

# Shared Life

The Monthly Newsletter of Old First Presbyterian Church

March 2019

Telephone 415-776-5552

Website [www.oldfirst.org](http://www.oldfirst.org)

Old First Concerts: [www.oldfirstconcerts.org](http://www.oldfirstconcerts.org)

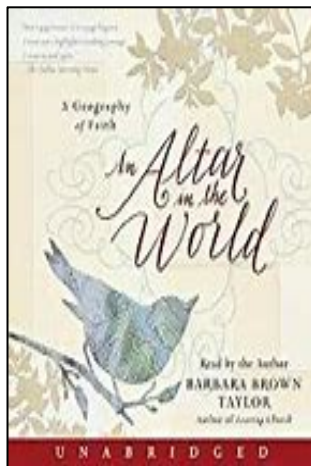
## Maggi's Musings

Lent begins with the joint Ash Wednesday service with the clergy and people of St. Luke's Episcopal Church **at Old First at 6:00 pm on March 6.**

Our Lenten journey begins with ashes – a symbol of death – that lead to resurrected life celebrated on Easter. This forty-day season of Lent signifies a time to turn around, to change directions, to learn a new way of being. It is a time for us to prepare for the mystery and joy of Easter by taking on a new discipline that focuses our life or by letting go of an old habit that gets in the way of fully following the Risen One.



This year we will focus on ways to go deeper in our faith by reading a book by Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. Taylor is an Episcopal priest, a college professor and a writer whose books are found on church folks' shelves and in the New York Times bestseller list. She describes herself as a "Writer, Speaker, and Spiritual Contrarian." She reads scripture in amazing ways and looks at faith and life in ways that refresh tired hearts. I quote her frequently in sermons and we have also read her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.



*An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* explores our longing for God and for spiritual depth. Taylor says even people who are not a member of a church can name this longing "for more meaning, more feeling, more connection more life. When I hear people talk about spirituality that seems to be what they are describing. They know that there is more to life than meets the eye." Taylor offers twelve practices, twelve things we do in everyday life as ways to connect us to the divine.

One reader "This book is not a page-turner. It s a page-lingerer." I invite you to read a single chapter, to read the whole book, or just to come and encounter some of the book in worship. We are going to focus on one chapter, one practice each week in worship on the Sundays in Lent: Chapters 1, 4, 5, 9, 8, and 12. We will take time during worship to explore each new practice.

My hope is we will find ways to go deeper this Lent and discover ways, opportunities, and moments to let God into our lives.

Peace, Maggi

Copies of *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* are available after worship in the Fellowship Hall for \$10.00.

### **An Excerpt from *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith***

Retrieved from [http://www.oprah.com/spirit/an-altar-in-the-world-excerpt-barbara-brown-taylor\\_1/all#ixzz5gsuElg00](http://www.oprah.com/spirit/an-altar-in-the-world-excerpt-barbara-brown-taylor_1/all#ixzz5gsuElg00), February 28, 2019

#### ***It is forbidden to taste of the pleasures of this world without a blessing.—The Talmud***

*As someone who has been paid to pronounce blessings at weddings and funerals, at baptisms and house blessings, at soup kitchens and foxhunts—as well as at lots and lots of weekly worship services—I think it is a big mistake to perpetuate the illusion that only certain people can bless things. Not everyone is vulnerable to this illusion, I know. Plenty of people say grace over meals in their own homes, asking God to bless the food they are about to receive from the divine bounty. A number more bless their children at bedtime, asking God to bring those children safely through the night. Where I live, you can sneeze in line at the post office and receive half a dozen blessings from people you do not even know.*

*Yet there remain a great many people who excuse themselves when asked to pronounce a formal blessing. They are not qualified, they say. They are not good with words. They would rather jump off a high diving board than try to say something holy in front of a bunch of other people. My guess is that even if you asked them to bless something in private—thereby separating the fear of public speaking from the fear of pronouncing a blessing—they would still demur. If you are one of those people, then only you know why. All I can tell you is how much the world needs you to reconsider.*

