



Imagine
TOGETHER

Fall 2024 Devotional Booklet

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A Devotional Booklet filled with Hope and Possibility

Introduction

Fall is when we come back together. Many of us find that our rhythms and schedules fall into more regular and predictable patterns. Whether we realize it or not, it is also a time when we again get to choose the world and the life we create. We don't just have to fall into patterns, but we can choose how we use our lives to make a difference.

This fall we are invited to "Imagine Together" what the world could be like when we choose to live from values that are good for us and for the world.

This devotional is intended to be a companion on that journey. In it are readings and reflections, stories and poems that are intended to invite you to remember, to imagine, and to wonder.

What you will find is seven different themes, each with a few reflections to read and questions to consider. It might be that you spend the next seven weeks exploring one theme each week. Or you might do something different. After all, there is no one right way to work your way through the devotional. You can start at the beginning...or at the end...or surprise yourself and start somewhere in between. You can read occasionally or set up a regular pattern of reading. You can spend a few minutes or a few days with one reflection and the questions that accompany it.

You can do this on your own or you might find it helpful to share conversation with others. "Imagine **Together**" is the title after all. So, you might read and discuss with family or friends or join a table group where conversation around the table will touch on some of these themes.

However you use it, we look forward to Imagining Together a world that reflects God's heart.

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A Sense of Wonder

Wondering Together by Jill Cameron Michel

The children gather in a circle. In the middle of the circle are simple wooden figures. Slowly a storyteller begins to tell a Bible story. As they do that, the figures are presented, placed, and moved.

There is time and there is space to hear the story. No one has to be in a hurry. As if by magic, children who are usually talkative or antsy are drawn into silence and stillness.

They receive the story.

But it doesn't end there.

As the story concludes, the children are invited to wonder.

I wonder why this happened...

I wonder who else was present...

I wonder how that person felt...

I wonder what that would be like...

I wonder where God is...

Answers are not required. They sit with the wondering.

- I wonder how your faith would have been different if you had been invited to wonder as a child...
- I wonder if you allow yourself to wonder now...
- I wonder what you wonder about...
- Imagine a world where wonder is invited.

Strawberry Sorbet by Kara Seaton

There is a picture of my youngest child, at 8 months old, and a waffle cone with a giant scoop of strawberry sorbet on top. She's sitting on the table in an ice cream shop with her lips puckered into an "O" and her eyes wide with wonder.

Wonder is a word that can be defined as the curiosity to know something. Wonder has another definition as well: a feeling of surprise or amazement – the 'wows' we encounter.

My daughter was just a baby in that picture and I imagine she saw that sorbet cone with such wonder – possibly because she had not seen anything like it before. I remember her face continued in this look of amazement after her lips touched the sorbet, a likely ongoing response to the icy cold and the stunning sweetness.

This is a season of sabbath for our faith community - both for Pastor Jill, and for the congregation. The practice of slowing down goes hand in hand with sabbath. I find part of the beauty of slowing down is that we are far more likely to notice our surroundings. And when we notice, we not only see, but we hear and smell and feel and experience the world around us differently.

So I invite you to slow down, be it for a moment, an hour, or a whole day. Take the time to breathe – and to notice. Notice the beauty and the mystery and the 'wows' of the world around us. From the simple and common, to the unusual and extravagant. Allow yourself to experience wonder.

- I wonder what simple things 'wows' you...
- Imagine how your life might be different, if you took just one moment each day, to notice, to be amazed and to experience wonder.

The Majesty of Creation by Kent Clark

For me, our national parks are more than a place for recreation—they are sacred spaces that protect some of the most majestic parts of God’s creation.

When I was 13, I went on a two-week trip camping in the Great Smoky Mountains. It was a pivotal time in my life and dramatically influenced my conceptions of God. As a suburban kid, most of my environment was human built. It seemed everything started and ended with a parking lot—and even trees and landscapes were somewhat artificial and human-made. Even when I got out of my hometown, it was ordinarily by road trip. The shape and texture of the land were smoothed into interstate pavement.

At that age, people lay down patterns about how they relate the abstract and spiritual nature of their faith to their everyday experience, and I was no different. Like most kids, it was hard to relate to stories from the Bible—they seemed so long ago and from a world not recognizable to my own.

