**2015 Lenten Devotions**

***Unlikely Neighbors***



Experiences shared for your faith walk

by

**Bishop Jeff Barrow**

**Greater Milwaukee Synod -- ELCA**

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***Unlikely neighbors***

**The one who showed mercy**

**Preface by Jeff Barrow**

The story of the Good Samaritan has long been one of the most intriguing bible stories for me. It is one of those passages which seems to shatter the veneer of our religiosity and calls us to dig deep at the heart of discipleship. It defies our religious complacency and raises the question of whether our understanding of a merciful God is too small.

In Luke’s Gospel, a lawyer and religious leader puts Jesus to the test by asking: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Then he answers his own question by summarizing the Commandments correctly: “He says you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength, with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus commends him and says, “Do this and you will live.”

But then it gets complicated. Seeking to justify himself, the man says, “And who is my neighbor?”

New Testament scholar David Tiede in his commentary reminds us that the question “Who is my neighbor?” is not a new one. In Leviticus 19:8 “neighbor” refers to “the sons of your own people.” On the other hand, Deuteronomy 10:19 says that “neighbor” also includes the sojourner.

I suspect that in a world in which we have often migrated into like-minded communities, in which we listen to news that reinforces our already made-up minds, and in which we find churches where people look pretty much like us, the notion of neighbors being “sons of our own people” is pretty palatable. Jesus, however, in telling us the story of the Good Samaritan, would have us look beyond our comfort zones.

It could be that over time the image of a Samaritan has gravitated into our comfort zones. Thus we name care centers and hospitals with the name Good Samaritan. In Jesus’ day, however, Samaritans were considered altogether unclean. Certainly it would have been offensive to the religious insiders who heard this story. It also raises the question for us: “Who would Jesus tell a story like this about today?” A good Muslim? . . . a good homosexual? . . . a good kid in a hoodie? . . . a good policeman? . . . a good Democrat? . . . a good Republican?

Whoever it would be, Jesus would probe the narrowness of our own little worlds in order to point us to a God whose mercy is beyond our imagination.

Last year when I penned Lenten devotions about “holy places” it was suggested that many of the reflections were about places which might be considered “unholy”. This year, as we ponder the question “Who is my neighbor?” perhaps many of the reflections will be about those who might be considered *unlikely neighbors*.

**Bishop Jeff Barrow**

**The Greater Milwaukee Synod—ELCA**

**February 2015**

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**The sacrifices of God . . are a broken spirit**

**Ash Wednesday, February 18**

When I look at the world today, I am sometimes drawn back to the summer of 1970. The world and its future seemed altogether unsettled. It marked a generation's acknowledgment that we had somehow lost our collective innocence. The success of walking on the moon suddenly seemed so inconsequential amid the reality frustrations over the war in Vietnam and continued unrest in our city streets in the struggle for civil rights.

One month after the shooting of four students at Kent State University, I returned to work for a second summer at a service station in Yellowstone Park. At a time when summer jobs were not so plentiful, it seemed like the best option available.

It was good in that it exposed me to people from all over the country, mostly college students, but also a number of people either recently retired or simply looking for a job anywhere. Hours were long and pay was short.

Make no mistake, some of life in the park was as fun as it was frivolous. We worked hard and played at about the same pace. In an unsettled world, however, good times were often measured more by the amount of decadence than by the amount of fun. The truth is, I never encountered so many lonely people as I did that summer.

There were reminders along the way that a life was terribly serious, even sad at times. One of the transient workers was an older man named John. A solitary figure who struggled with alcohol, he rolled a truck on a mountain road late one night and was killed. No one could locate a family member. The summer chaplain offered a memorial service and there were two people in attendance.

That summer exposed my own loneliness, my own search . . . for meaning . . . for who I was . . . for who I would become. What was surprising about that search was my discovery that God was not absent, or indifferent -- amid my own personal struggles, nor amid the world's collective, struggles for meaning.

God may not have always been present in the familiar ways I would have expected. God’s voice was not heard simply in the safe, comfortable confines of my limited expectations. I began to discover a God able to find us in the darkness, willing to crawl into the crevices in which we often hide.

I also discovered that God's face is often shown to us through the faces of unlikely neighbors.

***Dear Lord Jesus, as we begin this Lenten journey with you, help us draw closer to you. Amen.***

Pray for the schools located in communities of poverty within our Synod that they are able to help children move beyond the limitation of poverty, and will be places of inspiration, safety, and positive change.



**Two farmers**

**Thursday, February 19**

The work day was supposed to be over. It was time to return to the monastery where dinner would be waiting. Even though they had worked all day under the hot Mexican sun, the two men did not seem to be in a hurry to finish their conversation. It was not an unfamiliar scene. Over the weeks the two had become fast friends.

Dwight was a college student, an agriculture major from South Dakota State University in Brookings. He was one of eight staff who spent the summer at Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles, a monastery just outside of Cuernavaca, as part of a youth encounter program through the Lutheran Church.

Antonio was also a farmer, a family man, who was part owner of one of the *ejidos*, a small collective farm in the village just below the monastery. In the spirit of the Benedictines, the monastery had helped organize cooperatives in the village and worked closely with the local people.

The monastery also maintained pastoral care for the three small villages, but their involvement permeated all aspects of daily life. Brother Ruben taught many of the young people in the village to play the guitar; in exchange they provided music for the folk mass held at the monastery. Community health was another arena. A second year nursing student was summoned to deliver a baby on her first night in Mexico. One of the service projects involved dismantling an old chicken coop which was to be rebuilt as a dispensary.

It was through working on a daily basis in the agricultural cooperative that our feet were most firmly planted in the lives of the people who lived there. Suddenly those villagers became not simply the object of our benevolence but our partners, our teachers, our friends, our family.

No friendship seemed to run deeper than the one which developed between Dwight and Antonio. Their common love of the land forged a strong bond able to break the chains of class and culture. At the end of almost every day they lingered in the field as they shared their hopes and dreams for better lives . . . for a better world.

What was most remarkable was that Dwight spoke hardly a word of Spanish, Antonio hardly a word of English.

Sometimes the power of a relationship trumps everything.

***Dear Lord, help us to remember that our differences need not get in the way of our friendships with one another. We are one in the Spirit. Amen.***

A contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps supports the Lutheran Church of the Great Spirit serving the American Indian population, providing a blended worship of Lutheran and native components.



**Pallbearers**

**Friday, February 20**

I'm not sure the men who served in World War II knew where to go with what they had experienced, nor did they ever learn how to talk about it fully. Thus my father and many like him created a pub culture as a place to share with each other what they chose not to share with others. Sometimes those pubs served as places to forget. At other times they became places to remember.

Over time as they learned to drink less and trust more, those gathering places continued to provide safe havens. After Joe's wife died, he was distraught. In the months that followed, he and my dad used to meet often for lunch at the AmVets Club, for a bowl of soup and a beer, but mostly to talk about Joe's sorrow.

That changed overnight when my dad had a stroke and lost both his speech and his freedom to be about town. Dad lived at the Lutheran home in Billings until his death two months later. It was yet another big loss for his friend.

As funeral preparations were made and the family began to gather, people showed up at the house with an avalanche of food: full meals, snacks, desserts, baked things, bought things . . . *good* things. I happened to step out onto the porch when Joe showed up with a cheese tray big enough to feed an army. As he came up the steps I shared an idea. The funeral was in two days, but my brother-in-law and I wondered if it wouldn't be fitting to gather a few friends at the AmVets the day before the funeral for a toast.

Joe's eyes lit up immediately. "I'll get'm all there."

There were nine of us who gathered the next day. None were unfamiliar to me. It was a fitting picture of dad's life -- golfing buddies, colleagues from work, the neighbor across the alley, Veterans, ushers from church. Over the next couple of hours words of deep friendship were expressed, interspersed with a slew of stories about a guy who everyone agreed was a colorful, comical character, an unapologetic teller of truth, and a most loyal friend.

I believe that faith and life, the sacred and the secular, are not the separate things we sometimes try to make them to be. As we gathered a day later for a service of Christian burial, as we gathered around the Word, as we remembered a child of God, it was most fitting that the Pallbearers were mostly the people who had been at the AmVets the day before.

***Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of loyal friends who understand what is in our hearts. Amen.***

When you say your prayers today would you also pray for Parish Nurses in congregations working with low income families?



**Mrs. Orvitz**

**Saturday, February 21**

Some people become neighbors over time and out of necessity.

Mrs. Orvitz was old when we moved next door to her. After all, I was 11 and she was pushing 50. She lived alone and seemed to have very few visitors. She had a son that lived some distance away. Whether she was widowed or divorced, we did not know for the longest time. She didn't volunteer much and we didn't ask much.

We moved in with our beloved cocker spaniel, Pepper, who was almost never off the leash, but who with a leash could manage to crawl through the hedge and encroach a full two feet onto her yard. In short order and without notice, a chain link fence appeared to fully separate the two back yards.

The woman seemed to live in anonymity. I dare say the most interesting thing about her life seemed to be a once large elm tree that stood in her front yard. It was either the product of a very bad pruning job or an ill-fated attempt at removal. However it managed to survive was amazing, but in the end it looked much like a 6-year-old's first attempt at drawing a tree: a thick trunk and a round ball of branches plopped unceremoniously atop.

When my mother sent me out to shovel snow for the first time in the new house with the instructions, "While you're at it, shovel Mrs. Orvitz's as well." I complied only out of obedience to my mother, even though I must thank her for starting a practice that has carried on to most of my subsequent neighbors, some of whom I never knew.

Over time, when people learn to fear each other less and trust each other more, things begin to change. I think the solitary woman next door no longer feared the intrusion of her neighbors. In turn, my parents -- through time and patience -- began to listen to, and hear, her story.

As the neighborhood itself aged, next door neighbors learned to depend on each other. Mrs. Orvitz kept a watchful eye on the neighborhood. My mom and dad, amid their own retirement years, made sure she got to the hair dresser and the grocery store on a weekly basis and to her doctor's appointments whenever she needed.

Sometimes I wonder why it takes so long to become the neighbors we are called to be.

***Dear Lord, help us remember that people who don’t invite neighborliness have a story to tell if we have the time and patience to listen. Amen.***

 A Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support the Lao Ministry of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, seeking to welcome Lao immigrants through a ministry of direct service, invitation, and evangelism training.



**Margarito and Maria**

**Monday, February 23**

Father José’s old Willys Jeep pulled up in front of the tar paper shack at the edge of Cuatemoc. Cuatemoc was one of three villages surrounding the Benedictine monastery not far from Cuernavaca, and the most remote of the three. I think it was an early attempt to deal with the urban sprawl spilling out of Cuernavaca in the early 1970s intending to create housing for a potential labor force for jobs that never materialized.

The result was a hillside full of huts made out of real tar paper and people doing their best to eke out any kind of living at all. Margarito and his wife Maria were no exception. Already a bit advanced in age, over the years they had accumulated very little other than the gift of survival. Their little plot of land did have enough space for a small garden which grew enough vegetables to supplement their Spartan diet and enough beautiful flowers to make one’s heart sing. The monastery was working with people like Margarito and Maria to extend their ability to grow things.

