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1 Within the church we often consider ourselves a family. In a family, while all the members are different in personalities and practices, they are considered as one, therefore, when one member of the family suffers, all suffer and when one member of the family rejoices, all rejoice. This is because family members often care about the well-being of one another. Just as in a biological family, all members of the family are considered to be one; in the same way, in 1 Corinthians 10:14-17, the apostle Paul considers Christians to be one. Because we are one, it means that we must care about the needs of those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

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The apostle Paul wrote this message to the Corinthian church which was a divided church. The church in Corinth was divided because of various issues. The divisions were caused by issues such as the devotion to certain leaders, the expression of spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues and possibly according to rich and poor. One of the ways that Paul sought to address this division was to show them that they are one. He used the metaphor of being one body in 1 Corinthians 12. 1 Corinthians 10 falls within the section 1 Corinthians 8:1 – 11:1 in which he addresses the matter of meat sacrificed to idols. Paul addressed this matter by comparing it to participation in the Lord's Supper. He indicated that just as participation in the Lord's Supper causes one to identify and be associated with the sacrificial death of Christ, in the same way eating meat sacrificed to idols causes one to be associated with the idols. He also indicated that because everyone is sharing the one bread they all are one.

We notice here that sharing in the one bread means that all will partake. None is left without. Therefore, as we partake in the Lord's Supper and we are fed spiritually with the bread, we are reminded that there are persons who have no food. Because we are one, we all need to be fed. Therefore, let us seek to share with those in need.

Prayer: Provider God, help us to remember that we are one and so to care for those less fortunate than ourselves. Amen.

Food and Justice

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1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-29

Within our Methodist churches, we often receive a care fund whenever the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is being offered so that we can give to those in need among us. Many times persons give sparingly to this fund. This could give the impression that such persons do not want to help those in need. This was what Paul condemned in the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-29, he was challenging them that they need to share with those in need.

Within the early church, the celebration of the Lord's Supper was in the form of the *agape* meal, which was a potluck supper. Each believer would bring food which would be pooled and then shared by all. This enabled poor believers to have at least one good meal for the week. In the Corinthian church, however, the food was not being shared equally. The Christian slaves who had extra duties would arrive late to the meal. By this time, those who had already arrived would eat everything and the slaves would be left without. Paul condemned this indicating to them that in sharing in the Lord's Supper they must demonstrate mutual love and sharing. If they could not do this, it would be better for them to eat at home. This practice showed that they had no regard for the less fortunate and it demonstrated unequal distribution of food, which is the cause of injustice.

Just as Paul challenged the Corinthians to demonstrate mutual love in the sharing of the Lord's Supper, in the same way, every time we participate in the Lord's Supper, as we remember the love which Christ demonstrated for us, causing him to give himself for us, we need to demonstrate justice in ensuring that all of God's people have food to eat and we can do so by sharing what we have with those who do not have.

Prayer: God of justice, help us not to be selfish and keep all that we have for ourselves, but to share with those in need. Amen.



Lenten

Booklet

2019

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FOREWARD

God in his wisdom has made the provision of food primary to His creative activity. The very topic for this year's Lenten Booklet suggests that the provision, production, distribution and access to this basic necessity is a matter of justice. The question to be answered is, justice defined and determined by whom? It is undeniable that God has always been just with His provision for all creation and scripture is replete with God's assurance that food will always be provided. So then, why is there still hunger in the world and why is food a matter of justice?

I commend to you this Booklet which demands more than a cursory glance, or a casual reading confined to the season of Lent. We are being encouraged to be engaged in a serious reflection as to how each of us has produced, consumed, shared and or destroyed food. And by our actions or inaction, have we withheld our resources or supported policies that prevented the use of arable lands for the production and distribution of food thereby contributing to hunger and perhaps to the starvation of those who cannot provide or do not have the means to access food for themselves?

Furthermore, before we begin to take the moth out of society's eye as we respond to the socio-economic issues that are deemed as acts of injustice, perhaps we need to ask the question, as a Caribbean Church endowed with the rich resource of arable lands and prime real estates, have we exercised justice in our stewardship of our resources?

The writers invite us to contemplate that God has already made provision for the well-being of humanity and it is our lack of stewardship which has contributed to the need for justice. The writers also remind us that there is need to consider our relationship with one another since we ought to be concerned about the welfare of "the least of these."

On behalf of the Connexional Office, sincerest appreciation is expressed for the partnership between the writers, the MCCA and the United Methodist Women, UMC toward the production of this booklet.

Rev'd Patmore C. Henry
Connexional Secretary

We can demonstrate this love by ensuring that all persons have food to eat.

Prayer: God of love, help up to demonstrate our love in practical ways as we encounter persons in need. Amen.

JOHN 6:53-59

As human beings we are physical, spiritual, mental and social beings. For us to be well, all aspects of our being must be functioning. When one aspect is deficient, the other aspects are affected. Hence, there is a relationship between physical and spiritual well-being. It is this relationship that caused Jesus to use the metaphor of eating and drinking to describe the necessity for spiritual food. So, the body needs both physical and spiritual food.

Jesus told this discourse about bread from heaven after he had performed two miracles, which were considered signs, “the feeding of the five thousand” and “the walking on water.” This Gospel was written to a people who had issues with the identity of Jesus. Because of the belief that flesh was evil, there was a difficulty in accepting Jesus as God, so John seeks to present Jesus as God becoming man. Hence John refers to the miracles as signs. These signs pointed to Jesus as God. Up to John 5, Jesus had already performed three signs. John 6:2 indicates that a large crowd was following Jesus because of the signs that they saw him doing. Then Jesus performed the fifth sign, the feeding of the five thousand, and which he gave the discourse about bread from heaven. In this discourse Jesus sought to show the people that just as physical food is important to the body, in the same way, spiritual food is also important. This spiritual food can only come from Jesus. Jesus was the live-giving bread.

As we reflect upon food and hunger, we too are reminded that both physical food and spiritual food are important for the body. Sometimes as Christians we believe that our role is to only focus on the spiritual. Just as Jesus saw the necessity of both and fed the people both physically and spiritually, in the same way, we too must focus on feeding the people both physically and spiritually. Let us therefore ensure that we have programmes in place to cater for the physical food for the many persons who are hungry in our communities.

Prayer: God of wholeness, you care about our every need, help us to focus on both physical and spiritual needs of those around us. Amen.

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INTRODUCTION

The UN Sustainable Goals Report 2017 estimated that 767 million people lived below the extreme poverty line in 2013. Although this was a reduction from 1.7 billion people in 1999, poverty in our world remains an untenable situation. In a world where there is enough to meet the basic needs of humanity, this effectively means that 767 million people cannot or are unable to supply their basic God given needs-water, clothing, shelter and health care.

As a result, human beings die each day from a lack of proper nutrition, clean water, access to medical care, education and sanitation. This is the reality of our world. But does it have to be like this? Your answer to this question must be a resounding NO! Earth is endowed with enough resources to meet the basic needs of humanity. The crisis of food and hunger and by extension poverty, is therefore not about little resources or no resources at all, it has much to do with unjust and unregulated policies, markets and structures.

It is clear that ‘tackling hunger cannot be addressed by increasing food production alone. Well-functioning markets, increased incomes for smallholder farmers, equal access to technology and land, and additional investments all play a role in creating a vibrant and productive agricultural sector that builds food security’.

Our theme for this year, ‘**Food and Hunger: A matter of Justice**’ is an extension of the 2017 reflection on “*Violence Against the Created Order*”. At that time, a clarion call was made for humanity and faith communities, in particular, to put more energies and resources into saving mother earth and the cosmos from protracted destruction.

JOHN 6:43-58

Bread is considered an essential staple in one’s diet in many cultures. This was very much the case in Jesus’ Day. Any meal that did not include bread would have been considered incomplete. In declaring “I am the bread of life” Jesus was indicating our indispensable need for Him.

Today’s reading represents the climax of an earlier discussion that Jesus had had with the crowd. Having seen him perform the miracle of multiplying loaves of bread (John 6:11 & 26), they had asked Him to perform a sign like the manna from heaven that God had provided for His people in the desert (6:30-31). Jesus responds by referring to himself as “the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32). Jesus was saying that He had been sent to be their spiritual bread; He would supply their spiritual needs.

Likewise, Jesus’ desire is for us to feed on Him in our hearts, to recognise him as our vital food. We can only be made into His image and likeness by daily coming to His table and feasting on all that He has prepared for us. In this way, we would have “learned of the Father”, that we may come to Jesus and experience His everlasting presence.

