

THE SPIRE

*Your
Church
Magazine*



January / February 2022



NURTURE FAITH

by Dr. Doug Hood

Senior Pastor

A LIFE FULL OF MEANING

“Come, follow me,” he said, “and I will show you how to fish for people.”

Mark 1:17 (Common English Bible)

Norman Vincent Peale said, “To find life full of meaning, live a bigger and better life.” Joseph R. Sizoo spoke of a man who said to him, “I am not interested in the endurance of life but in an enduring life.” Jim Rohn wrote, “Consider others’ interest as important as your own. Much of the world suffers simply because people consider only their own interest.” I like best the way Michael Brown expresses the route to a life full of meaning, “Find something bigger than you to live for. Be like Abraham who was so busy tending the needs of his children, Israel, that he just didn’t have time to fret much about his own needs.” Multiple voices that all, essentially, share the same wisdom. A life focused only on your own wants and desires is the shortest route to an empty life.

These few words in Mark’s Gospel offer tremendous guidance to a full and satisfying life. First is an invitation to “follow.” To the one who is experiencing emptiness in their life, tossed from here to there by unseen forces, without direction or purpose, Jesus asks that their eye be focused on him. As sailors once navigated the seas by the North Star, Jesus asks that we navigate the complexities and uncertainties of life by an eye that pays attention to Jesus. Time reading the Bible, learning the teachings of Jesus, is never wasted time. Nor is this an exercise for the margins of time that may remain after a day of work. Learning of Jesus continually resets those values and priorities that propel us forward. We discern with greater clarity the important stuff of life.

Second is the invitation to “learn.” In Judaism, rabbis often shared their wisdom with their followers. Formation of others was accomplished by teaching, modeling life built upon the teaching, and asking followers to do the same under the supervision of the instructor. This method of learning is more effective than instruction alone. During a vacation in Mexico my wife and I enrolled in a cooking class. The chef introduced the ingredients required for a particular Mexican dish, the kitchen instruments that would be required in the preparation, and then prepared the dish under our watch. Then the chef turned

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CHURCH STAFF

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THE SPIRE MAGAZINE

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**If you or a family member
are hospitalized, please
notify the church office.**

**Even if you give the
name of the church upon
admission, the hospital
will NOT notify us.**

ANNUAL CONGREGATIONAL DINNER AND DISTINGUISHED PREACHER



Our Annual Dinner and Distinguished Preacher program relaunches after taking a break due to the pandemic. Join us on Friday, January 21st at Benvenuto Restaurant (1730 N. Federal Hwy in Boynton Beach) at 5:30 p.m. for a social hour, and at 6:30 p.m. for a sit down dinner, thought-provoking speaker, and live music coordinated by our Director of Music, Don Cannarozzi.

Our speaker this year is Dr. Michael Brown. He is the pastor at Blowing Rock Methodist Church in North Carolina. Prior to his ministry there, he was the Senior Minister at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. Dr. Brown is an accomplished author, preacher, and teacher. Then, on Sunday, January 23rd, Dr. Brown returns to our pulpit for the fourth time for our Distinguished Preacher series.

The cost of the dinner is just \$35 per person. This event is underwritten by both the church and Benvenuto Restaurant. Reservations are required and can be made by completing the form on our website (www.firstdelray.com) or by calling the church office (561-276-6338). All monies are due on or before January 21st. ●



SUSTAINING MINISTRY EXCELLENCE

- Nurturing Our Faith
- Enhancing Our Congregational Care
- Strengthening Our Pillars of Support

by **Grace Cameron Hood**

Director of Children and
Family Ministry



FIRST FAMILIES MINISTRIES

FIRST FAMILY NEWS!

It has been exciting to have some wonderful participation of the First Families in the past months. We are planning some more fun events and we invite you to participate as possible!

Monday, January 17th – **Morning Time Together on the Beach.** 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. We'll enjoy drinks, bagels, Bible Study, and have a Sandcastle Contest! As this is a school holiday, we hope that as many families as possible can join us. We will meet at the church and then go to the beach together.

February is still in the works, but we are looking at several possible outings for Sunday afternoon, February 20th. More details to come, so be sure to put that time on your calendar!

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Sunday School is continuing to use Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible. In January and February we are looking at the teachings of Jesus. Keep your eye out for the weekly email from Grace for details.

If you would like your child to participate in the worship service in any way, please contact Grace Hood (gracehood@firstdelray.com). Opportunities include ringing the bell (very loud!), lighting the candles before the service, reading Scripture, and musical presentations.

NURSERY NEWS

We are pleased to welcome Caroline Calder to our Nursery team! Caroline has grown up in the church, starting in the nursery as a baby, then graduating to Bible Bunch, Sunday School, and Youth Group. It is so exciting to see her become an important part of the ministry of our church as she helps Liz Landes in the nursery. ●



Craft night at the church. Fun was had as the children made gluten-free gingerbread houses.

by Grace Cameron Hood

Director of Children and
Family Ministry

FIRST FAMILIES FUN FACTS

The Narvilas Family

We are Maddie and Mari Narvilas and we'd like to say a warm "hello" to our church family! We're members of the Welcome Team, so you may have met us already at the church doors on a Sunday morning, where we try to convey our enthusiasm for this wonderful community of worship: *"Good Morning! It's lovely to see you! Are you visiting us from elsewhere? Where are you from?"* As Mari says, in reference to the sacraments, *"Don't forget your communion cups!"* (We've both been told to cut down on the caffeine...)

