Lenten Meditations
February 26 - April 12, 2020

Plymouth Congregational Church
February, 2020

Dear Friends,

For 12 Lenten seasons, Plymouth’s Spiritual Exploration Committee has been honored to shepherd this lovely heartsong of meditations.

Plymouth members have been generous to share their reflections. May this book help connect us as a whole community of faith.

— The Spiritual Exploration Committee of the Board of Spiritual Formation

Jan Rabbers, Chair
Seth Patterson, Clergy Liaison
John Bennett, Diane Boruf, Bonnie Janda, Jan Mattox,
Joan Thompson, Anne Seltz
Ash Wednesday, February 26

I killed a spider  
Not a murderous brown recluse  
Nor even a black widow  
And if the truth were told this  
Was only a small  
Sort of papery spider  
Who should have run  
When I picked up the book  
But she didn’t  
And she scared me  
And I smashed her

I don’t think  
I’m allowed

To kill something  
Because I am

Frightened  
—“Allowables” by Nikki Giovanni

Reflection  
How often are we frightened by that which we have so much more power to hurt than has power to hurt us? My daughter received from Beth the star word “Mercy,” and, when we looked up the definition, we discovered it means “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.” Too often, power and fear go hand in hand, with violence, anger and lashing out the response meted out by one with great power, as a way to protect the power that they may have neither worked for, nor deserved. How different would our world be, if those with the most power consistently acted with mercy, love and an open heart?

Prayer  
Dear God, let us realize that we have power, but, more importantly, that we have a choice in what to do with it. Let us choose wisely. May it be so.
Thursday, February 27

God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume.
—Vance Havner

Reflection
I suspect we’ve all broken something we held dear—an heirloom plate or cup, a childhood toy, an ornament or knickknack. Sometimes we break bones, or our cars break down. We break promises or confidences. Our hearts break.

These broken things are never welcome, and rarely does it seem that they have meaning or value. So how can God use them?

Perhaps the meaning or value lies in how we connect with others as we suffer through the break. The person who can empathize with the loss, forgive the transgression, or simply sit with us in the broken place is the one who can help heal the break. While the scar may remain, the tender presence of another can link us to the God who uses broken things.

Prayer
Holy One, help me to be a tender presence in the lives of those who feel broken, just as you’ve brought the healing ones into my own brokenness.
Friday, February 28

God and Sunshine

Your relationship with God is the same as your relationship with the sun. If you hid from the sun for years and then chose to come out of your darkness, the sun would be shining as if you had never left. You don’t need to apologize. You just pick your head up and look at the sun.

—from The Untethered Soul, The Journey Beyond Yourself, by Michael A. Singer

Reflection

Why don’t we automatically turn toward God, the very definition of unconditional love and compassion? Is it because we have never experienced such unconditional love? Many of us have only been exposed to conditional love—loved only if we do as we are told or meet certain demands. Often our guilt and shame from not meeting our taught or self-imposed requirements of being a “good Christian” block our openness to receive the Light.

Prayer

God, Divine Force, may I not hide in guilt and shame but always be open to your warmth, love and compassion so these may flow through me to others. Help me to always remember that is in relationship with you and others that I may become an instrument of love and healing.
Saturday, February 29

What really matters is that we should all of us realize we are guilty of inhumanity. The horror of this realization should shake us out of our lethargy so that we can direct our hopes and our intentions to the coming of an era in which war has no place.
—Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Peace Prize speech 1972

Reflection
Wisdom from the past can inspire us today. We are all capable of all that has been done in the past, whether labeled good or bad. That is the nature of a human being. Forgiveness of ourselves and erasure of the guilt and shame we hold can free us to create spaces filled with love and acceptance and creativity.

Our history is real and we need to remember it so as not to repeat it. To erase it is foolish, for it will emerge to haunt us. Creating respectful connections with others can allow each to thrive.

Prayer
Oh Holy One, help us to honor our deep roots, whatever they may be, so that we may co-create with others a better world. May it be so.
Monday, March 2

Just sit in your backyard and spend a few minutes sipping your morning tea, noticing what you see and hear. —Spiritual Direction

Reflection

How could I argue with that? I tried it. I was amazed by the beauty of my urban backyard. I noticed spring blossoms and bird song. I felt the wind in my hair and the sun on my cheeks. I was refreshed and had more to give others from a place of ease and harmony.

Of course, many times I forgot or felt too rushed, so sometimes I savored those minutes at the end of the day. Often five minutes became ten or twenty as I enjoyed the gift of quiet contemplation. Eventually, it became a meditation practice.