Prayer: Gracious Father, thank you for sending Jesus, the Bread of Life. May we know Him today as the only spiritual food that can satisfy the hunger of our souls. Amen.

Food and the Eucharist

Rev. Dr. Karen Mc Sweeney - *is a medical doctor and a Methodist Deacon. She is presently a Methodist Tutor at the United Theological College of the West Indies, where she lectures in Biblical Studies and Biblical Languages.*

LUKE 22:19-22

Eating together is a common practice for building community and fellowship among persons. This was no different in the days of Jesus. For the Gospel according to Luke records several instances of Jesus having meals with his disciples. Luke 22 records the last meal that Jesus had with the disciples before his crucifixion. He was celebrating the Passover meal with them for the last time and instituted the Lord's Supper. We see from these verses that the Lord's Supper is a remembrance of Jesus' demonstration of sacrificial love for us. This means that as Christians when we remember Christ's suffering, we too must demonstrate sacrificial love.

The practice of eating meals together was an important practice for Jewish family and community life. Hence within Israel there were many kinds of sacred meals. Through the participation in meals, the Jews would give thanks to God for God's creation and for all that God had provided for them. The Passover meal was a remembrance and a celebration of God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Since its first institution, the celebration of the Passover is an annual event for the Jews; hence Jesus would have celebrated with them before. But on this occasion in Luke 22, it was his last celebration and then he was going to be crucified. Just as God had delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt, now God was going to make a way for all God's people, whether Jew or Gentile, to be delivered from the bondage of sin. So, as Jesus participated in this meal, he instituted a symbol of his suffering, the bread to represent his body given on the cross and the wine to represent his blood which was poured out.

Today, as we eat the bread and drink the wine in the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that Jesus' death on the cross was a demonstration of sacrificial love. In this reminder, we are also called upon, as representatives of Christ, to demonstrate this same sacrificial love to all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is with profound appreciation that I gave thanks to the United Methodist Women who has once again partnered with the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA) to fund the Lenten Booklet for 2019. In fact, they have been on board from the inception of this important ministry. Special thanks to the team of writers for their invaluable commitment and to the new writers who have joined us in this ministry; without whom this project could not have become a reality. Sis. Jenieve Cato continues to devote her artistic talents to this project and we wish to thank her for designing the cover for this year's Booklet.

This edition is especially dedicated to Bro. Oscar Allen, a member of the editorial team, who gave yeoman service to the project. He was always available for meetings even when he was ill to make suggestions about the quality and content; ensuring that it was readable and reachable by all. Most critically, he was concerned about how the material will impact peoples' walk with God.

Bro. Oscar was called to higher service to be with his Lord and Saviour on 28th July 2017. We therefore dedicate this year's Lenten Booklet in memory of his stewardship and passion for this ministry. May his soul rest in peace.

Reflection Helps

Dear Reader,

You may wish to use daily reflections on more than one occasion each day. Personal, and Group reflection are both valuable, not for debate but for sharing. A quiet time and a place are helpful. A relevant newspaper or magazine item can help to highlight the matter and focus the prayer concern.

Let God's Spirit lead yours to clearer discernment and new commitment.

GOD'S ABUNDANCE

Rev. Janice Soyer-Delaney - *is a Deacon in the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas. While undertaking Chaplaincy to schools, she also coordinates the children, youth and young adults Ministries of the Church. Janice has organized and facilitated many camps, retreats and Vacation Bible School events, mainly for children, as well as Training sessions for Adults.*

GENESIS 1:24-31

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food." Genesis 1:29

In many of our Caribbean Islands, sizeable portions of our fertile agricultural lands are being taken out of food production and instead converted to housing developments. Ironically as this is happening some persons are calling us to grow what we eat and eat what we grow. They are calling us to be mindful of the need for food security.

While it is true that farming is 'hard work', we cannot underscore the need for adequate supplies of food to be available for all persons to consume. According to the hierarchy of needs developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow, in addition to air and sleep, food is a basic need of humankind and our experience bears this out.

Our creator God knew this and before God created humankind, God made the vegetation to meet the needs of humankind.

Increasingly we are consuming food that is cheaper or even more convenient to purchase, but which has been over cooked or processed to the extent that valuable nutrients have been extracted. Others, out of their situation of a lack of, may eat food unfit for consumption. In these instances such food is contributing to a high percentage of non-communicable diseases.

We may want to ask ourselves if we are using the food of the earth that God has created and given to us, and if we are using it in a manner that is of benefit to our bodies.

God gave the reassurance that the earth will always produce food, as after Noah exited the ark and offered burnt offerings to God, in a covenant, God

1 KINGS 17:7-14

God provides. Even in the most difficult of circumstances He provides and He will do this in the most miraculous of ways, if we trust Him. We see this truth demonstrated most profoundly in our scripture reading today.

In our scripture reading the Lord says to Elijah: 3 "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. 4 You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there." God showed His miraculous power and presence by using the most unlikely and unexpected means to sustain His servant. God then directed Elijah to journey to Zarephath, saying "I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." (17:9) Ultimately, God's plan not only ensures the survival of His servant but returns the widow from the edge of despair.

When we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, in the "ravines" of life where hope is lost and everything seems bleak, we must understand this - God provides. It is in such situations - where we have nothing to depend on except God - that we learn that God *is* dependable and that He can be trusted. So let us not mourn these moments, but embrace the presence of our all-powerful God!

Prayer: Gracious Father, give us the courage to trust you regardless of the circumstances we face, knowing always that you are our provider and the keeper of our souls in Jesus' name. Amen.

EXODUS 16:2-5 & 11-16

It is the second month of the Children of Israel's journey out of Egypt, and the people are complaining miserably - "murmuring" against Moses and Aaron because they are hungry. The complaint is the third of its kind since they began their journey (Exodus 14:11; 15:24). Each complaint has thus far, been resolved through the miraculous power of God. In this particular instance, God answers their grumbling by raining bread and meat from heaven.

The complaint belies the awful tyranny which the people endured in Egypt. Speaking to Moses and Aaron, they complain: 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'" (16:3). Their experiences bore no resemblance to this description of the lavish living they claim they enjoyed there. They seem to have conveniently forgotten their suffering and servitude. Despite this terrible glorification of their former reality in Egypt, God demonstrates, yet another time, His great love towards them by meeting their needs. The Lord remains faithful, as He is to us, generously providing bread and rest, symbols of His presence and mercy.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may we be truly grateful for the way in which you have set us free from the bondage of sin and brought us back to yourself. Help us today to feast on you in our hearts in Jesus name. Amen.

This year, our theme joins that call and encourages us to focus on the fact that God has provisioned enough to meet humanity's basic needs; but that, God also places an obligation upon us, as co-partners, to ensure that our and succeeding generations have enough. We are therefore called to be responsible and engaged stewards of God's creation (Genesis 1: 28 - 29), so that our children and grand-children and future generations would live in peace and harmony with creation. As you read these reflections, we implore you to take action in concert with others when and where ever it is necessary.

Rev. Serna E. Samuel

Caribbean Regional Missionary
United Methodist Women

ISAIAH 24:6-8

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” Isaiah 25:6

Increasingly, in our Caribbean islands, food is being used as the centre point for bringing people together. In the tourist sector, food and wine festivals are marketed aggressively as events to attract visitors to the islands. Locally and regionally, there are many food competitions for both youth as well as adult participants. These competitions which bring together persons of different ethnicities and cultures, are a catalyst for the latent creativity as well as a foundation to motivate persons to a higher standard of food preparation and quality. In the Bible, people are also brought together around events where a meal is shared.

In what appeared to be an eschatological setting, the prophet Isaiah records for us what some Bible scholars believe to be either the celebration of a victory that signals an end to Israel’s shameful exile, or an event that signals an end to military destruction and the mourning it produced.

Described as a feast of ‘rich food and of well-aged wines’, there seems to be no scarcity nor need to be constrained by costs as the celebration is hallmarked with abundant food of the highest quality.

Additionally, this event being hosted by the Lord for all peoples. It may be a reminder to us of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper where all persons may commune in an act of remembering the body of Jesus broken for us and his blood shed for us so that we may be released from the penalty and power of our sin, and of celebrating Jesus’ conquering of the final enemy which is death.

Through the grace of our Saviour Jesus Christ, all persons are invited to come to the feast of quality food and share in communion with each other.

In our celebratory events what do we serve, and who is at the table with us?

Prayer: Jehovah Jireh, as we seek to build community, may the food we prepare and serve to all persons always be of the highest quality, and thus contribute to their good health and physical wellbeing. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

ISAIAH 55: 1-2

In 2014, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) calculated that the regional food import bill for its member nations was in excess of US 5 billion dollars. Why are Caribbean nations so blessed with agricultural lands, livestock and oceans teeming with seafood importing so much food?

