

## ***A Season of Peace***

### **Path of Peace Reflections**

### **September 4 – October 2, 2022**

Welcome to the 2022 Path of Peace Reflections, a set of daily devotions centered on themes of peacemaking. These reflections accompany *A Season of Peace*, the four weeks leading up to World Communion Sunday, the day when the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) celebrates the Lord's Supper as a global feast and receives the Peace and Global Witness Offering, supporting peacemaking ministries.

The 2022 theme for the offering and the devotions is from the book of Isaiah: *You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace* (55:12 ESV). This year, our writers cover four areas of peace work — climate change, nonviolence, the intersection between race and poverty and issues of immigration and migration. Here's what our "path" looks like:

Week 1 Sept. 4–10: Climate Change

Week 2 Sept. 11–17: Nonviolence

Week 3 Sept. 18–24: The Intersection Between Race and Poverty

Week 4 Sept. 24–Oct. 2: Immigration and Migration

We hope that you will be encouraged, inspired and challenged during this season of peace to continue and expand your work for peace in a world that needs all it can get.

Anne Russ  
2022 Path of Peace Editor

## Week 1: Climate Change

**Sunday, September 4**

*Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth." Genesis 1:26 (CEB)*

As travel has resumed in this world transitioning from a pandemic to an endemic state of being, we've had more than one weary traveler spend the night at our apartment in New York City because of canceled flights. While the airline industry has been plagued with problems of staffing and fuel shortages, our air mattress dwellers were all there because of one reason — weather.

As maddening as travel interruptions are, part of me is grateful for them. We are actually beginning to be inconvenienced by climate change — and that tends to be when Americans rally for change. We really *hate* to be inconvenienced. And since bad weather in Atlanta or Chicago or Los Angeles can affect travel across the country, no one is immune.

Of course, it would be great if we all took care of our planet because God calls us to and because we want to leave the earth better than we found it for the generations that come after us, but come on! Life is ridiculously absurd right now. It's hard enough just to get from week to week without being responsible for stuff that happens in the future. Some of us are barely keeping our heads above water and have not the time nor the energy to monitor the rising tides.

As people who lead busy, hectic lives, we *do* need a wake-up call from time to time. May we heed these calls and make care for our planet a priority.

**Action:** Do one thing to lower your carbon footprint this week. Learn more about your carbon footprint and what you can do to reduce it [here](#).

**Prayer:** *Creator God, in the midst of our busy lives, help us pay attention to, revel in and care for your good creation. May we be mindful of its many gifts and never allow ourselves to take our world for granted. Amen.*



Anne Russ is an ordained pastor with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has a heart for small church ministry, Christian camping and the power of the Web to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Anne is a fiercely supportive theater mom, a loud laughher and a lover of good stories. She is a displaced Southerner living in New York who pastors through her online platform, [DoubtingBeliever.com](http://DoubtingBeliever.com).

## Monday, September 5

*You are the light of the world.* Matthew 5:14 (NRSV)

Isaiah says, “You shall go out with joy.”

Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.”

Taken together, we are “joyful lights” in the world. I really like that! But can light really be joyful? Isn’t light just light?

Energy poverty is a humanitarian crisis facing much of the world’s population. Solar Under the Sun (SUTS), a ministry of the Synod of the Sun, works to remedy this crisis one community at a time. By partnering with local churches and other agencies, SUTS installs small-scale solar energy systems to bring an abundant source of power to communities that have none.

When a system is installed, the whole thing looks utilitarian; a tall pole with electrical conduit running down the side and large solar panels on top. But then the lights come on, and the only things shining brighter than the sun are the faces of the partners in the community! It is in that moment that you realize what *joyful light* really is. Light bulbs make light. Neighbors partnering to build one another up make joyful light.

Joyful light is what happens when SUTS and our local partners work together to bring energy to a community that needs it. It is what happens when we reach out to a sibling in need. It is what happens anytime we share the hope we know in Christ. Joyful light is who we are called to be and what we are called to share.

**Action:** Find a place in your community that needs a bit of joyful light and be that light for someone.

**Prayer:** *God of light and life, we are grateful for the joyful light of Christ in our lives, and we pray that you will give us eyes to see and hearts to share that joyful light in a dark and frightened world. Amen.*



Dr. Robert Lowry is pastor of Westover Hills Presbyterian Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. He serves on the boards of the Vera Lloyd Family Services Foundation, Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center and Solar Under the Sun. He is a founder of the Mississippi Gender and Sexual Diversity Cooperative and is a past Mississippi Interfaith Lead for Moms

Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. He and his husband, Brian, live in Little Rock with their 15-year-old Springer Spaniel Mo and 3-year-old Corgum Wednesday and Huck.



PEACE & GLOBAL WITNESS  
SPECIAL OFFERINGS  
PEACEMAKING AND RECONCILIATION



## Tuesday, September 6

*You make grass grow for cattle;  
you make plants for human farming  
in order to get food from the ground,  
and wine, which cheers people's hearts,  
along with oil, which makes the face shine,  
and bread, which sustains the human heart.*

*Lord, you have done so many things!  
You made them all so wisely!  
The earth is full of your creations!  
And then there's the sea, wide and deep,  
with its countless creatures—  
living things both small and large.*  
Psalm 104:14–15:24–25 (CEB)

Psalm 104 describes the vibrant orchestra of Creation that God provides and brings life to. All things big and small have purpose and are called to participate with joy and peace.

During the global shutdown, like many others, I coped with the collective trauma, tragedy and change by engaging the outdoors. I began learning about *vermiculture* (also known as worm farming). Humbly, I found that God's call to humanity is beautifully similar to God's call to earthworms.

An earthworm's call is more than munching through the dirt. As they munch, they create aeration in the soil, which means breaking it up for plants to root and breathe and for water to flow underneath. The worms are the essence of what it means to cultivate: *to prepare, break up or loosen — in order to grow*. Cultivating does not mean exploiting, suffocating or detaching ourselves from fellow Creation.



Verse 14 says that people are meant to cultivate the things that God brings forth because what we do and how we live is meant to be for all of Creation, and to prepare the way for today and tomorrow. We aren't separate from Earth; we *are* Earth. We are the dirt, the wind, the water, so may we treat ourselves with intention, care and gladness.

**Action:** God calls to our very depths to prepare, break up and loosen our everyday routines and mindsets that have turned into dry, compacted, hard dirt. Cultivating the earth may look like ... recycling (obvious, but true), changing where we invest our money (are we funding joy and peace?), becoming intentional about food we consume and what it means to honor the process from food to table (we are earth consuming earth, how can you honor its gifts?), or simply getting outside to plant our bare feet on the ground and matching the Earth's deep breaths.

**Prayer:**

*God of Creation,*

*May I embrace the joy to see you in the beauty you've created.*

*You invite me to be glad, to shine with life and to cultivate that which cultivates me.*

*May I embrace the call to not just see the beauty of Creation. Amen.*



The Rev. Julianna Whitson (she/her/hers) is a queer, Chinese American Presbyterian who works as a hospital chaplain. Julianna is passionate about her spiritual journey as it brought her liberation and empowerment to enjoy being part of Creation. As a Presbyterian and a chaplain, she wishes to welcome the whole stranger, lovingly and courageously, as they navigate their way through their human experience and their spirituality. In her spare time, she loves being outside, DIY projects, and spending time with her wife and their cat.