*I think that the best way to discover what pronouncing blessings is all about is to pronounce a few. The practice itself will teach you what you need to know.*

*Start with anything you like. Even a stick lying on the ground will do. The first thing to do is to pay attention to it. Did you make the stick? No, you did not. The stick has its own story. If you have the time to figure out what kind of tree it came from, that would be a start to showing the stick some respect. It is only "a stick" in the same way that you are "a human," after all. There is more to both of you than that. Is it on the ground because it is old or because it suffered mishap? Has it been lying there for a long time or did it just land? Is it fat enough for you to see its growth rings?*

#### ***The more aware you become, the more blessings you will find***

*If you look at the stick long enough, you are bound to begin making it a character in your own story. It will begin to remind you of someone you know, or a piece of furniture you once saw in a craft co-op. There is nothing wrong with these associations, except that they take you away from the stick and back to yourself. To pronounce a blessing on something, it is important to see it as it is. What purpose did this stick serve? Did a bird sit on it? Did it bear leaves that sheltered the ground from the hottest summer sun?*

*At the very least, it participated in the deep mystery of drawing water from the ground, defying the law of gravity to deliver moisture to its leaves. How does a stick do that, especially one this size? Smell it. Is the scent of sap still there? This is no less than the artery of a tree that you are holding in your hand. Its tissue has come from the sun and from the earth. Put it back where you found it and it will turn back into earth again. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes. Will you say a blessing first? No one can hear you, so you may say whatever you like.*

*"Bless you, stick, for being you."*

*"Blessed are you, o stick, for turning dirt and sun into wood."*

*"Blessed are you, Lord God, for using this stick to stop me in my tracks."*

*As I said earlier, the practice itself will teach you what you need to know. Start throwing blessings around and chances are you will start noticing all kinds of things you never noticed before. Did you ever notice the white and black striped stockings on the stick legs of that blessed mosquito before? Did you ever notice the tiny purple flowers on that blessed moss? One liability of pronouncing blessings out of doors is that it gets hard to walk on things. Once you become aware of the life in them, the kinship can really slow you down.*

*The same is true of other people. The next time you are at the airport, try blessing the people sitting at the departure gate with you. Every one of them is dealing with something significant. See that mother trying to contain her explosive two-year-old? See that pock-faced boy with the huge belly? Even if you cannot know for sure what is going on with them, you can still give a care. They are on their way somewhere, the same way you are. They are between places too, with no more certainty than you about what will happen at the other end. Pronounce a silent blessing and pay attention to what happens in the air between you and that other person, all those other people.*

### ***How events in life can influence your spiritual practice***

*No one's spiritual practice is exactly like anyone else's. Life meets each of us where we need to be met, leading us to the doors with our names on them. Yet because we are human, we almost never go where no one has gone before. I remember once when I went on a walk through the woods near my house. It had rained the day before. The path under my feet was soft. The air was fragrant with damp bark and leaf rot. I was glorying in my aloneness when I came to a wash in the trail, where yesterday's rain had deposited a fresh layer of silt. Looking down, I saw that it was really a guest book, signed with deer hooves, turkey feet, snail trails, and three paws of a raccoon. I was hardly alone. I was in the middle of a parade, with life going ahead of me and more life coming along behind me to lay down its print next to mine.*

*My father died after a small seizure caused by his advanced brain cancer knocked him for a loop two weeks before Christmas. After the seizure was over and the ambulance had taken him to the hospital, my mother and I followed in my car. Soon his small cubicle in the emergency room was full of my sisters, their sons, and our husbands, all crowded on a white bench set against the wall. The doctors and nurses checked my father's pupils, took his blood, rolled him over so they could replace his bathrobe with a hospital gown. They were in no hurry. No one spoke to my father, except one nurse who scolded him for wetting the stretcher.*

