

STILL LEARNING

That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

COLOSSIANS 1:10 (KJV)

I'm not much different than many other human beings. We prefer to have life go our way. Our desire is to do what we want, when we want. My personality usually chooses the easy road.

There was a situation in my life for many years that bothered me to no end. No matter what I prayed, or how much I prayed, nothing changed. Finally, when I figured out God's way for my life was best, He gave me the solution. Why didn't I learn that sooner? Because I am selfish and desire to live my way.

You would think, after all these years of learning and trying, a person would be much more like Jesus. I still seem to have a long way to go. That's why I'm still here, I guess.

Lent is the perfect time to adjust our devotional habits. So with God's help, my senior years will be more devoted to our Heavenly Father and to listening to His directions. Thank you, Lord!

Thank you, our Heavenly Father. We are so blessed because of your love. Help us to serve you in the manner you have planned for our lives. May we learn to love as you love. Amen.

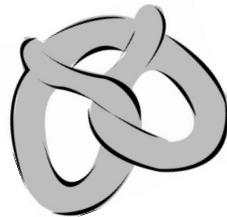
BETTY LITTLE
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

“LITTLE ARMS” FOR LENT

Little arms crossed in prayer (pretzels!) were first made by the Roman Christians hundreds of years ago out of flour, salt, and water as a food to be eaten on fast days. They were called *bracellae* (little arms).

Germans called them *brezeln*, from which the word pretzel has come.

In Luxembourg, the fourth Sunday of Lent is Pretzel Sunday (Bretzelsonnidig). On this day, friends and sweethearts exchange elaborately decorated pretzels.



MY STORY

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.

PSALM 107:1-2A (NIV)

It was the last day of our retreat at America's Keswick, and the theme had been *My Story*. For four sessions we had focused on the lives of Joshua and Abraham, finishing up with how God affects our own stories.

Arriving Friday night, I had noticed a 6-foot cross up on the stage, with what appeared to be nail holes over the entire structure. By Sunday morning, a hammer and a basket of nails had been laid at the base. We were told that the small card we'd been given was for us to write our own story — how far we've come, the impact of God in our lives, how we've changed, or what we'd take away with us from the weekend.

With the piano softly playing, we made our way up the aisle, all 300 of us, to nail our cards onto the cross. The women talking softly made a low hum, but their voices were overshadowed by a continuous sound — that of hammering nails. My thoughts went immediately to the crucifixion, and I imagined the sound of the hammering of nails into my Lord.

The women fixed each card with their nail, the action making the cross wobble. Immediately, two from the crowd grabbed the ends of the crosspiece, keeping it steady. I thought about those women as I approached. They felt each nail as it was driven into the cross, each blow of the hammer as it resonated through their own bodies.

Each story, each testimony, was being nailed to the cross. Each life represented on a 3 x 5 card was going back to the One who got them through their trials. Those two cross holders didn't feel the pain of the nails, but they were impacted. Simon the Cyrene carried the cross for Jesus, but it wasn't his humiliation. That story belonged to Jesus.

I came home that Sunday with a new shirt. It simply says *My Story* (the "t" being a cross) with a large thumbprint in the center. That print belongs to Jesus. That print carries His life, His joys, and His sorrows, and what He did in going to the cross and taking those nails for me.

Just like my thumbprint unlocks my phone, His thumbprint is the one that unlocks my heart. You see, my story is nothing without Him.

Father, I thank you and praise you for creating each one of us and giving us a story.

JUDY FRETT

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

WHEN LIFE HURTS!

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

MICAH 6:8 (RSV)

Recently, I was wronged. Not the kind of wrong for which someone says "He's sorry and all is well," or the kind of wrong where I sit and wallow in self-pity and people wonder what on earth is happening. No, this was the kind of wrong where I had done nothing to invite the action, and people stopped me to say they were sorry it had happened. Even six weeks later, people were still expressing their outrage on my behalf. This wrong created a deep, ragged wound that still hurts.

