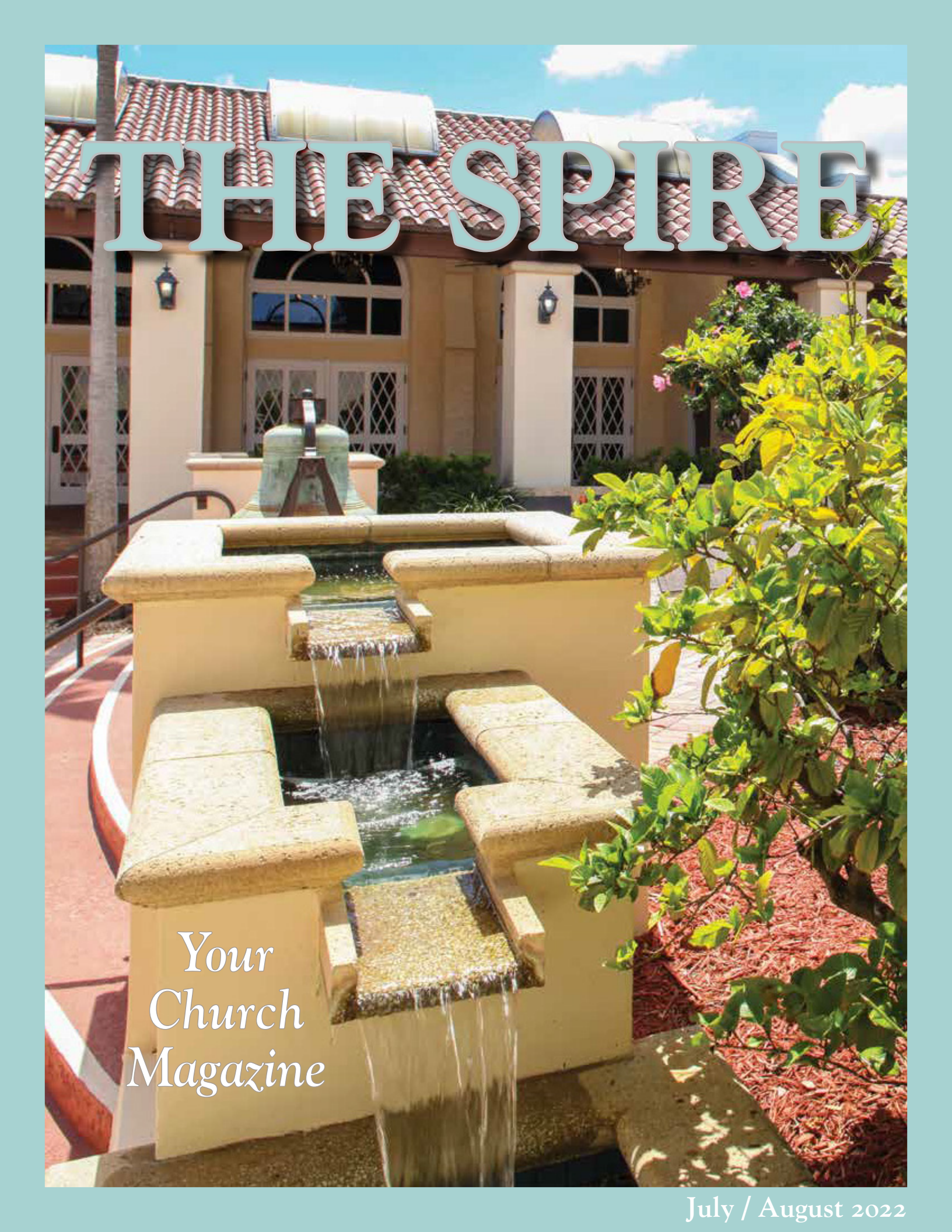


THE SPIRE

The background image is a photograph of a church courtyard. In the foreground, a multi-tiered stone fountain flows with water. Behind the fountain is a church building with a red-tiled roof, arched windows, and white lattice doors. To the right, there are green bushes with pink flowers. The sky is blue with some clouds.

*Your
Church
Magazine*

July / August 2022



NURTURE FAITH

by Dr. Doug Hood

Senior Pastor

THE DEEPEST FORM OF PRAYER

“Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves.”

Matthew 11:28, 29 (Common English Bible)

In the deepest disquiet of the day, I am reminded of Ernest Hemingway’s words in *The Old Man And The Sea*, “‘But man is not made for defeat,’ he said. ‘A man can be destroyed but not defeated.’”ⁱ We live in an anxious time. Trouble and tumultuous trials capture the larger narrative of the present day. Jesus is correct that there seems to always be present some war or rumor of war—both wars of combat and wars of poverty, illness, disillusionment, and failure. A thousand-antagonist lineup to squash any optimism we once may have had about life. As I have written elsewhere, we may profess faith, but that faith is hesitant, uncertain, and unsatisfactory. If Hemingway is correct, if men and women are not made for defeat, then some resource must be available to combat the destructive forces that rage all around us—something more sound and sturdy than the temporary escape various addictions provide.

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky captures the psychological and spiritual impact such anxiety, despair, and disillusionment can imprint upon our consciousness in his short story, *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*.ⁱⁱ The protagonist despairs of life, fails to find any meaning in life, and is convinced nothing in the whole world made any difference. One evening, a little girl desperate for help suddenly grasps him by the elbow. But he did not help her. On the contrary, something made him drive her away. If life is meaningless, if nothing really matters anyway, then this little girl is nothing more than a distraction. Arriving at his small apartment, he is resolved to take his own life. Before the decision is executed, he falls asleep. Through a startling and poignant dream, he is made to realize that as long as he is alive, life is not meaningless and that the world—in some way or other—now depended on him.

