

## *“Attitude without altitude”*

January 2008

Hymn                      God of the sparrow                      VU 229

Scripture                      Philippians 2: 1-11

Verses 5-7, ‘Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant’

Prayer                      Let us pray – O God, our strength and our guide, we call on you as we enter this new year. We thank you for the joy experienced as we celebrated Jesus’ birth. Help us to know as individuals and as groups of men the direction you would have us take this year that we might truly serve you and our fellow man as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Amen.

Lesson                      A flock of Bohemian waxwings descended on our mountain ash tree. “Flock” sounds pastoral, placid, sheep-like, but these birds showed up like tow trucks converging on a highway accident. One minute the tree was loaded with bright red berries. The next, it was bare and shivering in the winter wind.

The strange thing was they didn’t seem to have a leader. They all arrived at once, they all left at once, as if a single mind motivated them. When they left, they swirled around in the sky, forming and re-forming the constantly changing patterns in a kaleidoscope. First one bird was in front, then another. But they all wheeled and turned together as if they weren’t forty or fifty separate birds at all, but one bird, governed by a single collective mind.

A favourite biblical passage comes in Paul’s letter to the Christian church in Philippi. “Let the same mind be in you,” he wrote, “that was in Jesus Christ.” In simpler terms he was saying, “If Jesus is the head of the church, then all his followers should be so much like him that you even think like him.” We would all be like-minded.

Paul might be dismayed if he could see today’s Christians squabbling with each other about things which make no real difference. I don’t suggest that all members of a faith group should become little robots, mindlessly listening for instructions from their master’s voice. Bland uniformity can be as boring as flavourless pudding.

But think of the impact that a group could have on society if the entire group could act quickly, decisively, and consistently. Compare the effect of one person alone...with a club of thirty men...with a national organization of sixty clubs...with several hundred thousand men of a denomination...

With a true collective consciousness, we could act more like that flock of waxwings. No, not stripping mountain ash trees. But sharing the same ideals, the same values, and then changing the world.

Discussion                      What are the ideals and values you share within your club?  
    What more can we do as a club to help our congregation and community?  
    What will we do along with others to help change the world?

**Prayer**            Let us pray – O God, we thank you for Jesus’ example. May we see that example in others. May others see that example in us. Amen.

*This meditation is based on material from ‘soft edges’ by Jim Taylor which first ran in January 2000.*

**Coming events**    Celebrate the events you have planned for the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “As One That Serves” with the men of your neighbouring churches.

**Book of the month**        ‘Paul’s letter to the Philippians’

Hymn

Scripture Romans 4: 1-17

Verses 4-5, ‘If you’re a hard worker and do a good job, you deserve your pay; we don’t call your wages a gift. But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it’s something only God can do, and you trust God to do it – you could never do it for yourself no matter how long and hard you worked – well, that trusting–God–to–do–it is what gets you set right with God, by God. Sheer gift.’

Prayer Let us pray – Creator God, you created humankind to work hard and do a good job, but some of the jobs you offer are too big for our imaginations. Help us to let go of some of our pride when we see that we can’t handle a job alone which we know you want to have done. Show us how to share that job with others. We thank you for hearing our prayers when we ask for guidance. Help us to see that guidance in whatever form it is given as we attempt to follow in Jesus’ way, Amen.

Lesson The story of Abraham and Sarah, which begins with Noah in Genesis 9 twists through many chapters of Genesis. With the story of Abram who becomes Abraham and Sarai who becomes Sarah, we meet God who promises new life to those who hear, trust, and follow. There are no guarantees of what the future may hold, only the promise of an ongoing mutual relationship for those who stick with it.

The story of Abram having to leave the world of his ancestors impressed Paul more than a thousand years after Abraham’s death. In becoming a Christian missionary, Saul the Pharisee had made a radical break with his culture and the faith of his ancestors, and had entered into a new relationship with God, founded on God’s promise of new life in Christ. Abraham and Sarah had set out into an unknown future with no map; they had to think “outside the box” and so did Paul.