But when I got out into the park and walked up the long twisting pathways to the tops of some of the peaks, I started to see past the limitations of my own imagination. It occurred to me that we were traveling—not at highway speeds but at the same pace that Jesus might have walked the hills of Galilee. As I got out of the built world and closer to creation, my biggest barriers to faith were falling away.

The views from the mountain tops were as stunning as you would imagine. How can you not experience a sense of wonder when you look at the majesty of the world we occupy. But the most wonder-full part of this experience was young me connecting the dots about the timeless relevance of God’s message of love—uncluttered by the noise of my everyday life.

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- I wonder if travel experiences have changed your perspective in positive ways...
- I wonder if modern distractions like social media make it harder to be contemplative...
- Imagine a world where we have time and space to think about deep subjects.

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Enough at Every Table

Enough at Every Table by Pam Ries

My husband and I both grew up in churches where no one took communion until they had been baptized. People made their own decision about when they were baptized. When we were thinking about joining the Christian Church, we were informed that everyone was welcome at the table, even the children. I struggled with that change to my theology, my traditions.

In a conversation with the minister, I expressed my concern about communion. She asked me, “Do you have any other meals where you exclude the children?” Wow! That was a defining moment. I would never exclude my children from a meal. Nor would I exclude anyone else. We always invite others to join us for a meal. Especially at the holidays, I have always felt no one should be alone. We always have more than enough food. We invite others to join us for the meal and fellowship. I began to think about communion in a different way. Communion is a meal to be shared.

The Last Supper was an actual meal, it was part of the Passover tradition. According to Jeremy Myers, it was a celebratory meal of believers where they gathered to enjoy a meal, laugh, tell stories, and build relationships. There was also a formal time when someone would remind the group of the symbolism of the bread and wine as we see in Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 (<https://tinyurl.com/4zpprd38>).

That sounds like a perfect time to include everyone. There is enough at the table for everybody.

- I wonder why communion is rarely a meal in today’s churches...
- I wonder how we can better meet the needs of those who are food insecure...
- Imagine what it would look like if there was enough at every table and no one went hungry.

Hospitality in an African Forest from Sharon Watkins' book *Whole: A Call to Unity in Our Fragmented World*

“Dense African forest pressed into the nearly impassable road. The drivers maneuvered carefully. Even so, the van and pick-up seemed to bump and slide forward, rather than actually roll along the muddy ruts. We Americans were grateful that our Congolese hosts had been this way before.

“Round the bend, the ‘nearly impassable’ route became totally blocked. A large tree had fallen, stretching from one side to the other.

“We all piled out of the vehicles and stood there...scratching our heads.

“A rustle in the brush alerted me to a group of village children gathering - curious, as children will be. Their moms were with them. The women carried parcels wrapped in brightly patterned cloths. In a moment, some men followed, with machetes and knives in hand. Four other men were hauling a door, a big wooden door.

“The men with the tools went straight to the tree and got to work, cutting and tugging. The others placed that door on the forest floor, and the door became a table. The women began unwrapping their bundles to reveal peanuts and bananas and Orange Fanta! (Where did they get the Fanta?)

“They spread that feast and invited us to partake” (Sharon Watkins, *Whole*, St Louis: Chalice Press, 2014).

- I wonder if you have experienced a surprising offer of hospitality...
- I wonder what you have to share...
- Imagine a world where hungry people are greeted with tables of generosity.

The Greatest Table

excerpts from Michael J. Rosen's, *The Greatest Table*

The greatest table isn't set
inside a single home
oh no, it spans the continents,
and no one eats alone.

The table in your dining room,
a picnic bench, a tray,
a beach blanket, breakfast in bed,
a small sidewalk café,

the midway at a county fair,
a shelter amid a storm,
a roadside tent, a campfire site
where families share the warmth –

each one is just another leaf
in one uncommon table,
where all the guests have cooked or baked
or brought what they are able,

where all of us can help ourselves,
and all of us are fed,
and no one has been turned away
with only rice or bread.

The greatest table, like a tree,
is growing leaf by leaf,
and broadening its canopy
to welcome more beneath.

- I wonder what tables came to your mind as you read this poem...
- I wonder when you have set a table for others...
- Imagine a world where there is enough at every table.

