**Who is this Man?**

*Small Group Discussion Questions*

Week 1 – **Luke 14:1-23:** A Revolution in Humanity - April 7, 2013

What are some ways we show others that they have worth and value?

Respond to the following statement: “Christianity is flourishing wonderfully among the poor and persecuted while it atrophies among the rich and secure” (John Ortberg).

Read **Luke 14:1-23**. We read of a dinner Jesus was invited to at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees (the religious teachers of the time). At dinner Jesus heals a servant on the Sabbath (a big no, no) and exposes the sharp division in society between those who were considered to have worth and those who did not. What does healing on the Sabbath convey regarding the worth of the servant in God’s eyes? The worth of all people?

Read **Luke 14:7-11.** What do you think Jesus is trying to convey in verse 11? How is being humble before God show us the world through His eyes?

Read **Luke 14:12-24**. The lame, poor, crippled and blind would never have been invited into the Pharisees’ home for fear of making people unclean. By telling the Pharisees that the poor should be invited what is Jesus trying to say to the Pharisees? How would you translate the same situation into your own life and our community both inside and outside the church walls?

The message of the Gospel is all-inclusive; the Kingdom of God is not just for a specific group of people, but also for all. **Luke 14:16-23** shows us that we can make excuses why we cannot find time for God and his call in our lives. When have you recognized those times in your life and how have you returned to God and embraced His call in your life?

Keeping in mind the parable of the wedding feast and the great banquet, why is it important to reorient our understanding that reaching out to others is a lifestyle rather than a once a month or yearly event?

**Inspiring our community:** If someone, perhaps a friend, family member or co-worker etc. told you they weren’t worth anything or didn’t have value, how would you respond?

Monday April 8 – Luke 1

Tuesday April 9 – Luke 2

Wednesday April 10 – Luke 3

Thursday April 11 – Luke 4

Friday April 12 – Luke 5

Saturday April 13 – Luke 6

**Who is this Man? Week One Devotions**

**4/8 – Luke 1**: Over the next six weeks we will read through the gospels of Luke and Mark. As we explore Christ’s impact on our own culture (how we value and view others etc.) the narratives we have of Christ will convey His immediate impact of the world through his ministry. Luke is one of three synoptic gospels (Mark and Matthew are the others). Though the three include many similar stories, slight variations exist and each has it’s own specific audience, writing style and unique contributions. As you read through Luke chapter one consider the ways in which God worked through Mary and Zechariah and how he called these parents of Jesus and John the Baptist to depend upon Him. How have you responded to God’s call in your own life?

**4/9 – Luke 2**: Merry Christmas! I know it’s April (and the 9th at that so this is no April Fool’s joke). We read today of Jesus’ birth, the shepherds hearing the news from the angels and the beginning of Jesus’ childhood (they grow up so fast). Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world, born in a humble stall, is not presented to the cultural royalty of the day but brings the good news to lowly, poor shepherds. Who would you want Jesus to meet if he came up to you? Where would you take him?

**4/10 – Luke 3**: John the Baptist always points people to Jesus. It can be easy to become wrapped up in our own accomplishments and abilities, marveling at those who follow us on twitter, our blogposts, facebook etc. and forget that our lives are not about ourselves but about each and every one of us pointing to Christ. How have you found yourself playing the role of John the Baptist, sharing with someone that it is Jesus who lives in you, giving you the strength for each and every day and situation in life?

**4/11 – Luke 4**: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (vs. 18). Jesus came for all people, for those who at the time were viewed as having little to no value. How might you be called to bring the “good news to the poor”, “proclaim liberty to the captives” and “those who are oppressed”?

**4/12 – Luke 5**: Have you ever felt unworthy of Jesus? Like Peter I don’t feel that I deserve God’s blessings. When we recognize all he has done in our lives, how he gives us his unconditional love, grace and forgiveness even though we daily turn away from him and rely upon ourselves we are truly able to see the power of the Gospel and the hope we have in Christ.

**4/13 – Luke 6**: There is truly too much in this chapter to touch on in a few sentences. As you read Luke six, pay attention to whom Jesus heals, when he heals then and what that means. Consider verses 20-23 and how they shape our understanding of the value Christ places on our lives.

Week 2 – **Matthew 22:15-22:** There are things that are not Caesar’s - April 14, 2013

What goes into your decision making process? Who do you consult and what sources do you rely upon on a consistent basis? Why do you rely on those sources?

Unlike many other countries, cultures and communities, in America we have a very specific idea of private ownership. Whether a piece of property, car or other material possession, if we bought it or it was given to us we own it. How does this understanding make living as though all we have comes from God difficult?

Read **Matthew 22:15-22**. What does Jesus communicate regarding Caesar’s authority in this passage?

Jesus tells the Pharisees to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (verse 21). What belongs to God?

Jesus speaks of an everlasting kingdom, a kingdom where Caesar has no authority. Our faith in Christ as Lord of our lives shows us that God has the final authority in our lives; creation belongs to God. How does this understanding of our ultimate allegiance being to God affect your faith?

When living in a cultural environment that doesn’t align itself with the gospel there are three responses to the tension between Christ and culture: revolt against culture, withdraw into Christ or assimilate Christ into culture. Why do none of these responses work? Which response do you find yourself leaning toward?

