

Laity Sunday 2023: Rise Up! And Remain Committed to Love's Teachings

Laity Sunday celebrates the ministry of all Christians as they love God and neighbor. As God's people grow in grace to become "all-love" disciples in community, we gather with others and connect all to God's saving love in Jesus Christ. So, on Laity Sunday (this year, October 15, 2023), we continue to lift up the vocation of all (all means all) to follow the way of Jesus and lead others to him – particularly as we consider what it means to hold fast to the pattern of healthy, sound words that bring life to all our relationships.



Laity Sunday 2023– Overview/Planning Worship

Laity Sunday is a day set aside to remember and lift up a constant reality: the priesthood and ministry of *all*. Every person on the planet is invited to share in God's community of healing, love, justice, and world repair.

Laity Sunday is a special Sunday defined by General Conference "to celebrate the ministry of all Christians" (2016 *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 264.2). Usually observed on the third Sunday in October (in 2023, October 15), Laity Sunday is one way we express the core Christian conviction that *all* are called to participate in God's mission to create healthy, flourishing life in the world. **[Read more about the history of Laity Sunday \(https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-laity-sunday\)](https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-laity-sunday)**.

This year, the emphasis is on discipleship and healthy words that encourage love and abundant life together.

Laity Sunday 2023– Quadrennial Themes

The **Laity Sunday themes** for this quadrennium come from II Timothy 1:1-14. Under the call to **Rise Up**, laity (all people) in the current quadrennium will continue to echo the invitations of this passage: Rise Up and **revive** God’s gift of faith (that first lived in those who loved us); Rise Up and **reveal** the grace in Christ that brings life together, with and for others; Rise Up and **remain** committed to sound teaching (the pattern of healthy words witnessed in those who model faith); and, Rise Up and **retain** this reliable gift of good and beautiful things placed in our trust by the Holy Spirit.

In **2021**, we noted that **when we remember** those whose care and love brought us to faith in Jesus, we discover that same faith and **fire for life are rekindled in us**. This was compared to remembering a forgotten tune as we learn to sing the LORD’s song in what seems like a very ‘strange land’ (Psalm 137). The writer of 2 Timothy prayerfully reminds us that our forebears sang this song of saving love into our own lives where it still burns (if we remember to revive it!). Strangely enough, one phrase that harmonizes with that song is found in paragraph 128 of the *Book of Discipline*: “...all Christians are called to minister wherever Christ would have them serve and witness in deeds and words that heal and free” (*BOD ¶ 128*).

“All Christians are called to minister wherever Christ would have them serve and witness in deeds and words that heal and free” (*BOD ¶ 128*, emphasis)

In many ways, the lives of these dear saints have been verses in a sacred song extending and rhyming with the memories of scripture and the social life of Jesus in churches across time. So, we join this chorus and discover how to sing the LORD’s love song for life.

In **2022**, we focused on how the vocation to **all-love discipleship** first modeled by people who ‘sang their lives to God’¹ takes root and finds new expression in our time as we create **‘together-life’ with others**. As we turn to God’s life-giving nearness, we find that very same love calling us to **bring others along with us** into God’s healing life. In our here and now, living well together for others becomes the place where John Wesley’s words ring true: “The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.”

“The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.” John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface

Since grace has crossed our paths through people who loved us into maturity and leadership, we sing the cover song of faith that rekindles a fire for life, for all. The **2023 Laity Sunday focus** is on what it means to **hold** on to the pattern of **healthy words heard**—words heard in those whose lives have been remade and restored by grace (2 Timothy 1:13). **Laity Sunday Themes 2021-2024 - Rise Up!**

2021: **RISE UP!** – and **Revive** God’s gift (2 Tim 1:3-7)

2022: **RISE UP!** – and **Reveal** God’s grace (2 Tim 1:8-12)

2023: **RISE UP!** – and **Remain** committed to Love’s teachings (2 Tim 1:13)

2024: **RISE UP!** – and **Retain** the Spirit’s good and beautiful things (2 Tim 1:14)

Laity Sunday 2023– Preaching Notes

Texts: **Exodus 32:1-14**; **Isaiah 25:1-9**; **Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23** (or Psalm 23); **Matthew 22:1-14**; **Philippians 4:1-9**; **2 Timothy 1:13**

LAITY SUNDAY READINGS

Today's scripture passages from the Hebrew Bible remind us of a covenant people's storied rebellion at the foot of a sacred mountain. In **Exodus 32**, we read the story of a rescued people's propensity to seek security in idols of their own making. It is also the tale of a prophet/liberating leader, Moses, and his compassion and advocacy for the people, even when they are at their worst.

We also have a song in **Psalms 106** that echoes the story of Exodus 32, recounting God's faithfulness in spite of the people's idolatrous song and dance around the golden calf at Sinai (and the poor leadership of Aaron, who helps them trade "their glorious God" for a knock-off cow "who eats grass"). Moses's patient advocacy and thoughtful leadership turn both Aaron's incompetence and God's justified anger toward mercy for a people who, like us, tend to forget the God who has rescued us.

The prophet **Isaiah** offers a song of praise to God who has been a refuge and shelter for the poor and needy. **Like a cloud giving shade from the 'more heat than light' bluster of those who violate others with words** ("the song of the ruthless" in the NRSV), God will silence the abuse, wipe away tears, and even swallow up death. This salvation song is a promise kept from our perspective, a thread of hope for God's awaited salvation for those who first heard it in the midst of occupation and exile.

The **New Testament scripture readings** take center stage on this Laity Sunday, especially 2 Timothy 1:13, in the context of other writings in the so-called 'pastoral epistles' and the other writings of Paul.

The wedding party parable from **Matthew 22** reminds us that everyone is invited to feast and fellowship in God's kingdom. Not only that, all (evil and good) are gathered together, even – and maybe even especially – those on "the edge of town." The deafening silence of those who think their clothing speaks for itself and earns them a place at the table is followed by heartache, tears, and a self-imposed exile beyond the open table fellowship that is always and ever extended to all. (Who knows, maybe even those making noise from the "farthest darkness.")