Grandmother's Table by Kent Clark

My grandmother was a remarkable woman of faith, and one of my biggest influences in life. I remember so many wonderful times with her and my grandfather—but I have to admit: sometimes, meal times were a bit odd. She would often prepare somewhat odd combinations of foods. Some were actually really tasty, if uncommon, like peanut butter on French toast. Others were a bit less tasty, like anchovies in the mashed potatoes.

I was a bit older when I realized that her habit of pulling different things together was actually a holdover of her childhood during the great depression. Her family was particularly hard hit, and that experience in early life affected her profoundly. Even years later, and when financially stable, she was inventive about using whatever she had on hand. The idea of going to the store to buy a missing ingredient never crossed her mind.

While I can't say I relished all of her creations, her experience gave her a fundamentally different relationship with food than many of us have. My grandmother always had something to offer guests or family and would always pull something together. I realize now that the food itself wasn't the thing—it was the offering of food.

- I wonder if you had family members who lived through the depression... I wonder how it affected them...
- I wonder if those who have enough to eat were more mindful of our abundance, how it would change the way we cook, and the way we eat...
- I wonder if the excesses of our food system (like fresh berries in winter flown in from other countries) reduces our appreciation for our food...
- Imagine a world where everyone has enough to eat, and we value the meaning of our meals rather than just the quantity.

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Communities of Belonging

Let Your Faith Work Through Love by Martha Melton

Love is the natural response of those who have committed themselves to Christ. As I contemplate faith working through love, my mind returns to the small church where I became a Christian. It was located in rural Southern Illinois in a village of fewer than a thousand people. As the saying goes, “everyone knew everyone else,” and for the most part we were all friends. My non-Christian family was never criticized, and I had a “support group” before that concept was popular.

I was encouraged to attend all of the church activities. When food was to be served, two of the older ladies in the church who were friends of my family told me, “Your mother doesn’t need to send food. We’re bringing extra food.” They also communicated that to my mother. Our high school Sunday School teacher/youth leader attended many of our school activities, i.e., ball games, plays, musicals, etc. and applauded our efforts. Every summer he arranged transportation for us to attend at least one St. Louis Cardinals baseball game. He also encouraged us to attend congregational meetings because “you are important members of this congregation.” As I grew older, I was an assistant Sunday School teacher for young children and participated in music activities. In every way, I was a part of the community. I belonged.

These Christians in this small rural village understood the concept of faith working through love, although most of them would have said, “I’m not doing anything important.” The result of that demonstration of love was that many of the young people who were a part of that church in the 1950’s remained active Christians throughout their lives. When faith expresses itself through love daily, the impact is monumental.

- I wonder what new or different activities we could do at FCC to help people feel they belong...
- Imagine a world where everyone felt they belonged and where everyone was supported.

Do We Belong Here? by Jill Cameron Michel

It was August 4, 2012. One of the beautiful things that had come in the wake of the previous year's tornado in Joplin, MO was that many faith leaders who did not previously know each other well had gotten connected. An interfaith group was formed, and we were getting to know each other.

On the evening of August 4, the imam at the local mosque had invited some Christian and Jewish clergy to join their congregation for their time of prayer and the iftar dinner that would break their daily fast during the holy month of Ramadan. Here, in the midst of their holy days, they had invited us to the table.

And we went.

We joined them for prayer, removing our shoes and sitting on our knees. We joined them at the table, delighting in each morsel of food from the international buffet that was created potluck style by the members of that community who were so diverse.

For most, if not all of us, it was the first time we had been in that building, worshiped with that community, learned intimately rather than generally about their faith and about these, our neighbors. We entered with a bit of anxiety, not sure we knew what to expect or how to behave, hopeful our presence wouldn't feel like an intrusion. We left full, relaxed, and with new friends.

On August 6, less than 36 hours after we left there, the mosque was set on fire in an act of arson. This was an act against our friends. This was an opportunity for us to welcome them. We served them their iftar dinner the following weekend at the Episcopal church.

- I wonder when you have been invited into an unexpected community...
- I wonder what can grow when we build relationships with people who are not like us...
- Imagine a world where everyone belongs everywhere.