This invitation from Matthew’s Gospel is set in a larger teaching where we learn that God has chosen to reveal the same truth to the world. Life is not without meaning, and each one of us is called—in one way or another—to make a difference. When life’s storms rage and swirl and we are disheartened and disillusioned, Jesus offers himself—“come to me, all of you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Jesus becomes for each of us that inner

continued on page 3

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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.

NURTURE FAITH

resource that guarantees that we are not defeated. Here, Jesus is immensely practical, “Put on my yoke, and learn from me” (Matt. 29). In that culture, the yoke was a symbol of obedience to the wisdom of God. Similarly, Jesus’ yoke is obedience to all Jesus teaches and Jesus’ call to serve others, to recognize that the world is dependent upon us. To come to Jesus is to learn from Jesus and to join Jesus himself in serving the world in a manner that God’s Kingdom flourishes.

Each one of us is under a divine compulsion. We must go out and try to take a world that is upside down and set it right. That requires that we lay down our arms of rebellion and turn from seeking our own desires and ambitions, and begin to be concerned with God’s own purposes in the world. It is accomplished by living in obedience to God’s will. It is God who can accomplish the inexplicable. God can bring to pass in our turbulent, confused, and frantic day a peace that is transformative – a peace that recognizes beauty where once we only saw brokenness, and hears the cry of a little girl and realizes that we cannot drive her away. Does that mean a life now lived with ease? Not at all! But it does mean that in those moments when we grow weary from life’s strains, moments when disillusionment seems as close as the next breath we take, we can find rest in prayerful communion with Jesus. This is the deepest form of prayer that the disciples knew. ●

i Hemingway, Ernest, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Norwalk: Easton, 1952, 96.

ii Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, London: Folio Society, 2021, 214-232.

DEACONS’ CORNER

One of the ministries of the Deacons of First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach is to acknowledge the women and men of the church on their special days. On Mother’s Day, the children of the church handed out flowers to the women who worshiped that morning. On Father’s Day, Hershey kisses were given to all the men. These small gifts were given to honor the women and men in our church family who are parents, step-parents, grandparents, or role models to children. ●



by Grace Cameron Hood

*Director of Children and
Family Ministry*



ROCKY RAILWAY: GOD'S POWER PULLS US THROUGH VBS 2022

It was so wonderful to get back to normal with VBS at FPC!! The church prayed, volunteers came forward, and children arrived! Songs were sung, games played, Bible stories learned, and experiments made. It was a great week!

It takes many people to make a successful event happen in the church. A special shout-out goes to the kitchen crew that made the Chew Chew Snacks so delicious. Pastor Greg, Lori Hackenberg, and Pamela Kent-Balasco led the children on a wild race with Loco Motion Games. Bible Adventure was exciting with Cathie Miller and Holly Anderson. Steve Anderson and Lucille Fannin led the children at Imagination Station as they did experiments to illustrate the Power of God! The children were delighted to watch short videos each day that again illustrated the point of the day. Martha Smith



and Donna Van Horn kept the TV and the conversation running!! Lissette Rapier and Belle Salmore made sure that our littlest riders had a great time in the Little Kid's Depot. This year we had special leadership for the children by our youth. Chloé Anne, Tomás, Harrison, Nathan, and Elle were Crew Leaders. The Crew Leaders made sure that everyone got everywhere!!

Lastly, Birgit Djupedal Fioravante, Kathy Baldwin, Nancy Fine, and Grace Hood were able to get the train off the ground and moving! And Aaron Strippel was the glue that kept everything together.

In the end, none of this wonderful week could have happened without the prayers and support of every person in the church.



VBS 2022!



by Jeanne Heavilin

Mission Outreach Ministry Team Chair

ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING UPDATE

THANK YOU!

Thanks to your generosity, sixty middle and high school students in our community will be receiving counseling and social/emotional learning workshops at the Achievement Centers for Children & Families this summer.

Our One Great Hour of Sharing offering this year provided \$8,650 to the ACCF for their summer camp program. This enabled them to contract a licensed therapist who will conduct sessions two days a week for these youth. Mental health is a critical issue today, especially impacting our youth, and resources are not readily available to many of them.

You have helped to change that!

Thank you again! ●



GIFTS TO OUR CHURCH

Food for the Needy in loving memory of Abigail Buck, daughter of Neil and Megan Buck, from Beth Rivers.

Memorial Garden Fund in loving remembrance of Janet Loennecker, in honor of Mother's Day, from her daughter and son-in-law, Karen and Don Carter; and in loving memory of John Loennecker, in honor of Father's Day, from his daughter and son-in-law, Karen and Don Carter.

Remembrance Fund from anonymous, in loving memory of Lou Cappiello. ●

*Giving
Our
Gifts*

NEW MEMBERS

Virginia Sipp

Ann Tighe

Steve Tighe



WELCOME!

SESSION REPORT

During April and May, the Session received new members. ●

Blessing of the Backpacks!

Start the 2022 - 2023 School Year off
with a special blessing!

Bring your backpack full of your school supplies to Worship,
Sunday, August 7th at 10 a.m.

During the Worship Service, everyone starting school will be
invited to be part of a special blessing for the school year.