Some have argued that Caribbean nationals’ consumption preferences lean towards foreign goods and services, a ripple effect of the impact of globalization. The spirit of consumerism has become commonplace in our islands as we desire to acquire all that money can buy. Yet, there are those whose basic needs for food, shelter and clothing are not being met in this very atmosphere of extravagance and self-indulgence.

The prophet Isaiah gives an invitation to an abundant life, one in which currency is not a prerequisite for entry. Isaiah’s audience does not differ much from us today as he speaks to the exiled nation of Israel who at that point was seeking satisfaction in materialism. In stark contradiction to their present mind-set, he invites them to share in a feast that is free and accessible to the poor, the rich and anyone who so desires. He tells about an equitable place where all needs are satisfied. Isaiah sets their eyes upon the spiritual, eternal things whilst they yearned for the material, worldly things which could not satisfy their deepest desires.

The invitation was to a feast in the presence of the one who is able to feed both the body and the spirit. This invitation is still open to all believers. We must have a paradigm shift of focus from the pursuance of earthly, carnal endeavours to the pursuit of the things that are eternal. By all means work hard to earn your daily bread but never lose sight of the heavenly riches that we should be striving for whilst being in continuous fellowship with God. Our greatest desire should be to be in God’s presence to feast in the eternal banquet prepared for all mankind.

Prayer: Eternal God, may our focus always be on the things that are eternal though the world may tell us otherwise. May we work hard and be diligent whilst never forgetting that we are also spiritual beings. Help us to remember those amongst us who have varying kinds of hunger. Give us the boldness to tell them about the One in whom there is neither hunger nor thirst. Amen.

Dr. Roanne Harry – is a Policy Planner in the area of children and family issues. She is also the Windward Islands Lay Representative on the Board of Trustees at the Caribbean Nazarene College and the Coordinator for Nazarene Compassionate Ministries in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

ECCLESIASTES 9:7-10

Life is short and full of uncertainty. This is the underlying theme of Solomon's message to us in Ecclesiastes 9:7-10. He urges us to embrace all that God has given to us and make the most of our lives.

He writes, "Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works." Throughout the Bible, "bread" and "wine" are often reflective of that which God gives us to bless and cheer us. They are symbols of the presence of the Lord – His presence that is illuminated in His joy, favour and manifold blessings. Thus, we are to enjoy God's good gifts and celebrate life with others. The reason Solomon gives is that "God has already approved your works". In essence, such enjoyment is God's will for us and He sanctions it. He expects us to live our lives to the fullest!

This encouragement to live enjoyable and deeply meaningful lives does not contradict the fact that we are called to be good stewards of all God has entrusted to us. Solomon assures us that it is not sinful to take pleasure in what God has generously bestowed on us. The blessings of our current lives are symbolic of the eternal promises to come when we shall forever bask in the presence of the Lord.

Prayer: Divine Father, may we live our lives with joy and fervency before you at all times remembering your generosity and love. Amen.

promised that 'as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, shall not cease.'

Our responsibility is to ensure that there is equitable distribution of adequate amounts of quality food as we partner with God who supplies the food we need.

Prayer: O God who created and ordered all things in heaven and earth, we thank you for providing the food we need to strengthen and sustain our bodies. May we distribute and consume food that is healthy so that our bodies may be nourished. Amen.

MATTHEW 6:25-34

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...” Matthew 6:25a.

On many occasions we fret and complain because the monkeys have eaten our crops or, the birds have eaten the fruit that we had planned to harvest the next day. When we thought that the fruit was not quite ready to be picked it appeared that they knew that it was fit and ready to be consumed and so had moved one step ahead of us. We may have even asked ourselves, “how did they know that the fruit was ripe?”

The parent or guardian whose cupboard is bare and who has children to feed, knows the increasing anxiety that creeps up and, at times, overtakes the mind as morning breaks. In this and other instances, much time is spent worrying if and when food will become available to feed their bodies and satisfy their hungry bellies. Many are challenged because of their lack and thousands of children as well as adults die daily from starvation.

Whatever the circumstance, our focus text tells us of Jesus’ directive – we are to refrain from doubt or doublemindedness; that undue concern or anxious despair over what we are to eat or drink.

One writer notes that Jesus is appealing ‘to common sense and the observation of nature,’ as he points his listeners to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. They neither labour nor toil yet they are provided for by our heavenly Father. Jesus is calling those of little faith to increase that faith by relying on God who has a proven track record of being faithful in providing for God’s creation all that is needed for sustenance, hence we must not doubt God’s power or willingness to provide.

Rather than dishonor God by failing to trust God’s providence, we must believe that the one who created us will give us all that is necessary to sustain that life.

Prayer: God who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field, we look to you with the confidence that you will be faithful in providing food for our sustenance. Amen.

MATTHEW 4: 1-4

The upsurge in crime and violence in the Caribbean has been at the forefront of discussion by criminologists, law enforcement and other stakeholders. Some purport that crime rates have increased because of poverty and economic hardships faced by those who are marginalized. Others argue that in order to “eat ah food” men and women are easily led to theft, gang activity, embezzlement and dealing in illicit drugs. Does the need for daily bread justify yielding to the temptation of illegal activity?

Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness and at the point when he was famished and obviously lacking in physical strength, the tempter appeared. Satan, always aware of our weaknesses, saw this as the opportune time to tempt Jesus with what he desired most, food! Noteworthy though, is that Jesus was not alone in this battle, the presence of God was there with him in the person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus could not rely on his physical strength to fight that battle which signifies that physical food is not the only element required for daily survival. Jesus recognized that spiritual food is of equal importance. He cited the necessity of the word of God which has been described as the sword of the Spirit in Ephesians. The word of God therefore equips us for battle against the enemy as no soldier enters into battle without a weapon.

As Christians, we will encounter our wilderness experiences where we face battle with the enemy. It is during these times that we must recognize how much we require God’s presence through the person of the Holy Spirit, to stand with us. What are we then to say to ourselves and to those in our society who believe that criminal activity provides an easy solution to their need for bread?

We are to declare that yielding to temptation can only lead to further degradation and both spiritual and physical poverty. Within our communities we can provide opportunities for the vulnerable to be provided with fish whilst teaching them sustainable ways to fish. Furthermore, we must be equipped to tell them about Jesus for we carry the word of God in our hearts. As Christians, we must prepare for battle by having the sword of the Spirit with us by knowing words of scripture to effectively win the fight. As we teach them the word then shall they be equipped to face temptation.

Assured of God’s presence with us mankind is able to face the fiery, skilfully crafted darts of the enemy.

Prayer: Father, may we always have your word in our hearts and know that the Holy Spirit is with us as we face diverse temptations and trials. Help us through our wilderness experiences to remember that to be victorious over temptation we must be ever mindful that we exist as both physical and spiritual beings. May we ever be mindful of the needs of others in society and be ever ready to sing Christ to the world. Amen.

PSALM 104: 24-30

“These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.” Psalm 104:27-28.

I am reminded of the group of secondary school boys who were conducting devotions with the entire school. They selected and lustily led their fellow students in singing the chorus that affirmed the providential care of God.

“I will not suffer, I will not beg for bread, I will not suffer, I will not beg for bread.

He is my daddy O, He is my daddy O, He is my daddy O, that’s why I love him so.”

Or the chorus taught by the youth group members: ***There is nothing that I need that he won’t provide, nothing that I need that he won’t supply, If I believe, I will receive.***

In what seems to be an evaluation of the Genesis 1 account of creation, the writer of psalm 104 begins by inviting his soul to join in the blessing of the Lord. He proceeds to recount the marvelous ways in which God in wisdom did manifold works, and in wisdom created living things both small and great. He then alludes to the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness, when fifteen days into the second month after they had departed Egypt their food ran out. There God demonstrated providential care for them by sending them their daily supply of manna and quail to eat. We are told that some gathered more, some less, but when they measured it they neither had overs nor shortage.

With the assurance and confidence of those teenage school boys, most of whom were from the lower socio-economic strata of society, as well as those in the youth group, who incidentally were mainly from a ‘poor community,’ we too can affirm our faith that our heavenly Father will not allow us to beg for bread for indeed he provides our daily bread.

Prayer: Sovereign God, who gives us our food in due season, help us to have open hands and thus be the channels through whom you answer the prayers of those needing a daily supply of bread. Amen.

