



### **Prayer for Understanding**

Gracious God, as we prepare to hear your Word, open our hearts to understand its message of selflessness and compassion. May we listen with attentive ears and receptive spirits, gaining insight and guidance for our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### **SCRIPTURE PASSAGES**

**Responsive Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-15**

**Isaiah 1: 10-17; Luke 4: 1-13; Matthew 16: 24-25**

### **SERMON**

### **Living Abundantly: Beyond Self-Centeredness**

What do we need to have to live life well, satisfyingly, and securely? What are life's essentials?

In today's gospel reading, Jesus eats nothing for forty days. He is tempted by the devil over three important aspects of life: self-reliance, satisfaction or happiness, and the need for protection and security. First of all, self-reliance is an important value in the culture of capitalism and individualism in which we live. It is the ability to do things and make decisions by ourselves using our resources and power without the need for help from others. Jesus was hungry for forty days. It was his conscious choice to be alone, ask himself questions, and ask God questions. Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice aimed at helping us to focus on a particular spiritual goal. However, lacking food and being hungry, Jesus is tempted by the devil to use his divine abilities to create food. Bread signifies self-reliance, independence and abundance. We all want to be self-reliant and have the means to possess as much as possible because we don't want to feel insecure.

The problem is that self-reliance has become an idol in our materialistic society. We can never have enough. Our desire is never gratified because we are imperfect and desire-centered beings who are always seeking more and more. There is no limit to our desire to meet our needs. So unless we find a way to discover self-reliance differently, we will eventually focus our lives on ourselves and our own needs and fail to consider the needs of others. Paying attention to our own desires first turns us into competitors. We rarely feel any measure of genuine spiritual abundance. We also forget or resist that we depend on others as much as others depend on us.

The second important life needs is the freedom and the power to find satisfaction or happiness. The devil takes Jesus to a high place from where he can see all the kingdoms of the world in all their glory. What an attractive world if only we had the power and freedom to use it for our own ends! There is so much to take in and enjoy. Yet, as self-absorbed beings, we could never have enough. The other dilemma here is that whatever we take, we take from this earth and from all other forms of life, both human and non-human. The bounty is not endless. Indulging our perpetually unsatisfied desire has repercussions. There is a cost we don't always want to have to think about. We want to set ourselves apart from the needs of others because we are afraid of losing our wealth, happiness or power, and focusing too much on the problems of others would drain us and bring us down. Yet unlike us, Jesus denies this pleasant temptation to satisfy himself, to use his freedom and power to rule the world, and to take all its glory and sparkle for himself.

The final essential need in life is security and protection from harm. This time, Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and is tempted by Satan to throw himself down. We can all agree that protection and security are essential for our lives. Yet, if we look back over our lives, when did we ever feel we had enough protection and security? Do we ever feel we are safe and secure enough? Whether it is financial security or other kinds of security, the more expensive things we have, the greater their quantity, the more self-indulgent we become, and the more we feel we need security and protection.

Jesus denies this last temptation also. The road ahead will be difficult. It will be dangerous and risky. But he will not use his power to protect himself and secure himself from the aftermath.

Don't get me wrong. I don't reject the need for self-reliance, freedom and power, and security. Those things are necessary for the abundant life God promises. But according to the Bible, for a blessedly abundant life, we need to be converted to a whole other vision, a whole other way of seeing things and living, especially as learners and followers of Jesus. That is what Jesus teaches us today.

In another passage in Matthew, Jesus tells Peter he is not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts. And he teaches his followers then and us now that the key to finding life's essentials is the very opposite of tending to the needs of our self-centeredness. Jesus invites us to take a risk again and again in life. We have to exit our self-obsession and go into the wider world of others and their needs and the earth's needs. Yet how will we ever find self-reliance, freedom, the power to enjoy things, and our security and protection if we are called to focus first on the needs of others?

This is a spiritual truth. Ironically, we can be more independent, happier and better protected when we focus on the needs and concerns of others. A focus on the needs and concerns of others does not increase our own neediness and vulnerability. The more we open up to and engage with the needs and concerns of others, the more we are empowered to deal with our own problems. This is a spiritual law of life in the reign of God in heaven, the Source of life.

There is a mysterious achievement that comes from helping others. It is an abundance, peace, and salvation that cannot come by simply increasing our ability to satisfy our own needs. We completely miss out on this kind of gratification if we begin by focusing on ourselves above all else. We will never find satisfaction this way and will grow tired and finally lose our lives.

Relationships are a vital part of life, along with the basic necessities of food, shelter, clothing, and safety. Concentrating on myself first is a poison to developing relationships. This is why community is so important. In the community we learn how to think, feel, give and share beyond ourselves, thereby making sacrifices. At the same time, what we receive is always more astonishingly beautiful than what it costs us to give, even if we give our very life.

The death and resurrection of Jesus reveal this spiritual truth. Dying to self is a spiritual practice of letting go and becoming converted toward focusing on others in need. What we discover in

this journey beyond ourselves is that our own personal needs, identity, enjoyment, satisfaction, and salvation are fulfilled in a totally different and new way.

It is your choice and mine. It is a hard choice. It has its risks. It requires our commitment, sacrifice, and ongoing awareness of God's Word as God's will for us. We are all vulnerable, we are all interdependent, and we need one another. We are responsible for our own needs but also for the needs of others, embodying the love and compassion exemplified by Jesus.

Do we believe in the transformative power of selflessness and community? May our actions speak louder than words as we seek to live out this truth in our daily lives. Amen.