It was one of my very first experiences in being so near to people living in poverty. It is unsettling at first to see people living so close to the edge. I suspect it is the instinct of the privileged to lament what seems to be missing rather than to notice the wholeness that exists in one’s neighbors. Father José did not appear uncomfortable with the couple’s circumstances. He spent a good deal of time marveling at all the things that were growing in that small plot. Margarito and Mario proudly showed us one plant after another as though each was a rare and unique gift from God.

After a good while we were invited in to the front of the tar paper shack where there was a small table surrounded by folding chairs. I was surprised at how clean and comfortable the living space was. After a bit of conversation Margarito excused himself, slipped outside, and returned a few minutes later with three limes and a full bottle of tequila. I know the disciples objected to the costly ointment brought by the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet. In this case, whatever Margarito had spent and however (or from whomever) he had obtained the bottle, I have no idea. I do know they honored Father José and us strangers from the United States as though we were the body of Christ in their presence.

For an hour or so no one was privileged, no one was poor. We shared stories about ourselves, laughed a lot and talked about life as though it mattered. It was an experience of extreme hospitality without reservations.

The ride home from that remote place was very bumpy. We wondered if Father José was a little tipsy. What the heck. . . it was a Jeep and we were young.

***Dear Lord, thank you for reminding us that in You there is no rich or poor. Help us follow the example of people like Margarito and Maria by sharing generously of all we have. Amen.***

A Partner in Ministry of the Greater Milwaukee Synod with those in poverty: ELCA World Hunger Appeal



**Lillie**

**Tuesday, February 24**

For the longest time I thought she lived in a tenement apartment. Later I learned that the manager had rehabilitated most of the units and that Lillie had refused to let him in to do anything to hers. I'm not sure she let anyone into her world.

She seemed resigned to live in self-imposed confinement. A little bit of natural light managed to peek through the holes in her drawn shades, but otherwise the room was dark and depressing. Most of her time was spent on an old green couch, next to a tall green oxygen tank to which she was perpetually tethered.

Before receiving the sacrament she insisted on kneeling on the bare floor as she recited by memory the words of confession from two outdated hymnals. Whether she ever heard the words of absolution which followed is debatable.

It was incredibly hard to get inside Lillie's story. Once she hinted about a past life, a past relationship, a past hurt, but as she moved closer to true disclosure, she abruptly retreated. She seemed willing to remain in the crawl space between sickness and healing, between life and death.

Then one day Lillie found that she really was dying. Some emergency must have driven her from her confinement to a doctor's office. The doctor told her she had a very short time to live. Mercifully, Lillie was forced to spend the rest of her life in a hospice facility. It was there a remarkable transformation began.

The care she received from the nurses was immediate and overwhelming. The dignity which she had surrendered long ago was returned as a gift. The last days of her life were rich beyond measure. I happened to visit on a day when one of the nurses, on her day off, came to show off her newborn to her colleagues. She brought the infant into Lillie's room and placed the infant in Lillie's arm. Color rushed into the face that had been so pallid and Lillie smiled — I had never seen her smile before.

I consider those hospice workers to have been nothing short of miracle workers. They were the best of neighbors.

***Dear Lord, help us to remember that people who are cold and unsmiling on the outside can be infused with warmth when touched by your love, as brought by your caring servants. Amen.***

Your contribution for a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support Faith/Santa Fe Lutheran Church that ministers to both the Spanish and English speaking congregations with emphasis on the Latino people through worship, spiritual direction and leadership formation.



**Dr. Hulme**

**Wednesday, February 25**

I consider it a gift from God that Bill Hulme happened to pass by the entry way to Gullixson Hall and saw my pallid expression.

After a somewhat circuitous but successful journey through seminary, my senior interview did not go well at all. One of the two professors who held my candidacy in the palm of his hands took serious exception to what I had written in my senior paper. He was ready to deny me for final approval to be a pastor.

To this day I still don’t know exactly what it was that tripped his trigger. My paper was influenced heavily by a marvelous year of internship spent in a Hispanic congregation in the inner city of San Antonio. The content of the paper seemed neither unorthodox nor offensive, but right from the start he began to challenge not only the core of my thesis but seemingly the core of my being. It probably did not help that in defense of what I had written I suggested that an old Norwegian Lutheran professor’s own views seemed to be more Baptist than Lutheran.

My advisor mercifully chose to suspend the interview and have it reconvene in a couple of weeks rather than end it all together. I exited the small room and sat in stunned disbelief in the small waiting room outside, wondering if all that I had worked for through years of study had just flown out the window.

It was in that very moment Dr. Hulme happened to walk by. Interestingly he had been my original advisor at seminary and was one of the first people I met in a class called Formulation of Faith. He was head of the Pastoral Care Department at seminary, had published books on the subject, and was held in high esteem throughout the church. However, just weeks before class started that year, his daughter, struggling with post-partum depression, had chosen to end her own life. I think it must be doubly hard to, on one hand, be the voice of authority and, on the other, to be broken inside.

But right away Dr. Hulme noticed my look of devastation, interrupted his own journey, and sat down on the chair beside me. When I told him what had happened, he chose not to discuss my academic credentials nor my preparedness for ministry, he chose instead to assure me of my place as a child of God and remind me of the blessing of my own baptism. Suddenly, pastoral care became for me not a course of study but a word of grace.

A good neighbor seems to know how to sense pain in another and step inside.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for good neighbors like Dr. Hulme, who can step away from their own personal heartaches to extend a comforting, reassuring hand to another. And help us to be that kind of neighbor too. Amen****.*

A contribution towards a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support an after-school program called God Squad at Atonement Lutheran Church in Racine. The program emphasizes literacy, relationship, and faith development.

Your contribution for a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support Faith/Santa Fe Lutheran Church that ministers to both the Spanish and English speaking congregations with emphasis on the Latino people through worship, spiritual direction and leadership formation.



**Walter S.**

**Thursday, February 26**

In a tight-knit, family-centered country church, Walter was a bit of a solitary figure. On the surface, he didn't appear to be much different than most of the other men his age who lived in the far-flung place. Still, he was readily referred to as the black sheep of the family, though no one ever told me exactly why.

I suspect it had to do with some rough edges alongside some hard living, though I could never determine whether he was serving a sentence for past sins or chalking up some new ones as well. He had a perfectly kind, somewhat subdued, probably submissive wife who seemed to engender a lot of sympathy from the other women in the community. The two were always in church together, but of course attending worship doesn’t name what's going on inside the heart and soul.

Walter was one of the more frequent visitors to the church, which was set in the middle of a cow pasture. He came often to tend the graves of his departed family members, as though he might be doing some act of penance for a life of indiscretions.

I do have to admit, on the surface he had a bit of a curmudgeonly appearance. He would drive up in his old pickup truck and disembark, sometimes with chewing tobacco leaking from the corners of his mouth. One day he stopped at the parsonage before going to the cemetery and when he noticed I had a cold and sore throat that had compromised my voice, he said, "Just a minute, I got something for that," and from behind the seat of the pickup pulled out a pint of whiskey.

"A shot of this and a teaspoon of sugar and you’ll be good as new," Walter exclaimed. I took the bottle, looked at the tobacco dripping from his chin, and realized that compared to this, debates about the use of the common cup in the Eucharist were fairly insignificant. Surprisingly, I felt much better by the next day.

Within the church Walter was somewhat ostracized from the inner circle of piety, but I found him to be refreshingly honest about what was really happening in the church and in the community and even in the world around us. Furthermore, in a Southern community where, as in the North, segregation was rarely acknowledged but generally understood as a way of life, he was the only person I recall who used the word "friend" to describe a black man.

***Dear Lord, it is not our job to separate the sheep from the goats. Help us to welcome all in our midst and leave judgment to you. Amen.***

Remember the poorest countries of the world where many are forced to live on less than a dollar a day. Pray for nations of wealth to work toward economic justice and equity.



**Blizzard!!!**

**Friday, February 27**

When, as a single pastor, I moved from south Texas to Milwaukee in January of 1981, my first residence was a unit in an apartment jungle. It was convenient to church, the price was right, and although there were two large buildings with over 30 units each, the small outdoor swimming pool kept the hope of spring alive.

I suspect that in an apartment like that the need for privacy usually trumps the desire for community. It was a potpourri of people who lived there: many folks who were either retired or thinking about it, many young people who appeared to be just starting out, and a few couples. Everyone was seemingly on a budget and everyone seemingly thinking that this apartment was either the place before, or the place after, a dream home. People were generally respectful, but in truth we all kept pretty much to ourselves.

As someone who grew up in the North, I did not fear a January move from Texas to Wisconsin. Winter was no stranger. The winter of January 1981, however, was exceptional. Twice in that month Milwaukee was struck with paralyzing blizzards. In both cases there was a three-foot snowfall followed by below-zero temperatures. The snowplows could barely make it onto the city streets, so an apartment jungle with cars strewn in a large outdoor parking lot hardly made the priority list.

After each blizzard, people went out with whatever shovels could be scrounged up and began to dig out. The truth is, nobody was getting out at all unless we helped each other. It turned out to be an all-day effort both times. We were mostly strangers as we emerged from our cubicles, but during the course of a day of shoveling, we not only learned names for the first time, we had actually begun to have fun.

At the end of the day, we were still confined and dog-tired but ready to celebrate. In the absence of access to a grocery store, potluck parties sprung up all over. A six-pack of beer, a bottle of cheap wine, a block of cheese, hot dogs and potato chips suddenly skyrocketed in value. For a moment we were neighbors. Suddenly my own story became our story. We laughed, we shared what we had, we began to know each other -- and we all agreed what a marvelous time we had shoveling together. As we headed back to our own apartments, we pledged to get together again real soon.

Strangely, except for those two days of being snowed in, the promised reunions never happened. We all seemed to retreat to our own cells of confinement. We all moved out as soon as we had the money.

I have often thought about those wonderful days of strangers becoming neighbors. I have also wondered....why does it take a blizzard?

***Father in heaven, thank you for those occasions when strangers become friends and when we work together to solve a common problem. Amen.***

Your **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps fund the Racine Neighborhood Camp, offering free, multi-site, summertime Christian programming to children of the unemployed and ‘working poor’ in the urban neighborhoods of Racine.



**The Saids**

**Saturday, February 28**

September 11, 2001 shook the world for almost everyone in this country and seemed to subvert the way we live. Orange alerts and long security lines are now part of life as we know it in a country where we often cherish complacency. It also may have changed the way we look at neighbors.

I dare say it also changed things for Muslims living in or entering the United States. In the aftermath of September 11, every Muslim in the country seemed suddenly suspect. A collective prejudice, fueled by fear, was aroused in a way we might not have imagined.

On that fateful day in 2001, my wife, Kate, had a number of Muslim children in her school, including the beautiful children of the Said family. They were excellent students and some of Kate’s nicest students ever.

The Said family’s story was not unlike that of many immigrants who come to this country in search of a better life. The father, a gemologist in his native Palestine, was not certified in the United States, so he worked long hours at a duck farm in order to provide for his family. The mother was entirely grateful for the opportunities offered by the public school system in this country.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Saids were scared to death. It was as though a handful of extremists had suddenly become the faces of all Muslim people.