PSALM 24:1-2

As Caribbean territories we are mostly surrounded by water. Each day as we drive along our coastal roadways, enjoy the view from our homes or interact with nature we can marvel at the beauty of God's creation. Our territories are blessed with rivers that provide sustenance and beaches that attract visitors from all over the globe. But all is not rosy for even as we rejoice in our marine attractions, we also acknowledge the danger posed to us as we ponder the effects of climate change and subsequent changes to water temperatures and rising sea levels.

The text recognises that God is our sovereign. It is He who has created the world and everything in it. King David, the author of psalm 24, outlined God's power and encouraged the Israelites not to be fearful. We too need not be fearful, because the God who made all things well is the same God that we serve today, and He still provides for his people.

As people of God we are His representatives here on earth. As His stewards we manage the earth in His stead. All persons should, therefore, be able to enjoy from the provisions of the land, air and sea. We should not hoard our resources for ourselves while others faint from hunger and want. If we are to be faithful stewards, we must recognise our responsibility to care for the earth and its produce.

God intended that the earth sustain His people for millions of years. Let us not be fearful of the waters that surround us for these too are the Lord's. What the earth produces is for the consumption of all God's creations. Let us cherish them and share them with all who are in need.

Prayer: Oh Lord, our creator and sustainer, we acknowledge today the sovereign divinity of your creative power. Help us to know that it is you who have made us and not we ourselves. May we be your faithful stewards to our lives end. Amen.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we pray for those who are hungry and in any type of need. We pray that they will understand that through you all their physical and spiritual needs can be fully met. Thank you for your provision and continued presence in our lives as we fix our eyes to eventually be with you in eternity. Amen.

LUKE 24: 30-35

A prayer recited before the lunch time meal is customary in most schools in the Caribbean. One of the popular grace before meals was composed by John Greenleaf Whittier and asks for God's presence at our table. However, in this fast food generation where convenience is of utmost priority and sitting to have a meal can be a luxury, do we take time to remember to request God's presence and blessing before we eat? Do we acknowledge that the provision of food is indeed a gift from God? Sometimes, we become distracted by our thoughts and the vagaries of life that we fail to acknowledge the need for His presence and providence in every aspect of our lives.

The two disciples who encountered Jesus on the way to Emmaus were so focussed on the recent death and resurrection occurrences that they did not recognize that Jesus was present with them. Their eyes were only opened to recognize Jesus through the blessing, breaking and sharing of bread. Within the Jewish community sharing a meal represented a time of fellowship. After the resurrection, several of the appearances of Jesus are associated with table fellowship (Luke 24:41-43, John 21:9-15.) Fellowship requires intimacy and it was during this intimate moment that their eyes were opened to recognize His presence.

Jesus wants an intimate relationship with us so that we can recognize and desire His presence. Through the trials of life, the daily hustle and bustle and hectic agendas, Christ longs for us to be in continued fellowship with Him. As we fellowship with him, we will understand that He is present with us through every situation.

When we pray before we share a meal with family, friends or on our own we recognize God's providence in supplying the meal and we invite God's presence into our daily activities, even those which may seem mundane or ritualistic.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us that we will never be too busy to have fellowship with you and to share with you. We pray that we will always be able thankful for your providential power in our lives. Help us to acknowledge and desire your presence in the midst of us as we walk in daily fellowship with you. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP OF ABUNDANCE

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LEVITICUS 25:1-7

Harvest time in the Caribbean is usually a joyous occasion. It is a time when farmers reap the reward of their hard work. On occasions, the harvesting is done by those who contributed nothing. Those responsible are generally the homeless, the addict or the marginalised of the society. They are usually pushed aside or forgotten but they are God's creation nonetheless.

The passage reminds us that God makes provision for all His creation. The Israelites were instructed to observe a Sabbath year. Every seventh year, no crops would be cultivated. This was to allow the land to rest, and to remind the Israelites that God would provide for them as the land would still provide food for them and their households.

Interestingly, the Israelites were about to enter a land of overflowing abundance. Surely there was no need to worry about food shortages! This provision enabled them to understand what the less fortunate endured. God made it clear that they were required to share with all in the society. For, during the Sabbath year not only would the Israelites be provided for, they were to set aside for foreigners, their servants and their livestock.

Today, the Sabbath year may take the form of natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes or drought. We too are reminded that God is our provider and God expects us to share our abundance with others. Even as our nations enjoy our years of abundance let us not forget the less fortunate. When we enter our Sabbath year let us thank God for what God has done and continue to trust that He will do for us what He has promised to do.

Prayer: Dear lord, you proclaimed for us a Sabbath year to allow the land to rest and maintain its ability to produce abundantly. Help us to trust in you and provide not only for ourselves but for the homeless, the addict, the marginalised and all those who are in need. Amen

LEVITICUS 25:23-27

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Leviticus 25:23

Many of us are blessed to have inherited the lands on which we live. We are “entrusted by our family to the entitlement of a deed to property and therefore the land should not be sold”. These words are usually the instructions given by our grandparents to our parents. Yet in our zeal to acquire cash, when these lands are passed on to us, we tend to resort to selling our inheritance and suffering the consequences of our actions.

The text quoted forms part of a directive given by God to his people through Moses, and it addressed the Sabbatical year and the year of jubilee - a time of rest and return of property to the original owners. It was to ensure that the people lived on the land securely. It was God’s way of reminding them that the land belongs to God and it was a way of God perpetually providing for them.

Across the Caribbean, we are encouraged not to sell lands passed on to us by previous generations as the buyers have no obligations to return such land to the sellers, unlike in the times of Leviticus.

Rather than capitulate in times of economic challenge, at all times we must be careful to guard and manage that which is entrusted to us, for to whom much is given much is required.

Prayer: Dear Lord help me to remember that what I possess is being held in trust for you; it is not mine, I am only given stewardship over it. May I be faithful in my care of it. Amen.

eyes. What is important is not how long our service is given but the manner in which it is given. God requires us to carry out all of our duties as unto him, a faithful and merciful 'landowner' whose only required qualification is for his 'workers' to serve him and one another with love and sincerity. Whether we perform our tasks at the beginning, the middle or at the end of the season, we all must be given the opportunity to feel that our contribution is important. To truly experience God's kingdom among us, work should not be seen as a means to material gain but rather, a service to enable a peaceful and just society for all.

Prayer: Almighty God, in a world where work is the taskmaster that hinders our true worship to you, open the eyes of leaders in all strata of our society so that the example of your love for all mankind would permeate all of our tasks. Amen!

FOOD AND THE PRESENCE OF GOD

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JOHN 6: 32- 40

The islands of the Caribbean have been blessed with an abundance of fertile land and rich seas which reap abundant harvests of tropical vegetables, fruits and fish. Yet, within this context we often hear of the plight of families who are needy and those who struggle to put food on their tables. How does poverty exist against this backdrop of vast, bountiful resources? Is there an inequitable distribution of food and other resources which fosters this dichotomy?

Food has always been one of the basic needs of human beings and God acknowledges this in the provision of manna for the Hebrews after fleeing Egypt. In John 6: 32-35, Jesus, reminded of the act of God in the wilderness, speaks to the crowd about bread and drink that goes beyond physical sustenance. He declares that in Him, there would be no hunger or thirst. Jesus' declaration shows no favour or bias in the distribution of this spiritual food as it is available to all those who believe.

The same God who understood the physical needs of human beings and responded with manna is able to satisfy the deepest desire of human beings which is to be with God. In recognition of that need, God sent his son Jesus, the bread of heaven to give eternal life to the world just as he had sent manna from heaven to maintain the physical life of his people.

What are we then to say to those who are hungry in our villages and cities? How do we balance injustices in the sharing of resources? We are called to provide physical food and resources to the needy in the same manner in which God made provision for the Hebrews. We stand with those who are vulnerable and speak out about unfair practices. Our mandate is to help them recognize that God is in tuned with all our needs and is a present help in times of trouble. It is imperative of us to introduce them to Jesus, the One who is able to fulfil an even greater need through His presence in their lives.

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RUTH 4:1-12

At this, the next-of-kin said, "I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it. Ruth 4:6

Like a farmer obtains a new contract, we could only imagine the exhilaration that Boaz felt as he heard these words. His plan had worked! He was able to meet with the prospective buyer of Ruth's inherited land and acquire the land and Ruth's hand in marriage all in one day. Sometimes opportunity knocks at our doors and we fail to accept it but at other times, we see the opportunity and we seize it. Boaz saw the opportunity and he seized it.

