

2014 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

**“THE ONLY NORMALCY THAT WE WILL SETTLE FOR IS
THE NORMALCY OF BROTHERHOOD, THE NORMALCY OF
TRUE PEACE, THE NORMALCY OF JUSTICE.”**

--THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.”

—Cesar Chavez

“At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received; how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by, “I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in...”

--Mother Teresa

“First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me.”

--Martin Niemoller

“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

--Nelson
Mandela

WHAT IS LENT?

Lent is a period of forty days and begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the Saturday before Easter. Sundays are not counted because Sunday always celebrates Jesus' victory over sin and death.

It is a season of preparation for the celebration of Easter. The word Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon *lencten*, which means, "spring," the time of the lengthening of days. The forty days of Lent are a time for a probing consideration of our human condition, including sin and its deadly consequences for both individuals and society. It is also a time for an equally intense consideration of the new possibilities offered to us in Jesus Christ and their implications for practical living.

The process is intended to engage persons at quite different stages of commitment. Lent came to be formed in relation to converts' final preparation for baptism. For the baptized that are active in the life of the church there is ever the need for reassessment and renewal, lest a lively faith be diminished by an increased conformity to old ways, or simply by the dead weight of unimaginative piety.

Finally, for those who have departed from the faith, "backslidden", the Forty Days can be a time for restitution and restoration.

Sources

Floyd, Pat. *The Special Days and Seasons of the Christian Year: How They Came About and How They Are Observed by Christians Today.*

² Stookey, Laurence H. *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church.*

HOW TO BEGIN A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST:

First, God loves you and wants a personal relationship with you. You are loved. Second, you can begin a relationship with Jesus Christ anywhere and at anytime.

Confess Jesus as the Lord and Savior of your life. Romans 10:9 says that "*If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*" By taking these steps of faith, you enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

Biblical Background

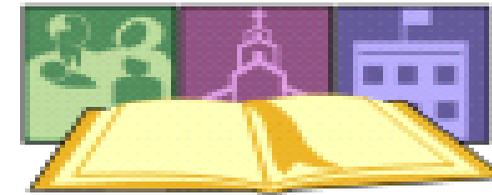
"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23). *As believers we admit that we are sinners, which means we have disobeyed God.*

Romans 6:23 tells us that "*The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" Jesus paid the price for our sins and when we accept him, we receive the gift of eternal life.

The Bible says, "*Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Romans 10:13).

JOURNAL ENTRY

During the Season of Lent, Sundays are to Celebrate the Resurrection, Jesus' victory over sin and death. Today, take time to reflect and write about your victories. The victories can include actual events, situations, behaviors, thought patterns or even attitudes.



YOU ARE INVITED TO JOURNEY WITH GOD.

MAY GOD BLESS YOU.

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LEAVE SOME BEHIND Min. Yvonne Shinoster Lamb

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FINAL REFLECTIONS OF LENT 2014

Reflect on your journey during this Lenten Season. Has God spoken to you?

Were you able to hear Him?

What lessons have you learned?

What most impacted you?

Write a prayer that expresses your thoughts around divine justice. How has God shown His justice to you? How has God used you to deliver justice?

GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION

Today is Good Friday; what appears to be the lowest event in the Gospels. Reading the story of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion often leaves us in a state of distress. But our benefit is in knowing that it is all leading up to the triumph of Easter.

Will you follow Jesus?

Will you hear the voice of our Lord, and also bear the Cross of Calvary?

Will you sacrifice and show compassion for your brothers and sisters in need?

TITLE AUTHOR

HERE AM I LORD; PLEASE--
SEND SOMEONE ELSE! Vivinee', "Reverend Mother," Garner-Jones
STEP UP TO THE PLATE! Eunice Achiaa
THE POWER OF LOVE Rev. Gloria Grant
MY NEIGHBOR'S NEED IS MY CALL TO ACTION Catherine Edwards
WORKING POOR
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HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH? Rev. Dr. Charles E. Collins, Jr.
WHAT REALLY MATTERS? Micah Robinson
SECOND FIDDLE Gwen Bowles
VOICES OF DISSONANCE Rev. Kasey Jones
HUMAN TRAFFICKING
SPEAKING FOR THE SPEECHLESS Richard "Rick" Walker
DELIVERANCE IS STILL POSSIBLE Kenneth Oberly
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GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION

The devotional book you are about to read is prepared by National Baptist Memorial Church family and friends. It is a project of love that is designed to be read during the season of Lent, which is March 5-April 20, 2014.

It may seem to be a simple matter that justice is central to any well-functioning society. However, the questions that surround what justice really means and how we achieve it are some of the most difficult to answer. Our communities locally and globally have experienced so much oppression, neglect, and rejection that it is incumbent on the faith community to intercede and seek God's direction and perfect will as it pertains to a just world. As a result, the theme for **NBMC's 2014 Lenten Devotional is "Divine Justice."** The purpose of the Lenten Devotional this year is to challenge the reader's higher consciousness, encouraging them to trust God's constant and unchanging will toward all of humanity

Use your favorite Bible version to read along with the daily devotions. As you read you will find wonderful reflections on God's Word; thought provoking questions, prayers and space to journal. The contributors are diverse in gender, ethnicity, age and income. There are a mix of both clergy and laity.

As you read this devotional may the Holy Spirit speak to you. May your heart open to the call of God to speak, walk and act justly. May your faith, courage and boldness grow stronger. May our community and our country become instruments and examples of God's love by how we care for the entire community.

Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to all the contributors to National Baptist Memorial Church's 2014 Lenten Devotional. Thank you to Kimberly Brown and Richard Walker who helped edit this publication. A special Thank You to Rev. Dr. Charles E. Collins, Jr. who took the lead and made this devotional possible.

Rev. Kasey Jones, Senior Pastor

ANOTHER WEALTH; ANOTHER POVERTY

One who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and one who gives gifts to the rich—both come to poverty.
Proverbs 22:16

As illustrated above, poverty comes in more than one form. It is not solely a fiscal condition. This scripture reminds us that a greater poverty is a lack of heavenly reward, which comes as a consequence of harming others to serve one's self interests. This scripture offers assurance that we will all be held accountable for our actions. If we oppress others for our own gain, there is a cost. Additionally, if we find ourselves in a state of financial poverty, we know that we can survive or even transcend this state through devotion to Christ. We can be wealthy without a single dime, if we have faith and trust in God.

*Silver and gold, silver and gold
I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold
No fame or fortune, nor riches untold
I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold*

*Don't give me a mansion on top of the hill
Don't give me the world with a shallow thrill
But just give me a Savior, my life He can hold
I'd rather have Jesus than silver and gold*

—from "Silver and Gold" by Kirk Franklin

Prayer for the Poor and the Neglected

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer for the Right Use of God's Gifts

Almighty God, whose loving hand hath given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Otis Ramsey-Zöe, Office Manager 2010-2011, National Baptist Memorial Church

LITANY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

For any injustice that we have committed in word or deed—
Please Lord, forgive us.

For neglecting our responsibility to love one another—
Please Lord, show compassion towards us.

