

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – NOVEMBER 21 EDITION

A Thanksgiving Message from the Bishop: I give thanks in this moment for each of you

Greetings to the wonderful people of the South Georgia Annual Conference, both clergy and laity!

You are such a wonderful blessing to me. It is hard to believe this is my third Thanksgiving with you. I want to give thanks in this moment for each of you. The blessings that you have given me keep coming.

There's the hymn we are all familiar with: "Count Your Many Blessings." When you get down and you get discouraged, name them one by one, and then give thanks to the Lord. That's what I do.

I give thanks for this opportunity to walk alongside you to see the wonderful ministries that are taking place all across the South Georgia Conference. It is amazing what you're doing in your communities and your churches and how you are proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. And, so, on behalf of Nancy and myself, we're so thankful to be on this journey with you.

As we walk this journey and move toward thanksgiving, we'll gather around tables with family and friends. We'll remember those that won't be with us this year that were with us just a year ago; so, for some of us it will feel different. But we are thankful people because we have hope. We have hope in the risen Savior. Every day we know that we are God's people, and that we can count our blessings.

May we also pause this Thanksgiving and as we look across the world continue praying for peace in war torn areas like Ukraine and in the Middle East. Those images that we see on television every day of innocent people on both sides of this conflict are heartbreaking. Let us pray that those who have the ability to begin to cease what is going on will come to know the peace that passes all of our understanding that comes from God.

My prayer today for you is that you will lean in to the great gifts that God gives us every single day. Even when there are difficult days and hard days, we know the Lord is with us. I believe – and you've heard me say it many times – we can give thanks because we know the best is always yet to come.

Happy Thanksgiving!

In Christ,

David Graves



Martha Bowman UMC is living the gospel through food and hospitality

By Allison Lindsey

Food. Festivities. Fun. Martha Bowman United Methodist Church packs all of these into one at their annual Food Truck Fest, which according to organizers is one of the church's favorite days of the year.

Food trucks have existed for decades but have become even more popular over the last several years offering food truck owners an opportunity to share unique foods with a larger audience of people and take their food and hospitality literally - on the road.

Martha Bowman United Methodist Church, located in Macon, Ga., leaned into this popularity back in 2015 when their Food Truck Festival idea sparked from a vision to ease a crowded programming Fall calendar and create an inclusive event that would appeal to people of all ages and backgrounds. They began to brainstorm ideas for an event that would essentially “check all the boxes.” They were looking for an event that would be unique and attractive to children, adults, and families as well as singles and retirees. The concept of a food truck festival emerged as a unique and appealing option.

A dedicated team of volunteers set out to make the very first festival a reality, even if that reality was a short one-time experiment. They launched the first food truck festival in November 2015 with six trucks and torrential downpours in the forecast the day of the event. Still, over a thousand people came with umbrellas and rain boots to enjoy the live music, activities for children and youth, inflatables (that were moved indoors), to compliment the fantastic food and fellowship. That first year, everyone was wet and happy.

In fact, the day proved to be far from a short one-time experiment. Eight years later the festival has grown bigger than that first team of organizers could have ever imagined.

On Sunday, November 5, 2023, the church celebrated its 8th annual festival with over 2,300 people in attendance, over fifty volunteers, and enjoyed a beautiful sunny fall day.

In a Facebook post, the church shared their thankfulness to everyone who joined in the day: “Thank you all for joining us at our 8th Annual [Food Truck Fest!](#) One of our very favorite days of the year - spent celebrating community as families and friends gather together, sharing in the warmth of a beautiful Fall day...and the joy of invitation and belonging. This day for us is more than just a celebration of great food (though the food certainly WAS amazing!), it reminds us of the strength of community and fellowship...where good food brings people together in unity and love. Remember, y’all are all welcome here at Martha Bowman, anytime.”

Over the years, the organizers have gained valuable experience and insights into what works and what doesn't. The selection of food trucks is a crucial aspect of the festival's success. The organizers aim to offer a diverse array of food options while ensuring that no two trucks specialize in the same menu items. Each year Martha Bowman hosts 10 trucks and reserves a certain number of spots for local and regional trucks, while also opening applications to other interested vendors. They strive to cater to different dietary preferences and requirements, including dessert-specific trucks and those offering vegan and gluten-free options. They have established a strong rapport with food truck vendors to ensure a positive experience for everyone involved.

“We’ve worked to involve our church community in many ways through this special day, whether through baking cookies, boiling peanuts, or helping direct traffic,” said Elizabeth Hammock, Director of Family Ministry and Outreach at Martha Bowman UMC. “We have been blessed to meet and welcome so many in our Macon community.”

The event has had a significant impact on both the church, the surrounding neighborhood, and the community. The festival serves as an opportunity to bring people together, fostering a sense of unity. It transcends religious boundaries and offers a welcoming space for individuals and families from all walks of life.

“The practice of sharing a meal with others was central to the life and ministry of Jesus,” said Rev. Fran Magoni, Associate Pastor at Martha Bowman UMC. “Eating with others was not just the backdrop of His ministry but was an intentional way in which Jesus extended God’s grace and love to others. Each year during Food Truck Fest at Martha Bowman, it is our hope that those who attend will experience God’s love and grace as we welcome the Macon community to join us around the table.”

One of the noteworthy aspects of the Food Truck Festival ministry is its commitment to outreach and giving back to the community. Each year, the festival partners with a local organization or cause, encouraging attendees to contribute donations, such as canned goods or monetary contributions. The participating food trucks also donate a portion of their sales to this community partner. This collaborative effort allows the festival to make a positive impact beyond the event itself, reinforcing its mission of service and outreach.

During this year's event, the ten participating trucks donated \$1,875 to [Crossroads Recovery](#) in Macon and the event collected household items for [Rescue Mission of Macon](#) sharing what it means to be in community and ministry together.

In just 8 years, the Food Truck Festival has evolved from a small idea into a significant community event. It has become a means to connect with the wider community, break down barriers, and create a space where people can come together, enjoy good food, and build relationships. The festival is not about numbers or parking logistics, but about demonstrating love, kindness, and hospitality to all participants. It serves as a platform to share the Gospel of Jesus through actions, attitudes, and genuine care for others.

“The ‘why’ for this event is pretty simple and at times, in the chaos and unpredictability that can accompany an event like this, we have to remember it ourselves,” said Hammock. “It's not about the crowds; it's not about the number of people; it's definitely not figuring out how to park 10 giant trucks on flat surfaces in our tight parking lot. It's about loving people well and sharing through our actions, our attitudes, our kindness and our hospitality the Gospel of Jesus.”

Allison Lindsey is a member of St. Mark UMC in Douglas, Ga. and chairs the Conference Nurture Team.