It appears that the parcel of land belonging to Elimelech had been previously sold and the opportunity was now presented to redeem the land and so restore it to the control of the clan or extended family. With Boaz's interest in Ruth, and the awareness that the transaction with the land included the acceptance of Ruth as well, Boaz approached the family member who had the first right of redemption. While the relative was interested in the land, he could not acquire it for some reason unknown to us.

This cleared the way for Boaz to redeem the land, marry Ruth and raise children who would become future claimants to the title of the land. Surely this was a prudent move on the part of Boaz and it demonstrated a great sense of stewardship. We too need to be prudent in our business transactions.

Prayer: Dear God, give me the fortitude to seek out new opportunities and be responsible in my stewardship of what comes within my realm of possession. Amen.

LUKE 12: 13-21

The parable of the rich fool is an oft-told story, yet, each time that I hear it referenced, or when I read it myself, I am compelled by its simple, yet profound message - life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions. In essence, this parable, told by Jesus, is about a young man who was wealthy. He was quite clearly, very proud of his wealth and he was consumed by it. Materially, God blessed him, and as his wealth expanded, he could think of nothing other than how he could store it. There is no indication from the parable that this wealthy man gave a thought to those who were less fortunate and to how he could help relieve their poverty or hunger. Instead, he planned, with pride, to build an even larger barn to store his produce, but he had no idea that that would have been his last night on earth.

Before launching into this parable Jesus warned; "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed..." Greed is rooted in selfish desires for more (power, riches, food), often at the expense of others. Greed is problematic for us as Christians, and it affects our ability to exercise good stewardship. Further, our desire for more, affects our relationship with Jesus Christ, since we know that our hearts are really centered on where our treasures are hidden. If we are consumed with our earthly possessions, then that is where our hearts will be.

Jesus actually cautions us about this when in Matthew's gospel chapter 19, he warns that we ought not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth where moths and vermin destroy. Instead, this Lenten season, I urge you to store up for yourself treasures in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

In an environment where life is often judged based on how we present physically: how we dress, what type of car we drive, where we live, Christians need to be mindful of the treasures that will be with us eternally.

Prayer: Loving God, we thank you for blessing us with many material possessions. Help us not to be consumed by these possessions, but to see them as a way both to help others and to lead them to you. Help us O God, to understand that life is so much more than the abundance of our possession. Amen.

Prayer: Dear Parent of all humanity, in the name of Jesus Your Son, we ask that You fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we are able to love our neighbours as we love ourselves! Amen.

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MATTHEW 20:1-20

“For the kingdom of God is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard....So the last will be first and the first will be last.”

In one of the Islands where I ministered, I was confronted with the reality that God's view of equality is inherent in the gospel message of loving God and one's neighbour as oneself. It was the first day of the second term of the sewing class. In a rush, a lady entered the room and expressed a desire to join the programme despite the fact that she missed at least seventy hours of intense training. When I asked her why she had not joined before, she explained that no one told her about it. Despite the fact that she was new to the class, she availed herself to learning and graduated at the end of the fourth semester with the other students, having been rewarded her certificate, sewing machine and all the tools necessary to start her business. The situation was questioned by others who felt it was unfair that she was treated in the same manner that they had. I also had my doubts at first, but after a year, I was able to visit her home and was pleased that she was able to cultivate that same determination into a small business that is able to augment her standard of living just like those who attended the class from its inception. I shudder to think what a mistake it might have been if I had refused this student.

In this parable, the story is told of a landowner who went out and hired workers for his vineyard. At an early hour in the morning, some were hired for an agreed wage, later in the day others were hired with the understanding that they would be paid what they deserved. Persons were being hired throughout the entire day. Yet, later that day, he found others who were unemployed because they did not know that he was hiring and he offered them employment. When the work day had ended, he proceeded to give each employee the same wage. This was not well received by those who started to work earlier and the employer explained that they agreed before they began the work what their payment would be. He chose to be a generous employer.

Jesus used the parable of the labourers in the vineyard to illustrate to those around him and us that all persons are valuable and equal in God's

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DEUTERONOMY 24: 19 – 22

The Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy presents some powerful themes; theological constructs and practical guide, which if understood and applied can positively influence the Christian life today. In our passage of focus, Moses is speaking to the people of Israel before they enter into the Promised Land. He provides in Deuteronomy 24:19, advice on how they should handle their abundance, how they should respond in a time of plenty: “when you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it: it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings.”

There is an abundance of wealth in the world today; there are more billionaires and millionaires than ever before, and there is evidence of affluence all around. Still, according to official data, more than half of the world's population live on less than \$2.50 per day. By extension, these persons are vulnerable to hunger. How is it possible for such an equation to exist? It is clear that there is nothing wrong with us having wealth: ...” When you reap your harvest...” (Of course, we understand that we must first sow, in order to reap); the important question is how do we respond, and what are our responsibilities in the presence of our abundance. Our harvest in this context must not be limited to physical food, or wealth and riches; we do have an abundance of gifts, graces, and talents. Are we using these gifts in God's kingdom? Are we ensuring that the orphans in our midst are adequately provided for and that further, they are included in our ministry, in our work for the church and ultimately for God?

There is an important end to verse 19 in our passage: “that the Lord your God may bless you in the work of your hands”. It is true that we receive material blessings from God, but our ultimate blessing, the blessing which we as Christians should yearn for, is that of a renewed life in Christ.

Prayer: Gracious God, we acknowledge that the earth is yours and that everything that we have comes from you. Give us the grace to be good stewards of your abundance; help us never to neglect the orphans and widows among us, and bless us all we pray. Amen

ACTS 4:32-37

Our passage for this meditation may best be described as a progress report on Christianity following the conversion of about three thousand persons, on the day of Pentecost. The major themes coming out of this report are unity and concern for others. "And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul". They were unified in their desire and determination to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Regarding the concern for their fellow believers we read in the passage: "For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need".

Taking these two broad themes, one can ask the question of this our Caribbean region. To what extent do we see unity in our churches? In looking across several of our Caribbean countries, there is evidence of disunity; in some along ethnic or racial lines, in some, according to skin colour, and in most, political party affiliation takes precedence over everything else. It is sad that this spirit of disunity has invaded our churches. It is clear that our churches thrive when we are in harmony; thus as we try to grapple with the socio-economic and salvation issues in our region, it is imperative that we again strive to be "all together in one accord".

Using that newly minted unity as a springboard, we can then examine our concern for each other. I am sure that any church leader will be timid to suggest that the church members sell off their possessions so that they can provide for all in need (I would be timid too), but there are some creative ways in which the church can look out for and reach out to those of its congregations who are in need. As a practical suggestion; education is vital as a vehicle to lift people out of hunger and poverty. When last have you asked a child in your congregation how is school, and how are you managing with your English or Mathematics? Dear reader, how have you used your talent as a gifted organizer to support the young people in your congregations who need to put a programme together? How have you otherwise helped to relieve the suffering of those who are in need?

Prayer: Father God, give us hearts that we may recognise the need to be unified in our purposes towards you. Help us to work with each other in love, and give us the grace and courage to reach out to others. Amen.

Prayer: Lord of the Vine, kindly grant us the desire and the ability to abide in Christ, the true Vine in whom we will bear much fruit to the honour and glory of Your name. Amen.

DEUTERONOMY 24: 14, 15

"You shall not withhold the wages of the poor and needy labourers... Otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you and you would incur guilt." Deut. 24: 14a, 15c

As I read this passage the words of Micah 6:8 rings in my ears: **"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"**

Scripture tells us that God is not a respecter of persons, yet the 'poor and needy' seem to be of great concern for God. Reading through the remainder of Deuteronomy 24, the following words or sentiments are repeated several times **"You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge."**

God obviously has a heart for the foreigner, the parentless and the vulnerable female: those who are normally in need of justice as they tend to be considered 'the least' in most societies! Yet, it is not that God deems them more valuable than the rest of society; after all God is God of **all** humanity. But it seems as if God desires that we lift up the fallen in our midst, strengthen the weak and be the voice for the voiceless. God seems to desire a community where each and every member is on equal ground and thus desires or requires of us to give to those that do not have what the average member has... to seek justice for and to be kind to them. In other words, to love them and see that they are as valuable as anyone else regardless of their place of birth, their family situation or their marital status.

Our God is a God of balance and all the Laws and Prophets can be summed up into two commands: to love God with all our being and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Don't love others more than we love ourselves and don't love ourselves more than we love others. Just as we want justice and to experience loving-kindness we must do the same for others, even if they are poor and in need or aliens in our midst. Furthermore, this theme continues into the New Testament as Jesus taught in Matt. 25 that if we feed or clothe or visit 'the least' in our midst, we are lifting them up from a position of less than to one of equality!

