The Monastic Way is for people who lead a busy life, but long for greater spiritual depth. Each month in 2017, Joan Chittister invites you to explore words of Scripture that stretch the soul and help you to construct your world differently—to discover how God dwells among us in surprising forms.

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Isaiah 55:1

If I have learned anything over the years it is surely this: Life is a plan that doesn’t work. At least not the one we make for ourselves. Instead, life forever challenges us to do more than we are doing at the present time. It invites us to keep going out of ourselves for the sake of those around us. It prods us to realize while we’re sitting around waiting for someone to save us from a meaningless life that there’s someone else waiting for us to save them. Point: Our own salvation lies in what we ourselves do to make the world a better place for others.

I read a story in a newspaper, back section, under the fold. A quiet little story that said nothing about the invasion of one more defenseless country or one more tragic death. On the contrary. It was about a homeless panhandler. Depressed and out of work for 16 years, Billy Ray Harris had migrated away from friends and family to street life in one of our large cities where benefits had run out and job applications had gone dry.

One day, a woman opened her change purse, dropped her coins in his basket and went her way. That night, when the man was counting the day’s change, he found it. There tucked in the corner of the case was a large diamond ring—if it was a diamond ring.

But, no, the jeweler who appraised it for him said, it was no fake. In fact, the jeweler told him he would give him $4000 for it himself. Harris put the ring back in his pocket and went back to his street corner. He would keep the ring safe, he thought, in case someone came back for it. And sure enough, the next day, the woman who had dropped her ring there by accident returned to look for it.

“I got it for you,” Harris said, and to her shock and amazement returned the ring.

The woman and her family were so impressed by the man’s honesty, so grateful to have their engagement ring returned, they began a fund solicitation on the internet to raise the $4000 the ring was worth and reward such honesty and care.

Think of it: Billy Ray Harris, the beggar, was so busy caring about someone else, he never thought to enrich himself.

The woman whose engagement ring he had returned was busy trying to reward him. And reward him, they did. That fund raised over $190,000 in donations and changed the beggar’s life.

And all the people who donated to the fund not only had the satisfaction of rewarding honesty, they also managed to save a life. Billy Ray Harris has since reconnected with his family, bought a small house and found a job.
Every single character in this quiet little drama took a risk. And every single one of them discovered once again that happiness is what we do, not what we get. Every single one of them was recklessly generous. Every single one of them was better for what they did for someone else.

The meaning for each of us is obvious: Nobody planned to lose that ring or find that ring or contribute to the gratitude merited by the saving of that ring. Every one of the characters in this life drama was recklessly generous and so outrageously rewarded.

Point: Unless we give everything we have, to everything we do, whatever joy and satisfaction that comes with it will be halved and quartered. And we will grow old wondering why everything in our lives didn’t work out.

The call of the Scripture is so clear: Read it slowly and ask yourself if you ever offered such a new beginning to someone else. And then thank God for the life lesson learned from those who have already done it for you.

Wednesday, February 1: What we give of ourselves we will get back a hundredfold. We just can’t predict where or how. On the other hand, what corrupts the gift is expecting it.

Thursday, February 2: Reckless generosity throws the world into another orbit. We don’t understand love that gives itself away—no strings attached—but no one can really live an exciting life without it.

Friday, February 3: The well-lived life always requires us to step outside the traces, to forget yesterday, to trust tomorrow, to leap into newness. “Forget safety,” the poet Rumi says. “Live where you fear to live. Destroy your reputation. Be notorious.” Translation: Live life to its edges so that you may grow beyond your own.

Saturday, February 4: Whatever you do, collect enjoyment, collect new experiences. Branch out to expand your personal human community. Get to know the rest of the world and the different ways to see things, one person at a time.

Sunday, February 5: Think of the people who make up the human community for you. Count them. Exactly how many—of your kind—have become your kind? When I was young it was only Italians and the Polish. Funny, huh? Point: Change always becomes the norm. You will survive—and be better for it.

Monday, February 6: The human tendency is to build a life and then make it a fortress. I live in my house and never even try to get to know my neighbors. I go to my club, my church, my job the same way every week. I talk about the same things to the same people day after day. And that does what for me? As the Roman philosopher Tacitus wrote, “The desire for safety stands against every great and noble enterprise.”

Tuesday, February 7: I don’t really need to go to Europe to find out how other people live and think or what they seek in life. I could start by simply going across the street. Ah, go on, try it.

Wednesday, February 8: We are our own prisons. We lock ourselves into other people’s ideas. We never venture outside the ruts in the road in anything: not recreation, not education, not social life, not any dimension of life. Beware. As the poet Robert Frost wrote, “Freedom lies in being bold.”