The familiar **Philippians** passage from chapter four speaks directly to a context of disagreement among those who have "struggled together" in the work and ministry of sharing good news. It also encourages joy, gentleness, and prayer since God is so close. And the promised peace that comes from God *with us* accompanies those who practice what they heard and witnessed in the lives of Paul and Timothy.

The short reading from **2 Timothy 1:13** encapsulates the writer's advice to hear and hold tight to the pattern of healing words witnessed in the faith and love of Jesus – a love and mercy that has remade and restored Paul's own problematic life. This resonates with the message of the other so-called 'pastoral epistles' (1 Timothy, Titus), where toxic words (teaching) threaten the wholeness of these faith communities.

TAKEAWAYS

- Remember the message of 1 & 2 Timothy: Love is a promise and fire for life that binds us together for others.
- Paul and those close to him invite us beyond profane and empty speech (sick words that spread dis-ease) to ‘sound teaching’ in the story of grace.
- How? By “holding the pattern of healthy words heard” in all who model the faith and love of Jesus (2 Timothy 1:13).
- We hear, sing, and share ‘wonderful words of life’ that become “professions that heal,” bringing wholeness to all.

QUOTES

“Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you heard from me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

-2 Timothy 1:13 (CEB)

“[H]oliness **of conversation** [is] the image of God visibly expressed.”

-John Wesley, *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, p.12 (1743)

Sweetly echo the gospel call,

Wonderful words of life;

Offer pardon and peace to all,

Wonderful words of life;

Jesus, only Savior,

Sanctify forever.

Beautiful words, wonderful words,

Wonderful words of life

-Philip P. Bliss, “Wonderful Words of Life” (1875), United Methodist Hymnal, 600

Above me, wind does its best

to blow leaves off

the aspen tree a month too soon.

No use wind. All you succeed

in doing is making music, the noise

of failure growing beautiful.

-Bill Holm, excerpt from “August in Waterton, Alberta” in *The Dead Get By With Everything* (1991)

The streets of my town are not

What they were

They are haloed in anger, bitter

And hurt

And it's not so you'd notice but

It's a sinister thing

Like the wheels of ambition at

The christening

-Shawn Colvin, "Cry Like An Angel" (1989)

Songwriters: John Leventhal / Shawn Colvin

Cry Like an Angel lyrics © Downtown Music Publishing, Warner Chappell Music, Inc

"Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is.

In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness:

touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it,

because in the last analysis all moments are key moments,

and **life itself is grace."**

-Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then* (1983, emphasis mine), <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/1/1/life-itself-is-grace>

"Walk fearlessly into the house of mourning.

For **grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy,**

and after all these mortal human years **love is up to the challenge."**

-Kate Braestrup, The Moth broadcast "The House of Mourning" (2015).

Love is a burning thing

And it makes a fiery ring

Bound by wild desire

I fell into a ring of fire

-June Carter and Merle Kilgore (1963)

Ring of Fire lyrics © Painted Desert Music Corp

So look homeward baby

Keep your eyes on the sky

They will never forgive you

So don't ask them to try

This is your party, I know

It's not your ideal

May **we all find salvation**

In professions that heal

-Shawn Colvin, "Cry Like An Angel" (1989, emphasis mine)

Songwriters: John Leventhal / Shawn Colvin

Cry Like an Angel lyrics © Downtown Music Publishing, Warner Chappell Music, Inc

WONDERFUL WORDS OF LIFE

Faith is a passion and fire for life. And life is God's promise in Jesus – life that is nourished by words that heal and help.

Faith is also a cover song, but sometimes the life-lyrics to this song become 'empty noise' and vessels that don't hold water. Or to mix metaphors again, our words and deeds become a hostile, blow-hard bluster that strips trees bare.

But healthy words form a life pattern and plot that is heard, told, and sung together, a story of love and a song of grace *with us, for others, for life*. Beautiful. Wonderful.

As mentioned above, the Laity Sunday themes for this quadrennium began in 2021 with a reflection on Paul's invitation to Timothy to **revive that faith** (his chosen term, "**rekindle**," contains three words: 'again, life, fire') that lived in his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois. This fire for life reflects Paul's own life calling/sending, too, "for the sake of the promise of **life** that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:1, NRSV, emphasis added). Sent to burn bright for life. This is not a bad nutshell definition of our calling (and sending) as laity to fan the flame of God's promised nearness in Jesus.

This fire or "shared yearning for a better life" for all¹ turns us together to those who need our caring accompaniment on the way to Jesus, the healer. This is what we celebrated in 2022 on Laity Sunday as "the social life of Jesus" with us, for others.

"Holiness of conversation [is] the image of God visibly expressed."-John Wesley

A few questions for this year's Laity Sunday to prime the pump as you prepare for worship and celebrating God's good news are listed below. Your answers, stories, and songs are probably all you need to prepare a message of good news this week.

- Who is an example of a life changed by grace? What do you hear and see in that person's story that resonates with your own life?
- What are some ways we "hold on to" and celebrate stories of rescuing, redeeming love? [For example, do our worship services or small-group experiences create opportunities to share this kind of witness or testimony?]
- What are the "word patterns" (conversations, gestures, things said, actions that speak louder than words, etc.) that you have witnessed in people in your own life who are examples of discipleship formed out of the pain of damaging experiences and the power of healing?
- We say things that hurt. What's one example from your own life where grace mended the damage of your own unhealthy words, turning them into the "holiness of conversation" that Wesley describes? Is that a story you have ever shared?

The longer take away from the deep dive notes that follow can be summed up like this: the pattern of sickness and health in Paul's own life and ministry is a story of menacing affliction that God's patient grace and mercy redeemed and made whole. "Jesus saves sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15) is Paul's nutshell – and Paul's life is, in his mind, the best example of that. This "pattern" (model, example) is not just a "solo" song. It is a melody of wholeness and restoration that we hear and sing together. These "wonderful words of life" abandon the futility of always having our say and getting our way. And this pattern held together by the melody of grace is more than just empty noise and profane chatter: it's our whole life, in the flesh, our lived example of how soul-sick people are changed and filled with love for all. These are people who love by sharing words that heal and help.