For our mistreatment of those that don't look like us based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, education, and class—
Please Lord, have mercy on us.

For our silence in the face of neglect and mistreatment of others—
Please Lord, rise up in us.

For the many times that we have ignored the cries of the hungry, sick, poor, and broken—
Please Lord, open our eyes.

For our love of excessive lifestyles and selfish habits—
Please Lord, show us your way.

For our stubbornness that results in violence, war, neglect and hardness of heart—
Please Lord, break us.

For the many that have suffered at the hands of our unjust laws, iniquitous decrees, oppressive prison systems and prejudices—
Please Lord, revive and renew us.

For our failure to trust in the Holy One who grants the courage to show compassion in the struggle for justice and peace—
Please Lord, humble us.

AN INVITATION FROM THE EDITORS

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.
2 Chronicles 7:14, (KJV)

The first few days of this Lenten Devotional will identify the four areas of social concern that requires emergency attention by all faith communities. Images and issues of poverty, hunger human trafficking and mass incarceration have impacted each of us on some level of our lived experience.

Therefore, we ask you to spend this Lenten season in dedicated prayer, reflecting on those persons that have been adversely impacted by these social concerns. Ask God to reveal God's presence and purpose during this time. Seek God's divine will. Knock and be assured that God will not only respond, but answer.

Engage with us in prayer; even write them down for future reference in the journal sections of this devotional. For the Bible teaches us where two or three are gathered, there I will be in the midst. We invite each of your to gather!

DIVINE JUSTICE

Most Christians share a unique experience when reflecting on the purpose of the Bible. It is explained as being a uniquely divine guide for matters of theological belief and moral practice. For Christians, it serves as the exclusive voice of God, articulating God's word, will and ways. So what does the Bible say about justice? Honestly, it says much! But, coming to grips with these teachings is not an easy task.

To understand biblical justice we must reflect on it in the larger scheme of the cultural and worldview in which it was written about. Contextualizing biblical justice can often prove difficult because it requires us to discern the instruction of God as these passages of text relate to us now, and determine what is necessary to relate to our current situation.

What is justice? How should we define it? Is it truly a biblical principle, and who determined that? Is justice a fair practice? And, how should we carry out acts of justice? Justice is recognized as a complex set of values that are applied to the human condition in broad terms. The most basic of those are the distinction between distributive or social justice, which deal with how resources are dealt with, and corrective or criminal justice, which deals with how violations are settled.

God's justice is retributive inasmuch as it is never prejudiced, arbitrary, or impulsive, and is always morally attuned to human deeds. Yet, it focuses not on the imposition of wrongdoers, but the restoration of right relationship. Therefore, it is best described as divinely relational or restorative. It refers to the constant and unchanging will of God to give everyone what is due to him or her. Every possible form of justice is possessed by God. He practices legal justice in that through the natural and moral law He coordinates creatures to the common good; distributive justice because He gives to His creatures everything they need to fulfill the purpose of their existence; remunerative justice because He rewards the good; and vindictive justice because He punishes the wicked.

Sources

Marshall, Chris. *Divine Justice as Restorative Justice*: Center for Christian Ethics, 2012.

Fr. John Hardon's *Modern Catholic Dictionary*: Divine Justice.

I AM VINDICATED

*The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.
Psalm 103:6 (NRSV)*

Vindication. This isn't a word you hear very often in everyday speech. It is a word that holds a lot of weight and responsibility. Different translations of this text change the meaning of the phrase ever so slightly. This particular translation, The New Revised Standard Version, is one of the most dynamic and active translations of which I have come across. It leaves the audience craving how God will do these works in the world.

In this text, the Lord is actively pursuing justice for a marginalized or "oppressed" people. The phrase does not say, "The Lord works vindication and justice for all." It says the Lord works vindication and justice for all *who are oppressed*. Who are those oppressed in our society and those who were oppressed when this Psalm was written? What does this mean for those who do not feel oppressed? What does mean for those who are? What does this mean for us?

This verse triggers unease. It should encourage us to ask questions and seek a life that pleases the Lord. A life that urges us to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8)."

Reflection: Who are oppressed in our society? How does this verse align with National Baptist's mission statement? How does National Baptist work vindication and justice for those oppressed in Columbia Heights, Washington, DC and the world?

Prayer: God, holder of what is right in the world, thank you for the mercy you show us when we stand in the way of your justice. We ask that you give us the guidance to seek justice for those who are oppressed and put their needs above our own. We ask guidance in vindicating the oppressed who are our neighbors and those who aren't visible to us. Help us to live in a way that pleases you. Amen.

Lauren Hovis, 2010 Summer Intern, National Memorial Baptist Church

Hearing, Learning, and Growing in Grace

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.”

Acts 17:30-32(NIV)

Paul’s words to the Athenians come on the heels of several debates with both Jews and Gentiles about the role that Jesus has played and will play in the salvation of humanity. Paul’s assertion to the people of Athens reveals a very important lesson for people in contemporary society—ignorance is not an excuse for failure to act out the Great Commission of love.

Paul’s problem is not as simple as just dealing with unbelievers. The narrator does not say that some scoffed and some believed whole-heartedly. Instead some scoffed and some were willing—or perhaps needed—to hear Paul’s cautionary remarks again. This suggests that the greatest in the kingdom of God are not the smartest but instead those who are most faithful and persistent in the task of imitating Christ. None of us is exempt from the potential to err in our journey. However, part of the magnificence of God is that despite our insufficiency and faulty being, God continues to walk with us as we attempt to walk on our journey to be more like Christ. Our response to God’s grace and mercy should be to return to God and imitate God in our actions in the world.

When we fall short let us pray:

God, we are grateful for Your mercy as we continue to fall short. Continue to remind us that it is Your will that justice be carried out in the world through our demonstrations of grace in the lives of Your children. Amen.

Rev. Yolanda Norton, After School Coordinator and Minister to Children and Families, National Baptist Memorial Church 2010-2011

Even though **hunger** is a global issue measured on a global scale, there is still no universal definition. Is the hunger experienced by a rural farmer because of crop failure the same hunger that is felt by an inner city family of four in Brooklyn, New York? Is the hunger experienced by flood victims of Hurricane Katrina the same hunger that is felt by children in rural villages in Africa and Asia? Perhaps they are different roads leading to the same destination. While malnutrition can be measured on an individual level and food security is often characterized at a household level, hunger is quantified on a large scale and is influenced by the political and economic climate of a state, country or region. Fighting hunger means looking down all possible roads and exercising every option around hunger. This means addressing long-term causes of chronic hunger as well as short-term needs such as providing food assistance in the face of an emergency or disaster.

Poverty is state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials to enjoy a minimum standard of life and well-being that is considered acceptable in society. Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines poverty as the state of being poor or lacking something. Poverty is the reality for the majority of the world’s people and our nations. Here are some interesting facts about the state of poverty:

- ◆ Almost half the world — over 3 billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day.
- ◆ The GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (567 million people) is less than the wealth of the world’s 7 richest people combined.
- ◆ 1 billion children live in poverty (1 in 2 children in the world). 640 million live without adequate shelter, 400 million have no access to safe water, 270 million have no access to health services. 10.6 million died in 2003 before they reached the age of 5 (or roughly 29,000 children per day).