The very first time we attended this church in 2014, we were welcomed by a lovely lady named Barbara, who must have realized we looked a little lost and invited us to sit with her in one of the front pews. She came towards us as we walked up the front stairs from the street (pre- renovations) and she said, "Welcome. Are you new? I don't think I've seen you before. Come with me." And so we did.

Welcomed we felt! Mari started attending Sunday School and we joined the church shortly thereafter. Jim Poch was the children's choir director, and he was terrific. I'll always remember the songs from "Christmas Letters: The Musical," which we played in the car nonstop for weeks before the performance.

Mari and I returned to Delray this summer after five years back in NYC/Amagansett, and we couldn't wait to get back to "The Church by the Sea". Here's a little more about us personally: Mari is 16 and a junior at American Heritage. She works part-time at Delray Goodies as a "bobarista". Boba is a dessert topping and an integral part of a popular Chinese drink. Mari is considering attending college in China and speaks fluent Mandarin. Her interests include urban planning, plant-based cooking, and international finance.

I am an attorney and social worker, and have been working remotely for a NY firm since we've been in Florida. Half of the firm never returned to the office after the shutdown of 2020, and we realized that in many ways, thanks to Microsoft Teams and everything being online, physical offices risk becoming obsolete. It amazes me that even a few years ago, I would never have thought of being able to work for a company that's 1200 miles away. Aside from yoga, reading, and singing in the shower, my hobbies include watching Netflix and cleaning up after Mari's plant-based cooking turns our kitchen into a Cat 5 Hurricane.

We are both committed to becoming the best people we can be as Christians. Lately, I've been starting each day with a reading from Nurture Faith Volume Two, and I try to "practice these principles in all of my affairs," which is easier said than done. Mari is a member of the youth group and is excited to also be part of Pastor Greg Rapier's Princeton project committee, wherein the youth are coming up with a creative way to show their dedication to God and their communities. We have many blessings, and consider ourselves extremely fortunate to be members of a church community which is vibrant, welcoming, and feels like a place to call home. ●



Mari and Maddie being Ushers.



Mari at Putt'n Around.



Mari's plant-based cooking with Chinese ingredients.

DEACONS' CORNER

The Christmas spirit was alive and well at First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach! Donations to the Deacons' Christmas Tree Fund topped \$6,682, making it possible to meet our commitment to five local agencies.

They, in turn, distributed Target and Walmart gift cards to underserved families. One thank you note received by the church office read, "Without individuals like you, we would not be able to achieve 98 percent of our Milagro Center children being promoted to the next grade level this past school year."

Heartfelt thanks to the donors, to the staff, and to my committee of deacons: Maria Graham, Bill Fisher, Candy Zolcinski, and Marge Lanthier. ●

SESSION REPORT

During the months of October and November, the Session received new members and approved a baptism. They approved that there would be three Christmas Eve worship services. They also approved having only one worship service at 11 a.m. on the Sunday following Christmas, as consistent with previous schedules. The Session also approved the 2022 Communion calendar. The Session called the Annual Congregational Meeting for Sunday, March 6, 2022 following the 11 a.m. worship service. ●

GIFTS TO OUR CHURCH

General Fund from Jack Marshall, in loving memory of Gerald and Mary Marshall.

Memorial Garden Fund from Don and Karen Carter, in fond remembrance and love in memory of John J. Loennecker; and from Don and Karen Carter, in fond remembrance and love in memory of John and Janet Loennecker.

Music Fund from Dorothy Denault and from Cliff Roberson.

Remembrance Fund from Woodrin Grossman and Beth Rivers, in loving memory of Abigail Buck; and from Mirta Viamontes, in loving memory of Frank Viamontes.

Robert H. Teninga Scholarship Fund from anonymous. ●

*Giving
Our
Gifts*

NEW MEMBERS

Catherine Barton

Glenn Barton

Robert Hollahan

Audrey Horan

Ray Horan

Dale Ross

Dianne Somerset

Richard Somerset

Judy Stephenson



WELCOME!



ETERNAL LIVES

Our Deepest Sympathies as a congregation are extended to the families of the following members upon the death of their loved ones:

– Robert Smith –
November 4, 2021

– Sue Chaney –
December 18, 2021

STEP-ABOVE RUMMAGE SALE PREPARATIONS

We have all been waiting for the next Step-Above Rummage Sale as we cleaned our closets and cabinets during the Pandemic. We have been storing our extras and looking forward to more information about our beloved church rummage sale. The time has arrived.

Donation Drop off Dates:

Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from January 18th through February 3rd, from 9:30 a.m. until noon. Make sure to drop off your donation at the correct location on the church campus.