MEET OLEKSANDR DONSKYI

Oleksandr Donskyi, who likes to go by the nickname Sasha, joined our choir last year. Born in Kyiv, when Ukraine was part of the USSR, Sasha's family was ethnically Jewish. The Soviet government treated Jews as undesirables, which made thriving, education, or advancement for his parents and Sasha very difficult. His father and grandfather were both mechanical engineers, but his family had to take work where they could find it. How Sasha ended up joining the choir at First Presbyterian in Delray Beach, Florida, after a life in Kyiv, is a fascinating story.

When he was a child, the Soviet government made musical training accessible to every child in the USSR. From ages eight to fifteen, Sasha was in Music School. He loved singing in the choir, but he hated the instrument which was chosen for him, the "bayan", button accordion. Here was this little boy carrying around this big, heavy instrument. One day he threw it off of the second story. His father didn't care, paid for another one, and put him back in school. His father ordered, "this Bach Toccata cost me a lot of money, go play!"

Eventually, Sasha did so well that his teacher suggested he take an advanced study to become a professional musician. But the reality of life in the USSR was there was no room for a talented young Jew at the musical academy, one would have to be a genius to be accepted. There were few places a Jew was actually permitted to study, most were relegated to manual labor.

As a young man, Sasha joined the Soviet army and became a sergeant. After demobilization from the army, he worked at the military plant in Kyiv, while going to Institute remotely. A few times a year he traveled to Moscow to take exams at the Moscow Forestry Technological Institute, where some Jews were accepted. He graduated with an engineering degree with an engineer mechanical designer.

After taking work as an engineer, he took up hiking, mountain, as well as water and ski exploration as passionate hobbies. His parents lamented that he spent all his time away from people and had no time for meeting girls. His parents went to a friend who decided to play "matchmaker". She knew another couple from a small village, whose daughter had announced to her parents, "I will be married in 1980. I don't need to know him, but he has to be a suitable husband." Both sets of parents were secretly trying to get them together but Olena was a flight attendant and usually not available. When she was, Sasha was out in the mountains. After frustrating their parents for some time, they finally met in June of 1980. Sasha had planned a trip beyond the Arctic Circle, kayaking on mountain rivers in August, and no pretty girl was going to stop that. If Olena was going to go with him, her mother insisted she must be married. Olena decided this "very handsome" young man would do nicely as a husband. After knowing each other only a few days they married on July 12, 1980, followed by an unusual honeymoon inside the Arctic Circle. Sasha took his wife's non-Jewish surname so at least their children could identify as Russian to avoid persecution.

When asked about the war in Ukraine today. Sasha and Olena both said, "the Russians have been killing Ukrainians for the last 400 years". Also, with the exception of Jews and other ethnic groups considered less-than, the Soviets would put 'Russian' on children's birth certificates in order to claim Ukrainians as Russians.

The young couple set up house and had two children, a boy and a girl. Olena took a job in a large school as

an administrator, making a salary of \$7 a month. Sasha at that time made a good salary of \$13 a month. When their daughter was six, an American program, Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), was introduced to her school. The young parents, who were non-believers, wanted their children to learn English so they committed to the \$5 a month cost. Sasha took any extra work he could get to help pay for this very expensive program. One thing he did was sing in Russian Orthodox churches. It didn't pay much but it helped.

Then Sasha heard about this 'crazy American' who moved his family to start a music ministry in Kyiv and he would pay one dollar for every rehearsal and two dollars for every performance. This was like striking gold for Sasha. Roger McMurrin left several nice homes and big jobs in large Presbyterian Churches in Florida to bring the great sacred works of Handel, Bach, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Verdi to where all these wonderful trained singers and instrumentalists could learn for the first time that this was not just music, but the glorification of the Lord. And all texts are taken from Scripture. Roger ended up having Sasha in his baritone section where he remained for many years, touring the United States several times to raise money for the Music Mission Kyiv. Olena was brought on early on as an administrator to help Roger. After Roger started an actual church, Sasha served as the Treasurer and nine years later he was ordained an Elder. After some years, the entire family became committed Christians, one by one being baptized.

When their son, Andrew, was brought to England as a translator for a well-connected woman involved in philanthropy, she arranged for him to be educated in England. After a trip to Kyiv, his benefactor was so horrified by the many street children that she started a foster care program. After nine years of working with Roger and the church, Sasha and Olena felt called to help. They left touring and singing and began fostering children, fourteen in all over the next twelve years.

After retiring, they followed their daughter to the United States. She married a young American missionary who at that time was a student at the Academy of Music in Kyiv. Later, the young family moved to the United States, she received citizenship, and her husband graduated from seminary and became a minister in a large Presbyterian church. At first, they lived in Salisbury, Maryland, and then Jackson, Mississippi. There, Sasha and Olena helped with childcare and volunteering. After their grandchildren were a bit older, they decided to settle down for good and picked Delray Beach, warm and close to the beautiful Atlantic Ocean.

Sasha tried four different Presbyterian churches before deciding on First Presbyterian. "The music spoke to me since I couldn't understand anything anyone was saying. By now I knew the Bible as well as many pastors, just not in English. So, I joined the choir."

As far as their two children; Andrew, 41, is a British citizen, and still works for a large charity along with his day job as a kitchen designer. Daughter, Darya, 37, works as an editor of the magazine "Parents and Kids" and as an administrator of Christian Education in Jackson, Mississippi at a large Presbyterian church where her husband is one of the ministers. ●

family photos on page 10



by Kathy Baxter

HOLLY HOUSE

Our families have grown, our lives have changed, and we find ourselves needing more. Perhaps we have relocated, or maybe we have lost friends and family. We need a purpose and a new start.