*Clearly, this was no emergency. These professionals had seen lots of old men die and this one was no different. Watching them do their work, the rest of us gradually realized that my father was dying too. Two weeks before Christmas, the hospital was full, or at least the floor where they put the people who were waiting to die. Because there was no room in the inn, the medical staff left us for long stretches. During these lulls, one or the other of us would get up and go to my father, standing over him so the harsh examining room light did not shine straight in his eyes. One of us would kiss him all over his forehead. Another would dip a pink sponge on a stick in water to wet his mouth. He was dazed from the seizure, but he knew who we were.*

*My mother and I lamented calling the ambulance. We should have kept him at home, we confessed to each other in low voices. But it had seemed an emergency to us. Watching him go rigid on the couch in the living room, we forgot that he was not ever going to get better. We did what we were taught to do when we were afraid someone was going to die. We called 911, forgetting that even they could not prevent him from dying. My sisters joined us with their own rehearsals of remorse, as the husbands and sons held our arms and rubbed our backs.*

### ***Blessings have healing power***

*While we were doing this, I noticed my husband get up and go over to my father, leaning down to say something in his ear. They had long loved each other. Years earlier, they had gone on a canoe ride meticulously planned,*

outfitted, directed, and concluded on schedule by my sometimes maddeningly compulsive father. Everything had gone according to plan—my father's plan—throughout which Ed had been uncharacteristically compliant. Then right at the end, when they were almost safe on dry land, Ed tipped the canoe as he got out of it and dumped my father in the river.

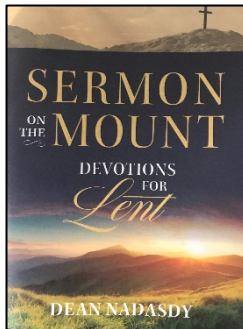
"I hope that was an accident," Ed said when my father surfaced, his Cabela's outfit soaked through with the same green water he was spewing out of his mouth. That my father had laughed at this memory was a testament to his love for my husband, who in the present was kneeling down on the linoleum floor by my father's bed to fit his head underneath my father's bony hand. As I watched, Ed reached up and put one of his big hands on top of my father's hand to make sure it did not slip off. Then he held still while my father's lips moved. After he stood up, he leaned over to say something else in my father's ear.

"What was that?" I asked when he came back to slump beside me again.

"I asked him to bless me," Ed said. "I asked him to give me his blessing."

This kind of blessing prayer is called a benediction. It comes at the end of something, to send people on their way. All I am saying is that anyone can do this. Anyone can ask and anyone can bless, whether anyone has authorized you to do it or not. All I am saying is that the world needs you to do this, because there is a real shortage of people willing to kneel wherever they are and recognize the holiness holding its sometimes bony, often

tender, always life-giving hand above their heads. That we are able to bless one another at all is evidence that we have been blessed, whether we can remember when or not. That we are willing to bless one another is miracle enough to stagger the very stars.



**Worship Committee**  
Committee co-chairs

Linda Reyder, Hsiaochien Chuang; Worship

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### Devotional Booklet

The Worship Committee invites you to join us in looking ahead to Lent and Easter. We have chosen *Sermon on the Mount: Devotions for Lent* by Dean Nadasdy for devotions during Lent. The ushers will be handing out copies March 3, one

week before the first of Lent. If you can't get to worship, please call the church office and request that one be sent to you.

### Easter Garden

We were surprised to learn about a shortage of Easter lilies this year! Our usual nursery reported this and let us know they will be unable to supply any this year. Fortunately, we used some azaleas last year and it was fine. So we will use only azaleas this year since they can do well in the sanctuary. As always, we thank David Griffith, Joe Sheffey and Glen Potter for ordering, picking up and delivering the beautiful past Easter and Christmas flowers. There will be the usual opportunity to donate an azalea and or music in honor of, or remembrance of a loved one. The cost remains the same, \$15.

Additionally, each Lenten week we will highlight a spiritual discipline similar to those mentioned in Lori Yamauchi's Shared Life series. We hope this will help deepen the Lenten experience.