How do you response and see the difference between God’s authority in your life and the cultural and government authority?

What makes growing in and living in faith difficult in an environment that doesn’t support dependence upon God?

Monday April 15 - Luke 7

Tuesday April 16 – Luke 8

Wednesday April 17 – Luke 9

Thursday April 18 – Luke 10

Friday April 19 – Luke 11

Saturday April 20 – Luke 12

**“Who is this Man?”**

**Devotions Week 2**

**Monday April 15 - Luke 7**

Think about someone you've known for a long time.  Think about everything you know about them, their life, experiences, character etc.  Did you know everything about them after your first conversation?  Probably not.  How did you get to know them?  Like the people we interact with in our everyday lives, we didn't know everything about Jesus the first time we heard about him or what he did for all of creation upon the cross.  Instead, as we have lived our faith each and every day we've come to find out more about who he is and why he saved us.  This chapter of Luke helps us (and the people back in Jesus' day) to answer the question "Who is this Jesus guy and what is he about?"  Based on the reading today, what have you learned about Jesus?

**Tuesday April 16 - Luke 8**

Skipping back to our theme of last week's sermon, do you remember how Jesus changed our understanding of what makes someone valuable and how we show people they are valued both by ourselves and by God?  Well, here we read, albeit briefly, about some of the women who were a part of Jesus' ministry.  Luke holds more references than any other Gospel to the part women played in Jesus' ministry (and we'll address that topic in a few weeks).  Because women were not seen as influential at all in the world at Jesus' time their involvement in his ministry shows us a great deal about what it means to include, rely and build-up those who the surrounding culture would rather use and/or take advantage.  Who might some of the "undesirables" in our own city?  In your life?  How might you show them their worth in God's eyes?

**Wednesday April 17 - Luke 9**

Authority.  It is a bit of a loaded word is it not?  Luke chapter nine speaks to authority in many ways, specifically that Jesus' authority is higher than any earthly authority.  Now he might not come out and say "I am the one in charge, I have the authority" using those specific words BUT lets see what he *does* do: sends out the disciples with the power to cure diseases, feeds five thousand people, is transfigured and heals a boy of an unclean spirit (not to mention foretelling his death a couple of times).

  Jesus has authority over much more than the Caesar's and emperor's of the time.  We are called to understand him as being Lord of our lives.  Sometimes we might view the authority of his Lordship in our lives negatively - as though he is just one more person trying to control our lives - but based on what Jesus did in this chapter of Luke, why does his authority (the changes he wants to and is able to make in our own lives and circumstances) an authority unlike those that seek to oppress and control people?

**Thursday April 18 - Luke 10**

Every time I read this passage I am reminded of Noah, the ark and all those animals coming in two-by-two.  Jesus doesn't send the seventy-two out alone but with someone else; they don't do ministry alone, it just isn't an option.  What does this passage tell us about how we should approach reaching out to others and the importance of the faith community and working in community with others?

**Friday April 19 - Luke 11**

Jesus is quick to point out at the end of chapter 11 how easy it can be to let our pride and desire to "appear" a certain way for others get in the way of a true transformation of our hearts.  Have these words from Jesus ever convicted you of how much work and emphasis you place on what you look like from the outside rather than the inside?  In Matthew's gospel we read that out of the heart the mouth speaks (we cannot hide what we look like on the outside because those feelings and thoughts will surface through what we say and what we do).  God does not want pretense or a mask, but our honest and repentant hearts.  It is when we begin to "clean-up" what is on the inside that we become more aware of our need for a Savior and just how gracious his gift of life is to us and to the whole world.

**Saturday April 20 - Luke 12**

What comes to mind when you read Luke 12:22-34.  Just before these verses Jesus tells his friends not to fear and the parable of the rich fool points to somewhat pointless nature of our material concerns. Think of a time when you have been anxious about a situation: how does your knowledge of God's faithfulness and mercy change your understanding of why we shouldn't worry?

Week 3 – **Matthew 5:38-48**: Love your enemies - April 21, 2013

What is our natural reaction and response to being laughed at, mocked, taken advantage of and or/when we feel disgraced by someone? What causes us to respond in such a way?

The words “us” and “them” carry a lot of weight. How does your understanding of the body of Christ call us to leave behind our natural inclination to separate and group people together? What is difficult about doing so?

Read **Matthew 5:38**. This was the general rule at the time of Jesus. How do verses **39-41** contrast with this idea? What do we convey when we respond with love to those who seek to harm us?

**Inspiring our community:** Read verses **44-45**. What does this mean for our city? How would you rewrite these verses in reference to Stockton?

Read verses **46-48**. Jesus says it is not hard to love the people who love us back – after all they build us up with their love. Why is it necessary to love our enemies? What would Jesus call us to do so? Who does that call you to love in your own life? Why does this kind of love an act of faith?

How is forgiving someone else an exercise in faith? How is asking for forgiveness an exercise in faith?

Monday April 22 – Luke 13

Tuesday April 23 – Luke 14

Wednesday April 24 – Luke 15

Thursday April 25 – Luke 16

Friday April 26 – Luke 17

Saturday April 27 – Luke 18

**Who is this Man? - Love Your Enemies – Week Three Devotions**

**Monday April 22 - Luke 13**

    Do you have enemies?  Who are they?