**Hymn 634                      Will you come and follow me**

**Invitation to the Offering**  
**Doxology**

**Prayer of Dedication**

Thank you, O God, for calling us. Thank you for filling our hearts with love. We pray that you bless these offerings back to you by making them a blessing to whoever will benefit from them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Prayer of Thanksgiving and for the People**

What an awe-inspiring world You have brought into being, O God! Continuously unfolding and evolving over billions of years, Your creative presence and influence remain steadfast. We thank You! And what an awe-inspiring life You have given us to experience, O God! Though it presents its challenges, we acknowledge that amidst our struggles, there are also blessings beyond measure. Even in the face of overwhelming circumstances, life's possibilities remain open, if sometimes obscured. We express gratitude, O God, for being our constant guide, leading us through life's inevitable transitions, and inviting us to wrestle with You until we discover the abundant blessings of life despite the adversities we may face. We thank You!

We thank you for the enlightening message we have received, reminding us of life's true essentials and challenging us to shift our focus from self to others. We thank you for the example of Jesus, who faced temptation and chose to prioritize the needs of others over his own desires. Help us to follow in his footsteps, embracing self-reliance tempered with humility, seeking satisfaction in serving rather than indulging our own cravings, and finding security in trusting you rather than in accumulating material wealth.

In this season of Lent, may we journey deeper into self-reflection and selflessness, learning to see and respond to the needs of those around us. We lift up to you all who are struggling with hunger, loneliness, insecurity, and fear. Grant them your comfort, provision, and peace.

We pray for our communities, our nation, and our world that they may be filled with compassion and solidarity and that justice and mercy may prevail. Bless us with the courage to step out of our comfort zones, embrace vulnerability, and extend love and grace to all whom we encounter.

In our closing moments of prayer, we turn our hearts towards our cherished friends within the Rockway and North Pelham family. We hold in tender embrace Fran Johnson, Tim Norton, Tom Keenan, Kent Reynolds, and all others who are navigating their own personal challenges. Surround them, O God, with the gentle embrace of your grace and mercy.

May your abundant blessings overflow in their lives, nurturing them with growth, enveloping them in peace, and guiding them towards healing. May they find solace in your unwavering presence and strength in their moments of weakness. In this community of love and support, may they feel upheld and cherished, knowing that they are never alone in their struggles. Grant them the courage to lean on one another and to trust in your divine plan for their lives.

We entrust them into your loving care, O God, knowing that your compassion knows no bounds. May they feel your loving embrace surrounding them today and always. We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us to love one another as he loved us. Amen.

### **Hymn 371**

### **Love divine, all loves excelling**

### **BENEDICTION**

May the eternal blessing of God, the peace of the Risen Jesus, and the fellowship we share in the Holy Spirit, be with us all this day and forevermore. Amen."

### **Sung Response- Go Now In Peace**

### **Postlude**

**We acknowledge that we meet on the traditional  
Territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe**

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**\*Worship on Sunday, February 25, at North Pelham**

**\*Two Bible studies:** Join us for Wednesday Bible study at 10:00 AM at First Church, led by Diane McMillan. Our Thursday Bible study was suspended due to Fran's illness. She is currently at Urgent Care Centers in Port Colborne.

**\*Outreach - Thursday Walking:** Join us for the Wellness Walk and Coffee Chat! We gather at 9:30 a.m. at Canada Games Park to start our walk together. After the walk, we meet at Rockway for a joyful chat over hot and fresh coffee at 10:45 am.

**\*Quilting Gathering:** Join us for our quilting session on Tuesday, from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM at North Pelham. All sewing enthusiasts are welcome to participate!

**\*Offering Update: Circulating the Plate Starting February** - We circulate the offering plate during our worship service. If you make monthly offerings through PAR, you can place your PAR cards on the plate each week.

**\*The Presbytery meeting:** it will take place on February 21 at 7:00 pm at the Gathering Place in Port Colborne.

**\*Rescheduled Session Meeting on February 28:** Our joint session meeting scheduled for Wednesday has been moved to February 28 at 7:00 pm at Rockway.

**\*World Day of Prayer:** The Local World Day of Prayer service for the Pelham area in 2024 will be held at St. Alexander Church in Fonthill on March 1st at 2:00 PM.

**\*Special Guest Preacher: Rev. Krista Hilton** - On March 3, we are excited to welcome Rev. Krista Hilton, a Chaplain at Brock University and a priest in the Anglican Church. She will share her experiences in chaplaincy for young students and present mission opportunities for our congregation to support the ministry of spiritual and pastoral care for university students.

**\*Meat Pie Fundraiser:** Pre-order now for 9" Ground Beef or Chicken pies at \$18 each. Pick up on Saturday, March 16, 2024, at First Presbyterian Church from 10:00am to 1:00pm. Order online at <http://tinyurl.com/3sav9ctv> or call Janice at 905-246-9175.

**\*Annual Congregational Meetings:** The 2023 Annual Congregational Meeting for North Pelham is planned for March 10, right after the service, and for Rockway, our gathering is scheduled for March 17 following the service. Committee reports play a vital role in providing a thorough overview. Committees, please submit your reports for North Pelham by February 25th to Janice or Carole and Rockway by March 3rd to Bonnie.

**\*Connect with your Minister Jacob for pastoral visits.** Reach Jacob at [jacoble0501@gmail.com](mailto:jacoble0501@gmail.com) or 289-213-2797.