

## February 2018

“We carry the past with us, so we must understand its legacy of deep darkness as well as strong light. We can see the future only in imagination, so we must continue to dream of freedom, peace, and justice for everyone.”

Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.

1) To honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy, think about the deep darkness and strong light of our past. How do we keep faithful to the dream of freedom, peace, and justice for our present and our future?

2) The sermon series on “Jesus in the Headlines” reminds us that Jesus lived a life of scandal. As Pastor Taylor reminded us, if we have eaten at Christ’s table, we are implicated in the scandal created by his life. In what ways do you find yourself “implicated” and how do you perpetuate his scandalous life?

3) Do you remember the moment you decided to become a member of First United Methodist Church? How and why did you decide to join First Austin? What brought you to First in the first place?

## March 2018

1) In honor of Women’s History Month, think about the women who have helped shape your faith, supported you in your faith, or helped you move forward on your faith journey. It doesn’t have to be women in this church, it can also be the women who helped get you here in one way or another.

2) As we consider the book of Exodus during this Lenten season, consider your time in the wilderness—how has your wilderness journey brought you to First Church? Has the church (or particular members or leaders) sustained you during a difficult time? How have you felt called out of the wilderness (or perhaps into it?) into ministry at and with this church?

3) Lent is also about repentance. When and how has the church helped you to turn, to change your mind or your heart or your actions?

## April 2018

1) *In Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks writes “To educate as a practice of freedom. . . . comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe our work is not merely to share information but share the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students”. For those of us who teach, whether in primary, secondary schools or in higher education, or in different settings,

the experience of teaching and learning can be viewed as a spiritual practice by both teachers and learners. Have you experienced either a teaching or learning experience which you would define as a spiritual practice? How would you describe your teaching or learning as a vocation or spiritual gift?

2) In his book, *Opening to God, Lecto Divina and Life as Prayer*, David Benner explains “creativity, like thought, is undoubtedly also one of the important ways humans show divine likeness. God creates, and we are made in God’s image. Consequently, creativity springs forth from all of us, in one way or another. We do not always trust its voice, and when distracted we may not even discern its presence. We tend to think of creativity only in certain limited spheres of life—the arts, for example—and fail to see that any act that emerges with authenticity from a deep place of spirit and soul is a creative one.” What creative activities help you experience the presence of God? What creative practices do you use to open to God?

3) “They shall call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.” Matthew 1: 23  
Have you ever felt a moment which you understood to be a moment of Presence, a moment of “God with you?” How did this affect you? How were you changed?

## **May 2018**

1) After the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallum (in 1833), Tennyson wrote in “In Memoriam” “There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds.” Paul Tillich, over a century later, wrote “Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.” What role has doubt played in your own faith? Have there been moments when your own doubts have challenged your faith or helped you develop a deeper understanding of your own faith?

2) After Jesus Christ Superstar Live aired this spring, many FUMC members discussed the role this musical had on their own faith development. FUMC’s own history of summer musicals has played a significant role in many members’ lives. Has music, sacred or secular, ever lead you to a new understanding of your faith or offered a transcendent experience with the Holy? Has a specific piece of music or experience of music spoken to you more deeply than other faith experiences?

3) Cathy Stone spoke of Bandelier National Monument in her Earth Day sermon. Some places, whether in church or elsewhere, offer an experience of Presence. Have you had an experience of such Presence in specific place, either at First or elsewhere? Are there places you consider sacred or significant to your own faith?

## June 2018

1) Kaye P. McKee's book, *When God Walks Away*, explores the complicated experience of "The Dark Night of the Soul", so named by St. John of The Cross, and the moments we feel God has left us alone in our suffering. Even Moses and the prophets ask God why they suffer. Gideon asks "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?'" (Judges 6:13). Have you ever experienced a dark night of the soul or felt that God walked away from you when you were in need? How would you explain this experience to someone experiencing their own dark night? How did this experience affect your faith?

2) "To journey and be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim" writes Mark Nepo, in *The Exquisite Risk*. Have you taken a pilgrimage, literal or figurative? Has a journey ever become a surprising pilgrimage that has transformed you in unexpected ways?

3) Christians often speak of a calling to the ministry or a calling to vocation (teaching, medicine, etc), that Frederick Buechner describes as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." We speak less often of the feeling of being "sent", as if you were some and answer for someone or some community or some particular situation. Have you ever felt a calling for a particular work or a vocation for which you were perfectly suited? Have you ever felt "sent"?

## July/August 2018

1). You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10: 19). Have you ever been a stranger, either in another place or even in a community? How did this experience affect how you view strangers? Have you ever welcomed a stranger as part of how you live your faith?

2) Paul writes, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;" (2 Corinthians 4). He encourages us not to lose heart, not to despair. Have you ever experienced despair or hopelessness? How have you coped? Did your faith community help? Did your own faith change during your despair?

3) Joan Chittister writes “the purpose of Sabbath is to reflect on life, to determine whether what we’re doing and who we are is what we should be doing and who we want to be. Sabbath is meant to bring wisdom and action together.” Do you practice a Sabbath ritual? Have you taken a Sabbatical in which you felt that you were able to reflect on life and determine what course of action you were to meant to take next?