Holly House has been my answer. I have discovered talents that I didn't know I had. My neighbor, Gail Benson, invited me to visit Holly House, where ladies create items to sell, such as jewelry, shell creations, aprons, table runners and placemats, floral wreaths and trees. I found my place designing unique items with shells. I love to see someone buy one of my shell creations.

At Holly House, I have formed friendships and feel connected and supported. We share our collective creativity and life stories. Not only do we meet on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, I also see friends outside of Holly House, and I sit with Holly House friends at church. We pray and support each other.

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

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



by **Nathanael Hood**

Princeton Theological Seminary ('23)

“RECLAIMING GRIEF”

A sermon preached on May 29, 2022 by Nathanael Hood

“The Lord of heavenly forces proclaims: Pay attention!

Summon the women who mourn, let them come; send for those best trained, let them come.

Hurry! Let them weep for us so that our eyes fill up with tears and water streams down.”

Jeremiah 9:17-18 (Common English Bible)

In the first century CE, there was a Greek man named Strabo who was known for his learning and travels. Throughout his life, he visited the lands and peoples throughout the Mediterranean, Near East, and Africa—no mean feat in the ancient world when traveling between neighboring towns could see you eaten by wild animals or murdered by thieves. Before he died, he published one of the most important books to survive from the ancient world. Simply titled the *Geographica*, it's the only surviving work from his era describing the peoples, cultures, and histories of the regions that appear in the New Testament. Though indescribably valuable for historians, one can't help but second-guess the great man's judgment when one considers his assessment of the holy city of Jerusalem which he described as “not such as to excite jealousy, nor for which there could be any fierce contention.”¹

Modern archeologists, on the other hand, are quite certain

that there was, in fact, a good deal of both jealousy and contention for Jerusalem. Scientists have determined that within the last 4,000 years there have been 118 separate conflicts in and for the holy city. Records show that it's been captured and recaptured forty-four times, besieged twenty-three times, and completely destroyed at least twice.² The history of Jerusalem is one of blood and fire, of great weeping and terrible lamentation. And indeed, that suffering lingers in the city's very stones.

I remember traveling to Jerusalem with members of this very church in late 2019 and being amazed by the psychic heaviness of the old city. The energy along the Via Dolorosa where Jesus carried his cross on the way to his crucifixion was indescribable—nothing could distract from the sensation of traveling backwards through time itself, not even the street merchants hawking University of Alabama “Roll Tide” T-shirts to American tourists. Of particular power were various grates strewn over the streets where

onlookers could gaze down into the actual alleys traversed by ancient Judeans, once abandoned and built over millennia ago, now excavated by archeologists. These alleys, once vital arteries for the city, now stand silent and dark, more tomb now than street. I remember gazing down into those depths and shivering.

The lives and circumstances, thoughts and emotions of the people who occupied those buried alleys, who populated the old city, who lived through Jerusalem's 118 conflicts—particularly those in antiquity—have largely been lost to history. But there is one major exception—the Bible. The Bible provides many different accounts of Jerusalem being besieged and conquered, from King David first taking the city from its Jebusite founders in Second Samuel to accounts of its pillaging by the Romans in the New Testament. But of all the testimonies to Jerusalem's sufferings, none are more harrowing than the one found in the Book of Jeremiah.

This book is unique among

the biblical prophets as it isn't just a record of what Jeremiah said and did. It also provides a first-person worm's eye view of one of the city's greatest cataclysms—its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians in the year 597 BCE. After centuries of disobedience to the Lord, despite the desperate warnings of prophets like Isaiah, the city of Jerusalem rebelled against neighboring Babylon and was swiftly destroyed. The army was crushed, the elite carried away to Babylon, and the survivors mercilessly assaulted. Those who escaped the carnage were beset by exhaustion and disease. And many starved when they discovered that the Babylonians had annihilated the towns, farms, and villages surrounding the capital city. Those who dared return faced a future of forced labor and exploitation at the point of a sword. But perhaps most devastating, from a cultural standpoint, was the destruction and sacking of the Temple, an unthinkable violation of the Holy of Holies, a cataclysmic shattering of how the ancient Hebrews envisioned their relationship with a God who seemed suddenly very weak and very distant.

And there, in the middle, recording it all, was Jeremiah. If understanding the grief felt by the ancient Judeans is possible, it's only because Jeremiah put it into words. "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears," the prophet wrote, "I would weep day and night for the slain of my people."³ Elsewhere, the prophet moans "I will weep and wail for the mountains and take up a lament concerning the wilderness grasslands. They are desolate and

untraveled, and the lowing of cattle is not heard. The birds have all fled and the animals are gone."⁴ Is it any wonder that Jeremiah is nicknamed the "Weeping Prophet"? How can we here in America, a land that has never been conquered by an enemy power, never seen our cities leveled by invaders, imagine such chaos, such suffering? I don't think we can.

At least, that's what I thought. I have a confession. I've been sitting on this sermon for some time. Jeremiah has long been my favorite Old Testament prophet and this past semester at Princeton Theological Seminary I took a Hebrew exegesis class on it. When I was invited to preach today a couple months ago, I decided I would write a sermon based on some of the things I was learning in that class. Those who know me know that I'm fascinated by grief and the grieving process—it's one of the main reasons why I'm training to be a hospital chaplain—so I also knew that my sermon would tackle those subjects. Specifically, I wanted to write about how the Book of Jeremiah recontextualizes how we as Christians are supposed to experience grief, namely that we are not supposed to run from it.