¹ Mary Ann Tolbert, "The Politics and Poetics of Location," in *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

FAITH AND FIRE FOR LIFE TOGETHER: OUR COVER SONG

Faith is a passion, a cover song, and a fire for life.

I recently joined a group of certified lay ministers in the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico for a training retreat. While sharing a few slides about how our **faith is both a passion** for connection **and a 'cover song'** performed anew in each generation, I asked this group to remember a song (not necessarily religious) that became something of a soundtrack for their life – maybe something they danced to or that blasted through the car radio on some hot, southwest summer day in their youth.

One beautiful couple from west Texas, Bill and Beverly, had dated since their teen years – and had more than fifty years of wedded bliss under their belts. They both raised their hands. I asked Beverly what song was in her head, and she said, “Ring of Fire” by Johnny Cash. Bill nodded the way people who finish each other’s sentences do (“What she said”).

After telling us how they were in love and started their life together to this song, we all spontaneously hummed a few bars of the mariachi horns at the beginning of this tune that had sealed their affection. The rest of us found that we could sing along to the chorus, too – covering it ourselves – without even Googling the lyrics. We then streamed it from Spotify and watched it take Beverly and Bill (and others in the room) back to a time when love felt like falling into something perilous that might hold you tight forever.

“Love is a burning thing, And it makes a fiery ring. Bound by wild desire. I fell into a ring of fire.” June Carter, Merle Kilgore

I was taken back, too, to a moment with my younger daughter at the iconic Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee. A close friend was playing with the bluegrass group, Hot Rize, and invited us backstage after the show when most everyone had left the building. We stood on the stage and sang an impromptu version of “Ring of Fire” to a room of empty pews that had long hosted ‘worship services’ of all kinds across its storied history.

And it felt like magic, though a strange kind since this song meant so many different things about desire and love to Johnny, June, Bill, Beverly, me, my daughter, and a host of others who still sing them today.²

FROM ‘HOLDING PATTERN’ OF GRIEF TO LOVE ‘SQUARING UP’

The streets of my town are not what they were. They are haloed in anger, bitter and hurt. Shawn Colvin>>

In the last couple of years I’ve heard more than one person use the metaphor of **“a holding pattern”** to describe the uncertainties facing the church. Whether referring to our discontent and disconnection or the challenges of post-pandemic worship attendance and how new technologies promise to blend online and in-person ritual life, this phrase always carries a tone of grief, loss, and uncertainty (at least to my ears).

² This song has questionable origins (in authorship and the experiences that birthed it). Roseanne Cash, Johnny’s daughter, says that the song means for their family, ‘the transformative power of love,’ in spite of its complicated origins, evolving lyrics, and competing stories of who wrote it when and why (like so many other love songs).

While hope for God’s future is strong across the connection, something like a “holding pattern of grief” lingers, too. This grief is rooted not only in institutional realignments or doctrinal differences but also in real-life hometown/home church experiences of hurtful (and some would say dishonest and abusive) words from people once considered extended family and friends in Jesus. Though grief does not define us (and need not keep us stuck in a feedback loop or holding pattern of hurt), it can register a powerful and healthy response to things that end badly.

“[G]rief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy, and after all these mortal human years love is up to the challenge.” - Kate Braestrup

Community minister and law enforcement chaplain, Kate Braestrup, reminds us that grief is actually a form of love. She wisely encourages us to “[w]alk fearlessly into the house of mourning. For **grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy**, and after all these mortal human years love is up to the challenge.”³

Our oldest enemy is death, of course. But ‘good grief’ can be a form of grace meeting our hurtful endings with the strength and resolve to join God’s ongoing love for life. Words of loss and the empty noise of critics do not get the last word. Maybe ‘words of faith and beauty’ do.

LIFE SHAPED BY WORDS

Paul is wordy, to be sure. He talks a lot – sometimes till midnight so that people who are listening fall out of upper story windows.⁴

Paul’s life has been shaped by a preoccupation with words. As a Pharisee and teacher of Torah, he believes that words shape life, too. The trajectory of his own life has been shaped by words like *chesed* (faithful love), *berith* (covenant), and *baruch Hashem* (blessed be the Name of God).

And he knows what we know: words *measure* life. You don’t have to be a Torah teacher to recognize that.

I found all my old report cards in my mother’s things after she died in 2016. I found hers, too; no doubt inherited from her mom who had passed the year before. Why do we save these things? Pride? A measure of growth? Proof our parents made a good faith effort to get us an education? A testimony to milestones (and setbacks) and other external measures of our promise and potential?

On one report card, in addition to the letter grade symbol, my sixth-grade language arts teacher wrote, “David maintains a good enough grade, but would be a much better student to work with if he could control his talking during class.” Painful, but true – though I’m not sure being ‘better to work with’ was my primary goal in life at the time (it’s up there, though, if you are teaching a confirmation-age class of distracted boys).

Thank God a literature teacher wrote these words on my twelfth-grade report card: “A fine student...a real thinker; definitely college material.” It’s hard to know when someone’s words will become a lasting blessing (or curse) in our lives.

³ Listen to her speak about this on The Moth broadcast “[The House of Mourning](#).” See, too, her memoir, *Here If You Need Me* (Bay Back Books, 2008).

⁴ See Acts 20:7-12. After ‘raising’ the young man who fell to his death from an upper story window during this long teaching session, Paul grabs a bite and keeps talking until dawn the next day (v.11).

Paul knows that we ‘build’ people based on what we hear and see in response to what they say and do, too. And he knows we can get them wrong, too, especially when their reputation precedes them.⁵

We might ask, though, why Paul is so ‘word’ worried? Why are these letters to Timothy so obsessed with the power of talk and teaching to mend and ‘together’ or rend and divide? Is it “loose lips sink ships”? What does it mean to “hold the pattern of healthy words heard”?