Perhaps the only time many of us have is to take a few deep breaths at a red light or while using the rest room. Don’t discount how useful this can be. Scientific studies show that just two minutes of slow, deep breathing reduces anxiety and helps people become significantly calmer. Deep breaths can also be a way to steady our minds and hearts, helping make the transition to the next activity.

I recently read, “If you don’t go within, you go without.” Going within doesn’t have to be a complicated, therapeutic deep dive but a return to the touchstone of the divine within. It’s a reminder that we have a wellspring of peace, calm and energy as close as our heart.

Prayer

Patient God, remind me to breathe in this moment. You always provide what I need, without me knowing what to ask for, without me knowing why I need it. Illuminate the course unfolding before me. Help me to discern your guiding voice. And then let me move forward in peace.
**Tuesday, March 3**

*Protect me, O God, for in you I take my refuge.* — Psalm 16:1

**Reflection**

The words of the Psalm were all I could hang on to after multiple deaths of loved ones. The stuffing had been kicked out of me and nothing made sense. The losses were unbearable. So many questions: How could this be? Keeping it together seemed out of reach.

Loss comes even with good changes. Childhood is left behind for adult dreams and goals.

Death comes to all, expected or not, and no one is exempt.

**Prayer**

Dear God protect me, for in you I take my refuge.
Wednesday, March 4

_For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty gave extravagantly from all that she had.” —Luke 21:4_

**Reflection**

When I first graduated from seminary in 1959, not much was being taught about how to run a congregation. We had our heads full of theology and church history, but just a few choice words of wisdom about working with a congregation. We were left to figure out for ourselves what worked and didn’t work.

Therefore, when Stewardship season came in my first pastorate, I relied on the traditional time-honored program called Every Member Canvas. This plan meant first to have the church officers make their pledge to support ministry locally and globally. After that step, the officers would choose what families they would visit to explain how their money would be used and to listen to the members’ interest and concerns.

I joined in Every Member Canvas with one of the officers. I will never forget the experience I had that first year, as it closely resembles Jesus’ story of the widow’s mite.

The church officer and I had visited members all afternoon and were ready to call it a day, but we had one more visit to make with an aging widow who had been for years a faithful member of the church.

We knew what she would pledge would not make a significant difference in our total budget, but we had promised members we would visit every family unit. So, we did.

After knocking on the door of her humble dwelling, we could not have been greeted any more warmly if I had been the King of England. She smiled and said “I thought you would never come as I’ve made a cake and some coffee for you.”

It was obviously our best visit of the day, not for the pledge of a dime per week, but because of her devotion and commitment to what the church was all about. What an inspiration to others she was, to give abundantly from whatever she had to live on.

**Prayer**

Lord, help me to give sacrificially from all I have, remembering the widow’s mite. Amen.
Thursday, March 5

Be not afraid of silence.
It is more powerful than the awkward word.
It allows God’s voice to be heard.

Stir not from the hush
until you sense that hesitant blush
of hope and understanding.

Be not afraid of silence.

—Rabbi Donald Goor

Reflection
Lent is a time for silence. Silence to be present to that still, small voice which suggests the gentle nudge, and whispers comfort and stirs the soul. It sometimes says nothing but reminds us that we are in the company of seekers whose inner eyes are open to the wonder of the quiet—the same quiet that lives deeply within each soul.
Be not afraid of silence.

Prayer
Gracious Spirit of the Universe, in the midst of the constant chatter of our country and our world, speak to us in the quiet. Sustain us as we listen for hope and understanding. May it be so.
Friday, March 6

You have established … trees of life by a secret fountain (25). May the Eternal open … an early rain, … a fountain of living water (104, 145).
—from The Dead Sea Scrolls’ Essene Book of Everyday Virtues, edited with comments by Kenneth Hanson, 2006

Reflection

The Essenes likely meant these words in both an external and internal sense. Externally, they immersed themselves daily in ritual baths; some scholars say they may have introduced John the Baptist to baptism.

Internally, the Essenes believed in healing—a main theme in the Gospels of the same era. Essenes also believed in acts of love. Such acts are, according to MedicalNewsToday.com, experiences that produce the hormone oxytocin, which is “associated with empathy, trust, sexual activity, and relationship-building.” All of these—love, healing, and the Essene “secret fountain”—are inner-felt experiences.

How can we internally feel the Essene “fountain of living water?” It may be a deep feeling of relaxation, perhaps a sensation of light rain or spray from a fountain, or even our heartbeat as it oxygenates parts of our body with more blood.