When I think of the word enemies a very specific image comes to mind.  I automatically think of someone who is doing physical violence, someone who I don't really see as a person but more of a concept; I judge them by their actions and attribute their worth and value to their actions against me and against others.

   Jesus calls us to respond differently, to see all people as He sees them: through God's eyes.  By sending Jesus to the cross God was giving us a very specific idea of how he see's us, his creation, and how he would like us to see all those around us.  What does the world look like when we look at all people as God see's them?

Why is seeing through God's eyes so difficult?

**Tuesday April 23 - Luke 14**

   When we first began this sermon series and asking ourselves the question "who is this man" we read the majority of this chapter from Luke.  Jesus calls us to love our enemies.  Continuing from yesterday's devotion, sometimes we have very specific images that come to mind when we hear the word "enemy".  Reading through chapter fourteen we get perhaps a slightly different idea of what the word "enemy" might mean.  For the Pharisees anyone who is unclean could in a sense have been considered their enemy.  Those who were unclean kept them from doing and being as they liked.

   Keeping such a broadened understanding of the enemy concept in mind, who are some of the people who might be considered your enemies?  Who are the people you might classify as "unclean"?  We don't always recognize our prejudices or biases or the fact that sometimes we don't want to deal or work with certain people simply because doing so will be difficult for us.

   God, however, loves us and calls us to love all of his creations, including those in whom we struggle as sinful humans to find value.  Think about one of the people in your life that you struggle to love, one of the "enemies" you would rather avoid.  Now pray; pray that God would give you the strength, the words, the sight to look through his eyes to love that person and share your faith with them.

**Wednesday April 24 - Luke 15**

   Consider for a moment the first two verses of chapter fifteen of the Gospel of Luke:  "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [Jesus].  And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

   After these few verses we read three "lost" parables: the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son (more commonly known as the prodigal son).  Taken in context with the first two verses the lost items, the sheep, coin and son are not you and I, as we can sometimes read the texts, but those who do not know, who have never heard the message of grace and salvation; the hope found in Christ.  We are the shepherd; we are the woman with the lost coin.  We have a pasture full of sheep out there we need to care for and with whom we need to share our faith.  We know that God is with us as we do so and we know that His Spirit is working in and through us helping us to share the Gospel and point those around us to the grace we have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Thursday April 25 - Luke 16**

   Have you ever had a friend that you didn't quite like when you first met them?  Someone who took a little while to "grow on you"?  Or perhaps you were working with a group of people and there was one individual on the team you figured would never make a worthwhile contribution or have anything of any meaning or worth to say?

  We're really not very good at seeing the big picture in every situation.  That friend who took a bit for you to grow to love, that member of the team who came up with the best idea these are the people we often underestimate and whose impact we cannot see until we look back on the experience from somewhere in the future.  The Pharisees and religious leaders in Jesus time struggled to understand why Jesus seemed to care about the poor, the outcasts, the widows and the lame; they could not see the value of the individuals with whom Jesus wanted to spend his time.  Throughout the Luke's gospel he emphasizes Jesus' love for those in need.  Jesus saw the big picture.  How can we see the big picture when it comes to being the body of Christ and reaching out to those in need, seeing those whom we tend not to really see through God's eyes and not our own?  Pray that God will open your eyes and that the Spirit working through you will help you to see how we are all called to be a part of the body of Christ.

**Friday April 26 - Luke 17**

   *Growing for others.*  It's an interesting catch phrase (and one of our measures of a mature believer at St. Andrews).  But what does it mean?  Growing for others means that when we seek to grow in faith, as we read God's Word, pray, serve and worship, we are not doing so only for our own benefit but so that when we share our faith with others we have some of the tools to help them learn and grow in faith as well.  Growing for others and understanding that as believers we are a part of a greater body - the body of Christ - of believers in the world, we recognize that our faith is not just about ourselves, but is directed toward others; our faith is "other-oriented".

   In this reading from chapter 17 of Luke we realize that growing for others isn't always a matter of what we do but sometimes it is a matter of what we choose not to do.  There are going to be times when we need to make a decision not to do something, (to drink, listen to a certain kind of music, see a specific movie, participate in an event etc.) because we might move someone else to misunderstand and turn away from God (that is after all what we do when we sin, turn away from God).  We will all be tempted to sin, but we do have the ability to not lead others into temptation.  Are there people in your own life who you can support in the growing their faith by not doing something?  Pray that God would give you the strength to be other-oriented and focused outward rather than inward as you grow in faith.

**Saturday April 27 - Luke 18**

   Verses 9-14 of this chapter of Luke present a classic "we" and "they" scenario between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.  The Pharisee considers himself to be better than the tax collector and goes so far as to point it out before God, thanking God that he is not like the tax collector.

   It can be all too easy to compare ourselves to others and come up smelling like roses because of our particular method of comparison and set of standards.  Does God divide us up as the Pharisee did?  Why is it that we are to look to the example of the tax collector when it comes to living our faith and how we come before God?

   As human beings we will always struggle with labels and dividing people into specific groups.  How can we as the body of Christ in this community work against that struggle?  What must change within our own heart individually?  What must change within our congregation?  Pray that God might give you the strength today to come to Him in humility, asking Him to work in and through you as you seek to share your faith and knowledge of God's grace and mercy with those you meet.