Drop off at Fellowship Hall

- Clothing
- Belts
- Shoes
- Purses

Drop off at Holly House

- Jewelry
- Housewares
- Linens
- Books
- Electronics
- Luggage
- Toys
- Tools
- Sports Equipment

We need your help to make this event a success. Please join us on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays to help sort, hang, and price during the preparation. There is no need to sign up. Just come whenever and however often you are available.

For more information, call 561-274-9597, visit the church website (www.firstdelray.com), or visit the Holly House Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/CleverCrafter>). ●

Holly House is a ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach.

PRAYER MINISTRY TEAM

AN INVITATION TO JOIN THE PRAYER TEAM

JUST IMAGINE

Can you imagine our Father God just waiting to heal the sick? To comfort the lost, and those who have lost someone to death or to the world? To feed the hungry? To fill our needs? I could go on...but you all already know all this, it's nothing new. The Bible teaches us that God wants to bless us; he is waiting, all we need to do is ask! So what are you waiting for?

As members of First Presbyterian I am sure you all pray, but why not try doing it together as a group? Joining the Prayer Team takes little time, and daily prayer is done at home following the guidelines of a Prayer List that is sent out on Monday afternoons. Knowing that you are praying with others of the same belief is of great comfort, AND prayer works!

Imagine how powerful it would be for all of our members to be praying for the same things, showing God how much we care, and how much we believe in him and his loving Son Jesus Christ...Just Imagine.

Prayer requests come through the church office and are then distributed to team members. Each request is carefully and thoughtfully lifted up in prayer with respect and confidentiality. Please call Nancy Fine in the church office (561-276-6338) for more information or if you are interested in joining. ●

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A LIFE FULL OF MEANING

to us and asked that we now repeat what we saw. What was most satisfying is that Grace and I then enjoyed a lunch that we had prepared. Jesus says right here in Mark's Gospel, "I will show you how."

It is then that these words reveal their "strangest secret" - a phrase I have borrowed from Earl Nightingale. The cooking class Grace and I took in Mexico was, without apology, for us. After all, we were on vacation. Yet, here Jesus identifies that our instruction, our formation, is for one purpose: the welfare of other people: "I will show you how to fish for people." I call this the "strangest secret" because what remains unnoticed by many is that discipleship isn't really about us. It is about others. Jesus is asking us to join him on the great adventure of populating God's Kingdom with people who have lost their way in life. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah writes about God calling people to "catch" others in God's net that they also may know God. A life lived for others is the secret of a life full of meaning. ●

GREAT DEALS AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN'S STEP-ABOVE RUMMAGE SALE

CHURCH MEMBER SHOPPING
FEBRUARY 9, 10 A.M. - 1 P.M.
ALL SHOPPERS ARE WELCOME!
FEBRUARY 10-13, 10 A.M. - 1 P.M.

You'll want to get to the Step-Above Rummage Sale early to shop for all the great deals on new and gently used items that look like they've just been taken off a department store's racks and shelves. The Step-Above Rummage Sale is from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, February 9th to February 13th.

Items for sale in Fellowship Hall include clothes and accessories for women, men, and children sorted in departments and on racks, just like at a department store. Shoes are arranged by size and can be tried on in a comfortable sitting area.

In the Holly House, the jewelry department includes unique items at bargain prices. The linen department contains bedding, towels and tablecloths. The housewares department has kitchen supplies including glassware, flatware, sets of dishes, and small appliances.

We also have art, books, toys, sports equipment, bicycles, luggage and tools.

Sales specialists will help with selections and answer any questions. A dressing room is on-site. Some items have new tags still attached. For more details, call (561-276-6338) or visit the church website (www.firstdelray.com). ●

Holly House is a ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach.



Moments from our 2020 Step-Above Rummage Sale.

by Rev. Greg Rapier

Associate Pastor



The following is from Confronting Life's Challenges: Sermons on the Struggles We Face which features sermons by Doug Hood, Greg Rapier, and John "Skip" Randolph.

WHEN YOU FEEL GLAD

1 Thessalonians 5:16-21

Listen for God's Word:

*"Don't brush off Spirit-inspired messages,
but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good."*

1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21 (Common English Bible)

How do we know we've had an encounter with God? That's the question I'm wrestling with this morning. In a world where God rarely speaks audibly, especially recently in a world where the headlines on the news lead us to question God's whereabouts, where a growing percentage of the population doesn't even believe in God, and where those of us who do believe in God do so in a passive way where we really don't see God as an active agent in our lives, where we just live our lives and shoehorn God in where we can, where is God?

To make it more personal, where do you see God? How do you know when you've had an encounter with the divine?

To answer that question, we're going to begin today's sermon with two godless stories. Not godless in the sense that they're morally bankrupt, but rather godless in the sense that neither story really



appears to be about God. The first story from my own life, the second from Scripture. Yes, a Godless story from Scripture.

