new direction. Ananias received direct instruction from God, through a vision, to go, lay hands upon Saul, so that he might regain his sight. When Ananias expressed fear, because of Saul’s reputation for persecuting believers, God assured him: “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (vs. 15).

This is another example of the Spirit’s match-making: bringing together people who need one another in order for God’s will to be fully accomplished. Ananias laid his hands on Saul, saying, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (vs. 17). Is there any doubt who is in charge?

Prayer: Lord God, we honour and praise you for taking hold of our lives and turning us around, sometimes 180 degrees, to face in the opposite direction. Although we make plans for ourselves, you know best. Take charge of our lives for your glory to do your will, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

THE FALLOUT AFTER CONVERSION

June 22nd, Tuesday

MW	Ps. 119.161-176	2 Chr. 13	Acts 9.19b-30
EW	Ps. 121, 122	2 Chr. 14	Matt. 11.2-19

“Is this not the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” (Acts 9.21)

Distrust simmered among the people of the “Way.” Wherever Christians are persecuted, new “converts” are suspect, because they could be “undercover agents” of the persecuting authorities. These were the fears surrounding Saul’s witness when he first spoke in the synagogues of Damascus, proving that Jesus was the Messiah (vs. 22). “Has he really changed, or is this a strategy to entrap us?”

Conversion in India is equally challenging. A fellow Hindu teacher at St. Thomas’ School, in Delhi asked the question in the teacher’s work room one day, “Why would anyone convert?” Although I remained silent, another teacher spoke up: “Well, if you evaluate different religions and decide that a different one than the one you were born into makes more sense or has more impact on your life, you should be free to change.” The teacher who responded was a Christian. However, these are dangerous conversations in India.

Christians in Orissa and other parts of India have been coerced under threat to “re-convert” back to their original Hindu roots. Churches have been burned, and lives have been damaged by that movement. However, we must also humbly remember that similar “forced conversions” have taken place throughout Christian history where non-Christians were coerced into compliance within so-called Christian nations. How would a Christian in Orissa feel if a Hindu nationalist suddenly spoke positively about Jesus Christ as his/her Saviour and Lord? The Hindu convert would most likely be distrusted, and their Hindu compatriots would probably try to kill them, just as the Jews tried to kill Saul. These are consequences of conversion. Let us lift up those who courageously take the risk of embracing Christianity!

Prayer: Lord, conversion is risky. Please strengthen people who undertake major life changes for the Gospel. Comfort them when they are rejected by family and friends, even cut off from their own culture. Provide the support they need. Open us up to make changes in our lives for the Gospel, without our fearing the fall out. Give us courage to face the challenges which come from the changes we make for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

THE CONTEXT OF HEALING

June 23rd, Wednesday

MW	Ps. 123, 124, 125	2 Chr. 15	Acts 9.31-end
EW	Ps. 126, 127, 128	2 Chr. 16	Matt. 11.20-end

Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it [the church] increased in numbers. (Acts 9:31b)

Initially my attention was drawn to the two dramatic healing stories in this passage, where Peter, in the name of Jesus Christ, healed a man bed-ridden and paralyzed for 8 years. From there Peter went to Joppa where a devout woman named Tabitha had died. Peter asked the mourners to go outside and then he knelt beside the body and prayed. Following the prayer Peter invited her to get up and she did. Tabitha’s rising from the dead became known throughout Joppa and many believed in the Lord.

On second notice, I recognized the importance of the context of these miracles. The believers were living in the “fear of the Lord” and in the “comfort of the Holy Spirit.” Let’s look at those two characteristics analytically and intentionally. As we consider why some churches today lack a sense of passion and gifts of healing seem noticeably absent, one factor may be the “emotional health” of the churches. Those who live in the “fear of the Lord,” which I would re-frame as respectful awe, are more motivated to obey the Lord, and those who allow the comfort of the Holy Spirit to dwell in their midst, WILL experience healings as the Kingdom of God organically breaks into the here and now of our lives.

Peter was a “midwife” for the Holy Spirit; he was there to “call out” the healing which God intended in the lives of Aeneas and Tabitha. As church leaders of all kinds, we want to create an environment where holy awe can thrive and where people are invited into relationship with agape love. In a context of trust and emotional “safety,” people can disclose their needs and receive God’s grace more readily. Gifts of healing begin to flow.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I wonder whether the environment within our churches is holy and safe enough for your healing power to flow. Create in our worship spaces awe for God and respect for others and ourselves, so that the people of God can unpack their burdens at the foot of your cross. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

DIVERSITY ENDORSED!

June 24th, Thursday

John the Baptist

Aaron of Tranquebar (Conv., Ev.), bap. 1718

Theme: Thanksgiving for John the Baptist, the faithful forerunner of Christ.