Community at Camp by Cameron Michel

Church camp has always been a place where I feel that everyone, no matter where they come from, what they look like, or what they believe, can come together in one community. It's a home away from home for many, where you can reconnect with old friends and at the same time create new relationships.

In hindsight, it's these relationships that are established at camp sometimes don't make sense outside of camp. In school environments these same people wouldn't be seen with each other because they would find themselves in different groups. But at camp it's different.

This past year, multiple people at our high school camp described it to me as a family or friend group that they've never had. And what's amazing is that camp doesn't even last for a week. These relationships get established very quickly. And they often don't make sense to someone who's never experienced it.

I feel as if campers are able to express their true selves whether that be through the activities that they participate in, gifts they are willing to share in times such as worship or sharing personal stories and experiences that they haven't told to anyone outside of the camp's grounds. It's this willingness of expression and vulnerability that I believe helps create a community of belonging that is rare anywhere else.

- I wonder how the world would be different if we approached each other with a willingness to be vulnerable...
- I wonder where you have experienced fast friendships that made a difference in your life...
- Imagine a world where people weren't divided by demographics or interests, but where everyone was valued.



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Living From Our Values

Freedom to Love and Serve by Martha Melton

As Christians, we have a freedom that cannot be surpassed. To exercise this freedom, however, we must be motivated by love. The Apostle Paul says, “The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:14, NIV)

During the civil rights movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s, there was a migration of middle-class white populations out of cities into the suburbs as the areas became more racially or ethnoculturally diverse. This became known as “white flight.” White churches closed their doors and moved to the suburbs.

I once met a minister who chose to stay and work in the ghettos of St. Louis during the days of this “white flight”. As he overcame his inhibitions and accepted the hospitality of the people, they took him into their hearts and dubbed him, “Father Paul”. One night he was caught in the crossfire of a street fight. In his semiconscious state, he could hear the murmur of voices: “It’s Father Paul. He’s been shot. Get help.” Without thought of risk to themselves, his friends came to his rescue, and their immediate response saved his life.

Father Paul had exercised his freedom to love and serve in a setting shunned by many white, middle-class Christians. He lived his life in accordance with his values even at a great personal risk. His love evoked an unselfish love in return. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13, NIV).

- I wonder how many of us would have been a part of the “white flight” ...
- Imagine a world that values diversity. How would it look different from today’s world? What can we do to work toward this goal?

The Sweet Spot by Kara Seaton

“A value is a way of being or believing that we hold most important. Living into our values means that we do more than profess our values, we practice them.” – Dr. Brené Brown

Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, specializes in the study of courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. Her research reveals that each person has one or two core values, and everything else we consider important stems from these foundational principles. She suggests that aligning our daily practices with our core values is the “sweet spot” to live our lives – a place where we feel balanced and fulfilled.

When we dedicate our time and energy to what we truly value, we feel content, our souls are fed, and we often find deeper meaning in our lives. On the other hand, when we choose or are forced to invest in areas that are mismatched with our core values, we are left feeling unsettled, stressed, and dissatisfied.

This fall, our church is experiencing a season of sabbath—an intentional time for rest, connection, reflection, and renewal. This season offers the opportunity to identify or reexamine our core values. Then, with courage, we can work to align our actions with our values. Instead of focusing on how we can do less or more, let’s ask how we can do more of what we genuinely value.

- I wonder how you feel about the balance of values and actions in your life...
- I wonder how your faith has influenced your core values...
- I wonder how we can support each other in finding the “sweet spot” where values and practices align...
- Imagine a world where each person had meaningful work that aligned with their values and provided the support needed to care for themselves and their families.

For more on this topic including a list of core values, visit:
brenebrown.com/resources/living-into-our-values/

Overcoming Our Inadequacies by Martha Melton

John was a young man who had a severe stuttering problem. His one desire was to become a minister of the gospel. “You will never be able to be a minister,” his father told him. “Your stuttering problem is too great.” John would not give up. He prayed, sought professional help and learned compensatory techniques. Always positive in his attitude, he also began studying for the ministry. The churches he served during the early days of his ministry were compassionate and helpful. When I met him many years later, he was a successful minister and an articulate speaker. He continued to struggle inwardly with the problem, but it was not apparent to his audience.