Godless story number one: It was the night before my wedding, about 11:30 p.m. I should have been asleep but, of course, I wasn't, because it was the night before my wedding. I received a text from my friend, Shane, and her boyfriend, Jesse. They were driving to In-N-Out Burger, because that's what you

do when you live in California. They had miraculously guessed that I was unable to sleep this night before my wedding. Though it was borderline irresponsible when I should be sleeping, they asked if I wanted to join them.

Naturally, I said yes. Thirty minutes later, there I was, sitting in the back of their car in a well-lit parking lot on what, as of a few minutes ago, was officially my wedding day. I ate a cheeseburger

and fries. We talked about how I wasn't nervous, but excited, and about how I wasn't going to be seeing Lissette again until the wedding itself when she was to walk down the aisle. I told them this whole In-N-Out situation was so weird, I'd probably end up using it in a sermon someday, but I just wasn't sure how. There was something about that moment, something I couldn't articulate that felt oddly poignant. A moment of stillness before everything was going to change.

The next morning, two of my groomsmen took me out to breakfast. I was still full from the In-N-Out, so I ordered something small like toast. If I were smarter, I would have had something more substantial, because Lissette and I were so busy during the wedding we forgot to eat! We had our breakfast, then I lingered around the house for a bit and gradually made my way to the church to get ready. When I arrived, Lissette was already there. She and her bridesmaids had been getting ready in a room on the far side of the church, and even then, we were practicing social distancing. It was all very carefully choreographed so

our paths didn't cross.

Then came time for the service. I remember standing there with my pastor outside the Sanctuary door, just waiting to go in. I was excited and all sorts of nervous. I processed in. As the groomsmen and bridesmaids processed in, the organist messed up. He was supposed to play a soft little Bruno Mars number on the piano but instead he played Canon in D, which was going to be Lissette's song. Lissette ended up walking down the aisle to Bruno Mars. Let me tell you, as soon as those Sanctuary doors reopened and I saw my future wife, I did not care what song was playing. I thought she would be the one struggling to keep things together. When I first saw her, it took all the strength I could muster to fight back my tears. It was a flood of emotion. To this day, when I perform a wedding and everyone is standing for the bride, I sneak a glance to my side, because I like to see the groom see the bride.

Godless story number two: This one's from Scripture. The Jewish Esther marries a powerful king who does not know she is Jewish. She's

not the king's only wife, so they don't interact the way we think of when we think of a modern couple. Remember, this is way back in the day, and Esther's a woman, so she's very subservient to her husband, let alone her king. Even speaking out of turn could get her killed.

The king's chief minister, Haman, had come up with a plot to massacre all the Jews in the empire. With the persuasion of Esther's cousin, Mordechai, Esther decides to confront her king to tell him about Haman's plot and try to stop it, even though it could mean death for her.

Then, in a scene with so much tension it feels ripped straight from a Quentin Tarantino movie, Esther, the king, and Haman share a meal together at a banquet table. Haman wants Esther and her people killed, Esther wants to see Haman killed. More than that, she wants to save her life and the lives of her people. Unbeknownst to Haman, Esther plans on telling the king as much during this meal. If this goes well, she'll have saved her people. If this goes poorly, she'll end up dead by night's end.

"What do you want?" the king asks. Esther looks at the king, then Haman, then back at the king. Finally, she says, "I am a Jew. This man, your most trusted advisor, wants to kill me and my people. What do I want? I want to live."

The king deliberates, and eventually he rules in Esther's favor. He sends Haman to be killed, and all the Jews throughout the land rejoice and feast. The feast of Purim is celebrated by Jews to this day.





Here's the thing, and this is why Esther is literally a godless story: In the entire Book of Esther, ten chapters, God is never mentioned. Not once. There are actually two Books in the Bible that don't mention God. The other is Song of Songs, your go-to source for biblical erotic love poetry. Look it up. Or don't.

My question is this: Why do our Scriptures have entire books that don't mention God? What do these godless stories tell us about God's presence in our lives and in the world?

If our lives seem godless in that we live our lives without burning bushes speaking to us and without seas parting miraculously; if our lives are godless in that we've never walked on water or witnessed someone rise from the dead; if our lives are godless in that we can live our whole lives without thinking of or discussing God; and if the Book of Esther is godless in the sense that God is never discussed, never thought of, never mentioned, then maybe there's an overlap between the Book of Esther and our lives.

Maybe, and just humor me here, this is an outlandish claim,

maybe Esther is in the Bible for a reason. Crazy, I know. I hope they don't revoke my degree for that one. Maybe God is there in Esther, not on the page, but between the lines. Maybe, if we can unlock that, if we can find God in Esther, we can also find God in our lives. Maybe the Book of Esther wasn't godless all along. Maybe our lives aren't godless either.

First Thessalonians chapter five connects *God's will with everything that is good*. The Scripture says, *rejoice always, (be glad always), because that is God's will...examine everything carefully and hang onto what is good*.

In other words, hang onto what is good because that is God's will. Because God's will is good, we are to rejoice.

I want to take a moment to clarify that we often think about God's will completely wrong. When someone dies and we say *oh, God wanted another angel*, or if we experience a hardship in our lives, and we say *God-willing, I'll get through it*, I get the sentiment, but we're actually shortchanging God. God wants us to get through it.