### Wednesday, September 7

*“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’*

*“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’*

*“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” Matthew 25:34–40 (NIV)*

In Matthew 25, Jesus talks about who will inherit the kingdom. At first, this seems like a fairly simple list. Donate to the food bank, drop off some of your old clothes to Goodwill, bring some flowers to your friend who’s sick, and you’re good to go. However, what is often overlooked is how hard it can be to *continually* do what Jesus has asked. When what is easy is at odds with what is right, we often forget what it means to be a Christian: to help those most vulnerable in the world.

Climate change means and will continue to mean more natural disasters. In times when disasters feel so far from our own homes, we forget that Jesus calls us to love everyone despite their gender, race, age, political ideologies or region of the world. With humanitarian crises around the globe, some of our neighbors have to flee to other countries in need of exactly what Jesus has called us to provide. Often we have failed to fully welcome our neighbors. Limited resources and the overwhelming numbers impede our call to hospitality. Yes, it is in these very situations that the Prince of Peace has called us to be his hands and be of service to the world. As the world changes, may our commitment to follow Christ be unwavering.

**Action:** Do what is right, not what is easy.

**Prayer:** *Today, we pray for those who have lost friends, family members and loved ones to the violence of war. With bomb sirens crying by the hour and buildings now rubble at their feet, we pray your love is shown to them through us, Lord, as they attempt to rebuild a new life. We ask you to empower us to be your helping hands at such a dire time despite our inconveniences, indecisiveness and shortcomings. We pray you give us the strength and courage to actively aid and welcome those displaced by war. Allow peace to spread through our hearts, bodies and minds as we know you are with us, now and forever. Amen.*





Christian Kasten is a recent graduate of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. He currently is a political science major at the University of Missouri. He plays chess, coaches soccer and spends much of his summers as a counselor at Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center.

### Thursday, September 8

*If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. James 4:17 (NIV)*

Climate change is a problem with as many facets as a blood diamond. It's easy to be overwhelmed by such diabolical catastrophe — do we create policy to reduce emissions, or limit personal carbon footprints? Do we plan for inevitable climate refugees, or address plastics poisoning the soil, waters and flesh of almost every being? The needs feel endless.

In 2014 I fasted from plastic for Lent, and was surprised to find it's fun to use less plastic: bulk produce, cloth bags, saying "no." Each year I found more ways to refuse — glass containers, thrift clothing, solar-powered tools. Changes started small, but grew — and were notably joyful.

If Paul speaks of the sin of not doing the good we know we should do, and we're facing climate change, how do we choose what to do amid all that needs doing?

None of us can do it all, but all of us can do something — and all of us can support the parts that others play. To rephrase the Scripture another way, "If anyone knows the good they ought to do and *does* it, it is God's will for them."

**Action:** Do the good that gives joy and fan the spark of the Holy Spirit at play. If your gift is hospitality or planning, climate refugees will need your light. A passion for justice or communal life is the energy to feed policy development.

**Prayer:** *Blessed Creator, help me find my joy in stewarding your creation, the place where my deep gladness meets the world's need. Help me to do the good that is mine to do, and turn my prayers to action; that my thoughts would be your thoughts, and my hands your hands. Capture my heart in a moment of joy to see your will for the world, that I would help build your kingdom. Amen.*



Marie Mainard O'Connell is a free-range PC(USA) minister in central Arkansas, excited about her family, chickens and cats, and exploring God's new movements for church and Creation.

## Friday, September 9

*O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.* Psalm 104:24 (NRSV)

I know a family that keeps and raises butterflies as pets. The parents tell me that, like many things, it all started at their daughter's school three to four years ago when she was given butterfly eggs by a teacher. Since that time this family has become full-on butterfly farmers. They've got the whole setup. Inside the house they have a pop-up butterfly dream condo enclosure. Outside they cultivate native plants that butterflies love, like fennel, milkweed, phlox, aster and catmint.



*Butterfly Tree, Santa Monica, Calif. Photo credit: Grace Heer*

I was recently on a Zoom call with the dad when I completely lost his Zoom-attention. He was definitely looking beyond the screen, focused on something else happening in the household. It turns out that a chrysalis was opening. A butterfly was slowly emerging right in the middle of our Zoom call!

It was a moment worthy of distraction, one that delightfully derailed my incessant screen time for a glorious moment of observation. I was instantly interested. The family reports that they have learned a lot by immersing themselves in what they describe as “the easiest pets you can have.” They’ve trained themselves to be attentive to small things, to look closely and carefully at plants and the world around them.

Climate change is a daunting and serious thing that can easily overwhelm. To combat it, we need big thinking and significant change. But we also need seemingly small actions, like butterfly gardens, that together can add up and bring transformative hope and the possibility of new life.

**Action:** Think of one small thing you can do to help address the climate crisis, and do it today.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, help us be agents of transformation and bearers of hope in the corner of your creation where we reside. Amen.*



Carl Horton is the coordinator of the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and the interim coordinator for the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He is also a dahlia farmer.

## Saturday, September 10

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you. How often I wanted to gather your people together, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want that. Matthew 23:37 (CEB)*

I grew up in Florida. Not at Disney World or on some white sand beach. I grew up in REAL Florida. My dad owned a swamp buggy, and we would spend hours driving through the swamps and strands checking on tree stands and corn spreaders. Once you left the safety of the buggy, you knew there would be snakes, bugs and the occasional alligator. But the thing you were most afraid of was the momma gator. You better not come close to her nest of eggs — any proximity to her nest, and she would turn off her nonchalant charm and become aggressively defensive to protect her hatchlings. You don't want to mess with a momma gator.

And now, being a mother myself, I find that you don't want to mess with this momma, either. The suburban wilderness that surrounds me is not so wild. But my protective mothering kicks into gear in the face of bullying, name-calling, and even though I am ashamed to admit it — my place in the car line. But us mommas share this deep mothering connection. The hens, the alligators, the humans — if you mess with one of our babies, you mess with us all.

Climate change affects all of our babies — from the tiniest baby bird to the biggest baby whale.

Just as my heart cries out in anguish alongside mothers at the border being separated from their children. Mothers in war-afflicted countries. Mothers who have lost their children due to gun violence. Mothers without access to formula to feed their babies. My heart also hurts for our children who are inheriting a world that we have not cared for like we should.

**Action:** Use the [Your Life and Climate Change tool](#) to see how the climate has changed in your life and what it will look like for your child's life.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, a chicken wing isn't much of a defense against climate change. Even the meanest momma gator can't combat global warming. Give us the courage and strength and fortitude to fiercely protect our children from a weather-worn world. Amen.*



Kelly Fitzgerald is a PC(USA) pastor who lives on Florida's coast reveling in God's creation with every glorious sunset.



## Week 2: Nonviolence

**Sunday, September 11**

*Then suddenly a messenger tapped him and said to him, “Get up! Eat something!” Elijah opened his eyes and saw flatbread baked on glowing coals and a jar of water right by his head. He ate and drank, and then went back to sleep. The Lord’s messenger returned a second time and tapped him. “Get up!” the messenger said. “Eat something, because you have a difficult road ahead of you.” Elijah got up, ate and drank, and went refreshed by that food for forty days and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God’s mountain. 1 Kings 19:5b–8 (CEB)*

I have a workout tank top that reads “Weights and Wine: Because punching people is frowned upon.” (I am a Gen-X, straight, white woman. I’m required to have at least one T-shirt that references wine.)