Giving Thanks

There's no question this has been a challenging season. But we still have much for which to give thanks. We asked you, our South Georgia UM family and friends, what you're thankful for during this season of giving thanks. We are thankful for our wonderful [#sgaumc](#) family! Here's what you shared with us:

I am very thankful that I can live a life knowing that I'm doing what I am supposed to be doing. I am so grateful for the great mentors, friends, and people that I get to do life with. In youth ministry you become so involved in families' lives that they become like family. I'm so thankful that I get to live into that. Throughout life's journey, it's hard to look back and not be thankful for what God has done for you. Oftentimes your perception of reality and your reality are not the same. When you truly stop and think about how blessed you truly are, it can change your perception. Then, when you are looking at your reality, you can truly be thankful for all God has given you. *Derek Harrison, Tifton First UMC*

I am so grateful for the faithfulness of God's grace. The last couple of years have been challenging for many and yet God's grace is evident in spite of. It can't be ignored and for that, I am thankful! *Rev. Abra Lattany-Reed, Director of Diversity and Justice Ministries*

I'm extremely thankful for the friendship of clergy colleagues. I have a close group of friends in ministry who know exactly what I am going through! We check in on each other, we encourage each other, we talk through sermons together, and we pray for each other. I am very thankful to walk through life with them as my friends! *Rev. Jack Varnell, Hawkinsville UMC*

I am thankful for the people around that support me and care for my life and ministry. *Rev. Daniel Medina, Nueva Vida UMC*

I am thankful for MUSIC! Music speaks to my soul. Music is a huge part of my worship experience. Whether contemporary or traditional, it brings me closest to the foot of the cross. *Ivy Kratzer, Waycross First UMC*

I am so thankful for all the beauty of the world that God has provided us with that goes unnoticed each day! *Susan Wilcox, Broxton UMC*

This Thanksgiving I am thankful for so much. On May 1st, after a lot of prayer, I stepped out on faith and retired. After being in the workforce for so long it has been quite an adjustment. I was diagnosed over two years ago with Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) Stage 3, and today I'm finally back to normal. My kidneys are healthy again. I am thankful that God walks beside me every day. I am thankful for my church family who has become like my very own. And those are just two things I am thankful for this Thanksgiving. *Martha Cabiness, St. Mark UMC, Douglas*

In this season of denominational confusion and questioning, in my disaster role, I am thankful for volunteers who can step across denominational division. During the recent relief efforts post Hurricane Idalia, I was blessed to rely on early response trained (ERT) individuals from within and outside of South Georgia. They came to Berrien, Cook, Lowndes and other counties and worked with affected survivors. Many of these volunteers were no longer UMC-affiliated, but responded to the call nonetheless. I counted over 110 ERT volunteers who worked almost 1,250 hours in a span of about three and half weeks. They helped 98 residents to include one damaged church in South Nashville, GA. For these volunteers, I am thankful. *Luis Morales, SGA Conference Disaster Response Coordinator*

I am thankful for all the opportunities the United Methodist Church has provided to me so that I can serve others. My experience and training with UMCOR provided a path for me to find a job that I love in humanitarian service and I am thankful for a career that allows me to live out my faith every day. *Kelly Crane, Coastal District Disaster Coordinator*

As I think over the past year with a thankful heart, I realize that in my little corner of Savannah, Georgia known as Baldwin Park, my family, dear friends, colleagues and neighbors are well. Where things are not well, I can see Godly direction. Our home is safe, secure, and nourished. In our house, we have had productive and satisfying work, and have been called to service through great organizations in meaningful ways. I am thankful that there was no coastal hurricane while my mother battles dementia in skilled nursing. Hurricanes and skilled nursing just don't go well together. As I am writing this piece for The Advocate, I am most thankful for my home church, Wesley Monumental, and the denomination of which my family has been a part for many generations - the United Methodist Church. We are blessed by an amazing and loving church family. With focused clergy, dedicated lay leadership and a caring congregation Wesley has continued to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world through a pandemic, a congressional campaign providing two opposing candidates from our church balcony and the disruption of disaffiliation. Wesley Monumental stuck to John Wesley's three simple rules. It is a daily blessing. I am thankful for the June email before annual conference inviting me to serve well beyond the local church. I am thankful for my two new colleagues in service, John and Scott - and our two hour working lunches. Getting to know the churches of the Coastal district, there are great opportunities ahead for discipleship and service as United Methodists. Not to be accused of wearing rose colored glasses, I am well aware that there is turmoil, hurt, warfare, hatred, exclusion and division all around. But I am thankful that in my home, my neighborhood, my church, and in the mighty presence of God, blessings abound. *Scott Cleaveland, Coastal District Lay Leader*

In this season of Thanksgiving, I am thankful for new lives born into our family, which helped to ease the sadness of losing a beloved family member this summer. As Psalm 100:5 says, for the Lord is good and his love endures forever, his faithfulness continues through all generations. Thank you, Lord, for your many blessings in all seasons of life. *Karen Forrester, Southwest District Lay Leader*



2024 Pre- and Post-General Conference Gatherings announced

Bishop David Graves, along with the South Georgia Conference Cabinet and Conference Leadership, has announced dates for pre- and post-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings as well as a post-General Conference informational webinar for laity.

The pre-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings are set for the following dates. These gatherings will be a time for Bishop Graves to check in with clergy, offer pastoral support, talk about the timeline for 2024, and provide General Conference and Jurisdictional updates to take back to share with local churches. Registration is now open for these gatherings.

- **January 30** - St. Paul UMC in Columbus at 10 am | [Register now](#)
- **February 1** - Tifton First UMC in Tifton at 10 am | [Register now](#)
- **March 5** - Richmond Hill UMC in Richmond Hill at 10 am | [Register now](#)

The 2024 General Conference will take place April 23 - May 3 in Charlotte, North Carolina. A live stream link will be made available for clergy and laity to view the conference. Regular updates will be made by Bishop Graves and the delegation before, during, and after General Conference.

The post-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings are set for the following dates. These gatherings will be a time for Bishop Graves and members of the delegation to report factual information around any decisions made at General Conference. Registration will be available closer to the dates.

- **May 13** - Tifton First UMC in Tifton at 10 am
- **May 14** - St. Paul UMC in Columbus at 10 am
- **May 23** - Goshen UMC in Rincon at 10 am

A laity webinar has also been scheduled to provide local church lay members with information following General Conference. The date for this webinar is **May 14, 2024**, at 6 pm. Registration information will be available closer to the date.

In addition, Bishop Graves has scheduled the following clergy gatherings and laity webinar in the Alabama West-Florida Conference. These are also open to South Georgia clergy (lunch gatherings) and laity (webinar) if the dates are a better fit for an individual's schedule.

Alabama West-Florida Clergy Gatherings

- February 8 - Providence UMC, Mobile, AL at 10:00 am CST
- February 22 - St. Luke UMC, Enterprise, AL at 10:00 am CST
- February 27 - Montgomery First UMC, Montgomery, AL at 10:00 am CST
- February 29 - Trinity UMC, Ft. Walton, FL at 10:00 am CST
- May 15 - Trinity UMC, Ft. Walton, FL at 10:00 am CST
- May 16 - Dothan area (exact location TBD) at 10:00 am CST
- May 20 - Montgomery area (exact location TBD) at 10:00 am CST

- May 21 - Mobile area (exact location TBD) at 10:00 am CST

Alabama West-Florida Laity Webinar

- May 20 - 6 pm CST

“As we continue to focus on making disciples in our local churches, we are also mindful of the important work that will take place in Charlotte this Spring,” said Bishop Graves. “I invite all South Georgia clergy and laity to join me in prayer for our United Methodist Church and for our delegation as they prepare for General Conference 2024. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, may those things of God and each other connect us so we can lean into all God is calling the South Georgia Conference to be today and in the days to come.”



Practice radical generosity on #GivingTuesday, Nov. 28

It’s hard to believe the holidays are right around the corner. That means it’s time once again for Giving Tuesday. #GivingTuesday harnesses the generosity of millions of people around the world to support the causes they believe in around the world and in the communities in which they live. This year on November 28 United Methodists have the opportunity to come together as a part of that movement to advance vital ministries in our communities, in our conference, and around the world.