God wills us to get through it. God promises that, one way or another, we will get through it. God's will is that we all experience wholeness in this life and the next. God doesn't will us to suffer and to die and to experience pain. What sort of parent wants that for their child? Not a very good one, I'll tell you that much.

God is good. Our Scriptures are very clear, so let me repeat that again: God is good. All the time, God is good. God's will is good. God wills for good to happen, not bad. God is good. ***Literally***. I don't mean literally the way my generation uses the term, I mean ***literally***, *God is good. God equals good*.

When First Thessalonians tells us to examine everything carefully and hang onto what is good, it's telling us to hang onto God. It's also telling us where to find God. Because God is present in the good. Friends, where there is good there is God, and where there is God, there is good. First John tells us that God is love. Again, literally, God is love. God equals love. Where there is love there is God, and where there is God there is love.

Now, friends, we have two guideposts for finding God, don't we? Where there is good, there is God. That's guidepost number one. Guidepost number two: where there is love, there is God.

In the Book of Esther, where do we see love? Where do we see good? Finding God is as simple as that. God is present in Mordecai's love and his sense of justice, as he lovingly urges his niece Esther to do what is good. God is present in Esther's courageous call to do what is right at that dinner table, where

Esther is afraid to do what is good, but knows that she must. God is there in the king's heart as the king lovingly listens to his wife when she speaks something brash, and when he rules in her favor anyway. Finally, God is with the Jewish people in their gladness and in their joy as they partake in the Purim feast, for something good had happened, and that was God's will.

Friends, we can use these same guideposts to find God in our lives. Where we see love, we see God. And, where we see good, we see God.

There was something fundamentally good, irresponsible maybe, but good, about my friends taking me to In-N-Out Burger the night before my wedding when I couldn't sleep. It's hard to put into words the

same way God is sometimes hard to put into words. As I ate a cheeseburger at midnight in a harshly lit parking lot, I experienced something good, and I felt loved. I felt happy. I felt God.

I felt God the next morning as I shared breakfast with my groomsmen. I felt God there waiting in the church with my good and loving friends. And then, when that silly Bruno Mars song played on the organ, when finally, at the peak of a long day, I saw my bride, as I felt an outpouring of joy and of love and of gladness, you better believe I felt the presence of God.

What about you? Where are the places in your life you've encountered love? What makes you happy? What has made you feel the most alive lately? When have you felt glad?

Where have you experienced good? Because that, friends, is where you've experienced God.

When you feel glad, know that you are feeling something else too, God with you and in you. When you feel alive, know that that is God's will for you to experience life in all its glory. When you feel love, and feel loved, and see love acted out in the world, know that you are bearing witness to the very essence of God.

Amen. ●



SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

For 2022, Communion will be celebrated on the first Sunday of each month: January 2nd, February 6th, March 6th, April 3rd, May 1st, June 5th, July 3rd, August 7th, September 4th, October 2nd, November 6th, and December 4th. Communion will also be served on Maundy Thursday, April 14th. ***All are welcome at the Lord's Table.*** ●



CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

Our annual Congregational Meeting is on Sunday, March 6th, immediately following the 11 a.m. worship service. ●

EVERYTHING BLUE (PER CAPITA)

In case you are wondering what the blue envelope near the beginning of your 2022 offering envelope box is for, you are not alone. “Per Capita” is the assessment that each congregation pays for each church member recorded on their membership rolls. It is assessed by our denomination (Presbyterian Church, USA). Per capita enables Presbyterians to mutually and equitably share the eccleastical and administrative costs of sustaining our witness to Christ - as a sign of the covenant that binds us together. These expenses are rounded out to \$40 per member for 2022.

Even though our Per Capita expense is included in our operating budget, we need your help to ease the financial burden this places on the church budget. Paying your per capita does make a difference when our congregation’s total assessment for 2022 is \$31,778. *Thank you to those who choose to help.* ●

EVERYTHING BLUE (PARKING STICKER)

One of the benefits of membership at the church is the blue parking sticker. Mounted on the inside of the front or back window of your car, wherever it is easiest to reach, this sticker is a signal that your car belongs on the church lot for non-Sunday events. Since the east parking lot is leased to a valet company, this sticker is a visual clue to them that you are a member and therefore entitled to park in the lot.

Our parking lot, located on the west side of Gleason Street across the street from the front of the Sanctuary, is leased to the City of Delray Beach for their use, other than on Sunday mornings. Our blue parking sticker is not a substitute for paying for metered parking in that lot and you will receive a ticket from the city. The visual reminder that this parking lot is reserved for church events is the large Church Parking sign by the entrance.