In preparation, I read several studies and books on how Americans grieve, most notably Gary Laderman's *Rest in Peace* and Thomas G. Long's *Accompany Them with Singing*, both of which discuss how over the last century we've culturally separated ourselves from traditional methods of communal grieving. We've grown culturally unaccustomed with death and try to deny its physical ugliness. As a result, current generations are

more terrified of death and dying than perhaps any that have come before us.

But Jeremiah elevates the act of mourning—of confronting the realities of death and loss—to that of worship. Wails of despair are transformed into prayers. Questions of suffering become pious explorations of the nature of God. The lowest parts of our lives are sanctified into moments of holiness. This is what I wanted to preach on. My thesis was essentially—to paraphrase Gordon Gekko—that grief is good.

And then nineteen children and two schoolteachers were murdered in Texas. Suddenly the idea that grief is good and something we Christians need to reclaim seemed...pointless. No, not pointless, offensive. How dare I get up in the pulpit while we grieve the senseless death of children amidst an ongoing epidemic of gun violence that our politicians in Washington refuse to address and say that what we're feeling right now is good?

So I abandoned Jeremiah and started scrambling for other parts of the Bible I could preach on. Maybe I could preach on religious reformers like King Josiah or the scribe Ezra who helped redirect the ancient Hebrews towards more godly lives. But no, the massacre took place in Texas, one of the most religious states in the Union. Having lived there myself for several years, I can say that the one thing Texas doesn't need is more Jesus. Perhaps I could preach on the Bible's many condemnations of child sacrifice. But no, nobody in Texas willingly offered their children up



for slaughter. Perhaps I could preach on Nehemiah, the man who directed the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls to keep its people—to keep its children—safe after the Jews were freed from Babylon. After all, communities can't thrive if they're not protected. But no, decades of active shooter drills, armed school guards, and metal detectors have done nothing to dissuade shooters.

I searched and I searched and I searched and I couldn't find anything. At least until I went back to Jeremiah. As I was browsing through this book that I'd spent the last several months dissecting, a passage suddenly jumped out at me like a lightning bolt: Jeremiah 9:17-18. For you see, these verses are instructions for how traumatized communities should act in the wake of tragedy. They're part of a larger section of Jeremiah where the prophet recounts God's commission of women to lead the survivors of Jerusalem's destruction in communal mourning. Understand: this was no mean call to service. In the Ancient Near East, communal mourning was literally considered sacred, and was frequently organized and led by temple priestesses.

It was one of the few aspects of religious life where women exercised authority over men. So vital were these activities that they're one of the few aspects of pagan polytheism that Israel's God didn't forbid in the Old Testament, but in fact encouraged! So pay attention to these verses—really study them, really examine and consider them, for they teach us three important lessons about grief that speak to our present suffering.

First: pay attention!! The first two lines see God demanding us to pay attention to the wounds of the world. Don't look away from catastrophe. Don't change the channel or ignore news updates on your phone. Pay attention! Ignoring trauma doesn't lead to healing, it leads to denial. Denial leads to ignorance. And ignorance leads to self-destruction. No, I'm not saying that we should spend every waking hour of every day glued to our televisions or doomscrolling on our phones, drinking in every terrible news story. But when something truly nightmarish happens—when nearly twenty innocent children are murdered in cold blood—we have a responsibility to notice. We have

a responsibility to not let it fade back into the news cycle. We let that happen ten years ago at Sandy Hook. We can't let it happen again.

The second point is that to mourn demonstrates wisdom. This is a nuance lost in the translation used by the Common English Bible printed for you in the worship bulletin, but the original Hebrew text of verse 17 literally identifies the “women who mourn” as “wise women.” And if wisdom is a virtue, then mourning—by extension—is virtuous as well. Our society has issues with grief, specifically how and for how long we express it among others. We Americans are expected to compartmentalize our grief and work through it. Medical studies have argued that bereavement grief for loved ones peaks not after six days, not after six weeks, but after six months.⁵ But sometimes, when it involves a direct family member, that peak may not come for up to five years!⁶

Yet how many of us have lost someone, been given one, maybe two days off from work to attend their funeral, and then expected to return to normal immediately afterwards? How many of us were told to get back to the office within a week of losing a parent? A sibling? A child? How many men in this congregation have been told at least once that crying, even at a funeral, is wrong and that they need to “man up?” But no, this passage screams: “There is wisdom in grief!” It acknowledges our humanity. It acknowledges our biological need to mourn and readapt to new realities and circumstances. It acknowledges that God created us to

be communal creatures and that when that community is ruptured it shakes us to our core. To grieve is to be wise. To mourn for Texas is wise. To toss and turn at night with heartbreak for the victims' families—to toss and turn with fear that it could've been your child, that it might still be your child in the future—is wise. You are not foolish or wrong or broken to do so.

The third lesson is that grief unites us with community and God Godself. Pay very close attention to the wording in 9:18. When the prophet commands the wise women to weep for us so that our eyes fill up with tears, God is the one he's quoting. God includes Godself among those mourning in this passage. This confirms the fundamental belief of our faith in Jesus Christ: that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son to die for us so that we might have everlasting life. We believe in a God so desperately in love with us it chose to come to earth as one of us, suffer as one of us, die as one of us so we might never be parted from it or our loved ones in Christ. The Bible says that wherever two or more Christians are gathered Jesus is there. That doesn't just apply for prayer or worship. It applies for those grieving as well. And I say that God is in Texas today, just as God is here with us today, just as God is with each of us in our own brokenness.