Lent is a time for engaging our new life in Christ more deeply, risking new levels of trust. The purpose of Lent is not to dwell on suffering, or to spend 40 days bemoaning our sins and wickedness. Lent is about engaging in the ongoing process of renewal, regeneration and new birth. It is about encouraging us to trust, and to risk, going forth and being sent out with promise of new life.

Lent may require us to “think outside the box” of Christian piety and religiosity as we do this, just as Abram and Sarai had to break with their past, and Saul the Pharisee with his. When Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Apostle as we know him, he brought new words, images and community structures into being by trustfully following Jesus into new life. At this point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, God may well be inviting us to rethink how we do ministry with men in light of the socio-geographies of the times we live in.

Lent is for listening for that call in our own lives. Lent is for careful thinking about how to step into the as yet unmapped future for AOTS and promoting ministry with men. Lent is for seeking to deepen our relationship to God and trust the picture of new life in Christ. And lent is for identifying the breaks with the past that we need to make in order to respond to the promises of God.

Discussion    What are the walls which form the “box” in which we find ourselves?  
List the ideas (wildest dreams) which God may be inviting you to consider.

Prayer        Let us pray – God, we love what we have within the groups of men we know as AOTS. Help us to share what we have, what you have given us, with others. Help us to identify ideas and assist us, coax us, prod us to make things happen to speed the coming of your kingdom here on earth. Amen.

*This meditation is based in part on material dated 2005 from Rev. A. V. Askew of the Episcopal Church*

**Coming events    ‘Breaking the Ice’ - Manitou Conference**  
**‘Maritime Men’s Conference’ – Maritime Conference**

**Book of the month        the book of Genesis – ‘relive’ the “origins” stories**

## *“Your spiritual guide”*

March 2008

Hymn

We meet you, O Christ

VU 183

Scripture

Mark 16: 8 - 16

Verses 10 – 11, ‘She went out and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.’

Prayer

Let us pray – God of resurrection, you have rolled the stone away and the tomb of our world has been opened wide. With the dawn has come a new creation. Let our celebration today empty our tombs, renew our lives, and release your power, through the risen Christ we pray. Amen.

Lesson

Two young men are hurrying away from a city where a friend, another youth, has just met a violent death. They are grief-stricken and in shock. Unable to comprehend what has happened and fearful for their own safety, they have decided to run away, just as any of us might do when confronted with pain and confusion. They go over the incident again and again in their own minds and in their frantic conversation.

Suddenly they are joined by a mysterious stranger who asks what is upsetting them. The men come to a stop in astonishment that someone might not share their troubles, but the stranger proves a good listener. He allows them to tell their story and express their feelings without interruption, and then he interprets it for them so that they begin to see the meaning of the terrible event they have witnessed. So helpful is this stranger that when he tries to move on they plead with him to stay. After spending further time and sharing a meal with him, the two men resolve to abandon their flight and return to the city. Their earlier decision to run away now seems misguided.

As Christians, we recognize the story of the encounter of the disciples with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It is also one of the classic texts on spiritual direction. The stranger is a model guide who walks alongside the men without imposing his presence on them. He listens more than he speaks. He empathizes with them, taking their pain seriously, but shows how it can have inner meaning that is greater than the hurt it inflicts.

It is important, however, not to dwell too much on the suffering of the individuals in the story. The point is that they have come to a crisis in their spiritual lives and do not know which way to turn. The stranger gently helps them to discover the way for themselves.

The word crisis, rather than suggesting some kind of disaster, originally referred to the need to make a judgment concerning taking one course of action or another. The decision to take our spiritual lives seriously is a kind of crisis, in that sense, and one for which we might feel the need for guidance. The principal guide is the Holy Spirit acting upon us and acting within us, but at some stage we might want to have a “stranger” to speak with.

Prepare yourself. Be ready. At some stage you may need to listen to the “stranger”. At some stage you may need to be the “stranger” for someone else.

Discussion    Talk about the empty tomb.  
What is different in your thinking of Jesus as a resurrected being?