In the face of a hurt this crushing, what does a Christian do? It's so easy to offer platitudes: "It will all work out! Let go, let God! It's all part of a grand plan, have faith! Forgive and forget!" But what happens when those platitudes do nothing to assuage the hurt? What then?

I am not too proud to share that I spent a few days knocked onto the couch in tears, wondering what to do. After a while, I had an epiphany. During a few sleepless nights, I was inspired to look at the wrong differently. Don't misunderstand — looking at it differently didn't help the hurt. But it did give me the strength to formulate a strategy to overcome the hurt and move forward.

I also realized a very important lesson (again): staying angry and resentful only hurts me. My stomach is in knots, my blood pressure rises, my head pounds. Staying angry does nothing to change the situation. I hate that lesson. Being filled with righteous indignation is so gratifying! "I was right!" "So, there!" "That will teach them!" And yet, once the righteous indignation has cooled, what's next?

This year, during Lent, I am going to work on moving forward, knowing that time changes everything. I am going to try not to dwell on the wrong. I am going to work on living in peace — with the wrong, the wrongdoer, and my pride. I am going to work toward focusing on serving a living, loving, righteous God, trusting that His plans for my future are filled with hope and, most likely, are far better than those I envisioned before I was hurt. Perhaps this Lenten journey is exactly where I am supposed to be.

Lead us, Lord, to lives filled with your peace and purpose so that we emerge from Lent able to serve in ways beyond our limited ideas. Amen.

STACI SCHEETZ
PITMAN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

WHAT MESSAGE ARE WE SHARING?

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.

JOHN 17: 20 (NIV)

As I read and listen to the news, I am often shocked and saddened by the way Christianity has been marginalized and in some cases silenced. I know the message of the cross is important and must be shared. However, even if Christians were completely prevented from verbally sharing the Gospel, God in His infinite wisdom has provided a way to get the message out. I became aware of this evangelistic “tool” while reading a short book by Francis Schaeffer called *The Mark of a Christian*.

Shortly before His death Jesus was preparing His disciples, and in John 13:34-35, He tells them, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

At first glance you might think this is nothing new. Jesus has already instructed us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but this is different. He is talking to His followers and referring to how they should behave toward one another. The love, care, and support of our fellow Christians is a way of identifying ourselves as believers without sharing one verse of scripture. But the relationship we have with one another has an even more powerful outcome.

In John 17, Jesus is praying for His disciples before the crucifixion. He is specifically praying for the unity of all believers as He and the Father are unified. Jesus prays in John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Verse 23 continues, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Wow! By loving one another, the world will know that we are Christians, that God is real, and that He sent Jesus to redeem us because of His love. The Gospel message can be proclaimed to the world when we treat our fellow believers with *true biblical love and unity* (I Corinthians 13:1-7).

What message are we sharing with the world when we fail to express true biblical love to fellow believers?

Heavenly Father, help us take seriously the admonition to love one another. Help us develop a true biblical love for those we consider our brothers and sisters in Christ and, in turn, share the good news with the world.

SYLVIA GRUBER
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

MEN AND DIRECTIONS

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.

PROVERBS 3:5-6 (NIV)

If you are like me, prior to getting a GPS (global positioning system), I did not like having to stop and ask someone for directions when traveling. I had too much pride in myself to succumb to that. After all, I knew I would eventually get where I wanted to go. Sometimes, to the frustration of my wife, I would use a comment from one of my favorite comedians, “I may be lost, but I am making great time.” Converting that secular statement into a spiritual statement, it might read, “I may not believe in God or depend on God, but look how well I am doing. I have a great job, wonderful family, nice house, and sharp car. I am doing great and doing things my way.”

We all know men who fit this description. They are doing things their way — plowing their own paths using their own directions. They are like quarterbacks using their own special playbooks, calling their own game. As Christians, we know that if God is not in the game with these men, they will eventually have a long, losing season.