PROFANE CHATTER AND HEALTHY WORDS HEARD

The writer of 2 Timothy has something to say about **words that promote or inhibit life**. Paul believed that ‘how you talk’ and ‘how you hear’ bears fruit that is either healing or soul sickening. In letters to Timothy and Titus (the other ‘pastoral epistle’), we find ourselves in the middle of a conversation about, well, conversation (teaching, words, speech) – a conversation that began in Paul’s personal life and later extended to the communities that gathered to his witness. This frames the whole book of 1 Timothy (see 1 Tim 1:3; 6:20) and continues in 2 Timothy and Titus.⁶

Reflecting the writer’s distress at the dangers of toxic speech (“word fights”), the last admonition to young Timothy in the first of two letters in our Bible is to “**avoid...profane chatter**” (literally defiling “**empty noise**”). This exclamation point on the First Timothy letter seems meant to make a memory about the corrupting effect of unhealthy words and the need to cling to the “sound words” of Jesus (1 Timothy 6:3).

The advice in our Laity Sunday passage, 2 Timothy 1:13, serves up a positive Pauline prescription for health through life-giving words: “**Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching [healthy words, *hygiainontōn logōn*] that you heard from me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.**”

Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you heard from me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:13 CEB)

An aside (skip ahead if you don’t like rabbit trails and footnotes): “**Sound teaching**” is not a bad translation of this passage. But **the word ‘sound’** for us often carries a sense of “reasonable, settled, solid, and foundational.” The evolution of the word ‘sound’ in English often causes modern ears to hear *only* that sense (a reliably rational understanding based on mental capacity and competency). But the letter’s first hearers would have heard more when these words were read aloud.

People in Paul’s culture heard *health* in this word (not just *reasonableness*). For them, there was no ‘un-hearing’ the name of a sacred source of preventative care and health. Why? The root word for sound/healthy here is *hygiainō*, meaning ‘**to be healthy**’ – to be free from sickness or disease.⁷

⁵ Paul is suspicious of his own press (and the press about him). Positive or negative, he encourages those within earshot of him to pay attention to what they actually ‘heard’ and saw in him, not his own boasting/PR or that of his detractors. See 2 Corinthians 12:6, Philippians 4:9, and 1 Timothy 1:13.

⁶ See 1 Timothy 1:6-7, 10-11; 1 Timothy 2:7; 1 Timothy 4:6-7; 1 Timothy 6:3-4, 20; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2 Timothy 2:14-17, 23; Titus 1:9-13; Titus 2:1, 8; Titus 3:9-10)

⁷ It was the standard greeting in many if not most letters written at the time (Paul usually substitutes ‘grace and peace’ for *hygieia* in his letters); e.g., “I hope you are healthy/well.” It is also connected to the story of Hygieia, the goddess of preventative health (it’s where we get the word “hygiene”). In the Greco-Roman world, physical health was a spiritual matter, just as it was in the life and faith of Israel. The audience of this letter would be familiar with temples to the Greek god Asclepius, as well as statues of him and his mythical daughter, Hygieia, sold in the marketplaces (agoras). These state-endorsed gods were very popular with devotees who regularly practiced rituals of cleansing/healing and health across the Hellenistic influenced Roman world. Most uses of this word found in the New Testament are in letters associated with Paul. In other places. It very clearly means “health.” Luke uses it that way three times. Jesus says in Luke 5:31 that those who are “healthy” (*hygiainontes*) don’t need a physician. Likewise, in Luke 7:10, the centurion’s slave is found in “good health” (*hygianonta*) after Jesus speaks the healing word. In the story of the “prodigal” son in Luke 15:27, the older brother

A good example of ‘sound’ in this sense is felt when a loved one (a child out late on a date or a service member deployed abroad) arrives home “safe and **sound**” (bodily intact, whole, unharmed, without disease, infection, corruption, damage). So, the phrase ‘sound words’ would be more like how things said come together in a way that helps others remain healthy, alive, and whole. First Timothy 1:5 says **the aim of our words is love**. Given that the promise of “life” in Jesus in 2 Timothy 1:1 is the deep “why” of Paul’s calling, choosing to read this phrase as “healthy words” alongside of “sound teaching” seems a sound choice.

GRACE FOR HARMFUL WORDS

A good clue to what the writer means by hearing word patterns is found in Paul’s own life, especially the mini re-mix or **reprise of Paul’s own conversion** or ‘turn from death to life’ **story**.⁸ In 1 Timothy 1:13, we hear Paul admit the Achilles’ heel and pain point from his own complicated tale of abusive speech and actions: “...I was previously a **blasphemer** and a **persecutor** and a violent **aggressor**” (1 Timothy 1:13, NASB⁹).

Luke’s story in Acts, chapter nine, confirms this raging zeal for the truth as he saw it: Paul is “**breathing threats and murder** against the disciples” (Acts 9:1, NRSV). These were not empty threats. In addition to his own speech, **he carried letters** from leaders (like religious ‘arrest warrants’) giving him the authority to take his ‘hate show’ on the road where he could beat, bind, incarcerate, and even kill (see Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts 7).

We forget sometimes just how “sick” Paul was. Paul’s life was a crime scene, filled with deeds and words that spread harm. So, when Paul says words hurt – speaking/writing letters about dangerous, empty words almost constantly – he knows what he’s talking about. To his shame, he dished it out with devastating consequences.

Paul likely sees himself as one in a long line of those whose obsession with word wrangling infects all around them. And he knows that a “sick obsession with debates” (CEB) or “morbid craving for controversy” (1 Tim 6:3, NRSV) is something that “spreads like gangrene” among the sheep of God’s pasture (2 Timothy 2:17).

I know you know this story. In the 1 Timothy re-mix, though, Paul skips over the details of his first encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus¹⁰ to cut to the chase: “But I was shown mercy...Our lord’s favor poured all over me with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:13-14, CEB). He knows his own story is more than an example of hate speech and violence. It is a tale of hearing the life of Jesus on the road and in the lives of the very people he opposed and harmed.

asks what all the song and dance is about, and a servant explains that his father threw a party because he got his son back, “safe and sound” (NRSV). The first verse of 3 John is the typical greeting found in letters of the time: “I’m praying that all is well with you and that you enjoy **good health** in the same way that you prosper spiritually” (*hygiainein*, CEB). All uses in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), refer to physical health and wellbeing (Life). See Genesis 29:6, 37:14, and 43:27-28; also Exodus 4:18, 1 Samuel 25:6. Also, Proverbs 13:13, which connects health (*hygiainei*) to a healthy respect (fear) for the commanded word.