Our son's birthday was three days after 9/11, and we planned a small family celebration on that day. Sensing the dismay, fear, even shame of the Said family in the aftermath of the attacks, Kate invited them to Jackson's party. Mom and the kids came partly because it offered a moment of sanctuary, a safe place, a place to breathe again.

Their presence was also good for us as a family. In a moment of unthinkable tragedy, at a time when one’s own fears seemed to skew the way we looked at the world, their presence reminded us that the voice of evil is not the only voice to be heard in this world. We had such a good time that night.

Interestingly, the God of whom Mrs. Said spoke that night sounded a whole lot like the God I worship. . . the one who wills peace and grieves over the suffering people, wherever they are.

***Dear Jesus, in the face of unspeakable evil, remind us of the goodness that endures and protect us from our own unreasonable fear. Amen.***

Pray for a new ministry at Spirit of Peace in Milwaukee, a 40 bed Urban Retreat Center designed to welcome confirmation, youth, and adult groups to experience ministry in an urban setting. The program is structured to give participants opportunities for hands-on engagement in a variety of ministries during their stay.



**Joe Pirtz**

**Monday, March 2**

Joey McIntosh, who would later go on to pitch for the San Diego Padres, was my best friend growing up. He was 11 years old when the elbow of his right arm became inflamed. Baseball was life in Billings, Montana; therefore, the prospect of contracting the dreaded " Little League Elbow" constituted a life crisis.

I happened to be spending the night at his house when his parents realized that this might be more than a simple sore arm. "We need to get that looked at right away tomorrow morning," Mrs. McIntosh said. She also kept insisting that Joey was in serious need of a haircut, something she seemed to regard as an emergency. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out how they would make it to both the doctor and the barber without appointments on the same Saturday morning.

What I didn't realize was that nobody said anything about going to a doctor. Saturday morning we headed straight to a place called Joe's Barbershop where I first met an amazing man named Joe Pirtz. He may have been only a mediocre cutter of hair, but in a world before the Beatles, in a world where buzz cuts were the norm, Joe developed a strong clientele. It didn't hurt that he was also a fantastic pitching coach for the American Legion baseball team. Year after year Billings would produce not just good, but great high school pitchers, including Dave McNalley of Baltimore Oriole fame, and later one Joseph Anthony McIntosh — and a number of people who paid for college on the strength of their pitching arms. People said it was all because of Joe Pirtz .

There was much to like about Joe Pirtz. Overall, he was a very humble man whose own ambition to be a great pitcher was cut short by lung disease. His barbershop could have inspired a Norman Rockwell painting: it featured an old time barber pole, a stack of copies of the *Sporting News* and a black-and-white television with the Game of The Week. There always seemed to be more people talking baseball than getting haircuts.

Joey's mom returned just at the end of his haircut. The barber felt Joey's tender elbow for a couple of minutes, looked up at Mrs. McIntosh and said, "Yup, he's got it." He then proceeded to give her a list of instructions for recovery. I do not recall if seeing a doctor was on the list.

Over time I learned that Joe Pirtz was also a fantastic human being. He wasn’t simply interested in raising up star pitchers; he cared about people, especially young people. Joe would drive across town to any Little League or Babe Ruth field to watch someone pitch a game. He was as much interested in one's life as he was one's fastball.

As one who loved baseball but never developed a major league arm, I quit tryouts for Legion baseball when I was 16 years old and went to work at a camp in Minnesota. It was so hard to give up baseball that I didn't even tell the Legion coach I was quitting. Some weeks later, in the middle of a fantastic summer in the wilderness that would change my life forever, I received a letter from Joe Pirtz, saying how proud he was of me.

***Lord, thank you for the role models we had growing up and bless all those who continue to be an affirming presence to our young people. Amen.***

A holy place to the Greater Milwaukee Synod is the Meru Diocese of the Lutheran Church in Tanzania, Africa.



**Pastors**

**Tuesday, March 3**

As a pastor often called to the bed of a dying person, I never assumed that I had to be the primary caregiver in the room. Over the years I witnessed wonderful care delivered by a host of people: sometimes it was a nurse who faithfully walked beside the person, sometimes it was a spouse who refused to leave the bedside, sometimes it was a friend or a relative who dared to speak the truth about dying without compromising the person's dignity, and sometimes it was a neighbor willing to offer heartfelt prayer or share Scripture at just the right time.

Thus, when my dad lay in the hospital bed hovering between life and death in his last few days, I did not expect the two pastors from his church to keep showing up like they did. After all, I knew the routine. I could keep vigil with my mother. We could offer the prayers.

I was truly grateful for what Pastors Jerry and Rich had meant to my parents in their years of retirement. Not only did they know them well, they continued to call forth their discipleship and inspired them with the Gospel. They did that for so many people in that large, active, sometimes demanding parish. Thus, when they would show up at the hospital early in the morning on their way to work or late at night after a church meeting, I assured them (as would any self-respecting Norwegian Lutheran) that it was not necessary.

What I underestimated was the comfort I received from those visits in those final hours of Dad's life. The big things were already settled for Dad. Whatever faith meant to my father, I know that he believed in, found comfort in, was going home to a God whom he acknowledged was so much bigger than he was. The two pastors came to name that truth, and they were willing to offer assurance to my mother in her time of loss. At the very end of my father’s life, when Pastor Jerry came to the words of commendation, it brought great peace to my own soul.

Over the years I had come to know both of the pastors. They were both easy to like. . . kind, witty, articulate, thoughtful. But in this case they were more than the sum of their personalities. They came simply to bear the Word, to represent the whole church, to name a God bigger than any of us.

I guess it begs the question -- is there a church in your neighborhood?

***Lord, thank you for dedicated pastors like Jerry and Rich, who offer comfort and assurance to the dying and their loved ones. Amen.***

Say a prayer of thanksgiving and guidance for congregational partnerships within the Greater Milwaukee Synod, usually made up of two congregations coming from diverse cultures, languages, race, and economic settings, yet growing stronger in faith and understanding through shared experiences and resources.



**Bob and Dale**

**Wednesday, March 4**

I used to stop at the same fast food restaurant near my church every day. Every day I would order the same large black coffee. Every day the same woman would ask if I'd like cream. Every day I would reply, "No thank you."

"Something to eat with that?" "No, thanks."

Who could blame her? That's exactly what she was taught to do. After months on the same treadmill I dared do the radical thing. Across the street and down the block was a struggling little hole-in-the-wall café. I sat down at the peninsula-shaped counter which took up half of the dining area and ordered my usual. Bob was the good-natured soul who seemed to be the only one working there. By the third morning I didn't have to say a word. The large ceramic mug full of black coffee was waiting for me when I sat down.

Another pastor and I began to show up there on a regular basis. . . for coffee. . . for lunch. . . for meetings. . .for conversation. In time we learned that Bob and another man named Dale owned the café and lived in the flat above. Dale was usually out driving the food truck that was necessary to keep the café afloat.

In time, slowly at first, the two men began to give us a peek into their lives. We heard about their past lives, marriages, children, hard times, heartaches, new beginnings, hope. The two even began to attend church on a regular basis, seemingly more hungry for the Word and fellowship than for membership. Whatever it was, it seemed to work.

One day, out of the blue, Bob, who'd become very close to Pastor June, volunteered, "You know, everyone thinks we're gay. We're not. We are just family. We need each other." His simple statement spoke volumes on two levels.

So sad it was that the times seemed to require a disclaimer. Besides, such disclaimers seem to do little to dissolve suspicions. Far more profound was the statement about family, about friendship, about neighborliness as a matter of needing each other.

It is my observation that in a world where, ultimately, we ALL need each other, some of the best families, some of the best friendships are ones into which we are not simply born, but rather in caring relationships which are born of necessity.

***Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of caring relationships; help us to celebrate, without judgment, the loving relationships of others. Amen.***

Your contribution during Lent of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support Emmaus Lutheran Church with their mission ministry to the Latino community offering worship in a music school for kids, after-school tutoring, and kid-friendly worship.



**Angels among us**

**Thursday, March 5**

My son Jackson was about seven or eight at the time. We were visiting my sister and her husband in Palo Alto and went into San Francisco for the day to visit Fisherman’s Wharf. We had just finished lunch at one of the crowded piers and had stopped for ice cream when suddenly Jackson was missing. It was one of those moments I suspect every parent dreads. There were two small children and five adults: two parents, an aunt, an uncle, and a grandmother -- all responsible, all doters, all super cautious by nature. It was the slightest lapse where each adult thought someone else was watching.

Panic reigned. The whole incident lasted no more than a minute or two, and Jackson was never more than 50 yards away from us, but to a parent that time apart can be an eternity. It was not instinct but rather sheer terror that caused me to head down the sidewalk in the direction I did. As I was frantically searching, sifting through the constantly moving sea of people, suddenly the crowd parted ever so slightly and there standing in the hot summer sun, ice cream from a cone melting onto his hand, tears streaming down his cheeks -- was my child.

One can say it wasn’t really a crisis. Jackson was never really gone; the whole drama was over in a minute. But if it wasn’t a crisis, how does one explain the number of times I have been awakened in the last fifteen years, panic-stricken, trying to tell myself that nothing really happened that day?

Amid the images that remain etched in my mind are the faces of two individuals. One was the face of a well-dressed woman who spotted my son at exactly the same time I did. The way she gasped told me that she also must have been a parent. The other was the face of a strange-looking dude who was making his way down the sidewalk. I saw him look at my son as he too saw the tears stream down the boy’s cheeks. My instincts had already left the scene by then, but I think the man’s eyes were eyes filled with compassion and not ones filled with malice.

On those nights, when I suddenly begin to relive those awful seconds, I see those two faces and have to trust that at least one of them would have helped secure Jackson’s safety.

Sometimes the Good Samaritans of this world are people we do not even know.

***Dear God, thank you for the “angels” and Good Samaritans in our midst. Amen.***

Reformation Lutheran Church which has “an irrational commitment” to a community of poor people that society generally doesn’t want to deal with, is helped through your Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty**.



**Blessed are those who mourn**

**Friday, March 6**

Even in a world which frequently proves to be unfair, Katharine's death seemed altogether unfathomable. Blessed with a vibrant spirit and so many things for which to live, she stood at the doorstep of both graduation from college and engagement to her boyfriend.

She was on her way to see him on a beautifully placid sunny afternoon, one of those late autumn days to be savored. Traffic along I-94 was headed into Milwaukee at a comfortable clip, when suddenly a semi-trailer veered in front of her, pushing her through a guardrail and down an embankment. Suddenly her life was over.

Katharine’s distraught mother called me later that evening. Who could blame her for being inconsolable in a moment beyond grief? Who could blame anyone in a moment like that from shaking her fist at God? The Psalmist did it all the time. Why can't the rest of us?

As one might imagine, the sanctuary was packed at the funeral. At that moment the line between community and congregation becomes appropriately blurred. Faith and faithlessness are permitted to stand beside each other in front of God's promises. No one is asked to explain that which seems incomprehensible.