Now, I have never punched anyone. Ever. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t wanted to. I am really bad at being angry. While some people are energized by anger, it absolutely exhausts me. And when I’m tired, I get cranky. And when I’m cranky is when I’m most likely to resort to violence. For me, violence is more likely to manifest itself in shouted or hurtful words, but we all know (contrary to what we learned as children) that words DO hurt and can cause wounds that can take years to heal. Sometimes words inflict the kind of pain that never heal.

So, when I’m ready to punch someone (literally or metaphorically), I know it’s time for me to take a step back. Sneak in a 20-minute nap. Have a snack. Drink some water. Maybe even pray about it. (I know. Radical stuff.)

We often don’t think of self-care and soul care as tools of nonviolence, but peaceful responses to stressful, upsetting and tension-filled situations require energy and imagination on our part. And when we are weary and worn-out, responding to violence with violence can often feel like the easiest thing to do.

**Action:** Pay attention to those times when anger and violence are welling up within you. Have a plan to de-escalate your own self so that you can respond in ways that are peaceful and redemptive.

**Prayer:** *Prince of peace, lead us in your way. Help us to be a peaceful, transformative presence in this world that is hell-bent on violence. Amen.*



Anne Russ is an ordained pastor with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has a heart for small church ministry, Christian camping and the power of the Web to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Anne is a fiercely supportive theater mom, a loud laughter and a lover of good stories. She is a displaced Southerner living in New York who pastors through her online platform, [DoubtingBeliever.com](http://DoubtingBeliever.com).

## Monday, September 12

*He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:4 (NRSV)*

This Scripture is inscribed into a wall across the street from the United Nations headquarters in New York. It presents an image of a world without war and in which weapons and violence can be transformed into something more constructive.

I want to call attention to the word *beat*. It is active, not passive. It implies that not only words, but physical action is required to transform a sword into a plowshare. Additionally, to take one thing and turn it into something else requires both creativity and imagination. Further, if every sword and spear is to be transformed, it is not something one can do alone. It is a process that requires all of us.

Yet, when we think of peacemaking, we often mistake it as being a passive activity. If someone is mean to us, we'll sit there and take it. We'll turn the other cheek. When something bad happens in our world, our primary response is with prayers. But true, nonviolent peacemaking is an action that is spiritual, physical and done in community.

Therefore, peace is not simply the absence of conflict or violence. It is an activity that we choose to engage in every day with our bodies, minds, hearts and spirits. May we be courageous and creative enough to engage in it.

**Action:** Do something creative such as making a piece of art or music. Consider how it can be used as part of your peacemaking witness or advocacy work and how it can be done collaboratively with others in your community.

**Prayer:** *Loving God, we pray for peace in your world, for nonviolent resolutions to conflicts among your children. May we remember that we are not alone in seeking peace and that Jesus provides us with the ultimate example of seeking change through nonviolence. Amen.*



Simon Doong is the associate for Peacemaking with the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program. He oversees the development and updating of select congregational resources, both print and digital. He coordinated the webinar series on how faith communities can address gun violence, *Standing Our Holy Ground*; oversaw the development of the Companion Guide to the Commitment to Peacemaking; co-hosts *A Matter of Faith: A*



Presby Podcast; and interfaces with Presbyterians on specific topics such as gun violence and peace church discernment.

## Tuesday, September 13

*Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. Jeremiah 22:3a (NRSV)*

Several years ago, I led 20 teenagers from Arkansas on a mission trip to serve with Memphis Youth Mission. We had a free day and decided we would visit the Civil Rights Museum. My hope was for the youth to engage with and learn from the structural oppression that poisons the roots of this country. I wanted them to wrestle with their privilege and be moved to action. I wanted them to see the young people of the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who transformed and led the civil rights movement.

I am embarrassed to admit I didn't learn until I was an adult that Rosa Parks, the SNCC and many others were trained at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. The Highlander Center that to this day, still trains people to organize, work for justice and liberation within their communities. As I walked through exhibits outlining 400 years of violence, the roots of structural racism and the civil rights movement in the American South, I eventually found myself at the bus. The bus that represents and honors the women of the Montgomery bus boycott. I was overwhelmed as I thought of the women who endured multiple intersections of oppression and hatred, who resisted through nonviolence. They were trained, prepared and ready for this action. They were sustained by the love and power of community. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would preach the next year, the answer is not to choose inaction, nor to give in to ways of evil, but "to organize mass nonviolent resistance based on the principle of love."

**Action:** Educate yourself on the history of the civil rights movement and allow it to inform and encourage your own justice work.

**Prayer:** *Creator, let us live into love and be moved to action. Shake us up and move us from places of comfort and complicity into places of discomfort and resistance. Let us speak up against that which is evil and oppressive. May we embody a peace that is restless and transformative. May we use our power to support those working within their communities crying out for justice and liberation. Amen.*



Sarah Leer (she/her/hers) is a native Arkansan who served PC(USA) churches in Austin, Texas; Northwest Arkansas; and currently serves in Dallas. Sarah is a graduate of Wake Forest University, Columbia Theological Seminary and the Clinton School of Public Service. She is a practical theologian who is living into her call to deconstruct systems and disrupt the status quo in order to seek liberation, justice and belonging in solidarity with those living on the margins.

Sarah is working on her Doctor in Educational Ministry at Columbia Theological Seminary. A lifelong Presbyterian, Sarah enjoys singing Broadway songs in her car, random road trips and adventures, geeking out over pop culture, traveling the world with friends, hanging out with her family, board games, watching SEC college football and attending youth conferences that include energizers.

[civilrightsmuseum.org](http://civilrightsmuseum.org)

[highlandercenter.org](http://highlandercenter.org)

[www.civilrightsmuseum.org/the-year-they-walked](http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/the-year-they-walked)

[kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church)

**Wednesday, September 14**

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in God, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13 (NIV)*

Promoting nonviolence is a primary pursuit of peacemaking. Skillful, intentional communication is required for peaceful resolutions on an international scale in war-torn regions, in the conflicts experienced in our local communities and even within our households. This communication requires practice and practice and more practice.

What if this practice of peaceful, nonviolent communication begins *within* us? The way we treat ourselves internally is the seed from which our actions toward others will grow. This “self-care” work is a valuable undertaking as it impacts our work for nonviolence in our households, communities and world. You are a valuable part of the body of Christ. Caring for yourself provides a solid foundation from which to participate in the peacemaking work of Christ in the world.

I propose that the best starting place is to practice a posture of empathy. Practice empathy toward yourself today. What do you notice? Does the “self-talk” in your head sound peaceful? Gracious? Empathetic? Or are you quick to criticize, judge and berate yourself? How can you shift the words you speak to yourself in a direction that honors the precious beloved creation of God that you are?

May you nurture and grow this seed of empathy, and may you bear the fruit called peace.

**Action:** Journal what you observe today as you notice your “self-talk.” Replace any hurtful statements with words of affirmation.

**Prayer:** *Guide me, Jesus, in the pursuit of peace. Amen.*



Amy Lewis serves as the mission specialist to the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program. She brings a social work perspective to her work, based on her years of advocating, networking and supporting nursing home residents, as well as families and children in crisis. Amy resides in southern Indiana with her husband and teenage children.