My father used to practice relaxation to sleep. First, he said, he would relax one foot, then his leg, then the other foot and leg and move upward. Traditional yoga and modern psychology offer similar practices: You may encourage various parts of your body to relax, they say, so you can experience relief from a variety of physical, psychological, or mental difficulties.

Prayer

Dearest God, please come into us. Fill our body and heart, our throat, mouth and head with your quiet, peaceful rain. May we rest in your healing fountain of love.
Saturday, March 7

It is I who must begin. Once I begin, once I try—here and now, right where I am, not excusing myself by saying things would be easier elsewhere, without grand speeches and ostentatious gestures, but all the more persistently—to live in harmony with the “voice of Being,” as I understand it within myself—as soon as I begin that, I suddenly discover, to my surprise, that I am neither the only one, nor the first, nor the most important one to have set out upon that road. Whether all is really lost or not depends entirely on whether or not I am lost.

—Vaclav Havel

Reflection

This poem speaks me, deep down to my core. It urges me to start. Not wait. And it tells me there are others also interested in making the effort with me. In fact, some have started. I am not alone. I feel reassured that I can begin, that I will begin. And that my small steps matter. My wee effort adds to the needed work. That I am walking alongside fellow-believers.

Prayer

May I begin. May I take the first step and trust I am not alone. God is always by my side. May I believe I will find old and new friends traveling in the same direction and that together we will make a difference for the good of others.
Monday, March 9

_The land knows you, even when you are lost._
—from Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

**Reflection**

I’ve been lost more times than I care to count, in more ways I could possibly measure. When I find myself again, it is usually with my feet plodding along a trail at the Arboretum or trekking beside a river, or rambling through a golden meadow. I reawaken to a sense of being remembered—re-membered to a body where I belong. The land and God never forget where I need to be.

**Prayer**

Precious God, thank you for this Creation; for this home you have given us.
Tuesday, March 10

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have brought, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and, when they come to judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.

—An unknown prisoner in Ravensbruck concentration camp

Reflection

This quotation is included in Prayers for Healing, which is a book of blessings, poems and meditations that Plymouth ministers often give to members facing major health issues. What struck me when I read this is how many times when I felt someone had wronged me, my first impulse was to seek revenge. What I failed to realize in those moments was that much more satisfying is the freedom that true forgiveness can bring. That realization helped me greatly as I faced my own major health crisis. Rather than feeling sorry for myself I began to appreciate the enriching life experience of the compassionate and loving care I received from all of the dedicated people who serve our health care needs as well as the positive force that the love and well wishes from family and friends brought to me. That freed me to focus on the positive aspects of life and the goodness that exists among humankind. Truly, this was a prayer for healing and brought positive results.

Prayer

Dear Lord, as I recite the words of your universal prayer, help me to move beyond the mere recital of words and to understand the real import of what I am saying and asking. When I ask forgiveness of my debts and state that I will forgive my debtors let me realize the freedom that will bring. Help me in making that request to be both mindful and meaningful and lead me to experience the “greatness of heart” that true forgiveness can bring.
Why I Wake Early
Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who made the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety—
best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light—
good morning, good morning, good morning.
Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.
—“Why I Wake Early” by Mary Oliver

Reflection
What I appreciate about this poem is how it expresses an
eagerness to greet the new day. No doubt we can all relate to that
warm feeling we enjoy when the sun is shining on our face and
brightening our day. The sun’s rays remind us of the love of Christ
that permeates and supports all life. May we always be cognizant of
how God’s love, without exception, surrounds and supports all of
creation.

Prayer
Gracious God, as we go through our day, may we be mindful of
how your love surrounds, nurtures and supports us. Your love is an
enduring and constant presence that sustains and strengthens us.
During this Lenten season, may we strive to channel your love into
tangible action to promote social justice and care for your Creation.
Make us instruments of your love. Amen
Thursday, March 12

God with us lying down
God with us rising up
God with us in each ray of light…
—Slight variation on an Irish prayer

Reflection
The problem is finding God in the darkness.

Prayer
God help us find You in darkness, when there is no light.
Friday, March 13

*Lumen accipe et imperti. Receive the light and pass it on.*
—Latin aphorism of unknown origin from the Anthem Lumen by Abbie Betinis sung at the 11 o’clock service, February 2.

**Reflection**
I was raised in a family where being generous was valued. Sharing with others, being good to others and helping out were all regarded as virtues. So “passing it on” seems natural, and good. I was also raised to stand on my own two feet, to make my own way and to not be a bother to anyone. This makes “Receiving the light,” or receiving any important gift, difficult. As an older man, I am still learning to be open to receiving the light, whether it is from friends or truly unexpected sources. Receiving gifts of light fills me and opens me to be more fully human.