There are hundreds of ways you can #GiveUMC through our [Global Ministries partnerships](#) and our [Conference Advance Specials](#).

You are also invited to select a ministry affiliated with the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church. Click on a link below to give directly to an organization.

- [Andrew College](#)
- [Epworth By The Sea](#)
- [Georgia Southern Wesley Foundation](#)
- [Georgia United Methodist Foundation](#)
- [Good News Television Ministry](#)
- [Magnolia Manor](#)
- [Open Door Community House](#)
- [The Methodist Home for Children and Youth](#)
- [United Methodist Volunteers in mission, Southeast Jurisdiction](#)
- [Valdosta State University Wesley Foundation](#)
- [Vashti Center](#)
- [Wesleyan College](#)
- [Wesley Community Centers](#)
- [Wesley Glen](#)



Conference Nominations Committee seeks leaders for 2025-2028 quadrennium

The South Georgia Annual Conference Committee on Nominations has begun a process to identify laity and clergy interested in serving on Conference and District boards, committees, and teams for the 2025-2028 quadrennium.

Between now and November 30, you are invited to indicate your willingness to serve or to encourage possible leaders to complete an [online Interest Form](#).

Each quadrennium, the United Methodist Church seeks new leaders for open positions on conference boards and committees to serve for four years. The current quadrennium draws to a close in December 2024, and a new one launches on January 1, 2025. However, service on conference boards and committees for the new quadrennium begins at the conclusion of the 2024 South Georgia Annual Conference session. The six districts are also seeking nominees to fill vacancies to prepare for spring district conferences.

The Conference Nominations Committee is looking for resourceful and committed leaders who have vision, leadership skills, and a passion for the work of the particular board or committee on which they are interested.

“I would like to invite lay and clergy of South Georgia to join the nominations committee in prayer that God will speak to those who we need in leadership,” said Mrs. Meredyth Earnest, Conference Secretary who stewards the nominations process along with Bishop David Graves, chair of the nominations committee. “The 2025-28 quadrennium will be an opportunity for us to reset our commitment to the power of the connection. As we remember our membership vows of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, may we each seek to be in connectional ministry in the South Georgia Annual Conference.”

Persons interested in serving on the conference or district level should complete this [online Interest Form](#). This comprehensive form allows individuals to indicate their spiritual gifts, share their professional experience(s) and identify which board(s) or committee(s) they feel best align with their gifts and talents. Please note that self-nominations are kept on file in our database for up to four years. Because our districts must begin their work soon, the deadline for this form is November 30, 2023.

The annual conference will elect the leadership team for the 2025-2028 Quadrennium at the June 2024 annual conference session. The newly elected conference leaders will begin July 1, 2024.

Pastors, district superintendents, district nominating committees, and laity can help with the process by recruiting and identifying persons in local churches who should submit an interest form.

“I strongly encourage every clergyperson to serve their district or conference in some capacity as well as at least one lay person from each local church,” said Earnest. “This process will help the Conference and District nominations committees match people and their interests, gifts, and graces with the various opportunities to serve on the district and conference level.”

Steps in the leadership selection process are:

- IDENTIFICATION — Indicate your interest(s) by completing and submitting the [online Interest Form](#). Note that this is the sole means available to indicate interest in serving. Nov. 30, 2023, is the deadline for submitting Interest Forms.
- NOMINATION — The District Committee on Nominations and the District Leadership Team will receive and evaluate Interest Forms and coordinate the nominations process with the Conference Committee on Nominations. The Conference Committee on Nominations will submit a slate of nominees (committee and board chairs and members) to the 2024 Annual Conference.
- ELECTION — The annual conference will elect the leadership team for the 2025-2028 Quadrennium at the annual conference in June 2024.
- SERVING — The newly elected conference leaders will begin July 1, 2024.

Questions or in need of help? Contact Mrs. Meredyth Earnest, Conference Secretary, at meredyth@sgaumc.com.

.....

2023 prayer emphasis: November prayer guide

The South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in 2023. November’s prayer guide, written by UM Commission on Higher Education and Collegiate Ministry leaders – Jonathan Smith, Linda Buchanan, Albert Williams III, and Michael McCord – is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer.

.....

November 26 Lesson: Freedom to Edify

Fall Quarter 2023: God’s Law Is Love
Unit 3: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves
Lesson 13

Sunday School Lesson for the week of November 26, 2023
By Craig Rikard

Devotional Reading: James 1:19-27
Background Scripture: I Corinthians 8; 10:23-11:1
Key Text: I Cor. 10:23b

Lesson Aims

1. To realize there are moments when our response might be in concert with Scripture but not beneficial to the non-believer before us.
2. To more fully understand what it means to live for the common good as a Christian.
3. To recognize the importance of prayerful consideration in all our actions and speech.
4. To learn the importance of praying for discernment in seeking to maintain a clear conscience and remain a viable witness of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

I want to thank all who read and taught this quarter’s lessons. Delving into Paul’s doctrinal writing is never easy but always profitable. May God bless you as we complete this unit. This entire unit has been related to the real intent of the Mosaic Law and its intimate relationship to the Shema, Deut. 6:4. Paul understood that the Shema was the one spiritual dynamic that would bind Jew and Gentile Christians together. Of course, Jesus was the embodiment, the fulfillment of the Shema. Thus, our unity has always ultimately been made possible through our common faith in Jesus Christ.

Historical/Theological Background

Corinth

Corinth, understood in today’s language, was an appointment many would hope the Bishop would never appoint them as pastor. The church was riddled with problems. Not only did they have the problem of melding Jew and Gentile together, they also struggled with their moral life, especially the sin of hubris. Some refer to Corinth as “sin city.” Those with certain spiritual gifts viewed themselves as more important

than others with less public gifts. They struggled to understand the common ground that existed at the foot of the cross.

Corinth was an isthmus jutting out into the Mediterranean from southern Greece. It was inhabited by both Jews and Greeks, but Greek culture was far more dominant. Paul spent a lot of time with Corinthians, staying at the home of Aquilla and Priscilla. Just 146 years prior to Jesus, the men of Corinth were brutally killed by the Romans, and their women and children become slaves. The city was burned to the ground and remained charred rubble for almost 100 years.

The city and the surrounding area were eventually rebuilt and became a thriving area for commerce. The currents were so strong around the isthmus that ships often sank as they engaged in trade. Therefore, a system was created to literally carry the ship across the land of Corinth and relaunched on the other side. Therefore, the people were exposed to a myriad of thoughts, philosophies, and religions. As Corinth grew in wealth it also grew more hedonistic. Perhaps their hedonism was the sinful response after years of pain, loss, and struggle. However, Paul knew that such a lifestyle did not give life, it destroyed life in the end. The body may have known pleasure, but the heart did not know peace, real hope, or the transforming power of God's love.

Greek Thought

Though many Jewish Christians were part of the Corinthian church, a large population of Gentile Christians also were part of the family. Most thought like Greeks. One of the major differences between the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians was the nature of the soul. In Judaism one could talk about the body, soul, heart and spirit as distinct parts of man and woman. However, they believed they were *inseparable*. A man or woman was one integral whole, and thus we could not separate any facet of our being from another. Heart, soul, mind, and body were all intertwined and were inseparable. Thus, after death, there will be a day of bodily resurrection, with the entire body and its parts renewed.