Moses was “slow of speech and tongue,” and he felt inadequate for the task even though God promised to be with him (Exodus 4:10-13). We, too, often feel inadequate for a task we must perform or a commitment we have made. As the old saying goes, “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Several years ago, I read a book titled “Here I Am – Send Aaron” by Jill Briscoe referring to Moses’ hesitancy in the book of Exodus. As Christians, when we face difficult challenges, we can focus on our weaknesses and say, “send someone else” or we can do as the young man, John, and strive to overcome our inadequacies and trust God to help us accomplish our goal. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

- I wonder if you have ever felt inadequate for a task that needed to be performed...
- I wonder what you did when that happened...
- Imagine if we all had the faith and tenacity of John. Imagine how we might be more successful in accomplishing difficult tasks?



A Sense of Priorities

A Safe Haven by Martha Melton

Many years ago during the summer, states along the Mississippi River experienced a great flood. In our community, just as many businesses reopened and people moved back into their homes, there came another torrential rain and the dam across the river could not hold back the water. It was heart wrenching to witness people losing their possessions a second time.

When school opened that fall, we on the professional staff listened as students talked about living in motels, with relatives or in temporary housing and the loss of their treasures. Tears came quickly and hugs were frequent. The children desperately needed to feel they were in a safe, stable environment. This catastrophe accentuated the transitory nature of worldly goods and the importance of faith, prayer, love, friendship, compassion and caring. It made us acutely aware of our dependence on God's mercies and the need to realign our priorities.

As the children of Israel were poised on the brink of the promised land after spending forty years in the wilderness, God reminded them to remember His loving kindness and not to forget Him. As Christians, we, too, need to be reminded to pause our busy, complicated lives periodically and remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

- I wonder if you remember a difficult time in your life when you felt the only safe haven was God...
- I wonder who was helpful to you then...
- I wonder if you have ever had to realign your priorities...
- Imagine a world where our priorities were aligned with God's plan for us.

God's Sustaining Power by Martha Melton

Ann observed her seventy-ninth birthday quietly as she recovered from her fifteenth surgery. Early in Ann's marriage when she was pregnant with her daughter, her husband became disabled. Ann worked long hours to support her family, cared for her husband and raised their child. After more than thirty years of marriage, Ann was widowed. At age seventy-nine, her health was failing.

Many would say that Ann had a hard life. Yet, she often said, "I have had a good life" and "God has been so good to me." Her philosophy was summed up in this way, "I don't view adversity as many people do. I don't think the Lord takes away hardships. I think He gives you courage and strength to endure them." Although Ann struggled with pain daily, she was in church every Sunday. Following the church service, you could hear her laugh ring out as she visited with her Christian friends. As you observed Ann, it was easy to recognize that her life was characterized by an intimate relationship with her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Ann had been a lifelong member of a denomination that practiced sprinkling as baptism. Although aware of immersion, she had never seen anyone immersed until she attended the Christian Church. She asked questions of the minister, her Sunday School teacher and friends. The minister told her about the history of baptism, and she decided to be baptized "in the way my Lord was baptized." I was at the foot of the baptistry as she came out of the water. With a glow on her face, she quietly said, "Inwardly I am rejoicing." It was characteristic of the life she had lived.

Ann's life serves as a good example for us. Even though she faced many hardships, she kept her priorities in order. She knew what was most important in life. We may face hardships, but God has promised to support and sustain us during those trying times.

- I wonder how our world would be different if we all lived with the sense of priorities that characterized Ann's life...
- Imagine how many lives we could influence by consciously nurturing those priorities.

Run the Race of Life Boldly by Martha Melton

The Bridge Builder

by Will Allen Dromgoole

*An old man going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening cold and gray,
To a chasm vast and deep and wide.
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim,
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.
“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting your strength with building here.
Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again will pass this way;
You’ve crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build this bridge at evening tide?”
The builder lifted his old gray head;
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said
“There followed after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been as naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!”*

In the twelfth chapter of Hebrews, the writer paints a picture of people who are weary. They have faced trials and persecutions, and they are feeling “battle fatigue”. The admonition to these battle-weary Christians is “Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.” (Hebrews 12:12-13)

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In other words, we are not only in this race of life for ourselves, but we have a responsibility to those following in our footsteps. In the poem, “The Bridge Builder” by Will Allen Dromgoole, the old man crosses the vast, deep chasm safely at eventide, then builds a bridge over it. When a fellow traveler reminds him that he will never again cross this chasm and asks why he is building a bridge, he replies that coming after him that same day is a youth who must also cross the chasm. Though it was “naught” for the man, it may be a pitfall for the fair-haired youth. “He, too, must cross in the twilight dim. Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”

We must be steadfast in this race of life and keep our eyes on Jesus until we cross the finish line. A part of that steadfastness is having a sense of priorities that include concern for our fellow travelers. Through God’s grace, we will receive the crown of life and those following in our footsteps will find a level path.