As we go about our daily lives let us do good; let us strive to do what is required of us and love our neighbours, regardless of their social standing, their nationality or their familial circumstances!

ACTS 2:42-47

Acts chapter 2 details a powerful story of the conversion of about three thousand persons to the church. These persons, from various countries, were convinced of the need to change their lives, following Peter's exhortation and enquired as to Peter about what they could do. What happened after their conversion is not very often spoken about. Acts 2 verse 44 tells us: "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all; as they need".

According to data released by the Caribbean Development Bank, poverty in the Caribbean ranges from a low of 13 percent to an unimaginable rate of 65 percent. This data, if accurate, suggest that there are thousands of Caribbean people who "have need". Still, there are thousands of Caribbean people, who display signs of opulence. The Caribbean church has, and can, play a unique dual role in helping to address the "need" of Caribbean people, including their (church) members.

The church can, in its programming, devise activities that help to empower the poor to live decent and dignified lives. In doing so, the church may have to sometimes collaborate with the state, but this is not new. In the Old Testament, we note how well the church and state (Joseph and Pharaoh) collaborated to respond to a crisis of famine. But, while the church tries to reach the physical needs, and hunger and want of the people of this region, it must, and can never, neglect its fundamental purpose. We have to claim like Jesus, that God's Spirit is upon us, and He has sent us to preach the good news to the poor, tell sinners that they are sinners no more, tell blind people that they can see and set the captives free. We must as we do this, preach with conviction, that Jesus is indeed the answer to our problems and point our followers to a life rooted in the principle of salvation and eternal life which are available, by grace, through belief and surrender to Jesus Christ.

Prayer: God, who is our provider, we look to you as our refuge. Give us the heart to accept you so that we too can be baptised by the Holy Spirit. Help us to recognise the situations of want and need in our communities, and to respond to those need, as we are able, In Jesus' Name. Amen.

and interactions with the rest of God's creation. With our hearts in such a state, we will naturally be good stewards of all the *abundance* that shall be added unto us.

Prayer: Dear God, we come before You, seeking first You, Your kingdom and Your righteousness. May we be constantly filled with Your Holy Spirit, whose indwelling power enables our hearts to be filled with the treasures of justice, mercy and faith. In You and in the name of Your Son Jesus the Christ, and in the power of Your Holy Spirit, we place our trust. Amen.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-10

As children, we learned a lot of things by imitating the actions of the adults, or the more mature ones around us. I remember the story of a young boy who would not eat any food that his father didn't eat, because he so wanted to imitate him. Paul uses this principle of imitation in his second letter to the Thessalonians to teach the church the tradition and the practice of work as a community. He knew that imitation is one of the earliest stages of the learning process, so he set the example for Christians to follow as they began their walk with Christ.

The example that Paul sets for the Thessalonians is one of a just community: a place where each person contributes to the work, and is in turn fed by the community. Anyone not willing to contribute, should be willing to go hungry in their idleness. This runs counter to the lives of many people worldwide, who spend all day and night in toil and labour, but still go hungry, whereas others languish in idleness and never lack food or drink. Our community of believers is called to something different: we do not let our idleness shift the burden onto others, we ensure that reciprocity exists between those who provide the bread and those who eat it.

We are all equal members in the community, and by our example of a community rooted in justice, we teach others to imitate us and walk in justice.

Prayer: Lord, may we imitate the example of your servants who have come before us as they have imitated Christ. As we mature in our own walks with you, we pray that we may be rooted and grounded in your love, working together as the body of Christ. Amen.

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GENESIS 3:19

I'm conflicted as I read and re-read this passage. We in the Caribbean see the presence of sweat as a sign of someone 'hard at work'; a badge of honour indicating that the individual is responsible and not lazy.

Yet, when this sentence is placed in the context of Genesis 3, we see that sweat is the 'fruit' of a 'curse'. The curse that the male human received due to his disobedience to God's command of not to eat from the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. The full curse was that **'cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you....'** Do you see my dilemma now?

Sweat and the ability to work and to earn a decent wage are privileges in today's hard economic situation. Yet it's deemed here as the fruit of sin. But after much wrestling with this particular word, the Lord of Light brought a gleamer of understanding.

There is work and then there is *work*. There is no honour in unfruitful, unproductive work or ineffective, unyielding labour which seems to be the curse incurred by the man's disobedience. Yet, there is work that is 'easy and light'... Work that bears much fruit!

The differentiating factor? Work done in our human 'strength' more often than not produces thorns and thistles, strife and struggle. Contrastingly, Christ calls us in Matt. 11: 28 to **"Come to Me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."** For in Christ, the curse of the fall is no longer upon our shoulders as believers for **"they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run [work] and not be weary. They shall walk [work] and not faint."** Isaiah 40: 31 NRSV

In Christ, we become transformed and become men and women who are **"strong, energetic and hardworking...clothed in strength and dignity"** (Prov. 31). We become labourers together with God (1Corinthians 3:9) through whom God's Spirit works and bears much fruit.

In whose strength are you labouring? Yours which produces thorns and thistles or in Christ's which produces fruit such as love, joy, peace and much more?

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MATTHEW 6: 19-21

***"Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be."* (Matt. 6: 21 NLT)**

The state of your heart determines the quality of your life!

Modern medicine indicates that the state of a person's heart affects the state of that person's life. A healthy heart leads to better quality of life. The medical world purports that the heart is the mechanism that keeps our blood flowing in and around our bodies. And we all know that our blood is our life line as it feeds every cell, tissue, gland, organ and system in our bodies. Without our hearts pumping strong, oxygen-rich blood, our body will become sluggish and eventually disease ridden, especially with cardiovascular diseases which are the number one killers in the Caribbean. Hence why the condition of the heart matters.

This is not only true for our physical bodies but also for our spiritual 'bodies'... A heart filled with God's Spirit will be filled with joy, peace, love, kindness, patience, gentleness, goodness, and self-control. Hence it is only logical to conclude that a heart void of God's Spirit will produce fruit such as sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties and other sins like these (Gal. 6: 19-21a). Scriptures instruct us to ***"Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life."* Prov. 4: 23 NLT** ***"For out of the over flow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of his good store of treasure, and the evil man brings evil things out of his evil store of treasure...."* Matthew 12: 34b, 35 NLT**

It's not surprising that Jesus taught His followers and by extension us, that it is a matter of the heart that determines the quality of life. If your heart is set on worldly treasures, the accumulation and protection of these, would cause the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith (Matt. 23:23) to be neglected. But once we seek first the kingdom of God and all His righteousness, our hearts will be filled with God's Spirit and the characteristics of joy, peace, love, kindness, patience, gentleness, goodness, and self control will guide our thoughts, words and actions

children of the light, we are called to consistently be shrewd managers of all that we possess.

Prayer: Lord, we your children desire to be true emitters of Your Light on earth. Therefore we ask that you flood our hearts, transform our minds and empower our bodies with the True Light of The World, Your Son, Jesus the Christ. This we ask in Jesu's name. Amen.

ACTS 20:32-35

Paul is here, speaking to the elders at Ephesus, near the end of his ministry and life. For him, it is a moment of reflection on the example that he has set as a leader in the church, for the Ephesians, and for all of us to follow. Paul calls us to do the work, to put our hands to the proverbial plough, to give of ourselves to support the weak. Paul's exhortation to the elders is not born out of great wealth, for he tells us that he doesn't have the riches that others had. Instead he speaks as a member of a community in which each person works to support themselves and for the good of the community.

This is a moment that shows us the practicality of our faith: not just to work to support our companions in the faith, but to work to support those who cannot support themselves, whatever the reason. This is the work of justice. We are not called simply to pray, or to send our well-wishes. We are called to work, to give. The cost of our faith is also material, and there is more blessedness in the giving of things through faith, than in the receiving of them.

In this moment, Paul shows us the way that any of us, and all of us can do the work of justice. We simply have to do the work. We are called to do the work. And by this work we support those who are weak where we are strong. The message of God's grace will sustain us as we do it.

Prayer: God, let us give in faith, supporting those who are weak. Sustain us by Your Word. May our food be to do Your will and to complete Your work (John 4:34). Amen.

EPHESIANS 4:28

Present into Paul's advice to the church about the new life in Christ is an admonition to thieves to give up stealing and to labour honestly instead. We find it in between warnings to not go to bed angry and to let no evil talk come out of our mouths. Paul finds honest work to be just as important to the character of someone living a new life in Christ as the words we speak, and dealing with anger. He tells the church that we work not only to provide for ourselves, but also for those of us who are in need, the ones who cannot work.