In Greek thought the soul was distinct from the body. As a matter of fact, the body was an impediment and almost useless in the pursuit of spirituality. Thus, at death the soul leaves the body and finds its eternal purpose. In his early letters Paul strongly believed in the bodily resurrection. (Read I and II Thessalonians). However, as Paul ministered in the Greek world his understanding of what happens when we die broadened. Remember, Paul's faith was not static. He was always growing in faith and understanding. He still believed in a day when the body would be resurrected. However, he also wrote, "I am willing to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord." Reconciling the Jewish and Greek understanding of death remained a difficult struggle. There are certain mysteries in our faith that are unknowable in this life. However, they drive us to our knees in prayer and create "spiritual seeking" within the heart.

Do you believe most of our funerals are more Jewish in thought or Greek? Do we really have to know what happens at death since Jesus revealed we have eternal life? What is certain for us as Christians at death and beyond death?

This understanding in Greek thought helps us understand many of the issues afflicting Corinth and giving rise to hedonism. Many Greeks so distinguished the body from the soul they thought one could do with their body what they pleased and it would have no bearing on their spiritual lives. In other words, one could be sexually promiscuous and still be spiritually righteous!!!

Christianity taught that righteousness always began with a transformed, loving heart that effected our behavior. Our outer life should be as righteous and loving as our soul. Proverbs reads, "Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?" (Proverbs 6: 27-33) The proverb is saying if we have a destructive, unrighteous heart it will affect our outer life. This also means that if we have a loving, righteous heart it will affect our outer life for the good.

Our text today addresses how we are to live our outer Christian life in a culture that is not Christian, or a situation in which the Christians with whom we fellowship hold to a very different interpretation of righteousness. Paul has taught, above all, the heart matters most. If our hearts are transformed by Jesus, and we embrace the Shema through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, it affects how we act, especially in the presence of others. For Paul there was no separating the heart and one's actions. Poor actions are destructive to a loving heart. Righteous actions contribute to a loving heart. A loving heart will lead to righteous actions. A self-centered heart will lead to sin.

Walking Through the Text

"I have the right to do anything you say; but not everything is beneficial"

Some of the Christians at Corinth had taken Paul's teaching on being liberated from the Law too far. They had adopted an attitude, "I can do what I please, for I am not bound by the Law." It is true they were not bound by the Law, but they were bound by THE LAW. They were bound by the Shema. Through Jesus and the power of the Spirit we are to live a life of incredible, selfless love. We obey the Shema, not to gain salvation, but because we are the recipients of that love from and through Jesus. We did not deserve the love revealed by Jesus and imparted by the Holy Spirit. There was nothing we can do to deserve it. Remember, in I John 4:10 it reads, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." We live the Shema because we are the recipients of the Shema through Jesus.

In what ways do you think our witness may become prideful? Do you think as Christians we have learned well when to speak and when to listen? Are our actions often too "loud"? Can you share a moment in which you witnessed a well-intended Christian do more harm than good with their words and actions? How can we set boundaries that warn us when our words and actions are nearing self-centeredness?

Though we are liberated from the rites, rituals and laws of Judaism, it does not mean we flaunt our liberty. There is a standard by which we judge when to ignore such tenets of Judaism and when to keep them. That standard is THE COMMON GOOD (as defined by God)! If a Christian was asked to dine with a non-Christian adherent to Judaism, and they ritually wash their hands before the meal, so should the Christian. What good would be accomplished if the guest haughtily said to his host, "I don't have to do that. I am a Christian!" The host would be offended, and our opportunity to witness to our host is greatly damaged. Refusal to wash one's hands would be a "holier than thou" act on the part of the Christian in this case. No harm would occur by simply washing one's hands. Great harm would occur through refusal. In this case we have the right not to wash our hands, but our refusal would be anything but beneficial.

How do you determine "the common good"? What is your spiritual resource for recognizing the common good? How do you think we can distinguish "what is good for me," and "what is good for all"?

Paul uses the example of dining with a non-Christian Gentile. If a meat is served that has been sacrificed to an idol, do we eat it or inform the host we do not agree with their religion? According to Paul, we thank God for the food and ask God to bless it. Thus, for us, it is no longer a meat offered to idols. Our host will eat it as a meat offered to idols. The Christian should not eat the meat to appease the conscience of the host. In contrast, the Christian gives thanks to God for the meat and eats. We would eat it because we are thankful for God's provision, not to fall in line with the belief of host. Again, we have not insulted our host or violated our conscience. We have acted for the common good. The opportunity to be a loving witness to Jesus is alive in the moment. Insult would close the ears of the host quickly.

Can you share a moment, without names of course, when you watched an open door of witness slam shut? Do you think it is important to understand as deeply as possible the life of the one to whom we witness? Do you think such knowledge should be acquired over time, being patient before speaking and acting? Do you think most beneficial witnessing is done over time rather than in a single moment? What does our patience say to the one to whom we witness?

As Christians, we do not engage in unrighteous acts. So, there are lines we do not cross. If someone were making racial remarks and jokes, we could not join in and say, “We don’t mean them when we say them.” Our witness is greatly damaged when we demean and devalue any of God’s children. We enter each moment prayerfully observant. We ask, “How can I best be a witness of Jesus in this moment in a manner that opens the ears in front of me?” In this case, our non-participation is not an arrogant gesture on our part. It is a witness as to who we are and to the love of God present in our hearts. Those around us might very well respect our non-participation and think for themselves about the nature of their behavior.

Even in seeking the common good, are there not moral and ethical lines we should not cross? Can you share an example? How do we determine what is permissible and what is not?

Again, we are not bound by the rules, rites and rituals of non-Christians. We also are not bound by the rules of other Christians who do not act out of God’s love. However, if we can participate while remaining true to our heart and conscience and keeping our witness alive, we should so do.

In summary, Paul’s use of the phrase “is not beneficial” is an important word of instruction. We live in a world in which even Christianity has been subjected to “added rules, selective sins, and other requirements.” We are not just witnesses to non-believers. We are witnesses to all. We always care about the common good. It takes restraint to hold our tongue and actions and consider our circumstances. We should ask, “Would my refusal or my challenge to their beliefs violate my conscience or damage my ability to be a loving witness?” “Would my participation violate the Law of love Jesus has placed in my heart?” “Would my words or actions prove beneficial?” “Would they be beneficial to my witness and their ability to spiritually hear?” When Paul reminds us to do all “to the glory of God,” he is stating the motivation behind all we do or say. The word “glory” often is interpreted in Koine Greek as “the character and nature of God.” When Paul writes, “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” he is proclaiming that the presence of Jesus within us is our hope of living out the character and nature of God. Thus, when all is to be done for the glory of God, we are being taught every situation and circumstance has an opportunity for God’s nature and character to be seen within us and through our actions. The most beneficial thing for another is to see the nature and character of God in a believer.

Why do you believe a non-believer finds it difficult to listen when arrogance is present? Can even a true word of witness do harm? In other words, can my words be correct, yet damaging? Can you share an example? What are the things that hinder our witness to many non-Christians? How important are patience and prayer to our witness?

“Do not cause anyone to stumble”

Is it possible that our Christian life can actually cause someone to stumble? If we lived and acted in perfect love we would cause no stumbling. However, we are not yet perfect in love, though we journey toward that perfection every day. There are moments when our own sense of self and self-importance is too dominant. We can come across as judgmental and condescending. Most people do not respond well when someone speaks “down to them.” Arrogance and Christianity do not gel. In Christianity, Jesus is Lord; in arrogance, I am lord. We may not become the instrument of God’s transformation in a single moment. However, our humble, loving faith opens a door and keeps it open.

