

I AM SENT AND SO ARE YOU:
DEVOTIONS BY MISSIONARIES OF NEW HOPE

SEASON OF LENT 2018

NEW HOPE

United Methodist Church

One Church, Two Languages, Three Locations

120 N. Knights Ave., Brandon, Florida 33510 * (813) 689-4161 * www.findnewhope.com

***I AM SENT AND SO ARE YOU:
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When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, there was no ambiguity in his response: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31, NIV)

If we really, truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, then loving our neighbor is the natural result. The work of loving our neighbors is not delegated only to church leaders or those who are comfortable in a servanthood role. No, we are all called to live out our faith by being missionaries right here in Brandon, Florida. We are all sent into our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, communities, and world to be the hands and feet of God by showing His love to all those we meet. We are all challenged to live out the directive of Matthew 25:35-40 (NIV):

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

We are happy to share through the devotions on the following pages stories of how God has used us to be missionaries of New Hope United Methodist Church. The devotions have been written by people of all ages, as we are never too young or too old to be used by God. You no doubt have stories of your own. During this Season of Lent, we hope you will take some time to ponder new ways that God might be calling you to step out of your comfort zone and love your neighbors. Because we are all missionaries. We are sent and so are you!

DAY ONE
February 14

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.” ~ Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV)

I became a Hospice volunteer in 2008, with Karmen Electra as a certified pet therapy dog. I now visit the Hospice House with a hundred-pound bundle of love, Moses. I love that the dogs can bring so much joy to a difficult circumstance. I also love that the dog is the star of the show and I can blend into the background. I am comfortable in this space.

I was recently called by the volunteer coordinator to sit vigil with a woman who was actively dying. The nurse felt her death was imminent and did not want her patient to be alone. I have been with many patients near their sunset, but have never been present at their last breath, so I came up with every excuse possible to say no to this assignment. That darn volunteer coordinator had an answer for everything. I felt like God was nudging me to do this. Yes came out of my mouth. I agreed to sit with her for one hour. I was absolutely out of my comfort zone.

I arrived at the nursing home at 1:00 and found a frail woman in her bed. She had stunning blue eyes. I pulled up a chair and found her hands under the covers and held them. I knew her name, that she was 97, had a son who was out of town, and she was very well loved by her hospice nurse. God would have to lead me now. I had no idea what to say. I told her that her son loved her and wished he could be there with her as many times in as many ways I could. Now I need more words. I had brought my Bible. I was not even sure if she was a Christian or not. I would use those words in which I found so much comfort and wisdom. If she did not know Jesus, I figured it's never too late to hear about Jesus. I read some of my favorite passages from my Bible: John 3 about being born again in Christ, Psalm 91 about being in the comforting presence of God, and Psalm 121 about God protecting us.

Okay God, now what am I supposed to do? Sing! I do not have the gift of an angelic voice. I did sing “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong.” My new friend took her last breath in the middle of the song. It was 1:45 in the afternoon. It was very peaceful...for both of us. Another hospice volunteer arrived at 2:00 to relieve me. I felt a high and holy moment being able to share this precious brief time with a total stranger, but fellow human being. It is hard to describe the emotions of surprise, serenity and excitement that this person passed on my watch. I had to settle my emotions. I asked the other volunteer if she wanted to say a prayer with me. We prayed and sent her into the arms of Jesus. The other volunteer noticed greeting cards on the night stand. This little lady was indeed a sister in Christ and also member of my church. I knew God had ordained a moment for such a time as this. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Father: Thank you for the privilege of sharing in the last moments of life with this precious woman. And thank you for uncomfortable moments in my faith walk, because that is where I grow the most. Continue to give me strength to listen to and obey your promptings. Amen.

DAY TWO
February 15

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” ~ John 13:14-15

During my first semester of seminary, I had the opportunity to work with refugee ministry. We learned about the families’ struggles: in the forced flight from their homes, living in impoverished camps, enduring the unreasonably lengthy process of immigration to the US, and finally after arriving, having to become financially stable within months. One Saturday, we furnished a home for an incoming refugee family, and were ecstatic when our instructor, Louisa, told us we’d be going to the airport on Wednesday to welcome the family to the country. Filled with my newfound knowledge of the plight of refugees, I dreamed up ideas of how the encounter would go. Will their eyes light up upon seeing us waving? Would they cry tears of joy? Would I?

As I drove to the airport on Wednesday, I noticed my nerves begin to grow. I found Louisa and a few other classmates waiting anxiously by the gate. We stood watching travelers flood out of the gates in chaotic waves; Louisa was tasked with picking out the family from the sea of faces. Louisa got a call and had to leave to meet a classmate who was having trouble finding us. Of course, it was at that moment that a large family came out looking lost, and I recognized the International Organization for Migration bags they were carrying. It was time. I beelined straight to them, a cheery smile on my face, and began waving, “Hello!” Silence... “Oh! I should introduce myself. I’m Mark and I’m here to welcome you to the US!” (Cue another enthusiastic smile) They looked at me with blank stares, and then politely returned the smile. Maybe they hadn’t learned English yet. “Do you know any English?” The father responded, “Yes.” More silence... I wasn’t sure what to do; my eyes began to dart frantically around seeking help from the ever-wise Louisa. At this point, some of the other students and Louisa arrived and there were more uneasy introductions. Not much was said between us and the family, we helped them collect their luggage, exchanged a few smiles with their youngest children, and loaded up their bags in the truck. The father’s brother came to drive them to their apartment, so they drove off.

On my own drive home, I reflected on the normalcy of the situation. There were no warm hugs (except with the brother/uncle), no poetic exchanges of words, no real sense of accomplishment. It was the perfect letdown to lead me into a humble learning moment. Ministry is not always a grand occasion, and more often than not, there will be no immediate, quantitative results to cling to. Leading up to the encounter, I had romanticized it in my mind, pride fully inflating my own role as some sort of “savior” figure; yet what occurred was simply meeting some strangers and helping them take their bags to the car: a small act of service. In John’s Gospel, Jesus performs many miraculous signs during his own ministry, but the only one he commands the disciples to take up is the service of foot washing. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

*Dear God, Thank you for the reminder that, while the master washed the feet of the servants, Jesus was not calling the disciples to take on the role of the master. As we live in the world and discover unique opportunities to serve, help us to remember that we are not washing the feet of another **as the master**, but because **we are disciples**, called by you, the Creator, to participate in your humble service for all equally and eternally loved, created life. Amen.*

DAY THREE
February 16

To give to those who mourn in Zion joy and gladness instead of grief, a song of praise instead of sorrow. They will be like trees that the LORD himself has planted. They will all do what is right, And God will be praised for what he has done.” ~ Isaiah 61:3 (Good News Translation)

“Take it to the place you had chemotherapy. There’s a frail white-haired elderly lady who should receive a floral bouquet....” These thoughts invaded my mind, after Sharon phoned from the church, asking if I would deliver some flowers from a funeral. Sadly, the deceased was a young teenaged girl, and the parents had kindly donated the multiple floral arrangements for others. Though returning to the place I received chemotherapy was not my favorite visitation choice, I felt compelled to obey God. I mean, I could even see a fleeting image of this woman’s face!

As I walked throughout the dreary room, I greeted patient after patient who looked grim at first. When I offered them a flower arrangement, they appeared skeptical, surprised, and then grateful. Each asked why I was doing this. It brought joy for me to explain it was because God, and our church, cared for them. Barriers fell, so they could divulge their stories. I treasured hearing from their hearts, providing hugs, and praying for some of them.

Yet – I still held two vases, and hadn’t met the lady I envisioned. Perhaps I made a mistake? I turned a corner in the back and there, connected to many tubes, was ‘my’ frail, white-haired old lady! I tenderly asked if she wanted some flowers. She softly and weakly said, “I am blind and I haven’t gotten flowers in over twenty years. I cannot see the flowers, but I can still smell them.” When I gently placed the flowers in her shaky hands, she lifted them to her nose, took a huge deep breath, and then her face blossomed into the most contented smile! With tearful eyes, I thanked God for His directions. He must truly love her! And I’m sure it was His will for me to deliver flowers to this sweet woman before, shortly thereafter, the location asked me to stop bringing flowers because some patients had compromised immune systems.

The parents of the deceased felt some comfort knowing their daughter had been honored and remembered in such a special way. Others who have heard this story are touched with gut-wrenching sadness for the parents who lost their teenage daughter and the blind woman who now also has cancer, but then overwhelmed with joy over how this simple act brought happiness and peace to each of them. Isn’t our God amazing how He creates beauty from ashes? He transforms our grief to see things in another way. He’s frugal, having us re-visit past rooms with a new view. What wondrous love He has for us! He truly works all things for good, if we but trust, follow and obey Him. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Wonderful Father – Thank you for your love! You call us by name for an adventurous life, if we but agree to listen, truly hear and follow You. Don’t let us miss any of your life invitations and instructions. Give us ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to believe in You. We believe – help our unbelief. We know we cannot do anything on our own – but with You – all things are possible for your glory. In Jesus’ Name we praise and pray. Amen.

DAY FOUR
February 17

“When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’” ~ Mark 10:14 (NIV)

History was never my favorite subject, but I remember being excited in fourth grade to learn about the United States being a melting pot. At the time, I was only one of two white students in my class. (That is a story for another time . . . Ask me about it sometime!) I was proud to live in a country that welcomed people of all races and ethnic backgrounds, believing that all people are created equal. As an adult, I have come to appreciate even more that diversity is not something just to be tolerated—it is something to be embraced. A diverse society, a diverse workforce, keeps our perspectives fresh, our ideas innovative, our lives exciting.

To celebrate this diversity, I try to find volunteer experiences that will expose me to people of races and cultures other than my own. For many years, I spent one morning a week volunteering with first graders at Dover Elementary School, where the parents of most of the children are migrant workers. It was a wonderful experience, because the formal teaching was left to the teachers, and my role was just to love on the kids. It was a blessing to watch their delight over things that most children in my social circle found ordinary – granola bars, Life cereal, and homemade waffles!

One morning in January, I took a group of six students into the library to talk about Martin Luther King, Jr. As I was telling them about Dr. King’s dream that all children would get along whether their skin was black, brown or white, one boy interrupted to announce, “I don’t like white people. They’re mean!” “Am I mean?” I asked the group. “Oh no, Mrs. Burgan, you are nice,” the children chanted in unison. “Well, I’m white,” I told them. The children gasped, and one of them said, “You aren’t white! Your teeth are white, but you’re not white!” Can you believe, when the next group of six children came in, we had the same conversation, with one of them saying how mean white people were, and upon me telling them that I am white, this time the child spokesperson proclaimed, “You’re not white! Your face is a little red, but it’s not white!”

While I left the school that morning broken-hearted that the experiences of these children of God with people of my race were so negative, I was blessed to have the opportunity to show them that this white person loved them and thought they were incredibly special. My prayer is that they will continue to have encounters with people who see beyond their skin color to the beautiful souls that lie within. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Creator of the universe, Forgive us for ways that we make people who are different than us feel marginalized. Bless us with hearts like these beautiful children, who see others not for the color of their skin but for the love in their hearts. Amen.

SUNDAY
February 18

(Note: Sundays are not officially counted in the forty days of Lent. So, Sunday devotions will consist of hymns and prayers that reflect on the meaning of being sent.)

“People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you.
Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten.
Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.
Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.”

Mother Teresa

DAY FIVE
February 19

"Look to the LORD and His strength; seek His face always." ~ 1 Chronicles 16:11

As I'd spent time in prayer that morning both alone and with the Prayer Team, I know being in God's presence readied my heart to stop and really "see" two gentlemen in the Publix parking lot who needed somebody to listen to their story. They needed God's encouragement and reminder of His hope they had known, but felt slip away over the years.

As I got out of my car at Publix, a weary looking younger man walked up and asked for gas money because the family's trailer was ruined during Hurricane Irma. The Holy Spirit led me to walk with him over to an old truck to meet his brother, who came down to help sift through their belongings and bring them up to Alabama to be with family. I asked how they were holding up . . . physically and spiritually?

They said the family was a mess. They shared their stories and the younger one added it'd been a long time since he had much to do with God . . . with a quiet, "but I still believe!" Looking down, the brother shared about wanting to go back to church but just hadn't done it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw another man walk out and stand in the parking lot, looking our way. Odd, but I was focused on ministry.

Our devotion earlier was about assurance of salvation, so scriptures were fresh and flowed out to minister to these men who were being drawn back to God. When asked if they'd like prayer, they reached out to hold hands. The brother who'd lost his earthly home wept openly as God affirmed that his salvation and heavenly home were secure, God always has open arms for him . . . for them both . . . their families, too. God's Word and His message of love washing over them definitely impacted them.

When I asked what other kind of help they needed, they told me they'd gotten help of food, supplies and stuff, but nobody had prayed with them... and *that* was what they needed most. After our "goodbyes," I walked towards the store. The gentleman I'd noticed before across the parking lot came alongside me and said, "I was watching to make sure you were protected... and was praying over you as you were ministering to them." What a sweet gift from God! We talked about our churches. I shared I'd just been with my church's Prayer Team before I arrived. He said, "no wonder you were ready!" I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Thank you, Lord, for our time together each day and for the privilege of ministering to these men who realized their greatest need was for You. Help me be alert, have eyes to "see" and to never be selfish with all the ways you love and reveal yourself to me, but to freely love others anywhere and anytime You lead. Amen

DAY SIX
February 20

*“God can restore what is broken and change it into something amazing. All you need is faith.”
~ Joel 2:25*

I arrived with my family in our matching T-shirts to spend time helping families prepare for the holidays. This is a day that we look forward to every year. Normally I greet people, offer food, and wrap gifts for children alongside my own daughters, but this time was different. I was going to be in the prayer room talking to people about Jesus and sharing my story, all the while trying to determine what resources they needed and if they had a relationship with God. Nervous doesn't begin to explain what I was feeling.

After a few minutes of “training,” I sat down to meet my first guest. She was sweet, had fallen on hard times, and was clearly as nervous as I was. As we spoke we both began to relax. We talked and talked. Before she left, she thanked me and took a deep breath, then said, “I'd forgotten how good it feels to be listened to.” Wow! I had spent the first minutes of our time together worried about doing and saying just the right thing, but she felt heard and cared for, and I really didn't say much at all. God had used me, and I wasn't even aware. He had shown Himself through me. I was able to tell her and show her that she was loved. She had Hope, and I had been blessed.