**Prayer**
Lord, help me to receive all the gifts of light that are sent my way.
Amen
Saturday, March 14

Perhaps the best thing we can do is to recognize how hard it is to offer unconditional love. That way we can start working on our love life. Selfless love—agape, Jesus called it—doesn’t come naturally. It takes work, practice. We have to find some way to unplug the mind, which is a nonstop judging machine, and move deeper into the heart. All the caveats that cling to our loves come from the unchecked mind. The saints of all time and every tradition have committed themselves to some daily spiritual practice that moves a man or woman out of the hamster wheel in the head and into the depths of the heart. There I can see all the limits I put on my love, and there I can choose another way.

The only beings who naturally offer unconditional love are either God or dog. If you’re a human being the only way to get there is through a lot of inner work—and a flood of grace.

—God, Dogs, and Unconditional Love; blog excerpt June 20, 2016, by David Anderson

Reflection
I think a lot about unconditional love, and I recognize how far short I fall of that ideal. My dogs remind me daily. But every once in a while, I see a golden opportunity, and it’s not hard, and I say the right words or do the right thing and make someone’s life better. And it feels so good, in a selfless way. I can’t explain how feeling good can be selfless, but I know it when it happens. It feels like a gift, like I am being part of something grander than myself. When it happens, I feel chosen, rather than choosing. I have done some inner work, but nothing in a disciplined way, other than broad reading. But I do feel that flood of grace, all the more beautiful for being undeserved. If I can have this feeling, undeserved, then so can many others, maybe even everyone.

Prayer
God of grace, touch each and all our hearts, make us aware of your gifts, and thankful. Make us aware that we share your grace equally. Amen.
Monday, March 16

*The care of the Earth is our most ancient . . . most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish . . . and to foster its renewal is our only hope.*” —Wendell Berry

**Reflection**

A necessary question: What is needed in order to see that all have food and our environment is saved?

- Our recognition that all humanity is sacred
- An informed awareness that we have endangered our earth by our misuse of natural resources and our disregard for the consequences of our choices and actions.
- The realization of the futility of resorting to military might in seeking to resolve conflicts with other countries.

Let it be our intent to discover the compassion and necessary motivation to see that vulnerable people have adequate food and live in safe communities. May we accept the necessity of having informed, purposeful actions while seeking to achieve a benevolent environment for future generations.

**Prayer**

Gracious God, bless us and give us the will to persevere in our journeys as we seek to act with increased concern for others in need and greater awareness of the fragility of life on our planet. As we strive to be more caring of others and our environment, may we discover an increased awareness of your love for each of us while enjoying closer relationships within our community.
Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” —John 4:13-14

Reflection
We all have things in our lives for which we thirst and strive, and yet do not feel satisfied. Such desires are varied: they can be for material things, peaceful family relations, the love of a particular person or for justice in a broken world. Suppose that Jesus is using the word thirst in this broader sense: What water could it be that Jesus gives that slakes these thirsts, water that becomes a spring of water gushing up to eternal life? Perhaps this passage from John asks us to find in Jesus’ teachings a joyful response to the world in all of its brokenness and flawed beauty. Finding joy in the moment in which we live and transmitting that joy to other people is a high calling of Christianity. A saying attributed to Saint Francis is: “Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary use words.”

Prayer
Tender, loving God, help me to be aware of the thirsts in my life that separate me from you. Help me to understand the words of your precious Child, Jesus, who teaches me that I am also your precious child in this awesome and sometimes difficult world. Create in me a new spirit of joy and help me to share your joy to those I meet along the way. Amen.
Wednesday, March 18

_In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer._ —Albert Camus

**Reflection**

A dear friend shared this quote with me in December, and it has revisited me several times since that day. I do appreciate the beauty of winter in the Midwest, abundant with crystallized water droplets that present themselves as snowflakes on the boughs of the pine trees, or decorations that red cardinals create on the fallen snow.

Right around late February or early March, however, the beauty and innocence of winter can disappear for me. The clean, white snow turns grey, the ice becomes treacherous for walking, the cars are covered with salt, and the long dark days can become somewhat depressing. Yet the fact is, there are many thousands of people who survive the Midwestern winters, and some even do it with cheery delight. Some much prefer the change of seasons, including the winter months, to warmth and sunshine year round.

Have these people who readily endure the Midwestern winters discovered an invincible summer in themselves in the midst of their winters? Or, was Camus talking about finding “youthfulness” (summer) in the winter years of our lives? Or, was Camus implying that in a time of depression, people rise to find a hidden light that still burns in them? Perhaps all of the above, or perhaps none of the above. I do hope we can all discover some summer in our lives.