- I wonder if we realize the impact we have on the lives of young people as they observe us...
- I wonder what some ways are we can improve on this...
- Imagine if all of us made a conscious effort to set a good example for the young people in our lives.

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Generosity Made Real

Who Needs It More Than We Do?

by Jill Cameron Michel

It was a small country church...a white steeple amidst rolling hills. Just seeing it took you back in time. It was one of those places where the doors weren't locked. In fact, more than once there was a note in the bathroom that read something like, "Thank you for letting me use your facilities."

There wasn't a lot of structure and red tape in a place like this. The pianist chose the hymns, from the abbreviated list of the ones she could play. There was Sunday School with one of the teachers picking up the curriculum at a Christian bookstore in the nearest city. There were potlucks, and you wanted to be in attendance on those days. There was a board, and they met quarterly after worship.

It was on one of those board meeting Sundays when the members of the board had gathered at the table. There wasn't much business, but they tended to what was on the agenda. When it was time for the Treasurer's report, she said, "We have money in the bank and it isn't doing anyone any good there. Who needs it more than we do?"

And without skipping a beat, without hesitation the rest of the members simply started brainstorming. Soon it was decided, and a check was cut to help a neighbor from the community pay for his chemo treatments. They had more than enough and they needed to share.

- I wonder how you define "enough"...
- I wonder how willing you are to share.
- Imagine a world where everyone shared that easily.

Through the Eyes of a Child by Jill Cameron Michel

His name was Loyal. And as a child, I was in awe of him. You see, each year our church participated in the CROP Walk raising money for hunger. Back then, the walk was 10 miles long. Not everyone walked the entire distance - you simply walked as much as you could.

To raise money we took pledges with people indicating they would donate a certain amount per mile. Then, after the walk, you went back to those who had pledged, told them how far you made it, and collected their donation. In those days most people pledged 10 or 25 cents per mile.

But Loyal...Loyal pledged \$1 per mile. \$1! For every mile! And he didn't only do this for me, but he did this for every child in the church who participated. I was in awe. And it wasn't just because I thought he was rich (although, I'm pretty sure I thought he was rich). But I remember being aware that he was giving that much money for something that didn't have a direct impact on him. He didn't get anything in return. This wasn't money spent on a cool new gadget or a nice suit. This was simply a gift to feed hungry people and encourage children who were learning to do for others.

As I grew up and learned to be generous, Loyal has never been far from my mind.

- I wonder who modeled generosity for you...
- I wonder how you model generosity for others...
- Imagine a world where every child is inspired by generosity.

My Most Generous Gift by Martha Melton

Sally came into my second-grade class on the first day of school as a new student in our district. She was obviously from a very poor family and extremely shy. She stood apart from the other students. As the weeks progressed, she seldom spoke and did not interact with the other children. I spoke with her gently and kindly and felt I was making some progress, but she never interacted with the other children or spoke in class. Her parents never responded to requests to come in for a conference.

Then the week after winter break some of the children brought in their Christmas gifts to show the class. One little girl brought an especially nice doll, and as class was dismissed for the day, it was missing. The next morning Sally came in early with her father, and he was irate. She had taken the doll. He told me she had been “whipped” and otherwise “punished”, and he wanted her punished at school. He was “not going to have a thief” in his house. I finally quietly told him I would take care of it, and he needed to leave as the other children would be coming in soon. After he left, I visited quietly with Sally and assured her she was not going to be punished. We omitted the “Thou Shalt not Steal” lecture and talked instead about my understanding why she took the doll, but that in doing so she made the other girl very sad. And that it was never fair or kind to make someone sad by taking something s/he owned because you wanted it. We agreed I would return the doll and no one else needed to know about it.