M/EW	Psalm	80	L.S.	OT	Isaiah 40.1-5
	OT	Isaiah 40.1-5		Psalm	71.1-6, 14-15
	NT	Hebrews 11.32-40		Epistle	Hebrews 11.32-40
	and/or	Luke 1.57-80 7.24-35 or Matthew 14.1-12		or Gosp.	Luke 1.57-68, 76-80 or 7.24-35 Matthew 14.1-12

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is justified by all her children (Luke 7: 33-35).

The two "children of God" in this story are John the Baptist and Jesus. They had different lifestyles and served God's purpose in an evolving, "process-kind-of-way," with John coming first to get things ready for Jesus to be "the way." The Pharisees rejected both of God's children. Lifestyle differences were a smokescreen and diversion. Their "criteria" for judgment were superficial.

Since the Pharisees would not receive the baptism of "repentance" from John the Baptist, they also rejected the "purpose of God for themselves," which required a willingness to confess their sins before Christ's coming. Their hearts were hardened towards the rugged prophet of repentance, as well as the servant leader from whom the blind received sight, the lame walked, lepers were cleansed, the deaf could hear, and the poor received good news.

The Pharisees could not weep with those who wept over their sins nor could they celebrate with people Jesus transformed. Sometimes the "log in our own eyes" causes us to miss the beauty, diversity, and giftedness of all God's children. Let's not get hung up in the lifestyle questions among ourselves, but rather "tune in" to the purpose of God for which we are called. Wisdom is justified by ALL her children, not just the ones who look and act like us.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the gift of repentance preached by John the Baptist. As we confess sins heavy on our hearts, grant us the grace and love to forgive others as we have been forgiven by Christ. Amen.

WHEN THE RULES CHANGE

June 25th, Friday

MW	Ps. 132	2 Chr.17.1-6 & 18.1-8	Acts 10.1-23a
EW	Ps. 135	2 Chr.18.9-end	Matt.12.1-21

And the voice came to him [Peter] again a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." (Acts 10:15)

Are we prepared to receive new revelations from God, to hear the whispers of God's spirit in the here and now? What if Peter had doubted his dream, saying: "This cannot be from God, because it is my dream, from within me. How can I trust that God is in this dream?" There are ways of checking our dreams and testing subjective experience against the realities of others. In Peter's case, there was a matching dream in the mind of Cornelius, which mirrored God's "change in the rules" of engagement between Jews and Gentiles.

Peter's sermon (Acts 2) anticipated new visions and dreams for every generation of believers. As the good news of Jesus Christ permeates creation the old rules are no longer sufficient to contain the liberating grace which the Spirit brings. Old hierarchies begin to crumble. Gentiles enter the inner circle of God's people. Women become leaders. Dalits rise up and receive the education and opportunities they deserve. Peter listened to the dream and opened the door to a new way of relating to Gentiles.

It wasn't easy for Peter to learn the new rules. Paul challenged him when he acted one way among the new Gentile Christians and another way with the Judaizers. It won't be easy for us when God's grace throws open the door to groups we have excluded from the good news. What if the door is thrown open to gay and lesbian Christians in the next generation? Some people will never accept it. However, more people are seeing this as a "justice issue" rather than a "moral issue." The Gentiles were not admitted to the fold of God's people because of their righteousness. They were admitted to the family, because God's love is that large. What God cleanses, we must not call common.

Prayer: Lord, this dream came out of nowhere for Peter, but came to confirm the dream which Cornelius received. This coming together of two disconnected groups of people demonstrates God's intention to integrate people with differences all over the world. It is a foretaste of God's Kingdom, it is a glimpse of the heavenly banquet which awaits us, but it begins in the here and now, as God's love breaks down barriers, builds bridges and brings people together, one dream at a time. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

GOD OF ALL NATIONS

June 26th, Saturday

MW	Ps. 136(om.v.17-22)	2 Chr. 19	Acts 10.23b-end
EW	Ps. 137(om.v.7-9),138	2 Chr.20.1-19	Matt.12.22-37

And Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10. 34-35)

As the story unfolds in Acts, it is important to note that Peter’s dream throws open the door to people who fear God in every nation. Acts did not imply what contemporary Christians call “universalism.” The Bible does not teach that all people will be saved, but it does teach that anyone who “fears God and does what is right” is acceptable.

Is this “works righteousness?” Does it contradict the grace of God? Only God knows the exact meaning of the phrase; however, I link it to Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees several chapters earlier. When the Pharisees condemned John the Baptist for his “prophetic” asceticism and then condemned Jesus for his “grace-filled” libertarianism, they failed to factor into their thinking what it means to “fear God and do what is right.” They tried, in a literal way, to “do what was right,” but lacked the humility of spirit to hold God in awe and trembling.