Week 4 – **Matthew 23:** The Good Life vs. the Good Person - April 28, 2013

What comes to mind when you hear the word “hypocrite”?

Jesus is the one who helps us understand hypocrisy and its impact on our faith and the faith of others. What does **Matthew 23:1-7** teach us about hypocrisy?

Hypocrite comes from the Greek word for stage actor – someone who takes on a specific role that is significantly different from who they are. Is there a “part” or “role” you feel you have to play in your own life that isn’t really who you are? Does the church (meaning other Christians) pressure you into hiding certain aspects of your own life?

Read **Matthew 23:23**. What are the “weightier matters” according to Christ? Why do you think the Pharisees neglected them? Why do we neglect them today?

Read **Matthew 23:25-28**. It is clear that our culture does not embrace expression of personal weakness or owning up to the fact that we are not able to rely completely upon ourselves. Knowing this to be our reality how can we break that understanding and cycle of masked self-sufficiency within the church? How might focusing on the “weightier matters” help? In whom must we place our trust in order to do so? What are some areas in your own live that you struggle with hypocrisy?

**Inspiring our community:** What can we do as a church to break the understanding that all Christians are hypocrites? How would you respond to someone who talks about Christians and the church as a bunch of hypocrites?

Monday April 29 – Luke 19

Tuesday April 30 – Luke 20

Wednesday May 1 – Luke 21

Thursday May 2 – Luke 22

Friday May 3 – Luke 23

Saturday May 4 – Luke 24

**Who is this Man? -** Week Four Devotions

**Monday April 29 - Luke 19**

The good person vs. the good life; an interesting comparison and point of discussion.  What is the difference between being good person and living the good life?  We read throughout the new and old testaments plenty of stories of those living hypocritical lives; those who say one thing but turn quickly to do another.  Our faith, our belief in Christ calls us to live honestly and humbly before God; to take off our masks and realize that we cannot hide who we are from God but even more importantly that God does not want us to hide who we are from Him.

   Chapter 19 opens with a familiar children's story (and song) about a man named Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who did not deal justly with those he taxed.  Not only was he surprised by Jesus wanting to eat with him but those who knew of Zacchaeus' reputation grumbled at Jesus' choice of dining as well.  Zacchaeus was living "the good life", rich and well-off but through his time with Jesus he realized that the good life was not what he needed.

    Jesus could have hung around only those who already knew him, those who were already good people but that is not why he came to earth.  What we do find in the first ten verse of chapter 19 is yet another example of why Christ came to earth; "to seek and to save the lost" (vs. 10). Give thanks that though you were lost you have been found and redeemed by Christ.

**Tuesday April 30 - Luke 20**

We read in chapter 19 about Jesus entering into Jerusalem on a colt (what we celebrate and remember on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter).  So starts the beginning of the week of the passion narrative, the events leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection.  In all of the gospels we read short narratives, as we do in the 20th chapter of Luke, where the authorities try to trap Jesus in an effort to remove his influence.

    As Christians sometimes I wonder if we don't speak up about our faith or engage in discussion about God because we are afraid someone is going to try and trick us; to try and discredit what we believe and cause us to doubt what we have heard about who God is and how he is working in our lives.  While not saying anything might make us feel more secure in our faith (after all if we don't talk about it people can't point out whatever flaws they might think they see), if we don't share our faith we've missed part of God's call in our lives.  We are all called to be witnesses to who He is and how He is working in and through our lives.

    Do you feel confident in sharing your faith and talking about God with others?  If so, why?  If not, why not?  May the Spirit work and move through you to show you not only your own faith story but also that in sharing faith it is God working through each and every one of us to speak boldly in His name.

**Wednesday May 1 - Luke 21**

This question of the good life verses the good person continues to play out in these chapters at the end of Luke.  What might the narrative of the widow's offering be telling us about what it means to be a good person (vs. 1-4)?  How are we to understand that even though we will be persecuted for our faith that we are to remain true to what we believe and humble of heart when confronted by those who seek to harm us (vs. 10-18)?

   With such a future ahead of us it might be easy to turn and make "the good life" our priority over being of strong character.  But the widow did not bemoan her lack of wealth but gave joyously and generously out of what she had.  When we focus on the good life we can get caught up in what we don't have rather than what we have been given; we look through the eyes of our culture rather than those of our creator.

   How have you been blessed?  What have you been given that you share with others?  Keeping the widows offering in mind today what do you feel you have little of?  Pray that God would give you the strength and the humility to give out of that small amount so that you might be dependent upon God, trusting in what you cannot see that is given only by Him.

**Thursday May 2 - Luke 22**

Have you ever wondered what Jesus and the disciples talked about when he wasn't healing people, telling parables etc.?  What was His relationship like with the different disciples?  Were there inside jokes and lot of laughter or was Jesus a pretty serious guy?  We read in the Gospel of John that there was one disciple who Jesus especially loved (though we don't have his name).  What was Jesus' relationship with Judas, the one who betrayed him into the hands of those who would lead him to the cross?