## Thursday, September 15

*And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he returned to the temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and taught them. The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?" They said this to test him, because they wanted a reason to bring an accusation against him. Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger.*

*They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone." Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd. John 8:1–9 (CEB)*

I once read a prayer that seemed odd, while at the same time was so truthful in calling me to confession. I am not sure who wrote the prayer, but I found it in *Prayers: From Adoration to Zeal* by C. Welton Gaddy. A portion of the prayer says:

**Honestly, God, if Jesus had told us to cast a stone at someone only if we were without sin, I am afraid that someone would have been killed by stoning. Not because we are perfect people, but because, when it comes to our own sins, we are dishonest people.**

When I consider the woman mentioned in John 8, I recall the nonviolent tactic that Jesus used. The nonviolent tactic required that those who were going to do the abusing first consider their own flaws. When Jesus inquires of her accusers, she had no answers for him. Which is, in my opinion, the right response. It is not our responsibility to make excuses or provide reasoning for the ones eager to abuse.

**Action:** Examine your words, actions and deeds. For what sins should you seek to ask God for forgiveness? Use your own experience to write a prayer of confession. Pray about this for three days and then write a prayer of assurance that tells why you believe you have been forgiven.

**Prayer:** *As a dishonest person, God forgive me for siding with abusers by not checking my own sinful ways. God, I do not condone violence and I do not want to become numb to its existence. Help me to find ways to avoid the silent consent of violence and show me ways to help prevent violence, too. In the name of Jesus, Amen.*



The Rev. Cecelia D. Armstrong is a cradle Presbyterian. She was educated at Spelman College; the University of Southern Mississippi; the Interdenominational Theological Center, where she attended Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary; and is currently enrolled at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree. She was ordained as a deacon, and then an elder, before she accepted the call on her life into ministry.

Cecelia served Grady Memorial Hospital as a chaplain and Beth Salem as supply pastor. Cecelia also served as solo pastor of grace Presbyterian Church in Lantana, Florida, and now is the very proud associate pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church on James Island in Charleston, South Carolina.

## Friday, September 16

*Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Matthew 26:50b–52 (NIV)*

Often when threatened, we want to fight back. It is part of our nature. But in Jesus' betrayal, we receive a different message. Jesus flips the script and world upside down. Instead of fighting back with sword and violence, much like those who came to arrest Jesus, we are told to put our swords back.

That is a hard lesson for most of us. We want to fight with all we have when we are threatened. But Jesus calls us and challenges us to find another way to fight. Put the swords down and use your words and actions, for that is where power truly comes from. Fight systems by doing exactly what they don't expect — fight without violence. Fight with your words, your energy, through protests and civil actions, take to the streets and use your voice, not your weapons, work to bring about change through your resistance.

**Action:** Spend a moment reflecting on your personal context and community. Think about the areas of your life that you tend to lead and work for change with the power of the sword. Now, step back and think about those places and organizations in your community that fight back and work for justice without the power of the sword. Create a list and try to join one or more for upcoming events they are hosting. Find a way to participate, to engage in and work with them to bring about change and peace to your corner of the world. See how your outlook on peace and justice change as you approach it from a nonviolent perspective.

**Prayer:** *Gracious God, we know that we are called to put away our swords, but that is often easier said than done. Give us the courage and strength to do so this day. Enliven us to your ways of justice, equip us with the voice and action needed to bring about your peace and justice to our hurting world. When we are complicit in systems of oppression and abuse, awaken us to this and work within our hearts to bring transformation. May all that we do in this world be done to usher in your great peace for all Creation. Amen.*



The Rev. Maggie Alsup lives on iced coffee, believes that Disney movies are for all ages, is obsessed with hippos and hails from the great state of Oklahoma. She loves to cook and try new baking recipes when she isn't traveling and exploring new places across the U.S. and world. She is convinced that if she could give up

her love of bacon, she could become a vegetarian. Maggie has served as a youth director in Arkansas and Alaska, which sparked her love to work with young adults in the church. After earning her Master of Divinity at Columbia Theological Seminary, she served in campus ministry at Clemson University and in her current call at Lyon College in Batesville, Arkansas. Her passion in life is helping empower and equip students for the life and ministry of the church universal.



## Saturday, September 17

*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24 (CEB)*

I made the mistake yesterday asking God for a “peace bomb.” That’s a juxtaposition of two words if I ever saw one. What I was asking for was an “invasion of love” — there I go again.

Not the right descriptive language to use when talking about *peace*, but I really needed an aggressive invasion of peace in my life. One that took me by surprise and threw me off my normal rhythms of worry and anxiety. I wanted to be knocked right into a state of Zen and feel peace at my core. I wanted to be held so tightly by the peace that there was no way to escape its unrelenting grip on my life.

We associate nonviolence with passivity, but this doesn’t affect its potency. Those who “fight for justice” fight with the same fervor and fire but use different means to obtain the desired result. Often these ways shock the opponent — expecting elevated violence and aggression to be reciprocated. The approach of nonviolence gives the peacemaker the chance to utilize creative tactics to meet the intended goal.

Nonviolence is *not* non-action. We must actively respond to chaos that surrounds.

**Action:** The next time you feel the need to light a candle to claim a moment of peace, write an email to a government official first. When you are done meditating, make a donation of time or money to a peacemaking organization.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, when we feel those impulses to act out give us the courage to turn them into a call to action. Instead of lashing out transform that energy into a desire to serve. Amen.*



Kelly Fitzgerald is a PC(USA) pastor who lives on Florida’s coast reveling in God’s creation with every glorious sunset.

## Week 3: The Intersection Between Racism and Poverty

Sunday, September 18

*I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call.*  
Ephesians 1:18a (CEB)

There are many statistics that cite the disparity of wealth between the white population and the Black and Latinx populations in the United States, but our family lived it and witnessed it during my daughter's time in high school.

In a town whose public school system had a high rate of white flight to private schools and neighboring town districts, we sent our daughter to a school where she was in the minority. Less than 15% of the student body was white. At her graduation, she was easily spotted as she was the only blond female in the 300-member class.

While we were by no means the richest people in town, she was one of the wealthiest students at her school — something she tried very hard to keep on the down-low. The correlation between race and poverty was not hard for her to make.

Now at college with a predominantly white student body, our daughter has realized that her fellow students don't know what she knows. They haven't lived with, studied with, played with and performed with people who don't look like them, people whose families struggle to pay rent, people for whom daily bread is not guaranteed. Her world view is different. Often, our very opinionated daughter is not very patient with her current classmates' ignorance on the causes and systemic cycles of poverty — especially when it is related to race. She is much more aware of her privilege than the average 21-year-old white woman because she lived in the midst of people who did not share her status.

It is easy to ignore and dismiss articles and statistics.

It is much harder to ignore and dismiss *people* — especially people with whom you are in community.

**Action:** Take an assessment of your communities — school, church, neighborhood, social and professional groups. What is the makeup of those social networks? What shifts can you make to be more involved in communities where people who don't look like you make up the majority?

**Prayer:** *Loving God, open the eyes of our hearts to the people around us. Help us to forge communities that make the systems of injustice in our world impossible to ignore and imperative to address. May we work with each other side by side. May they know we are Christians by our love. Amen.*



Anne Russ is an ordained pastor with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has a heart for small church ministry, Christian camping and the power of the Web to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Anne is a fiercely supportive theater mom, a loud laughter and a lover of good stories. She is a displaced Southerner living in New York who pastors through her online platform, [DoubtingBeliever.com](http://DoubtingBeliever.com).