Reflection:

Have you ever experienced hunger or poverty? Do you know anyone that has?

Sources

Shah, Anup, Causes of Poverty. Global Issues.org, March 24, 2013.

World Food Program, wfpusa.org

Human Trafficking is a serious crime and a grave violation of human rights. Every year, thousands of men, women and children fall into the hands of traffickers, in their countries and abroad. Almost every country in the world is affected by human trafficking, whether as a country of origin, transit or destination for victims. There are three basic elements of trafficking that we should know:

- (1). The Act (What is done)—recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons.
- (2). The Means (How it is done)—threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim.
- (3). The Purpose (Why it is done)—for the purpose of exploitation, which includes exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery, or similar practices and the removal of organs.

The definition of the term "**mass incarceration**" is hard to find possibly because scholars disagree over its causes and consequences. However, it could be defined as a rate of imprisonment that is markedly above the historical and comparative norm in a society. In other words, mass incarceration refers to the imprisonment of a large number of people.

The United States has the highest rate of imprisonment in the world, and this has become a social issue of great concern. Whether we call it mass incarceration, mass imprisonment, or the prison boom, this phenomenon refers to the current American experiment in incarceration, which is defined by comparatively and historically extreme rates of imprisonment of young African American and Latino men. This is particularly true of those living in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage; marked with high levels of hunger, poverty, crime, and poor school systems.

Reflection:

Do you know any people who have been victimized by human trafficking or mass incarceration?

Reread the definitions and write down what you currently understand them to mean. Tonight offer a prayer of peace and safety for people that have been victims of either of these great social concerns.

Sources: United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime: www.unodc.org
Wildeman, Christopher, Mass Incarceration: Criminology, 2012.

JOURNAL ENTRY

“Through our scientific genius we made of the world a neighborhood, but we failed through moral commitment to make of it a brotherhood.” –Dr. King

Sermon delivered Feb. 26, 1965, at Temple Israel of Hollywood, Hollywood, CA.

..the BOOK ITSELF IS THE BEST WITNESS!

All scripture is given by the inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Bookstores are filled with self-help books that teach people how to live better lives. We buy them in mass volumes thinking that they will help to dramatically change our current situations. Usually they end up skimmed over, and stacked on bookshelves or coffee tables. The problem is that we often find out those tools are not reliable or useful. Interesting enough many of us already own a book that teaches and tells us about maximizing our greatest potential, yet we pass it by. It stands alone as its own best witness to living out our best life!

This is the kind of information that we find in 2 Timothy 3. Paul is describing to Timothy the difficulties of the last days, while addressing the question of how Christians should survive and prosper during evil times. He reminds Timothy about the reliability and the truth of God's word, and illustrates how we should live in order to live a more abundant life through Jesus Christ. Paul's teachings seemed to express that theme, for example in Galatians 3:28, he reports that "There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither Bond nor Free. There is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." From the message we must learn to see the beauty of God's creation in everyone. Adding to the good news is Psalm 139:14. When Christians think of others, they must remember that everyone is "fearfully and wonderfully made." We are all one in Christ. Status, social distinction and racism are wrong and should end.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please do not let us be like leaves on a tree, blowing where the wind takes us or like the tides in the sea, blowing to and fro. Help us, Lord, to trust in your word as it becomes a light to our feet. Be the peace that our hearts and souls desperately need. Thanks for your love, your grace and mercy. Amen.

Kelvin Chrichlow, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church

LITANY OF WEEPING

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Nehemiah 1:1-11 [4], NRSV

When was the last time that you wept because of someone else's troubled condition?

Let us pray...

God of Justice, you have shown us what is right: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you.

Lord WE hear you.

Forgive all in the life of our nation that falls short of what you require.

Lord have mercy.

Forgive all the poverty of body, mind, and spirit that still exists among us;

Lord have mercy.

Forgive all the broken lives and all the broken hearts that are not tended;

Lord have mercy.

Forgive us for the lives of young children that are being perverted and degraded, and all the social casualties that are not lifted up.

Lord have mercy.

Forgive us, as individuals and as a nation, for not being big enough, broad-minded enough, hopeful enough, or loving enough to create a just society.

Lord have mercy.

Forgive us and help us, so that our life as a nation, and the contribution we make to the life of the world, may honor you and do justice to your demands through Jesus Christ our Lord and Redeemer!

Lord WE need you.

AMEN!

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Learn to do well. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of the orphan. Fight for the rights of the widow.

Isaiah 1:17(NLT)

God is desirous of moral behavior towards society's most vulnerable members, the oppressed, the fatherless, the orphans, and the widows. The world seems to have ignored its obligation to the least of these.

I pray that the faith community and I will fulfill God's desire with His moral behavior towards the least of these. What will you do?

William T. Fauntroy, Jr., Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen
Bible Study Attendee, NBMC

LET GOD BE THE JUDGE

And I charged your judges at that time, "Hear the disputes between your people and judge fairly, whether the case is between two Israelites or between an Israelite and a foreigner residing among you. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of anyone, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it."

Deuteronomy 1:16-17

Who will stand up for you? Who will represent your case? No matter what the odds are that seem to be against you, know that God knows and sees all. The world seems to celebrate those in power, and those who have influence. But we are all equal in the court of our Lord. If you have been wronged, God is sure to make it right. And even when we have wronged another, God's nature is always to have mercy. As sons and daughters of God, we are called to be fair to all people, not just those we like. And those who follow Christ don't have the luxury to say who deserves God's goodness. The justice we give to others, God will surely give to us.

Reflection: So where is God calling you to do the right thing? Where is justice being misrepresented? Bring the issue to God, and let the Holy Spirit tell you what you should do.

Rev. Melissa Brown, Author and Life Coach,
2011 Revival Preacher, National Baptist Memorial Church

DELIVERANCE IS STILL POSSIBLE

*Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.
Proverbs 24:11 (NIV)*

In Proverbs 24, King Solomon reminds us that we should not desire the rewards of evil men. Similarly, fellowship with evil bestows upon us guilt by association. The wicked thrives on every opportunity to destroy others in an effort to build themselves up. They speak slander and provoke violence. The bible teaches us that the *“thief comes to steal and kill and destroy (Jn. 10:10)*. But those that believe in Christ know we have life and share in the fullness thereof.

This passage of text speaks about someone who is in great danger, and it is in our power to save them from disaster. This could be the disenfranchised or the disenfranchised. This could even be the person that has strayed away from the will of God. Whatever the situation; whether it be unjust treatment, violence, or death, deliverance is still possible. We have been given power to speak life into dead situations. Therefore, we are required to provide whatever our brothers and sisters need to thrive and survive.