Everyone attending worship can park in the church parking lots on Sunday mornings and a parking sticker is not required. If you are a member of the church and are in need of a new parking sticker, contact Nancy Fine in the church office (561-276-6338). ●

by Nathanael Hood



BLUE BAYOU

A Movie Review by Nathanael Hood, MA, New York University

*“Then he said, ‘The Sabbath was created for humans;
humans weren’t created for the Sabbath.’ ”*

Mark 2:27 (Common English Bible)

The bayou is all the man knows—or at least all he can remember. Standing on the water’s edge and looking out over the Mississippi River, Antonio LeBlanc (Justin Chon) feels a strange kind of peace. Sneaking a forbidden cigarette he’s sworn he’s quit, he reflects on a difficult life. Orphaned in Korea, he was adopted by white Americans who abused him for years. After escaping, he bounced around Louisiana, getting in and out of trouble with the law as he struggled to survive. But now, he’s reformed and finally found a life worth living—a hard one, but a good one. He’s married a kind woman named Kathy (Alicia Vikander) and fallen in love with being the step-father of her daughter Jessie (Sydney Kowalske). Now the two have their own baby on the way, and though Antonio’s felony

charges prevent him from getting a job besides piecemeal work at a tattoo parlor, the three are really and truly happy.

At least until ICE comes knocking. Following an unjust arrest by a corrupt, power-tripping police officer, Antonio is scheduled for deportation after it’s discovered that his abusive foster parents never technically filed to naturalize him. He may be racially Korean, but America is all he’s ever known. But now, because of a legal loophole, he faces being separated from his family and sent to a country where he doesn’t even speak the language. Now he faces legal fees for an appeal he can’t afford and the specter of a future he can’t control. This is the plot to Justin Chon’s devastating melodrama *Blue Bayou*. Sound farfetched? It isn’t. In recent

years, the nativist politicization of America’s immigration system has led to an explosion of unjust rulings where countless citizens who were legally adopted from abroad as children in the 80s and 90s have been sent back to their “home countries” thanks to an aggressive, legalistic interpretation of the Child Citizenship Act of 2000. I say “countless” because the actual number of adoptees who’ve been deported has proven difficult to calculate. *Blue Bayou* alone was directly inspired by thirteen such cases.

The film itself is understandably difficult to sit through, both in its examination of an immigration system gone insane, a law enforcement system riddled with corrupt officers, and the psychological turmoil Antonio feels as a Korean-American who,

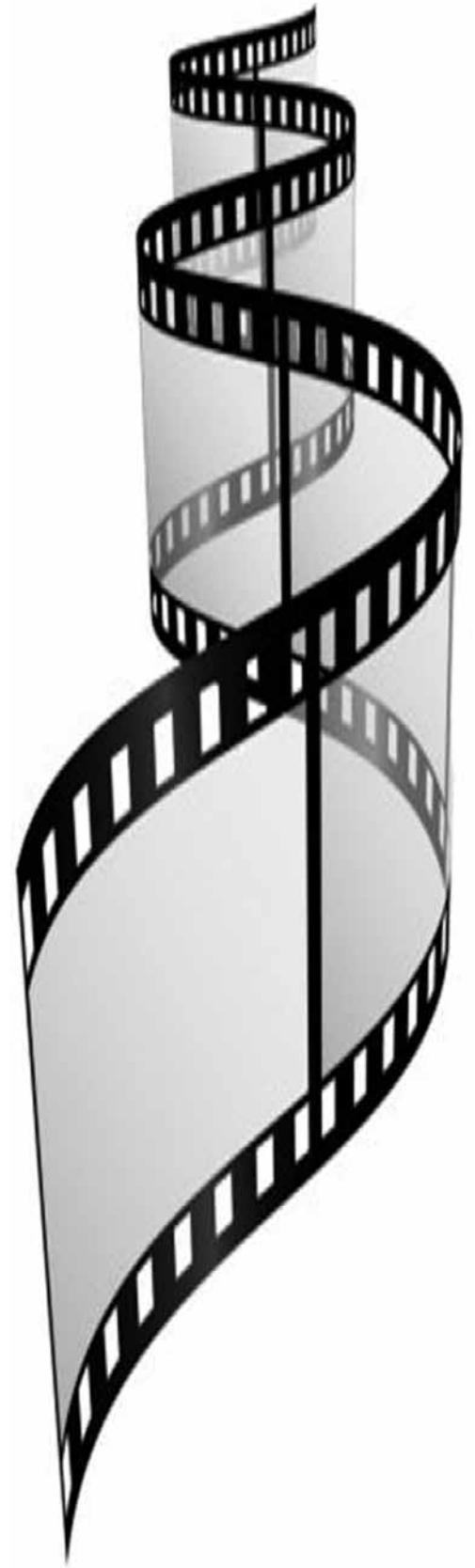
continued on page 18

despite his thick New Orleans accent, has never felt fully accepted by his white neighbors. There's a lovely subplot where Antonio develops a friendship with a terminally ill Vietnamese refugee named Parker (Linh Dan Pham) whose extended family provides him with a glimpse of a possible life where his Asianness might complement his American identity instead of hindering it. But for him it's not to be. All the justice system sees in him is a foreigner—and an illegal one, at that.