While studying Marriage and Family Therapy one of the students in our small group shared that she was recently divorced. Two men, professed Christians, immediately began to share how her divorce was unacceptable to God. I did not participate in their diatribe. It was not that I was better or more pious. I just knew my own pain and struggles well and was learning to recognize our common humanity, especially in pain and suffering. At the end of that long, exhausting night, the teacher looked toward the other two women in our group. She asked them, "If you were going through a divorce, who in this group would you go to?" None mentioned those two men. Their self-righteousness was beneficial to no one, and it had slammed the door on an opportunity to truly help her.

What do you think is meant by a Christian life that invites the seeker? What about us and others can invite someone to seek us out for comfort, for advice, for help? What are some behaviors or words that are very uninviting? What was it about Jesus that made people come to him? Listen to him? Respond to him?

Our witness should always seek to open doors and keep them open. We do not do so by violating our Christian conscience. We do so by prayerfully discerning what is beneficial for the glory of God in any given moment. I cannot help but remind the readers of the lesson of the importance Jesus placed upon children. His words were strong and, for some, harsh toward those who caused a child to stumble. I was having dessert with two other couples one night, and they were talking about the problems they saw in the church and the people they judged to be trouble-makers. This was one of those moments in my young, green ministry when I experienced a tap on the shoulder from the Lord. I looked at our kids. They had stopped playing and were intently listening. We had done them no good. We were planting seeds of negativity toward the church and those they mentioned. Again, we did those kids no good. When we seek to cause no stumbling we should be equally aware of those we do not think are listening, especially the children. As Paul stated in our text, "It is our desire that they may be saved."

Summary

As we close out this unit, Paul has moved from the doctrinal to the practical. He is speaking of everyday life and common circumstances. Christianity is not simply a spiritual journey; it is also a practical journey. Our faith is meant to be applicable to everyday life. May we remember, not everything is beneficial, seek the common good, cause no one to stumble, that all may be saved.

Prayer

Almighty God, teach us patience. Empower us through your Spirit to hold speech until we have spoken to you in prayer. Strengthen us to wait before rushing into a moment, until we understand what is the most beneficial and loving. Thank you for every beneficial word we heard in our journey and will continue to hear. Thank you for actions that allowed us to witness selfless love. We pray to imitate those lives whom you used to redeem us. In Jesus name, Amen.

Dr. D. Craig Rikard is a South Georgia pastor. Email him at craigrikard169@yahoo.com.



December 3 Lesson: The Faith of Ruth

**Winter Quarter 2023-2024: Faith That Pleases God
Unit 1: Profiles In Faith**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of December 3, 2023
By Jay Harris**

Lesson Scripture: Ruth 1:6-18, 22

Key Verse: *But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God.”* (Ruth 1:16)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the Winter Quarter Theme (Faith That Pleases God)
- To introduce the setting and context for the story that follows in the Book of Ruth
- To explore the decisions faced by Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth as they began their journey
- To understand Ruth’s decision in light of her loving kindness toward Naomi
- To reflect on the faith it took to go into an unfamiliar place and live your life in pursuit of your goal
- To take in all that was involved for Ruth to go wherever Naomi went in life
- To see how the story works out beyond our scripture lesson
- To ponder the implications of Ruth’s story in terms of what we learn about faith

Introduction to Ruth and the Winter Quarter Theme: Faith That Pleases God

The theme for this Winter Quarter is “Faith That Pleases God.” There is a dual focus in this theme. First, we will be exploring the nature of faith in all of its dimensions and movements. Second, we will be exploring all the ways that we, through our faith, please God. We will learn that, in many ways, faith *is* pleasing God, and pleasing God *is* faith. Notice that faith in this context is not merely giving mental assent to a certain set of religious propositions. Faith is highly relational. We will want to stay in tune with this relational aspect of faith throughout our study.

Have you reflected on the relational aspect of faith before? In what ways does faith please God?

Our first unit, entitled “Profiles in Faith,” offers a good place to begin. The profile of Ruth is just one of the profiles that we will explore. Ruth’s story is a highly relational story.

The opening verse of the Book of Ruth mentions that this story occurred during the time span when the judges ruled. More specifically, this story took place when there was a famine in the land of Judah, the land of God’s people, forcing a certain family to move from their ancestral home of Bethlehem in Judah. In order to find a food supply that would enable them to survive, Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons went to live in the country of Moab, although it was outside the land of God’s people.

As fate would have it, Elimelech died, ushering Naomi into widowhood in a foreign land, but at least she still had her two sons to take care of her. The two sons soon found wives from the land of Moab. The names of their wives were Orpah and Ruth. Once again, however, fate would step in after living in Moab for ten years. Naomi’s two sons died. Now, she was left with no husband and no sons, which left her in a much more destitute state of widowhood. Naomi, in a very grief-stricken state, was forced to consider her options. She had not only herself to consider, but also her two widowed daughters-in-law.

What do you think it would be like to live in a time where famines meant you had to pull up stakes and migrate to a foreign land? What must it be like when the pain of grief is compounded by a decline in one’s economic security?

The Beginning of the Journey and the Decisions to Be Made

In the first verse of our lesson, we observe the launching of a journey. The beginnings and endings of famines caused migrations of people. Were there others migrating from Moab to Judah along with our main characters as the famine in Judah was coming to an end? If so, every family's journey would have its own unique character.

⁶ Then Naomi started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

Naomi had heard news from her home country of Judah. She heard that the Lord had considered his people and had responded no doubt to their prayers for ample rains and fertile crops. The Lord had given them food. The famine in Judah was ending.

Hearing this news, Naomi made the decision to leave the land of Moab and return to her home country. This was a wise decision for Naomi because, with no husband and no sons, she found herself in a very precarious situation in terms of her present and future economic welfare. She would fare better living with her own people in Judah.

So, she set out from the country of Moab, where she had been living, to go back to the land of Judah. What is remarkable at this point is that both of her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, were accompanying her. What made sense for Naomi, did not make sense for Orpah and Ruth. They were leaving their families of origin in Moab, which could help support them after being newly widowed. What would make them want to go with Naomi?

They obviously cared for Naomi. Surely, they felt pity for Naomi, but it seems like their love was motivated by more than just pity. We only see Naomi in her grief and despair, but before her losses, it is easy to imagine the familial bonds of love and friendship that had formed between this mother-in-law and these daughters-in-law. Naomi, caring for Orpah and Ruth, intended to address the situation.

⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.

What Naomi said makes perfect sense. Orpah and Ruth should each go to the house of each one's own mother and not follow their mother-in-law. She prayed for the Lord to deal with them as kindly as they had dealt with her and with her sons before they died. Naomi also envisioned them easily finding husbands in the land of Moab and prayed for the Lord to grant them security in the houses of each one's future husband. Then Naomi kissed them as a sign of her love and affection, and as a way of sending them off with her complete blessing and with no need to feel any guilt for going their own way. Yet, Orpah and Ruth wept aloud because they truly loved their mother-in-law.

¹⁰ They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹ But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying?

Orpah and Ruth revealed their intention to go with Naomi as she returned to Judah and live with her people. I am sure that the love and affection being expressed toward Naomi was not lost on Naomi. Naomi's concern, however, was for the future welfare of Orpha and Ruth.