⁸ The long version of Paul’s conversion story is found in Acts, chapter 9 (twice, once narrated and once told by him). Paul also tells it in Acts 22 in Jerusalem before the temple leaders and the tribune, Lysias, and in Acts 26, bearing witness before Festus and Agrippa (see Galatians 1, as well).

⁹ New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by [The Lockman Foundation](#). All rights reserved.

¹⁰ Read Acts chapter 9 (see also chapters 22 and 26). The very first words Paul hears from Jesus are these: “Why are you hurting/abusing/persecuting me?” Jesus no doubt knows the answer. But maybe the first thing Saul/Paul needs to consider is the pain his words/letters/deeds are causing those his theology is too narrow to embrace.

For Paul, **the pattern** in his own story is **the plot of love**, not just theory or doctrine or good theology. It is first *his* story, his song – a story of how a passion for sacred words can be twisted into affliction and menacing violence. But it’s also a saving-grace story about love strong enough to redeem even the worst wielder of hurtful words (the “foremost” sinner, 1 Timothy 1:16, NRSV). Again, Paul knows there is grace for harmful words, and he knows this because he’s lived it.

By the patient mercy of Jesus, Paul finds the healthy word-work that began in his early upbringing (later warped into abuse and hatred) turning to “beautiful words” of life. The same word for “**pattern**” (hypotypōsin) that he chooses in 2 Timothy 1:13 (“hold the pattern of healthy words”) is used to describe his faith story in 1 Timothy 1:16: “But this is why I was shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all. So I’m **an example** [pattern/model] for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life” (CEB).

The measure of all our words is the plot of grace [bending] brokenness into a “life” story.

For Paul, the ‘pattern’ is the plot of grace – a plot that begins with life harmed and ends with wholeness. And the measure of all our words is the plot of grace. It’s this pattern of the whole that bends brokenness into a “life” story.

Healthy words that form a pattern we can perceive in another’s ‘talk and walk’ are constantly contrasted with meaningless “word fights” that harm, abuse, and confuse. The latter are not “words of life and beauty” (see the hymn by Philip Bliss). Rather, they are “profane chatter” (literally, “empty noise”), word wrangling, and “fighting words” (as my grandmother’s mountain kin might say)– sometimes even bald-faced lies. Whether intentionally misleading or not, their effect is toxic, deceptive, and damaging to others.¹¹

HELPLESS CHATTER AND “PROFESSIONS” THAT HEAL

A famous philosopher once described what takes place at most professional conferences in his time. First people meet. Endlessly. And at every meeting, they all wait for other people to show up and tell them what’s what. He continues, “and if it doesn’t get said, never mind, everyone has had their say.” So the professionally wordy folks (like me!) have their say, hoping to get their way. And “[i]t may very well be that all the talkers who are having their say have understood little of the matter in question, but still we believe that if we accumulate all that misunderstanding something like understanding will leap forth at the end of the day.”¹²

Ouch. Sounds like meetings I’ve planned, scripted, and presided over. This writer goes on to suggest that some go from meeting to meeting “sustained by the confidence that something is really happening... whereas, at bottom, they’ve merely ducked out of work, **seeking in chatter a place to build a nest for their helplessness** – a helplessness, it is true, that they will never understand.”¹³

¹¹ It’s interesting to note that much of the Book of Acts depicts Paul in word fights – in synagogues, marketplaces, and other public spaces. Reading 2 Timothy (set in the New Testament story near the end of Paul’s life), one gets the feeling Paul is exhausted with all the fighting. He even describes his ministry as having “fought the good fight” (2 Timothy 3:7, NRSV). His last days in Rome before his execution seemed to have been spent in holy conversations with those who do (and don’t) agree with his take on God’s nearness in Jesus (See Acts 28). Yet he still quotes Isaiah 6:10 (and Jesus) and connects, again, the affliction of failing to hear/listen in ways that lead to healing (Acts 28:27).

¹² Martin Heidegger, around 1925 on philosophy conferences in Europe. *Gesamtausgabe*, 20:376. This professor was not always tuned to his own helplessness and misunderstanding in his political life, though it was his silence and not chatter that testified most strongly to that. See *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism* by Gunther Neske & Emil Ketterling (New York: Paragon House, 1990).

¹³ Martin Heidegger.

Paul's story is a tale of an abusive, wordy life changed by patient mercy and grace. Mine too, if I'm honest. And while I have never "breathed threats and murder" or carried letters across the empire to bind and imprison God's people, I've done my own share of damage by always having my say in hopes of getting my way. I've been obsessed with helpless noise and chatter that promised a secure nesting place but delivered more misunderstanding than love and healing.

<<callout/sidebar:

This is your party, I know

It's not your ideal

May we all find salvation

In **professions that heal.**

-Shawn Colvin, "Cry Like An Angel" (1989, emphasis)>>

But hearing the pattern of graced affliction in Paul's story, I want to remember what I have heard in those filled with grace. I want to remember that faith is more saving story and love song than word policing or assigning a symbol to someone's life and work on a report card. And it's a story with a plot: life is good, something's wrong, someone helps.

I also want to hear the pattern and sing the melody of words that testify to this story. How? One way is by hearing wholeness in the shattered lives of those who need someone to witness grace at their own crime scenes.¹⁴ Another is by sharing sound teaching and healthy talk that 'holds water' and breathes life, words that become "professions" that heal.

THE LORD'S SONG, THE NOISE, AND THE MUSIC OF LIFE

The Lord's song is no doubt a love song, a savior song about the fire for life that mends and binds us together. It can be "all consuming," especially if it becomes a song of "shared yearning" for others to experience life in Jesus as they are drawn into the circle big enough to include those "on the edge of town" (Matthew 22:9).

Above me, wind does its best

to blow leaves off

the aspen tree a month too soon.

No use wind. All you succeed

in doing is making music, the noise

of failure growing beautiful.

-Bill Holm, *The Dead Get By With Everything* (1991)>>

¹⁴This music metaphor is consistent with Colossians chapter 3:14-17, where the writer encourages hearers to clothe themselves with love that "binds everything together in harmony" and let the words of Christ find a home as they sing songs, use words, and do deeds in Jesus' name.