## Monday, September 19

*The Lord takes his place in court; he rises to judge the people.*

*The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people:*

*“It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses.*

*What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?”*

*declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty. The Lord says, “The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, strutting along with swaying hips, with ornaments jingling on their ankles. Therefore the Lord will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion; the Lord will make their scalps bald.” In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, the earrings and bracelets and veils, the headdresses and anklets and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, the signet rings and nose rings, the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls. Instead of fragrance there will be a stench; instead of a sash, a rope; instead of well-dressed hair, baldness; instead of fine clothing, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding. Your men will fall by the sword, your warriors in battle. The gates of Zion will lament and mourn; destitute, she will sit on the ground. Isaiah 3:13–26 (NIV)*

After pronouncing judgment against the people for their brutality against the poor, Isaiah calls out the excessive wealth displayed in the lavish dress of the women of Israel. The prophet is making a direct connection between the culture of luxury among the powerful and wealthy and the culture of misery and suffering among the poor.

This is a prophetic call for modesty — true biblical modesty, which isn’t a matter of exposed flesh but exposed wealth. For generations the church has willfully misapplied Scripture’s call to modesty. We have rules about the length of shorts worn by adolescent girls, the width of their tank-top straps and the tightness of their yoga pants, but exposed flesh was never the prophet’s concern. He was making the case that their love of high-end bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces was crushing the people and grinding the face of the poor.

Isaiah wanted those with wealth to choose love of neighbor over love of fashion. King David praised God when his cup ran over — but those who came after him never made that mistake. They never allowed God’s blessings to flow through them to other people — they simply bought a bigger cup. Creation is good — there is enough for shalom, the mutual flourishing of all living beings. But when some of us take more than we need, we consign others to a life of lack.

In America, past and present, that often happens deliberately when white people pass laws and create policies — like redlining, gentrification and funding schools through property taxes —

designed to create and maintain economic disparities benefiting white people — all the while lecturing people impoverished by these systems about “taking financial responsibility.” We need to advocate for a holy culture of economic modesty with as much vigor and intensity as we ever did for misogynistic dress codes.

**Action:** Make a modesty audit of your life. How are you displaying signs of your wealth — do you post pictures of vacations or lavish gifts on social media? Are there upcoming purchases that you could reconsider through a lens of true biblical modesty?

**Prayer:** *Giving and gracious God, we know that there is more than enough in your good creation. Help us to not take more than we need and to share what we have so that no one is in need. Amen.*



Kate Murphy is the pastor of The Grove Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. She and her husband are raising three daughters and zero pets. She enjoys reading, running, talking and procrastinating.

## Tuesday, September 20

*The Lord loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of God's unfailing love.*  
Psalm 33:5 (NIV)

Whether we like to believe or acknowledge it, those of us who are white have participated (willingly or even unwittingly) in systems that perpetuate the cycle of poverty for our non-white neighbors. Perhaps none can so directly trace our participation than those who are descended from white veterans of World War II.

While there are numerous ways black veterans were prevented from receiving the benefits of the GI Bill ([you can learn more here](#)), none was so instrumental in helping to create the wealth gap between white and black that exists today as the VA home loan program. The VA guaranteed the loans, but did not administer them, so any institution who chose to refuse loans to Black people was free to do so.

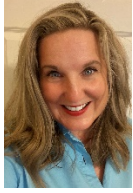
According to historian Ira Katznelson in the book *When Affirmative Action Was White*, in 1947, only two of the more than 3,200 VA-guaranteed home loans in 13 Mississippi cities went to Black borrowers. In New York and the northern New Jersey suburbs, fewer than 100 of the 67,000 mortgages insured by the GI bill supported home purchases by non-white people.

If the house your white grandfather bought in 1950 Levittown (Long Island or Pennsylvania) for \$4,500 under the GI bill is worth \$400,000 today, your family wealth is going to be greater than your friend whose Black grandfather couldn't even get a loan at the time.

No matter how progressive, inclusive and anti-racist you think you are, if you look like me, you are benefiting from racist systems designed to benefit us. May we not let denial, guilt or lack of understanding keep us from working to dismantle these systems.

**Action:** Educate yourself (and others) about the unjust and unbalanced systems that have caused the racial disparity in generational wealth. Knowing they exist is imperative to reversing their effects.

**Prayer:** *God of justice, help us put aside our pride and any preconceived notions we may be harboring when it comes to systems of oppression. May we be open to learning, growing and changing to help bring about your Kin-dom here on earth. Amen.*



Anne Russ is an ordained pastor with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has a heart for small church ministry, Christian camping and the power of the Web to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Anne is a fiercely supportive theater mom, a loud laughter and a lover of good stories. She is a displaced Southerner living in New York who pastors through her online platform, [DoubtingBeliever.com](http://DoubtingBeliever.com).

### Wednesday, September 21

*So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. 1 Corinthians 12:25–26 (NIV)*

When any part of the body of Christ is suffering, we all suffer. Today the suffering is being disproportionately borne by people of color. Knowingly and unknowingly, we have formed great division in the body. Political and financial leaders have created a racial wealth gap in this country that exacerbates the already-disproportionate suffering people of color experience.

BIPOC brothers and sisters among us are disproportionately killed by guns and Covid, laid off, evicted, stopped at the border when seeking asylum and plagued by widening educational disparities. Poverty and food insecurity are rising. Survival is day-to-day life for too many. Jillian Hanesworth, Buffalo, New York’s poet laureate and an East Side resident, said after the May 14 shooting of 10 Black individuals at an East Side supermarket, “I think a lot of people, especially on the East Side of Buffalo, have been forced to live in a perpetual state of survival. And it’s always something. If it’s not something with the police, it’s something in the water. If it’s not the water, it’s public health. It’s literacy. It’s crime. It’s housing. All of this is a symptom of poverty. ... So, we have been stuck in this state of survival. We don’t exist to survive. We can demand more. We are owed more.”

It is well past time when we should live in a world where all parts of the body are of equal concern for each other. Achieving a body with no division may seem like a dream, but we have been called by God to strive for it. Let us strive forward together.

**Action:** Educate yourself and advocate! Contact your Bread for the World organizer (find your organizer [here](#)) and ask her/him to lead a group you’re a part of in the Racial Wealth Gap Learning Simulation. To learn about the simulation, go to [bread.org/library/racial-wealth-gap-learning-simulation](https://bread.org/library/racial-wealth-gap-learning-simulation). Get involved in the Poor People’s Campaign. Learn more at [poorpeoplescampaign.org](https://poorpeoplescampaign.org). Both organizations have good advocacy suggestions, actions you can participate in and legislative policy priorities.

**Prayer:** *Oh God, suffering is all around us and we lament the pain and the grief that comes with it. Open our ears so that we may hear the message of those who are hurting. Open our eyes so that we may see injustices down to their root causes. Open our minds so that we may better understand the complexities of unjust systems and situations and then see ways forward that honor those who suffer. Use us, God, to help you achieve a world without division, where all parts are honored equally. Amen.*





Wendy Gist has been the mission advocate for Hunger, Poverty and Peacemaking Issues for the Presbyteries of San Fernando and San Gabriel in the Los Angeles area for the past 16 years. From 1994–2000, she and her husband, David, were mission co-workers in Nicaragua. They both worked for CEPAD, the Council of Evangelical Churches in Nicaragua. Wendy’s primary job was being a delegation coordinator for countless groups coming to learn about Nicaragua and the Nicaraguan culture. Wendy is also the proud mother of two young adults, both of whom were born in Nicaragua. She and her husband have recently become short-term foster parents for unaccompanied minors coming across the border, which is a whole new adventure. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, traveling and being out in nature.