Notice that Naomi has dispensed with the term daughter-in-law and calls them "my daughters." In various ways, Naomi was trying to convince them that husbands were what they needed for their future welfare. She could not provide them with husbands. She did not want them to miss out on the possibility of remarriage, marital love, and a secure future with husbands.

No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

Naomi admitted that the future was more bitter for herself because Naomi was a widow with no future prospects. The future prospects for Orpah and Ruth were much better in comparison. By saying that the hand of the Lord had turned against her, Naomi was facing her hard reality head on. Notice that she had not cursed or disparaged the Lord. She was stating what felt like for her a cold hard fact. Naomi did not want to draw her daughters-in-law into the wake of her misery.

Have you ever heard someone express in some way their belief that the Lord has turned against them? Would you be able to withhold judgment against them and let them give vent to their emotions and questions? How might that non-judgmental space allow them to work through their grief? How might you engage in the ministry of presence with them? Have you observed people moving from grief and anger to faith and hope? How did observing that process strengthen your faith?

The Journey of Ruth Begins with her Decision

Orpah and Ruth wept aloud again. That is when they each made a different decision. The scripture does not cast judgment on Orpah with regard to her decision. Orpah left Naomi with Naomi's blessing and Naomi's prayers to the Lord for her wellbeing. Orpah's decision made the most sense. It is what most women in her situation would have done. It was Ruth continuing to cling to Naomi that did not make sense. Naomi tried once more to persuade Ruth.

¹⁵ So Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

Naomi must have thought, at first, that Ruth was caught up in the emotions of the moment. After all, the experience of taking leave of someone whom you love can be like tearing away a part of yourself. Surely, Ruth was not thinking clearly in Naomi's way of thinking. Naomi pointed out how Orpah was already on her way to the only life that made sense—a life with her people, and with her gods. Ruth could follow Orpah and Naomi would not blame Ruth for doing so.

This is when Ruth speaks up. Until this point in the story, Orpah and Ruth have always been mentioned together. When Ruth speaks however we learn what her intentions are. Ruth has a voice, and she has a will, and she is not afraid to use them! Ruth had apparently thought this through, and she outlines the path that she is choosing for herself—an extraordinary, unconventional, and even risky path that would in many ways define her.

¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you!"

**Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people
and your God my God.**

Ruth truly meant to follow Naomi wherever Naomi chose to go. She intended to make her home with Naomi and be with her. She was committing herself to go to Judah, Naomi's home country, and to Bethlehem, her husband's ancestral home. Ruth understood that Naomi's people would become her people. There are not really any half-measures taken in this instance. Ruth was going all the way. That is what it would take for this to work.

Ruth intended for Naomi's God to become her God. It is difficult to know how deeply Ruth had contemplated this part. Was it an attraction to Naomi's God which motivated all of this, or was it mainly just love for Naomi? The very fact that Ruth mentioned the part about Naomi's God becoming her God makes us think that Naomi's faith and its importance were on Ruth's mind.

Had not Naomi prayed to the Lord on behalf of both Orpah and Ruth? Had not Naomi pronounced God's blessing on them? It is not hard imagining Naomi speaking of her faith in the presence of her sons when they were alive and with their wives. Even when Naomi spoke of the Lord's hand being against her, Ruth could probably see that it came out of Naomi's grief, and the important take away for Ruth would be that Naomi and her Lord were on a journey. Apparently, Ruth wanted in on that journey.

**¹⁷ Where you die, I will die,
and there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"**

Ruth intended to be united with Naomi on Naomi's life's journey for as long as life lasted, until the first of them died and was buried. Ruth even made this declaration as a kind of covenant prayer, with the Lord as witness.

Reflect on the selfless quality of this declaration that Ruth made. Ruth committed herself to follow Naomi's lead on where they would go and live. Ruth was leaving her people to live as a foreigner among Naomi's people. Ruth was adopting Naomi's people without any guarantee that they would adopt her. Finally, Ruth was changing her religious and spiritual allegiance to conform to Naomi's worship of the God of Israel. She was making a lifelong commitment.

What do you think of Ruth's ability to imagine and describe the commitment she was making in following Naomi? How did she make her commitment sound less like a life sentence and more like a faith journey? In what ways can you imagine Ruth's commitment pleasing God?

There is a good chance that you have heard verses 16 and 17 read at a wedding. We are recalling the fact that these words were first uttered by a woman to her mother-in-law. Yet, it is hard to find better words to use to describe the covenant that a husband and wife are making when they unite together in marriage. The words work at a wedding as long as the meaning moves beyond mere sentimentality and captures the essence of the kind of commitment Ruth was making toward Naomi.

Since Ruth's course of action was quite extraordinary among daughters-in-law toward their mother-in-law, is it fair to compare her commitment to the commitment made between husbands and wives in

marriage the world over? Should Ruth's commitment to Naomi set the bar for all marriages? Can marriages survive without that level of commitment?

18 When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

What else could Naomi do? I think Naomi could sense the open-ended quality of Ruth's declaration. What was Ruth getting herself into? Ruth was taking a great risk. Neither Naomi nor Ruth could know what was ahead, but everything in Ruth's words and actions set the stage for an amazing journey of faith.

In the next few verses that follow (Ruth 1:19-21), we're told that the entrance of Naomi and Ruth into Bethlehem created a stir. The women recognized Naomi, but they could not be sure because she looked different. What did it mean that Naomi's widowed daughter-in-law was accompanying her? Naomi expressed her grief, saying that they should no longer call her "Naomi" because that name means "pleasant." Instead, they should call her "Mara," which means "bitter," because the Lord has dealt bitterly with her. Naomi said that she left Judah full, but the Lord had brought her back to Judah empty. Naomi felt as if the Lord was dealing with her harshly and the Almighty was bringing calamity upon her.

In her grief, Naomi seemed to think that her current state represented the end of her story. Little did she know that an incredible story was just beginning. The next verse, and last verse of our lesson, sets up the story that is to follow.

22 So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

The first part of this verse contains a brief summary of what has happened so far. Ruth the Moabite has followed her mother-in-law into the land that is familiar to Naomi, but completely unfamiliar to Ruth. She has done so out of love and devotion to Naomi. Ruth has faith that helping her mother-in-law through her grief is going to work out for the both of them—by journeying where Naomi journeys, lodging where Naomi lodges, taking on Naomi's people as her own, and by following and serving Naomi's God.

We're also told that they were coming into Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. The place where these two women were landing was a fertile place, both literally and figuratively. The first chapter of Ruth began with a famine, and now by the end of the first chapter, the story has evolved into a story involving an abundant harvest. Interestingly enough, the barley harvest and the land take center stage in the story that unfolds.

The Rest of the Story

Although our scripture lesson ends at this point, we want to see how Ruth's decision to follow Naomi turned out.

Ruth somehow knew about the provision in the law of Moses concerning the gleaning of fields. This is the law where landowners were compelled by God not to harvest every morsel of produce from his fields, but to leave the edges of his fields to be gleaned by the poor and by the foreigners traveling through the land. Ruth told Naomi she was going to glean the field belonging to Naomi's late husband's clan. In this way, Ruth was seeing to it that they would have food.

What is it like seeing the Mosaic law concerning gleaning being applied in this instance for Ruth and Naomi? How do you feel about God putting in place a social safety net like this one? What does this

say to all of us about the concern we should have for the poor and for taking action on their behalf? What is an example of leaving “margin” for others?