Prayer: Father, although these thoughts were for the Jews in Solomon’s time, the ideas are for us as Christians as well. It is our responsibility to work with and prayer for those who are doing things against God and Christ to help them get back on track. Father, show us the way to appeal to each of them; rather than cause any offense that would harden their hearts toward You. We are aware that our own actions sometimes hurt, even when we attempt to help. We need your guidance. Amen!

Kenneth Oberly, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church

ANSWERING THE CALL FOR “DIVINE JUSTICE

*Do not put your trust in princes, in a son of man in whom there is not salvation. Blessed are those who seek help and hope in the Lord our God, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.
Psalm 146:3-7*

As I enter the Lenten season, I seek to awaken my faith so I can clearly see what is before me in this world of rapidly advancing technology and great abundance due to the grace of God.

Despite these blessings I still see hunger, poverty, religious and individual intolerance, and injustice. I see a need for individual and collective efforts to intercede on behalf of those adversely affected by the laws/decrees that bring about such oppression. Sometimes I ask God if this is the world He has chosen for us. But more importantly, I ask if this is the world we have chosen for ourselves. God has a clear picture of what he wants for us: peace, joy (or abundant life), love, dignity and purpose. A purpose that is consistent with our belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and the existence of a God who will grace us forever.

Reflection: The scripture clearly identifies our Heavenly Father as a God who executes justice and feeds the hungry. What can you do to help bring about God’s vision of justice and abundance for all of His children?

Wanda D. Foster, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church

GROWING...

*Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.
For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!
Isaiah 30:18*

This passage reminds us how good and kind God is to us. Earlier in chapter 30, Israel's leaders were making plans to partner with Egypt for protection. They even prepared and sent gifts to influence Egypt. Even with all they knew about God and all God did for the children of Israel, they decided not to ask God for direction or help.

As a child, raised in the church, I was taught about God and his love for all. I learned how he watched over us and how we could call on him no matter what. As an adult, on my own, I made so many mistakes. After many nights of crying, I began to pray. It took sometime but I started to feel safe. Then, I remembered my teaching and knew that God had never left me, I had left him.

There are times in our lives we find ourselves in bad situations based on our choices. Even when we mess up, the scripture says, "God longs to be gracious... he will rise up to show compassion."

Reflection: Have you ever experienced the kindness of God when you know you didn't deserve it? Do you show grace to others who are in need even if they made bad choices?

Prayer: God thank you for your love and showing me compassion even when I am not worthy. Amen

Geraldine Spencer, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church

SPEAKING FOR THE SPEECHLESS

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.
Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.
Proverbs 31.8-9 (NIV)*

Proverbs is full of practical advice from the viewpoint of Solomon the king. But in this chapter, we have advice from a mother to her son the king. She tells the powerful king to speak for the speechless. We may not be earthly kings, but all of us have times and experiences of being in powerful or influential positions, whether in the community, in the church, in our families, or in other relationships. What needs to happen for us to be able to speak for the speechless?

"Speak;" The word listen occurs 23 times in Proverbs, while the word speak appears 20 times. Before speaking, we should always listen.

Listen to what?

- Listen to our own experiences of being speechless, powerless and needy. We all have experiences of lacking power and control that we may want to forget, but they are actually full of lessons for us. God told Israel to treat foreigners well because they should remember their own past (Deuteronomy 10.19).
- Listen to the speechless. They have things to say, but can only be heard if we are in relationship with them. Jesus came and spent time with the rejected, the outcasts, the sinners (Mark 2.16-17).
- Most importantly, listen to God. God knows us better than we know ourselves. We need to see all people through the lenses God gives us in Jesus Christ. (Second Corinthians 5.15-20).

After listening, what can we say?

- We can speak up for justice for those who are neglected by society, by the institutional church, by communities, and by families.
- We can speak up to create conditions where the speechless can speak for themselves and be heard.
- We can speak up so that all power comes under the Lordship of Christ.

Reflection: Will you take time to listen? Will you find opportunities to speak?

Prayer: Lord, Thank you for your help when I have been powerless and speechless.

Give me ears to hear and a willingness to speak on behalf of others who cannot speak for themselves. Amen.

Rick Walker, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

“It ought to concern every person, because it is a debasement of our common humanity. It ought to concern every community because it tears at our social fabric. It ought to concern every business, because it distorts markets. It ought to concern every nation, because it endangers public health and fuels violence and organized crime. I’m talking about the injustice, the outrage, of human trafficking, which must be called by its true name—modern slavery.”—President Barack H. Obama

Did you know that Public Law 106-386- October 28, 2000 (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000) established the first human trafficking laws in the United States?

Human Trafficking enslaves more than 30 million women, children, and men every year.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “After drug dealing, trafficking of humans is tied with arms dealing as the second-largest criminal industry in the world.” Combating this \$32 billion-dollar-a-year industry takes enormous effort as well as a large framework of diligent abolitionists. Slavery is wrapped up in almost every industry’s supply chain, tainting the food we eat, the clothes we buy and the electronics we love.

The definition of trafficking has 3 main components:

- The action of trafficking; which means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons
- The means of trafficking; which includes threat of or use of force, deception, coercion, abuse of power or position of vulnerability
- The purpose of trafficking; which is always exploitation. In the words of the Trafficking Protocol, article 3 “exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

Sources:

Not For Sale Campaign, www.notforsalecampaign.org.

Prevent Human Trafficking, www.preventhumantrafficking.org.

A PRAYER FOR JUSTICE AND GENEROSITY

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.*

Luke 1:52-53 (NIV)

To the All Wise God, our Heavenly Father and Divine Mother,

Our languages, dialects, and songs are incapable of expressing our depth of gratitude for your generosity. Your generosity can scathe the diabolical practices of the powerful while bringing succor and strength to the powerless.

In the example of Mary, we see the illustration of your generosity. You entrusted your most prized possession (Jesus) to be embedded under the young, tender bosom of a poor woman who was betrothed to a low scale carpenter.

In a similar spirit of gratitude, we extol you for being so gracious, loving, merciful, and faithful in how you used Joseph to guard Mary and care for Jesus.

Above all, you showed us that in Christ the weak can dethrone the strong, and the oppressed can overcome the oppressor.

Therefore, show us how we can be used as weapons of love to fill the bellies of the hungry while fighting against the forces that try to keep them empty, to put clothes on those whom injustice tries to keep naked, and to visit those incarcerated and bound by sickness.

Lord, enable us so we can empower others. Amen!

Rev. Clifford Anthony Jones, Jr., Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, NC, 2010 Revival Preacher NBMC

I GOT MINE, YOU BETTER GET YOURS!

This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.

Ezekiel 16:49-50

Have you ever heard the statement “I got mine, you better get yours?” This seems to be the attitude of so many in our society today. We become very proud of our financial achievements and material possessions. We have made it! We are very comfortable and have become blinded to the needs and suffering of others. This passage reminds us that this attitude will lead to our own destruction. The Holy Scripture often tells us that everything that we have comes from God. This should give us an attitude of thanksgiving towards God. But what we often see is puffed-up pride. God is the one who blesses the “good” and the “bad”. The bible teaches us that, “...*he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous* (Matthew 5:45).” We are blessed so that we can help the poor and needy among us. Our blessings should not be hoarded, but shared.