I 'm not sure anyone really knows what to say in those moments. I know that too often the real promise that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8) quickly degenerates in pious, unhelpful platitudes like "God needed another angel" -- as though that would somehow bring comfort and clarity to a moment no one should be expected to understand.

If anyone did understand, perhaps it was those who had been there before. As the service unfolded, I became suddenly aware of a good number of people scattered throughout the sanctuary who had themselves suffered the death of a child. I'm not even sure how well some of them knew Katharine and her family. They came without fanfare. None claimed to be past the point of grief. Most had quietly slipped into the pews, offered their hearts in prayer and then slipped quietly away when the service was over.

On that day they stood as the best of neighbors.

***Lord Jesus, when tragedy strikes let us be the kind of neighbors who stand beside the grieving, offering our silent presence and quiet reassuring faith. Amen.***

Project Return, a partner with the Greater Milwaukee Synod, helps men and women who have experienced incarceration to make a positive, permanent return to their community, family and friends. Pray for its ministry and those they support.



**At the back of the church**

**Saturday, March 7**

Almost every Sunday the very same group of people gathered early at the back of the church. Art, Roland, and Elmer had been ushering together for more than thirty years. Roland’s wife always accompanied him, and another woman always took the same early bus across town to make it to services on time. A man named Tom walked every Sunday, rain or shine, from his apartment four blocks down. They had a lot to offer a new pastor fresh out of seminary.

They were the bearers of our history, a rather illustrious history for what had to be one of the great churches in Milwaukee. Over time, you could learn not only the significant events in the life of the church, you began to learn also about the curious idiosyncrasies of some of the former pastors, about some of the trials of the congregation as well. Like putting a giant jigsaw puzzle together, they helped explain why things in the congregation were what they were, why some things made perfect sense and why others things made no sense at all.

Those people at the back of the church were the weekly litmus test for what was going on in the church and the world. Long before the first bulletin was handed out, there was a rehashing of current events, there was laughter, there were sometimes spirited discussion about what was really happening in the world and then there were sometimes brutally honest evaluations of programs in the church.

At the same time there was a deeper purpose to their gathering. They gathered faithfully to set the table for the celebration of word and sacrament. They were the people who welcomed both the regulars and the stray cats to the worship service. I sometimes compared them to the women who gathered first at the empty tomb, those who simply initiated the story that was so much bigger than anyone first imagined. In their own down-home fashion they did it well for many years.

I suspect they also came for each other. They were the small group ministry that churches today work so hard to recreate. Over the years I saw them look after each other on a weekly basis, speak words of grace to each other, pray for each other at times of extended absence or illness, grieve together at the time of death.

It took me the longest time to realize that Tom from down the street was not a member. He was a curious, solitary figure who never took communion nor was he there by the end of the service. In some ways he was a sad witness to the fact that many people in this world believe, yet don’t belong to a community of faith. In retrospect, I think that group of folks at the back of the church was the only church, perhaps the only family he had.

***Dear Father of us all, help us to remember that “church,” as we sometimes think of it, extends beyond the doors of the sanctuary to the people outside. Let us welcome them in. Amen.***

Your **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support Unity Lutheran Church connecting people through a soup kitchen, an adult center, and a free clinic.



**Finding common ground**

**Monday, March 9**

 In 1950 Cuero, Texas was a town of roughly 7,000 people with an almost equal number of people who were Anglo, Mexican and Black. People for the most part were friendly and cordial to each other, but like many towns in the United States, Cuero seemed divided into unequal thirds. Also, as in many towns in the United States, sports was what integrated the community.

In my first parish I helped Doug Wolf coach his son’s Little League baseball team which again drew from all three segments of the community. On the team was a ten-year-old with considerable talent, a boy named Robert who happened to be African American. Robert had an outstanding arm for a boy his age and a considerable lack of coaching. He also came from a fairly difficult home life, and, according to the uncle who signed him up had a bit of a temper. I remember the day he walked nine straight players to start the game. When I finally took him out in what I considered to be an act of mercy, he swore at me and informed me that he was “just getting warmed up.”

Robert was a nice kid, a bright kid, a good-natured kid beyond the veneer. He also had little regard for rules, failed to show up for practice, and even missed a game. Something had to be done.

I accompanied Doug to the uncle’s house where the topic of conversation was whether Robert would be allowed to stay on the team or not. We drove to the side of town where white people simply didn’t go very often and stopped in front of the uncle’s brick duplex. In a world where people are often cordial through avoidance of controversy, the meeting seemed strained at first. This was the reality of racism; the strain, caused by separation of races, seemed to surface with subtle rather than with overt anger, and it was expressed in radically different views as to what was best for boy.

In the middle of the conversation going nowhere, there was a reference to having served in Vietnam. Both Doug and Robert’s uncle shared that experience. Both had been scarred in their own way. The conversation shifted for a time away from Little League baseball to their common experiences. Both seemed to find a piece of common ground on which to stand.

I was struck by the power of this common ground to help initiate a civil discussion. Both men cared about the boy’s welfare, but agreed he was better on the team than off it. There were mutual expectations placed on the ten-year-old if he wanted to continue.

I left wondering how many of the world’s seemingly insurmountable issues could be solved by finding some common ground.

***Dear Prince of Peace, in our relationships help us learn to find solutions to problems by finding common ground. Amen.***

Contributing a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** provides support to All People’s Church using youth programming to raise up new leaders for the church and community.



**The expectant mother**

**Tuesday, March 10**

 On the first Sunday after Easter an extended family gathered in the back of the cathedral, Iglesia Lutheran of the Resurrection in San Salvador. After the service was over they waited patiently for a chance to speak with Bishop Gomez. First he had to meet with Pastor Santiago, who had experienced yet another murder of a young person in his community. It is a strange irony that El Salvador, which has so many kind and gentle people, can be plagued with so much violence. The fear of the *bandias* (the gangs) is real.

After Santiago left, the family came to meet with Bishop Gomez. It is the other side of the immigration story. In the family were two young men, 17 and 23, who had been resisting pressure to join the *bandias*. Hence, they were being threatened and the parents were being extorted. For so many, this is the beginning of the journey.

The two young men were ready to leave that very night, fleeing at great risk first to Guatemala and then through Mexico, until hopefully finding safety and a new life in the United States. From what I could gather they were ready to leave with few provisions and not much of a plan.

The church had planned lunch for after services, and the desperate family was invited to stay for the meal. Before we ate, Bishop Gomez assured the guests from the United States that water added to the soup to extend the meal was clean water. If the sacrament of grace was shared around the altar that morning, it was the holy communion of sending that was shared around the table afterwards. It was a time of shelter from the sweltering afternoon heat. It was time for saying goodbye. It was rest for the arduous journey ahead.

I could not help but focus on the eyes of the young woman who accompanied the 23-year-old. She was expecting what was presumably their first child. The word “expectation” often speaks of hope. In a different world, to be an expectant mother centers on self-care, prenatal care, preparing the nursery, impending joy. For this expectant mother, however, her eyes revealed a look of deep longing, of fear and of diminished hopes.

When I see the other end of the immigration story, when I hear mention of illegal immigrants, when I hear stories of beatings, incarceration and deportation, I cannot help but see the look of anguish in the eyes of this young woman and wonder. . . . Whoever she is, she is my neighbor.

***Holy Father, help us to remember what it must be like for people fleeing their own country in hope of a new life in America. We pray for their safety and for the comfort of the loved ones left behind. Amen.***

A Partner in Ministry with those in poverty is the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee. The Conference consists of faith organizations focusing on peace and justice issues in the region as well as the CROP Walk and a Housing Trust Fund for low income housing.



**Feliz Navidad**

**Wednesday, March 11**

The original Latino congregation at Ascension Lutheran Church was born almost an unwanted stepchild. It originated as a renegade splinter from another Lutheran body which had found a place to worship in Ascension but began to disintegrate shortly thereafter. What remained was a remnant of the splinter. It didn't help that the worship was confined to a small chapel down the hall from the huge sanctuary still living off the capital of once thriving Christendom.

It was Christmas Eve. The early service was packed to the gills as would be the 11:00 Candelight Service, often the centerpiece of the liturgical year. In between I was called on to lead the Spanish service in the chapel for a relative handful of people. If a sanctuary could replicate the manger as an out-of-the-way place with no room in the inn, this was the place. I entered that setting with limited Spanish and fairly low expectations for what might happen. What did happen now seems fairly amazing.

There were only about 30-35 people that night, but where they came from spoke volumes.

Of course, there were the three older women from the splinter group who came to everything, even when I chose to read them the whole Passion story on Good Friday, in King James Spanish no less. One of the women had a daughter with three beautiful children whose expectations for Christmas were not one bit diminished by the small gathering.

There was another couple, a man who drove 150 miles through the snowy roads so his wife from the Philippines could worship in Spanish. There was another woman from the congregation, a mail order bride of sorts, whose husband seemed to allow church to be her only moment of true freedom.

There was another older couple with their adult children as well as a handful of Anglo people from the larger congregation, who spoke barely a word of Spanish but who were in a sense true believers.

Finally, there was a fairly well-known street person from the neighborhood who wandered in to catch a break from the cold and stayed for the service when he heard there was a meal afterward.

Sometimes people become neighbors when there is a common hunger and a God willing to find his way into the out-of the-way places.

It was one of the best Christmas Eves I have ever experienced.

***Dear Lord, thank you for meeting us wherever we are in whatever company we happen to be and meeting our low expectations with unbounded love. Amen.***

A Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support Just One More, a food rescue ministry, rescuing food from restaurants, grocery stores and catering services that would otherwise be thrown away and then provided to programs for the poor at neighborhood churches in Milwaukee.



**Calvin**

**Thursday, March 12**

Becoming neighbors is rarely a matter of encountering two adjacent, perfectly manicured lawns with houses where dwell two compatible, perfectly functional families. Sometimes the question "Who is my neighbor?" gets altogether messy.

There are folks who often stand at our doorstep when it seems most inconvenient for them to be there. Sometimes it is poor people who are willing to sacrifice even their own dignity to come to our churches for help. All seem to come with deep needs. Some tug at our hearts. Some are painful reminders of our inability to easily fix fractured social systems. Some may make us altogether suspicious of their intentions in coming to our doorstep.

Calvin was a frequent visitor not only to my church but to others in the community as well. He always seemed to be in deep conflict with someone else, whether it was a neighbor, another family member, the police or the justice system. He always seemed to come with a story colossal enough to raise my suspicion.

Calvin had a way of holding power in a conversation. He was fully able to string a series of lengthy paragraphs together without taking breath. His style was animated, his speech rapid fire, his stories seemingly far-fetched, his request for money at the end always inevitable.

I never felt comfortable in that setting. Called to look on the world through the eyes of compassion, one often gravitates to the place of being the unjust judge in the story of the importunate widow. One begins to deal expediently rather than lovingly . . . never wanting to turn someone away empty-handed, always worried about feeding an addiction; offering a pittance instead of a real solution, wondering at the end if your actions came from the goodness of your own heart or from your selfish desire to remove the stranger from your line of sight.