God knows the empty noise of our profane chatter is harmful bluster: more hot air bent on drowning out others and blowing the leaves off those with a lot of life left in them. But even our harmful words are subject to the power of grace to transform such noise into the music of life: “No use wind. All you succeed in doing is making music, the noise of failure growing beautiful.”¹⁵

Good news almost always comes to us in the midst of threat, hostility, and bluster. Even so, as song writer Philip Paul Bliss helped ordinary people ‘sing the gospel,’ we know that amidst winds of change, we will continue to embody and sing “Wonderful Words of Life”¹⁶ to one another and to the one who sanctifies forever. For love. For life. And for the wonder and beauty of the one who brings it.

*This year’s **Laity Sunday theme** is Rise Up! And Remain Committed to Love’s Teachings. The focus is holding healthy words heard in the lives of those who model grace.*

David C. Teel is Director of Laity and Leadership at Discipleship Ministries and a writer, editor, and Christian educator in Nashville, Tennessee. He studied at Vanderbilt Divinity School and has served United Methodist churches since 1997.

¹⁵ Bill Holm, excerpt from “August in Waterton, Alberta” in *The Dead Get By With Everything* (Milkweed Editions, 1991).

¹⁶ “Wonderful Words of Life,” United Methodist Hymnal, 600. Bliss also wrote the music to “It is Well with My Soul.” I’ve heard it’s fashionable these days among some musical/theological purists to speak of ‘gospel songs’ with contempt, given that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century produced so much church music that pales in comparison to the rich theology of, say, most Charles and John Wesley hymns. I can only grant the point. I would say that these highly repetitive songs were memorable tunes that became the soundtrack for average laboring people’s daily lives – you know, the kind of people that Jimmy Stewart’s character George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life* says “do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community.” The last line of verse three in this song is likely what sealed the deal for the thoughtful Wesleyan-minded folks who included it in the *United Methodist Hymnal*.

Laity Sunday 2023 – Order of Worship

ABBREVIATIONS

BOW = *United Methodist Book of Worship*

CCLI = Christian Copyright Licensing International, [SongSelect \[https://us.ccli.com/\]](https://us.ccli.com/)

TFWS = *The Faith We Sing* (2000)

UMH = *United Methodist Hymnal*

URW= *Upper Room Worshipbook*

WSM = *Worship & Song*, Music Edition

W&S = *Worship & Song* (2011)

SOZ = *Songs of Zion*

SoG= *Songs of Grace*

TAH = *The Africana Hymnal*

Some Suggested Congregational Songs and Hymns*:

Wonderful Words of Life (all three verses)	UMH 600
Give Thanks	TFWS 2036
Now Thank We All Our God	UMH 102
Take My Life, and Let It Be	UMH 399
Sanctuary	TFWS 2164
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise	UMH 103
Here I Am, Lord (I, the Lord of Sea and Sky)	UMH 593
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling	UMH 384
Just a Closer Walk with Thee	TFWS 2158
You Are My Hiding Place	TFWS 2055
Cares Chorus	TFWS 2215
Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling	UMH 348
Sing the Wondrous Love of Jesus	UMH 701
One Bread, One Body (if sharing Communion)	UMH 620
Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me	UMH 361
O Happy Day, That Fixed My Choice	UMH 391
Sing Alleluia to the Lord	TFWS 2258
There's a Wideness in God's Mercy	UMH 121

*Also see the "Suggested Hymns" tab among the Laity Sunday worship resources online.

ENTRANCE

CALL TO WORSHIP

We are called to hold tight to words that bring life.

We know God is speaking good news through scripture, song, and neighbors, both known and new to us.

We listen for grace at work in everything, for good, for life.

We know wise words serve Love's purpose.

In all we say and do, we are learning what it means to be faithful – as those called “to serve and witness in deeds and words that heal and free.”

We thank God for the good news of Jesus' love and healing words of life.

WORD AND RESPONSE

Message Theme: Rise Up! And Remain Committed to Love's Teachings

2 Timothy 1:13, Philippians 4:1-9

Prayers of the People (Skip if using “A New Great Thanksgiving for Laity Sunday”)

Three or four lay speakers/preachers may become the leaders of the intercessions, or other laity may be chosen to lead the prayers.

Pastor: Savior, God, and Friend – help us speak grace into the lives of those you love.

Lay leader: Savior, help us listen and bear witness to your good news for all.

People: *God, we trust your script brings life.*

Lay leader: God, help us remember the words to your salvation song.

People: *We know you are calling us to something beautiful and new.*

Lay leader: Friend of the forgotten and lonely, help our deeds and words to heal and help.

People: *God, help us draw near to this broken world through your church.*

Lay leader: Jesus, speak the word, and we will echo your call.

People: *God, draw us together in your love for life.*

Pastor: Savior, God, and Friend, we are your people. Help us remember that your faithful love is greater than our best words that speak of it.

All: Amen.

THANKSGIVING AND COMMUNION

WHEN NOT CELEBRATING HOLY COMMUNION:

Invitation to Thanksgiving

Leader:

We will go, Lord, into the world,
telling and retelling the story with other believers,
taking the gospel and making disciples

among all the peoples with whom we come in contact.
We will go, knowing *you* will be with us.
You, O God, to whom we would
in these moments,
pour out our lives in service
and in thanksgiving. But we know the barriers that stand in our way.
We cannot pour ourselves out to you fully as individuals
with unconfessed sin in our lives.
We cannot pour ourselves out to you fully as your body
when we are in conflict with others.
So, hear our confession,
forgive and deliver us,
and give us courage to offer your peace
to one another.

Confession of Sin

Leader:

We have sinned against you and one another, Lord.

We have not lived worshipfully.

Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our confession.***

Silence

We have not loved you wholly.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We have not lived worshipfully.

Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our confession.***

Silence

We have not denied ourselves and taken up our own cross daily.

We have not lived worshipfully.

Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our confession.***

Silence

We have not loved kindness, pursued justice, or walked humbly with you.

We have not lived worshipfully.

Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our confession.***

Silence

We have not shared the good news with our lips or in our lives.

We have not lived worshipfully.