## Thursday, September 22

*If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:1–5 (NRSV)*

One of my favorite partnerships I experienced growing up was when my father, a pastor for the predominantly white Presbyterian Church in our town in the deep South, worked with a few Black ministers from different denominations to coordinate a church service where all our churches would worship together. This was perhaps one of the only times where any church in Lake Charles, Louisiana, had a pretty even split of Black and white worshippers. After worship we would all gather around tables for fried catfish. It was a partnership in the Spirit that I'm sure made the Lord's joy complete!

As I got older, I began to learn what a church budget was. Our church budget was a constant discussion topic, and at times, seemed to be all that some church members could focus on. Meanwhile, friends from a local Latinx church (where finances were tight) would tell me about all the work their church did: feeding those who were hungry and putting on a toy drive for lower-income families at Christmas. Perhaps we can all learn from the small, lower-income churches, put our selfish ambition aside and look to the interest of others rather than our own. It is time to join Christ at their table where we are called to live out what the world calls impossible! One mind, one love and partnership through the Spirit.

**Action:** Develop a partnership through the Spirit with a congregation different than yours. Remember that you are not there to help, but rather to experience and learn while worshiping among others.

**Prayer:** *Oh Lord, we thank you for your call to live as one body through you. We ask that you lead us to help make your joy complete through our actions and the love we have for one another. Help us remember to look for the interests of others and to be the light for a dark world. As we face a world filled with hate, we are reminded to love one another just as you love us, oh God. Bring us all under one partnership through your Spirit. Amen.*



Aaron Seay is beginning his second year of his Master of Divinity hybrid program at Duke Divinity School. He is a preacher's kid who felt a call to ministry halfway through college after working as a leader for Mo-Ranch youth conferences for several years and takes pride in working as coordinator of youth ministry for the Presbytery of New Covenant. He currently lives in Houston with his dog, Easton.

## Friday, September 23

*You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. Isaiah 55:12a (ESV)*

The author of Isaiah 55 is speaking to a people in exile and explaining to them what they can hope to do and to be once that exile is done. He is extolling them to keep hope and faith in a difficult time because of God's presence and action in their lives. I wonder what it sounded like to those exiled folks.

For people in poverty, a voice of hope can sound like a lie or something unattainable because of the circumstances of daily life that are without the necessary resources for thriving. For people of color a voice speaking this sort of hope might be unbelievable because it is not a reality in life now. For those who face poverty or racism in daily life, there are many needs that go unmet because of lack of access or discrimination. When poverty and racism meet, things are compounded and even more difficult. Singing a song of joy might seem completely out of the realm of possibility.

Our hope is that living into Jesus' command to love will alleviate poverty and end racism. For those of us with the privilege of wealth or of whiteness this love means we must be willing to name our privilege and use it to assist those who have neither. For all of us living Jesus' command means we will one day live to "go out with joy and be led forth in peace" in a world where poverty and racism are no more.

**Action:** Read some stories of [the PC\(USA\) Committee on Self-Development of People](#) and the impact this work has in helping many people of color overcome poverty and share a story in your community.

**Prayer:** *God of the marginalized, put feet to our prayers and lead us to lift up and listen to voices that are not being heard. Help us to use whatever power and privilege we may possess to create a better world for all. Amen.*



The Rev. Jessica Dixon is a transitional pastor/intentional interim serving Old Tennent Presbyterian Church in Manalapan, New Jersey. She is a transitional ministry teacher, and on the Team of Three (leadership team) for the Transitional Ministry Education Consortium. She has served as transitional pastor to churches in Chicago Presbytery, Indian Nations Presbytery (Norman, Oklahoma) and now in the new Presbytery of the Coastlands. A native of Denver and a graduate of McCormick Seminary, she has loved all the places she has had a chance to see and the ways she has had a chance to serve.

## Saturday, September 24

*For you always have the poor with you.* Mark 14:7 (NRSV)

As a child, I grew up with the refrain, “We don't see color.” It was often repeated by adults in my community who meant well, who thought they simplified the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s message for children's ears. My parents shared with us the music of Peter, Paul and Mary; we watched “The Cosby Show”; and we had an extra set of grandparents who were a gay couple. Iconic white middle-class liberals in a notoriously conservative pocket of the United States.

This refrain of “we don't see color” echoed throughout my life. As I grew, I studied history and social studies, and I earned degrees in Political Science and Political Theory. I realized the narrative that I had been taught about race, color, creed, etc., being “meaningless” was a fallacy. My elders meant well, but they oversimplified the lessons learned by those who fought in the civil rights movement. As the scales fell from my eyes, I learned about the insidious nature of environmental racism, housing discrimination and voter rights denials. In course after course, from story to story, I realized that the colorblindness that I had so professed was part of the more immense evil of systemic racism.

A parallel between the oversimplification of the Rev. Dr. King's message to a single sentence, and Jesus saying, “The poor will always be with you” in the Gospel of Mark, is not lost on me. After many years of thinking about the intersection of race and poverty, these two stories overlap effortlessly. The Rev. Dr. King reminded us often that we cannot ignore differences away, pay our way out of disparity or simplify the narrative of poverty into sound bites.

Christ wasn't affirming poverty as a natural state of being when he said the poor will always be with us. He reminded his followers to take moments of joy in their lives and refreshment before coming back to the fight. To be restored in the spirit so that they could dismantle the systems that cause suffering. Jesus tells Judas the poor will be with you always only once. He repeatedly tells those who follow him that they are commissioned to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted and visit the imprisoned. The poor are with us is not a mandate to continue to oppress and discriminate, but rather to address the needs as generations come to pass.

**Action:** Consider where you have accepted things as they are: ignored needs that could be addressed, pled colorblindness, taken hard-heartedness that poverty is an unanswerable issue? How has your perception of race and poverty changed throughout your life?

**Prayer:** *God of the poor, lead us out of complacency and move us away from well-meaning teachings that simply aren't true. May we not shrug our shoulders at issues of race and poverty, but continue to work for peace and justice for all God's children. Amen.*



The Rev. Kimberly Reinholz is an Episcopal priest, currently between calls, most recently the associate rector of Grace and Holt Trinity Church in Richmond, Virginia. She currently lives in New Jersey with her clergy spouse, two kids and a rescue dog. She has a passion for working with youth and young adults and believes that the church isn't dying, rather changing. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be.

## Week 4: Immigration/Migration

### Sunday, September 25

*Because the Lord your God is the God of all gods and Lord of all lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God who doesn't play favorites and doesn't take bribes. He enacts justice for orphans and widows, and he loves immigrants, giving them food and clothing. That means you must also love strangers because you were strangers in Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:17–19 (CEB)*

America is a land of immigrants. Unless you are Native American, your people came from somewhere else.

When my in-laws immigrated from Germany, just 12 years after the end of World War II, they were not greeted with open arms in a country where anti-German sentiment was still strong. With the exception of a few kind and generous souls who made all the difference in their transition to this country, the good Christians of New England did not adhere to the biblical directives on how to treat strangers in their land.

For those of us who look to the Bible as our guide for living, there isn't much wiggle room when it comes to how we should treat immigrants. We are to welcome them, care for them and treat them fairly. The government will have rules about who can and cannot live on this land, but our mandate as Christians is pretty clear.

The Jews were strangers in Egypt. Many years later Jesus and his parents were strangers in that same country, fleeing an oppressive dictator who wanted them dead. Our ancestors were once strangers in this land we call home.

We are called to love strangers in our land — not only because we were once strangers, but because we are called to love as God loves.