   Perhaps one of the most poignant parts of the 22nd chapter of Luke comes when Judas leads a crowd of soldiers into the garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus.  He walks up to Jesus and kisses him.  One of his very own whom he had spent years of ministry with uses such a tender sign to betray him.  And Jesus went to the cross that this man's sins might be forgiven.  The depth of forgiveness which we receive in Christ Jesus through faith is like nothing we are able to offer to others or understand ourselves *but* it is in Christ Jesus and His gift of grace that is for all people that we find a hope for ourselves, for our community and for the world; a hope that is only found in Christ.

**Friday May 3 - Luke 23**

Have you ever been wrongly accused?  Someone points at you and blames something on you even though it either wasn't your fault or wasn't entirely your fault?  We read today of the sentencing and death of Jesus.  What always amazes me is that even though Christ did nothing to deserve death on the cross, while being crucified he prays to God asking "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (vs. 34).

   I know that as a sinful human being I will never be able to act or be in relationship with God, others, myself and creation in the way God intended; that will not happen until Christ comes again.  It is hard to reconcile that even as I try to follow Christ I will struggle, fail and need his strength in order to come before him and ask for forgiveness.  What does such a love look like, Christ's love toward us when we work against what he would have for us?  May we all continue to experience and come to continual understanding of the depth of Christ's love for all people.

**Saturday May 4 - Luke 24**

He is risen and we are His witnesses.  What is our message?

  *"Then he* [Jesus] *opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.  You are witnesses of these things."* (vs. 45-48)

   When Jesus speaks of loving our enemies he is calling us to bear witness to the gift of forgiveness we have been taught and given in Christ Jesus.  Can you think of extraordinary stories of forgiveness?  Have you witnessed forgiveness in your own life where reconciliation and love seemed impossible?

   Knowing that we have been forgiven is a gift; a gift of our faith in Christ Jesus.  How might you be a witness over the next week to Christ's resurrection, to the gift of new life we have been given and the hope we have in Christ?  May God grant you the strength and the opportunity to share who He is with someone you meet.

Week 5 – **Matthew 19:3-12:** The truly old fashioned marriage - May 5, 2013

How would you describe your perception of marriage? How might marriage be understood outside of a Christian context or mindset?

Sometimes simply looking at a concept or action from a different perspective changes how we respond. How does seeing marriage as a promise rather than just a piece of paper and as the pursuit of oneness on every level rather than the avoidance of adultery or divorce change our understanding of its purpose?

Read **Matthew 19:3-9**. The Christian idea of marriage is in many ways a new concept. At the time of Jesus sex was very casual, adultery common and out in the open and women were viewed as objects. Why is Christ’s concept of marriage viewed as “old-fashioned” today?

Read **Matthew 19:10-12.** Prior to Jesus’ time all people were really encouraged to marry. Survival, life and status were dependent upon such a commitment. These verses communicate the normalization of people remaining single. What reasons were given for remaining single?

Jesus elevates the status of women who, at the time and still in many countries today, were considered property. How might such an idea have colored the peoples understanding of the place for sex in a marriage relationship? What are some very real ways this understanding of “owning women” still exists today?

Incompatibility in marriage is a given though perhaps to varying degrees. How should we apply faith, forgiveness, God’s grace and faithfulness to marriage and our understanding of that commitment?

Monday May 6 – Mark 1

Tuesday May 7 – Mark 2

Wednesday May 8 – Mark 3

Thursday May 9 – Mark 4

Friday May 10 – Mark 5

Saturday May 11 – Mark 6

**Week 5**

**Monday May 6 - Mark 1**

   We move this week to the Gospel of Mark.  "Mark describes how the disciples and the crowds immediately responded to the authority of Jesus' teaching.  They flocked to receive His healing touch and blessings for their children.  But beneath the surface of this excitement, their hearts remained hardened and crippled by unbelief.  As you read Mark's account of Jesus' ministry and Passion, consider Jesus' patience.  He plows and replows  matters of repentance, faith, and the promises of God, picking out hard hearts and calling people to believe and to bear fruit."  (*The Lutheran Study Bible*: Introduction to Mark).

"I believe; help my unbelief."

**Tuesday May 7 - Mark 2**

"We never saw anything like this." (Mark 2:12).  When was the last time you were amazed by something you saw?  What was it that caught your attention?

*When was the last time you were amazed by something you saw in the church*?

   When Jesus was speaking at the home in Capernaum, which we read about at the beginning of the second chapter in Mark, those who saw him act and heard him speak were amazed not only by the healing which took place but by the authority of his words and the imparting of the forgiveness of sins.  I often wonder if we have forgotten what is so amazing about the grace we've received from Christ and the power forgiveness has to change and transform our lives; the power it has to change and transform the world; the power it has to *inspire our community to live in hope* rather than in fear, regret, bitterness or anger.

   Precious Lord Jesus - help me to remember the power of the hope we have in and through you.  Let me not be dismayed by what I see in the world around me, but help me to pray.  Lord I believe in your, but there are times when I cannot see the full picture and I fear for what may be ahead, tomorrow, the next day, and years from now.  Help me to trust in the power of your grace, the power of your forgiveness and strength.  "I believe; help my unbelief." Amen.