I was abruptly pulled back from my thoughts when a young lady pushing a stroller approached me. She looked tired, her clothes were wrinkled, and her shoes were too small, but her smile filled the space. She practically bounced across the room. She looked me right in the eyes as she sat down and said, “are you going to talk to me about Jesus . . . are you gonna pray for me?” Before I could even respond, she exclaimed with joy, “this is my favorite part.” What? I was confused. I thought people came for food and gifts for their kids, but in that moment, I realized that the greatest thing they received was love. To feel valued, important, heard, seen and known. To be prayed with and for, and to see Jesus.

In those few minutes, in those two meetings, I was reminded of a clear truth about our Savior: HE LIVES! He lives in me. He lives in you. He lives in those who long to be heard and in those whose shoes are too small and smiles are big. That day God blessed me and showed me the opportunity to love others in His name is one of His greatest gifts. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Father, Daily I need you to remind me I am yours. That I am cherished and loved, regardless of the things I feel incapable to do. Father you are the keeper of my strength, of my words and of my heart. May the things I do glorify you. May the words I speak show a clear path to your mercy and grace. May the steps I take bring me closer to you. Amen

DAY SEVEN
February 21

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” ~ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NKJV)

My sister made me a pillow that says, “Live is such a way that those who know you but don’t know God will come to know God because they know you.” That’s a lot of pressure! It’s easy to be on your best behavior at church, but the work week can be a challenge. Currently, the staff I supervise is a diverse group. On the rare occasions when the forbidden religion conversations happen, I’ve been able to determine that we have on staff two atheists, two Christians, two agnostics, a wiccan, a spiritualist, and one person who never gave it much thought.

So as the leader of this very diverse group, I have quite a hard time leading them through difficult situations. I find my office chairs are much like the psychologist’s couch where people sit telling me their problems. If this were my Bible study group, we would lift all those problems up in prayer. If there was a situation where we needed wisdom, we would take to the scriptures to find the answers. But what am I to say to the Wiccan that’s having trouble getting to work on time because she is out late looking for her grandson, who she knows snuck out of the house to buy drugs? How do I live out my faith in such a way so that people who know me but don’t know God, don’t get offended by me offering to pray for them?

So, what I did was to write down all my prayer requests, worries and problems for my co-workers, and I tacked the list up behind my computer monitor at work so that the only way you could see it was if you were sitting at my desk in my office. Daily, while booting up my computer, I would review the prayer list and say a short prayer to start my day.

During a quality management meeting one month, we were discussing and trying to troubleshoot a problem we had, trying to determine what course of action should be taken that would be the most cost effective and reliable. Someone said we should “Give it to Cheryl and have her put it on her prayer list;” that someone was not the only other Christian in my workplace. I quickly asked them how they knew about my prayer list, and their response was, “It’s right there behind your monitor. I’ve noticed several of the items listed there have been resolved.” I was somewhat shocked, somewhat miffed, and somewhat happy all at the same time! Right there at that meeting, God provided me a way, without being pushy and without offending anyone’s religion, to tell them how I know without a doubt that prayers are answered. It got a little confusing at one time because some attributed the answered prayers to the magic of the list. I did my best to dispel the magic and to let them know that all the glory was God’s alone.

I know it is hard sometimes to live out your faith in all aspects of life, but I’m living proof, God will make a way. Even at your best attempt you try to hide it, He will make a way. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for the blessing of being able to pray for the people in our lives. Help us to live in such a way that those who don’t know You will come to know You. Amen.

DAY EIGHT
February 22

“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”
~ Philippians 4:19 (ESV)

One of the things I have been trying to work is paying more attention to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We often get so busy completing tasks that we don't take time to listen to God in the moment. I'm not saying I do this well, but I'm working on it and sometimes it works out! Thank you, God! Paying attention to the Holy Spirit is essential to being a missionary, to being sent. When we listen to God in our normal, everyday interactions and wait for God to prompt us, then sharing our faith and blessing others feels natural rather than awkward and forced.

Recently, I took twelve boxes of medical supplies to the Outreach Clinic, which does incredible work providing free medical care to the working poor in Brandon. The supplies had been donated for us to take to Cuba, but space and cost restrictions prohibited us from taking them. I forgot that I had a large almost new sewing machine in a box on my back seat, which my husband had found at a recent shopping trip at Goodwill. (You know, it was such a good deal and he just had to buy it.) We already have two sewing machines and no one in our family sews, so I decided to keep it in the back seat while I figured out what to do with it. I mention this because I drive a Toyota Prius, which aren't really known for being roomy, and I needed to get twelve boxes of medical supplies in the car. Do I take the sewing machine out and walk it up to my office, or just cram everything in? Probably due to laziness, I simply crammed it all in.

Once at the Outreach Clinic, I was directed by their staff where to unload the boxes. I guess I looked pathetic unloading all these big boxes, because a couple pulled their vehicle over and insisted on helping me carry everything in. They spoke mainly Spanish, but I managed to thank them. As they returned to their car and started to drive away, I glanced down in my back seat at the sewing machine. It was at that moment that I felt the Holy Spirit tell me to go ask that couple if they needed a sewing machine. But I needed to do it fast because they were driving off! So, I ran across the parking lot and stopped them. The man looked surprised and rolled down his window. I said, “I know this is kind of odd, but do you by any chance need a sewing machine?” I couldn't remember the Spanish word for sewing machine, but he obviously understood as his eyes got big and he smiled. For the first time, I noticed a much older woman sitting in the back seat of the car. “Yes! My mother would love it. She has been wanting a sewing machine,” he said while pointing to the back seat. I excitedly ran back to my car, got the sewing machine box, and handed it off to them. The older woman thanked me profusely in English and Spanish, as I told her how much God loves her. It seemed like a small thing, but to that family it made a difference. Sometimes, being a missionary is as simple as a sewing machine from Goodwill. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God, Thank you for being involved in the intricate details of our lives. For knowing our needs, and having infinite knowledge of how to meet them. Please help me to always be cognizant of the prompting of the Holy Spirit calling me to do Your will. Amen.

DAY NINE
February 23

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you . . . plans to give you hope and a future.” – Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Tears of joy rolled down our faces as we reflected on what God had just done – again. Through volunteering at the Women’s Resource Center (WRC), it is amazing to watch how God works in both the lives of the women in need *and* in the lives of the volunteers who serve. On this particular day, a precious client (we’ll call her Mary/not her real name) had secured employment and was now in need of appropriate clothing to begin her new job.

Mary shared with us her style preferences and sizes as we carefully searched for just the right tops, pants, jackets and shoes to help her feel her best. As Mary tried on several style combinations, we were relentless in our pursuit of the perfect wardrobe for this beautiful and deserving woman. Through trial and error, Mary found several outfits that fit her perfectly and made her feel confident. She was smiling from ear to ear. We carefully placed Mary’s clothing choices on hangers, bundling each one. Before we helped Mary to her car, the WRC Executive Director, Cheryl Hickman, led us in a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving. She thanked God and gave Him the glory for all He has done and will continue to do for Mary and her family. We helped Mary carry her items to her car and placed them in her trunk. She hugged each one of us, thanking us profusely. We walked back into the WRC feeling so excited about Mary’s future.

About fifteen minutes later, when we had moved on to discussing some new training materials, Mary walked back in. We were surprised to see her and wondered if she had left something behind. She humbly began to address us, “I just had to come back and tell you all what this day has meant to me. The clothes totally exceeded my expectation. I had hoped for a couple of pants or tops to start my new job, but you sent me home with so much more. These clothes will help me as I start my new job. More than the clothes – I want you to know, I’ve never been shown the kindness that all of you have shown to me today and you need to know how very special you made me feel. It means so much to me, and I want to give you something too.” She handed us a small gift bag. “I have two gift cards that I want you to have. Maybe you could get sandwiches for lunch. I just want you to know how grateful I am.” As Mary walked away, tears flowed and we were speechless. I will never forget that day, that moment, Mary’s beautiful spirit, and the blessing she left on each of our hearts. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Lord, thank you for leading me and others to serve as volunteers at WRC and for the blessed opportunity to be humble servants. Thank you for our Executive Director, Cheryl Hickman, and her Christ-centered leadership. Give her the strength, wisdom, and resources to meet the overwhelming needs of struggling families in our area. Help me and all those who serve through the WRC to remember we are representing you Lord – Your hands and feet on this earth. We will never cease to Praise You Lord and give you ALL the glory. Amen

DAY TEN
February 24

“Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’” ~ Matthew 19:21 (NASB)

One time awhile back, maybe twenty years ago, I started to really look at life in a different way. That way was intentional giving. I was living in a one room apartment above a dry cleaners in Ybor City for \$10 a week. It was a run-down place, mostly housing transients. Everything was furnished but not in the best shape. There were communal showers, if that tells you anything. I was a student at HCC Ybor and was in a dead-end part time job. Enough to pay for school, my room and a couple of slices of pizza a day. I had no transportation at the time.

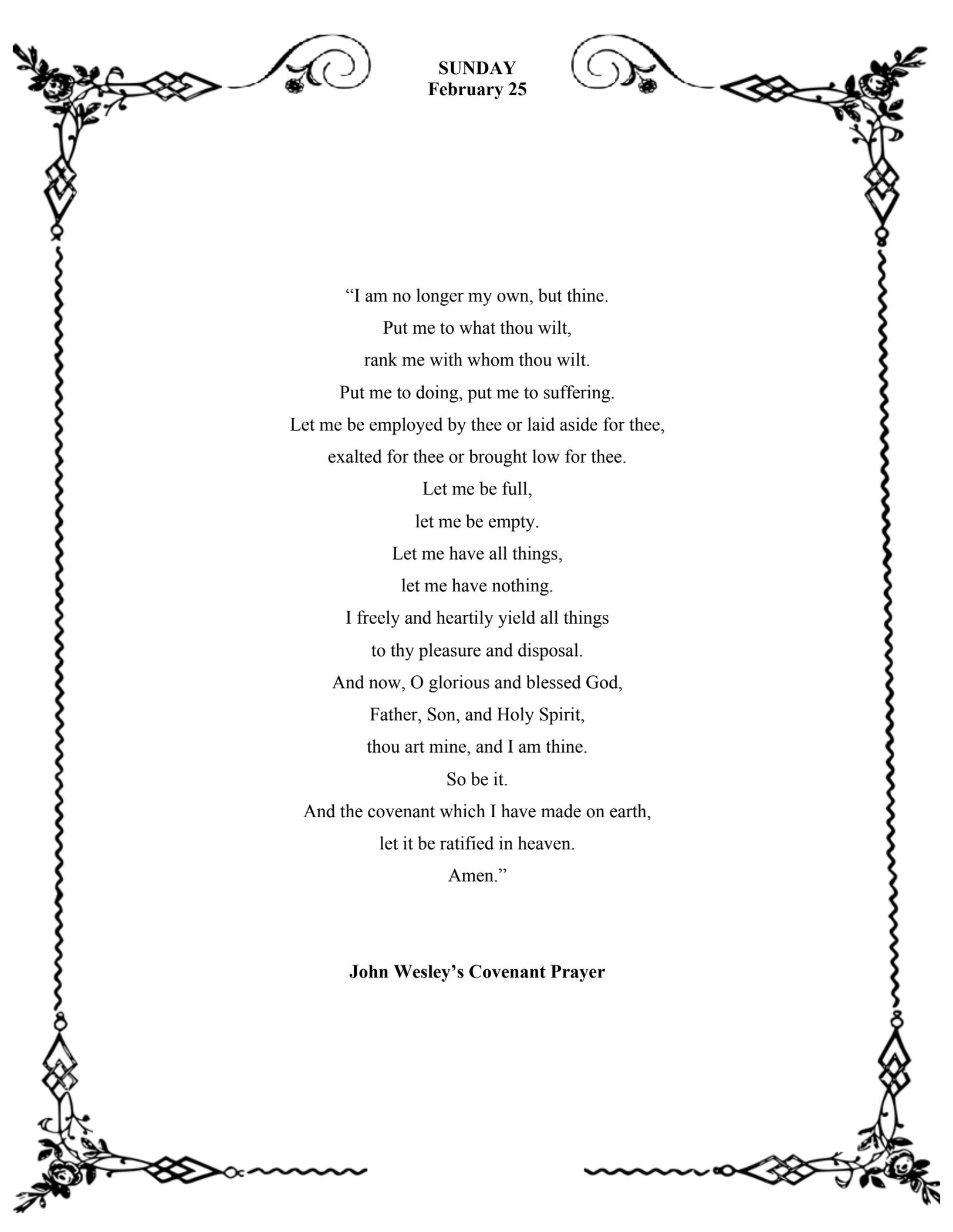
Now, down in Ybor, you got to know the regular people on the street. There was a guy named Lewis. Everyone knew Lewis. You could see Lewis travelling corner to corner selling incense. No one ever knew that Lewis was homeless. He was that kind of a happy, go lucky guy. Never talked about himself much, but always asked about you. A truly great guy.

One time there was a cold snap coming in and it was pretty harsh. The Florida freezing kind! I was getting out of the library late one night, walking my few blocks through the dimly light cold Ybor streets. I saw Lewis sleeping with just a blanket in front of a closed shop. People were still out that night enjoying themselves and passing him by, not even noticing Lewis’ limp body on the cold sidewalk, or much less that it was this distinct character who gave Ybor much of its personality. I passed him and thought, I need to go back. I walked back to Lewis and shook him awake. I asked him if he had a home or a place to go to. He said no. I invited him to come up to my room. The cold snap was to be for a few days and he was expressing his concern for his health. He was in his sixties and road ridden hard. I told him that I had paid up for the next two weeks, and that I would be staying at a friend’s house. I grabbed what little belongings I had and told him to make himself at home, and told him I would check in on him on frequently in the next week. He stayed until the end of the week. I came back to my room. He had left a note on the bed saying “God Bless”.

I didn’t see him after that. No one knew what happened to him. I moved into some better accommodations soon after. Until then, though, I always left my door unlocked just in case he ever wanted to drop by. I knew I could always find a place to stay if he wanted to crash in my room. I don’t know what happened to Lewis. There are stories, myths and even sightings, but I will never forget how the warming in my heart was telling me to go back and get this great man of the street and give him a place to stay. It was the start of many warm feelings. Many taps on the shoulder from God. It was definitely in the roots of my faith now. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for Lewis, the way his cheerful attitude touched my life, and the way I was able to provide a warm shelter for him. Please don’t let my heart harden to other people like Lewis that come into my life and need me to be Your Hands and Feet. Amen.

Chris Temple



SUNDAY
February 25

“I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt,
rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full,
let me be empty.
Let me have all things,
let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.”