To fear God implies humility. Whoever is humble before the creator AND tries to do right in their lives (the moral code imprinted on people who are created in the image of God) is acceptable. God will be the judge. No mortal can make that assessment. The Pharisees fell short, because their righteousness puffed them up in their own eyes. They failed to “fear God,” or to recognize their own imperfections. Through this experience, Peter got first-hand revelation confirming Paul’s call to the Gentiles. Although Paul would be the evangelist, Peter heard God’s voice of agreement on the matter.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the witness of other Christians, who hold us accountable and help to confirm when the Spirit reveals new truths to us. This was a huge shift in the witness of early Christians, when the Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household. We give you praise and thanks for the extension of grace beyond borders. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

FEELINGS FOR OTHERS

June 27th, Sunday

5 Sunday after Pentecost

Theme: The words of Jesus are signs of his being Christ.

M/EW	Psalm 111	L.S.	OT	Isaiah 52.7-10
	OT	Isaiah 52.7-10	Psalm	111.1-9
	NT	Acts 10.30-43	Epistle	Acts 10.34-43
	and/or	Luke 7.11-23	Gosp.	Luke 7.11-23

Notice of Peter, Apostle & Martyrs on 29 June

And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise!” And the dead man sat up and began to speak. And he [Jesus] gave him to his mother. (Luke 7.13-15)

Why did Jesus heal the young man? It seems from the context that Jesus had compassion on a mother who had lost her only son. His feelings rose up from within him. Instead of ignoring his feelings, Jesus spontaneously reached out to bring wholeness. This story, more than others, gives us a glimpse of Jesus’ empathy and emotional connection to the pain of others. In a world with a plethora of needs, it is good to see Jesus sensitized to the needs of others. We cannot lose touch with peoples’ stories. Every mother, father, child has a story to tell and longs for the touch of Jesus upon their lives. If we are true to our calling, our ministries will give us opportunities to stop, listen, pray and touch.

When we attend to peoples’ stories of pain, we are giving them the greatest gift we can offer. Those moments are sacred and invite God’s grace. We may not be able to cure diseases or raise people from the dead, but we can listen, look into peoples’ eyes and reach out a hand of support. These acts of mercy are rooted in the character of Jesus Christ. They are never a waste of time. Focused attention to a person whose life aches for mercy has incredible power to transform and heal.

Prayer: Sometimes, Lord, it is better not to think before we act, especially when we see a person in need, a person created in the image of God and beloved of God, no matter how broken or disheveled. Free us to see and hear and be moved by ones who need us most. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

PETER INTERPRETS “NEW RULES” IN JERUSALEM

June 28th, Monday Irenaeus of Lyons (Bp. Th.), c.200

MW	Ps. 142,143(om.v.12)	2 Chr.20.20-end	Acts 11.1-18
EW	Ps. 144	2 Chr.26.3-21	Matt.12.38-end

“If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us, when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, “Then, to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life.” (Acts 11:17-18)

Today’s lesson sounds strangely modern. Peter is reporting back to headquarters what happened out in the field. The leaders in Jerusalem had already heard about the movement of the Spirit with Cornelius and his household, but were skeptical of Peter’s actions and endorsement of the Gentiles. Therefore, Peter gave a very detailed account of his dream, Cornelius’ dream and the gifts of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon them.

Experiences with the Holy Spirit are often viewed with skepticism by those who have not been present. Peter’s job was “interpretation” of the Spirit’s work. This was his “testimony” of God’s grace at work beyond the borders of the Jerusalem Church. Based on Peter’s witness the leaders of Jerusalem came around to the understanding that God had granted to the Gentiles “repentance unto life.”

Let’s be mindful of this paradigm. It is rare for the Holy Spirit to stay centralized at headquarters! Healthy church leaders are ready and able to endorse the work of God’s Spirit on the margins, because that reflects Jesus’ own ministry. If Jerusalem had ignored or demeaned the work of God’s Spirit outside the city, the early church would have been a short term experience. Instead the early church leaders respected and honoured the movement of the Spirit to new places and people.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to recognize the value of retelling our experiences of the Spirit’s movement to others, as Peter so carefully shared his experience with the believers in Jerusalem. If we speak with “I messages” about our own experiences, it will not come across as preaching, but as one hungry person telling another where to find food. Free us, Lord, to share OUR good news, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

NOT DOMINEERING...

June 29th, Tuesday

Peter, Apostle and Martyr

Theme: Thanksgiving for the faith of Peter. It was on this faith that the Lord built his church.