Prayer        Let us pray – Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go in courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

*This meditation is based in part on material from “Vacations for the Spirit” by Alan Walker*

**Coming events    Central Region Roundup    25 – 27 April, 2008        Jackson’s Point, Ontario**

**Book of the month        The gospel according to Mark – ‘relive’ Jesus’ life on earth**

## ***“Will work for friends”***

April 2008

Hymn                      What a friend we have in Jesus

Scripture                Acts 4:32-37 and Galatians 5:13-15

Acts 4:32 “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything that they had.”

Gal 5:13 “You, my brothers, were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love.

Prayer                  Let us pray – O God we thank you for friends, for those with whom we can work as true servants. We ask for your presence with us here and in all the places we meet together. Make keen our minds, warm our hearts and soft our tongues. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Reflection          It was with a heavy feeling of dread and pain that I read name after name engraved on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. Then I saw that next to the memorial was a statue of three men – a black, a Hispanic and a white soldier. They were standing very close together. The tour guide, a former soldier who fought in Vietnam explained the significance of the statue. He said that there were more minorities fighting for the U.S. than ever before. The reason they were standing so close together was that in Vietnam they learned, like never before, how very much they needed each other.

We need to thank God that very few of us find ourselves in such perilous places with such grim conditions. We also need to thank God for the friends we have who are around and who meet the needs we have in our lives today.

Six friends have formed a home repair club in Minneapolis. They meet one Saturday each month at one of their homes to work on projects that cannot be tackled alone. Having helped one another for 20 years, they say they’re now bonded together like one big family. A similar group has formed in Snohomish, Washington. Their motto is “Will work for friends”.

The concern of these groups for their friends reminds me of the early church as illustrated in our readings from Acts and from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. During this time of great persecution of believers, they especially needed the support of one another. Some people voluntarily sold their lands or houses and brought the proceeds to the apostles, and they distributed to each as anyone had need. They were of one heart and had all things in common.

As followers of Christ today, we too need the spiritual support and encouragement of one another. We may be struggling with a decision about how to serve God, or concerned about a problem at work, or unsure of how to discipline a rebellious child. These are good opportunities to enlist the advice and prayer of fellow Christians such as fellow members of AOTS. Through love, let us serve one another – physically and spiritually – in the family of God.

*(based on material from “Daily Bread”, “Hours of Power” by Robert Schuler and the Quiet Time Bible version of the NIV New Testament)*

Discussion     How is oneness in heart demonstrated in Acts 4:32-37?  
                      Would we behave similarly today? Why or why not?  
                      What is the difference between the two concepts of freedom described in  
                      Galatians 5:13-14?  
                      Would a “Will Work for Friends” group work for you in your church, your  
                      club, or your community?

Closing prayer     Let us pray –  
                          You have never failed, God, to be our one essential, intimate friend.  
                          When we were lonely in striving - you encouraged us  
                          Lonely in struggling – you lifted us  
                          Lonely in serving – you supported us  
                          Lonely in suffering – you comforted us  
                          Lonely in sinning – you forgave us  
                          Lonely in sinking – you renewed us  
                          Lonely in succeeding – you rejoiced with us  
                          What a friend we have in Jesus.  
                          Thank you God. Amen.

Coming event     Are you making plans for an AOTS Laymen’s service? – on Father’s Day?

Books of the month     The book of Acts and Paul’s letter to the Galatians

## ***“A shape-shifting tool”***

May 2008

Hymn            Great is thy faithfulness        VU 288

Scripture        Luke 6: 27 – 40

      Luke 6:37        “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

Prayer            Let us pray –O God, we are quick to be critical when someone comes late to our meeting, or forgets to prepare the list he promised. The world around us does not help us to understand how to forgive or how to love our enemies. Listen to our feeble excuses and help us to build the strength we need to be better followers of your teachings. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Reflection        One afternoon I was waiting for the shuttle to take me to the airport. Sitting next to me was a woman reading her newspaper. But my eyes were on a fourteen-year-old boy who was on his skateboard. He wore his baseball cap turned around with the bill in the back, the cool look, you know.

      He buzzed us once. He buzzed us twice. Then he came around a third time for what turned out to be his grand finale, and he inadvertently knocked the newspaper out of the woman’s hands.