John Wesley’s Covenant Prayer

DAY ELEVEN
February 26

“It’s not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What’s important is that God makes the seed grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same purpose. Both will be rewarded for their own hard work.” ~ 1 Corinthians 3:7-8 (NLT)

After my medical retirement in 2011, I was struggling with what do with my time. I decided to volunteer on the front desk at the church. That was just the start of a journey I never have imagined myself doing. But I suppose God knew all along. I continued to get involved with other “feel good” projects and found that I enjoyed it immensely, but it was, in all honesty, all about me and how it made me feel.

I was involved in the Friendly Visitor program and found it “convenient” for me. Until I was asked to visit a church member at an Assisted Living Facility. That’s when God took over. I ended up doing a weekly two-hour program there for almost five years. It was a blend of Bible study, current events, humor, trivia, and singing—a genuine potpourri of activity for dementia and Alzheimer’s patients. Between 15 and 20 residents attended most days. I became very close to several of these folks and considered them extended family. Most had limited contact with their immediate families and some had none. We laughed, cried, prayed and thoroughly enjoyed the short time each week that we shared. I found out very quickly that spending “my time” with these folks was immensely special and became “their time” to teach me and bless me.

The most emotionally and heart wrenching event occurred after one of the residents passed away, which wasn’t uncommon, as the life span at this assisted living facility was usually three to five years. Ms. Doris was an extremely shy and quiet lady who seldom spoke except the cordial hello and thank you. She was always immaculately dressed, and her hair was always done. Ms. Doris never missed one of my programs. She was always there, every time!

A few days after she passed, I was summoned into the facility owner’s office. Totally out of the blue, the owner was notified by her family that they wanted me to officiate Ms. Doris’s funeral service! I was flabbergasted and speechless. Totally over my head, I graciously offered other options that were more appropriate, and someone who was qualified for such occasions.

How surprised I was to find out that Ms. Doris enjoyed the time we spent together so much that she raved to her family (in Ohio) every week about the things we talked about and how much she appreciated someone taking time to make her feel happy and good about the world she now lived in. She never shared any of this with me, as she hardly ever spoke a word. Yet God placed me in her life to offer her an opportunity to be a part of His Kingdom and also to bless both of us with kindness and positive words. You never know who is listening and how much of an impact your words and simple acts of kindness can make. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Heavenly Father, Thank you for the opportunity to plant seeds in the heart of Ms. Doris. Help me maximize every opportunity you provide to let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart minister to all those I encounter on a daily basis. Amen.

DAY TWELVE
February 27

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”

~ Romans 1: 16-17 (ESV)

I recently had the privilege of meeting Alberto. He moved to Florida from Michigan, running away from colder latitudes. He was introduced to me by a common friend, and we began a nice friendship. He knew about Christ, even attended church up north once in a while, but never committed himself to Him. As part of our natural conversations, it came to the point when he said, “I need some more formal time with you so you can explain to me more about your faith and passion.” So, Alberto and his wife came to my office, and I explained to them the salvation plan and what Christian ministry is all about.

This past November, Alberto and his wife were baptized and became members of New Hope United Methodist Church. He got involved in our music ministry, playing the bass guitar. But wait... his mother also became a member and his brother is attending church regularly. Alberto is now passionate about Christ, attends church at the main campus on Sundays and Tuesdays, and goes to our Dover Campus on Fridays. He also sings in the Hispanic adult choir.

Alberto’s story is a great example of how your identity defines your passion. It is okay to like sports, food, cars, even politics, but none of that should define who you are. Let Jesus be your passion. And then be careful ... it is contagious! I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for the opportunity to share my faith with Alberto, and for his decision to give his life and talents to You. Help us remember that every encounter we have, every person we meet, provides us an opportunity to share the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.

DAY THIRTEEN
February 28

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

~ Luke 6:38 (NIV)

I enjoy serving at the Gift of Hope each year at Thanksgiving and Christmas. My favorite type of service is pulling a wagon full of goodies to the guest's car for them. Each guest is cared for so well by the different volunteers at Gift of Hope, that sometimes he/she is overwhelmed by the whole experience. After I put the food and/or Christmas gifts into a guest's car, I usually get a big hug and thank you. With every hug, I feel blessed by God.

Sometimes as I'm walking a guest out, the person will open up to me about their life and I'll spend extra time with them listening. That is what happened with a young woman this year who had adorable, twin baby boys. I asked her if she had help at home with her twins. She began to cry as she shared that the boys' father would come over when she worked nights to care for them, but otherwise she was pretty much on her own. She said that she never thought that she would end up in this kind of situation. If it weren't for Gift of Hope, she wouldn't have gifts for her sons or food for Christmas. She said that the life that she had planned for herself was totally different than the life she was living.

I told her that when I was about her age, I had a life altering experience that put me in the same mindset that she was in right now. I was in a head-on auto accident that was my fault and that disabled me for about two years. The event totally changed my life. There was one particular family that helped me in ways that I could never repay. I told them I didn't know how I could ever thank them enough for what they had done for me. Their answer was don't thank us. Go help someone else. My thoughts at the time were, "How can I ever help anyone else? I don't have anything I can give." Yet, here I am helping her to her car with Christmas gifts for her boys and food for her table.

I told her that she will get through this time, and there will be a time in the future where she'll be the one helping someone else by volunteering at Gift of Hope or doing something else that will help someone get through a tough time like she is in now.

By the time we were done talking, she was smiling with the sparkle of hope in her eyes. The look on her face meant more to me than the big hug she gave me. I felt doubly blessed by God to be able to encourage this young mother during a difficult time. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for providing the help I needed exactly when I needed it. And thank you that I am now in the position of being able to help others in need. You are the ultimate Provider; help us remember that You are all we need. Amen.

Melissa Kordewich

DAY FOURTEEN
March 1

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” ~ Philippians 4:6-7 (NKJV)

“Therefore, with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And in that day you will say: ‘Praise the LORD, call upon His name; Declare His deeds among the peoples, Make mention that His name is exalted.’” ~ Isaiah 12:3-4 (NKJV)

You never know in what situation God will call upon your witness; so, be ready!

Crushing chest pain . . . ambulance and sirens . . . IV’s in three sites . . . morphine . . . rush to cath lab . . . all of those things happened in a blurry, suspended time and way. I seemed to be watching everything that was happening—more as a spectator than a participant.

With clarity, though, I remember the cath lab where I heard “LAD is 100%” and I wondered, “Is that good or bad?” Strapped down as I was, and apparently left awake for a purpose, it seemed like a good time to pray! So, I started thanking the Lord for all of the things that had been done in the last hour to keep me alive. I thanked Him that the pain was gone. In the midst of that thanksgiving, I asked the Lord to let me see another day,

I believe it was at that moment that the cardiologist, who was working on my heart, started humming “*Amazing Grace!*” I began to sing it with him and . . .

Well, the next thing I remember hearing was “I want some of what she has!” The circulating nurse who brought me out to recovery told the staff that I sang many verses of *Amazing Grace* during the procedure and, when the Doc said, “Sing something else,” I sang “His Eye Is On The Sparrow!” When she asked, “Debra, how can you be so happy at a time like this?” All I could manage was a fairly weak, “God is good all the time!”

I really wanted to say, “Through God’s grace, goodness, tender mercies, and everlasting hope, I have been given a happy heart. He is my joy!”

I am a missionary. I am sent, and so are you.

Gracious Father, Thank you for your faithfulness in the hard times. We can rest in Your peace because we know that underneath our weakness are the Everlasting Arms! Amen.

DAY FIFTEEN
March 2

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." ~ Galatians 5:24-26 (NIV)

One time while grocery shopping, I felt nudged to give the milk I had just bought to a woman who was also on her way out the door. I felt silly. I questioned myself: "Really? I'm just going to walk up to this woman and hand her some milk? She'll think I'm insane." The fact is that the only way for me to know whether or not this was a prompting from God was to take the risk and do what I sensed God was asking of me. So, I walked sheepishly over to the woman and said as honestly and sanely as I could muster: "Ma'am, I'm not sure why, but I think I'm supposed to give you this milk." As she began to cry, the woman told me that was one of the items she had put back on the shelf when she realized she didn't have enough money to buy it. I said, "Well, just consider it a gift from Jesus."

The point is not that I should give out milk to strangers; rather the point is that I need to be open to the promptings I sense the Holy Spirit sending my way. How do we receive nudges from God? Pray for them. Pray that you will be open and available to being used by God in ways that will bring Him glory today. The more often I remember to ask God to be prompted, the more often I seem to receive promptings from Him. I suspect this isn't a coincidence! As much as I'd prefer all of my Holy Spirit encounters to seem "natural and normal," I've grown to anticipate the nudges from God being things that will stretch me beyond my comfort zone. I imagine the same will be true for you as you ask God for promptings today and every day. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God, Thank you for prompting me to meet a simple need for this Child of God. Help me to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit on a regular basis. And once prompted, give me the courage to step outside of my comfort zone, and be obedient to whatever You are calling me to do. Amen.

DAY SIXTEEN
March 3

"In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. Look after him, he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" ~ Luke 10:30-36

I walk into this place that I go every Sunday after church to get good pastries and a sip to drink, not realizing that right here is the place where hot and ready meals are sent out to people who need them. One day I asked my mom if there were any service projects that I could do. She gave me a few options. The one I chose was "Meals on Wheels."

I started out by making tiny favors. I made some boxes full of little candies and scriptures. That's when I realized that I was giving love (even in the tiniest of ways) to people I had never met. I went to Meals on Wheels the Friday after, and as I packaged the meals, I felt that God was using me at a very young age to give these people the food that they needed. They knew that somebody took the time to put their heart into it and make these favors.

I have always loved to serve and help my community. When I make the favors and/or package the meals, I think about what the people's faces look like when they get a freshly cooked meal and a little "prize" to make them smile. I imagine how happy they are when they get a simple brown bag filled with happiness. It makes me feel warm inside and it makes me want to continue serving. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God, Help me to be the hands and feet of Christ now and in years to come. Help me understand how people feel and to know what they need. Help me to serve. Amen.

SUNDAY
March 4

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." ~ Romans 12:1 (KJV)

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in endless praise.

Take my hands and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

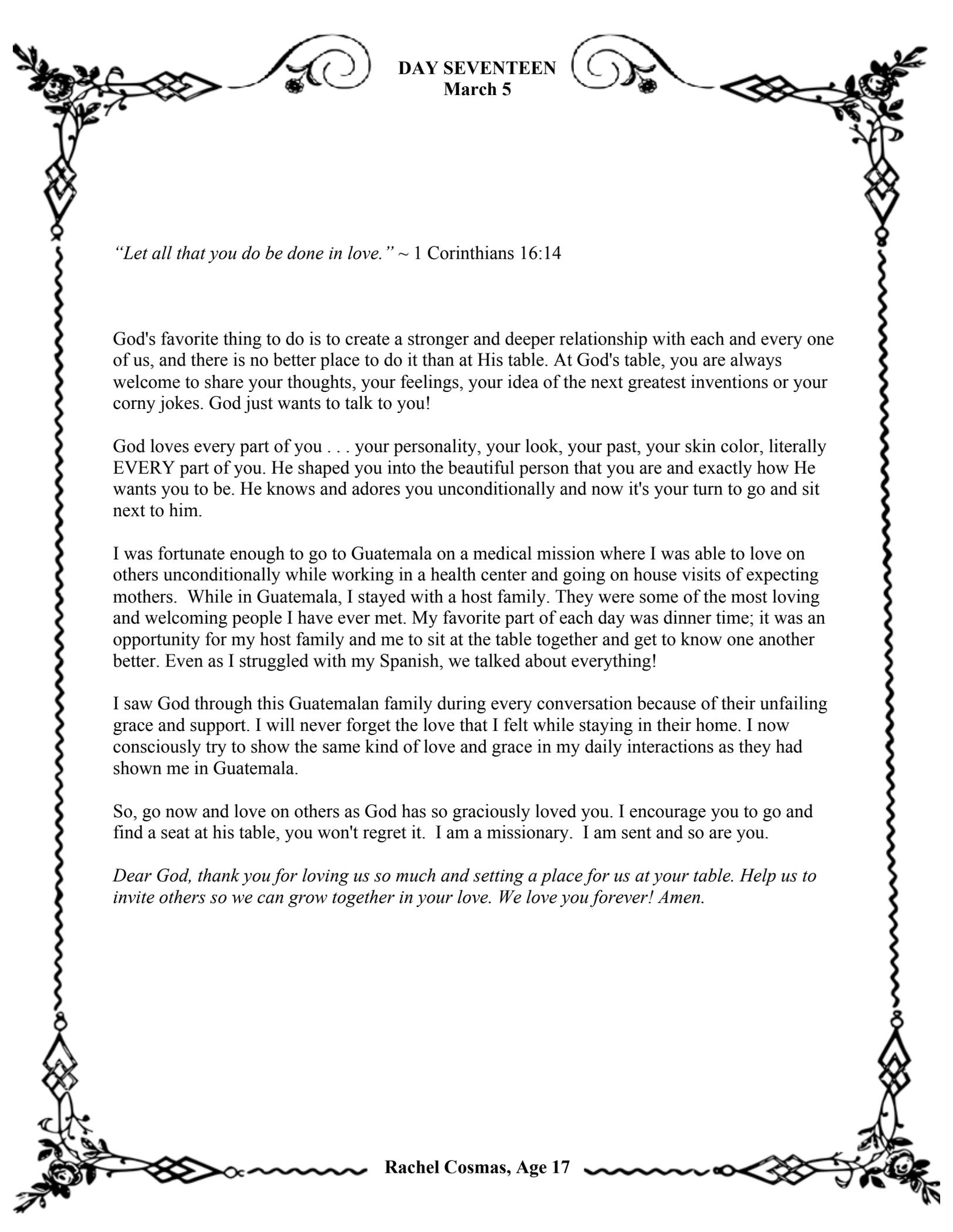
Take my voice and let me sing,
Always, only for my King.
Take my lips and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
Every pow'r as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it Thine,
It shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own,
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.

Frances R. Havergal (1874)



DAY SEVENTEEN
March 5

“Let all that you do be done in love.” ~ 1 Corinthians 16:14

God's favorite thing to do is to create a stronger and deeper relationship with each and every one of us, and there is no better place to do it than at His table. At God's table, you are always welcome to share your thoughts, your feelings, your idea of the next greatest inventions or your corny jokes. God just wants to talk to you!

