

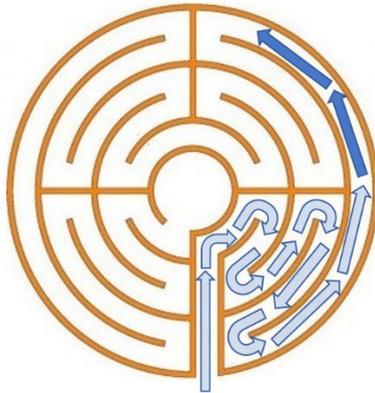
Week 2: February 25 – March 3

Gospel Reading: Mark 8:31-38

Path of Discipleship: Beyond Oneself

During the second week of Lent, we will be journeying through the second and third quadrants of the labyrinth, contemplating how this part of the path can relate to the struggles of the early Christian church, and also to our own spiritual journeys.

Day 1 (2/25): *Your long loop around the outer edges of the labyrinth continues. Neither moving further or closer to the center, you continue forward on the path.*



After the early Christians were scattered from Jerusalem by Saul's persecution, they began to travel to other cities, spreading the Good News as they went. Philip, who had been one of the original seven deacons of the church along with Stephen, went to Samaria. He was very well received there, as "the crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did... so there was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:6-8).

In that city was a man named Simon, who had previously impressed and amazed the Samaritans with acts of magic. Despite

this godless background, Acts 8:13 tells us that “even Simon himself” believed the teachings of Philip and was baptized. Even more, “after being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place” (Acts 8:13). What a great victory that must have felt like for Philip! In a reasonably short period of time, he was not only able to evangelize and baptize great masses of people in Samaria, but he was able to include in that number one who had previously used dark arts to enthrall the people for his own personal gain.

The establishment of the church in Samaria was going so well that, when word of it spread to Jerusalem, the apostles Peter and John were dispatched there, and prayed that its members would receive the Holy Spirit. Simon, the now apparently relentless apprentice of Philip, witnessed the apostles giving the Holy Spirit through the laying of their hands on people. Upon seeing this, instead of praise, worship, and humble thanksgiving, Simon’s reaction was to ask the apostles to sell that ability to him! That request was answered with a severe admonition from Peter, including being chastised for being “in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness” (Acts 8:20-23).

Imagine this event from Philip’s point of view... travel to foreign city to spread God’s word: check. Establish thriving church in new city: check. He even had this great success story of the former sorcerer who had converted and was now an active and fervent member of the church, travelling constantly with him as he did God’s work.

Then the big bosses show up – two apostles come in person from Jerusalem to see these successes and bestow upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit! Great! ...until one of Philip’s success stories turned into a story of disappointment, of sin, of lessons learned that would be recorded for all history as an example of what you should not do.

How must Philip have felt? Disappointed? Embarrassed? Ashamed? Angry? Are there times when you have felt like this? Times when you have felt discouraged because you had tried so hard and thought you had made such progress, only to have something you thought was solid deflate in front of you like a balloon? What or who was it that made you feel that way? Why?

Have you ever felt like the balloon? Have you felt like you let someone down who was counting on you?

In this week's Gospel reading, we saw Peter being admonished by Jesus. How are these two incidents (Acts 8:9-24 and Mark 8:31-33) similar? How are they different?

Just as being disappointed by other people is a fact of life, so is the fact that we will each sometimes not live up to the expectations of others. What can you learn from considering both sides of each of these situations? Consider them both separately and together.

Prayer for Day 1: Lord of eternal love, whose patience is never exhausted, we confess that we are weak and prone to disappointing you through our sins and shortcomings. We are also quick to judge others when their shortcomings become evident to us. Please grant us the patience, perseverance, and perspective to be forgiving and understanding of others and the determination and discipline to better ourselves so that we stray less from the path that you desire for us and live our lives in ways that are more pleasing to you. Amen.

Day 2 (2/26): *Your seemingly endless circumambulation of the outer edge of the labyrinth is finally interrupted by another turn – and this time a turn towards the center! Is this a sign of hope? A sign that things may be turning in your favor? But it's only a small turn with only a little inward movement, and you look ahead and*

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus instructs a crowd with his disciples that, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:34-38).

It is relatively easy to consider that statement in its original context, when people were in a situation to choose between either maintaining the comfort of the societal status quo or accepting the teachings and salvation being offered by the Christ incarnate and acknowledging that it would come with earthly persecution for the benefit of eternal life.

Now read that passage again and consider how it can be related to your life in the present day. Not just in whether you should trust Jesus as your personal savior, but in what it means to truly follow him as he instructs. How can you use his teachings in your daily life to honor him not just through belief and prayer, but also through your words and actions?

It is common to be faced with doubt, hesitation, or fear when considering making a stand for your beliefs or reaching out of your comfort zone to show compassion to someone in need. In those times, remember the advice of the apostle Paul in his Second Epistle to Timothy, who was at the time ministering to the early church in Ephesus: "for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7).

feeling of progress, of optimism that you thought might exist for someone on this part of the path? How do you feel about those who you might see from this side of the wall; those still travelling outwards in the first quadrant?