      She immediately started yelling. “Oh, you teenagers! No wonder the world is going to pot, because you are in it! I can’t stand it! And so on.

      The boy went down to the corner to talk to his buddy, and they turned to look at us. Then they talked together some more.

      In the meantime, the woman began to gather up her newspaper and get it all back together. She put it under her arm, walked to the middle of the block, and motioned to the boy to come to her.

      Very slowly and reluctantly, he came on his skateboard, and almost in an act of defiance, he turned the baseball cap around, put the bill straight out in front, and said, “Yeah?”

      She responded by saying; “What I meant to say is that I was afraid I would get hurt, and my comments were totally inappropriate and out of line. I hope you will accept my apology.”

      The boy’s face has been a source of inspiration for me ever since. He looked at her and smiled, then he said, “How cool.” I was deeply moved and touched by the moment.

      In Latin America, in some Hispanic societies of the world, that moment would be seen as a healing moment, as a holy moment, as a small miracle, as a *milagro pequeño*.

      Within ten minutes’ time, through a conscious intention and action of genuine apology, this woman made a choice. She made a life-affirming choice to create a life-changing moment between herself and the boy, a *milagro pequeño*. He will never forget that moment. I will never forget that moment. And she, who shape-shifted that moment, through genuine apology, will not forget that moment!

*(based on material from “A Blessing in Disguise” a collection of life lessons by Andrea Joy Cohen)*

Discussion     Do you apologize when you hurt someone's feelings or make an inadvertent mistake? If not, what holds you back?  
Has anyone's apology ever impacted you?  
Jesus knows that loving one's enemies is impossible without strong motivation. How does he argue that his disciples have that motivation?

Closing prayer     Let us pray – O God, here we are a group of men who are trying to follow in your way. May we encourage each other, and build one another up in every circumstance. May we love and accept one another just as we are, not waiting for change or perfection – as in Christ you have accepted us. Help us be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other as you have forgiven us. Help us not to bring past issues into the present. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Coming event     Are you making plans for an AOTS Laymen's service? – on Father's Day?

Book of the month     "A Blessing in Disguise" by Andrea Joy Cohen

## ***“Filling a need ”***

June 2008

Hymn            “I need thee every hour”        VU 671

Scripture       Ephesians 2: 8 – 10

Ephesians 2:10        “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Prayer            Let us pray together - O God, you have made each of us in your image to help to carry out your work here on earth. We need you and we need other people to achieve the anticipated result. Be with us here today and every day as we strive to do what you would have us do. Amen.

Reflection        There is a parable of a man whose wife had been captured by a king and brought to his castle as a slave. The man set off with his five-year-old son to rescue the woman. During their trip the father had to carry his son because the boy was too young and too small to walk all the way. Finally, the two arrived at the castle. The castle gate was closed, but there was a small narrow window in the wall alongside the gate. The boy realized that he was small enough to fit through the window; he climbed up the wall and through the window and opened the gate for his father.

We all need each other. Living a life without ever needing someone, using someone, or being used by someone is rare. If you’re a fair person usually you will find an equitable solution. But you may end up employing others’ talents. Then you should be generous. People resent being “ridden”. But even the best and most merciful rider is still the rider. Such relationships are inevitable. Soldiers fight, generals get stars; research associates discover, professors get promoted; salesmen move merchandise, CEO’s receive large bonuses. Of course it is likely that at one time you carried others: once, you were a soldier, or a research associate, or a salesman. Hopefully you were used for good causes.

Contribution from one generation to another is fine, but not sufficient. You must also deliver now. You must take care of your soldiers, associates and salesmen if and when you become the rider. Compensate them, share your glory, recognize their efforts in your success or help them in other ways. This is not totally charitable or altruistic behaviour. In a larger arena you may still need help in the future and perhaps you’ll receive it from a totally unexpected source.

Riding others may be inevitable but the rider and ridden must safely arrive at their destination together. You may not be able to carry the ones who carried you, but think of their souls as an extension of yours and show an equal degree of attention and interest in their souls. Jobs may be defined differently but each is unique in its contribution to the overall mission.