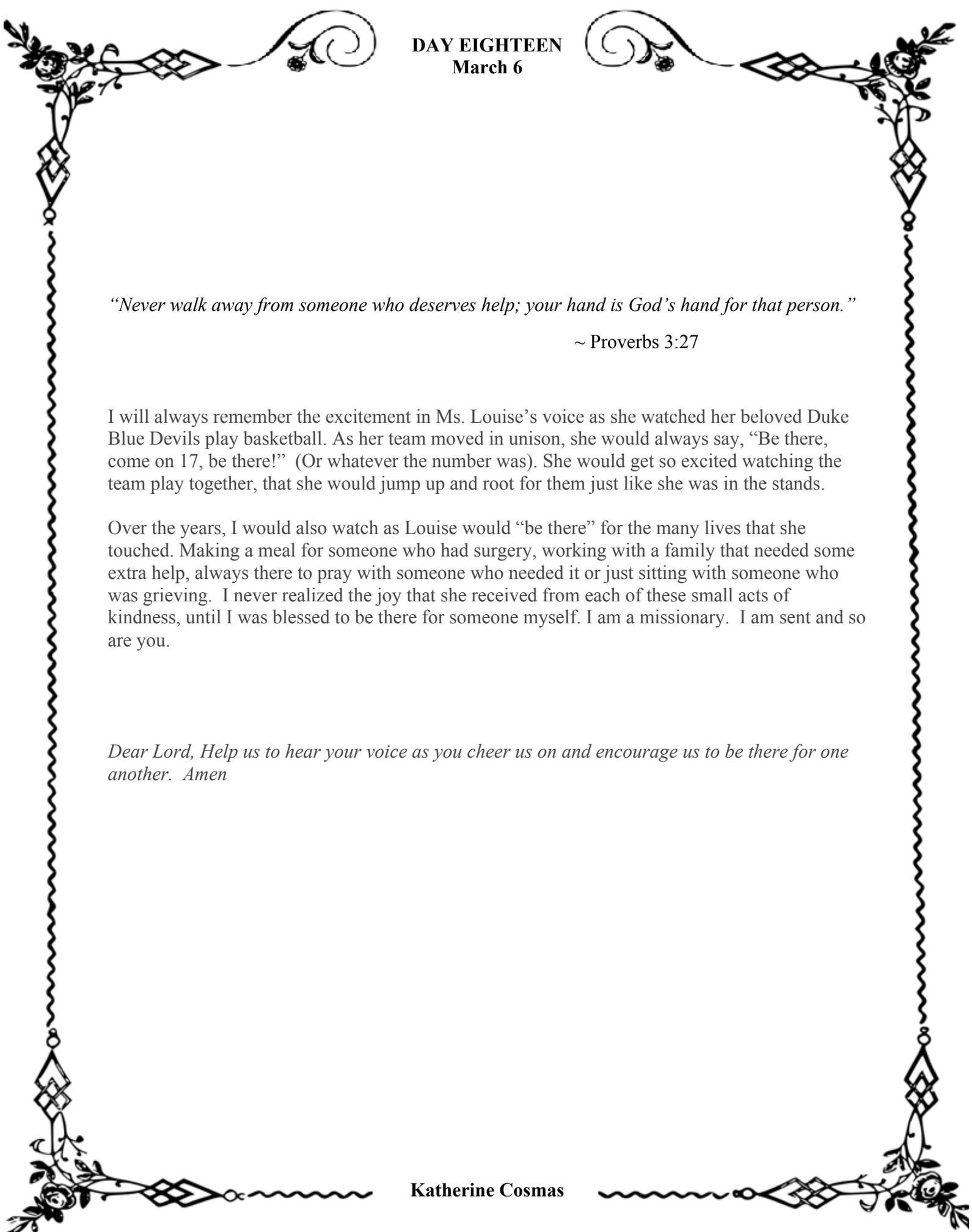
God loves every part of you . . . your personality, your look, your past, your skin color, literally EVERY part of you. He shaped you into the beautiful person that you are and exactly how He wants you to be. He knows and adores you unconditionally and now it's your turn to go and sit next to him.

I was fortunate enough to go to Guatemala on a medical mission where I was able to love on others unconditionally while working in a health center and going on house visits of expecting mothers. While in Guatemala, I stayed with a host family. They were some of the most loving and welcoming people I have ever met. My favorite part of each day was dinner time; it was an opportunity for my host family and me to sit at the table together and get to know one another better. Even as I struggled with my Spanish, we talked about everything!

I saw God through this Guatemalan family during every conversation because of their unfailing grace and support. I will never forget the love that I felt while staying in their home. I now consciously try to show the same kind of love and grace in my daily interactions as they had shown me in Guatemala.

So, go now and love on others as God has so graciously loved you. I encourage you to go and find a seat at his table, you won't regret it. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God, thank you for loving us so much and setting a place for us at your table. Help us to invite others so we can grow together in your love. We love you forever! Amen.



DAY EIGHTEEN
March 6

“Never walk away from someone who deserves help; your hand is God’s hand for that person.”

~ Proverbs 3:27

I will always remember the excitement in Ms. Louise’s voice as she watched her beloved Duke Blue Devils play basketball. As her team moved in unison, she would always say, “Be there, come on 17, be there!” (Or whatever the number was). She would get so excited watching the team play together, that she would jump up and root for them just like she was in the stands.

Over the years, I would also watch as Louise would “be there” for the many lives that she touched. Making a meal for someone who had surgery, working with a family that needed some extra help, always there to pray with someone who needed it or just sitting with someone who was grieving. I never realized the joy that she received from each of these small acts of kindness, until I was blessed to be there for someone myself. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Lord, Help us to hear your voice as you cheer us on and encourage us to be there for one another. Amen

Katherine Cosmas

DAY NINETEEN
March 7

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you...Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” ~ John 13:14-15, 17 (NIV)

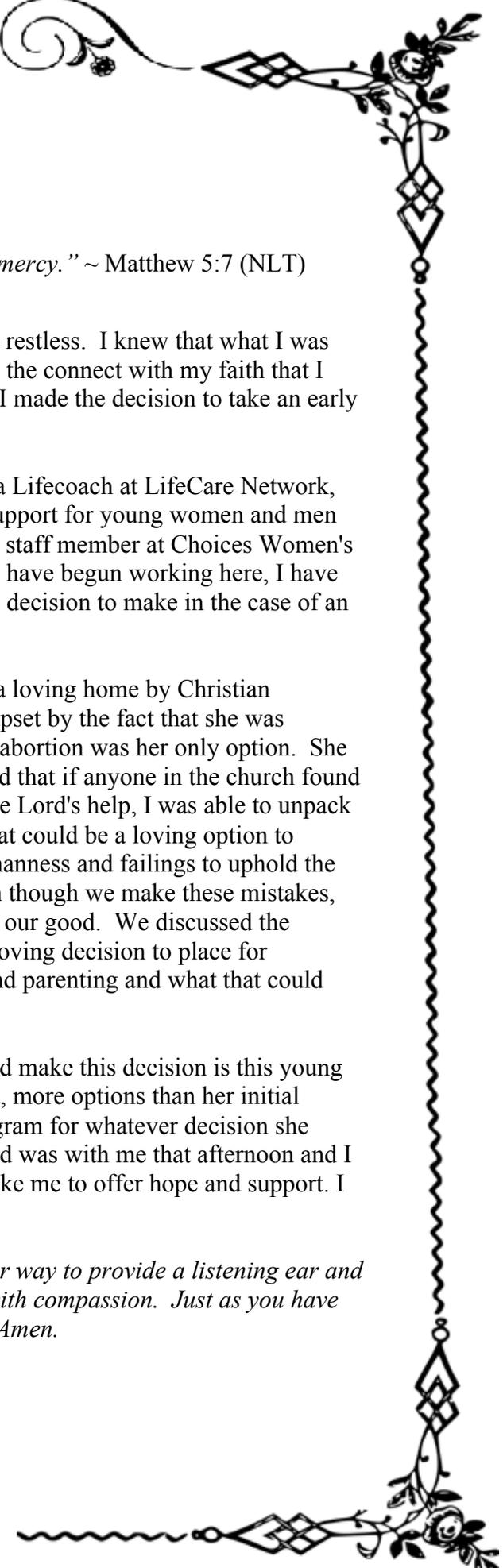
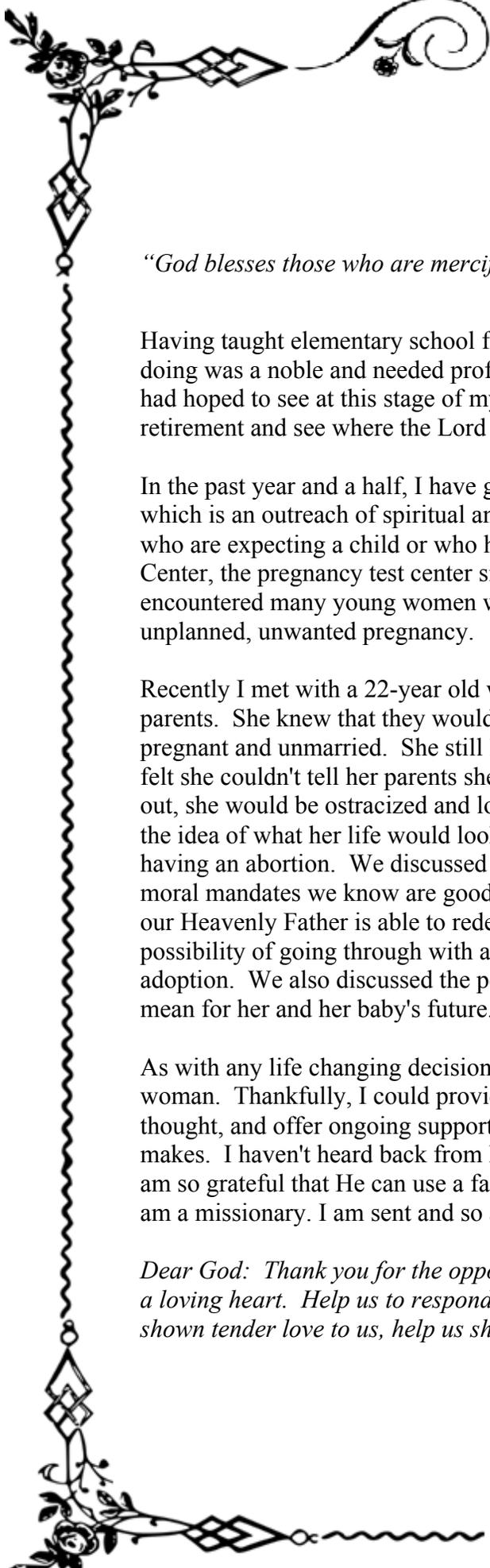
Jesus took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and washed the feet of his disciples. And so we are called to follow his example, for which we will be blessed. But where to start? How to overcome our hesitation? How to humble ourselves, maybe even expose ourselves to the risk of discomfort or feelings of inadequacy? Sometimes, an opportunity is right next door.

Before Barbara and I moved to Valrico, we lived in Minneapolis. Our neighbors, Bob and Nancy, had three children the same ages as ours. We had a lot in common and participated in many of the same activities for two years. Then we moved to Florida and they moved to Chicago. For about 20 years, we traded Christmas cards and little else. Then they retired to the St. Pete area and we reconnected – it was easy and fun, like nothing had changed.

Except Bob was dying. Over the course of a couple years, Bob and Nancy battled his illness. Their children lived far away and couldn’t visit often. Their extended family was in Canada. So, Barbara and I became their family. When Bob was taken to the hospital, then to a rehabilitation facility, and ultimately put in Hospice care, I drove an hour and a half to see him once a week. Not my comfort zone. Not my area of expertise. I would pull into the parking lot with a meal or a book or a plan to discuss current events. Then I would sit in the car, filled with trepidation. My prayer before the visit was consistent: God, help me walk through the door. God, help me. Jesus, help me. Holy Spirit, help me. Help me, help me, help me. Sometimes Bob was in great spirits and we would talk about business, politics or family matters. Sometimes I sat while he slept. The visits became increasingly more challenging. We prayed for his health, his comfort, and his family. These times were Nancy’s only real break. When I got back to the car, I would decompress, pray, and then call Nancy and give her a report. Sometimes, Barbara and Nancy would join me, and the three of us would have lunch afterwards. Good food, camaraderie, a little wine, hearty laughter and a few tears. I always felt we should be doing more.

Bob is with Jesus now, and Nancy has returned to Minneapolis. Last November, Barbara and I met Nancy in Chicago for their youngest son’s wedding. We were astonished when family members and friends we had never met thanked us for taking care of Nancy and Bob. Our seemingly modest acts of friendship had more impact than I imagined. Worth every second, every ounce of energy, every tear, every doubt. Blessed to be a blessing, indeed! I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Almighty Father, I thank you for your son Jesus, who taught us how to live and how to love and how to serve. Thank you for blessing me with the opportunity to take up the towel and follow His example. Thank you for the strength and confidence you gave me when I thought I had none. Please help me grow in your service, in more and varied ways, to your glory. Amen.



DAY TWENTY
March 8

“God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” ~ Matthew 5:7 (NLT)

Having taught elementary school for 27 years, I began to feel restless. I knew that what I was doing was a noble and needed profession, I just wasn't seeing the connect with my faith that I had hoped to see at this stage of my life. After much prayer, I made the decision to take an early retirement and see where the Lord would lead.

In the past year and a half, I have gone from volunteering as a Lifecoach at LifeCare Network, which is an outreach of spiritual and general education and support for young women and men who are expecting a child or who have a baby, to becoming a staff member at Choices Women's Center, the pregnancy test center side of the outreach. Since I have begun working here, I have encountered many young women who are struggling with the decision to make in the case of an unplanned, unwanted pregnancy.

Recently I met with a 22-year old woman who was raised in a loving home by Christian parents. She knew that they would initially be shocked and upset by the fact that she was pregnant and unmarried. She still lived at home and felt like abortion was her only option. She felt she couldn't tell her parents she was pregnant, and worried that if anyone in the church found out, she would be ostracized and looked down upon. With the Lord's help, I was able to unpack the idea of what her life would look like if she were to do what could be a loving option to having an abortion. We discussed the reality of our own humanness and failings to uphold the moral mandates we know are good, and the concept that even though we make these mistakes, our Heavenly Father is able to redeem them and use them for our good. We discussed the possibility of going through with a pregnancy and making a loving decision to place for adoption. We also discussed the possibility of giving birth and parenting and what that could mean for her and her baby's future.