**Prayer**

Holy One, may we find the blessing of light in the darkness.
Thursday, March 19

Seven Deadly Social Sins

POLITICS without PRINCIPLE
WEALTH without WORK
COMMERCE without MORALITY
PLEASURE without CONSCIENCE
EDUCATION without CHARACTER
SCIENCE without HUMANITY
WORSHIP without SACRIFICE
—Mahatma Gandhi

Reflection
Each day is a gift, my mom used to say. It is a new and fresh start to do something good and peaceful for other beings—no matter how small the act of kindness.

Be hopeful. Let truth and beauty be your guide. War and hatred are temporary, but love, peace and justice are immortal.

Prayer
May I always have the strength to be a wheel of justice in the love train.
Friday, March 20

*May Grace be the pillow upon which you rest.*
*May you rise with joy and hope.*
*May love be your guide,*
*And faith give you strength,*
*And peace fill your heart and your soul.*

—Variation on *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer*  
by Maya Angelou

**Reflection**

With apologies to Maya Angelou, by whom this blessing was inspired and from whom it was adapted:

“Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer,” in her *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer.*

First as a blessing for my grandchild, I recite it now for myself as I pull down my bedsheets each night.

Reflecting upon my day I ask:

- What have I done with love today?
- When have I needed faith?
- Do I feel at peace?
- Be grateful for the divine’s blessing of Grace.

It is easy and comforting to end my day this way. But rising with joy and hope is not always that easy. The restless night, another grey cloudy day, the morning news, the day’s to-do list clicking away. It is far too easy to just jump start the day without first taking the time to rise.

I have started to repeat this self-blessing as I pull my bedsheets back together again. Although already up, I can still take time to rise. I can let the light of the day be my awakening. And with that I can feel joy and hope and begin.

**Prayer**

Divine One, may I always live with Grace. For with grace I find love, peace, joy and hope. Amen
Saturday, March 21

If we surrendered
To Earth’s intelligence
We could rise up rooted, like trees

Instead we entangle ourselves
In knots of our own making
And struggle, lonely and confused
—Book of Hours II, 16, by Rainer Maria Rilke

Reflection
Oftentimes in human history, in theology and in poetry, the foundation of the earth and God are the same. If we hold both the creator and the creation to be synonymous, then God is not a distant overseer of the world. Rather God becomes present in and around us all—filling us and surrounding us with all that is God. Rooting ourselves in this ever-present God allows us to rise up, rooted in God like a tree. When we root ourselves only in ourselves, then we get more easily entangled and lost in loneliness and confusion. When we root ourselves in God, we have a better chance to rise up with the abundance of God’s love, hope and compassion.

Prayer
May I allow myself to root myself in God and give myself permission to rise up, rooted like a tree. Amen.
Monday, March 23

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. —Corinthians 13:1–3*

Now we can see what Jesus meant when he said, “Love your enemies.” We should be happy that he did not say, “Like your enemies.” It is almost impossible to like some people. But Jesus recognized that love is greater than like. When Jesus bids us to love our enemies, he is speaking neither of eros nor philia; he is speaking of agape, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all.

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Reflection**

It has been difficult to witness division in communities and the country at large. Much of it has to do with anger that dehumanizes another human being. Some of it has to do with a sense of certainty that does not acknowledge there is little that is perfect—particularly when we act like we know what is best for others without their input. Darkness will prevail if we cannot learn to accept our own faults and respect the humanity of others. I’ve discovered I have much more to learn when I read the messages of King, and visit with friends of different races—who have more than enough reasons to be angry—and yet they remain open and loving.

**Prayer**

What love is this that judges all and condemns none? That is complete in itself and yearns for us? That empties itself of power and conquists all evil? That is silent as light and answers every cry? That is divinity itself and wrapped in flesh? Praise to you for your holy paradox. Amen. *(from The Well is Deep by Rev. Virginia Rickeman)*
Tuesday, March 24

Prayer is not a shout into an empty void answered only by its own echo. Prayer is the spirit within us reaching out to the Spirit of the Universe, and prayer is that Spirit responding to us. —Robert I. Kahn

Reflection

We’re inclined to define prayer very narrowly. Fold our hands, bow our heads, say please and thank you, and end with amen. What might we consider other forms of prayer?

I was once a part of women’s prayer group. I was telling a friend about the group and said, “We mostly just do a check-in with each other.”

“Oh,” my friend responded, “that’s another form of prayer.”