*(based on material from “The Spirit of Happiness – discovering God’s purpose for your life” by T. Byram Karasu, M.D.)*

Discussion            In what ways have you carried others?  
                             In what ways have others carried you?  
                             How have you thanked others for what they have done for you?  
                             How have you thanked God?

Closing prayer        Let us pray – O God, we thank you for this group of men who work and play and laugh and cry together as we listen and learn and act together in your name. Each of us needs to be carried much of the time and occasionally each of us is able to carry another for a short time. Help us to hear the needs of one another and give us the humility to allow ourselves to be carried and the strength to carry others. These things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Coming event         Kairos 2008 for young adults (18-30) at Five Oaks in August

Book of the month    “The Spirit of Happiness” by Dr. T. Byram Karasu in which the author explores the psychological barriers that prevent so many of us from allowing faith to become an integral part of our lives and from becoming truly serene and fulfilled human beings.

## *“Causing ripples”*

July/August 2008

Hymn “Come let us sing” VU 222

Scripture Matthew 10: 40-42 “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”

Prayer Let us pray together – O God of the prophets and our God, we have struggled with you in lonely places and praised you in the company of your people. We have cried out to you and you have shown us your steadfast love. We have resisted you and you have drawn us back into the circle of Christ’s disciples. Pour out your blessing on each one of us. Hear our prayers, and renew our spirits. Amen.

Reflection To accept, to welcome, to receive are all active verbs. It’s not just a matter of recognizing someone as Messiah, prophet, or righteous person, but what we’re willing to do about them. Are we accepting them, welcoming them, receiving them? For not to receive actively those whom Jesus sends, is to reject Him. And what about the way we engage with a child of God who loves God but is estranged from church or biblical interpretations? We do well to remember that, inside our church structures and our club environs and out in the margins where the accepted or rejected live.

There are three Godcentric ripples here: receiving a Jesus follower means receiving Jesus which means receiving God. Another trinity which includes not only Jesus’ humanity inside it, but ours too; yours and mine; personally and corporately as Jesus’ Body, making us real insiders. Does the life of our club flow through all three ripples? If there are no ripples, maybe our pond is stagnant, rather than living water.

What Jesus says next underlines our responsibility to care for each other as fellow ‘little ones’. But what exactly is ‘the cup of cold water’ needed by those around us. When our neighbour tells us, “No thank you, I don’t need any help”, can we be aware enough to know their real needs and sensitive enough for them to let us give them that ‘cup of cold water’ without infringing their pride or dignity.

Our churches do a good job of setting up some “welfare agencies” to meet some of the needs of people. Our National organization provides assistance for some blind persons, some campers, and some students. But that doesn’t let us off the hook of personal responsibility Jesus calls us to have towards those in need. Maybe we need some low key ‘cups of cold water’ by little people for little people, disciples or not? And then humbly demonstrate with these ‘cups’ to Whom we all belong, across all three ripples.

Discussion What starting place can we find to begin some such rippling?

Closing prayer            Let us pray –For your abounding grace, we give thanks, O God. For your steadfast love, we pour out our gratitude. May our service to you and to other people provide for those who seek refuge from doubt, from oppression, from ignorance, and from calamity. Through our service in Christ’s name, we seek to grow in the Spirit of One who gave life itself for us. Amen.

Coming events            Kairos 2008 for young adults (18-30) at Five Oaks, Ontario August 25 to 29  
AOTS National Council meeting in Red Deer, Alberta September 13-14

## *“Worthy of the Gospel”*

September 2008

Hymn                      Jesus, stand among us                      VU 396

Scripture                      Philippians 1: 15-27

Verse 27                      “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.”

Prayer                      Let us pray –Your ways, O God, surprise us, for your standards are not our own. We want quick results, while you work patiently for steady transformation. We seek to comprehend within narrow limits, but you come to us to broaden our horizons. We dare to worship what we cannot see because Christ has demonstrated that your love is real. Love us now into becoming all we are meant to be. Amen.