Over time I stopped giving Calvin even the pittance when it came to honoring his request for money. I began to realize that his hunger went so much deeper than the hunger of those forced to beg simply to put food on the table for their children. I began to realize that, because of the way he was, no one ever probably listened much to Calvin. I decided that the best thing I could offer him was my attention. I began to try to hear without fidgeting. I quit looking for the first crack in the soliloquy, that brief moment when he paused to breathe so I could intervene and find a way to end the conversation. I stopped making my main objective to find a way to politely usher Calvin out the door. Interestingly, even though he left empty-handed, Calvin continued to show up.

I don't know if the two of us would ever become good neighbors to each other. I do know that I was a better neighbor when I stopped trying to pay him off and began to try to listen to what he had to say.

***Dear Lord, please give us the patience and the love to truly listen to our neighbors, whoever they might be. Amen.***

A holy place to the Greater Milwaukee synod: Alice’s Garden, Milwaukee.



**Bob Rohner**

**Friday, March 13**

   In a world where law enforcement officials sometimes contribute to public mistrust as well as to public safety, Bob Rohner seemed to provide a clear exception. I’m sure he had a reputation as a tough cop in some circles. During his battle with terminal cancer, as I came to know him well, I saw the heart of a person who cared deeply about others.

Bob was the retired sheriff in Racine County as well as a member of my congregation. Early on, I realized he was a keen observer of what went on around him. As a pastor new to the community, I didn’t even think he knew who I was. Then one day I pulled up behind him at a stop light; when the light changed he waved at me and pulled away. I came to realize later that he was always watching.

Bob’s plan to retire to North Carolina for a full life was altered by the discovery of cancer. At first it did not slow him down but it did keep him in Racine County. One day he offered to show me the county jail that had been built under his watch. You would swear he was showing off a brand new house as he described how it was built to serve the community. I was struck by the way he treated people within the facility. As we walked by the reception area and through the kitchen, he called people by name and asked about their families.

Upstairs, walking past the cells, many of the inmates greeted him as though an old friend. When Bob saw one man he recognized, he called him over and lamented that the man was back in jail. He noted that the man’s father had been in there before him and wondered aloud when the cycle would be broken. The man seemed to take it as encouragement rather than judgment.

As Bob’s illness progressed, I had to admit there are times when a parish nurse can be more valuable than a pastor, but I did consider it a privilege to be a part of his journey. Dignity is what we offer at a time like that. Bob and his wife, Sharon, lived on a little hobby farm. He had begun to raise llamas and was telling me about his dream to get rich through his new adventure. In the middle of our conversation Sharon appeared at the door, shook her head, and smiled as she told me he’d never get rich off those llamas because they were now his pets and he didn’t have the heart to sell them.

That sentiment was confirmed on another day when he took me to see yet another correctional facility. On our return he suddenly stopped his car, got out and halted all four lanes of traffic on Spring Street. With no badge, but with uncommon use of a position of privilege, he held up traffic while a flock of about twenty geese crossed the road. In a world where mistrust of public officials is often present, it is refreshing for a community to have a public servant like Bob Rohner.

***Father, we thank you for law enforcement officials who help to keep us safe, and we pray especially that these public servants relate to all neighbors -- the law-abiding citizens as well as those incarcerated -- with dignity and caring. Amen.***

Pray for the 11 X 15 Project, a coalition of religious and community organizations lobbying to cut the Wisconsin prison population from 22,000 to 11,000 by this year, 2015. Wisconsin’s oversized prison population has been documented to be a huge drain on state resources, and unfairly weighted toward people of color.



**Christy**

**Saturday, March 14**

I was fourteen years old when I attended my first funeral. It was the funeral for my grandmother who, everyone agreed, died much too young. She died of cancer which had gone undetected for too long. It was a day of sadness not only for our family but for the town of Belfield, North Dakota, where she and Grandpa lived for all of their married lives.

Almost fifty years later there remains in my mind many powerful images from that day including her not sitting at the organ that she had played for decades, including seeing her laid in the grave next to Uncle Jack who never returned from WWII, including the lost look in the eyes of my grandfather. No image was more powerful than the image of a man called Christy weeping as he limped away from the visitation. I have no idea what his real first name was. I know that Grandma’s maiden name was Christiansen and that she was somehow related to him. I know that he walked with a pronounced limp and that he was labeled “slow” by people in our community. Thus Christy became a fixture of sorts in a small town where everyone knew your business.

Far-flung towns in western North Dakota did not have an abundance of social services in that day. Like widows in the Bible, Christy became wholly dependent on the community itself for his well-being. Grandpa, who was the station agent in that railroad town, paid Christy a pittance, perhaps out of his own pocket, to do odd jobs around the depot. I suspect that some of the merchants in town did the same. Somehow Christy survived, and his slowness of foot, slowness of speech could not keep him from being a gentle soul.

Folks in town would tell you that it was my grandmother who helped him the most. She was also the one who believed in him. To her dying day Grandma staunchly maintained that Christy was not as slow as others imagined. She argued that many of Christy’s maladies could be traced to a hearing problem and did her best to communicate clearly and listen attentively. In a town short on diagnoses, she treated him with dignity.

I suspect that one of the true marks of being a good neighbor is having the ability to believe in another.

To this day I have a crystal clear picture of Christy limping away from church. Sometimes I can still feel his pain.

***Lord Jesus, thank you for reminding us that we all have different gifts. Help us to be attentive to one another. Amen.***

A holy place to the Greater Milwaukee Synod is the Serenity Inns in Milwaukee. This is a seven-month residential ministry for men in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. The ministry provides jobs, housing, and addiction counseling, group spiritual experiences and an evening meal served daily by various groups including 30 ELCA congregations.



**Corrine Reid-Owens**

**Monday, March 16**

The first time I saw Corrine Reid-Owens it was at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside where she was receiving a lifetime achievement award for her work in education. She was there with three other educators being honored for a lifetime of extraordinary dedication and excellence.

When it was her turn to speak, the older African American woman stepped to the microphone with great humility and great dignity. It was there I got a glimpse of this woman’s remarkable life. She talked about what it meant to be in charge of the same institution in which she had started as a janitor.

The larger story was more complicated . . . sadder. . . more wonderful than one might have imagined. As a young woman, a teacher, Ms. Reid-Owens migrated from the South, but since she was black her credentials were not recognized and she was forced to take whatever job was available. Thus her career as one of Wisconsin’s great educators began with mopping floors, which bears its own dignity, but was certainly not the work she sought.

I’m sure she was given a large ring of keys with which to unlock doors for others. Over time she began to unlock doors that many would have left closed forever. Many called her the Rosa Parks of Racine, Wisconsin. Somehow she was able to weave a spirit of kindness and compassion with a dogged determination to fight for civil rights that penetrated and persevered to open the closed doors of our world.

I probably witnessed this remarkable woman in her days of grace. I do not believe the journey towards civil rights is ever an easy one nor do doors open simply because of a heart filled with compassion. Securing civil rights comes at a great price and sometimes because of a willingness to go toe to toe with our oppressors. Even in her advanced age, Ms. Reid-Owens continued to be a strong voice for justice, continued to offer that heart of compassion, continued to inspire those around her, both black and white.

Corrine died on November 6, 2012, the day her country re-elected a black president, one day before her 100th birthday. There are few people in this world who are bigger than the things that divide us. I daresay we could all use a neighbor like Corrine Reid-Owens.

***Lord, thank you for those who raise their voices for human rights and justice, for those who work to build bridges between divided people. Amen.***

Your Lenten **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Racine. This church provides Terrific Tuesdays, an after-school program for neighborhood children, and Pan de Cielo, food and bible study for adults.



**Ione**

**Tuesday, March 17**

Ione Henkl was in her last days in the nursing section of Methodist Manor. It was hard to see someone who had been so strong, so independent, now almost entirely dependent on the care of others. However, even in her dying the one thing that had not been taken away was her keen mind.

Ione was part of a generation that carried the church on their backs for decades, the one Tom Brokaw once called the Greatest Generation. For them “commitment” was the key word -- a word which they understood and lived. On any given day they might be angry with the institution of the church, but their loyalty did not waiver.

Ione never married. Her job and the community of faith that surrounded her gave her life wholeness and purpose.

It was in the week of Ione’s death that I came to the nursing home to offer her communion for the last time. I think she knew the end was drawing very near. The big things were settled for her; she was not afraid to die. On the other hand, I’m not sure she was ready to go “softly into that good night.” There was a restlessness, even discontent, about her condition. She knew what was happening to her. Her breathing was becoming more shallow and her voice barely audible.

We shared the sacrament for what would be her last time on this earth. It seemed to bring some measure of comfort. Afterwards she pulled me close to her so I could hear her speak. She had something she wanted to tell me. As I leaned over the bed, fully expecting a world’s greatest pastor speech, instead she looked me straight in the eye and said, “Learn to preach.” Needless to say, I was a bit taken back.

Ione continued with uncommon clarity. She believed that I had some potential in that area; moreover, her complaint wasn’t directed simply to me but to the church she loved. She was tired of safe sermons. She wanted a clear and powerful proclamation of the Gospel. Still shaping the church she loved, even in her dying breath, her aim was to raise expectations. I think she was able to die in peace after that.

I left the nursing home wholly convicted, chuckling a bit, fully mindful of what this dying parishioner had said. Thirty years later I am still learning to preach.

Sometimes a good neighbor is one who tells it like it is.

***Lord, thank you for those who love your church and who are not afraid to speak their minds when they see room for improvement. Amen.***

A holy place to the Greater Milwaukee Synod is the Lutheran Church of El Salvador, a Companion Synod with many one-on-one parish partnerships that each of us know to be a faithful church even in the midst of poverty and violence.

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**Poinsettia**

**Wednesday, March 18**

The tradition of the poinsettia at Christmas can be traced to the sixteenth century in Mexico where a poor girl, unable to offer a gift to the Christ child, planted a gathering of weeds which grew into a beautiful plant. That plant has now become an integral part of the celebration of Christmas, a reminder of the star of Bethlehem, for its shape, and the blood of Jesus, for its color. In this country it often decks the chancel area of our churches at Christmas.

I’m so thankful for a person like Pat Kveen who, after the Christmas Day service, volunteered to take one of those poinsettias to the home of Mrs. Wolf. I had just returned from a string of services and was ready to relax when the phone rang. Pat had gone to Mrs. Wolf’s house and no one was there; something didn’t feel right.

Mrs. Wolf was always home. She seemed quite content living in that old house even though she was no longer able to climb to the second floor; with the help of her good neighbors, she moved her bed down into the dining room where guests were no longer entertained. It just didn’t seem right that there was no answer at the door. I put on my shoes, grabbed my coat, and agreed to meet Pat at that house.

