

## THIS WEEK'S KEYWORD

# RELATIONSHIP

Lent is a time of reflection. It's often considered a time of repentance, of study, and of prayer. But an undercurrent to those powerful faith practices is the concept of relationship. We repent so we can restore our relationship with God. We study scripture so we can learn what God wants from us in the relationship. And we pray so we build bonds with our Creator.

As we start our first full week of Lent, we have the opportunity to wonder at the ways God has provided relationships for us so that we don't wander this world alone. Make no mistake: We must work at relationships. My parents were married for more than 50 years. It was a second marriage for both of them, and it was clear to me that whatever didn't work in their first marital attempts they had figured out with each other. That doesn't mean they avoided difficult times, but they managed to show me what it means to care for one another.

My dad's kidneys failed when he was in his 60s. We would laugh a bit at the way my mom would prod him about taking his medication and following through on all he had to do once he received a donor kidney. Likewise, my mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease later in life, and my dad became her chief caregiver. He worked so incredibly hard to take care of her and to make sure she had what she needed, right up to her last day in this world.

But marriage is just one kind of relationship. We have relationships with our children, parents, extended family, friends, co-workers, people who check us out in the grocery store (for stores that still have clerks), coaches, teachers and more.

All of them are unique. Some are strong, and some are not.

This week, we will reflect on relationships. We'll start with the apostle Paul collecting an offering from the Gentile converts to Christianity for the church back in Jerusalem that was under such heavy oppression. It's a way for Paul to demonstrate the importance of connection within the Christian community. Any time we give to people who have suffered from natural disasters or tithed to the local church or give to wider missions, such as the United Methodist Committee on Relief or to annual conference mission shares, we are practicing what Paul taught about embracing our connection.

We'll explore how relationships start with the story of Isaac and his wife. We'll look at how relationships change through the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. We'll examine our relationship to people we don't even know via the story of the Good Samaritan, God's relationship with us through the parable of the vineyard workers, and one of the best documented friendships in scripture through the story of David and Jonathan. Just a heads up that the final one — for Saturday — has a lot of reading to go with it, but you'll understand why after you read the mini-soap opera that is their relationship.

My prayer is that you will come away from this week realizing that your God wants a stronger relationship with you, and all you have to do is accept that fact.

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Offering for Jerusalem

Scripture — Romans 15:25-33; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, and 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

### Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think it was important for the Gentile followers of Christ to show support to the church in Jerusalem, which was primarily made up of Jewish Christians?
2. How do followers of Christ support each other financially today?
3. Beyond money, what can you do to support your church and the wider Christian community. Make a list of five and then choose one to try at some point yet this year.

## MONDAY

Vineyard Workers

Scripture — Matthew 20:1-16

### Questions for Reflection

1. Some people get jealous of the idea that people can come to faith in Christ (the vineyard) later in life and receive the same reward (eternity). According to the parable, what should our reaction be to someone who comes to faith late in life?
2. Have you ever felt like God owed you something? What was it and what was the circumstance? Does reading this parable make you feel differently?
3. What do you think it means when Jesus says “The last will be first, and the first will be last? How does that make you feel?

## TUESDAY

### The Good Samaritan

Scripture — Luke 10:25-37

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Samaritans and Jews did not get along. Why do you suppose Jesus (a Jew) placed the Samaritan in the story as the hero?
2. People who should have been compassionate passed by. Have you ever passed by a person in need? Why? And how do you wish you would have handled the situation differently?
3. Consider your community. To whose aid might you be able to come in the days ahead. How might you help them?

## WEDNESDAY

### Finding a Wife

Scripture — Genesis 24

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Abraham sends a servant to find a wife for his son so he could marry someone from his own ethnicity. How has the seeking of a mate changed in our modern world? How is it better or worse?
2. What must the relationship have been like between Abraham and the servant he sends to find his son a wife? Describe someone with whom you have a high level of trust.
3. Isaac and Rebekah had to get to know each other. If you are married, or have been, what were your favorite parts about how your spouse and you got to know each other better?

## THURSDAY

### Woman Caught in Adultery

Scripture — John 8:1-11

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Notice only the woman was brought to Jesus for condemnation from adultery. In what ways has society improved in its treatment of women? In what ways is it the same?
2. Scripture tells us Jesus wrote something in the dirt, but it doesn't tell us what he wrote. For fun, speculate on what he drew. What do you hope he was writing or drawing?
3. What do Jesus' remarks to the woman after the men leave tell us about the relationship God wants with sinners?

## FRIDAY

### Road to Damascus Experience

Scripture — Acts 9:1-31

#### Questions for Reflection

1. What was Paul's relationship with God before his encounter with Jesus? And how did it change afterward?
2. Consider Ananias. What was his relationship like with God? How was the relationship tested by what God instructed him to do?
3. Not everyone has a "Road to Damascus Experience." How did you come to faith in Christ? Or if you don't, what has made you curious about the possibility of a relationship with Jesus?

## SATURDAY

### Friendship

Scripture — 1 Samuel chapters 14, 18, 19, 20, and 23; 2 Samuel 1

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Jonathan and David forged a close bond. We don't know all the details, but it was clear they were close. Why are friendships important? How might they be stronger ties than even to family members?
  
2. Jonathan chose David over his own father by helping keep David safe. In what ways do friends become like family? If you have a close friend, write down how you met and how your friendship has grown.
  
3. At the start of 2 Samuel, David learns of the death of Jonathan and mourns his friend. Many of us have lost friends due to illness or accidents or by other means. How do you keep their memories alive in your life? Do you have anything, such as a gift they gave you, to remember them by? If so, write down what it is and why you have hung onto that object.