Paul's advice here is so different from what has become our cultural norm. We see work as something that we do for ourselves, for the betterment of our own lives, lives that we live independently of our neighbours and our faith community. Instead, Paul calls us to shift our focus: our work is to be our honest contribution to our community, something that requires us to put our own efforts into it, to produce something that we can share with others. The point of our work is not the material gains (otherwise stealing would be acceptable), it is that those who can work, should work and in doing so provide for those who are in need.

This is what is most important, the sharing of what we have worked for. Paul calls us as followers of Christ to make sure that we have something to share with whomever might need it. In the body of Christ, no one goes hungry, because we are all provided for by each other, as we have need.

Prayer: Lord, turn our hearts to honest labour, and prepare us to give to the needy. May we always serve you, by providing for the least of these. Amen.

LUKE 16: 1-8

***"And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."
Luke 16: 8 NRSV***

This passage raises more questions than answers for most of us. It's one of those biblical passages that upon first, maybe even the hundredth reading we walk away a bit uneasy because of sentences such as: "**...his master commended the dishonest manager" (v. 8)** or "**And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth...." (v.9)**

From the time that we were knee high to a grasshopper, attending Sunday school, we have been taught that honesty and integrity, especially regarding money, were characteristics of a good Christian. Schemers and crooked dealers are to be avoided at all costs. Yet, Jesus teaches through this parable that the '**dishonest**' manager is an example to which we should follow.

One thing that I am certain about, is that Jesus is *the Light* that directs us to *the Truth* and *the Way* to experiencing *abundant Life*. So rather than concluding that He is encouraging us to be dishonest with our financial decisions, I dug deeper into the passage to find clarity. As I read beyond the prescribed verses I found my answer in verses 10 & 11 of Luke 16: "**Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little, is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?"**

Jesus is not encouraging us to be dishonest schemers, but to be '**faithful**'; in other words to be faithful in the sense of consistency. Children of the light are called to be consistently **wise, shrewd as snakes yet harmless or innocent as doves** (Matt.10: 16). Children of the Light are *in* the world but not *of* the world and thus need to know how to maneuver and overcome the world's pitfalls but not at the expense of one's character. Shrewd stewards handle their abundance (personal blessings) in such a way that models being "**faithful**" - "**good and trustworthy stewards of the talents**" (Matt. 25:23) placed in their possessions regardless of it being one's personal **talents** or that of another person. Therefore, as

LUKE 16: 19-21

"...And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table...." Luke 16: 19, 20 NRSV

Was it really the wealth of the rich man that led him to Hades (separation from God)? Or was it his unfaithful stewardship of his abundance that was more the issue? This man **"feasted sumptuously... every day"** while **"at his gate lay a poor man...covered in sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger..."** It is this lack of stewardship that Jesus made reference to in Matthew 25 when He separated the sheep from the goats.

The rich man was totally consumed with his own care that he was unaware or unconcerned or both regarding the plight of the poor man laying at his gate. He truly had no love for his neighbour. His neighbour was hungry, thirsty, possibly naked or next to naked, homeless, sick and imprisoned by his social and physical circumstances. And the one blessed with abundance, gave him no food, nothing to drink, no clothing and he did not visit him or sheltered him- he did not attempt to set this poor man free from his shackles of social and physical captivity. According to Jesus, it is this lack of care that separates human beings from His Heavenly Father!

It seems that lack of love is abhorrent to Jesus and His Heavenly Father who is the epitome of love and requires only one thing of us mortals; to seek justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6: 8). And they who love not in mere words but in action qualify to **"inherit the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25: 34)**. Therefore, as God blesses us with food, clothing, health, wealth and time (abundance) we who represent God on earth are called to faithfully and consistently be sources of light and love in the varying circumstances, relations and environs that we find ourselves. We are called to care for/ love those who are lying at our gates (our neighbours). Through the caring for, multiplying of and the sharing of our abundance, we are being good and trustworthy stewards.

Who is lying at your gate? Who in your environs is hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or imprisoned and is in need of tender loving care? Let us never forget that **"If [we] speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, [we are] a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if [we] have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all**

the world - right down to the poorest of the poor - are welcome at the table of God.

Do we behave as the disciples and try to send away those whom we deem nuisances or who are not of our status? or, like Jesus, do we seek to break down the barriers that prevent us from reaching others; those who are different from us?

Prayer: God of the marginalized help us to remove the barriers that prevent those in the room with no voice to come to the table to voice their concerns.

FOOD AND WORK

Dr. Shanique Edwards - is a Barbadian Scientist who currently resides in Indiana, USA. She grew up in the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and has a deep love of the church, community, and hymns. She has a Ph.D. in Cell & Developmental Biology, and is an avid reader, who has been writing since she learned how to put sentences together.

JEREMIAH 22:13-16

Over and over the voice of God calls out to God's people, across the pattern of history, that true justice brings relief to the oppressed and freedom to the captive. This passage of scripture from the prophet Jeremiah was controversial because it was so blatantly political (since he was speaking directly to the king). Too often, we conflate material wealth with blessedness, assuming that the wealthy are divinely favoured because physically, they lack nothing. But God calls us to something simpler, more commonplace.

In the passage, Jeremiah speaks out against overt exploitation: a wealthy king who built grand buildings, lavish monuments to his own wealth, but cheated his workers, *his neighbours*, out of their wages. The prophet proclaims that what truly makes a king is for justice and righteousness to be as everyday as eating and drinking. This too, is what God says to us through Jeremiah.

Eating and drinking are the most ordinary of activities, common to every class, culture, and country across the globe. This is how pervasive justice and righteousness should be. This is what we are called to do as God's people: to feed the world with food and drink, yes, but also with justice and righteousness. People hunger for it. Here, Jeremiah reminds us that our character, the way we treat those less powerful than ourselves, is the key to God's blessings – this is how we show that we know God. It is well with us when we seek justice for all.

Prayer: Lord, let us pursue justice and righteousness as part of everyday life. May we walk in justice and righteousness in our every interaction with members of our community. We pray that your steadfast love is before our eyes, and that we walk in faithfulness to you (Ps 26:3). Amen.

MATTHEW 25: 31-40

"Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;'" Matthew 25: 34 NRSV

According to Jesus in Matthew 25, those who are blessed by His Father and therefore qualify to inherit the kingdom are those who are good stewards of their abundance (personal possessions). How do I draw this conclusion?

Well, according to verses 35 - 40 those who physically provide and care for the needy and the underprivileged of society are the ones who *hit the mark* that qualifies them to inherit the kingdom. In other words, they who share their food, beverages, clothing, shelter and time with the least among us are they who will inherit the kingdom. Therefore, it is logical to surmise that in order to *'give'*, one must *'have'* in the first place. And in order to be sustainable with ones giving, one must be a responsible steward of one's own possessions.

Count it not a coincidence that the story of the talents is placed before this particular teaching. For it is in this story of the talents in Matthew 25: 29 that Jesus explains: **"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."**

Good stewards take what they have received from their Master and multiply it; not simply to enrich themselves but to expand the kingdom; and as the kingdom of God expands in abundance, the more persons can be cared for. This is what being **'good and trustworthy'** [stewards] look like- they are **'trustworthy in the few things'** received from their Master ensuring that the least amongst us is cared for. This is why being a good steward of one's abundance is critical to our Christian walk. Can we honestly testify that you **'have been trustworthy in the few things'** you have been given? If you cannot readily respond in the affirmative, I invite you to join with me in the following prayer:

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Lord, we are truly grateful for the blessings that You have entrusted into our care. Our prayer today is that You will grant us manifold wisdom, creativity and shrewdness as we seek to be good and trustworthy stewards with these blessings. This we pray in no other name but the mighty and awe-inspiring name of Jesus, our Lord and Perfect Example. Amen.

FOOD AND JUSTICE

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MATTHEW 14: 13-21

Hurricanes Iris and Maria blew across the Caribbean in 2017, devastating several Caribbean nations, leaving most of the citizens without basic needs - food, clothing and shelter. The several districts of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas along with other regional and international organizations and agencies sought to extend a hand, providing in cash and kind for the basic needs of our brothers and sisters affected by this onslaught. While this effort was being mounted from far and wide, on the ground, those who were affected searched through the rubble for what could have been salvaged. These meager resources were shared until those from further afield became available. Some of the stories told were nothing short of miracles.

Our reading today is the miracle story of the feeding of the five thousand. This passage teaches us how to respond to the seemingly impossible situations of life by trusting Jesus in them. That with God nothing is impossible. The story of the feeding of the five thousand is no doubt very important as it is told in detail in all four gospels.

In Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus "left town" following the devastating news of the execution of John the Baptist. He and the disciples went out to "a deserted place," into the wilderness but the crowds followed them. Rather than being upset Jesus was moved with compassion on them and healed the sick. Towards the end of the day the disciples asked Jesus to send the crowds away so they could purchase food. Jesus however entreated the disciples "No, you give them something to eat." What is evident is the difference in perspectives; that of Jesus and that of the disciples. Jesus was no doubt aware of the seemingly impossible task as it presented to the disciples, however they were concerned over the lack of resources, not about the people or their needs. Jesus' attention was on the people, he had compassion on them.

As we continue to reflect on the challenges we face as we deal with the levels of poverty and hunger in our world today caused by natural and or human disasters, will we be willing to share our loaves and fish, or will

Unlike the special occasions of our time and the feasts of the Pharisees in biblical times where only those of similar status are and were invited, the feast of Jesus - Salvation - includes all, especially those who think they are least worthy. As servants of God, we have the privilege to tell the world "Come, for all things are ready!" Even if some reject the invitation, we are to keep sharing it. Those who think they are the least worthy are the ones with whom God wants to commune.

During this Lenten season, let us seek to reach those in our communities who are unchurched and feel despised.

Prayer: Empowering God, help us to reach out to those who because of their position in life are shut out from the world and its offerings. Amen.

MATTHEW 15:21-26

We live in a world of the haves and the have nots. We live in a world that is divided into First, Second, and Third worlds, and other sub-divisions. We live in a world governed by military and economic might, and political power. We live in a world divided across religious and ethnic lines. We live in a world of 'tions', and 'isms'. We live in a world where it is more beneficial to erect a fence that costs billions of dollars, than to contribute a portion of that sum to assist the very world from which a large portion of these dollars would be gained through exploitation. We live in a world where a border patrol officer is pictured pouring water to the ground from bottles left by a 'good Samaritan' for those persons who risk crossing the Mexico/USA border.

In the Caribbean, we live in a region that is a microcosm of the world, divided by race, ethnicity, class, religious beliefs, language, and culture. Left with the structures of colonialism, we use same to promote division among ourselves. We treat many among us as lesser than ourselves. We subject some to more rigorous scrutiny than others. Once oppressed by our masters, we have now become the oppressors one of the other.

Matthew's Gospel offers a new vision of human relationships as it encourages the underprivileged to work for a change of the conventional hierarchal structures that favour the privileged. It also restores the lost dignity of those who are inferior and calls them to engage in the creation of just relationships. It empowers the excluded by giving them hope that they can have equal share in the abundance of God's grace. It also appeals to those in power to become attentive to the needs of the distressed and serve them as if they were serving Jesus himself.

In today's reading Matthew tells the story of the faith of a Canaanite mother. This story is also recorded in Mark 7:24-30. Like they did in the previous chapter, the disciples urged Jesus to "send her away. . ." While Jesus seemed to ignore the woman, He wanted only to increase her faith. Testing her, Jesus told the Canaanite woman that the bread was meant for the 'lost sheep of Israel' (Mt 15:24) and that it was "not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs", (v. 26). When she insisted a third time that she, as a 'dog' (gentile), could surely get the crumbs from the table, she passed the test. Jesus' delays are tests not denials!

The basic understanding of God's option for the poor seems to be put to the test in our world today. We are challenged to spread the Gospel - the Good News - with courage and obstinate hope that all the marginalized in

knowledge, and if [we] have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, [we are] nothing...." 1 Corinthians 13: 1,2.

Prayer: Dear True Source of Unconditional Love, may Your Spirit of love course through us as our motivation to be good and trustworthy stewards of our abundance. May our thoughts, words, actions and interactions be always birthed from love- love of You and love of all Your creation. This we ask in Jesu's name. Amen.

MATTHEW 25:35-40

The Gospel of Matthew is about understanding and doing the will of God. It contains five major discourses namely, the Sermon on the Mount, the Missionary Discourse, the Parabolic Discourse, the Discourse on the Church and the Discourse on End Times or the Sermon on Eschatology.

This text is embedded in the larger periscope, verses 31-46 which speaks about *the judgment of the nations* and which in turn forms part of the Fifth discourse in Matthew's Gospel - the Sermon on Eschatology (Matt 23-25). From the Mount of Olivet and beginning with a scathing attack on the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus predicts what is to happen in the end time and warns his disciples of dark days ahead, and of the return of the 'Son of Man in his glory.'

Jesus is portrayed as King and does not present what He has done for humanity, the giving of His life for our redemption, rather He presents the faithful work done for Him; and from his throne he separates the people. Using the familiar motif of the shepherd who separates his flock of sheep from the goats, the sheep receive the place of honor and inherit God's kingdom. Jesus calls the sheep those who are "blessed by my Father" (25:34). In Christ's kingdom, the blessed ones are those who do not retaliate with violence, but bear witness to a new rule by serving others (25:31-46)

Today's reading deals specifically with the commendation of the sheep, the blessed ones, those who have demonstrated their faithfulness by performing acts of loving-kindness. These acts were performed with no idea that the blessed ones, the righteous ones, were ministering to Christ. Jesus says that whenever they gave food to the hungry, welcomed a stranger, clothed the naked, or visited the sick or imprisoned, they acted in kindness toward Jesus himself. For Jesus the ultimate mark of an authentic Christian is not his creed, or his faith, or his Bible knowledge, but the concern which he shows to those who are in need. The practical demonstration of love is the final proof.

The service of the "least" concerns all people everywhere. Not only are believers to provide this service for one another, but they are to demonstrate Christ's love by ministering to others who may have no one to care for them. Herein Jesus identifies with the least.

The Lord's teaching on the final judgment therefore challenges every disciple of Jesus to be a herald of God's kingdom in a broken world. Having been warned by Jesus that they too will be persecuted and imprisoned for His sake, the disciples are encouraged to look after the needs of others who find themselves in similar positions.

We are called during this Lenten season to redouble our efforts in our prison, hospital, school, and feeding ministries so that the basic needs of the least may be attended.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to find delight in meeting the needs of others and for the continuing joy of being permitted to minister in Christ's name. Amen.

LUKE 14:12-24

On special occasions a formal written invitation is sent to those guests who have been chosen to share in the event. The wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markel had led to wide speculations as to whose names will appear on the guest list. In both instances the question remains the same, who is to be or will be invited? Such lists I dare say would include those of similar status.

Our reading contains the pretext to and the parable of the Great Dinner, which is also recorded in Matthew 22:1-14. It falls within the section of Jesus' teaching on his journey to Jerusalem. Luke's reading of this parable comes after Jesus' teaching of humility and hospitality based on what he observed as a guest at the house of a Pharisee. His exhortation to his host was to invite those who could not return the favour: listed among whom were "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind". The result of such inclusion would be blessings.

The parable following, targets the already religious who have no time for God. These are represented by those who accepted the invitation but rather than attend made excuses and sent regrets. The reaction of the one giving the dinner was anger and an extended invitation to "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." The refusal of the invitation is evidence of the feelings about God and the followers of God. The real issue is the open rebellion and contempt towards God rather than having no time for God and the servants of God. The contempt however is met with a determination of exclusion of those who refused, "For I tell you none of those who were invited will taste my dinner" (v.24 NRSV).

We see Jesus as Luke portrays him; the compassionate Son of Man who cares for those in need, the least worthy, and wants His message of salvation to be taken to the whole world, but **Whom do I invite?**

Charles Wesley (1707-88) captures the response to this question in the hymn he wrote:

"Come sinners to the Gospel feast, Let every soul be Jesu's guest:
Ye need not one be left behind, for God hath bidden all mankind.
Sent by my Lord, on you I call, the invitation is to all: Come, all
the world: come, sinner thou! All things in Christ are ready now.
Come all ye souls by sin oppressed, ye restless wanderers after
rest, Ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind, In Christ a hearty
welcome find." (vs. 1-3 VIP # 165, MHB # 323).

we, like the disciples, try to send the people away with small concessions for which the poor are expected to be grateful? Hunger is not only to be defined as the absence of "loaves and fish" what about those who hunger for justice? what about those who hunger for meaningful living? What about the needs of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness?

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand also means that God is willing to provide not only bread, but that God is willing to offer the bread of life as well, the food that does not perish but endures to eternal life. The impossible situations of life can be summed up in the words of Jesus—recorded for us only here in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus says, "Bring them here to Me" (Matthew 14:17). Jesus gives us Himself; and invites us to cast our cares on Him.

Prayer: Dear God, give us the assurance not only of your power, but of your tender care of your people in the common things of life. Amen.