As with any life changing decision, the only person who could make this decision is this young woman. Thankfully, I could provide a listening ear and heart, more options than her initial thought, and offer ongoing support through the LifeCare program for whatever decision she makes. I haven't heard back from her yet, but I know the Lord was with me that afternoon and I am so grateful that He can use a fallible but forgiven vessel like me to offer hope and support. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for the opportunities you put along our way to provide a listening ear and a loving heart. Help us to respond not with judgement, but with compassion. Just as you have shown tender love to us, help us show tender love to others. Amen.



DAY TWENTY-ONE
March 9

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” ~ Matthew 7:7-11 (NIV)

No matter where you find yourself throughout the week, if you pray for opportunities to impact others for good, and God wills it to be so, it will be done in amazing ways. A positive impact may look different than you think, but when God’s plans are revealed, it will remind you of God’s blessings and power.

I recall praying for this exact opportunity in July of 2017 on the Mission Trip, as well as several times after. Throughout this school year, I have been so blessed to share my testimony with five friends, as well as being given the opportunity to help run a Fellowship group at my school. I have heard peoples’ stories and have had several friends ask me about my faith!

With God’s guidance and help, your work, school, or anywhere you go regularly can become a mission field filled with people you can share the gospel with. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: What a blessing it is to be able to come to you in prayer. Thank you, God, for the opportunities you provide us on a regular basis to impact others for good. Help our hearts to remain open to these opportunities as you present them. Amen

Josh Harbord, Age 16

DAY TWENTY-TWO
March 10

“For everything there is a season . . . A time to be born, and a time to die; . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” ~ Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2, 4

As the Chief Ministry Officer for Dallas 1 Corporation, my job is to visit our workers on the job sites. My prayer is to visit these hard-working men and women and build a relationship with them which might, over time, bring them a little bit closer to Jesus. Willie, a foreman for our company, is one of the men I visited. Most early visits to Willie’s job ended pleasantly, but I didn’t feel any special attachment to him. I was, however, intrigued by his tenacity and ability to teach others construction skills. He had earned the respect of his employees and their ability to tackle our toughest projects. On one visit, Willie asked if I could visit Nicole in the hospital; she was about two months pregnant and was experiencing some pain and discomfort.

I visited Nicole on the day she was going to be released. She said the baby was in no danger but she must go home for bed rest for the remainder of the week. We prayed together and enjoyed some small talk. At home that evening, I received a phone call from one of our superintendents. He said Nicole was rushed by ambulance back to the hospital. Something was wrong with the baby and Willie had asked him to call me to see if I would come to the hospital to be with them. I left immediately. Upon walking into the room, I was told that the baby had died, and that Nicole was experiencing very serious low blood pressure issues. The fetus was in a bassinette in the room and Willie ask if I would pray for the entire family. We prayed and cried together.

Nicole was still in much pain and agonizing over the death of the baby. As the doctors and nurses rushed in, they sent all of us out of the room. As I stood in the hallway with Willie, Nicole’s mother, sister, Willie’s nephew and wife, I consoled them the best I could. We prayed for Nicole, Willie and the family. When we were allowed back in Nicole’s room, she asked if I would pray for the entire family again while she and Willie held the fetus to Nicole’s chest. All the family and friends circled the bed, holding hands as I prayed.

As I left the hospital after this experience, I realized what a blessing and honor it was to be present with these fine people. This is not a situation I would choose to be placed in ever again, but God used this time to strengthen and supply a bond for the future. When Willie told me a few weeks later that Nicole was having a difficult time getting over the stillbirth, I was able to connect her with our Human Resource Director’s wife, who had experienced multiple miscarriages. They spoke several times, helping Nicole work through her grief.

Through this experience, I learned that we never know when or where God will choose to use us. We just need to be obedient to the Holy Spirit’s calling. Reach—Connect—Grow—Send is a lifetime process through which we strive to honor and serve our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Be on the lookout for your opportunities! I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for putting me in the right place and time to minister to Willie, Nicole and their families. Help us to be obedient to your call to Reach, Connect, Grow and Send. Amen.

Paul Lancaster



SUNDAY
March 11

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
it is in dying that we are born again
to eternal life.

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

DAY TWENTY-THREE
March 12

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” ~ Matthew 6:33 (KJV)

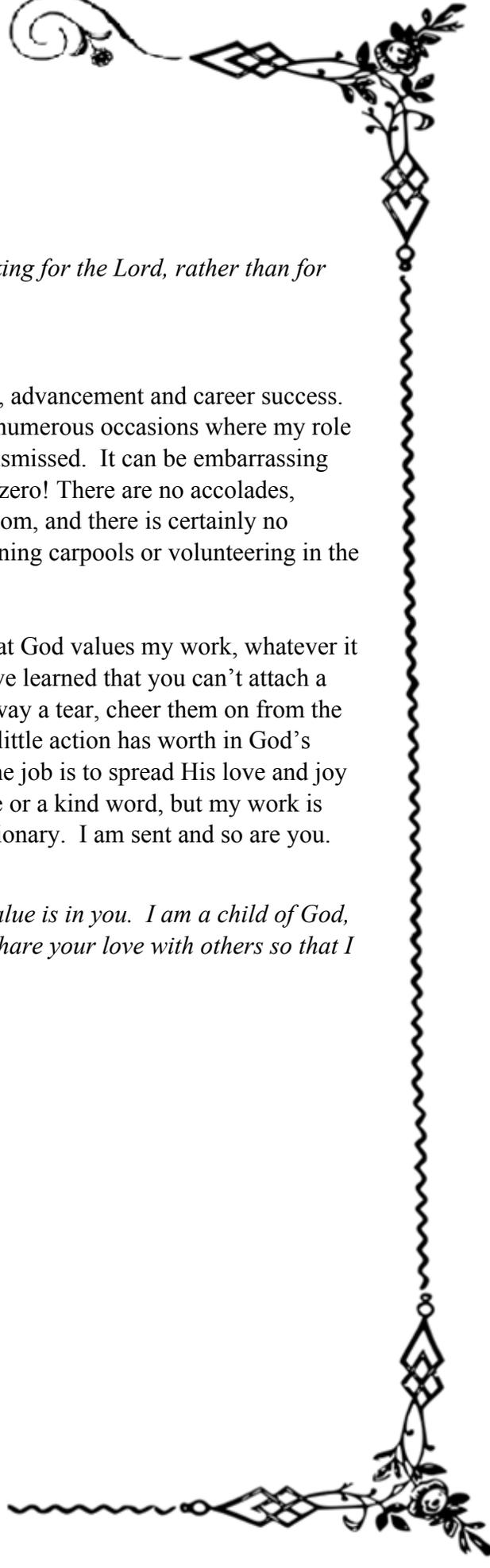
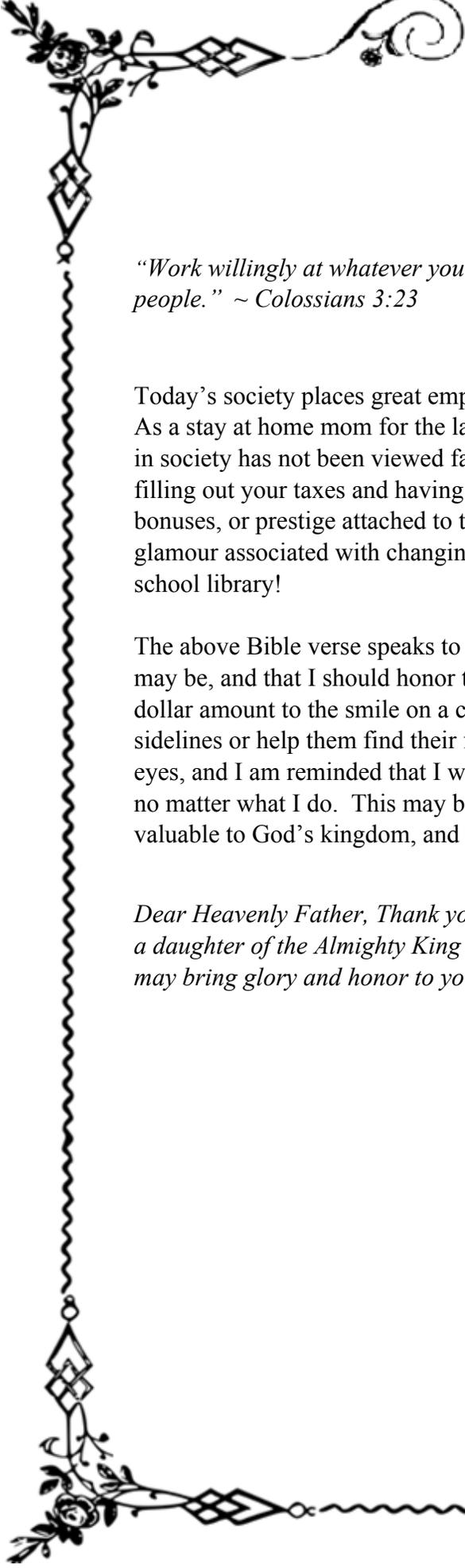
As I began to think and pray about what I was going to do in retirement after 39 years at TECO, several thoughts and tasks came to mind, none of which I knew anything about. The first thought was to get Young Life started again in Brandon. The second was to become involved in homeless issues. And the third was to get involved in a prison ministry. With help from Tad Denham, we were able to get Young Life going after a year of work, including fund-raising. The United Methodist Men have stopped their prison ministry and the other opportunities I have explored so far aren't very successful. So that one is not yet done.

The task for which I have devoted most of my time post-retirement has been helping individuals who are homeless and hungry. I looked around to see where God was already working, and found Cynthia Pinkney and her ministry to the day labor folks. She was also doing a meal with presents and clothing at Christmas at Sadie Park. Having this ministry outdoors was not ideal, so I helped her move to the Boys and Girls Club, which was more conducive to her work. Cynthia helped New Hope with a Thanksgiving ministry, and we helped Cynthia with her Christmas ministry. After a few years, the Brandon community started Gift of Hope as a partnership between churches to provide food and gifts to families in need. It became evident that Cynthia Pinkney's Christmas ministry was no longer needed, and it was once again time to move on.

About this time, a community meeting was held at the Chamber of Commerce, which was attended by about thirty people who were concerned about homelessness and hunger in Brandon. We felt called to do something to address this need, so Vince Ferraro and I took the ball to figure out how to feed the hungry. After looking for a year for sites, with no one offering one, the Lord led us to the First Baptist Church in Mango; attendance was declining at this church, but the 80-year-old pastor had a heart for this work. He gave us a Sunday School wing, which we gutted and, with Austin Walters' help, turned it into a dining room. Several churches, including New Hope, volunteered to take a day to serve a meal. We operated the program, I Am Hope, for eight years, serving 80,000 meals! When another church took over this building, we lost our lease. During this time, Vince talked with the county and we were able to open the Cold Weather Shelter at Sadie Park, which still operates under the leadership of Bay Life Church.

I have learned several lessons through these experiences: Be careful what you pray for. God is looking for willing people. See where God is working and get involved. And never give up! If God wants something to happen, it will eventually happen! I share this only to encourage others to be missionaries, too. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for the ways you can take ordinary, but willing people, and use them to do extraordinary things for Your Kingdom. Help us to continually seek Your will and direction for our lives, and then trust You to provide a way in Your perfect time. Amen.



DAY TWENTY-FOUR
March 13

“Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord, rather than for people.” ~ Colossians 3:23

Today’s society places great emphasis on materialism, wealth, advancement and career success. As a stay at home mom for the last 18 years, there have been numerous occasions where my role in society has not been viewed favorably and at times, even dismissed. It can be embarrassing filling out your taxes and having to list your value as literally zero! There are no accolades, bonuses, or prestige attached to the job title of stay at home mom, and there is certainly no glamour associated with changing diapers, doing laundry, running carpools or volunteering in the school library!

The above Bible verse speaks to me as a constant reminder that God values my work, whatever it may be, and that I should honor the Lord in all that I do. I have learned that you can’t attach a dollar amount to the smile on a child’s face when you wipe away a tear, cheer them on from the sidelines or help them find their favorite library book. Every little action has worth in God’s eyes, and I am reminded that I work for Jesus. My number one job is to spread His love and joy no matter what I do. This may be as simple as sharing a smile or a kind word, but my work is valuable to God’s kingdom, and that is priceless. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for the reminder that my value is in you. I am a child of God, a daughter of the Almighty King and I am loved. Help me to share your love with others so that I may bring glory and honor to you in all that I do. Amen

DAY TWENTY-FIVE
March 14

“If with heart and soul you’re doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you’re still better off. Don’t give the opposition a second thought. Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy.”

~ 1 Peter 3:15-16 (The Message)

I admire those who have the courage – or maybe, have the kind of faith – to leave where they are and go to wherever Jesus needs them. On mission trips or simply spending the night on a cot for Family Promise.

I haven't sensed that type of calling inside myself, yet. Instead, I keep my radar tuned, open and available, looking for ministry opportunities to those who are – conveniently – right in front of me. The need exists in both places, so I don't believe this is any “less” of a commitment to sharing the love of Christ. But, it does allow me to sleep in my own bed at night and avoid ripping my gut out eating local foods. As long as God grants me restful nights in this belief, I'll presume He is okay with it for the time being . . .

This approach to a more localized mission field offers many opportunities to minister to folks I run into on any given day. For example, when visiting someone in the hospital, I make it a point to drop into random rooms on the same floor to share a smile, a kind word, and ask if I can pray for them. To let those there know they are loved and not forgotten. I make it a point to thank volunteers and minimum-wage people who do the clean-up in places for their part in keeping things looking so beautiful. While running errands around town, I actively look for opportunities for brief exchanges to bring a smile to people who may have forgotten theirs. Occasionally, this opens the door to expanded conversations. Whether it is in Walmart or my own neighborhood, the Holy Spirit often seems to use these interactions to cause people to wonder what is different in me that they do not have or are not taking advantage of in themselves. Those conversations always come around to Christ's love and an invitation to worship with us.

I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Heavenly Father: Fill me with joy and a peace that surpasses all understanding. And let it be so evident in my approach to life, that others are compelled to ask me about the source of my Joy! Amen.

DAY TWENTY-SIX
March 15

“Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced.”
~ Psalm 105:1-5 (NIV)

“Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God has done.” (Johnson Oatman, Jr.) Needs are being met and lives are being changed, one by one, at the Women’s Resource Center (WRC). With an emphasis on assisting women and families, this faith-based, not-for-profit organization is working with those who are homeless, hungry, unemployed, addressing the complications that these conditions create. Each client and each situation is unique. WRC coordinates resources with local agencies, maintains a well-stocked clothing closet and food pantry, and provides emergency shelter through the Little White House.