Blue Bayou is above all a damning indictment of a broken immigration system that's been hijacked by bureaucrats who see the enforcement of the letter of the law as more important than actually helping people. The second chapter of Mark sees Jesus confront such corrupt authorities after a group of Pharisees condemn him and his disciples for picking and eating heads of grain on the Sabbath, a violation of one of their 613 laws extrapolated from the teachings of Moses. Jesus rebukes them, reminding them that King David once broke such a regulation when he and his army needed food. He continues by reminding them that the Sabbath—and by extension the laws associated with

it—was made for humanity, not the other way around. Here Jesus argues that if following the letter of the law hurts the people it was meant to protect, then the law itself should be reconsidered or even ignored. What good are Sabbath laws if they keep the hungry feeling hungry! One can't help but wonder what Jesus—himself a refugee whose family fled violence into a foreign country when he was a baby—would think of Antonio's story. What, then, might Jesus think of the immigration system that victimized him? One can't help but shudder.

two fishes, how many more could he feed with nearly half a billion dollars? Suddenly Jesus' face in the painting doesn't seem so blank. Is that exasperation or resignation we read? If it isn't, maybe it should be. ●



FILL A BAG, FEED A FAMILY

Each February our congregation collects food for Christians Reaching Out to Society (CROS) Ministries' food pantries. With your gift of any canned or boxed, unopened, unexpired, non-perishable food items, you can help families and individuals in our local community who don't have enough to eat. This includes people like Wayne, who is struggling to find a full-time job. He is working two part-time jobs, but he is not getting enough hours nor benefits. Your donations help him to have the food he needs for his family as he works towards finding stable employment.

This problem of meeting the basic food needs of those in our community who are under-resourced is real. Won't you consider purchasing basic items to ***Fill a Bag...Feed a Family?***



Suggested items include:

- Peanut Butter
- Canned Meat – Tuna, Chicken, Ham
- Boxed Pasta
- Bagged or Boxed Rice
- Dry Beans
- Canned Vegetables
- Canned Fruit
- Canned Soup
- Canned Spaghetti Sauce
- Canned Tomato Sauce
- Other non-perishable items

Food may be left in the church lobby on Sunday mornings, or on the cart outside of the Sanctuary doors by the covered circle during the workweek. If you prefer not to shop during this time, please consider making a monetary donation in the form of a check payable to “CROS Ministries” and place it in the offering box or mail it to the church office.

Your generosity and compassion can impact individuals and families in our community. Thank you for your support. ●

FIRST IMPACT

*“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their hard work.
If either should fall, one can pick up the other.
But how miserable are those who fall and don’t have a companion to help them up!”
Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10 (Common English Bible)*

What are we doing here at First Presbyterian? Well, many of us are not actually “here”, as in the sense of being physically present. For almost two years, many of us have been in our homes avoiding the Covid virus. However, technology has granted us the ability to be “here”, while still keeping us out of harm’s way.

Now that that is cleared up, I ask again, “What are we doing here?” Our church continues to function in our physical absence, but we have been missing that weekly, sometimes daily, contact with each other. We are missing the friendly greetings and casual exchange of information we formerly had. We miss the fellowship of our gathering together. Technology cannot replace a warm handshake or a hug, but it can still bring us together in a meaningful way.

The Fellowship Team of First Delray invites you to join the first “First Impact” meeting, a Zoom gathering highlighting what we are doing here, even when we do not gather “in person”. Each monthly meeting will consist of a guest speaker from one of the organizations we support with our offerings. There will be time for questions for the speaker as well as time to catch up with our friends afterwards.

Our first meeting is Wednesday, January 26th, at 7:30 p.m. Kerry Filippone, Community Impact Manager for the Achievement Centers for Children & Families, will tell us about the impact that our support has on our community, and then we will have the opportunity for “virtual fellowship” with one another. Please notify either Pat Breman (pat.breman@ac-ex.com) or Nancy Fine (nancyfine@firstdelray.com) by Friday, January 21st, of your plans to attend. You will be sent a link for the Zoom gathering.

“See” you in the New Year on January 26th! ●

FIRST IMPACT PROGRAM SCHEDULE

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 26TH

Kerry Filippone, Community Impact Manager
Achievement Centers for Children & Families



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23RD

Ruth Mageria, Executive Director
CROS (Christians Reaching Out to Society) Ministries



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23RD

Pam O'Brien, President and CEO
AVDA (Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse)



WALKS WITH THOUGHTS

After a weeklong Thanksgiving celebration with family followed by frenetic holiday decorating, shopping, wrapping, and mailing, this December afternoon I find myself zapped of all energy and devoid of any inclination to engage in the expected, sparkling dinner conversation with friends. My body and spirit are in serious need of rejuvenation.

A nap or a walk? Which will it be? I choose the walk. And I know just the place—the Morikami Museum and Gardens: a quiet island of tranquility tucked away just off Jog Road in Delray Beach.

To my dismay, on arrival, a crowded parking lot greets me. Tempted to turn around, I instead park and climb the entrance ramp, pay my \$13, circumvent the museum exhibits, and open the glass doors at the back of the museum building. To my right lies the open-air terraced patio of the noisy, crowded Cornell Café. However, directly in front of me, all is serenity.