A final word before we finish. Further on in this chapter, after the wise women have led the survivors of Jerusalem in mourning, the Lord gives them one final command in the twentieth verse: "Teach your daughters to mourn; teach each other to grieve."

This speaks to a fourth, final truth about grief: grieving is how we pass things on to future generations. Just as we pass traditions of grief to our children, we pass our stories on as well. And through our stories we form our values. And through our values we form our identities. Not just our personal identities, but our family identities, our communal identities, and even our national identities. I'm feeling a bit of an identity crisis today. Am I the kind of man who wants to ignore the shootings in Texas? Is this a church who will refuse to acknowledge this tragedy and seek to prevent it from happening in our own schools? Is this a country who will keep ignoring massacres like the ones at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, and now Uvalde? What do we value—truly value—as a nation? Are other people's children truly the price we're willing to pay to maintain the status quo? Where do we go from here, as human beings, as Christians, as Americans? The center cannot hold much longer. It cannot and it should not. Please. For our children. *Amen.* ●

1 "Modern Jewish History: Strabo on the Land of the Jews," Modern Jewish History: Strabo on the Land of the Jews (c. 22 CE) (Jewish Virtual Library, 2022), <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/strabo-on-the-land-of-the-jews-22-ce>.

2 Eric H. Cline, *Jerusalem Besieged: From Ancient Canaan to Modern Israel* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 2.

3 Jeremiah 9:1 (NIV)

4 Jeremiah 9:10 (NIV)

5 Ellen Barry, "How Long Should It Take to Grieve? Psychiatry Has Come Up With an Answer," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, March 18, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/health/prolonged-grief-disorder.html>.

6 Debbie Koenig, "The Grief Experience: Survey Shows It's Complicated," WebMD (WebMD, July 11, 2019), <https://www.webmd.com/special-reports/grief-stages/20190711/the-grief-experience-survey-shows-its-complicated#:~:text=1%20Nearly%20one-third%20%2831%25%29%20had%20faced%20serious%20illness,the%20death%20of%20a%20pet.%20More%20items...%20>.

SOME CHAT

I can safely say there is no other church gig like ours. Unless they are good actors, everyone enjoys singing on Sunday. Good repertoire, a group of phenomenal singers, paid and volunteer alike, and each soloist has their own forte: **Shanna**, doing the contemporary and baroque; **Laura** and **Kyaunnee** in the stratosphere; **Alejandro**, with amazing coloratura; **Fernando**, with the voice not unlike Robert Merrill; **Birgit**, a renaissance woman who is exploring her Mezzo side; **Mario**, known around the world for his interpretations of contemporary religious songs that genuinely move people; **Zaria**, who obviously works diligently and has adapted to ensemble singing; **Marsha** and **Joyce**, with fine musical ability; **Marsha's** baking talents; **Penny**, the alto, pianist, organist, and good cook; and **Alex (Sasha)**, who brings music never heard by the congregation before from his Ukraine heritage.

What a group.

And, of course, a director who is a legend in his own mind.

And a church that supports all we do. ●



SAVE THE DATE!

HUSTLE TO END HUNGER 5K

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2022

You have plenty of time to get in shape before October 1st to be ready for the Hustle to End Hunger 5K supporting CROS Ministries' hunger programs. Come join us and participate in a 5K timed run, a 5K walk, or a 5K run/walk with the team from First Delray on Saturday, October 1st at John Prince Park in Lake Worth at 7:30 a.m.

Watch out for more information on the church website (firstdelray.com). ●



MEN'S FELLOWSHIP UPDATE

The Thursday morning Men's Fellowship group is taking a summer break and will resume in early October. ●

by Nathanael Hood



RRR

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

After years of Hollywood franchise glut—of reboots and remakes, spin-off miniseries, and bloated two-part finales—watching S. S. Rajamouli's Telugu-language epic *RRR* is like taking that first breath of outside air after being cooped up all day in an office building with no air conditioning. It's like taking a long, cool sip of ice water after days in the desert with nothing to drink but lukewarm Diet Coke. It's like being reminded for the first time since you were a child amazed by the moving pictures on the television that movies can truly do anything, say anything, and *be* anything. It's not just the most triumphant, crowd-pleasing blockbuster in years, it's the best, most exhilarating action movie from any country since George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

The film centers on two real-life Indian revolutionaries who fought against the British Empire in the early twentieth century. The

first, Alluri Sitarama Raju (Ram Charan), led guerilla campaigns in southeast India on behalf of indigenous tribal communities after the colonial government restricted their movement and livelihoods. He successfully dodged British manhunts for two years before being captured and killed. The second, Komaram Bheem (N. T. Rama Rao Jr.), helped lead a revolution against Britain's puppet leaders in south-central India. After being killed by policemen in 1940, he was deified by his tribe and remains a symbol of armed rebellion to this day.

In truth, Raju and Bheem—despite being revolutionary contemporaries—never met. But after reading about them, Rajamouli envisioned a world where the two not only crossed paths but became close friends and allies. *RRR*, then, is the product of this fantasy. It's about as historically accurate as a movie about the American Civil War where George Washington and Benjamin Franklin sail to

England, shoot their way through Buckingham Palace, and defeat King George III in hand-to-hand combat. But *RRR*'s rejection of historical reality is its greatest strength. By ignoring what *actually* happened, Rajamouli dreams of what *could* have happened. Filtered through the maximalist bombast of Indian cinema, the results are nothing less than pure cinematic mythmaking.