Only by the grace of God, I have never experienced being without shelter, clothing or food. I can’t begin to imagine the toll it takes on the mind, body, and soul to try and navigate such dire circumstances. If you’re like me, you know how you can become irritable and find it hard to concentrate when you skip one meal during the day. Now imagine those negative effects of several days of missed meals. At the WRC, we understand the importance of meeting the basic need of nutrition before we move forward to assist with clothing, housing, and employment.

A young lady, who we will call her Joan, was referred to the WRC from an area church. Unable to feed her family, Joan was crying and completely distraught as she entered the WRC. She was a woman who was obviously out of resources to help her family with their dire situation. We consoled Joan and quickly prepared a much-needed meal for her while she explained the turn of events that had brought her to this moment. Joan had not received a check that was the part of her family’s budget she used to buy groceries. Yes, for too many families, one check can mean the difference in being able to buy groceries or not. Joan’s husband, wanting the family to have what food was left, had gone without for several days. We were humbled by his sacrifice for the sake of his family. After Joan finished the meal, she thanked us profusely and we were able to move to the next step of discussing solutions for her family. From our pantry at WRC, the volunteers selected food items that would meet her family’s needs during their temporary hardship. It’s hard to put into words how joyful it was to gather those bags of groceries and place them in the trunk of Joan’s car. Knowing hers was a temporary situation, WRC had again “stood in the gap” for another hurting and hungry child of God. A family in crisis found love and solutions through Him, His love, His grace, and His helpers. Counting my blessings, seeing what God has done...and continues to do. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for the countless blessings that you pour out on us. Thank you for all the organizations in Hillsborough County that are meeting the needs of those who are hungry and hurting. Thank you for New Hope UMC and our leadership that supports many of these organizations with their talents, time and resources. We give you ALL the Glory. Amen.

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN
March 16

"The LORD is my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him." ~ Exodus 15:2 (NIV)

"Thank you, God, for your many blessings." That was the prayer that came almost involuntarily from Margaret's lips as she endured the suffering of her last few months of life. It was a prayer from her soul, and was not contingent upon her earthly circumstances. I was assigned to visit Margaret in the nursing home as part of the Friendly Visitor Program. She had recently had hip surgery, and was temporarily placed in a nursing home for rehab before she could return home. Our connection the first time we met was spiritual. She was touched that a "stranger" took the time to visit her, and I was overwhelmed by her attitude that exuded grace and gratitude. Time passed quickly during our first visit as we enjoyed learning about each other's families, life experiences, and shared faith. Margaret asked if I would visit her when she went home next month so she could show me photographs of her loved ones, and was delighted when I told her I would visit her every week.

That evening, I told my husband all about my new friend, Margaret, and how excited I was to grow my friendship with this beautiful woman. I counted the days until I could visit Margaret again. In the seven days between my first and second visit, something had changed. Margaret's health had declined, her pain level intensified, and while she treated me like a dear friend, I could tell she didn't really remember our first visit. But the one thing that never changed over the five months that I visited Margaret was the gratitude that flowed from her heart about how God had blessed her life. When her pain was at its worst, when others might be cursing their suffering, Margaret's simple prayer, sometimes whispered and sometimes shouted, was, "Help me, God."

Margaret told me at our first visit that she was ready to see Jesus face-to-face, and I know there was rejoicing in Heaven when God took her home five months after we met. I was sad that I didn't get to know Margaret better, but I thank God for the beautiful example He provided me of how to make a life a living testament to Him. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Heavenly Father, help me to love you like Margaret loved you. . . with a confident and genuine faith that flows from the depths of my heart. And when I take my last breath, let it be filled with words of gratitude for Your mighty works. Let Margaret's prayer be my prayer, regardless of my circumstances: "Thank you, God, for your many blessings." Amen.

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT
March 17

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. . . . But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.” ~ 1 Corinthians 12:12, 18

In 2013, I made the decision to sell my house in Michigan and permanently move to Florida to take care of my elderly parents. I had retired in mid-2012 after working many years in a full-time, often stressful and busy job. My only son had recently gotten married and was busy with his career. I had also been a widow for eight years and decided I needed a change. The timing was perfect in many ways for me to make this move.

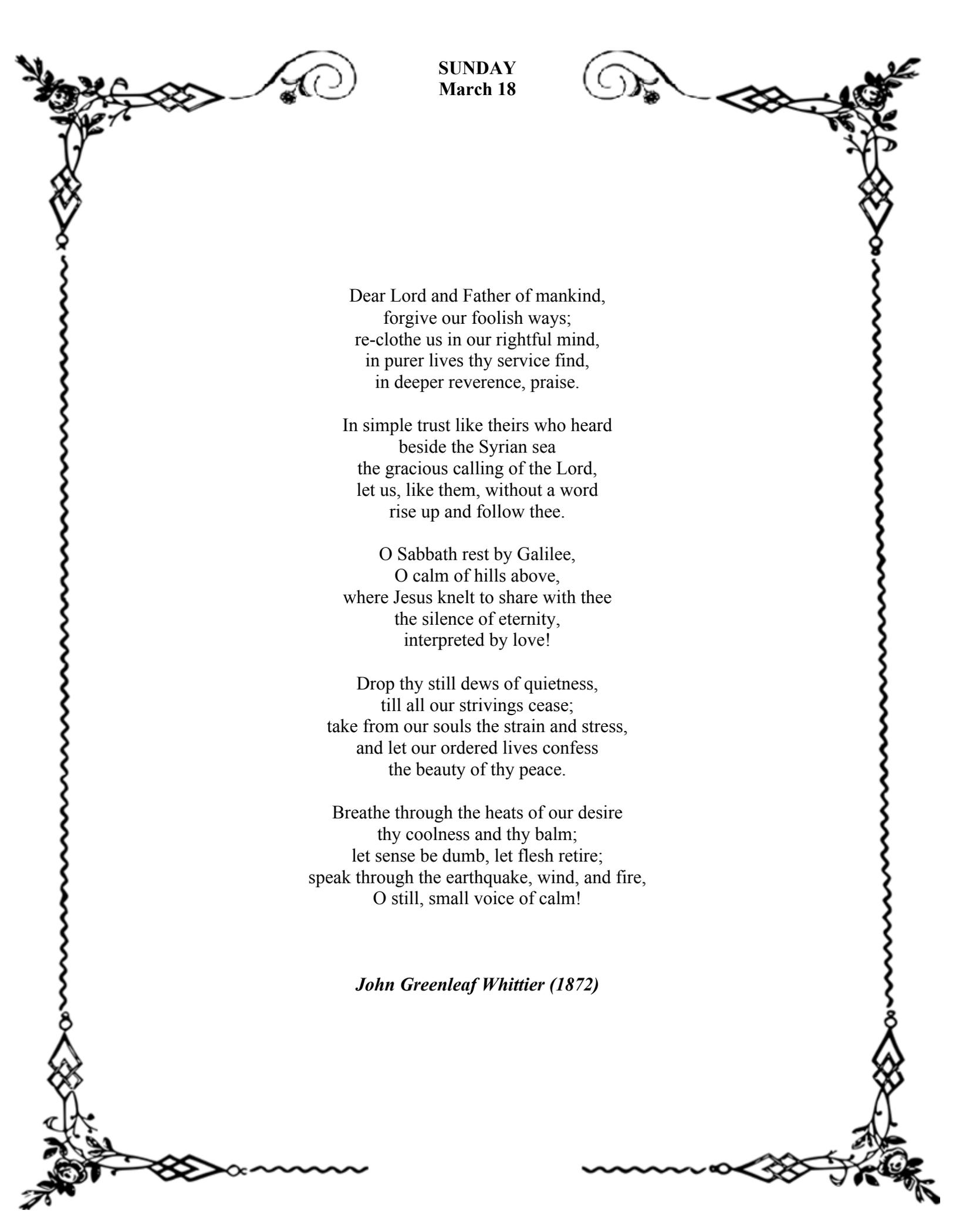
I became a member of First UMC at the beginning of 2014. Part of the process in becoming a member I learned was to get involved with the church and its ministries. I thought this would be a great way for me to meet people and learn more about the community. The hard part was taking that first step and getting involved in an area that would mean something to me. At this same time, Rev. Vicki Harrison was looking for volunteers to be part of a new outreach project the church was starting—the Food Co-op. My first job was working in a grocery store, so I thought this would be a good fit for me. Turns out it was.

The Food Co-op at New Hope is moving into its fourth year and I have been blessed to be part of it through all those years. When you show an interest in a project at New Hope, the administration will encourage you to run with it, which is what I have tried to do. We have a wonderful group of volunteers who work very hard to make the co-op a great experience for those who attend, many of them quite regularly. Since I am responsible for maintaining the records with the co-op and checking people in, I make a point of trying to remember everyone’s name. I notice people like it when you use their name and remember who they are. Some are very hesitant the first time they come to the co-op. We don’t want them to feel like they are getting a handout, so that is the principle behind being a food co-op where they pay a \$5.00 share instead of a free food pantry. I’ve come to realize that \$5.00 is a big expenditure for many people, especially when they are paying with a baggy full of loose coin, and we want them to feel welcome and comfortable here—not judged.

Since the co-op has grown and been moved to the Sanctuary, I have been given the opportunity to witness about the wonderful church we are. People seem more open to ask questions about our church. I love to tell them about our great pastors and the wonderful music and children’s programs that we have at New Hope. That is something I had never done much in the 30 years I was a member at my church in Michigan. Many of the people attending the co-op will leave saying “Bless you for what you are doing here.” My answer is always “Thank you for coming. Please come again and tell your family and friends about us.” I feel I have been truly blessed and have grown so much by meeting all of them. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for the opportunity to fill an important role in Your work of feeding the hungry. Continue to touch my heart, oh Lord, with a desire to do Your will. Amen.

Linda Legris Hall



SUNDAY
March 18

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!

John Greenleaf Whittier (1872)

DAY TWENTY-NINE
March 19

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” ~ 1 John 3:1 (NIV)

One thing about working at a church is that most of the time, you are only around church people. This may not sound like much of a problem, but for someone who strongly desires to be missional (to proclaim and live out the Good News of the Kingdom in my neighborhood, community, and world), this means I need to get out of my office as much as possible and be intentional about building relationships with people who have no connection to church. Thus, I am always looking for organizations to join where I can be a missionary. I sincerely want to build friendships with people who are different from myself. As I get to know people, God opens doors (usually unexpectedly) where I can minister to someone, offer prayer, or simply listen.

One specific way I have chosen to do this is by being on the “rotating pastor” list at Brandon Regional Hospital. I’m not even sure I know how I got on the list, but for some reason, the hospital often calls me if there is someone without a connection to a church who requests spiritual counsel. It almost always comes at the most inopportune time, but I have learned that if there is any way for me to make it, then I need to do so. The week before Christmas I got a call that a middle-aged man was requesting prayer. It was a food co-op day, I needed to be in the sanctuary, I had a pile of messages to call back, and there was just general business associated with the season. But there was something inside me that said, “You need to go to the hospital.” So, I made sure everything was taken care of and somewhat begrudgingly headed there. I said a quick prayer for God’s guidance, parked, and headed up to the man’s room.

When I got to the room, there was a man about my age (early to mid-40s) in the bed and his mother and her friend were sitting beside him. He was about to have surgery that was serious, but with a high likelihood of complete recovery. The four of us said a prayer together and then the ladies left the room to give us some privacy. The man confided to me that he was positive he would die in the surgery. The more we talked, it became obvious that he really wanted to die in the surgery. He had spent his entire adult life in prison. The guilt he felt for missing out on raising his children (they were all grown and had no relationship with him) and the grief he had caused his mother and brother was overwhelming. He said he had become a Christian in prison, in the later years, but was still struggling with forgiving himself. I talked to him about God’s amazing love and forgiveness. We prayed for quite some time that he would be filled with that peace that only God can provide. He seemed a bit lighter, that’s the only way I can describe it; then he crawled back in bed and went to sleep. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Wonderful Father, Continue to be with this man, helping him experience You in a mighty way so that he truly understands that he is worthy and loved. Thank you for putting me exactly where You needed me that day. Please continue to provide opportunities for intentional relationship-building, particularly with those who have no connection to a church. Amen.

DAY THIRTY
March 20

“For we are His Workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” ~ Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

“But what if I fail?” people say, when we have talked about living a life that shares Christ to others. “After all,” they have explained, “it’s easy for you to do it. I’m not like you.”

Inwardly I have chuckled, “Thank God, everyone is not like me! One is more than enough!” I challenge them, “Do you *really* think it’s easy for me? I’ve had a young man not accept some flowers because he vowed not to take anything from any church. A slammed door isn’t fun. I’ve experienced the hint someone with tears would visit our church—and as far as I know, his family never followed up. I’ve felt the joy of serving in a chemotherapy ward, only to be told not to come because it might hurt the patients’ immune systems. I’ve given a devotion at the food co-op, where it became extremely quiet, and everyone’s expressions were solemn. Did I blow it?” We all face fears. It’d be so easy to serve God if we were guaranteed success.

But that’s just it. As explained in the above passage, we are each God’s workmanship. HE crafted us. HE guides us. HE empowers us. In a way, it’s none of our business how it works out. He asks us to be obedient. And to trust Him. We are ‘successful’ if we but choose to follow Him. I know trusting is hard. But I promise, or more importantly, God promises, He is trustworthy.

Sometimes, we get to catch glimpses of the ending. For example, with the young angry man mentioned above, I had the privilege of apologizing to him for how the church had hurt him. I hoped he’d give God and the church another chance. That was my mission with him that day. As for the chemotherapy ward, God had in mind a particular lady for a limited time and place. (I do believe, if anyone knows how to knit hats or make blankets, these would be warmly welcomed!) Even though the father with tears has not attended our church (yet), I still get a nudge to drop off flowers at his doorstep. Which I do, surrendering to God’s greater plan and timing. And the devotion given at the food co-op, which had people listening with furrowed brows . . . God, in His mercy, allowed me to be told, “My friend just attended for the first time, and she really needed to hear what you said. She had been thinking about what you talked about.” I truly had gone home that day, imagining I had ‘blown it.’

God has slowly and carefully, in His workmanship of me, chipped away at my pride, making me more humble. He’s shown me His love by asking me to work with Him. He’s built up my faith by believing He is the craftsman in charge; I’m just a work in progress in His hands. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Lord: We are yours to use, fashion, mold and equip. Help us to trust and have courage. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

DAY THIRTY-ONE
March 21

"They said to him, 'Rabbi, where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.'"