Lesson                      We’re coming to the end of summer. The world has just witnessed the Olympic Games from Beijing and has learned more about China and its people than we may have expected. We have also seen triumphs and defeats as athletes competed against each other and against the clock. Some things we saw or read about were heart-warming and others were heart-wrenching. Was this the “real world”?

While this has been going on we have also continued to witness violence, poverty and cruelty in Afghanistan, Georgia, Iraq, and Zimbabwe and even in Canada on our “reserves” and in our cities. Is this the world as it should be?

And now we move into the fall season with its “back to school”, its slowing down of the growth of plants, its planning and preparation for winter, and its elections within different levels of governments.

As I prepare this, the “Democrat” convention is taking place in Denver, Colorado. We are reminded of people such as Abe Lincoln, John and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King who were far from perfect but whose lives were taken while they were trying to make their country a better and fairer place in which all people could live as equals, without fear.

I was taken by some things which Michele Obama noted in her speech from her life experiences, such as:

“you treat people with dignity and respect, even if you don’t know them, and even if you don’t agree with them.”;

“we also know what our world should look like.....we know what fairness and justice and opportunity look like.....(we need) to believe in ourselves -- to find the strength within ourselves to strive for the world as it should be.”;

“the young people serving our communities – teaching children, cleaning up neighbourhoods, caring for the least among us each and every day.”;

“all of us driven by a simple belief that the world as it is just won’t do – that we have an obligation to fight for the world as it should be.”

To me these are good observations. I believe that we in AOTS, as for all those who serve Christ, have a continuing obligation to continue to serve wherever we

see a need. As Paul states in our gospel passage, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

There are many places we can serve to make this world a better place. Jesus Christ, our example, showed us many ways. As followers, “as one that serves”, let us too be examples to the world, even in our small corner. May our lives bring light that others might follow, not in our ways, but in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Discussion    What’s wrong in the world?  
                  What’s wrong right here in our town?  
                  Is what we are doing worthy of the gospel of Christ?

Prayer            Let us pray – O God, we know the gospel of Christ is ours for sharing. Help us to walk in the spirit, that we may lead worthy lives. Your Spirit strengthens us and fills us with joy. We seek to grow in faith and to help others to grow. Your harvest, O God, needs the labour of our hands. May our labours bear fruit for Christ. May our manner of life be worthy of the gospel. Amen.

**Coming events    Check for Men’s Fall Rallies and Roundups in your area this fall  
                          Banff men’s conference 17 – 19 October**

**Book of the month            The Book of Job**

***“Affluence, Joy, and Thanksgiving”***

October 2008

Hymn                      As the deer pants for the water...

VU 766

Scripture                Psalm 42

Verses 2 – 4 (New International version)  
“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When can I go and meet with God?

My tears have been my food day and night,  
while men say to me all day long,  
“Where is your God?”

These things I remember as I pour out my soul:  
how I used to go with the multitude,  
leading the procession to the house of God,  
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving,  
among the festive throng.”

Prayer                Let us pray – Creator, we come to offer our thanksgiving. In your presence our faith is warmed, our hopes rekindled, and our purposes strengthened. May your presence hallow us in this season of thanksgiving, that our hearts may be lifted to the joy that the days deserve. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Lesson                Some years ago John Ruskin, an articulate dreamer wrote, “Wealth, well used is a fisherman’s net gathering men’s souls out of the deep. By the strength of our possessions we shall direct the acts, command the energies, inform the ignorance, and prolong the existence of the human race.”

In many ways we inherit the legacy of that dream, in hospitals, schools, parks, and patios. In these we have good cause for thanksgiving. Yet we know there was a flaw in Ruskin’s dream. He came to the same realization in his own lifetime and wrote, “The pursuit of money is the most cretinous, speechless, paralyzing plague that ever touched the brains of mankind.”

To make wealth the central dream of life is to violate God’s order of life. A European commented on the spiritual poverty in the midst of material wealth that he found in North America. “It seems to me that the deepest questions you ask are, ‘How can I lose weight?’, ‘Where can I park my car?’, ‘Where can I find a cheap vacation?’”