Rajamouli recasts Raju as a quisling police officer working for the British government. Determined to climb the ranks of the British Raj, Raju devotes his life to the tyrannical British Governor Scott Buxton (Ray Stevenson), doing his bidding even when it involves persecuting and terrorizing his fellow countrymen. Raju soon finds himself on the trail of Bheem, recast by Rajamouli as the guardian protector of the indigenous Gond people. After Governor Scott's cruel wife Catherine (Alison Doody) kidnaps one of their young girls to become

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her personal songbird, Bheem sets out on a mission of vengeance to rescue her and punish her British captors. However, in a twist worthy of Shakespeare, a case of mistaken identity leads to Raju and Bheem becoming best friends after working together to rescue a drowning boy. As Bheem gets closer and closer to locating the kidnapped girl, so too does Raju get closer and closer to uncovering the legendary protector of the Gond people, not realizing until too late that it's his new companion. What happens when best friends become worst enemies? And, perhaps more importantly, is there more to Raju than originally meets the eye?

Like many Indian films, *RRR* is over three hours, but it whizzes by faster than most hour-long episodes of television. Rajamouli breathlessly skips from one gob-smacking set piece and action scene to the next with nary a wasted breath. Key to Rajamouli's method is a refreshing lack of self-awareness—there isn't a hint of irony or sarcasm anywhere in this film. Whereas in recent years American blockbusters have developed the cancer of self-deprecating self-awareness—how many times have we heard Marvel superheroes making fun of each other's names?—Rajamouli grabs his audience by the throat and throttles them with emotion and spectacle like an overly caffeinated child. Montages of Raju and Bheem happily riding horses together play as a musical narrator ponders the future of their friendship. Young boys swear oaths of vengeance over the bodies

of their slain mentors. Grown bare-chested men shout, scream, sing—and yes—dance their emotions to the heavens. More than once the action is interrupted by musical numbers including the show-stopping “Naatu Naatu” sequence where Raju and Bheem challenge a group of British officers at a party to a dance off. Watching this film in the theater marks the only time in my movie-going life that I've witnessed an audience joyously clap along with the music onscreen.

RRR has shot up to the top of my list of the best films of 2022 and will almost certainly end up one day in my top five favorite films of the entire decade. But there is one thing about it that gives me pause: in creating a new mythology surrounding the Indian Revolution, Rajamouli has rewritten it as one led, executed, and won by the country's Hindus with no contributions from the millions of Muslims who also called India home. One hopes that such revisionism was unintentional, but deliberate or not it represents a recent worrying trend of Hindu nationalism in modern India. Stoked by their populist right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, anti-Muslim (and anti-Christian) sentiment has recently exploded throughout the sub-continent. One can only hope that in future years this superb entertainment won't be looked upon as a portent of political atrocities. ●



PRAYER ON BEHALF OF OTHERS

When we pray on behalf of others, we allow the needs of others to take preference over our own personal needs.

This is where we stand side by side with one another to pray in strength, courage, and faith in the presence of God and support each other (our prayer partner) with our prayer on behalf of others in need. When praying for another, one makes a plea and meditation before God on behalf of (oneself as needed) but most importantly for others desperately in need. The Bible says Jesus Christ, our Lord, makes intercession for us at the right hand of God.

“Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God who makes intercession for us.” Romans 8:34 (NKJV)

Father, I pray fellow believers will be strengthened in their faith and pray for healing, wisdom, and guidance for the situations and persons of need.

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. ●



SUMMER SALAD SOCIAL POTLUCK

Join us on Sunday, August 7th for a Summer Salad Social Potluck. There is no cost to attend this fun, fellowship event. However, you are invited to sign up on our website or at the Welcome Center in the church lobby to bring your favorite summer salad or dessert. We are requesting reservations for planning purposes. They can be made on our website (www.firstdelray.com) under Upcoming Events, at the Welcome Center in the church lobby, or by calling the church office (561-276-6338). ●

We look forward to seeing you there!



MONDAY MORNING WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY

In July, the Monday Morning Women's Bible Study will be meeting on Zoom to complete the video study we began in June — Forgiving What You Can't Forget: Discover How to Move On, Make Peace with Painful Memories, and Create a Life That's Beautiful Again by Lysa Terkeurst. After one-thousand hours of theological research, Lysa discovered that Scripture not only provides the truth about forgiveness that our souls desperately need, but offers practical ways to let go of our bound-up resentment and finally heal.

In August, we will discuss The Book of Joy by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams. "Nobel Peace Prize Laureates the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu have survived more than fifty years of exile and the soul-crushing violence of oppression. Despite their hardships—or, as they would say, because of them—they are two of the most joyful people on the planet." This book is a record of a week the two men spent trading stories, sharing their spiritual practices, and teasing each other. Our discussion will focus on the Eight Pillars of Joy, which provide the foundation for lasting happiness.

We look forward to keeping in touch with one another over the summer as those of us who are snowbirds scatter across the country. We meet at 10 a.m. on Monday mornings for about an hour. We would be delighted to have you join us. Please contact Maria Graham (mmg2352@gmail.com) for a Zoom invitation. ●



WALKS WITH THOUGHTS

Have you ever felt like running away? I did that as a four-year-old. Packed a suitcase and walked across the park and down the block to my grandparents' house. I can't tell you what I was running from then. (My older sister helped me pack, so she might have had some hand in my situation.) Today, I want to run away from the negativity surrounding me—the constant grouching and complaining—my own and that of those around me. This Covid epidemic has lasted too long. I am afraid many of us have let our anxieties lead us into the bad habit of conversing by complaint.