**Wednesday May 8 - Mark 3**

Throughout the gospel of Mark Jesus is recognized as the "Son of Man".  Interestingly enough it is the demons and Gentiles (wait til we get to the end) who are able to Jesus for who he was.  I often wonder if I would have been able to recognize Jesus as Lord; would I have been able to open my heard and eyes to truly see him or would I have let doubts and my own fears get in the way?  There is no doubt that seeing Jesus as God's Son changes things; it changes everything.  Do you struggle with seeing Jesus a God's Son?

   Gracious God - I don't get it.  I don't understand everything about my faith and don't have the ability to logically explain it to people as they might want me to.  But I do believe; I do have faith because you have given it to me.  Give me the strength to be bold in telling people who you are even if I still have questions myself.  Help me continue to know what it means to walk and live by faith trusting in your and in your mercy for all that I need.  "I believe; help my unbelief." Amen.

**Thursday May 9 - Mark 4**

Ah, the Parables of Jesus.  I used to think that I would have been able to figure them out even if I didn't have the explanation from Jesus.  Then I grew up...and have been continuing to grow up every since.  Good thing there is forgiveness because I've had to come humbling before God more times that I would really like to admit.

   The Parable of the Sower helps us understand what the building of the Kingdom of God looks like.  The Sower, that would be us, sows the Word (vs.14).  So all we need to do is find the good soil right?  Where is that?  I'm not convinced that the good soil is a specific place or plot of land that we need to find.  But when we read about the seeds sown on the path, in rocky ground,and among thorns we read why those situations do not produce a strong and healthy plant.  How can we be good soil in our community?

   Lord, you have called your church, your very hands and feet in this world, to share their faith and to provide opportunities for the growth of faith to occur.  Help us to discern what this means for our congregation and what it means for each individual.  Lord, help me to know how I can share my faith and be a person who people feel comfortable talking to.  Help me to listen, not just with my ears but with my heart that I may speak your love into any and all situations. "I believe; help my unbelief." Amen.

**Friday May 10 - Mark 5**

I find it interesting that often when reading different narratives throughout the gospels there is a lot of talk about ear in regards to belief.  In this chapter of Mark we hear two stories of healing, on of the man who was possessed by many demons and the other the healing of Jarius' daughter.  When the man possessed by demons was healed those who had never seen him in his right mind fled, afraid of what they were seeing.  When news of the little girls death came to Jesus he tells Jarius "Do not fear, only believe" (vs. 36).  I do not often feel like I am afraid or fearful of something, but perhaps I am just labeling my feelings differently.  A natural reaction to the unknown is to be afraid.  When we are feeling anxious it can be because we are uncertain of what is coming next.  Fear and doubt can most certainly be linked in our lives.

  Lord, I am afraid.  I am afraid that what I am doing isn't making a difference.  I don't know what tomorrow will bring or how I will be able to handle the ups, downs and turn-arounds.  But I trust in you.  Help me to face my fears and to know that you are facing them with me.  Too often I think I can carry everything on my own shoulders but deep down I know that isn't true and that I was never meant to carry everything or to be alone for you are with me.  Thank you for your hands and your feet which lead and guide me each and every step I take.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Saturday May 11 - Mark 6**

"And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two..." (Mark 6:7a).  I've been hearing the phrase "never do ministry alone" quite a bit over the past several months.  From this passage in Mark is sounds like Jesus would agree.  He didn't send the disciples out one by one but in pairs (and I don't think he was trying to make a connection to our man Noah by going with two by two).  Not only did God make us for relationships - hard though they may be - but he knew that as his body we are connected to one another and called to serve together.  Who do you serve with?  Who are the people you walk with as you minister and share your faith with others?

   Lord, you made us for relationships, to work and live with others.  But relationships can be difficult and sometimes we would rather not deal with the negatives that comes along.  As your body we know that we are to show forgiveness to one another.  Help us to forgive and build up your body.  Help us to value working and growing in faith *together* even when we would rather be alone.  Help us to build one another up and reach out in faith, not by ourselves, but as members of your body.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

Week 6 – **Luke 10:38-42:** What does a woman want? - May 12, 2013

What sorts of gender inequality exist in our culture and nation? What inequalities exist in the world?

How would you define the phrase “woman of God”? “Man of God”? How are they different? How are they the same?

Read **Luke 10:38-42.** What is this story about?

Women were not encouraged to study or sometimes even to leave the home. It was men who were educated by rabbis. What was Mary doing in this story?

Read **Luke 10:38-42** again. Take Martha out of the story. What does it tell us about Mary?

Imagine your stereotypical BBQ: women gathered in the kitchen arranging food on trays, men gathered around the turbo-powered, super-charged grill. Take **Luke 10:38-42** and place it in a modern context and we would find Mary outside with the men around the grill. How can we understand Christ’s words to Martha a bit differently with this modern context in mind?

How does this understanding of the elevation of women affect our faith? How does it impact our outreach efforts?

**Inspiring our community**: What about this particular topic and understanding of Jesus’ impact on the world do you feel called to share with others? How does it change how you respond to the inequalities present in our culture and world today?