By the time we arrived, a man across the street who had witnessed the failed delivery attempt, entered the closed-in porch area in front of the house and, though the door was locked, determined that Mrs. Wolf had fallen next to her bed and could not get up. She had spent Christmas Eve alone on the thinly carpeted floor. The couple who checked on her every day had gone to Illinois to spend Christmas Eve with their daughter. They would be gone barely twenty-four hours, but it was in that small space of vulnerability that Mrs. Wolf fell. She was able to answer questions: “Was she okay?” (*A little cold*.)“Was anything broken?” (*She didn’t think so.*) “Could she get up?” *No.*

By this time a group of neighbors had emerged from their houses. What could be done? The couple with the key would not return until later in the afternoon, and we couldn’t simply let her stay there. Just as the group rendered its decision to break a window, a soft voice was heard from inside: “There’s a key under the dictionary out there on the porch.” Mrs. Wolf was not of a mind to trust even her neighbors. I guess in a moment of crisis she decided to make an exception.

People grinned sheepishly -- somewhat amused, somewhat bewildered, somewhat ashamed that trusting can be so hard. The rescue squad was already on its way. The caretakers would return soon enough. With help, Mrs. Wolf was able to get back into bed.

The poinsettia is sometimes called *Flor de Noche Buena*, the flower of the good night. I thank God for a neighbor like Pat Kveen, the flower bearer, the woman of generous heart, the woman of good instincts.

***Dear Lord, help us to remember our neighbors, especially those who live alone, to keep a watchful eye out for their well being and to build their trust. Amen.***

Please add a prayer today for the homeless and the homeless shelters in your community.



**Las Colonias**

**Thursday, March 19**

It is interesting that the word *colonia* in Spanish means “neighborhood.” It is even more interesting when the word is held alongside the biblical question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Along the Rio Grande border in the valley of Texas, *colonias* is usually a pejorative term, a description of a border slum, an area beyond regulation that has little infrastructure to provide adequate water or other services. With it goes the notion that some people, regardless of documentation or the lack thereof, simply don’t belong in this country.

Our experiences with Mission Luterana San Pablo painted a different perspective. For two years young people from Lutheran congregations in Racine visited that little mission church. In the second year, part of the experience included home stays with congregational members and some were invited to stay with a family living in one of those *colonias*.

It’s a funny thing about the Rio Grande. Geographically, it is anything but the strict wall of separation we have created. It is just a simple river. The land on one side looks pretty much like the land on the other. Extended families live on either side and traverse the river as though it is the center, not the divider, of a larger community. Perhaps the *colonias* are more than anything a reflection of this reality.

The cluster of dwellings was actually nicer than anticipated. The house we stayed in was made of brick, not unlike many of the ranch homes I have seen in Texas. In that regard, it may have been one of the nicer homes in the *colonias*. A young woman, now a college student in the valley, escorted us down the row of houses.

“This houses is the house of *mi tio* (my uncle) . . . this is my other *tio* . . . that’s my *primo* (cousin) playing in the front yard . . . these are *mis* *abuelos* (my grandparents).”

The grandparents had been anxious for our arrival and eager to show us their garden and their animals. The people were not squatters; they were stakeholders -- owners -- who may not have come through Ellis Island, but people who had migrated in search of a better life, people who would do anything for the sake of their children.

On an overnight stay, each of us had a clean bed. What we discovered mid-stream was that all six family members spent the night in one room, just so their guests would have comfortable places to sleep. After a good breakfast, I wondered who in this story were the good Samaritans and who were the ones left by the side of the road.

***Dear Jesus, help us to be like the Good Samaritan in the New Testament of the Bible. Amen.***

A Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support Incarnation Lutheran Church, Milwaukee. Their ‘God Bless the Kids Spot’ neighborhood youth outreach ministry provides a safe, welcoming environment providing a range of enriching experiences.



**The guitar player**

**Friday, March 20**

 The rules have changed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Because of increased usage, because of our need for privacy, if one encounters another group on the trails, particularly on a portage, one group is supposed to yield to another. That was not always the case.

In earlier days it was not uncommon to go five or even six days without seeing another group of canoers. In the unlikely event you might meet someone else, you were not only allowed to cross the portage at the same time, you might even help each other.

We were on a portage up near the Canadian border when we encountered three couples, all graduates of Duke University, who were a bit out of their element, who clearly had brought way too much stuff on the journey into the wilderness. They were struggling over the portage and only too happy to let some of our kids assist them in getting to the next lake. I was at the end of the portage making sure that our gear was all accounted for.

I later learned that knowing three chords is no reason to bring a guitar on a canoe trip, but I happened to bring mine along on this one. Seeing the case parked at the end of the portage, one of the men asked the seemingly ridiculous question, “Hey, is that a guitar?” I smiled and assured him it was indeed a guitar.

We were chatting as the two groups finished the portage together. Of course, I dared ask the seemingly ridiculous question, “Do you play?”

He did. I asked if he wanted to play and told him I didn’t bring a pick, at which point he smiled, pulled one out of the pocket of his flannel shirt, and grinned. He exclaimed, “You can always find a guitar, you just can never find a pick.”

The young man tuned up that old guitar the best he could as the rest of us found places to sit on the rocky slope by the lake’s edge. For the next fifteen minutes as he played, we laughed, we listened, and we all sang along to the strumming of “Country Roads.” In the middle of what was a very long day of travel, on one of those days when a canoe trip proved to be more work than fun, it was the moment of rest, the time of renewal which we all needed.

On the one hand, this incident might seem frivolous but, on the other hand, I daresay it was the moment of grace that we all too frequently surrender in this world.

***Dear Lord, thank you for all the “grace moments” you shower down upon us -- if we would only pay attention.* Amen.**

A Partner in Ministry with those in poverty is the Crossroads Anti-Racism Program which, in conjunction with the Synod’s Anti-Racism team helps identify structures that maintain systemic racism and inequality and offer new structures that are liberating, life-giving and just.



**Trudy**

**Saturday, March 21**

Most people leaving church will greet a pastor at the back door with "good morning," even if the service is in the afternoon. Some will offer a genuine "good sermon," even if you yourself didn't think it was your best work. Some will offer a muffled "good service," which may leave you wondering what they meant . . . or just wondering if they *know* what they meant.

The ante goes up when someone squeezes your hand and says, " Your words really spoke to me today," or " "I felt you were talking to me today." Some will be eager to let you know they've been to the place you talked about, that they share your love of dogs or baseball or, like you, have an aunt in North Dakota.

And then...there is Trudy Tobias.

Not often, every couple of years or so, but when you seemed to need it the most, there would arrive in the mail a beautifully handwritten note expressing not only deep appreciation, but deep insight into what you might have said. The words of appreciation often seemed more eloquent than the words of your sermon. They not only warmed the heart -- they stirred the depth of your soul.

Trudy’s wonderful notes were not restricted to sermons nor directed only to pastors. Trudy Tobias is one of those rare, remarkable people who seems to know what is in the hearts of others and who has the unique ability to arrive at just the right time, expressing thanks, offering wisdom, sharing suffering.

Over the years I was one of many -- hundreds, perhaps thousands -- who had received one of Trudy's notes. People who had achieved remarkable things (even remarkably ordinary things), people who'd suffered the death of a loved one, people who were facing a crisis, people who needed to know they were not alone in the world: they had all heard from Trudy.

I saw a bumper sticker once that proclaimed, " 80% of life is showing up."

Trudy Tobias has the gift of showing up in a wonderful way. She is a great neighbor.

***Lord Jesus, we thank you for the people like Trudy who appear in our lives when we need them most. Help us to be more like them. Amen.***

A Partner in Ministry with those in poverty: The ELCA Malaria Campaign through the Lutheran churches in Africa, provide mosquito nets, insecticides, medication, health care, education and more to help eliminate deaths from disease.



**The soldier**

**Monday, March 23**

 Leaving home brought both a measure of unbridled freedom and a time of significant loss. At age sixteen I’d hardly ever been away from home -- in fact, hardly ever out of Montana.

Accepting a job at a canoe base in northern Minnesota involved a leap of faith and a separation from most of my comfort zones. One minute I was standing on the railroad platform with my parents and sister and then suddenly the North Coast Limited roared in from the west, paused ever so briefly and then continued on its way to Minneapolis with me on board. Although anxious to embark on this new adventure, I must admit I was overcome by the sudden longing for home which followed.

The only seat left in the car was next to a red-headed soldier dressed in his fatigues. As I sat down, surrounded by strangers, tears began to well up in my eyes. As the train reached full speed and the cars rattled across the rails, I sat in suffering silence for what seemed an eternity, hoping that none of these people would see me.

I think that the red-headed soldier must have known what leaving home was all about. He allowed me to remain there until I regained my composure and at just the right time said, “Where you going, man?” I began to tell him not about my great loss but instead about my great hopes for summer. He in turn began to share a bit of his own story. He lived in a small town in eastern Montana. His parents would be picking him up in Miles City. This was his first time to be on leave and go home.

I’m sure somewhere along the way we exchanged names. I do not remember his. . . . and I wonder sometimes if Jesus’ Good Samaritan ever knew the name of the man he stopped to help beside the road. And I wonder if the man lying there ever knew the name of the person who helped him.

I know that good neighbors are often those sent to us when we need them the most.

***Dear Lord, thank you for all the people -- both strangers and friends -- who play the role of Good Samaritan in our lives. Amen.***

A Partner in Ministry with those in poverty is the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. The work of the ELCA through the LIRS includes responding to people caught in conflict, advocating for their needs and interests, helping people access resources for basic human needs, working with foster care programs for minors, and legal assistance.



**Jessie**

**Tuesday, March 24**

The streets seemed remarkably safe in the 1950s. I think people were tired of war. Houses went up like little boxes and kids were free to roam, at least the block on which they lived. There were enough of us so that we sort of watched out for each other. Even at four years old, it was not uncommon to be out of my mother’s eyesight.

It *was* uncommon, though, that I managed to find my way two doors down and pick all of the tulips growing in front of Jessie Hancock’s house to bring them home to my mother. It was meant as an innocent gesture of affection. I expected a big hug and a thank you, but instead witnessed an awful gasp and a surprisingly terse, “Where did you get these flowers?”

Mom put the flowers on the table and quickly dialed the Hancock’s number. Embarrassed, she apologized profusely. Jessie was a kind-hearted woman with a child of her own, but even at age four, I could tell from the conversation that Mrs. Hancock was not happy about losing those beautiful flowers, especially in one fell swoop. I was ashamed.

Shame turned to fear when my mother told me we would go to Mrs. Hancock’s house so I could offer an apology. The walk two doors down seemed excruciatingly long and painful. Tears began to well up as we approached the door where Mrs. Hancock was already waiting. My confession, while not eloquent or lengthy, did include no small measure of contrition. (Although contrition itself does not relieve guilt.)

Jessie Hancock truly was a kind, warm-hearted and good neighbor. She did, however, make it perfectly clear even to a four-year-old that picking someone’s flowers without asking was not acceptable. Then she did the most surprising thing. She handed me a small bouquet of flowers from her backyard and told me to give them to my mother.

It was my first real lesson in the power of forgiveness.

***Lord Jesus, thank you for teaching us about forgiveness -- through your own example and through the examples of others. Amen.***

Today when you say your prayers would you add in a prayer for the unemployed in your community and the food pantries that serve them?



**Crossing the bridge**

**Wednesday, March 25**

Holy Communion Lutheran Church is a majestic Gothic edifice perched on a hill that overlooks the Root River in Racine. In spite of its imposing structure, it has been a welcome place in the neighborhood. Below, on Kinzie Avenue, there is a bridge which spans the river. Sometimes the river below is wider and deeper than one might expect. Often it divides people racially and economically. The challenge has been of how to cross the bridge.