~ John 1.38

"They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep." ~ John 11.34-35

At the beginning of the semester, I took an intensive course on the Gospel of John. On our first day of class, we talked about the way in which the author of John has a special way of guiding the reader into a deeper understanding of the text. The first disciples' encounter with Jesus occurs when Jesus notices that they have been following him. He turns to confront them. "What are you looking for?" The disciples then respond with their own question. "Teacher, where are you staying?" At this point in the narrative, Jesus extends an invitation to the disciples, yet there is also a hint at a deeper invitation, as though Jesus is speaking to the reader as well. "Come and see." In this way, the author narrates the calling of the disciples in a "mystical" way, which simultaneously invites the readers themselves to "come and see" the glory of God as the gospel continues to tell Jesus' story.

Today in class, we were discussing John chapter 11, revolved around the death of Lazarus, and the many interpretations various scholars have gained from the passage. My classmate made a profound connection between the original invitation Jesus extended the disciples and a "role reversal" seemingly found in John 11. The text states that Jesus loved Lazarus, and it is the first time in John where Jesus refers to someone as "friend." When Jesus arrives late on the scene, Lazarus has already died, and he finds Lazarus' family and community mourning. At the sight of their weeping, Jesus becomes "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." Although the disciples had asked the "where" question in chapter 1 of John, Jesus is now the one who asks it. "Where have you laid him?" It is now the community's turn to extend an invitation to Jesus. "Lord, come and see." Jesus' earlier, powerful and life-giving invitation to "come and see" has actually been used against him by the people. Whereas Jesus invited others to "come and see" the glory of God through his revelatory works and words, the people invoke these same words now, as if they are saying, "It is your turn to come and see Lord. You come and see the reality of OUR lives: suffering and hurt, of death." Jesus wholly experiences the pain of human heartache, and his response is telling of an authentic recognition of the suffering humans are left to endure. "Jesus began to weep." When someone is far removed from a situation, it is much easier to take comfort in the hope that God redeems brokenness and pain. In the midst of suffering, however, Jesus himself, though he knew better than anyone the joy of the resurrection to come, could not escape the hurt of the loss of someone he loved. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God, Allow the community to awaken us to its aches and pains, just as the community awakened Jesus to a recognition of his own pain. In your troubled state, your immediate, human response was to be fully present within the shared grief of a hurting community. Still our hearts, so that we may be one with the community, and so that we can stand and cry with those who are hurting. We know that you delight in calling forth life from these darkened tombs, but for now God, we ask that you make your presence known, that we may recognize your abundant love poured out over the community in the flowing tears of your children. Amen.

DAY THIRTY-TWO
March 22

“And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. . . . I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” ~ 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 8-9

After Hurricane Irma swept through Florida, I gathered with a few of my friends who hadn't evacuated the area. We met at a house that still had electricity (ours wasn't so fortunate), and we all showed up with our extra loaves of bread, peanut butter and jelly. While we bonded over our personal hurricane experiences, we made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for hours. We took turns running to the store in hopes of finding enough bread to make 200 sandwiches. There were five women and over a dozen kids who were out of school for the week, and the house was full of noise and sandwich crumbs. I distinctly remember a conversation with my nine-year-old who kept asking, "When are we going to leave?" I tried to convey the importance of helping those in need, but she would have much rather been doing something else at the time.

It didn't become real to her until we drove the 200 sandwiches to a Pinellas County shelter that was in desperate need of food. She had never seen a community of people who lived in tents. The fact that we had been out of electricity for a couple of days paled in comparison to the living conditions of those who we met at the shelter. Our boxes of sandwiches provided lunch for nearly 200 people, and I asked my daughter to think about what they would have eaten otherwise. In that moment, I think we were both humbled by the contrast of our worlds. Delivering sandwiches was a small task with a huge impact. Not only was it an easy thing to do (especially with many hands at work), but it was well within my means. I knew there was a need that I could meet. I knew that I had been blessed and could bless others. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for the opportunity in such a small and simple way to be a blessing to people who needed something to eat. Please pour Your blessings and favor on our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico, who are still suffering from the ravaging effects of Hurricane Maria. Let our hearts ache in unity with them. Amen.

DAY THIRTY-THREE
March 23

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” ~ James 1:27

Through a series of God-directed events, my husband, son, son’s friend, and I joined a group from a sister church in a mission trip to El Ayudante (The Help) in Nicaragua. It was such an incredible experience, that my husband and I committed to going back the following year with the youth group from our own church. The church we attended at the time had never done an international mission trip, and we had no idea if there would be enough interest. But we knew God was calling us to do this, so we knew we had to be obedient. We decided that we had to have eight people sign up in order to go. We had 27!

Our work on both trips included constructing a home and leading vacation Bible school. While most of our group constructed the home, I had the privilege of making home visits to moms who were caring for special needs children. Life in Nicaragua is difficult – most of the homes we visited had dirt floors and either awnings or metal strips for roofs. The average family income is just over one dollar a day. So, life for families with a special needs child is particularly challenging. The moms we visited were overwhelmed with the small gifts we brought for them – shampoo, lotion, and gently used clothes. They were used to serving, not being served.

When we walked into one of the homes, we noticed a dilapidated child-sized wheelchair in the corner. It belonged to Justin, who was being raised by his grandmother. The grandmother explained that Justin missed a lot of school because, since his wheelchair was broken, she had to carry him down the street to the bus stop. Some days, she just didn’t have the strength to do this. The two youth who came with me and I couldn’t hold back our tears when it was time to say goodbye to this beautiful grandmother and precious Justin. We sadly shared this story with the rest of our group that night during our devotion time.

In addition to our servant opportunities, we had several fun adventures built into our schedule. The next day, we had planned to go volcano sledding. Yes, you heard that right! You climb to the top of the volcano carrying your sled, and then use the sled to go down the volcano at a very high speed. The youth couldn’t wait! When we were confirming our plans, however, we found out that there had been recent volcanic activity, so sledding was temporarily prohibited. We had paid the \$270 for the group in advance, so we gathered to decide what other activity we could do instead. In a burst of inspiration, one of the youth said, “Hey, why don’t we use that money to buy a wheelchair for Justin!” Amid cheers from the group, we decided that would be the perfect thing to do with our activity money. The chaperones talked in private later that evening about the fact that a wheelchair would cost more than that, so we agreed we would pitch in to pay the balance. When we called to find out the price of the wheelchair, however, we found out that due to God’s perfect plan, and the low cost of living in Nicaragua, the price was . . . exactly . . . \$270. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Creator of the Universe, Thank you for your perfect plan, and your perfect timing, in meeting this need for Justin. You are always good, and always faithful. We love you, God. Amen.

DAY THIRTY-FOUR
March 24

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” ~ Matthew 5:14-16 (NIV)

One of the ways that I choose to live sent (living my faith in a normal and natural way) is by being intentional in where I shop for groceries and where I go out to eat. For example, most Mondays at around 3 p.m., you will find me grocery shopping at the Publix on 60 in Brandon. The managers are getting to know my face as I make it a point to say “hi” to each of them as I am wandering through the store.

Then there is June. She is one of the cashiers at the check-out. I always make it a point to choose June’s lane when I am checking out. We have gotten to be friends as we talk about our kids and life as she is scanning my groceries. She knows my daughter and always greets her with a smile. When Emma is not with me, she asks how she is. Through this relationship I have had the opportunity to talk about my faith with June, and also have invited her to church numerous times. I pray for June often, and look forward to the day when she takes me up on my offer to come to church.

I am a creature of habit, so it is easy for me to be intentional in my visits to restaurants as well. I call Wednesday my “reaching out” day. I spend most every Wednesday morning at the Starbucks on 60 in Valrico. I don’t even like coffee! But, thankfully, they serve hot tea. I take my laptop with me and work on my sermon while being available to any conversations that might ensue. I go in every Wednesday praying, “God use me today in any way you want.” Then around 11:45 a.m., I head to my second location: Beef O’Brady’s in Valrico, also on 60. I try to meet a friend there for lunch, or I just go by myself. I want to be known as a regular and build relationships with the employees and patrons. I even sit in the same booth. It’s really been fun to get to know people as I am being intentional about where I am going and what I am doing.

This is how I live sent. You are welcome to come visit me anytime—I might even buy you a cup of coffee or lunch. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear Father: Thank you for the yearning you have put deep in my heart to have a personal relationship with You. Light a fire in me, dear Lord, to share Your Love with those I meet in such a way that they feel this same yearning. Amen.



SUNDAY
March 25

“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

John Wesley

DAY THIRTY-FIVE
March 26

“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.” ~ Galatians 5:22 (The Message)

One of my favorite Maya Angelou quotes is, “When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed.” Recently I was invited to go on a mission trip to Nicaragua. I was placed on a team that would deliver water filters to extremely needy families that were being poisoned by the polluted water. Kidney disease was rampant, affecting both the young and old.

The first morning we arrived at the medical clinic to receive our filters and instructions for the families we were to visit. There was a crowd outside, and little did I realize these were some of the families we were to meet that day. As we walked together down the muddy streets to their simple homes, we were welcomed with beautiful smiles and feelings of joy that our visit brought.

When we arrived at our first home, the crowd waited so patiently outside as the homeowner welcomed us in with open arms. So proud to have us visit their home, so touched by the gift of the water filter. We gave our simple lessons on how to use the filters, and shared a small gift bag of food. We would sit and listen as they shared their story, what God is doing and has done in their lives. But even as they told us of their struggles, we couldn’t help but sense an overwhelming gratitude and joy that filled each home.

We were always asked about our families and how they could pray for us. We would always close in a circle of prayer with our new friends where there is no doubt that each of us felt Christ’s presence. Upon returning outside we would find the rest of our friends waiting patiently for us to continue our walk. This story would repeat itself over and over throughout the day. The struggles were real, but the overwhelming love and gratitude for our Savior was made most real. We left each day feeling the amazing Power of God’s love and grace. We may have been able to deliver the water filters, but I believe my entire team felt that we received many more blessings. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God, Thank you for the amazing gift of your love. Help us to continue to share that love with our brothers and sisters, as it is in these times that we most feel your love. Amen.

DAY THIRTY-SIX
March 27

“But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” ~ Jeremiah 17:7-8

I believe it was Easter Sunday 2016 . . . there was an invitation after church to visit the Little White House across the street and meet the director of the Women’s Resource Center. This little home, previously the parsonage for our church, houses up to three women and their children to help them get through a difficult time, get back on their feet and avoid homelessness.

God used this invitation—along with a raw personal struggle in my life at the time—to nudge me into regularly volunteering with the Women’s Resource Center. That summer I began once a week at their location on the campus of Bay Life Church. There are many opportunities to volunteer there, but I felt strongly led to work one-on-one with clients. This was a big step out of my comfort zone, but with guidance from the Holy Spirit and the very competent director, Cheryl Hickman, I began helping people and sharing the love of Christ with them.

Each week I am able to provide counseling and resources to women who are struggling to avoid homelessness, gain employment, get assistance with basic needs and make life changes necessary in stopping negative cycles. I have an opportunity to share my faith and pray with clients in need of physical, emotional and spiritual healing.

This has been such a blessing! As in most volunteer opportunities, I am the one left feeling blessed at the end of the day. God has used my experiences at the Women’s Resource Center to grow my faith and show me that I can truly trust Him in ALL things. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for directing my path to the Women’s Resource Center and the wonderful work they do in helping hurting women restore their lives. In Your ultimate wisdom, you knew how this volunteer work would bless me and grow my faith. Continue to pursue me, Heavenly Father, to do your work. Amen.

DAY THIRTY-SEVEN
March 28

"The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer." ~ Psalm 18:2a

I love when God gives me opportunities to tell others about Him at work!

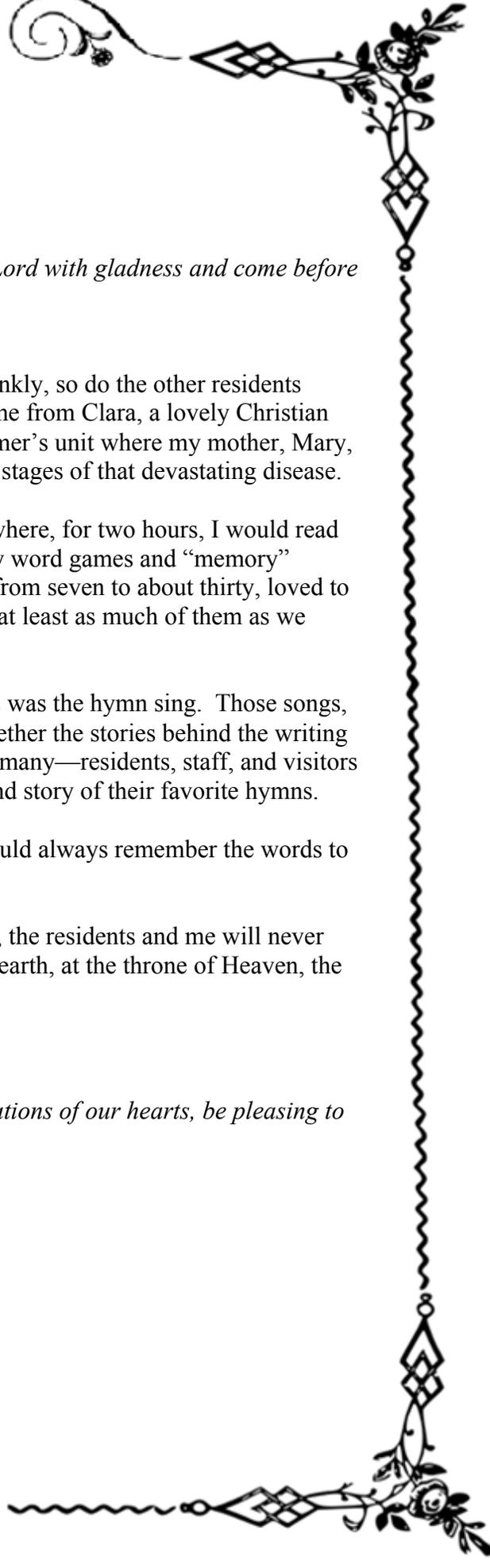
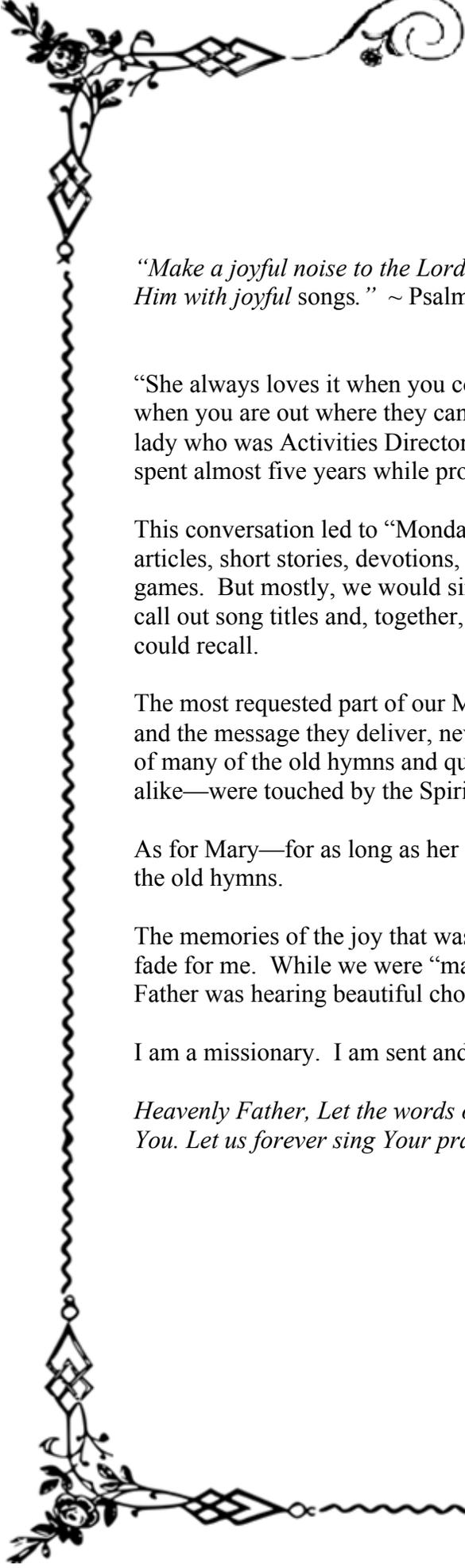
Diane has been a dear, longtime customer... We've shared many things with each other, including an ongoing faith conversation. She has admired the "good things" I've been a part of and has heard me say, "as I discover more and more how much God loves me, I want to let others know He loves them too!" My prayers of the hair salon being a safe place to be real and to allow God to move, were being answered again through her.