Lord, in your mercy, ***hear our confession.***

Silence

Pastor/Leader: The saying is sure: If we confess our sins, God is merciful and just and forgives us our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. In the name of Christ, you/we are forgiven.

People/Leader to Pastor and One Another: In the name of Christ, you/we are forgiven.

All: Glory to God! Amen!

Pastor/Leader: As forgiven and reconciled people, share Christ's peace with one another. The peace of Christ be always with you.

And also with you.

The people share the peace of Christ with one another. After a suitable period of time, the pastor may continue:

Pastor/Leader: Forgiven and reconciled to God and one another, let us offer our gifts and our thanks to God!

Thanksgiving Songs

During the Collection:

"Thank You, Lord" (UMH 84)

At the Presentation of Gifts:

"We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise" (TFWS 2031)

Pastor: Accept our gifts of thanksgiving and joy, O Lord, as, by your Spirit, we remember and proclaim who you are!

Continue with Sending Forth

OR WHEN CELEBRATING HOLY COMMUNION:

Invitation to the Table (UMH 12)

Confession of Sin (UMH 12)

Act of Pardon (UMH 12)

Sharing of Peace (UMH 12)

Offering (UMH 13)

Great Thanksgiving: "A New Great Thanksgiving for Laity Sunday"

SENDING FORTH

Blessing and Benediction

Leader:

Go into the world, sharing healthy words that bring life, always bearing witness to Love's pattern of patience, mercy, and saving grace.

Pastor:

May God Our Savior – Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit of Life – be

with you today and every day.

Amen.

#Laity Sunday 2023 — Hymn Suggestions

Hymns

BOW - *The United Methodist Book of Worship*

CLUW - *Come, Let Us Worship* (Korean)

MVPC - *Mil Voces Para Celebrar* (Spanish)

SOZ - *Songs of Zion*

TFWS - *The Faith We Sing*

UMH - *The United Methodist Hymnal*

URW - *Upper Room Worshipbook*

WSM - *Worship & Song, Music Edition*

WSW - *Worship & Song, Worship Resources Edition*

SoG - *Songs of Grace*

TAH – *The Africana Hymnal*

EXODUS 32:1-14	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH
Behold a Broken World	426									
It's Me, It's Me O Lord	352									
By the Babylonian Rivers				2217						
Great Is Thy Faithfulness	140									
Here I Am, Lord (I, the Lord of Sea and Sky)	593									
There's a Wideness in God's Mercy	121									
ISAIAH 25:1-9	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH
Come to the Table				2264						
Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me	361	247								

Sing Alleluia to the Lord				2258						
Taste And See				2267		258				
This is the Day of New Beginnings	383	208	311							
We, Thy People, Praise Thee	67		72							
You Who Are Thirsty				2132						
PSALM 106:1-6, 19-23	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH
Give Thanks			247	2036						
If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee	142									
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling	384					100				
Now Thank We All Our God	102									
Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven	66					75				
Praise the Lord with the Sound of Trumpet				2020						
Praise Ye the Lord				2010		372				
Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above	125		60			70				

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH
Blest Are They				2155		163				

Cares Chorus				2215						
Come and Find the Quiet Center				2128						
Come Away with Me				2202		59				
Go Now in Peace	665		363							
God of the Sparrow God of the Whale	122	37	59							
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise	103		74							
I've Got Peace Like a River				2145						
Make Me a Channel of Your Peace				2171						
O Day of Peace That Dimly Shines	729									
Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart	160		130							
Sanctuary				2164						
Sweet Hour of Prayer	496	248	330							
Thank you, Lord	84				228					
What a Friend We Have in Jesus	526	257	333							
You Are Mine				2218						

MATTHEW 22:1-14	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH
Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound	378	203	94		211					4091

MATTHEW 22:1-14	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH
As We Gather at Your Table				2268						
Come, Share the Lord				2269						
Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy	340									
Grace Alone				2162						
Here, O My Lord, I See Thee	623									
Humble Thyself in the Sight of the Lord				2131						
Jesus Calls Us o'er the Tumult	398		96							
O Jesus, I Have Promised	396	214								
Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling	348	193	284							
There is a Wideness in God's Mercy	121									
Time Now to Gather				2265						
Together We Serve				2175						
Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life	427	296								
You Are My Hiding Place				2055						

2 TIMOTHY 1:13	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH
Wonderful Words of Life	600									

By Gracious Powers So Wonderfully Sheltered	517									
Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands	319									
Come Christians Join to Sing	158									
Cry of My Heart				2165						
Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether	632									
Forward Through the Ages	555									
God Be With You Till We Meet Again	672									
He (God) Who Began a Good Work in You				2163						
Here Is Bread, Here Is Wine				2266						
Holy Spirit, Truth Divine	465									
I Know Whom I Have Believed (I Know Not Why God's Wondrous Grace)	714		290							
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise	103									
In the Singing				2255						
It Is Well with My Soul	377									
Jesus, Priceless Treasure	532									
Jesus, United By Thy Grace	561									
2 TIMOTHY 1:13	UMH	MVPC	CLUW	TFWS	SOZ	URW	WSM	WSW	SOG	TAH

Sing the Wondrous Love of Jesus	701									
Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus	514									
Standing on the Promises of Christ My King	374	252								
Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this Place	328									
There's Within My Heart a Melody	380									
Thy Word is a Lamp Unto My Feet	601									
Ye Who Claim the Faith of Jesus	197									

Laity Sunday 2023— Planning Notes

About the Acts of Thanksgiving

Acts of thanksgiving, although stated as an integral part of our Basic Pattern of Worship, are an uncommon or commonly truncated element when Communion is not celebrated. Today is an opportunity to model and explore what these acts can be if you are not celebrating Holy Communion.

About the Invitation to Thanksgiving

An act of invitation to thanksgiving is probably needed in most settings, much as the Prayer for Illumination, to help transition the energy from listening, commitment, and prayer in the previous movement (Word and Response) toward the energy of offering ourselves to God in thanksgiving for all God has done and is doing and will do to save us and renew the universe.

The principles of transition are the same. Match the contents, volume, speed, and energy of what came before, then move them to what is needed for what comes next.