Never was that division more apparent than the day I went to make visits in the hospital. In a day before HIPPA laws, almost anyone was likely to show up on Holy Communion’s hospital list. Sure enough, the woman I visited had been a member of the congregation more than 10 years ago. She was very pleasant and thankful for my visit. Then, as I was about to leave, she said with more surprise than anything, “Wow! it’s been a long time since I’ve lived in a white world.” An Anglo herself, she had remarried a black man and from that point her community was radically different. It was a sad admission about the world in which we live.

I don’t think one unravels the deep racial divide in this country easily until we confront racism head on. There are at first interim steps to be taken. Thus, over the years, I began to treasure the chance to take those steps, which I called simply, “crossing the bridge.”

The best place, it seemed to me, was at the local YMCA. In truth, it became the *only* legitimately integrated place for me in a world divided. For over 20 years I played basketball with the same group of people. Some days I would be the only white person in the gym. Not only did it provide good exercise, it also began to expose some of my deep-seated prejudice. Frankly, it forced me to surrender some preconceived images I had about other people. I think when we stop being afraid of others we begin to find common ground.

Over time some of those relationships became very important to my life. I was offered a glimpse -- though only a glimpse -- of what it meant to be a young black male living in a society . . . to be filled with hopes and dreams, on the one hand, and having the cards stacked against, you on the other. Equally important was that some of those people, now with names, began to offer the words of acceptance, the joy of play, the words of forgiveness that any soul longs to hear.

Sadly, I do not think that we have ever really crossed the bridge when it comes to racism in the world. All too often we find ourselves scampering back to our own sides. Every once in a while we seem to meet in the middle of the bridge, if only for a moment, and when we do we are all blessed.

***Lord Jesus, help us to build bridges which will bring your people together. Amen.***

Your Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support the Outreach Center in Kenosha, providing a clothes closet, infant supplies, GED and computer classes, bible study, youth programs and legal advice.



**Jovita**

**Thursday, March 26**

In 1976 San Antonio was said to have some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. The area around Lutheran General Hospital was one of them. While Our Savior’s Advent Lutheran Church was now located a little farther west of downtown, in a community birthed to give low income people decent housing, many of the members of the church still lived in the barrio around Lutheran General.

Just before I left to begin a year of internship in that parish, what possessed my father to help me find a 1967 Volkswagen bus -- a vehicle that he had previously labeled and condemned as a “hippie van” -- I’ll never know. In any case, it came in handy, since part of the duties of internship included picking up members before Sunday worship and other times as needed. Many people who have interned in inner-city parishes understand that aspect of call to ministry.

Part of the regular route included a trip into the heart of the barrio to pick up Jovita Hernandez, a woman between the ages of 40 and 50, who lived in a tiny house with her now aged parents. All of her brothers and sisters had been able to escape the barrio; most were quite successful and raising families of their own. Jovita, born with clubbed feet which were never repaired, walked on the sides of her ankles and never had the opportunity to go to school nor to master English like the rest of her family. I suspect poverty was the sole reason those feet were left without surgery.

Neither poverty nor malady could extinguish the spirit of an absolutely beautiful soul. Jovita was incredibly shy in so many ways but, given the chance, revealed a sharp mind, a heart full of compassion and a beautiful, authentic smile like no other. I’m not sure it was fair for her to be so accepting of her circumstances, but she did seem to treat her life as a gift and not as punishment. She earned the undying respect of her extended family and of the little mission congregation that was so much a part of her life.

One transmission, one brake job, and a heating system that would not withstand Minnesota winters later -- the van was surrendered by the end of my internship. However, the beautiful relationships spawned in that little Hispanic church did return with me. At the conclusion of internship there was a small party -- with tears, tortillas, blessed goodbyes and a few gifts. One was a simple thank you card from Jovita and, to my surprise, a five dollar bill. Five dollars was still a lot of money to anyone back then. From Jovita, it was a gift beyond measure.

***Lord, thank you for loving people like Jovita, who spread joy and good will wherever they go. Amen.***

Hephatha Lutheran Church’s worship is focused on the special needs of young people while putting a strong emphasis on life-giving partnerships in the church’s neighborhood. A Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support this ministry.



**Kep**

**Friday, March 27**

Like so many WWII veterans, my father did his best to bury those experiences deep within his being. So proud to have served his country, yet scarred by the face of war itself, he shared stories from that time in his life most sparingly. Outwardly, he maintained a certain stoicism. Inwardly, I don’t think he ever managed to stitch up or scar over completely the open wound in his soul.

A man from Minneapolis named Ted Keprios was one of dad’s shipmates. Like my father, he carved out his life beyond the war, sharing little of his experience. The war was over. There was relative prosperity. People married and had children. They moved away from the pain the best they could -- and to a certain extent it worked.

Dad and Kep stayed in touch with each other over the years, exchanged Christmas cards, spoke well of each other always, and saw each other only a handful of times. It was in those rare moments I caught a glimpse of another side of my father. My dad seemed more relaxed, more gregarious, less preoccupied than at any other time. What he could not say to others, he didn’t need to say at all to Ted Keprios. The two seemed so grateful to be in each other’s company.

It could be that neighbors are not simply those with whom we live in close proximity. Perhaps neighbors are also those far away who have been there in the midst of our trials, those with whom we have tasted common experience, those who have stood with us in our moment of greatest trials and accepted us in our deepest fears without judgment.

Kep and my dad seemed to be that for each other.

***Dear Lord, thank you for solid, lasting friendships -- for those people who know and accept us as we are. Amen.***

Cross Lutheran Church’s Bread of Healing Empowerment Ministry providing food, AODA counseling, medical and dental care, access to employment and other support services is partially supported with Lenten contributions from a **Dollar a Day for Poverty**.



**The attendants**

**Saturday, March 28**

Unless they are excessively vain, I daresay most men are not comfortable with their own bodies, much less someone else’s. All that changed for Walter Hermanns as Multiple Sclerosis began its assault on his body. Not only did he have to become increasingly attentive to what was going on with himself, he also had to be vulnerable enough to entrust others with his care. This was most evident in his frequent visits to the pool at the YMCA in Racine.

Thanks to the generosity of many of the town’s funeral directors who collaborated to obtain a lift for the pool at the Y, Walter was able to get in and out of the water. For him it was a source of much renewal. The muscles which so often labored on land were able to move with much greater freedom in the cool water. However, to get to that place of freedom required the accompaniment of a group of individuals, mostly retired men from Walter’s congregation, for assistance. Not only did they drive his accessible van from his house to the Y and back, they also learned to help dress and undress him in the locker room.

I have always wondered about the friends in the Synoptic Gospels who helped lower the paralytic through the roof. Certainly, Jesus would have recognized not only the faith of the man he healed, but he would have also acknowledged the faith and devotion of those who attended him.

Not all tasks in ministry are glamorous ones. Most, in fact, are rather ordinary -- or even mundane, I suspect. But then there are the tasks that initially call us out of our comfort zones, call us to touch others in a way we would probably not choose were it not for the respect and the compassion we hold for a treasured friend. Jesus reminds us that we are called first to be a servant community.

My guess is that those men who ushered Walter into the holy bath -- not just for a span of days or weeks, but faithfully for years -- would not speak about their extraordinary service. They would talk about what a privilege it is to be called neighbor, and how richly their lives are blessed because of it.

***Lord, thank you for those who serve others in a spirit of love and humility. Amen.***

A Partner in Ministry with those in poverty is WISDOM and its SE Wisconsin Chapters of MICAH, SOPHIA, RIC, and CUSH — faith based advocacy groups that seek to bring a voice of support and care for the poor and the powerless.



**Sponsors**

**Monday, March 30**

I was at the bottom of the stairwell when Jenny, standing at the top, blurted it out, “Loretta isn’t baptized. We want to know if she is going to hell or not?”

The “we” was a group of young people, a blessed blending of kids from church and kids from the neighborhood, who comprised the youth choir at Ascension Lutheran Church. They were all street tough on one hand, all terribly fragile on the other. The both lived with and demanded a certain level of honesty.

Interestingly, Jenny herself was in confirmation at that time. Like many of her classmates, she didn’t seem overly excited about learning what Luther’s Small Catechism might have said about the subject of holy baptism. This however, was about her friend and neighbor.

For the next five or six weeks, after youth choir on Thursday nights, the group of interested parties would gather around a candle in front of the altar in an otherwise dark sanctuary. We pretty much went through the curriculum we’d been using for confirmation. Suddenly Martin Luther seemed both pertinent and relevant again. The topic seemed to give birth to deeper questions like “who are we?”, and “who is God?” and for that matter “who cares, anyway?”

At the end of the conversation, still at the beginning of the journey, twelve year old Loretta chose to be baptized. It was certainly not a matter of parental pressure. Even though they live right across the street from the church, Loretta’s mother decided not to attend the service. It was fitting then that the youth choir members stood with her at the font and were recorded as the sponsors at her baptism. It was a great celebration that morning.

***Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of holy baptism and for all the sponsors who gather at the font. Amen.***

The Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan are dedicated to alleviating the conditions associated with poverty, homelessness, disaster, and incarceration. They are an Outreach for Hope Partner in Ministry with those in poverty.



**Rick**

**Tuesday, March 31**

Baseball was big time in Billings, Montana. It didn’t matter if it was Little League or not. From our Cincinnati Redleg-styled jerseys, to the way we put on our sanitary baseball socks, to a hundred pre-game rituals and superstitions, it all seemed to matter. You can imagine, then, what it meant to be eleven years old and in my first midsummer hitting slump.

The American Legion baseball team was what fueled our passion. They were in the midst of running off 18 consecutive championships. The season began before the snow was off the ground when all were welcome to come and hear Coach Ed Bayne preaching fundamentals and talking a ton of baseball. With frost still on the ground, even ten-year-olds could go to Legion practice, learning to throw and catch and run bases. When the season for Little League and Babe Ruth League began, all the younger folks were dismissed to their respective leagues. It was a baseball family of sorts, so my friends and I could usually be found in the bull pen rather than in the grandstand during the Legion game.

I knew right where to go with my hitting slump. Rick McLaughlin was the star of the team. He had already secured a major college scholarship. He was a great guy and, best of all, he batted left handed. When the game ended, I intercepted him as he was running in from the outfield, expecting only a word of encouragement. When I told him of my frustrations, he said, “When is your next practice?” “7:30 tomorrow morning,” I replied sheepishly.

He smiled and said, “I’ll be there,” as he quickly ran off to greet two high school girls, who seemed to be as anxious to talk to him as I was.

I arrived at Lissa Field at 7:15, hoping -- yet not daring to say a word to any of my teammates. Surely a local celebrity had better things to do. Besides it was the night after a game. Who could blame him for oversleeping?