Ruth went into the fields to glean because she also thought she might find a future husband among the workers who were harvesting the barley.

Little did she know that she had chosen a portion of the field that belonged to Boaz, a relative of Naomi’s late husband, who happened to be a very prominent and wealthy man. Boaz noticed Ruth and inquired about her. The one in charge of the reapers said, *“She is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, ‘Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.’ So, she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now without resting even for a moment.”* (Ruth 2:6-7)

The next thing you know, Boaz was telling Ruth to keep coming back to glean in his field, and that his employees were instructed to look after her. Ruth could not believe her good fortune and fell to the ground before Boaz. She said, *“Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?”* But Boaz answered her, *“All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!”* Then she said, *“May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.”* (Ruth 2:10-13)

None of Ruth’s selfless actions were lost on Boaz. The blessing he prayed for Ruth draws attention to the faith that Ruth had been expressing through her life and actions. He said, *“May you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!”* Boaz recognized the path that Ruth had taken in faith by deciding to strike out into the unknown in order to care for her mother-in-law. When Ruth, out of love, left the familiar path and left the seemingly more secure path, she came under the sheltering wings of the Lord himself, the God of Israel.

What do these images of God’s care and Ruth’s faith say about the nature of faith for all of us? What is it about Ruth’s faith that was not only pleasing to God, but also pleasing to Boaz?

Ruth was living the journey of faith, and Boaz was noticing it and pointing it out to Ruth. Thank God for the people like Ruth who live a journey of faith so unpretentiously and with such pure motives. Thank God for the people like Boaz who are able to see the journey of faith that another person is taking and draw attention to it.

As their story progresses, we see them drawing closer together. Ruth is amazed that she, a foreigner, would find favor in the sight of Boaz. Likewise, Boaz is amazed that he, an older man, would find favor in the sight of a woman as young and vibrant as she.

When Ruth told Naomi all that was happening between her and Boaz, Naomi immediately knew who Boaz was and his relation to her late husband’s family. Naomi knew the implications and said, *“Blessed be Boaz by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!”* (Ruth 2:20) Naomi, who had once felt forsaken by the Lord, was beginning to realize that the Lord had not forsaken her. The Lord had been working through all that had been happening on the journey of faith between Ruth and Naomi, which all got started when Ruth made the decision to follow Naomi.

The implications to which Naomi was referring, the implications of the romance blossoming between Ruth and Boaz, flow from another provision in the law of Moses. It was the provision for a relative to become the

“kinsmen redeemer” for Ruth and, by extension, Naomi. As a close relative to Ruth’s late husband, Boaz could marry his widow, Ruth, so that her welfare would be guaranteed by him and the land in her family would then be able to be transferred to the household they shared.

The only person who potentially stood in the way was a relative who was closer than Boaz. Boaz went right away to speak to this person in the presence of ten witnesses from among the elders of the town. (Naomi knew that Boaz would not waste any time wanting to settle the matter.) As this other relative considered the possibility of marrying Ruth and receiving the land, he realized it would mess up his own inheritance. This other relative turned it down, which opened the way for Boaz to marry Ruth.

Ruth and Boaz married and soon had a child. It was the women of the town who came to Naomi and celebrate with her the turn that Naomi’s life had taken after her long season of grief. They said, “*Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.*” (Ruth 4:14-16)

What do you think of the statement the women of the community made when they said that Naomi’s daughter-in-law “who loves you” was to her “more than seven sons”?

Then, we’re told that Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed.

This is when we are told the rest of the story: “Obed became the father of Jesse, the father of David.” (Ruth 4:17) In other words, Ruth, from Moab, would end up being the great-grandmother of none other than the renowned and beloved King David.

This story is not only a love story. It is a story that brought balance to Israel’s occasional tendency toward both nationalism and hostility toward foreigners. It reminded God’s people of the duty to show “neighbor love” to the alien in their midst—for God’s people were once aliens.

What joys and opportunities open up for us when we care for others in our midst? How does this mindset put our faith in alignment with God? Try to describe all the relational dimensions of faith that are present in this story? How does the relational faith described in this story compare with the religious faith we often associate with the word *faith*?

Prayer

God of love and mercy, You led Naomi and Ruth on a life journey that became an adventure of faith and love for both of them. We pray that you lead us to opportunities where we might open our heart in faith, that we may find a life of commitment and meaning through caring and being cared for, through our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the “Layered Bible Journey,” at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.



“With Thanksgiving”

By Hal Brady

A minister asked his mother about her friend. His mother replied, “Why, son, she has been trying to die for years. Every time I see her or hear from her she will say, ‘I’m so glad to see you. But I probably won’t see you tomorrow because things are mighty bad. I don’t know that I will be here.’” And then the minister’s mother added, “Son, if that woman ever worked as hard to live as she works to die it’s amazing to think how she might have enjoyed life!”

In these two women we see two different attitudes. The first woman is focused on dying and all that’s negative while the second woman, the minister’s mother, is focused on enjoying life and the positive. While we cannot always determine what happens to us, we can determine how we respond to what happens to us. The question is will we be negative and complaining and focus on the minuses or will we be positive and determined and grateful?

“With thanksgiving,” Paul advises us in life (Philippians 4:6). The choice is ours to make.

Albert Einstein once put the choice like this: “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” During this special thanksgiving season and always, I want to cast a vote for being positive and determined and grateful. For a few minutes, I want to focus on gratitude.

First, gratitude is rooted in God! G.K. Chesterton, the brilliant journalist, once remarked that the worst moment for an atheist is when he/she feels grateful and there is no one to thank. Gratitude is rooted in God, someone to thank. How often have we heard, said, or sung it: “Bless this house! Bless this nation! Bless this mess! Bless you! Bless me!” But the psalmist in his superior wisdom says, “Bless the Lord.” So, what does God really want from us? He doesn’t want merely hymn singing, though that is fine. Nor does he want only prayer, though that too is fine. What God wants first and foremost is a thankful heart.

Second, gratitude is remembering! Memory - it really is God’s gift to us! Our memories are our personal, interior “photo albums.” These albums are our personal archives of mementoes of the great things God has done for us. It is with good reason that scripture exhorts us to remember. You see, forgetfulness withers the muscles of praise and gratitude, so we need to be most careful to “forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:2). Recently, I read an article in “Time” magazine about John Grisham, the well-known author. The article was written by Molly Hall and was about the successful writing career of Grisham. Though Grisham has written 48 No. 1 consecutive best sellers on the New York Times list, the thing that made him was “The Firm,” of which he has sold 7 million copies. Grisham describes his success very humbly “as a series of lucky breaks for which he is grateful.” In his gratitude, Grisham remembers.

Third, gratitude is recognizing that God remembers! The psalmist says, “He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). To be sure, life is fragile and finite. The psalmist compares us to a flower that flourished and then quickly fades away. Each of us is only a generation or two away from oblivion, from being forgotten and unknown. But Glory to God! The psalmist declares that we are not forgotten by God. “God remembers!” His infinite love completely covers the shortness of our lifespan. And that alone becomes the claim to immortality. Because God remembers, there is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And with Christ, everything changes - life, death, the cemetery, even the coffin, everything!

And all because GOD REMEMBERS!

Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com).

.....