Yesterday, we read about Philip responding to a calling from God, and how he followed it immediately, even though he did not know the final destination or even the specific purpose for which he was being asked to leave his rewarding work in Samaria. Acts 8:27 continues with the events that would unfold on that wilderness road to which Philip had travelled.

At the same time that Philip was travelling along that road, so was an Ethiopian eunuch, who was a court official of the queen of the Ethiopians. The eunuch “had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him” (Acts 8:27-31).

Philip used this opportunity to instruct the eunuch on the teachings of Jesus, and even to baptize him right there on the side of the road. After his encounter with Philip, the eunuch rejoiced and returned to his native land where he, in turn, spread the good news of the Gospel.

Even in the seemingly most unlikely times and places, the Holy Spirit can provide the opportunity to God’s followers to make fruitful leaps forward, if only we are willing and ready to receive and follow the guidance that is sent for us. Consider those attributes and actions – what does it take to be willing to follow guidance and how can that be different from being ready to receive that guidance?

Does being willing to follow matter if you are not ready to receive? What can make you not ready to receive divine guidance? Are there distractions, unfinished tasks, or other aspects of your life right now which may be impeding your ability to fully receive guidance from the Lord?

Prayer for Day 3: God of creation, we thank you for all of the wonderful and glorious opportunities that you lay in front of us every day. Help us to remember that some of the best opportunities may look more like problems or challenges at the time, but that your divine grace is ever present regardless of our perception. Please bless us as your servants and help us to prepare ourselves to be ready to receive and willing to follow your guidance at all times. Amen.

Day 4 (2/28): *These are exciting times! Another turn inward, and now you are back as close to the center as you have ever been for the first time since the first leg of your journey, when you were fresh and rested. Your proximity to the center at last gives you encouragement through the knowledge that you have, in fact, made at least some progress throughout the journey, as winding and aimless as it felt at times.*



While the early church was enjoying successful ministries and growth in places like Samaria and Caesarea (where Philip travelled after his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch), the church as a whole was still facing brutal persecution under Saul's relentless direction. Saul was continuously exploring new opportunities and methods to carry out this campaign against the followers of Christ, and was constantly "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

While travelling to Damascus to further these efforts, Saul was literally stopped in his tracks by a light from heaven and the voice of Jesus, asking "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:3-4). This resulted in Saul becoming a convert – the church's biggest antagonist had become a leading protagonist and an exemplar for the ages!

Saul's calling to convert and serve was extremely dramatic – he had a two-way conversation with Jesus after which, "for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank" (Acts 9:9). Few people in history have experienced such a spectacular method of being called into God's service. For most, the experience is much subtler.

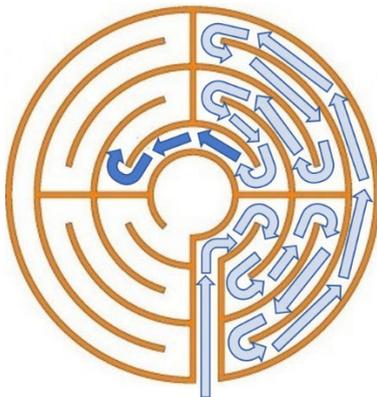
When have you been called to serve? How did you know? Was it immediately evident to you that you were being called and what you were being called to do? What doubts, uncertainties, or fears did you feel when considering the calling?

aWareness Wednesday: Almost 1 out of every 5 adults in America are affected by a mental illness each year. These include people that you work with, go to church with, possibly even live with. Do you know how to identify when someone is in need of immediate care for a mental health issue? Do you have a plan for what to do if you realize that someone around you may be experiencing such a crisis? If you are concerned that someone may be at risk of suicide or self-harm, you can always receive free, confidential

advice by calling the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Please save that number in your cell phone now; you never know when, or for whom, you may need it.

Prayer for Day 4: Holy Spirit, we have seen that your callings come in all manner of ways and magnitudes. Thank you for your guidance and help us to remember that the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves is one of the greatest callings of all. As we go through our daily routines, please help us to always be alert for opportunities to show gestures of love and compassion, no matter how small, to those that we encounter. Amen.

Day 5 (3/1): *A turn away from the center – the first one in a long time... what happened?? Why me? Things were going so well, now back to this? What bad will happen next?*



When Saul was called to turn from his sinful ways of murder and oppression, he was not instantly given all of the information that he would need to fully follow, much less succeed in, his larger calling of “being an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Rather, he was struck blind and given no instructions

other than to finish his journey to Damascus and wait to be told what to do.

In that city, there was a faithful disciple named Ananias. He also was called to service. However, instead of being called to be a “chosen instrument” to spread God’s name to people of all nations, he was called to go to Saul (who had been traveling to Damascus solely to secure more authority with which to persecute Ananias and his friends), to restore his sight by laying his hands on him, and to baptize him so that he may be filled with the Holy Spirit.

When Ananias was told that his calling was to be a rescuer of the chief enemy of the church, he questioned the calling at first, but did promptly complete the task. How important were trust and humility for Ananias at that time?