Today, I decide to run away to Mounts Botanical Gardens in West Palm Beach. Our landscaper recommended I visit Mounts when he learned I was from the north and knew next to nothing about subtropical plants. The gardens are an unexpected

green oasis directly across from Palm Beach Airport, just off Military Trail. Because of construction, the main entrance is closed, and I am met at the temporary entrance not only by a pleasant woman who asks for \$10 (the senior entrance fee), but by one of the strangest, yet most beautiful trees I have ever seen. The multitude of red flowers covering the tree resemble shaving brushes. Yes, each flower on these leafless trees resembles an old-fashioned shaving cream brush—a cylindrical handle with bristles. It takes the negativity right out of me.

Farther along the path is a pink handkerchief tree. Its clusters of flowers are white, but what catches the eye is the stunning pink of the new growth hanging from the ends of many of its branches. What was it John Denver sang about flowers? *Their loveliness could clear a cloudy day.* I think he mentioned laughter, too.

Proverbs, that book of biblical wisdom, tells us that *as we think in our hearts, so we are* (23:7). I believe it follows that whatever we decide to look for in life, we will find. Wisdom itself can be found in so many places. I have a vivid memory of a recently retired Nellie Wineland greeting me one day before church. She had just attended a seminar at a local university and was bursting to share some newly found wisdom. “Do you know what the secret to a happy life is?” she asked. Before I could answer, she replied, “Surround yourself with happy people.” Wisdom, indeed.

Rounding a curve in the path, I encounter an imposing twenty-foot statue, a replica of a Rapa Nui (Easter Island) moai. The weathered concrete statue and its two smaller siblings ignite the imagination as they tower over the surrounding ferns and colorful bromeliads in this Tropical Garden area. They, like the original moai in the South Pacific, stare enigmatically, holding fast to the secrets of their origin. Did the ancient people who built these amazing statues complain about the heat, their work, or their situations? Or did they have the wisdom to find joy in their creation? In each other?

My thoughts seem to be meandering just as my legs are, but my heart feels lighter. I decide to explore the maze ahead. Smiling when I take wrong turns and come upon dead ends, I finally laugh out loud as a couple of giggling children race by me toward the exit. Perhaps the wisdom to be found here at Mounts is that the beauty of nature and the laughter of others, two gifts from God, can indeed clear a cloudy day.

So, today, this is my prayer for you: when you find yourself complaining, your very being engulfed by clouds, may wisdom lead you to the sunshine of a garden and the joyful companionship of people with whom you can laugh. ●



by Rev. Greg Rapier

Associate Pastor



IN THE WORLD ... CONNECTING CHURCH AND CULTURE

AN UPDATE FROM PITTSBURGH

I'm about halfway through the coursework for my doctorate program, so I figure this is as good a time as any to share my experience so far. I love school. I've always loved school. Though attending school as an adult with a job and a family is definitely different from the immersive experiences of college and seminary. I'm more aware than ever of the need for balance—to be intentional with my time and fully present whether at work, home, or school. It's about living fully and living well.

School itself is going well. My Doctorate of Ministry program is in Creative Writing and Public Theology, which is absolutely perfect for me because I love to write. Always have. Most nights, I unwind with either a movie, a book, or a pen and paper; lately, it's been fewer movies and more everything else.

The program is basically a hybrid of a traditional DMin program and an MFA [Master of Fine Arts]. It's structured with intensive in-person courses each January and June and distance-learning craft-of-writing electives interspersed throughout the year. So far, I've taken

courses on *Voice and Place in Public Theology*, *CS Lewis and the Christian Imagination*, *Storytelling*, *Memoir*, and *Short Stories*. The emphasis on voice and storytelling has definitely helped me with my preaching, and the other courses have improved my writing. More on that later.

I have a wonderful cohort of about twenty-five total people—pastors, writers, podcasters, missionaries, and even the owner of a pie shop. Both writing and ministry can be lonely at times, so it's invaluable to have a community like this to lean on and champion one another's work. And while traditional MFA programs often have an overly critical cutthroat sort of vibe—especially when workshopping one another's papers—our cohort, if anything, is too gentle. I'll take the latter (though there is something to be said for honest critique spoken in love).

We have a Facebook group to discuss everything from schoolwork to form rejections (Did you know most literary journals have an acceptance rate of about 2%? The odds of getting a novel picked up are even worse). Still, some of our work has started to break through. It's such a joy to see a piece of writing I read in class pop up six months later in a journal or magazine.

And I myself have had both a journal article and a piece of short fiction published in recent months.

At this point, you may be asking yourself 'where's this all going?' or "what's the goal?" Sometimes, I ask myself this too. And while I'm mostly trying to enjoy the ride, it's important to state a few things I do know: I'm not going anywhere. My call to be your pastor is central to my Christian identity, and that's not changing anytime soon. Also central to my Christian identity is a passion to blur the line between secular and sacred. This means writing sermons infused with real-world stories and writing real-world stories propped up by religious themes.

I've always believed good pastors should spend less time inside church walls and more time in the community. This program has taught me there's more than one way to be in the community. You can be in the community without leaving your desk. You can be in the community with your words or your voice or even while sitting behind a computer. You can be in the community when you create. And so long as it's done with devotion and care, you're absolutely spreading God's love. ●

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Sunday Morning Worship Service

10 a.m.