I received a text one afternoon from Diane to pray... she'd found a lump in her breast and was scared—her mind was going wild. This happened to other people, not her! It went so fast after that. The immediate biopsy and request to get in quickly. She asked her husband to stop by the shop on the way home from getting results . . . she said she didn't know where else to go—that I was her "rock." After praying (and crying) with her, I told her it was a privilege to walk with her during this struggle, but really, Jesus was her answer. (The Rock, Fortress and Deliverer!)

My next client didn't show up, which hardly ever happens. (Thank you Lord for clearing the way!) Diane asked me to walk out to the car with her and talk to her husband. She had never seen him like this before. I met this man with fear and pain in his eyes, whose powerful job couldn't make this go away for the woman he loved. God led me to share some of what a husband of a cancer survivor shared had with me, and also, about the love and understanding God has for him. Tearing up, he shook my hand.

She texted me later . . . something was changing in her husband too! It was beautiful to see God grab her heart and have her lean into Him. Diane made it through surgery and very hard treatment with Christ as her Rock. Now she was telling me about how great God is! I got a text from her daughter asking if I'd record a video to her mom to include in a victory celebration of her last chemo treatment. I got to tell her how proud I was of her, give encouragement, and share about seeing God's goodness in it all. I got to extend the message of God's mercy and grace to her family as well. What a great God we have! I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Heavenly Father, Sovereign God, Thank you for the privilege of getting to work in this world you so love. May my workplace always be a sanctuary for you to love others. Thank you for meeting Diane in the midst of her storm and for showing her The Way to You. In Jesus' matchless name, Amen.



DAY THIRTY-EIGHT
March 29

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness and come before Him with joyful songs.” ~ Psalm 100:1-2 (NIV)

“She always loves it when you come and sing to her. And, frankly, so do the other residents when you are out where they can hear you.” These words came from Clara, a lovely Christian lady who was Activities Director for the health center/Alzheimer’s unit where my mother, Mary, spent almost five years while progressing through the various stages of that devastating disease.

This conversation led to “Monday Afternoons with Debby,” where, for two hours, I would read articles, short stories, devotions, even recipes. We would play word games and “memory” games. But mostly, we would sing! The group, which grew from seven to about thirty, loved to call out song titles and, together, we would sing them all—or at least as much of them as we could recall.

The most requested part of our Monday afternoon sing-alongs was the hymn sing. Those songs, and the message they deliver, never grow old. We shared together the stories behind the writing of many of the old hymns and quite often, it was clear that so many—residents, staff, and visitors alike—were touched by the Spirit as they heard the background story of their favorite hymns.

As for Mary—for as long as her speech center worked, she could always remember the words to the old hymns.

The memories of the joy that was evident for both my mother, the residents and me will never fade for me. While we were “making a joyful noise” here on earth, at the throne of Heaven, the Father was hearing beautiful choral renditions of praise.

I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you!

Heavenly Father, Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be pleasing to You. Let us forever sing Your praises. Amen.

DAY THIRTY-NINE
March 30

“And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’”
~ Mark 16:15 (ESV)

One of the things I often say to people is that you don't have to travel to a foreign country to be a missionary. We are each called to be missionaries right here in Brandon, Florida. That's the whole point of our "I am a Missionary" program. But then, sometimes, God really does call us to go somewhere else. I think it's important for us also to listen to those kinds of promptings from the Holy Spirit as well. I've felt God calling me to "go elsewhere" a few times. I often resist. When God called me to travel to the Dominican Republic, I started out not wanting to go. But I knew that tug was from God and I needed to respond. Each trip I took, I was stretched in some way and grew in my faith. I met incredible people and the experiences there were truly life-changing. When God called me to travel to Cuba, it was the same thing. I resisted. I felt strongly that God wanted our church to go to Cuba, but I came up with all kinds of excuses as to why I didn't need to go. I even asked four different people to lead New Hope's first trip to Cuba and no one agreed to do so. That left me. In the end, I led the trip, but I went dragging my feet.

And then – oh, what a great trip! There were four of us, all women, and we spent a week getting to know our sister churches, visiting missions, learning about the culture, and seeing God work in awesome ways. In a short time, we developed deep, meaningful friendships and experienced such meaningful, Spirit-led worship. Our hearts were touched by their prayers for us and their incredible faith. In fact, their faith bolstered my own faith in a way I can't quite describe.

Another interesting note - months before they received notice that we were planning a trip, the church in Buey Arriba had been asking God for help in building a new sanctuary. One person stood up in worship and announced she had a vision, "Four well-dressed women from the outside will come and help." When we showed up, they were not at all surprised to find four, well-dressed women. (I love the well-dressed part.) God has used us (our whole church) to be a blessing to the church at Buey Arriba as they build a new sanctuary. Over five trips now, we have brought money, building and other supplies, professional electricians, and so much more in an effort to come alongside our Cuban brothers and sisters as they build a sanctuary that will be a sign of God's power in a community that desperately needs to experience supernatural power, hope, and peace. And in return, they have given us so much—love, support, encouragement, bountiful prayers, and a renewed hope and faith. They inspire us and give us a beautiful picture of what faith and Christian community can and should be.

Say yes to those tugs from God to be a missionary here and sometimes even to "go elsewhere." I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God: Thank you for the blessing of being missionaries at home and abroad. Bless our dear brothers and sisters in the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Thank you for the example they are of how to live a life in full dependence on You. Amen.

Rev. Vicki

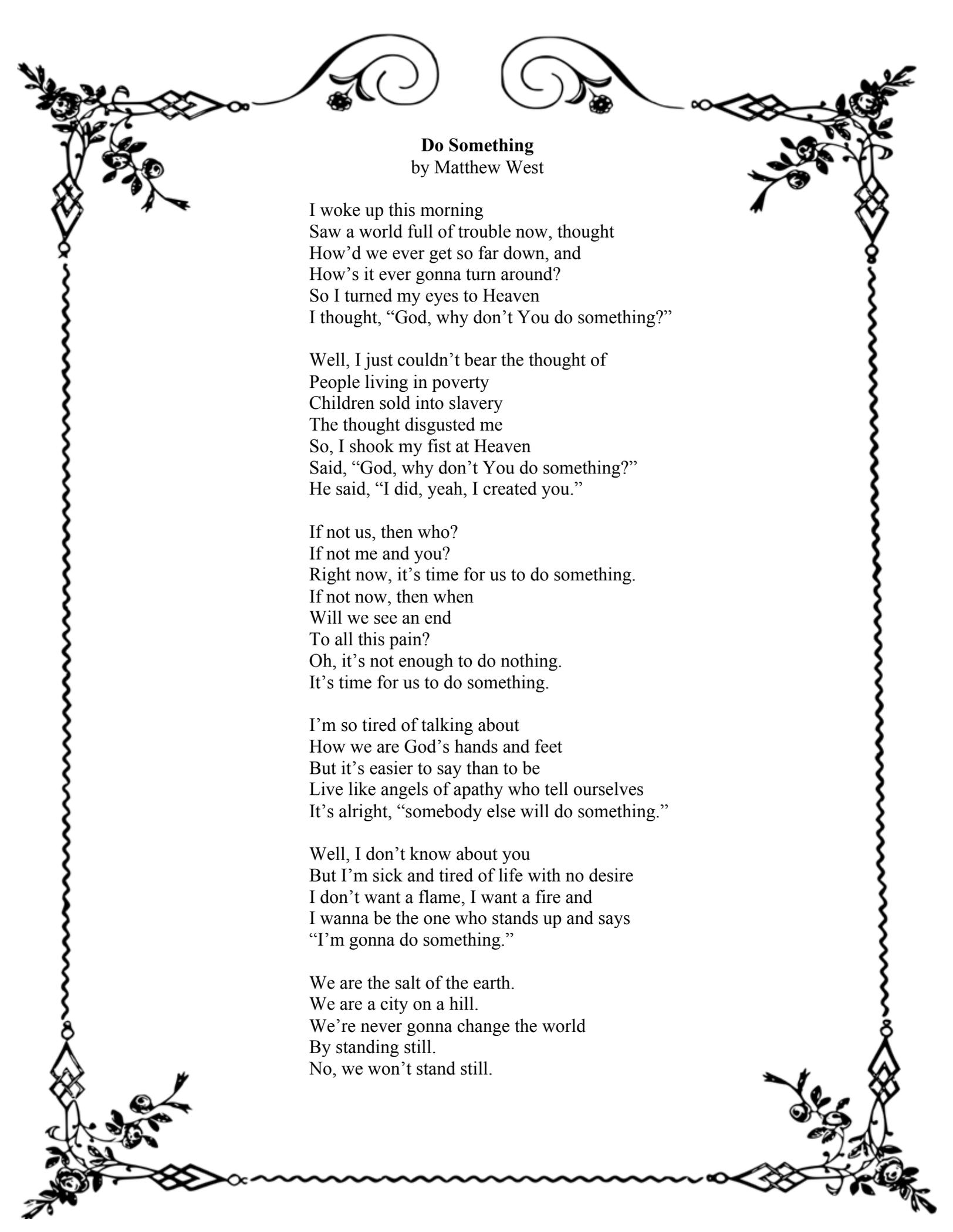
DAY FORTY
March 31

“When you happen on someone who’s in trouble or needs help among your people with whom you live in this land that GOD, your God, is giving you, don’t look the other way pretending you don’t see him. Don’t keep a tight grip on your purse. No. Look at him, open your purse, lend whatever and as much as he needs.” ~ Deuteronomy 15:7-8 (The Message)

She invaded my space as she brushed against me to put her bags on the bench where my family was standing, waiting to be called for a table at a restaurant after church. When I turned around, annoyed, I saw a disheveled woman who looked down to avoid eye contact. “Would you watch my bags while I go inside to get coffee?” she asked me nervously. I hesitated initially because I wasn’t sure what I would do if our name was called before she came back, and then the reality of her situation smacked me across the face. This woman was homeless, and those bags contained everything she owned. “Yes, of course,” I told her. As she walked into the restaurant, I felt a nudge in my heart to follow her.

I entrusted her belongings to my husband, and I found her standing sheepishly at the counter, handing her cup to the hostess. I told her I would like to buy her something to eat to go with her coffee. She immediately looked at the hostess and assured her she hadn’t asked me to do this. I assume they had an agreement that they would give her free coffee as long as she didn’t bother their customers. I confirmed with the hostess that she had not asked me for anything, and then instructed her to give the woman whatever she would like to eat. She chose two pastries, but asked for them without icing because the sweetness hurt her teeth. She thanked me profusely, as she took her pastries and coffee, collected her bags, and walked off. My heart ached watching her walk away, feeling helpless to do anything except pray for her safety. I have driven past this restaurant frequently since then, hoping to see her again and offer more significant help. She hasn’t been there, but each time I drive by, I offer another prayer for her safety. I am a missionary. I am sent and so are you.

Dear God, thank you for the opportunity on a Sunday afternoon to show a little bit of kindness to a woman in desperate need. And please forgive me for not doing more—for not stepping further out of my comfort zone to offer her a full meal, and a few moments of a compassionate relationship. Help me always to remember that by serving one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, I am serving You. Amen.



Do Something
by Matthew West

I woke up this morning
Saw a world full of trouble now, thought
How'd we ever get so far down, and
How's it ever gonna turn around?
So I turned my eyes to Heaven
I thought, "God, why don't You do something?"

Well, I just couldn't bear the thought of
People living in poverty
Children sold into slavery
The thought disgusted me
So, I shook my fist at Heaven
Said, "God, why don't You do something?"
He said, "I did, yeah, I created you."

If not us, then who?
If not me and you?
Right now, it's time for us to do something.
If not now, then when
Will we see an end
To all this pain?
Oh, it's not enough to do nothing.
It's time for us to do something.

I'm so tired of talking about
How we are God's hands and feet
But it's easier to say than to be
Live like angels of apathy who tell ourselves
It's alright, "somebody else will do something."

Well, I don't know about you
But I'm sick and tired of life with no desire
I don't want a flame, I want a fire and
I wanna be the one who stands up and says
"I'm gonna do something."

We are the salt of the earth.
We are a city on a hill.
We're never gonna change the world
By standing still.
No, we won't stand still.