M/EW	Psalm	18.1-3, 31-36	L.S. OT	Jeremiah 23.1-4
	OT	Jeremiah 23.1-4	Ps.	18.31-36
	NT	1 Peter 5.1-4	Epistle	1 Peter 5.1-4
	and/or	Matt. 16.13-19	orGosp.	Matt. 16.13-19 or John 21.15-19

Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5.2-3)

In the Gospel lesson of John, Jesus repeated his question to Peter three times: “Do you love me?” It must have been exasperating to Peter, but Jesus’ answer stayed the same: “Feed my sheep.” It is clear that Jesus’ focus was on meeting the needs of those who are placed in our charge, not as “bullies” of faith, but as tender shepherds who love and feed the lambs they love.

Jesus asked an “emotional question” – but his answer was ACTION oriented. If you “feel love” for me, then show your love through actions. Take care of the ones I have entrusted to you. “Take care of” means different things to different people. For me, the image does not allow for coercion, control, or paternalism. “To take care of” elicits images of maternal love and empowerment. Feed my sheep can mean anything from providing food, shelter, education, opportunity, or space to grow and use spiritual gifts.

“Feeding my sheep” is more maternal than paternal, since it is women who generally provide food and sustenance for their families. The flock or family requires sensitivity to the whole group. Jesus’ expectations of Peter did not allow for egotism or greed. His leadership was not something to give him a “big head” – but rather an opportunity to develop a soft heart. And hypocrisy is prohibited. If you cannot be good examples to the flock, it’s time to move over and allow someone to model that behavior. Sheep learn much more from what we “do” than from what we “say.”

Prayer: “Shepherd, like a shepherd lead us, much we need Thy tender care. In Thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use Thy folds prepare. Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus... Thou hast loved us, love us still; Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou hast loved us, love us still.” (“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us” Bradbury, 1859, #387 *The Presbyterian Hymnal*). Amen.

GIVING BACK

June 30th, Wednesday

Paul, Apostle and Martyr

MW	Ps. 147, 148	2 Chr. 28.-15	Acts 11.19-end
EW	Ps. 149, 150	2 Chr.28.22-29.11	Matt. 13.1-23

And the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea... (Acts 11.29)

Barnabas and Saul took back to Jerusalem the funds gathered for the believers in Judea. The importance of giving back from our abundance to others, according to our ability, cannot be underestimated as an integral part of our faith. Agabus foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine during the days of Claudius. The disciples proactively gathered funds to send relief.

I am not sure how many Christians take these responsibilities seriously. Many feel that "God provides" in a spiritual sense, but as Christ's hands and feet in the world, God's provisions for the poor and for those experiencing a famine or other loss in their community, often come from the hands of generous, forward-thinking believers, like you and me.

In *Presbyterians Today* (September 2009), a recent college graduate discusses his intention to come to India and Bangladesh to address the problem of arsenic-polluted water. Matt Murrill received a prestigious Fulbright-Nehru Award to study the groundwater arsenic contamination of the Indian state of West Bengal. He expects to spend nine months at Jadavpur University in Calcutta, working with scientists in the University's school of environmental studies. "The World Health Organization (WHO) has labeled the groundwater arsenic contamination of the Bengal Basin as the largest environmental poisoning in history, worse than the radioactive fallout of Chernobyl and the industrial disaster at Bhopal." Up to 26 million people in West Bengal and up to 77 million people in Bangladesh are at risk (p. 8). As the Spirit leads us, it is time to put our money where our mouth is for the good of God's world!

Prayer: "In haunts of wretchedness and need, on shadowed thresholds fraught with fears, from paths where hide the lures of greed, we catch the vision of Thy tears." Lord, grant us the will and ways to return to those in need the blessings we have so graciously received from your hand. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP!

July 1st, Thursday

MW	Ps. 1, 2 (om.vs.9)	2 Chr.29.20-end	Acts 12.1-24
EW	Ps. 3 (om. vs. 7), 4	2 Chr.30.1-12	Matt. 13.24-43

"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church." (Acts 12:1 RSV)

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles is considered to be the first History of the Church – the '*Witnessing Community*' (Acts 1:8) – thus, it is also the beginning of the history of its *persecution* (cf. Acts 7:54-8:1^a). Chapter 12 records an attempt to *persecute* the followers of Jesus Christ. James was martyred (vs. 2) and Peter was arrested to be killed (vs.3). Herod the king took all possible measures to protect his escape from the prison. This was done to please the Jews. He attempted to oppress the Christians with heavy hand.

In fact, *persecution* has been part of the missionary journey of the '*Witnessing Community*' all through its existence. From 1998, even, in some parts of India, planned attacks on Christians have been experienced.

Although, most of us are not called upon to bear *witness* by giving up our lives, but the call to *follow* Christ is the same. Jesus said, "*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him (her) deny himself (herself) and take up his (her) cross, and follow Me*" (Mt. 16:24 NKJV).

Prayer: 'For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life; In your righteousness; bring me out of trouble' (Ps. 143:11). Amen.