When asked by God, “Are you your brother’s or sister’s keeper;” will your answer be, YES?

Min. Linda Nakpodia, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church

VOICES OF DISSONANCE

*Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,
who write oppressive statutes,
to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey!
Isaiah 10:1-2 (NRSV)*

We learn from Isaiah that in God’s anger, the leaders and teachers of Israel are judged for misleading and misguiding the people. The masses are judged because they allowed injustice and did not seek God’s guidance for themselves. While arrogant and prideful personal practices of leaders became public policy, which oppressed the needy, the people did not rise up.

There was no voice of dissonance when poor people were robbed of their rights. There was no voice of dissonance when it became common practice to take advantage of widows. No one raised their voice when orphans became prey! The people of God muted the voice of God. As a result, the actions of the leaders and the masses cultivated an unjust society that was displeasing to God.

God cares for the needy. God cares about the eradication of unjust laws. God cares when poor people and helpless people are victimized. God does not turn a blind eye to unjust community policy. God calls us -- leaders and the masses--to live justly and combat injustice.

Reflection: How often do you go along to get along? Have there been times when you should have spoken up or done something to stand up for those who were being bullied or oppressed?

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for my quietness when my voice could have made a difference. Forgive me for turning a blind eye to my misconduct and the wrongdoing of others. May I always turn to you for personal guidance and the confidence to stand against oppression; please grant me the courage to live and lead justly. Amen!

Rev. Kasey D. Jones, Senior Pastor, National Baptist Memorial Church

JOURNAL ENTRY

ANSWERING THE CALL FOR “DIVINE JUSTICE (Part 2)

Do not put your trust in princes, in a son of man in whom there is not salvation. Blessed are those who seek help and hope in the Lord our God, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

Psalm 146:3-7

To know what is expected of us we only have to look at God’s word in Psalm 146:3-7. It should not take us long to reflect on these words and determine what we as individuals and a collective Christian body should do to affect change. The question is can we achieve justice—even possibly “divine justice”—in this society? And what is “Divine Justice”? Is it a man, acting alone, to intervene on behalf of others, or is it man’s God-inspired intervention that will bring about justice? I believe the latter.

Only by this kind of proactive intervention can we reach a better place and a better world. In closing, I ask you to find your place, your function, to create a world where there is less oppression and justice for more of us.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for being our Heavenly Father who wants justice and freedom from lack for all of your children. Please show me how to move and be a light in the world to bring forth your vision and purpose for our world. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

“There is a higher court than courts of justice and that is the court of conscience. It supersedes all other courts.” –Mahatma Gandhi

Wanda D. Foster, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church

Hunger & Poverty Statistics

Although related, food insecurity and poverty are not the same. Unemployment rather than poverty is a stronger predictor of food insecurity.

Poverty

- In 2012, 46.5 million people (15.0 percent) were in poverty.
- In 2012, 26.5 million (13.7 percent) of people ages 18-64 were in poverty.
- In 2012, 16.1 million (21.8 percent) children under the age of 18 were in poverty.
- In 2012, 3.9 million (9.1 percent) seniors 65 and older were in poverty.
- The overall poverty rate according to the Supplemental Poverty Measure is 16.1%, as compared with the official poverty rate of 15.1%.
- Under the Supplemental Poverty Measure, there are 49.7 million people living in poverty, 3.1 million more than are represented by the official poverty measure (46.5 million).

Food Insecurity and Very Low Food Security

- In 2012, 49.0 million Americans lived in food insecure households, 33.1 million adults and 15.9 million children.
- In 2012, 14.5 percent of households (17.6 million households) were food insecure.
- In 2012, 5.7 percent of households (7.0 million households) experienced very low food security.
- In 2012, households with children reported food insecurity at a significantly higher rate than those without children, 20.0 percent compared to 11.9 percent.
- In 2012, households that had higher rates of food insecurity than the national average included households with children (20.0 percent), especially households with children headed by single women (35.4 percent) or single men (23.6 percent), Black non-Hispanic households (24.6 percent) and Hispanic households (23.3 percent).
- In 2011, 4.8 million seniors (over age 60), or 8.4% of all seniors were food insecure.
- Food insecurity exists in every county in America, ranging from a low of 2.4 percent in Slope County, ND to a high of 35.2 percent in Holmes County, MS.

Source: FeedingAmerica.org, 2014.

SECOND FIDDLE

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Romans 12:9-13 (MSG)

These verses tell us how to love God and people. Only with God's help can we demonstrate this kind of love. In some traditions, Lent focuses on giving up relating to the sacrifice of Jesus. Other traditions focus on adding to your spiritual life. This passage speaks to both traditions.

“Practice playing second fiddle (v.10).” In an orchestra, the first violin plays melody, while the second violin harmony. Both are needed to play the piece but first violins stand out to the audience. God wants us to curb that nature to be the center of attention that starts in childhood. Remember pushing to be first in line? Instead, God tells us to let others be the focus. Being in a church family reminds us that we journey with others so we can't always be in the front of the line.

“Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame (v. 11).” Stay excited, my friends! I am a boisterous and devoted college basketball fan. I suspect that many of your might also enjoy something. But, the excitement that we express for things should never compare to the joy that express towards serving God. I want to show much more enthusiasm for serving God than I do for my favorite team or any other thing!

Pray with me in this season of Lent as we struggle together to “give up” the foreground and be supportive in the background. Pray that we all will “add to” our spiritual life by showing fervent joy in serving God.

Gwen Bowles, Mission Team Member, Mars Hill Baptist Church, NC

WHAT REALLY MATTERS?

But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:25-27

No matter who or where you are in life, sometimes we all get a little stressed out. We either get too busy or we get too anxious because we don't have enough "going on" in our lives. Most times it's because of pressure that we put on ourselves to be great, appealing, or even just in the eyes of others. It is not that others' opinions don't matter, because we are called to show God's spirit in the world. But this passage reminds us, in a very direct way, that it is ultimately God's justice and God's standard that matters most.

Obedience to Him and real relationship with Him—these are the things that really matter. Dealing with the idea of justice can be harsh sometimes; but today, with this passage, I hope you are reminded to be at peace in the will and grace of God. Remember that God's justice is not like that of the world. According to His word, God has only asked you to love, purely and genuinely; to try to love as He does. The best part is, even if you fall short, His love is the same.

Reflection: Are you ever more concerned about what others think than what God thinks? How can you more align your priorities with God's word as it relates to caring for those in need?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be just as You are just. Help me to see grace and love more than I see right and wrong both in myself and in others. Help me to show the world your spirit through the peace they see in me. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Micah Robinson, Music Director, National Baptist Memorial Church

JOURNAL ENTRY

“God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty.” –Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” Nov. 4, 1956, at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, AL.

IS THAT THE GOLDEN RULE?

*Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
Forgive, and you will be forgiven.
Luke 6:37 (NRSV)*

Sometimes the simplest things get taken for granted, or sayings, such as the verse above, become so familiar that they lose their edge. The radical nature of such statements as, “do not judge, and you will not be judged,” and “do not condemn, and you will not be condemned,” is at risk of being brushed aside as common sense or alternate phrasings of the “golden rule.” Yet, to do so is to minimize and potentially miss the subtlety of our Lord as He teaches what makes the ultimate difference for His followers today.

There is a difference between having opinions and judging. Knowing the difference between the two makes all the difference in the world. Opinions can be held and shared, and decisions can be made about the choices of others without demeaning, belittling, or disrespecting the other. Constructive judgment is thoughtful and not harsh. It comes with gentle correction, kind reproof, and patient teaching. These are perhaps a few ways to gently guide another’s behavior towards sound judgment without being severely judgmental.

Mary Little Apicella, Pastor of the Federated Church of Christ, Brooklyn, CT,
2009 Summer Intern, National Baptist Memorial Church

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? ...and HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

*Life is not measured by how much you own.
Luke 12:15 (NLT)*

For many years I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, the new Mecca of the south. For the up and coming young professional, Atlanta is the place where “beautiful and prosperous” people dwell. It boasts of prime real estate, high salaries and lavish living. Everyone is driving the fanciest car, throwing extravagant parties in larger than life houses, and blessed with the most prestigious jobs. This is the place in the new south that any young person would want to live! This is the good life! But, what price do we pay for the extravagances that we enjoy? How much is enough? And...how much is too much?

Jesus warns us against the potential to succumb to greed. He teaches us that, “Life is not measured by how much we own.” What I have learned over time is that the more we acquire, the more we become convinced that we need to be happy. Likewise, the more we see other achieving, the greater our need to compete and out-do them. Happiness takes on a new form; a deceptive practice, a covetous behavior, and a fatal spirit orchestrated by the enemy called greed. So, how much is enough? Jesus directed the rich young ruler who wrestled with this same question, “To sell all of his possessions; give to the poor, and have treasure is heaven.” To add this this moment, Jesus then said, “...follow me (adapted, Mt 19:21).”

This is a shocking testimony isn’t it? You blessed me Lord. I mean you blessed me indeed. Now you want me to give it away? How much and why? Does this mean that God is against us being prosperous and having money? Absolutely not! After all, He came that you might have life and that more abundantly, but He’s against us placing anything before Him. God recognizes that our hearts are where our treasure lies (Mt 6:21).

Reflection: So my question for you; my brother and sister, at what point does need become greed?

Rev. Dr. Charles E. Collins, Jr., Co-Editor, National Baptist Memorial Church

WORKING POOR

One of the most common misconceptions is the assumption that if someone is hungry, that means they do not have a job and are living on the streets. What most people don't understand is that anyone can experience hunger. It is a silent epidemic that affects over 50 million Americans.

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2010, 21 million people lived in working-poor families. This translates into nearly 9.6 percent of all American families living below 100 percent of poverty have at least one family member working.

Working Poor Facts

- Female-headed households were more than twice as likely to be among the working poor as male-headed households in 2008.
- Among families with at least one member working at least half a year, families with children were 4 times more likely than families without children to live in poverty in 2008.
- According to a survey on hunger and homelessness conducted by the United States Conference of Mayors, 88.5% of cities participating in the survey cited unemployment as one of three major causes of hunger in their city.
- 39% of all adults served by Feeding America have completed high school or equivalent degree with no further education beyond high school.
- 34% of all households served by Feeding America have had to choose between paying for food and paying for medicine or medical care.
- 65 percent of working families that received SNAP were single-parent families.

By the numbers:

- There are **610,042 people** experiencing homelessness on any given night in the United States.
- Of that number, **222,197 are people in families**, and **387,845 are individuals**.
- About **18%** of the homeless population - 109,132 - are considered "chronically homeless," and About **9%** of homeless adults- **57,849** - are veterans.

Has your life been impacted by poverty or homelessness in any way? Have you ever stopped to have a conversation with one of our homeless brothers or sisters? Has the Lord ever arrested your heart and caused you to stop and feed or offer to feed a homeless person?

Sources: FeedingAmerica.org, 2014; National Alliance to End Homelessness,

WHAT IS THE RIGHT WAY?

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.
Leviticus 19:15 (NIV)

When I read this verse, my initial response was utter confusion. "Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great." What can this possibly mean? How can I possibly judge my neighbor fairly in a world that is often anything but fair? I read this verse over and over trying to discern some sort of meaning and relevance to my life. Then I realized God's message was simpler than I thought.

Stop being so cynical. In a world that thinks there is only one way to be right, it is easy to lose sight of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Take for example Mother Teresa, a woman who devoted her life to serving the poor in the slums of Calcutta. She lived her life with nothing among people who had nothing and she trusted that God would provide. Look also to Billy Graham, a man who has ministered to millions of people for over 60 years. He used his influence and status to share Christ above anything else. I feel there is persistent pressure placed on Christians to choose a path, but Leviticus says differently. *Judge your neighbor fairly.* The Kingdom of God reaps no harvest by determining whether Mother Teresa or Billy Graham ministered better than the other. The Kingdom powerfully declares victory in celebrating the many lives affected by both of their ministries.

As for me and for you, let us seek not the *right* way, but God's way. Let us allow ourselves to judge our neighbors fairly, and in doing so, seek to make our days on earth as they are in Heaven.

Prayer: Our Father in Heaven, keep the Kingdom of Heaven in our thoughts and actions so that we might be a blessing to everyone we encounter. Amen!

Brett Greenfield, 2013 Summer Intern, National Baptist Memorial Church

KNOW JESUS, KNOW JUSTICE!

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah. Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

Psalms 82:1-4 (NRSV)

This prayer is a passionate critique and a proactive corrective to our indifference to human suffering. It's a cry of protest a time in which the moral, ethical, and spiritual fabric of society has come apart at the seams. The connective threads of community-- mutual respect and concern and sensitivity to the suffering of the most vulnerable of society (e.g, "the weak and the orphan, the lowly and the destitute)--is non-existent, or at the very least, nominal.

Having reflected on the plight of the poor in light of his relationship with God, the psalmist is given a glimpse, by the Holy Spirit, of how God views "immoral man and immoral society"--to use the oft-quoted phrase. Through this psalm, Yahweh, Israel's covenantal Senior Partner, reveals His displeasure with the plight of the poor (vs1). In fact, God questions the intentionality and integrity of those who have been assigned to dispense justice. "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked (vs2)? This question, while rhetorical, is really an indictment. It is not so much an indictment of powers in heaven as an indictment of those powers active here on earth. Not simply then and there, but here and now. However, God does not end with an indictment, but rather with an invitation. Draped in the form of a moral imperative (vss. 3-4), those who serve God are told to return to the values and vision of the Beloved Community, where Jesus not only gives us joy, but also calls for justice for the least and lost.

At a time when our country and community shows so little concern for the poor, will you join Jesus in repairing our tattered socio-eco-political tapestry? We must yet strive to picture justice and compassion for all of God's children as the social and spiritual ideal.