Thursday, February 9: Everything grows as we get older. The years, of course. Our commitments, yes. Our circle of friends, indeed. But starved of the juices of life—new ideas, new possibilities, new questions, new answers—one thing threatens to atrophy and that is the size and vision of our soul. It is the human soul that keeps life fresh and meaningful. Fail to nourish that and it won’t matter how much else of you is young and ready to bloom.

Friday, February 10: Growing beyond what we were taught and knowing what to keep and what to abandon as we grow is the essence of human adulthood. It’s when we surrender to the past simply because it is past that we fail to develop. “Any fool can make a rule,” Henry David Thoreau wrote, “and any fool will mind it.”

Saturday, February 11: The purpose of life is not to live down to the minimum of ourselves. It is to grow to the maximum.

Sunday, February 12: Scripture says of Jesus that he grew “in wisdom, age and grace.” Translation: He grew in insight, in years of goodness, and in spiritual depth and commitment. But that requires a faithful openness to life. Or, as William Faulkner put it, “You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.”

Monday, February 13: Life’s greatest temptation is to play it safe. Say only what’s safe around people who think other than you. Do only what your friends will not criticize. Think only what’s safe for fear you will find truth somewhere you do not expect it to be. It is the temptation to be everybody but myself.

Tuesday, February 14: It’s when we give ourselves to something bigger than we are that the self in us gets nobler, stronger, more light than dark in the world.

Wednesday, February 15: The fear of being different is the fear that smothers the rest of life in us.

Thursday, February 16: If you truly want to change the world, you must first be bold enough to say precisely what you think must be done differently, however severe the reaction of others to it may be. Tom Robbins writes, “Humanity has advanced, when it has advanced, not because it has been sober, responsible, and cautious, but because it has been playful, rebellious, and immature.”

Friday, February 17: The most foolish virtue of them all is love. Love is silly enough to believe that paradise is within us, simply waiting to be released. But foolish or not, it’s true. Then everything is possible. The question is only, What do you love? And if the answer is “Nothing” no wonder we’re in the state we’re in.

Saturday, February 18: Remember that time changes nothing; people do. If you want something to change it’s up to you to start the conversation. Foolish? Of course. Necessary? Absolutely. As Adlai Stevenson said, “All progress has resulted from people who took unpopular positions.”
Sunday, February 19: It may seem foolish to speak up in the face of common contradiction. But that is exactly the gift of the Holy Fool who sets out to expose the irrationality of the rational.

Monday, February 20: It’s the Holy Fool who forces us to question what we have always taken for granted. These “fools” require us, for instance, to reevaluate why we think that war wins anything. Or whether lifelong love is a gendered gift alone. Or whether medical care is the province of only those who can pay for it. Then the world spins on its axis.

Tuesday, February 21: When we become spiritually developed enough to understand that we are all connected to one another—to their pain, to their gifts, to their questions—we become part of the vanguard of the humanization of the human race.

Wednesday, February 22: When we become spiritually holy enough to understand that the pain of anyone is the pain of everyone, we become co-creators with the God of all. Then we finally begin to change what we were born to repair. As the Hindus teach in the Upanishad, “Who sees all beings in his own self, and his own self in all beings, loses all fear (sic).”

Thursday, February 23: When life passes us by, it is surely because we have failed to ask ourselves what it is that we should be doing for the world—other than simply getting up in the morning to breathe. As poet Mary Oliver says of it, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Friday, February 24: It’s the Holy Fool in you who knows that you can’t design societies that function for the welfare of the wealthy alone and create a society that will last. So what are you going to do about it?

Saturday, February 25: Jesus was a Fool. He supported everything the society opposed and the people followed him regardless. And though they killed him for it, the poor never forgot him. Who will remember you when you die? And for what? There is no more important question for each of us to answer before it’s too late.

Sunday, February 26: Best of all, the Scriptures guarantee the Holy Fool, “All generations will call you blessed.” The real memorial to our lives lies in the way we will be remembered by generations to come.

Monday, February 27: We are afraid of what will happen when we lose our reputations for moderation—meaning the thinking accepted by most of the society around us. Margaret Mitchell says, “With enough courage, you can do without a reputation.”

Tuesday, February 28: Think carefully about temporizing with the great struggles of life. As feminist leader Susan B. Anthony said, “Cautious, careful people... never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world’s estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences.” The Holy Fool calls us to bear the consequences of ideas that must be fostered if the ideas that smother life are ever to be rejected.

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FOR A LISTENING HEART

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
Isaiah 55:1

Spend a few minutes with this quote and then ask yourself:

- What do these words say to me? What feelings or memories do the words evoke in me?
- What do these words say about my spiritual journey?
- My journal response to this quote is:

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