**Action:** Look into local efforts to welcome immigrants into your community. Consider ways that you can help with time, money or other gifts you have to offer.

**Prayer:** God who knows no stranger, help us to love ALL of our neighbors and to make those who have been displaced from their homes feel at home in our midst. Amen.



Anne Russ is an ordained pastor with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has a heart for small church ministry, Christian camping and the power of the Web to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Anne is a fiercely supportive theater mom, a loud laughier and a lover of good stories. She is a displaced Southerner living in New York who pastors through her online platform, [DoubtingBeliever.com](http://DoubtingBeliever.com).



**Monday, September 26**

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.* Matthew 10:40 (NRSV)

This past January I participated in a Contextual Immersions J-Term course on Immigration at the U.S.-Mexico Border, sponsored by Columbia Theological Seminary. During the 2½-week course my classmates, professors and I gathered often on Zoom to connect with new colleagues working and living at the border. We were able to hear firsthand stories of hope and joy, loss and longing, leaving home and arriving new places, endings and beginnings, and over and over, themes of being welcomed and welcoming others.

As we heard these stories of our neighbors brought closer by technology, we began to share relational moments and orient ourselves as new characters in the lives of one another. No longer were we strangers or “others” but rather a new grouping of activists, students, leaders and children of God. We were called to action to invest ourselves in our local refugee and migrant communities and to work to dispel the often-taught narrative that we should keep our distance. Reminded that just as Jesus was once a refugee, we were called into fully welcoming immigrants in whatever way we can.

As people of faith, we have a calling to examine how we are currently practicing radical welcome and acceptance to migrants and displaced people. The laws and practices of the United States have not historically been welcoming to all who want to come here, and we have tended to “other” those who are leaving the places they have always called home. Perhaps it is time we begin to open our doors wider and extend invitations of welcome to all.

**Action:** Research local businesses run by refugees and immigrants. Grab a friend, plan a visit, and support their work and trade.

**Prayer:** *Holy One, Holy Three, just as you have moved and danced throughout history, we ask that you continue to journey alongside all who travel across land and sea. May we ever be reminded of your liberating hope and radical welcome as borders are crossed and new homes are cultivated. Amen.*



Courtney Anne Henry is a current seminarian at Columbia Theological Seminary in the Dual Degree Program (M.Div. and MAPT '24). She is an inquirer in the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta where she is currently discerning a creative and artistic calling to ministry.

## Tuesday, September 27

*Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” John 5:8 (NRSV)*

Migration headlines focus on people being “led forth in peace” to a safer home. However, not all immigrants are motivated by the search for peace. Many “go out in joy” toward opportunity. The joy they embody is not the joy of unfettered glee. It is a joy closer to that felt by the man at the Bethesda pool. When Jesus says, “Stand up, take your mat and walk,” joy was absolutely part of the healed man’s reaction, yet rarely does joy show up on its own.

It is still true that no one would help this man when he was in need. His joy is mixed with loneliness. The life he has become accustomed to changes in a moment. The new life is better, but there will be things to grieve alongside the joy. Then, on his first stroll in 38 years, he gets shamed for carrying his mat on the sabbath. Joy frequently is mixed with other emotions. When sadness, anger, fear, shame, guilt (etc.) twist around our joy, we second-guess the validity of the joy. Yet if we find ourselves moved to go out, the fuel is undoubtedly joy. Joy that is affirmed and championed is strong enough to drag any other emotional baggage we are packing for the journey. This kind of joy empowers people every day to stand up, take up their beds and walk toward a better life.

**Action:** Spend three minutes affirming your joy. It may be buried deep in fear or shame. Be intentional and give your joy a moment to be acknowledged. How can you be a champion for someone else’s joy?

**Prayer:** *Leading God, the joy in me is rooted in resurrection, so I know it cannot be destroyed. Show me those who need to be reminded and chose me to be a champion of joy in my community. I am ready to stand up, take my mat and walk. Amen.*



The Rev. Bethany Peerbolte, or RevBethany as she is known to her 300,000 followers on TikTok, serves as an associate pastor at First Presbyterian in Birmingham, Michigan. If you ever meet her in real life, DO NOT ask her about cults unless you have at least five hours to waste.

### Wednesday, September 28

*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* Matthew 25:35 (ESV)

I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine from 2006–2008. During that time, I formed and developed relationships I still carry with me to this day. My time in Ukraine developed my call to service and care for other people. Since this most recent invasion of Ukraine began, my family and friends have been displaced, struggling to survive. Some made it out. Some are still moving as internal refugees. On March 15, my host father, Vova, was killed by Russian artillery.

This war rages on and I still struggle to keep in contact. The week of May 7, my host mother and my youngest host brother joined other family members in a city of relative refuge. Yet we do not know how long they will be safe. We do not know how long this war will last.

Like any other conflict, we are often left wondering what good we can do. How can we save more lives like Vova's? Why could we not save them before? As a church that holds Matthew 25 as a central tenant, we are called to welcome the stranger. Sometimes that looks like donations. Sometimes that looks like hosting foreigners. Sometimes, it is a prayer such as the one below.

**Action:** Aside from praying and donating to our Presbyterian funds for refugees, here are other organizations that continue to help people in conflict zones and displaced persons in Ukraine: United Help Ukraine: [unitedhelpukraine.org](https://unitedhelpukraine.org). If you are interested in sponsoring Ukrainian refugees: [uscis.gov/humanitarian/uniting-for-ukraine](https://uscis.gov/humanitarian/uniting-for-ukraine). You can also learn more about what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is doing and donate through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance at [pda.pcusa.org/situation/ukraine](https://pda.pcusa.org/situation/ukraine).

Or, if you want to be of direct aid to a Ukrainian family who sheltered a stranger in their own land, you can reach out to me at [cameron.highsmith@gmail.com](mailto:cameron.highsmith@gmail.com), or through my Twitter account @ReformedCam.

**Prayer:**

*Holy God,*

*War rages and people are dying. It is hard to see all of your creation suffer from these injustices. In this continuing time of confusion and uncertainty, guide our hearts that we may make a difference. Guide us in your justice, love and mercy so we may care for your people. Help us to be vulnerable and strong for those who are relying on us. Amen.*



The Rev. Cameron Highsmith is a lifelong Arkansan and Presbyterian. After graduating college, Cameron joined the Peace Corps where he served as a youth development volunteer in Ukraine from 2006 to 2008. After working at a Presbyterian Camp, dabbling in the fine art of customer service, Cameron gave into God's calling and earned his M.Div. at San Francisco Theological Seminary and then discerned a call to chaplaincy. He currently serves in that capacity at Saline Memorial Hospice in Benton, Arkansas. In his free time, you can find Cameron spending time with his girlfriend, Lauren, enjoying all Razorbacks sports, brewing beer, reading and on the fields during the Little Rock Kickball Association seasons.

**Thursday, September 29**

*You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.*

Exodus 22:21 (NRSV)

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Hebrews 13:2 (NRSV)

Displacement as part of immigration is one of the important lessons that we have learned since leaving the United States of America and moving to the Netherlands. Ours is a self-imposed displacement where so many in our world (especially with what is going on in Ukraine) are being displaced because of circumstances beyond their control.

With displacement comes a certain amount of loneliness — saying goodbye to what is familiar and to those with whom you are accustomed to seeing on a regular basis. Saying goodbye to those you love.