Monday May 13 – Mark 7

Tuesday May 14 – Mark 8

Wednesday May 15 – Mark 9

Thursday May 16 – Mark 10

Friday May 17 – Mark 11

Saturday May 18 – Mark 12

**Week 6**

**Monday May 13 - Mark 7**

"And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

    'This people honors me with their lips,

        but their heart is far from me;

     in vain do they worship me,

        teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

   You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

                                                                                               (Mark 7:6-9)

Ouch.  I often feel sorry for the Pharisees and the disciples.  Try as they might to understand and follow Jesus they just don't seem to get it.  As we read last Monday the gospel of Mark speaks to the fact that though people flocked to Jesus to see him heal and hear him preach their hearts remained hardened; they struggled to believe.  We've spoken in this sermon series about the hypocrisy of man, how we struggle to show ourselves for who we are preferring to pretend we are sincere rather than being honest.  To pretend that we doubt, that we struggle to believe seems disingenuous.  All a person has to do is read scripture to see that those who surrounded Jesus struggled to believe and walk completely by faith.  We too still struggle today.

   Father, help me when I struggle to show my struggles to you.  Help me to know that I am not alone in my questions and my doubts.  I know that I cannot live up to the example of your son but I thank you that my inability does not stop you from using me as your hands and feet in this word.  Convict me when I come before you in dishonestly, hiding who I am from you.  Help me to know that you want to see all of who I am, to comfort and hear me when I am sad, weary and angry.  Walk with me Lord.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Tuesday May 14 - Mark 8**

    One of the most difficult parts of walking by faith is that there is a second option; walking by sight.  We have something we can see, the world around us, but we struggle to see God working in the midst of what we see.  The disciples just witnessed the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10) and yet when they were out in the boat with Jesus a little while later they were concerned that they only had one load (vs. 14-21).  How easy it can be for us to look around with our eyes and see what we have but forget to see *who* is with us.  The disciples seemed to forget they had Jesus with them - Jesus who had healed people and multiplied food right before their very eyes.  How easy it is to become dependent upon what we see.

   Jesus - you are my Savior.  You are the Savior of the whole world.  You have done what no other person has ever done or will be able to do.  When I forget that you are with me, that you are working through the people around me in Stockton, help me to remember that you are there.  When I look at what is in front of me and cannot see any possibility for change help me to remember the transforming power of your grace and mercy.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Wednesday May 15 - Mark 9**

   We've had Mark 9:24 as a part of the prayer each day as we've been reading through the gospel of Mark.  We now get the context for this quote.  The father of a young boy who is possessed by an unclean spirit speaks these words to Jesus when his son is brought before the Savior.  Jesus tells the father "All things are possible for one who believes." (vs. 23).  Do you believe that?  I can echo the words of the father because though I know I believe I still struggle to do so.

   Jesus Christ - you are my Savior.  I believe in who you are and what you have done.  Help me when I forget.  Help me when I struggle.  Help me when I despair and feel hopeless.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Thursday May 16 - Mark 10**

Children are the future.  I've been hearing that since I was a kid; I guess that means the future is now (funny that phrase seems familiar also).  Taking the whole linear thinking aspect of our lives out of the equation, I think there could still be an argument for why children are the future.  "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.  Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (vs. 14, 15).  Jesus calls us to have faith like a child, a faith grounded in looking to God for what is best in our lives, trusting in his mercy and placing our lives in his hands.  It is hard for us adults to understand and we struggle to keep such "childish" ways about our faith.  But as children of God, as children of faith we put our lives in his hands making it possible to walk by faith and follow God's call in our lives.

    Lord - I like to have clear answers and direction.  I like to see results and to be successful in what I do.  I like to trust myself more than I like to look to you in my life.  Help me to trust you just as a child trusts a parent.  Help me to be a child of faith ready to be led where you would like for me to go, walking by faith rather than by what I see.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Friday May 17 - Mark 11**

In chapter 11 we begin Mark's story of the passion narrative.  Jesus continues to teach his disciples during this week leading up to his death. He speaks to them of the power of prayer and of faith.  "Have faith in God.  Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him."  (vs. 22-23).  What might the equivalent to taking a mountain and throwing it into the sea be in your own life?  What might the equivalent be in Stockton?

   Lord, I struggle to believe when the world around me seems to be moving away from you and I seem to be pulled right along with it.  The impossible always seems impossible.  But that is my unbelief talking; that is me relying on what my own mind and heart can comprehend.  Help me to see the world through your eyes and to grasp how deep, far and wide is your love.  Help me to hope when everything around me seems to be hopeless.  May I dwell in the promise of your restoration today and always.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Saturday May 18 - Mark 12**

How would you response if someone asked you, "What is the greatest commandment?"  When you read through the Large Catechism, Martin Luther points out that commandments 2-10 fall into place because the first commandment is there. When Jesus is Lord of our lives our lives are reoriented toward his will for our lives. It is hard for us to give up the Lordship of our lives to Jesus, even when we know that he cares more for us than we will ever be able to comprehend.

   Jesus - when I struggle to give my life over to you and trust in your care for me, help me to see how you have provided for me and help me put my trust in you.  You are good; I know you are good.  Thank you for your faithfulness when I question and when I doubt.  Thank you for being the ultimate example of love in my life.  May I be bold in sharing that love with others and in sharing, continue to learn the true depth of your love for all of creation.  "I believe; help my unbelief." Amen.