If prayer is my spirit connecting with the Spirit of the Universe, then prayer’s scope is expansive. Sitting with a loved one who is dying, marveling at a bird dancing on a branch outside my window, hearing a song on the radio that triggers a poignant memory—all of these can be a form of prayer. Any time I feel the tug of mystery or the sense that something greater than my five senses is at work, that’s prayer. The Spirit cannot be constricted, and our definition of prayer need not be either.

Prayer

Spirit of the Universe, open my heart to prayer in all its amazing forms so that I may hear your voice throughout my day.
Wednesday, March 25

If somebody doesn’t begin to provide some kind of harmony, we will not be able to develop sanity in this world at all. 

Somebody has to plant the seed so that sanity can happen on this earth. —Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you. —Matthew 5:44

Reflection

At this year’s National Prayer Breakfast, the theme was “Love Your Enemies.” The keynote speaker, Arthur Brooks, a social scientist and politically center-right independent, challenged all of us to think more deeply about how to live this core instruction of Jesus. He encouraged us to ask God or Jesus to help us if we are struggling to let go of harboring resentments or ill thoughts of those we believe have harmed us. I especially appreciated him recommending, when we find the challenge especially difficult, that we “fake it till we make it.”

Prayer

God, make me an instrument of your peace. Help me be the one who will plant seeds of harmony—here in my own church, in the congregation I love, as well as in the outer world where there is so much pain right now. May it be so.
Thursday, March 26

There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.
—Howard Thurman

Reflection
This quote by Howard Thurman pulls no punches. I find it haunting and direct, pointing to the grave, out-of-kilter feeling one experiences when we don’t attend to our truest selves. At the same time, I also find it reassuring, knowing that faithfully following the echo of Truth in my own being is all I truly need for sojourning through this life. It’s a sentiment repeated throughout the ages: “To thine own self be true.” May we help each other rise to the challenge of hearing and heeding that Voice that calls to us all in myriad ways.

Prayer
During this season of Lent, may our inner ears be renewed in hearing the call to freedom.
Friday, March 27

I
like when
the music happens like this:

Something in His eye grabs hold of a
tambourine in
me,

then I turn and lift a violin in someone else,
and they turn, and this turning
continues;

it has
reached you now. Isn’t that
something?
—Rumi

Reflection
When we are willing to be present, to be present to where we are, to be present to those whom we are with, there is a connection made that is very precious. All we have to do is to be willing. To risk, perhaps, being vulnerable. I see opportunities at Plymouth for the symphony to be played. I see people passing it on. I am so grateful to be part of the music.

Prayer
Loving God, may I listen for your direction and be willing to contribute as you direct. AMEN!
Saturday, March 28

*I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.”* —Psalm 122:1

**Reflection**

The fourth Sunday in Lent is *Laetare* (“rejoice”), a Sunday of happiness in the midst of Lent. For this day, the Plymouth Choir will sing Vaughan Williams’ “Choral Flourish” with words that give us hope and joy—“O be joyful all ye righteous, for praise is comely for the upright. Sing praise to God lustily and with good courage.”

For this winter Sunday, let us each have a smile on our face, a bounce in our step, and a good word of hope for everyone we meet; and then let us all say AMEN!

**Prayer**

Author Nan Merrill offers this prayer for Psalm 122: “Pray for the peace of the world! May all nations prosper as one! May peace reign among all peoples, and integrity dwell within every heart! Then will friends and neighbors, and former enemies as well, cry out, ‘Peace be within you!’ For the good of the universe and in gratitude to the Beloved; let us serve the Holy One of all nations with glad hearts.” Amen.
Monday, March 30

Our common welfare should come first. Personal progress depends upon AA unity.
—Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Alcoholics Anonymous

Reflection
The AA program is filled with wisdom. We have 12 Steps and 12 Traditions, which I believe were inspired by God. What would our world look like if we lived by just this one tradition? What is our common welfare?

One way we can keep our common welfare in mind is to have respect for that which we don’t understand; to show kindness to those who might annoy, embarrass, or put us on the spot; and to let our judgments be thoughtful.

It’s easy to say, “I’m only human.” Yes, we are only human. We make mistakes with consistency.

What we have available to us is an open mind, the ability to listen with an open heart, the willingness to look at our motives, the kindness to look at our opinions and beliefs, and find the humility to say, “Maybe I could make a change in my thinking and/or behavior.”

Prayer
The AA 7th step prayer says: “My Creator. I am now willing that you should have all of me, good or bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength as I go out from here to do your bidding. Amen.”
Tuesday, March 31

The race is not to the swift  
or the battle to the strong,  
nor does food come to the wise  
or wealth to the brilliant  
or favor to the learned;  
but time and chance happen to them all.  
—Ecclesiastes 9:11

Reflection  
Often while raising children, a child of ours would say, “That’s not fair!” I would usually respond, “Well, life is not fair.” Secretly I enjoyed those conversations because I felt I was imparting some kernel of wisdom even though my message was surely frustrating to my child.