Here are six lessons that Jesus taught that apply to our age of affluence:

1 – Material goods are a gift of God to be accepted with joy and appreciation. Man does not live by bread alone, but we are told to give thanks for our daily bread, the symbol of all good gifts.

2 – Material possessions were not intended to be the primary objective in life. Although this may draw laughs, North American life is largely based on the assumption that the accumulation of assets is the primary goal of life.

3 – When Jesus said, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God”, he was talking of a life-shaping experience of yielding our wills to God’s will in a manner that sets out our priorities of all of life.

4 – The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of right relationships. Caring for others as creatively as we are able to will bring life’s deepest satisfactions.

5 – Our Thanksgiving celebrations, whatever they may be, are a reminder that richness of life consists of appreciating what we have been given, rather than in what we gather.

6 – All we possess has been given in trust and is to be shared.

All these are familiar thoughts. They become challenging when they are no longer mere sentiments but are measuring standards for daily living.

*(based on material from ‘Fire in the Bones’ by Robert A. Wallace)*

**Discussion**     Talk about Jesus’ six lessons listed above.

**Prayer**             Let us pray – Good and gracious God, giver of all things we bring our prayers of thanksgiving. Now hear our requests, we pray. Bless those who live under the shadow of oppression, those whose lives are threatened by hunger, those whose hopes are shaken by sorrow, those whose days are threatened by anxiety, the overworked, the underpaid, the unemployed, and the unemployable. Bless the countless refugees in squalid camps around the world, the homeless in city parks and streets, single mothers trying to make this season special, those who eat Thanksgiving dinner alone, whether in small flats or in sumptuous surroundings, those in isolated outposts, all for whom thanksgiving is a struggle. In our own thanksgiving, may we be aware of these our brothers and sisters. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

**Coming events**   See [www.aots.ca](http://www.aots.ca) coming events section

**Book of the month**     ‘The Pillars of the Earth’ by Ken Follett

## ***“Synergism”***

November 2008

Hymn “Let us break bread together.... VU 480

Scripture 2 Corinthians 12:5-10

Verse 10: “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Prayer Let us pray –We give thanks, O God, that as we gather we know ourselves to be among friends. We thank you for the encouragement and understanding that they bring to our lives. We thank you above all though for the presence of Jesus, in whom is fullness of understanding and the richest of encouragement. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Lesson In ancient Greek literature there is a story that shows the power of working together, or synergism.

*An aged, dying father called his seven sons around him. He gave each one a stick and told them to break it. Each son easily broke his separate stick. The old father then bound seven sticks and gave the bundle to his eldest son and told him to break the bundle. The eldest son could not do it. Then the second son was commanded to try. He could not, nor could any of the rest. “So is it to be of you,” said the father. **“Alone you are weak, together you are strong.”***

Synergism is derived from the Greek word “synergos” meaning “working together”. It means that by joining with others, common objectives can be more easily accomplished. There is strength in numbers when you multiply your efforts through others.

The Christian church, men’s ministries and AOTS work best when we work together. The mission of reaching out to people of all ages, of all races, of all genders, of all places, has greater effectiveness when we join hands in a common effort. Using the power of synergism, the seeker, the poor, and the ill, can be helped, can become part of your community and can learn about the love of Jesus.

Synergism also combines the talents of individuals. Those who have computer skills are teamed with those who have gifts in teaching or public speaking. Ministers can be teamed with laymen. Those with talent in music or in art can be used in a group effort in a presentation. People working together are not only more effective, they can reach a goal faster and more effectively. Working together is summarized in the pooling of our talent, money, and resources toward one common goal.

Synergism does not mean we have to be alike, think alike, or believe the same things. Synergism does mean that we are willing to work side by side, respect one another, and combine our talents and energy.

How does synergism begin? It starts when you as an individual or group volunteer to help another individual or group. Alone we are weak. Together we are strong and can accomplish great things, including sending kids to camp, improving camping facilities, supporting hospitals, working with our neighbours and through these activities, developing our discipleship and spreading the gospel.