Prayer: God over all powers, teach us, command us, and lead us in giving justice to all those in need. Amen

Rev. Anthony L. Trufant, Senior Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY
2012 Revival Preacher, National Baptist Memorial Church

MY NEIGHBOR'S NEED IS MY CALL TO ACTION

*Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.
Deuteronomy 15:11, (NRSV)*

In this scripture, God is asking that we provide for the needs of others who are unable to provide for themselves. He ultimately wants us to be in relationship with our neighbors as He wants us to be in relationship with Him.

I believe He wants us to go deeper than merely providing food and shelter, which are the most basic needs of mankind. Once those needs are met humans naturally strive for higher fulfillments including, safety and security, status or respect and, finally on to personal growth and self-actualization. Providing food and shelter satisfies the basic needs, but if we are honest with ourselves we all want to be self-sufficient, respected and proud of our accomplishments.

There is a saying, "If you give a man a fish, he eats for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime." I believe we're called to go a step farther than merely meeting the basic needs of the poor. As Christians, we need to also give a "hand up" to assist our neighbors in realizing their God-given potential.

Reflection: How are you answering God's call to care for your neighbors in need?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank you for the blessings you bestow upon me each and every day. Lord, I do not take them for granted. I accept your commandment to follow Jesus and take care of my "brothers and sisters." Speak to me, Lord, so that I might be moved to show loving care in a manner that opens doors to spread the gospel and helps someone grow in relationship with you. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Catherine Edwards, Office Manager, National Baptist Memorial Church

THE POWER OF LOVE

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

1 John 3:17

We often say: “God is good all the time and all the time God is good.” God is indeed good and He blesses us in so many ways. Those blessings are meant for us to also be a blessing to others. When we share God’s gifts to us with others, this expresses the sincerest form of love in action.

Are you in love with Jesus? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God—a heart that forgives, that cares, reaches out to others and wants to heal. If we have the means to help our brother or sister in need, how can we turn our backs on them and still say we love God? We cannot! Divine justice is predicated on our love for Christ and our love for each other. If we truly love, we will not want to see anyone in need. So let us love as Christ loves us.

Reflection: Have there been times when you have not shared your blessings from God with those in need? Why not? What would you like to do differently in the future?

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for making us a part of your family by giving us your Son Jesus. Help us to accept the care of others and to serve them out of gratitude and love for You. In Jesus’ name, Amen!

Rev. Gloria Grant, Volunteer, National Baptist Memorial Church

SHOUT FOR JUSTICE!

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality.

Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the

LORD your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference held several State Justice Hearings on Mass Incarceration. As a result, a report was published this year, Bearing Witness: A Nation in Chains that shared the following:

The Correction Corporation of America with assets totaling in the billions, is the second largest prison privatization company in the United States.

The Corporation has submitted a proposal to 48 state governors to purchase the state prisons with the requirements that the prisons stay 90% full for at least 20 years. The private prison industry spends millions of dollars every year to lobby lawmakers for laws that keep those prison beds full. That means harsher sentences and that means new crimes... The for-profit industry is driving the war on drugs and is driving the increasing numbers of prison beds. There is no incentive to work on reducing recidivism or promoting rehabilitation.

God’s Word instructs, “...do not pervert justice or show impartiality.” However, the justice system that mocks its very name is purchased and manipulated by a very few to serve their selfish interests at the detriment of the many. The powerful few pour millions of dollars into think tanks and stuff the pockets of unprincipled corrupt people for the sole purpose of crafting unjust legislation, which truly is the height of perversion.

Reflections: Is God calling you and the church for this appointed time to work towards transforming the justice system?

Prayer: God, help us as a faith community to raise a great shout for justice and let the walls of injustice come tumbling down. In the Name of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Rev. Sue Harris-Green, Bible Study Instructor, National Baptist Memorial Church

IS THAT THE GOLDEN RULE? (Part 2)

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Luke 6:37 (NRSV)

Forgiveness is a tricky word. Next to loving my neighbor as myself, I think forgiveness is one of the most difficult practices of our Christian faith. It is sometimes but not always the case that when you forgive, another will also forgive you. Sometimes it is not possible to receive another's forgiveness, and the challenge becomes how to de-couple the giving and receiving of forgiveness when one of the ways has been blocked. Forgiveness as Jesus teaches it feels contrary to what the world teaches. The world allows judgment and condemnation, and encourages us to remember things of the past. Yet the commands not to judge, condemn, and the imperative to forgive are all three bound together for Jesus, and during this Lenten time of internal review and renewal, how do they balance in your life?

The forgiveness of God as extended through the words of Jesus on the cross: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they are doing," covers a multitude of judgments and condemnations. In the forgiveness of God, there is freedom from judgment and liberation from condemnation. It is about forgiving with eyes wide open; with eyes that see past the stuff of life that the world so hastily judges and condemns; with eyes that see in the other the image of God. Forgiving through and in spite of judgment and condemnation; that is a sacred ability that comes from a deep sense of rootedness in the love and forgiveness of God. "May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and our treatment of our neighbors be acceptable and pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer." - (Psalm 19:14, adapted)

Mary Little Apicella, Pastor of the Federated Church of Christ, Brooklyn, CT
2009 Summer Intern, National Baptist Memorial Church

JOURNAL ENTRY

"Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred." -Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"I Have a Dream," Aug. 28, 1963, at the March on Washington, Washington, DC

STEP UP TO THE PLATE!

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Matthew 25:35

God works through divine justice, making sure that he provides for your every need so that you may fulfill your purpose in life as a child of God. God is willing to feed you whenever you are hungry; and, He's willing to give you something to drink when you are thirsty because he believes this is the divine right of all His children.

There will be moments in our lives when we witness injustice against people who are homeless, who have no food to eat, no shelter to keep warm and have no friend to comfort them. Since we are children of God, we ought to do what God has done for us. It is our responsibility as children of God to seek justice for those who may not be able to seek it for themselves. We must welcome friends both far and near, friends who need comfort, food, and drink without judgment, just as God would do for us. Go out into your streets and help the helpless!

Reflection: Have there been times when someone showed you God's love and met your needs? How can you step up your efforts to share God's love with others?

Prayer: God, thank you for making sure that my needs are met. Please use me as an instrument of your divine justice. Please open my eyes to the needs of others and equip me to show your love by tending to needs for sustenance and love. Amen!

Eunice Achiaa, 2013 Summer Intern, National Baptist Memorial Church

DID YOU KNOW...?

The United States incarcerates 753 per 100,000; comparable European figures include 153 for England, 96 for France, 92 for Italy, 66 for Denmark and 90 for Germany. The high figures in the U.S. are caused by imposing punishment rather than rehabilitation. Over the past forty years the number of incarcerated people has increased 350 percent while population only increased 33 percent.

The federal prison industry produces 100% of all military helmets, ammunition belts, bullet-proof vests, ID tags, shirts, pants, tents, bags, and canteens. Along with war supplies, prison workers supply 98% of the entire market for equipment assembly services; 93% of paints and paintbrushes; 92% of stove assembly; 46% of body armor; 36% of home appliances; 30% of headphones/microphones/speakers; and 21% of office furniture. Airplane parts, medical supplies, and much more: prisoners are even raising seeing-eye dogs for blind people.