Pentecost – May 19, 2013

 Monday May 21 – Mark 13

 Tuesday May 22 – Mark 14

 Wednesday May 23 – Mark 15

 Thursday May 24 – Mark 16

 Friday May 25 – Acts 1

 Saturday May 26 – Acts 2

**Week Seven Devotions**

**Monday May 20 - Mark 13**

Mark 13 = a pretty upbeat chapter isn't it...or maybe not.  How hard it is to recognize, to watch sin at work in our lives and in the world.  It's not a pretty picture and at times can make it difficult to turn to God.  We tend to want to know what will happen next, but how many times have you looked back over the last year of your life and recognized that if you had known everything you would have gone through you wouldn't have wanted to get out of bed?  Sometimes too much information does nothing other than make it difficult to take a step forward.  We do not know the day or the hour that Christ will come again only that he will come again.  Though we may look around and wish he would come sooner let us remember that God is faithful to his promises and rest our hope first and foremost in his faithfulness.

   God - you are a faithful God.  I don't have to look far to see where you have been faithful in my own life.  When I struggle with not knowing specifics help me to trust in you.  When I wish the world were the way *I want* it to be help me to remember my sinfulness and your goodness; help me to know that I am not in charge but a servant of yours.  God you are good.  Thank you for you faithfulness.  "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Tuesday May 21 - Mark 14**

A note on today's devotion: I'm not advocating that we don't have standards or expectations.  Thanks for reading.

  Do you want to know what the problem is with having standards?  When we have standards we have expectations, specific things we look for in a given situation and by which we judge its success, failure and value.  When we read the first bit of chapter 14 we read a brief narrative of Jesus being anointed by a woman with a flask of pure nard.  She served Jesus by doing something no one at the table expected and something that for some seemed a waste.  Whether because of the expensive perfume or because is was a woman who was washing his feet those in Jesus' company could not see the value in her actions.  Her actions did not meet their expectations.  But Jesus' expectations were different.  May we each grow to meet his expectations and view others not according to our own expectations or standards but according to His.

   Lord - I don't always see the people around me or their actions as valuable.  I know that I'm just looking through my own eyes, my own heart and judging them based on my own expectations.  Help me to see through your eyes; to look at the people around me and their acts of service and see those people and those acts for the value they have in your eyes.  Help me to give of myself as the woman did when she washed your feet.  Walk with me as I strive to be your hands and feet to the people in Stockton. "I believe; help my unbelief." Amen.

**Wednesday May 22 - Mark 15**

Take a moment and think about what you have read so far in the first fourteen chapters of the gospel of Mark.  Jesus calls his disciples and the people with whom he speaks to believe in Him but they cannot.  The Jews, the very people whom God had chosen, couldn't see Jesus for who he was.  But the centurion, a Gentile who had no background in order to understand the importance of the Messiah recognizes that "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (vs. 39) as he watched Jesus draw his final breath.

Jesus - your sacrifice on the cross restored my relationship with God; with you.  There is nothing I could have done or could ever do that could have mended what my sin did to my relationship with God. Thank you for your sacrifice and for those who have come before me, who recognized that you are God's one and only Son.  Help me to be bold in sharing my faith and to see that just as the saints over the past centuries have built your Kingdom here on earth, I have been called to do so in my own community and neighborhood. "I believe; help my unbelief."   Amen.

**Thursday May 23 - Mark 16**

Perhaps the words "I believe; help my unbelief" are most applicable when we consider the resurrection of Jesus Christ.  Jesus, Son of God, went to the cross and died.  He died, just as each of us will die.  But in and through his death comes new life for those who believe.  It is a message that to some seems like a crutch, foolish and uneducated and in many ways it doesn't make sense that someone would love us so much to do what Christ did.  But it is this foolishness that we proclaim, that we are called to live out each and everyday.

Lord - I don't like to appear foolish; I don't like to be wrong.  Help me to realize that in being your witness to this world there might be people who disagree with me and choose to make fun of me or treat me badly because I believe in you.  Give me the faith to know that you are with me, that my value does not lie in the ridicule of others or their opinions of me but in you. "I believe; help my unbelief."  Amen.

**Friday May 24 - Acts 1**

   In the book of Acts we see over and over the Spirit moving the early Christians to bear witness about Christ and what He has done for our world.  What makes the early Christian movement so powerful is how they responded to the moving and leading of the Holy Spirit and recognized God’s mighty hand in their work and witness. Today the Spirit of God is still moving in real and powerful ways.  Because Christians continue to bear witness “in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” billions today call Christ Lord and Savior.  Those who allow the Spirit of God to lead them to bear witness to the Gospel message still see God perform the miracle of salvation along with other incredible acts that bring glory to God.  As you read chapter one pray that God would open your own heart, mind, and soul to the leading of His Holy Spirit. Pray your life, words, and actions would be a witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Saturday May 25 - Acts 2**

  This past Sunday we celebrated the day of Pentecost, the day when we remember when God sent the Holy Spirit to His people.  The book of Acts tells some of the stories of early church and how the Holy Spirit worked through God's people to spread the grace given to all people through Christ's death and resurrection.

   We don't always talk much about the Holy Spirit and share how He is working in our lives.  Whether this is because we don't tend to talk about dependence upon God (because we are *supposed* to be self-sufficient according to what we are told by our culture) or because there is such a sense of mystery surrounding the Spirit working in our lives that we don't quite know what words to use or how to explain what we are feeling it is clear that God is alive and working through His people.