Now we move from prayer to thanksgiving, still in the spirit of going in the awareness that Christ goes with us. Exhortation (the song), prayer (the prayers we have just prayed), and thanksgiving are all different kinds of energy. Give attention not only to the words used in the invitation to thanksgiving, but also to the kind of energy with which these words are spoken.

About the Pardon; Before the Acts of Thanksgiving

Anyone, lay or clergy, may lead an act of confession and pardon. If the leader of the act of pardon is the pastor, use “you are forgiven.” If the leader is a layperson, use “we are forgiven.”

About Serving Communion

One of the ways to maintain the flow of the service when you celebrate Communion is to ensure you have an efficient way to serve the elements. You don't have to make people wait in long lines or for long periods of time in their seats. The typical amount of time for people to be able to receive both bread and cup without a sense of rush is ten to twelve seconds. This means you can easily serve five to six people per minute. Calculate the number and placement of serving stations to allow all in your congregation who wish to receive to do so within five minutes, if possible.

A Note about Presiding

While this is Laity Sunday in The United Methodist Church, the special day does not change the work laity and clergy do in the leadership and life of the church, established by both *Discipline* and doctrine (*This Holy Mystery*).

Authorized presiders are clergy, whether ordained elders, provisional members preparing for ordination as elders and assigned to a particular local church, other denomination clergy functioning as local pastors or provisional members, licensed local pastors, or, in extraordinary circumstances, ordained deacons given authorization by the bishop to preside in their particular ministry setting.

A layperson or deacon may assist at the Lord's Table by preparing the table, holding the liturgy book for the authorized presider, or leading intercessions if they are included within the Great Thanksgiving. The prayer is led by the authorized presider. It should not be divided among two or more presiders.

Laity Sunday 2023— Scripture Readings

Exodus 32:1-14 (CEB)

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.”

²Aaron said to them, “All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!” ⁶They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

⁷The LORD spoke to Moses: “Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! ⁸They’ve already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They’ve bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” ⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I’ve been watching these people, and I’ve seen how stubborn they are. ¹⁰Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I’ll make a great nation out of you.”

¹¹But Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, “LORD, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, ‘He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth’? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, ‘I’ll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I’ve promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.’” ¹⁴Then the LORD changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

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Isaiah 25:1-9, CEB

LORD, you are my God.

I will exalt you; I will praise your name,
for you have done wonderful things,
planned long ago, faithful and sure.

²You have turned the city into rubble,
the fortified town into a ruin,
the fortress of foreigners into a city no more,
never to be rebuilt.

³Therefore, strong people will glorify you;

the towns of tyrant nations will fear you.
⁴You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in distress,
a hiding place from the storm,
a shade from the heat.
When the breath of tyrants is like a winter storm
⁵ or like heat in the desert,
you subdue the roar of foreigners.
Like heat shaded by a cloud,
the tyrants' song falls silent.
⁶On this mountain,
the LORD of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples
a rich feast, a feast of choice wines,
of select foods rich in flavor,
of choice wines well refined.
⁷He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples,
the shroud enshrouding all nations.
⁸He will swallow up death forever.
The LORD God will wipe tears from every face;
he will remove his people's disgrace from off the whole earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
⁹They will say on that day,
"Look! This is our God,
for whom we have waited—
and he has saved us!
This is the LORD, for whom we have waited;
let's be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

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Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23, CEB

Praise the LORD!
Give thanks to the LORD because he is good,
because his faithful love endures forever.
²Who could possibly repeat all of the LORD's mighty acts
or publicly recount all his praise?
³The people who uphold justice,
who always do what is right, are truly happy!

⁴ Remember me, LORD, with the favor you show your people.
Visit me with your saving help
⁵ so I can experience the good things your chosen ones experience,
so I can rejoice in the joy of your nation,
so I can praise along with your possession.
⁶ We have sinned—right along with our ancestors.
We've done what is wrong.
We've acted wickedly.

...

¹⁹ They made a calf at Horeb,
bowing down to a metal idol.
²⁰ They traded their glorious God
for an image of a bull that eats grass.
²¹ They forgot the God who saved them—
the one who had done great things in Egypt,
²² wondrous works in the land of Ham,
awesome deeds at the Reed Sea.
²³ So God determined that he would destroy them—
except for the fact that Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the way, right in front of him,
and turned God's destructive anger away.

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Psalm 23, CEB (alternative reading)

The LORD is my shepherd.
I lack nothing.
² He lets me rest in grassy meadows;
he leads me to restful waters;
³ he keeps me alive.
He guides me in proper paths
for the sake of his good name.
⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger because you are with me.
Your rod and your staff—
they protect me.

⁵You set a table for me
right in front of my enemies.
You bathe my head in oil;
my cup is so full it spills over!
⁶Yes, goodness and faithful love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the LORD'S house
as long as I live.

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Matthew 22:1-14, CEB

Jesus responded by speaking again in parables: ²“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son. ³He sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding party. But they didn't want to come. ⁴Again he sent other servants and said to them, ‘Tell those who have been invited, “Look, the meal is all prepared. I've butchered the oxen and the fattened cattle. Now everything's ready. Come to the wedding party!”’ ⁵But they paid no attention and went away—some to their fields, others to their businesses. ⁶The rest of them grabbed his servants, abused them, and killed them.

⁷“The king was angry. He sent his soldiers to destroy those murderers and set their city on fire. ⁸Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding party is prepared, but those who were invited weren't worthy. ⁹Therefore, go to the roads on the edge of town and invite everyone you find to the wedding party.’

¹⁰“Then those servants went to the roads and gathered everyone they found, both evil and good. The wedding party was full of guests. ¹¹Now when the king came in and saw the guests, he spotted a man who wasn't wearing wedding clothes. ¹²He said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ But he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to his servants, ‘Tie his hands and feet and throw him out into the farthest darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.’

¹⁴“Many people are invited, but few people are chosen.”

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Philippians 4:1-9, CEB

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

Loved ones, ²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. ³Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life.

⁴ Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

⁸ From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹ Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

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2 Timothy 1:13, CEB

Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you heard from me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

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¹ Don Saliers, "Singing Our Lives" in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 1997), 179-193.