The loneliness can be exacerbated by not knowing the language. Most Dutch people speak English and yet you are in their country, so learning the language is important and polite. Having to learn a different language has given us a new respect for people who move to a new country and catch on to the language quickly. All of these things tie together with being vulnerable and open to asking for help. One thing that we have noticed is our privilege.

We are white immigrants in a predominantly white country and sometimes are treated differently, more respectfully than people of color. We have always had respect for other people and cultures, and this respect has grown since we have chosen to live in another country and to be immigrants ourselves.

**Action:** Take time to reach out and have a conversation with someone who is from another culture/country. If you are unable to have a conversation, then take time to look up something you are curious about another culture/country.

**Prayer:** *God of all nations, help us to welcome and embrace the stranger. May we not look at one another as “other,” but as children of God, one and all. Amen.*



The Rev. Dr. Debbie Carl is a retired Presbyterian clergy who is now a professional life coach specializing in mental fitness. She has lived in the Netherlands for three years and has two grown children. She is married to Noël.

Lindsay Freeman is a social media content expert working with the Synod of the Sun. She has lived in the Netherlands for four years. Her partner is Mitchell and she is mom to Delilah, a perky Maltipoo.

## Friday, September 30

*When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don't take advantage of him. Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love him like one of your own. Remember that you were once foreigners in Egypt. I am God, your God. Leviticus 19:33–34 (MSG)*

What started as a fun family outing became my first summer job. I was the slowest blueberry picker those fields had ever seen.

For me, I split slim earnings between a college fund and gas money. For them ... it did not occur to me that families working in those fields could remotely live on what they made. It never occurred to me that they moved to work other fields, or how they managed dreams for their children's college education. I never asked.

Our culture makes it so easy to not ask about our neighbors. Loving the migrant, as God calls us to do, means overcoming our prejudicial tendencies. It means honoring economic refugees, in their work, in their person and in the beauty they bring to a diverse beloved community.

Our system makes it so easy to not ask about the immigrant experience. Loving the refugee means creating peace for those who flee violence, only to find layers of fear and frustration, xenophobia and housing insufficiency. It means effecting merciful and meaningful change through your actions and political voice.

Our world makes it so easy to not ask about the millions who shuffle across borders and through camps. Loving those who are displaced means advocating for a reverse of climate crises and military aggression. It means supporting holistic resettlement programs. Loving the sojourner means praying to de-center the comfort of native identity. We all have been given the grace of welcome and we are all called to extend that grace to others, including migrants, with radical compassion.

**Action:** Learn to say "Thank you" in as many languages as you can. A simple *dhanyabad* (Nepali) or *motshakeram* (Persian) can brighten someone's day more than we might ever expect.

**Prayer:** *God of the wandering Aramean, God of the displaced Savior, shine comfort on those who are finding new lands. Give us the courage to welcome sincerely and the strength to demand that of our cultures and leaders. Amen.*





The Rev. Hansen Wendlandt serves as the pastor for Community of Grace Presbyterian Church in Sandy, Utah. When he is not climbing up rocks or skiing down mountains, he dreams about working a big garden and weekends camping in a van down by a river.

**Saturday, October 1**

*By the rivers of Babylon—*

*There we sat down, and there we wept*

*When we remembered Zion ...*

*How could we sing the Lord's song*

*In a foreign land?*

Psalm 137:1, 4 (NRSV)

What does *home* mean to you? Home is at the core of a person's identity. Home is a place of safety, of certainty, of ownership over one's community. It is a place of belonging, of connection, of tradition, of joy. It is to be *rooted*. What, then, does home mean when you have been forcibly uprooted? How can you replant your roots in a land disconnected from your culture and tradition? How do you feel safe, experience a sense of belonging? How can you sing the song of your heart in a foreign land?

Over the past year, the evacuation of more than 76,000 Afghans from Kabul and the promise of welcoming 100,000 Ukrainians through the "Uniting for Ukraine" program received increasingly rare bipartisan support. This outpouring of support from across the aisle is a reminder that welcome for the stranger remains a core value in the United States.

In this case, however, welcome comes with a catch.

Instead of utilizing the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, the United States opted for Afghans and Ukrainians to receive "humanitarian parole" status, granting little to no access to stability and services. This is temporary protection for up to two years without guarantee for further protection; they'd have to find a way to stay, likely through the severely backlogged asylum system.

Being displaced from your home is already a terrible trauma, filled with grief for the land, traditions and communities left behind. Without access to lifesaving services and assurance of stability, that grief and trauma only compounds.

"Welcoming the stranger" is a necessary first step, but the work doesn't end there. Those with the power and resources must ensure that all who were uprooted find themselves in conditions where they are empowered to begin planting deep new roots. Through cultivating community and ensuring stability, we must do all we can to ensure the new Americans we welcome can find joy singing the songs of their heart in this foreign land.

**Action(s):**

1. Urge your representatives to provide pathways to citizenship for the Afghans and Ukrainians who have fled their countries.
2. Advocate for expanding the refugee admissions goal to 200,000 in 2023, fully funding the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and rebuilding the resettlement infrastructure across the country.
3. Connect with your local refugee resettlement agency and learn about how you can connect with local individuals and families seeking community and support as they begin planting roots in the United States.

**Prayer:** *God of the stranger, help us to welcome home those who find themselves displaced from their homes. Infuse in us a sense of radical hospitality for those in desperate need of welcome. Amen.*



Emily Wilkes is the mission specialist for Domestic Refugee Ministries with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Her previous work has included pastoring, organizing, teaching, writing and storytelling. She loves (mostly gentle) yoga, (mostly experimental) gardening, and reading (mostly through audiobooks). Her current home base is New Jersey where she lives with her

spouse, Eric, and rescue pup, Mako.

**Sunday, October 2**  
***World Communion Sunday***

*You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace.* Isaiah 55:12a (ESV)

While the legal community may anxiously await the first Monday in October when the Supreme Court begins its new term, those of us who follow the liturgical calendar look forward to the first Sunday in October — World Communion Sunday.

There is something truly special about having a day where Christians around the world are all coming to the table. Of course, it can get dicey in that the table of Jesus Christ is like so many other things in the church — we don't all agree on who gets to participate. So even on World Communion Sunday, we're not of one accord.

Communion only makes sense for me if everyone is welcome at the table. Jesus instituted the ritual at the Last Supper and said, "Do this in remembrance of me." No qualifiers (or disqualifiers, for that matter). Just do this. It grieves me every time I hear stories of people not being invited to participate or flat out turned away from the table of Jesus Christ.

Even on World Communion Sunday, not everyone is welcome at every table. But for me, the day is a promise of what we *could* be ... what we *should* be as a community in Christ. A reminder that all over the world, people who don't look like us or talk like us or live like us are all coming to the table. They are all invited, just as we are.

If Jesus included the one who was to betray him, who are we to decide who does and doesn't belong?

**Action:** Gather round the table of Jesus Christ with people you love and even people you dislike. Get a glimpse of the kingdom. Be nourished for the journey ahead. Go out with joy and be led forth with the peace of the One who always welcomes us to the table in your heart.

**Prayer:** *God of welcome and inclusion, may we go forth with great joy, spreading the Good News that all of God's children have a place at the table. Amen.*



Anne Russ is an ordained pastor with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She has a heart for small church ministry, Christian camping and the power of the Web to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Anne is a fiercely supportive theater mom, a loud laughter and a lover of good stories. She is a displaced Southerner living in New York who pastors through her online platform, [DoubtingBeliever.com](http://DoubtingBeliever.com).