Today I’m reminded almost every day of how “unfair” life can be. Why am I still enjoying a healthy, favored existence while many of my friends have passed from this life? “Time and chance” have somehow smiled on me. I cannot explain my good fortune. t is certainly not anything I’ve earned or somehow deserve. All I feel I can do is to be mindfully grateful and to do my best to be a generous, positive influence with my children, my grandchildren, and my community.

Prayer  
Tender, loving God help us all to recognize the blessings in our lives. Help us to use our lives for good purposes. Help us to understand and accept how “time and chance happen to them all.”
Wednesday, April 1

*Lent is a time for reconsidering our feelings, for letting our eyes be opened to injustice, to open our hearts to those suffering.*
—Pope Francis

**Reflection**
So often we are inclined to think of Lent as a time of personal reflection, introspection, an inward spiritual journey. Indeed, the practice has merit, but during this time we are also encouraged to open ourselves to that which lies beyond our own personal experience.
With fully opened eyes, we begin to see more clearly the suffering and injustice in the lives of others. It doesn’t end there. Clearly seeing the suffering and injustice is meaningless if not followed then by opening our hearts so we might feel with genuine empathy and finally, opening our hands in order do the bold work of humanitarian change and much needed justice.

**Prayer**
In our reflections may we know open eyes and open hearts and move with wide-open hands in a world waiting for justice.
Thursday, April 2

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your
soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first
commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as
yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the
prophets. —Matthew 22:37-40

Reflection

We are to love God and ourselves and all others. God loves us with
a love we cannot begin to comprehend. Assuming this is a healthy
relationship, which I do, I don’t believe we need to ever ask God for
mercy. Among us humans, it is unhealthy, abusive relationships
where someone might need to ask for mercy. Our task in the
relationship with God is to be open to God’s wisdom, calling, loving,
and to share this with the world. For that we must trust God. How can
we trust someone if we need to ask for mercy? I do not believe in a
God who makes anything bad happen to us. I don’t believe God
controls us. It is choices I or others make that cause bad things to
happen. Not God. Therefore, I can trust God and need not ask God
for mercy. Thanks be to God that we are loved by God.

Prayer

God you are always present. Help me be open to you and follow
your guidance, live a life of faith, share your love with others and
seek justice for those who need it. Amen
Friday, April 3

Waksman Tanka, Great Mystery, teach me how to trust my heart, my mind, my intuition, my inner knowing, the senses of my body, the blessings of my spirit. Teach me to trust these things so that I may enter my sacred space and love beyond my fear, and then walk in balance with the passing of each glorious sun.
—American Indian Lakota Prayer

Reflection
I love this prayer. When I read it, it centers me and it reminds me how I try to enfold the great mystery into my life and creativity.

Prayer
Miigwech (thank you).
Saturday, April 4

‘Cheshire Puss,’ she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name; however, it only grinned a little wider. ‘Come, it’s pleased so far,’ thought Alice, and she went on. ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat. ‘I don’t much care where—’ said Alice. ‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat. ‘—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,’ Alice added as an explanation. ‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’

— Alice in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll

Reflection

Where do we wish to go on our spiritual pathway?
Who am I?
What are the gifts that I can give?
Which is the road that I should take?
How will I know?
It seems likely the answers are uniquely ours.
What would you say to the Cheshire Cat?

Prayer
I would love to live
like a river flows
Carried by the surprise
Of its own unfolding.

—“Fluent” from Conamara Blues, by John O’Donohue
Monday, April 6

The primary quality of hope is not certainty, but vision and imagination. Hope is not certain of a particular future, but it can envision it … enough to continue, anyway. Optimism lightens our load by promising a good end, even if the basis for the promise is faulty. Hope, by contrast, doesn’t lighten the load but strengthens us to carry the load … and by claiming that it is all worth it. —Rev. James Gertmenian, sermon Dec. 5, 2004, Plymouth Congregational Church

Reflection
To be hopeful in times of distress and despair is difficult for most of us. Yet knowing we might be strengthened by changing our perspective, our interpretation, our thinking, is helpful. Usually we need community to help us. Sitting with friends who allow us to grieve can give us hope. Sitting with others in despair can offer them hope. We all have many loads to carry over a lifetime. Remembering how to hope helps.