### OGHS: Fish Boxes for Lent

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**Coming Soon:** the perennially popular "fish boxes" for your One Great Hour of Sharing offering will be available on the First Sunday in Lent, March 10.

### New Deacons, Elders, and the 2020 Nominating Committee

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At its Annual Meeting, Sunday, February 10, Old First Presbyterian Church elected six new members of the Board of Deacons, five new members of the Session and a new Nominating Committee for

2020. Plan to be at worship on Palm Sunday, April 14, when deacons and elders will be ordained and installed.

***Finding God in the Faith of Others: A Conversation with Barbara Brown Taylor***  
**Newbigin House of Studies, 2460 Sutter Street between Divisadero and Broderick Streets**  
**Sunday, March 31, 12:15 pm: A Free Public Event**

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In her latest book, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, Barbara Brown Taylor, the renowned preacher and beloved New York Times bestselling author recounts her moving discoveries of finding the sacred in unexpected places while teaching world religions to undergraduates in rural Georgia. She weaves together stories from her classroom with reflections on how her own spiritual journey has been challenged and renewed by connecting with people of other traditions – even those whose truths are quite different from hers.

In conversation with Scot Sherman, Barbara Brown Taylor will discuss the promise of engagement with our spiritual neighbors, and how that engagement can strengthen our own faith.

***Tickets are free but required. If you're interested contact Pastor Henderson: She has nine of the free tickets to share.***

**Barbara Brown Taylor** is a New York Times best-selling author, teacher, and Episcopal priest. Her first memoir, *Leaving Church* (2006), won an Author of the Year award from the Georgia Writers Association. Her last book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (2014), was featured on the cover of *TIME* magazine. She has served on the faculties of Piedmont College, Columbia Theological Seminary, Candler School of Theology at Emory University, McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, and the Certificate in Theological Studies program at Arrendale State Prison for Women in Alto, Georgia. In 2014 *TIME* included her on its annual list of Most Influential People; in 2015 she was named Georgia Woman of the Year; in 2016 she received The President's Medal at the Chautauqua Institution in New York. She currently serves on the Board of Trustees for Mercer University. *Holy Envy* is working her fourteenth book.

**Scot Sherman**, executive director of Newbigin House of Studies, hosts *Conversations for the Common Good* — public conversations with writers, artists, musicians and leading thinkers about the issues that divide us and the ideals that bring us together.

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**Session Meeting Report**

Tom Culp, clerk

The session of Old First Presbyterian Church met on January 22, 2019. The following are highlights.

- The annual congregational meeting was scheduled for February 10 at which time new elders, deacons, and Nominating Committee members for 2020 would be nominated for election.
- The Worship Committee announced that communion stations during worship would be reduced to three stations down from four.
- The revised budget for 2019 was approved.
- Commissioners to attend the Presbytery Meeting of February 12 in Richmond were elected.
- Pastor Henderson gave a short report on the successful Martin Luther King Jr. March which had been in development over the last eight years.
- A committee was formed to address the challenges of being an urban church today.

- The Mission Committee reported on its activities including a \$500 donation to No More Deaths nonprofit, a matching gift challenge for International Rescue Committee's Vision Project for Refugee Girls, and a February 8 concert benefiting Interfaith Refugee Welcome at Zion Lutheran Church.
- The session would meet next on February 26, 2019.

### **Spiritual Practices - Self-Emptying or Fasting**

From Lori Yamauchi

Fasting has been a spiritual practice in virtually every religion. In ancient Jewish tradition, fasting had two primary purposes: to express personal or national repentance for sin, and to prepare oneself inwardly to receive the strength and grace to serve God. In the Christian church, fasting was a regular practice, until recently.