What level of fear could he have been feeling when he purposely walked right up to the man who had been trying to imprison and kill him? How easy would it have been for him to feel jealous, slighted, offended, or even angry? After all, he had been a faithful disciple the whole time, risking his life for Christ, while Saul himself had been leading the campaign against him.

The Path of Discipleship for this week of Lent is “Beyond Oneself.” What can you do to make sure that you are looking at your role in the world beyond yourself? Are there times or ways in which you might let pride, vanity, fear, or timidity inhibit you from fulfilling roles in which you may be called to serve?

Prayer for Day 5: Living God, we thank you for your love and confess our sins of selfishness, pride, and vanity. These weaknesses blind us to the plight of others and rob us of opportunities to find fulfillment through service and to praise you with our actions, rather than just our words. We ask that you help us to improve ourselves and become more accustomed to

focusing our attentions and passions outside of and beyond ourselves rather than selfishly inward. Amen.

Day 6 (3/2): *Another turn outward, bringing you further from the center with each turn. You notice that the lateral stretches have again started getting longer, giving you the feeling that you are again spending more effort “spinning your wheels;” going in circles without making any real progress one way or the other. When on these lengthening lateral stretches, you begin to doubt your self-worth, worrying that “you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot” (Revelation 3:16).*



After his conversion, Saul would eventually become known as the “chief speaker” for the early church (Acts 14:12). Why was he chosen specifically to fill this role? Why wasn’t someone who had already been a faithful member of the church called into that role?

The Revelation to Saint John includes a message to the church in Laodicea, in which they are warned that “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” They are then warned against self-satisfaction and reminded that true wealth can only come

from God and that “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Revelation 3:15-20).

Jesus stated that “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). In that context, what better, more merciful, and more appropriate choice for this calling than Saul?

Saul himself (writing later to his mentee Timothy) said: “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Tim 1:12-16).

The fact that the *foremost of sinners* was called to be a leader in the church as an example to all of the power and fullness of the love, mercy, and forgiveness of Jesus is a beautiful reminder of how we are offered eternal life through repentance and faith in him. It is also instructive of how we should view the role of ourselves and our church in the world today.

Calvary’s mission is “to faithfully demonstrate God's grace by nurturing disciples and serving the community.” This can only be accomplished if the church and its congregation maintains a proper attitude and focus. In general, a church can be looked at as either “inward-focused” or “outward-focused.” For a church to

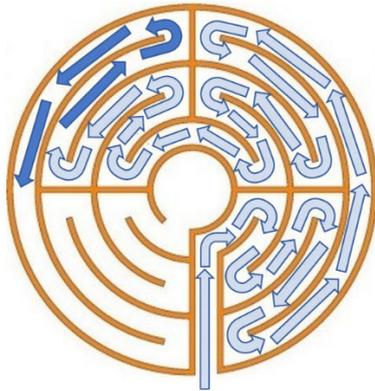
thrive, be vibrant, and truly succeed in nurturing disciples and serving the community, it is important to have an outward-focus. It is outside the walls of our church that we will find fulfilling ways to serve those who are most in need of the word and love of the Gospel and draw them into the kingdom of God. “For the love of Christ urges us on... he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

What are ways in which you can personally be outward-focused in your spiritual life? The fact that you are at this point in your spiritual and religious journey means that you have a faith story. What is it? What are some ways in which you can share your faith story with the world—with those outside of the church who could truly benefit from the love and forgiveness offered to all through the sacrifice and mercy of Jesus Christ?

What are ways in which Calvary can be more outward-focused in our ministry? Please share these ideas with the pastors.

Prayer for Day 6: Lord of forgiveness, we praise and thank you for your eternal wisdom and loving mercy. We are beneficiaries of your grace and desire to assist others to also learn about and accept your gifts of forgiveness and salvation. Please help us to further solidify our relationship with you and find ways to share our faith with others who are in need. Amen.

Day 7 (3/3): *After yet another turn outward, you again find yourself in the dark, dank, and distal outer regions of the labyrinth.*



In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus "began to teach that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering" at the hands of men in the days to come (Mark 8:31). Upon hearing this, Peter challenged him on the necessity of this, to which Jesus "rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'" (Mark 8:33).

Why do you think Jesus started his rebuke to Peter by using the name Satan? How can we learn from Peter's mistake in this passage so that, when faced with dark news or turns of events that are disappointing or even frightening, we follow the example of Jesus and set our minds on divine things and not on human things?

Consider the phrasing of Jesus' rebuke in this translation (NRSV) of the passage – he doesn't refer to "focusing on" or "making a priority of" divine things, he wants us to *set our minds* upon divine things. There is a firmness and urgency in that phrasing. Other translations refer to "savoring" the things of one world over another. What distractions do you have in your life that may be keeping you from the ideal of having that resolute of a mindset to the Kingdom of God? What does it mean to be *set* on divine things – to *savor* them?

Prayer for Day 7: Lord of heaven and earth, we thank you for the blessings that you have showered upon us in this earthly world. We thank and praise you so much more, though, for the promise and gift of an eternal life in your divine kingdom. Please help us to enjoy your wonderful creations in this lifetime while keeping our focus and passions on the life to come. Amen.