Prayer
Oh Holy One, we thank you for your constant reminder that with your love we can thrive and grow in peace and harmony. May it be so.
Tuesday, April 7

It is truly a great cosmic paradox that one of the best teachers in all of life turns out to be death. The mere possibility of death has the power to teach us at any moment. A wise person affirms, “If with one breath all of my life can change, then I want to live at the highest level while I’m alive. I’m going live life from the deepest part of my being.”

—The Untethered Soul: the Journey Beyond Yourself
by Michael A. Singer

Reflection

Death often makes us prioritize who and what is really important in our lives. It can force us to toss our daily to-do lists of tasks to complete and items to buy. What is really important in the time we have left on this earth? What do we want to say and do to make this moment and this day have worth and meaning? The death of a special loved one has the potential to force us to reinvent ourselves. Who am I now? Contemplating our own death may force us to consider what is keeping us from being the person we want to be rather than the person we have always been.

Prayer

God, Divine One, help me be willing to let go of whatever keeps me from living life fully, being present each moment without being afraid of what will happen next. Help me to trust in your love and guidance.
Wednesday, April 8

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*
—*Walden, or Life in the Woods*, by Henry David Thoreau

**Reflection**

There is a tall evergreen tree in front of our house. It was planted in memory of a young person’s death more than two decades ago. Labeled a dwarf tree, it’s now over two stories tall. Christmas lights strung the first year have intertwined with the branches. On a sunny morning, the red, yellow, white, and green bulbs twinkle from within.

Birds and small animals make the tree their winter home as they perch, sing, feed, chase, shelter and dash in and out. The tree like a nursing mother remains calm and unbending as her branches protect and swathe. She provides hydration with snow patches dripping moisture in the warm sunlight.

**Prayer**

Lord, let your woods and creatures guide us to live deliberately with your spirit. Amen.
Thursday, April 9

Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
—“Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye

Reflection
In a barren wasteland filled with criticism, disagreement, sarcasm and despair, Jesus asks us to cultivate a garden of loving-kindness. Oh, we are already well aware that it won’t be easy, because the forces of human nature can be destructive. But the choice is ours. We can add to the desolate landscape with savage actions of our own, or reduce it to mere pockets by growing vast regions of boundless, unconditional kindness.

Prayer
Gentle God, we cry out to you to fill our gestures and our words with kindness.
Good Friday, April 10

The end of Jesus’ life in death and resurrection provides yet another chapter in the astonishing narrative of God’s immersion in matter. No exception to perhaps the only ironclad rule in all of nature, Jesus died, his life bleeding out in a spasm of violence.

—Elizabeth Johnson (Roman Catholic feminist theologian)

Reflection

We all die eventually. The significance of Jesus’ death is its context. He dies a violent death at the hands of the empire. Contemporary theology emphasizes that Jesus’s suffering on Good Friday reveals God’s compassion with all who suffer throughout history. Figuratively and literally, crosses keep on being used in the world, connecting the violence of the human race with the compassion of God. In suffering, God sympathizes and desires passionately that we take all the crucified peoples down from the cross. It’s time to stop crucifying the “other.”

Who am I nailing to the cross?

Prayer

Open my eyes to the ways I crucify others. Give me the courage to take crucified people down from the cross. Amen.
Holy Saturday, April 11

_They are feeling their way out into the night, letting their eyes adjust to the future._ —from Delights & Shadows by Ted Kooser

**Reflection**

Everything seems to be changing. Technology is replaced in a matter of months instead of decades. Diseases once deadly are now manageable, some even curable. Educational systems are identifying and adapting to different learning styles. Restaurants are offering menus with gluten-free items and other options to accommodate food allergies and vegan diets.

Other changes are unsettling. The climate is altering, resulting in floods, fires, and storms that put our very existence at risk. Businesses are consolidating into mega-corporations. Magazines, books and newspapers have gone online as has clothes shopping. Drones deliver packages. Websites surveil our activities.

Church is changing. The church most of us grew up with, the one that was so stable and traditional, is no longer attractive to young people. What many of us have treasured is increasingly viewed as irrelevant. Even so, we need not despair. This change is a tremendous opportunity to examine our church’s purpose; explore new programs; invite new ideas from our children, youth, and young adults; deepen our spirituality; connect with our neighborhood; and respond to the unsettling changes of the world in innovative and justice-based ways.

As a community we can adjust our eyes to the future. With the Spirit of Hope as our companion, we can navigate change with courage and creativity. Together we can feel our way forward in the darkness of uncertainty and into the light of possibility.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Hope, guide us in adjusting our eyes to the future. Help us to join our hearts and hands as we embrace what it means to be a community of faith in the 21st century.
Easter Sunday, April 12

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.

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