Fortunately, all the directions we will ever need to prevent us from getting spiritually lost or temporarily losing our way are found in the Bible. Look at the ultimate example of faith in the story of Abram. In Genesis 12:1, God told Abram, “Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.” Abram didn’t even know where he was going, but he followed God’s direction to just “go” with a silent obedience. He did it because of his faith.

According to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, 70% of adults over 65 believe in God, compared to 51% of adults 30 and under. We need to be concerned about surveys that show an increasing number of younger non-believers. As Christian men, it is our responsibility to be mentors of other men who may be “lost.” We need to get more men to stop and ask for directions. We need to convey to them their need to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and believe what He said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

We need to grab hold of a different GPS, the one called God’s Positioning System.

Dear God, we know that without you as our guide, we are headed in the wrong direction. Help us trust you and follow your lead on our journey through life.

TED FRETT

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SHREDDING

I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

ISAIAH 43:25 (NIV)

... and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.

MATTHEW 6:12 (ISV)

Yesterday I spent the entire day cleaning out files and shredding paper upon paper until the shredder overheated and finally shut itself down to cool off. I wonder — do we ever wish we could shred certain areas of our lives to never revisit them again? We've asked for God's forgiveness, and He has forgiven us, promising to never remember whatever it is again. But can we let it go?

How many times do we go back to a certain situation and remember all that happened as we dig up all the pain, embarrassment, thoughtless words, and actions? Why can't we just shred those memories?

We've been forgiven and have forgiven those involved, so hopefully we do not think about what happened quite as often. God tells us that we don't need to keep bringing something to Him to be forgiven because once we confess it, He forgives us and remembers it no longer. Then why do we constantly remember and continually ask for His forgiveness over and over?

Maybe we could write what hurts us on paper, asking for God's forgiveness for not trusting Him enough to forgive and remember it no longer. Imagine shredding that paper with all the pain, embarrassment, and hurt feelings into tiny little pieces. Let's think about shredding those thoughts and memories from our lives as we trust our Lord. God forgives us, we forgive others, and we can forgive ourselves.

Let's start shredding those situations and whatever is keeping us stirred up. Let God heal us. We can "let go and let God."

Lord, help me begin today to let go of those parts of my life that need shredding. Help me trust you more.

CHAR GAYLORD
BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH



When God pardons, He consigns the offense to everlasting forgetfulness.

Merv Rosell

THE JOURNEY OF LENT

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

MARK 8:34-38 (NIV)

Lent for the most part has been thought to be a time for personal reflection, sacrifice, and abstaining from certain dietary pleasures such as ice cream (causing my personal fall from grace), chocolate candy, or maybe even going to the movies. All of these sacrifices have their place in the Lenten season. However, I would like to suggest that we might be able to delve a little more deeply into our spiritual journey of Lent.

Our Lenten journey leads us to the most loving act this world has ever known. Continuing this journey takes us to God's victory over the evil of this Earth, to the total liberation of our souls in their sanctification through the precious blood of Christ, and to His coronation as King of kings and Lord of lords.

We can enter a little deeper into our Lenten experience by changing how we see our spiritual journey in this season. In my life I will pray for the Lord to grant me wisdom, understanding, and compassion for someone who might be in dire need of love or may be alone in this world. Maybe instead of giving up candy, I could let go of my pride and ego. Or maybe I could be more proactive in helping my brothers and sisters in their time of need by using some of the gifts of abundance with which the Lord has blessed me.

As we work our way through this Lenten season, let us pray for our depth of healing and for a closer personal walk with the Lord. I don't think the Lord cares as much about our giving up certain dietary pleasures as He cares that we search deeply into our souls through the Holy Scriptures that will guide our hands, feet, and hearts to a closer realization of Lent's true meaning.

Dear Lord, in my heart I kiss your blessed feet that carried my cross of salvation. I kiss your wounded hands that have reached out to heal me so many times with healing warmth. And finally, I picture in my mind the crown of thorns you wore for all of us. O Christ we do adore Thee! Amen.

MICHAEL PATRICK MURPHY
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH