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Rev. Lynda Hepler

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Good Monday morning, and welcome to Memorial UMC's 10 at 10. I am Lynda Hepler, the minister of children and families at Memorial. Thank you for taking a few minutes of your day to join me for a short time of devotion. Last Friday, Rodney topped all of us with his wonderful devotion and his smiley face pajamas! Rest assured, I am fully dressed and out of my dungeon basement this morning!

I always like to begin my devotion time with a prayer. It's the same one I used last week so the words will become familiar to you. Will you please join me:

Father, you created us and put us on earth for a purpose.

Jesus, you died for us and called us to complete your work.

Holy Spirit, you help us to carry out the work for which we were created and called.

In your presence and name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we begin our reflection.

May all our thoughts and inspirations have their origin in you and be directed to your glory.

Amen.

Many of you have been like me this past week and added a new job title to your resume: home school teacher! Many parents and grandparents are navigating the waters of homeschooling for the first time. At my house, in helping my youngest daughter Payton with her studies, the biggest challenge has been time management, making sure that she spends at least 30 minutes on every subject and keeping a record of all of it to be turned in to the school. The challenge is keeping my child focused on completing all her assignments given the many distractions at home, namely the iPad and Nintendo!

For her PE class she is supposed to do at least 30 minutes of exercise a day and keep a journal of her activities. Payton used to be very athletic, going to gymnastics and competing in Special Olympics state gymnastics every year. But not so much anymore. Especially at home, it's like pulling teeth to get this girl to go outside. And forget about playing; it's not going to happen. So every day we walk to our mailbox. We live way back off the main road. I'd say our driveway is probably four-tenths of a mile long. This

past week we were walking back to the house and we noticed all the trees budding and the colorful flower blooms everywhere. We saw a bush along the drive with these long white flower petals on it and discovered that it's a thorn bush. I remembered seeing that thorn bush back in the winter when everything was dry, brown, and dead looking. Now it is vibrant green with flowers growing. I brought some cuttings to show you today. Let me slip on my gloves and while I do so let me say to any children watching at home, DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME!! Get adult supervision before cutting any wild plants around your yard!

It's surprising how quickly these blooms are fading and the leaves are coming out in just a few short days that I've been watching the plant change. These thorns are huge! Just look at them. When I look at these thorns I think of several passages in the bible. First and foremost, I'm reminded of the crown of thorns the Roman soldiers made for Jesus to wear as they made fun of him during his trial. We've always seen pictured and used a crown of thorns that is dry and brown, but I imagine that during this time of year in Israel during the festival of the Passover, it was a time of changing seasons from winter to summer. In late March the flowering trees and bushes are beginning to transform into the hardy drought resistant plants for the summer season. I can imagine the Roman soldiers cutting branches of a thorn bush similar to this and fashioning it into a crown. This crown is green, possibly with a few lingering flower petals and new spring leaves. This crown appears to be full of new life. The crown of thorns is a symbol of suffering and death and yet it is suddenly filled with signs of new life. Jesus is the means by which we receive new life. In this season of Lent and especially on the first day of statewide mandated quarantine, I hope you will join me on this spiritual discipline of fasting from personal contact and social distancing, to be a time where we can step back from all the chaos, slow down, and spend time with God.

Another story that comes to mind as I think about thorns is the Parable of the Sower. The children will remember how the sower scatters the seeds among the ground. Some land in the thorns, and as they try to grow up among the thorns they are choked out and wither and die. Many of us may feel like we're living in the thorns now or, more so, in the days to come with the quarantine. We may feel our freedom is being choked by this time of isolation. As part of our self-reflections and spending time with God, I ask you to look for God Sightings each day. Look for ways you see God's love in action. It may be in God's creation, like this thorn bush, or it may be through the thoughts and actions of others.

To close, I'd like to share a few words written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, pastor and teacher during the time of the Holocaust. He was imprisoned in the concentration camps for conspiring against Hitler. Here is what he has to say about freedom and I found his words very appropriate for our time today. Bonhoeffer writes:

"Responsibility and freedom are mutually corresponding concepts. Responsibility presupposes freedom substantively – not chronologically – just as freedom can only exist in the exercise of responsibility. Responsibility is human freedom that exists only by being bound to God and neighbor."

"Daring to do what is right rather than what you may simply want at the moment, not hovering about in what might be possible, but courageously seizing what is real, it is not in the flight of thought but solely in deeds that one finds freedom. Leave your anxious hesitation behind and go forth into the storm of events borne only by God's commandment and by faith, and freedom will welcome your spirit rejoicing."

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