(based on material from "*Dear Lord, they want me to give the devotion again*" by Schroeder and Groth

**Discussion** Discuss how synergism has worked successfully in the past.

Share a local goal you believe can be accomplished by working together.

Share a goal which would require working with men in neighbour congregations

Share a goal which could be accomplished with a provincial or even a national effort of men working together.

**Prayer** Let us pray – O God of mercy and tenderness, but God also of strength and vision, we ask your presence with all who seek to understand the changes and newness that surrounds our lives. Give us the humility and understanding that we may work together here and across our wonderful country. We are grateful for those who have been sensitive enough to your leadership to risk disfavour while they followed the conviction they believed were your gifts to them. Keep us open to new ways of dealing with life that more of your people may know the joy of accomplishment and fulfilment. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

**Coming events** See [www.aots.ca](http://www.aots.ca) coming events section

**Book of the month** 'Dear Lord, they want me to give the devotion again'  
by John D. Schroeder & Shane M. Groth

## *“The Flask”*

December 2008

Hymn “Creating God we give you thanks... VU 292

Scripture Luke 7:36-50

Verse 40: Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”  
“Tell me, teacher,” he said

Prayer Let us pray – Maker of all things, loving parent to all mankind, startle us with your truth and goodness this day. Open our minds and our imaginations to the working of your spirit in us that we may receive you and one another with joy and fellowship, through Jesus our Guide. Amen.

Lesson This passage is a model of story-telling which contains the Christian faith in capsule form. If all the rest of the gospels were lost and this preserved we would have the good news – the gospel.

We have three figures on the stage. Jesus pairs off with Simon the Pharisee, Simon pairs off with “the woman” and “the woman” pairs off with Jesus and we learn from each encounter. Simon can be compared with a ‘door slammed’, “the woman” with a ‘flask broken’, and Jesus with a ‘hand extended’.

From the start of his ministry Jesus gathered people into a family. So had the Pharisees. For Jesus the family was **inclusive** – “Whosoever will – let them come.” The Pharisees were **exclusive**. Simon knew about “this kind of woman” – not one of “our kind”. Jesus knew that poor Simon could not see the woman. He could only see his own labels – she is a sinner, a hippie, a radical. I don’t know her parents; she’s not from around here. She doesn’t belong. Simon was a door-slammer.

There is a difference between a church and a secular club. Private secular clubs have every right to limit membership, to set the standards they wish. But the church is God’s family on earth and every human creature is a part of that family by birth. The church is a gathering place for those who acknowledge themselves a part of that family. God made the church to be home for all his children. Jesus was a door opener.

“The woman” was invited by Jesus to come through ‘the door’. Once through she showed extravagant generosity in using her greatest material possession, the ointment from her flask, to bathe Jesus feet. Jesus was drawn to her because this was so much like what he would do. He valued reckless generosity. The flask – the beautifully, extravagant, spontaneous act of self-giving.

Jesus loved them both. He loves the Simons just as he loves the great giver. But the flask broken is the symbol for all time of love outpoured. Yet the hand of Jesus, extended to lift a “sinner” is a more powerful symbol yet. “The woman” was capable of love. Jesus was the source of love. That hand – reaching – made her love complete. Anne Murray sings of it in, “You needed me,” with one line, “you gave me dignity”. May those who come seeking find it in our churches and in our AOTS clubs.

*Based on material from “a present help” by Robert A Wallace*

**Discussion** Discuss the relationship between Jesus and Simon.

Discuss the “openness” of your AOTS club. Are there “outsiders”?

**Prayer** Let us pray – Blessed are you, O God, our creator, that you have given us life itself, this world in which to live, new life in Christ, and life everlasting in your glory. As we look to our life together in this season of Advent and Christmas and the year that stretches ahead of us, we seek direction from your spirit. Grant us sensitivity to the needs of those around us. May we not look on the world’s pain with dry eyes. Grant us wisdom to choose new ways of service, courage to walk in those ways and the constant challenge of your spirit to teach out to others in loving acceptance. Through Jesus, our guide. Amen..

**Coming events** See [www.aots.ca](http://www.aots.ca) coming events section

**Book of the month** **The gospel according to Luke.**