Who is investing? At least 37 states have legalized the contracting of prison labor by private corporations that mount their operations inside state prisons. The list of such companies contains the cream of U.S. corporate society: IBM, Boeing, Motorola, Microsoft, AT&T, Wireless, Texas Instrument, Dell, Compaq, Honeywell, Hewlett-Packard, Nortel, Lucent Technologies, 3Com, Intel, Northern Telecom, TWA, Nordstrom's, Revlon, Macy's, Pierre Cardin, Target Stores, and many more.

Sources:

Huffington Post, U.S. Incarceration Rate Is A National Disgrace, February 13, 2012.

Pelaez, Vicky. Global Research: The Prison Industry in the United States: Big Business or a New Form of Slavery, December 08, 2013.

JOURNAL ENTRY

“To love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person and face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely. And you are, dear brothers and sisters, in the face of Jesus.” –Pope Francis

Address during Visit at the Homeless Shelter “Dona Di Maria,” May 21, 2013

HERE AM I LORD; PLEASE--SEND SOMEONE ELSE!

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. To preach the acceptable year of the lord.

Luke 4:18-19, KJV

These words from Jesus, our Lord and Savior, are our example to follow and emulate. In Luke 4: 18-19, Jesus acknowledges in front of all in the synagogue that He is anointed by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit to minister to the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed.

Too often when we see need or lack in our communities, we pray, “Lord, someone needs to set up a shelter for the destitute the homeless and the hungry sleeping on the street because it’s very cold this winter, please send the Pastor. Lord, someone needs to visit the prisoners in the jails, please send the deacons. Lord, there are blind and sick folks at home and in the hospitals, please send the associate ministers. Lord, someone needs to tell people that Jesus loves and accepts them. Please send the Pastor, Associate Ministers, the Deacons even my neighbor next door to tell them.”

Instead, our prayer should be, “Lord, here am I. Save and accept me, anoint me, give me means and holy boldness. Send me.” Not only do we have Jesus’ example to follow, but He left us the Holy Spirit to help us fulfill our calling.

Reflection: What are you asking God for to help prepare you to be obedient to God’s call to preach the gospel?

Vivinee’, “Reverend Mother,” Garner-Jones

A LESSON ON LOVE

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren[a] only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors[b] do so?

Mathew 5:46-47

In Mathew chapter 5, the Bible teaches us that we should love people no matter what. We should love with no limits.

The Bible poses the question, “if you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” We should show unconditional love towards others for John 3:16 tells us that “for God so LOVED the world that he GAVE his one and only son.” God’s unconditional love caused him to give without receiving, without any boundaries or limitations. And His love is unchanging.

Sometimes the best way to show unconditional love is not based on a feeling, but by taking action no matter how you feel. A feeling is something we get from someone. Often when we stop getting it, we change our way of thinking and our actions. The reward in showing unconditional love is that your feelings actions remain constant and never change based on another’s feelings. You are the same all the time—in any situation. If you are wronged by someone, love them regardless.

Reflection: Have there been times when you were more focused on getting something from others over showing them the unconditional love of God?

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of Christ who is the ultimate example of how much you love us unconditionally—no matter what we say or do. Please teach us how to love the way Jesus loves. Show us how to be obedient to your word, which calls us to love others no matter how they act toward us. In Jesus Christ’s name we pray. Amen!

Victor Brice, Praise Team Leader, National Baptist Memorial Church

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound...

Isaiah 61:1-3 (ESV)

Lent, the time we reflect on our sin, is understandably unpopular! We prefer to blame the woes of the world on things like poor education, government failure, limited resources, or systemic injustice. We want anything to be at fault except our own sin.

Unlike us, the Bible is unflinchingly honest about sin. In Isaiah 59 we learn that, because of our sinful rebellion against God, we are alienated from Him (59:1-2), the world is broken (59:5-8), and we cannot save ourselves (59:9-13).

However, there is good news! In Isaiah 61:1-11 we hear of an Anointed One who inaugurates the “year of the Lord’s favor,” (61:2) the ultimate Jubilee, meaning forgiveness of sin (61:7), perfect justice (61:8), racial reconciliation (61:5), and the formation of a righteous people who take part in the renewal of the world (61:4,6,10-11).

How does this Anointed One accomplish this? By taking our place. He gives us beauty for our ashes, joy for our mourning, and praise for our despair (61:3). It’s no wonder the Jews were baffled when Jesus began his ministry by reading Isaiah 61, then proclaiming, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4). It only began to make sense at Golgotha, when Jesus, the Anointed One, took our place on the Cross.

Reflection: Jesus, the Anointed One of Isaiah 61, came to take our place, blessing us and removing the shame of our sin by taking it on Himself. How does this inspire us to seek justice and renewal in the lives of others?

Prayer: Lord, we praise you and thank you for taking our place. We ask that Your Spirit may inspire us to act in ways that work towards justice, renewal, and the righteousness of mercy. Amen.

Rev. Thomas R. Hinson III, Rector, Church of the Advent , Washington, D.C.

LEAVE SOME BEHIND

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

Deuteronomy 24:19 (NRSV)

Moses included this rule in the long list of laws that he gave to the children of Israel as they stood on the verge of entering the Promised Land. It remains relevant to us today.

God still commands us to take care of those in need. Leave something, God says, for those who are marginalized and disadvantaged. God does not want us to forget what it means to be in community with others and in covenant relationship with Him. God wants us to care about the destitute.

Prayer: Dear God, Forgive me for what I haven't done for the least of these, and remind me during this Lenten season of who You are and what You have done for me. Help me to respond by offering some of what You have blessed me with to those who are without. Use me to make a difference in someone's life today. In Jesus' name, Amen

Min. Yvonne Shinhoster Lamb, Dayspring Community Church, Lanham, MD
2013 Revival Preacher, National Baptist Memorial Church

GOD WILL LOOK AFTER YOU

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Isaiah 58: 9b-12 (NIV)

We have a saying in our society that is used quite regularly as we part company with one another, you may know it, "Look after yourself." I have often thought that this was a bit of an odd thing to say to a friend or loved one. On the one hand it could mean that we hope that they do take care of themselves, so that at some stage in the future we can meet again in happy circumstances. But, it could also be taken to mean look after "you" because no-one else will.

In chapter 58 of Isaiah, the people are confronted about their shallow faith. They were going to the temple, fasting and listening to Scripture. However, they missed the point of living a life for God. They participated in religious ritual, but did not look after those who needed help.

When we don't say "Look after yourself," but instead take the time to care for each other, then we honor God. We become the vehicle God uses to take care of those in need. Feeding the hungry and seeking justice for the oppressed allows our light to shine in the darkness of despair.

Prayer: Lord, may I live in the grace that you give me. May I give in response to that grace; love with the love you give; and, be blessed by the one who came to give me life and love beyond my understanding.

Min. Charmaine Young, Member, National Baptist Memorial Church