A John Wesley Moment: Linguist

By Dave Hanson

John Wesley spoke eight languages. His father urged him to study ancient languages in preparation for pastoral ministry. Of course, he knew English. For Biblical studies he learned Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke). Latin, he learned because “everybody” who was educated learned Latin. French was the language of scholars. German, he learned so he could communicate with the Moravians and Salsburgers in Georgia. And because there was a group of Spanish Jews in Savannah, he learned Spanish. This has been a John Wesley Moment

The Rev. Dave Hanson is a retired pastor and John Wesley scholar.

.....

Conference Updates & Happenings

3Practice Circle Conversations - Nov. 30 & Jan. 25: There are 3 practices that - when named - help us cross the “difference divide” and create space for real conversation. These 3 practices help and inform our interactions with others, ourselves, and God. Revs. Teresa Edwards, Meg Procopio, and Jared Wilson are going to set the stage for us on how to use 3Practice Circles. Learn more: www.sgaumc.org/3practice-circles.

Lay Servant Ministry: [Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry dates & registration](#)

Leading Through Trauma - March 21, 2024: This one-day retreat for South Georgia clergy will be held at Camp Tygart Pipkin Center in Ray City on March 21, 2024, from 9 am - 3 pm. Led by Cameron Bishop, we will talk about the trauma pastors experience in ministry and learn strategies for processing it so we can continue to lead well and thrive personally. The cost for this event is \$25 (lunch is included). [Click here to learn more and register.](#)

[View Full Conference Calendar](#)

.....

Resource Roundup – November 2023

2024 Revised Common Lectionary Sundays & Special Days Calendar

Discipleship Ministries' most popular resource is now available! Visit UMCDiscipleship.org to download the [2024 Revised Common Lectionary Sundays & Special Days](#) calendar. The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of scripture texts following the liturgical year and is designed to be used in worship week by week. For churches and worship teams who follow the lectionary, this resource gathers all those readings for the calendar year 2024 into one handy two-page document for weekly and longer-term worship planning. Even those worshipping communities that only occasionally use the lectionary, the calendar can help with

ordering of days and seasons as well as provide suggestions for preaching series and high holy day celebrations.

Moving from passive to active discipleship

Personal discipleship is more than attending Sunday school and reading the Bible. On a new “Get Your Spirit in Shape” podcast, the Rev. Stacey Harwell-Dye shares her thoughts on how following Jesus can move United Methodists into action in their churches and communities. [Listen to podcast](#)

4 tips for church social-media effectiveness

For most churches (even low-tech churches), the key to increasing your effectiveness with social media is the people sitting in your pews. This article offers four ways churches can leverage people to increase impact. [Read story](#)

Extra! Extra! How to get the best media coverage possible

It's time to write your success story with ink that won't fade. No more hiding in the shadows! It's your time to step into the limelight and get your story told in all the right places. [Read more](#)

New tools for your digital toolbelt

This article looks at some of the best digital tools, including email management apps, social media platforms and other tools that can help you stay organized and connected. It also provides tips on how to use these tools effectively. So, whether you're a seasoned church leader or you're just getting started, this is for you! [Read more](#)

10 policies church leaders should consider

Do you know what your church expects of you? Or what you should expect from the church in return? One way to make everything clear is through written policies. Ken Sloane, director of stewardship and generosity at United Methodist Discipleship Ministries, outlines 10 policies churches should consider. The list includes items on building use, gifts and communication.

[Learn more](#)

Grants available to rural churches

Five \$500 grants are available for rural churches that wish to start or continue an outreach program to attract young people. The deadline to submit applications for the grants from United Methodist Rural Advocates is Jan. 10. Winners will be notified by Feb. 1. [Read press release](#)



Retired Clergy Birthdays – November 2023

- 11/01 – Thomas Maddox: 5938 State Route 7 South; Gallipolis, OH 45631
- 11/03 – Loretta Dunbar: 7552 Edgewater Dr.; Columbus, GA 31904
- 11/03 – Edwin Smith: 305 Grindstone Creek Dr.; Clarkesville, GA 30523
- 11/07 – Eve Tomberlin: 137 Aston Hall; Macon, GA 31078
- 11/09 – Douglas Force: PO Box 1938; Hinesville, GA 31313
- 11/09 – Joe Flowers, Jr.: 390 Brook Hollow Dr.; McDonough, GA 30252
- 11/11 – David Johnson: 916 Watermelon Run; Charleston, SC 29412
- 11/12 – John Mitchell: 123 Lundy Court; Macon, GA 31210
- 11/13 – Kevin Baker: 501 Carson Ct; Bonaire, GA 31005
- 11/14 – Donald Youmans: 287 Pacolet Ridge Lane; Tryon, NC 28782
- 11/14 – Gordon Roberts: 1259 Hwy 36 East; Barnesville, GA 30204

11/21 – Robert Hall: 4221 Stone Mill Ct.; Martinez, GA 30907
11/21 – Kitty Newton: 187 Newbridge Rd.; Sylvania, GA 30467
11/23 – Jack Atkinson: 3530 Cottonville Rd.; Grant, AL 35747
11/25 – Rex Odom: 4062 Vineville Ave.; Macon, GA 31210
11/27 – Gordon Goodwill: 2911 Charlie Lane; Statesboro, GA 30461
11/28 – Richard Turnipseed: 12420 Clubhouse Court; Tavares, FL 32778
11/30 – Enoch Hendry: 306 E. 54th St.; Savannah, GA 31405

.....

Obituary: Rev. George Truett Leveritt

Rev. George Truett Leveritt, 75, passed away at the Camellia Health and Rehabilitation Center in Claxton on Saturday morning, November 11, 2023.

Truett was born in Moultrie, GA to Bryant Oliver and Lillie McGaha Leveritt. He was a graduate of Jones County High School in Gray, Georgia. He received a Bachelors of Arts degree in History from Georgia College in Milledgeville. He went on to obtain a Masters in Education from Mercer University in Macon. A Bachelors of Arts in Accounting from Georgia College followed next. Years later, Truett received his Masters of Divinity from Erskine College in Due West, SC.

He is a veteran of the United States Army and was stationed in Germany during the Vietnam Era. While in Germany, he served with a nuclear missile program and transitioned into the Central Intelligence Division. After his service to his country, he returned home to south Georgia.

Truett taught in several high schools in Georgia, including Screven County High School. While teaching he also pastored several United Methodist churches in the South Georgia Conference part time. He later went into full time ministry where he served as an Elder until his retirement.

He was a lover of poetry, art, and music, and published a volume of his poetry in January of 1973 - “A Vintage of Two” - and continued composing poetry for the remainder of his life.

Truett is preceded in death by his parents Bryant and Lillie Leveritt.

He is survived by his son and daughter-in-law, Daniel Truett and Skye Whitney Leveritt; a granddaughter, Layla Mae Leveritt; all of Sylvania; brothers and sisters-in-law, Oliver and Susan Leveritt of Houston, TX, Walter and Angela Leveritt of Sylvania, and David and Rhonda Leveritt of Knoxville, TN; and several nieces and nephews.

Funeral services will be held at the First United Methodist Church on Saturday, November 18, 2023. The family will receive friends at 1:00pm followed by the service at 2:00pm with Rev. Jimmy Cason officiating. Interment will follow in the Screven Memorial Cemetery.

.....

Scripture Readings – November 21 edition

November 26

Christ the King, Year A

- Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-34

- Psalm 100
- Ephesians 1:15-23
- Matthew 25:31-46

December 3

First Sunday of Advent, Year B

- Isaiah 64:1-9
- Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
- 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
- Mark 13:24-37