Practice began sharply at 7:30. I tried not to be disappointed, took the field for batting practice, still scanning the horizon. Then at 7:35, walking west on Rimrock Road, was a solitary figure. As he neared I saw a person with a baseball glove, spikes dangling at his side. Rick McLaughlin, star athlete, local celebrity, college-bound hitter of doubles, spent the next two and a half hours with fifty 9-12 year olds, watching us all hit, offering suggestions, kibitzing with our coach. We were all amazed at his presence.

I was proud to tell Rick that I got three hits in my next Little League game. Who cares if one was a bleeder through the infield? In baseball a hit is a hit; it doesn’t matter which league you are playing in.

It’s a funny thing what impact that morning had upon my life. And the question wasn’t about whether or not an eleven-year-old could break a slump. Neither was it a question about whether I could become the next Rick McLaughlin. As I began to fully understand the magnitude of his gift, the real question -- the only question -- was whether or not I could even begin to pay it forward.

***Lord, thank you for all the people who take time to mentor others. Amen.***

Today when you say your prayers will you add a prayer for those who need to come to community meal programs and for those who provide them?



**At the doorstep**

**Wednesday, April 1**

I did not know him. A young couple who had recently joined the church called me in distress. The man’s nineteen-year-old cousin, with whom he was very close, had taken his own life. He had no church. Would I be willing to do the funeral? I didn’t say I’d be happy to do so. Who can be happy at a time like that? But like most pastors I know, I obliged.

I have heard suicide referred to as a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Everyone pretty much agreed that such was the case with this young man. Distraught over a romantic breakup, he did something that seemed so out of character for him.

The funeral home was overwhelmed with visitors. Most of them were young people. Most looked like they had never been to church or left it some time ago. One wondered if the service of Christian burial was going to cut it.

What was apparent in the overcrowded chapel was the number of broken people, the number of people wondering if they could have done something, should have done something -- the number of people left searching for answers.

As the service began I realized that, for a gathering of so many unchurched people, there was an attentiveness to what was being said. Furthermore, there didn’t seem to be a concern about the use of God language in the service. More important was the question of *which* God would be offered. Would it be the harsh God, the always-judging God that has often become the face of Christianity for an unchurched world? Or would it be the ineffectual God who benignly blesses everything, who through the lips of the presider puts the best veneer possible on the face of our broken humanity? Or would it be the God of the Cross, who weeps with us and dares to enter even into the depth of our hopelessness?

Actually, the words of the service of Christian burial were more fitting than one might suspect for those who stand at the doorstep of organized religion. Within the service the words from Romans 8 --*“Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus”* -- spoke volumes.

***Dear Jesus, in those times when words alone are inadequate, when even nonbelievers look to the church for answers, help us find comfort in the knowledge that you are with us in our suffering. Amen.***

Your Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a day for Poverty** supports Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, which offers a Wednesday ‘Noon Prayer Service and Lunch’ each week for persons living in poverty to be fed spiritually and to enjoy a warm, nourishing meal.

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**Washing feet**

**Maundy Thursday, April 2**

  Who really knows why they came to this place? Tradition? Belonging? Isolation? Hunger? Broken hearts? Conviction? Or were they *called* to this place?

No longer able to kneel at the railing, she bowed her head as she cupped her hands to receive the bread and wine. She knew the power of a word of forgiveness: *The body of Christ given for you.* Next to her knelt a young man. He came alone this night, more lost than he could name, wondering where he fit -- if he fit -- in this world: *The body of Christ given for you.*

Next to him were three young middle school girls. They seemed to come as a set. Fun, frivolous, innocence in one breath; girls becoming women in the next. Complex, complicated, hopeful beyond measure . . . fearful: *The body of Christ given for you*. . . *The body of Christ given for you. . . The body of Christ given for you.*

He was such a tough old bird -- stoic, proudly rough around the edges -- yet a man with a heart of gold. This was the one place he could come to cry: *The body of Christ given for you.* Beside him was a couple. Everyone wanted to be like them; they were successful, sophisticated, seemingly on top of the world. No one would have guessed how broken, how fragile was their life together: *The body of Christ given for you*. . . *The body of Christ given for you.*

Next to them was a woman holding her two-year-old, the absolute joy of her life. Child of God, gift from God: *The body of Christ given for you.* As I laid my hand upon the child's head for a blessing, he looked at the bread. His eyes said, "What about me?"

She closed her eyes as she reached out her hand, not in sorrow but in thanksgiving. She knew, I knew, we all knew she would not be here by next year. . . *The body of Christ given for you.*

On the one hand, they seemed like most unlikely neighbors, a random gathering of folks you'd never expect to see in the same room, much less expect to see at the same table. On the other, they were the body of Christ in the world -- vulnerable, broken, loved, made whole once again. Freed now to wash the feet of others.

***Dear Lord Jesus, as we near the end of our Lenten journey with you, help us to welcome the “unlikely neighbors” you put in our path. Amen.***

A Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps Capitol Drive Lutheran Church develop its assets of music, a Senior Gathering Place, and TenderCare Child Care Center into an outreach mission to the surrounding neighborhood.



**Woman, behold your son**

**Good Friday, April 3**

Pastors Gene Peisker and Stan West seemed so far ahead of their time. They were the first people I remember using media, even if it involved plugging a phonograph into what was probably the only outlet in the wooden lodge at Lazy Day Ranch, a bible camp along the Boulder River in Montana which somewhat later would be renamed Christikon.

They played a 45 record with a popular song from Simon and Garfunkel called " I Am A Rock".

When the song was finished, they asked us what we thought. Amazed not only at the cutting edge use of media, but also at the thought that church and society, faith and life, were somehow connected, we gushed with excitement.

Suddenly Gene Peisker's normally delightful countenance stiffened. He told us it was the saddest song he had ever heard, and then he began to recite the lyrics: *I am a rock . . . I am an island . . . an island never cries . . . and a rock feels no pain*. Maybe he saw what was coming -- a world growing increasingly centered on the self, a world losing a sense of the collective good, a world of "language laboratories" where individuals would be stuck in gray cubicles to learn Spanish, a world where the oft-repeated message to children was to believe in themselves.

Those two young pastors told us there was more to life. They talked about life which included crying and feeling pain as part of existence. They talked about church not as a matter of recitation as much as it was about living in the world. They talked about following Jesus as becoming people for others.

The gospel of John, while it describes the death of Jesus in its gruesome, graphic detail, also includes Jesus continuing to shape the world around him. Thus there is this moment of intimacy where Jesus looks at Mary and the beloved disciple saying, "Woman, behold your son . . . son, behold your mother." Some have called it the birth of the early Christian community, the community of fragile, vulnerable believers who will carry on the work of Jesus in the world.

There is no neighbor like Jesus. The Word become flesh, the Son of God offering his life on a cross, is as unique, almost unthinkable, as it is amazing. But for us, it is the word of grace, the birth of faith, the establishment of a community of people who depend on each other. It is the calling to live as people for others that the world so desperately needs .

***Dear heavenly Father, help us to value your gift, your sacrifice, and to answer your call to live as you would have us live. Amen.***

The Lutheran Office on Public Policy–Wisconsin is a partner of the Greater Milwaukee Synod, which puts an emphasis on hunger and poverty, along with justice and human rights, working within the legislative halls of Wisconsin.



**Zane**

**Saturday, April 4**

My sister and her husband Sam live in a very nice condominium complex in California.

People are for the most part very respectful and cordial to each other. After all, they share the common interests of maintaining property values. At the same time, living in close proximity often means that respecting privacy is a top priority. So as in any neighborhood where much of our busyness is spent away from where we live, the home invites sanctuary as much as it invites community. In a condo complex where there are common walls, sometimes those walls divide rather than connect.

One of those walls separates Sam and Marilyn from the adjacent condo owned by an Indian couple, Roxanne and Sameer. When Roxanne became pregnant with her first child she would frequently go outside to exercise. Her activity not only piqued the curiosity of her neighbors but offered more time for interaction.

I daresay it was the birth of that child that served as a catalyst for a much closer relationship. A baby boy, Zane, with big brown eyes appeared first in arms, then crawling, then walking, then speaking, then having his own curiosity about the people next door. In those first years of Zane’s life, names and faces became tied to a growing family, to a history, to disclosure, to community.

When Zane turned four, Marilyn and Sam took him to a bookstore for his birthday, and it has become an annual ritual. In that time there has been a sharing of cultures, of traditions, of religious backgrounds. It has resulted in becoming friends not only with the people next door but with the grandparents who come to visit all the way from India.

My sister and her husband have come to delight in watching Zane -- and now his little sister, Anneka --grow up right before their eyes. I suspect they have become more than neighbors; they are neighbors becoming family.

A simple wall that used to divide one property from another now connects one family to another. I think that everyone has a need and a hunger for authentic community. Sometimes it takes a child to give us permission to become that community.

***Dear Lord, thank you for our neighbors of many generations, of many cultures. Amen.***

Redeemer Lutheran Church runs an Outreach Training Center with special focus on relationship building with the diverse community of neighbors, businesses and Marquette University. Your Lenten contribution of a **Dollar a Day for Poverty** helps support this center.



**Our Mission**

To provide financial support for congregation-based ministries that walk with people living in poverty within the Greater Milwaukee Synod — ELCA*.*

**How does it work?**

Outreach for Hope seeks financial gifts from individuals, congregations, grants, special offerings, and fundraisers. It then distributes those gifts as grants to the congregations working among the poor.

**How did it begin?**

Outreach for Hope of the Greater Milwaukee Synod – ELCA came into being in 1995 by action of the Synod Assembly. Outreach for Hope will celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2015.

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## **Why is your support needed?**

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The Greater Milwaukee Synod is committed to remain a ministry

presence to areas of poverty within the Synod. Those areas have become a tremendous mission field. The churches, by their outreach, have become vital beacons of hope and support in their communities. Your gift means they can focus less on survival and more on being the light of Christ in the communities they serve.

**How can you help?**

You can participate in a variety of ways including the donation of cash gifts, stock transfers, and bequests. Donations can be made by mail to the Synod office or online at www.outreachforhope.org.

***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”* Luke 4:18**

**Thank you for making these devotions part of your Lent!**

The devotions in this resource are part of a Lenten program called

**A Dollar a Day for Poverty.**

The program’s purpose is to raise an awareness of the issues of poverty around us and to highlight the nineteen ministries of Outreach for Hope that minister in communities of poverty in the Greater Milwaukee Synod—ELCA**.**

**We hope you have or will consider giving a Dollar a Day for Poverty** as you meditate on the devotions each day. If you can give more, consider what might be a sacrificial offering each day to remind you of the great sacrifice that Christ made for us. It will also serve to remind us of those for whom every dollar counts, as they struggle each day with the oppression of poverty.

**At the end of Lent** if your offering is part of your church’s Lenten program, please turn in your collected gifts to your church’s treasurer, with any checks made out to your church and earmarked for ‘OUTREACH FOR HOPE.’ You are welcome to send your donation directly to Outreach for Hope.

**OUTREACH FOR HOPE,**

**1212 S. Layton Blvd.**

**Milwaukee, WI 53215.**

You may also donate online by going to our web site at **www.outreachforhope.org**

**Thank you!**

**Bishop Jeff Barrow** for writing this year’s devotions.

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**Mary Romskog** for typing the devotions and designing the email artwork.

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