One of the best ways to explore the meaning and practice of fasting is to examine how Lent has been understood in the church. Lent is the traditional season of prayer and fasting in preparation for the great "Feast of feasts", Easter. Lent is the great fast of the church year. It is a season that reveals and magnifies our understanding of spiritual discipline. For the early church, Lent was understood as an opportunity to return to normal human life – the life of natural communion with God that was lost to us in the Fall, or Adam's sin. The early church viewed Lent as a spiritual spring, a time of light and joy in the renewal of the soul's life, or a return to the "fast" that Adam and Eve broke, or a return to authentic human life. The early church found the reversal of Adam's sin in Christ. Jesus "kept the fast", abstaining not only from food, but from the illegitimate exercise of power. He accepted human limits and accepted a human death. The discipline of fasting has to do with accepting those limits which are life restoring.

Abstaining from food is the original meaning and most basic expression of a fast. To recapture the practice of fasting as a spiritual discipline, we need to know how to do it. We must recover both a reverence for our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit and a genuine respect for food as God's gift.

There is a normal fast (abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water), a partial fast (restriction of the diet, but not total abstention), and an absolute fast (abstaining from both food and water). Don't fast if you're sick, traveling, or under unusual stress. Start with a partial fast of not more than 24 hours, not more than once a week. Give your body several weeks to adjust to regular fasting. After four or five weeks, try a normal fast for the same 24-hour period. Drink only water, but plenty of it. After several months of adjusting to a normal fast, move on to a 36-hour fast.

Other forms of fasting, or abstinence, includes: abstaining from the ways of our affluent and addictive lifestyle – alcohol, sex, drugs, guns, cars, clothing, energy, gadgets, TV, computers, videos, gossip, fads, ideologies, programs, even work and leisure. They have become objects of consumption to fill emotional voids. The purpose of abstinence is to learn rightly to enjoy God's gifts. This may mean choosing silence over TV, abstaining from compulsive eating or dieting, choosing anonymity over personal recognition, abstaining from judging others, abstaining from overpacked schedules.

Abstinence creates enough space in us so that the Spirit can creatively use our talents and energies in the service of God. Disciplines of engagement balance our practice of abstinence. Other spiritual practices call us to engage actively in God's purpose in deeper ways: worship, spiritual reading, prayer, self-examination, guidance, and hospitality.

Fasting is cleansing and it allows one to experience new hungers – for justice, goodness and holiness.

## Prayers for Healing and Wholeness

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Leota Parker, for improved health and strength.

Riley Kramar, for knee healing and improved functional capacity.

Don Pender, for dental problems.

### “The Threads in My Hand” by Howard Thurman

Only one end of the threads, I hold in my hand.

The threads go many ways, linking my life with other lives.

One thread comes from a life that is sick; it is taut with anguish

And always there is the lurking fear that the life will snap.

I hold it tenderly. I must not let it go...

One thread comes from a high-flying kite;

It quivers with the mighty current of fierce and holy dreaming

Invading the common day with far-off places and visions bright...

One thread comes from the failing hands of an old, old friend.

Hardly aware am I of the moment when the tight line slackened

and there was nothing at all – nothing...

One thread is but a tangled mass that won't come right;

Mistakes, false starts, lost battles, angry words – a tangled mass;

I have tried so hard, but it won't come right...

One thread is a strange thread – it is my steadying thread;

When I am lost, I pull it hard and find my way.

When I am saddened, I tighten my grip and gladness

glides along its quivering path;

When the waste places of my spirit appear in arid confusion,

the thread becomes a channel of newness of life.

One thread is a strange thread – it is my steadying thread.

God's hand holds the other end...

### Dates to Remember

March 3	Sunday	Last Sunday after Epiphany: The Transfiguration
March 4	Monday	Mission Committee, 6:30 pm
March 6	Wednesday	Ash Wednesday Worship, 6:00 pm
March 10	Sunday	First Sunday in Lent Board of Deacons, 12:30 pm
March 16	Saturday	All Faiths' Day at the Interfaith Food Pantry, 9:00 am Presbyterian Women, 12:00 noon
March 17	Sunday	Deadline for February issue of <i>Shared Life</i>
March 19	Tuesday	Worship Committee, 7:00 pm
March 23	Saturday	Saturday Community Dinner, 5:30 pm
March 26	Tuesday	Session, 7:00 pm