I descend the stairs to a pond where a blue heron stands calmly not more than a few feet from a lazy alligator

half-submerged near the bank. Not a soul is in sight. My body relaxes. It may be the effects of the artfully placed trees and bushes, the simple wooden bridges over calm lakes and ponds, or the attitudes of those who choose to wander through these grounds. There is a harmony with nature here. The stress of the hustle and bustle of today's South Florida life slips away in the midst of this beautiful, manicured space.

Unbidden, one of last Sunday's hymns plays in my head. "Emmanuel, Emmanuel, his name shall be Emmanuel." *Emmanuel. God with us.* It's easy to feel the presence of my Creator in these gardens. The words and music of the Christmas carol continue with me on my walk.

Have you ever wondered how and why music from our favorite hymns calls us to worship? Why we feel closer to God as we sing praise hymns?

Not so long ago, during children's worship time, our own Grace Hood shared her version of a toolbox. In addition to the expected Bible was a hymnal. I didn't pay much attention at the time. But today I'm struck by

the powerful analogy. Of course, a hymnbook is a staple of any Christian toolbox. Hymns are akin to connectors, those little rounded tubes that join two sections of PVC pipe. That's how hymns work. They ease, support, and further the connection between us and the Lord. Often, I find, all that's needed for a hymn to come to mind is the quiet beauty of a place such as this.

I pause to thank God for the gift of his son as well as the many blessings I enjoy. Then, I continue my walk. Over wooden bridges which join islands ablaze with pink Hibiscus and purple Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow bushes. Through a bamboo grove, with its faint sounds of stalks knocking against one another in the soft breeze. Startled by a loud knock, I look over to my right at a Shishi Odoshi, where a bamboo pole, filled with water, has just struck a smooth bed of black stones. Directly ahead lies a tunnel of bamboo. Above, intertwined bamboo shoots interspersed with green leaves and blazing red poms form a comforting canopy. Entering, I feel enfolded in God's grace and hear a whisper, "... And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." The end of the book of Matthew, my favorite bit of scripture. With renewed energy, I complete my journey at the base of Morakami Falls. Rushing water tumbles over massive boulders before it disappears into the depths below, only to reappear again above me and repeat its descent.

It's been well over 2000 years since the birth of Christ, his ministry, and crucifixion, yet through him, God remains with us. May you walk with him, feel his presence as you sing his praises, and listen for his voice in the quiet spaces. ●



by Rev. Greg Rapier

Associate Pastor



IN THE WORLD ... CONNECTING CHURCH AND CULTURE ON CREATIVITY (PART 2)

“The book of Genesis tells us God creates each of us in God’s image and breathes life into us. We all hold within us an element of the divine. And in those first passages of Genesis, God reveals that part of God’s divine nature is to create. God creates something out of nothing. God creates the sky and the stars and the sun and the land and the plants and everything else in the universe. When we create, we are tapping into that element of God within us. We are participating in a shared moment with God, expressing that most sacred part of us...”

These words come from part one of this article, which can be found in the last issue of The Spire. Today, I’d like to explore, creatively, what it means to create, and how we each express that divine nature on a daily basis, often without realizing it.

When a choir sings a song or an artist paints a portrait or a writer sits at her desk, I think just about everyone would identify these as acts of creativity. And when we’re especially moved by someone’s artwork, sometimes we’ll even say we’ve had a religious experience.

That’s the type of language we often use. There’s something about great art that can expand our consciousness, shatter our worldview, or even affirm our deepest-held longings. Some art does all three at the same time.

But what about the rest of us? What about those of us who never went to art school or sang in a choir? What about those of us who work 9-5, go home, eat, sleep, and repeat? Does this God-given gift just lay dormant and unexpressed? I don’t think it does.

I was once told the story of a plumber – this was back in California – who considered each service call an act of honoring God. He knew all the tricks plumbers used to plunge a few extra bucks from their clients, and he used none of them. Honest prices for honest labor – simple as that. The person telling the story had a clogged drain (I won’t tell you where), and she’d been working all morning to get it out before she called this plumber she’d heard about. The plumber walked around the small room, assessed the curvature of the drain, and plunged free the mess in about 15 seconds.

“That’ll be ten dollars, ma’am.”

The woman couldn’t believe it. “How’d you do that?” she asked. The plumber shrugged off her question and gave a gentle smile. “It’s an art.”

Yes, it is. With his hands covered in God-knows-what, that plumber was expressing God-within. And that woman telling the story caught a glimpse of it. I hope you did too.

What do you take joy in? My guess is there’s an element of creativity involved. Creativity – and the divine expression that comes with it – isn’t limited to the fine arts. You’re creative when you garden. You’re creative when you cook. What you consume on TV or read in a book is definitely creative. Even negotiation, peacemaking, and acts of service and justice have an element of creativity. Woodworking, building, playing, dancing – they’re all creative and even sacramental. You’re creative when you dress. You’re creative when you speak. Viewed this way, all of life is one big expression of the divine. ●

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN

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Sunday Morning Worship Services

9 a.m. & 11 a.m.