From that time on, I had a different relationship with Sally, and with some encouragement the other students began to ask her to join their activities. She never made close friends and remained reticent in many instances, but she began participating in class activities, and, on occasion, I could hear her laughing with the other children. She became much more responsive.

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On the last day of school, she came in very proud and excited and brought me a gift. It was a lovely amber glass candy dish with a noticeable flaw on one side. There was a thrift shop in town that bought and sold used items, and I surmised it came from there. Even so, I wondered how her mother afforded it. After having had a few other encounters with her father, I was confident that he did not know about the gift. As she handed it to me, she said, “Momma said I should thank you for being a good teacher.” With tears in my eyes, I accepted the gift. Over fifty years later, this gift is still displayed in my home.

This is the most generous gift I have ever received, because it came from poverty, hardship, and possibly personal risk from a woman I never met in appreciation for my caring about the child she loved. Generosity is not measured by dollars or the monetary value of a gift. It is measured by the heart of the giver.

- I wonder if you remember receiving a gift that was very special and generous but was worth little or nothing monetarily...
- Imagine a world where generosity of time, talents, and money were commonplace because the hearts of the people were in tune with God.

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Imagine
TOGETHER

A Sense of Awe

Amazing Grace by Martha Melton

“John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had once labored to destroy.” Thus reads the epitaph of the writer of one of our most loved hymns, “Amazing Grace.”

Newton’s early life was one of sin, slave trading, and unbelief. Then in the midst of a storm, as he traveled from Africa to England with a shipload of slaves, he heard himself saying, “Lord, have mercy on us!” Why, he pondered, would he call on a God in whom he did not believe? This was the beginning of his journey to a faith that led him into a life of Christian service.

Peter tells us that silver and gold cannot redeem us from our empty way of life. (I Peter 1:18-19) John Newton came to realize this and accepted the amazing grace that fills our empty lives to overflowing. He expressed it this way in those memorable words of the hymn, “Amazing Grace.”

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see. (Verse 1)

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home. (Verse 3)

May we, like John Newton, accept that amazing grace that sets us free.

- I wonder if you sometimes feel a sense of awe at the amazing grace God bestows upon us...
- I wonder what stands out to you in John Newton’s story...
- Imagine what John Newton must have felt as he heard himself saying, “Lord, have mercy on us.”

The Dayspring from on High by Martha Melton

At the circumcision of John the Baptist, after months of silence, Zechariah broke forth into a song of praise. And why wouldn't he? The Old Testament prophecies regarding the long-awaited Messiah were about to be fulfilled, and his son would play a vital role.

In Zechariah's song, recorded in Luke 1:67-79, he spoke of the coming Messiah as the rising sun or as the New King Version translates it "the Dayspring from on high." In John 8:12, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." Light is such a beautiful word. It dispels darkness, makes vision possible, reminds one of radiance, illumination and brightness. Christ shines forth in this way in the life of the Christian. A consecrated life is beautiful.

It is interesting to speculate how our world would be changed if every Christian let Christ's light shine forth to dispel the many problems that pervade our society today. Would it be possible that the need for marches, legislation, and social organizations would dissipate and be replaced by a caring, compassionate community?

Zechariah sang a song of praise because he knew that of all God's provisions for humankind, this Dayspring from on high was the greatest gift of all. Paul tells us in Colossians 1:15 that "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." May we let Him guide us as we strive to bring His light into the world.

- I wonder if you can think of ways Christ's light shines in you...
- Imagine if every Christian let Christ's light in our daily lives.

“Bring More of What I Dream”

by Ted Loder from the book, *Guerrillas of Grace*

O God,
who out of nothing
 brought everything that is.
out of what I am
 bring more of what I dream
 but haven't dared;
direct my power and passion
 to creating life
 where there is death,
 to putting flesh of action
 on bare-boned intentions,
 to lighting fires
 against the midnight of indifference,
 to throwing bridge of care
 across canyons of loneliness;
so I can look on creation,
 together with you,
 and, behold,
 call it very good.

- I wonder what line in this poem particularly speaks to you...
- I wonder how you might dare to do something more than you have ever imagined.
- Imagine if we lived with a sense of awe and connection.

