

# Ash Wednesday to 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

## A Guide for Devotion and Prayer (54 Days)



*The Temptation In The Wilderness* Briton Rivière (1840–1920)



This week's devotional resource was written by Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow, President of the American Baptist Churches of New York State Board of Missions, and edited by Rev. Mark H. Breese of Community Missions. The content was created specifically keeping in mind the populations served by Community Missions.

### Introduction To This Guide

These daily devotional guides are provided to encourage you to listen and reflect on how God is speaking to you during this Season of Lent. The question at the end of each day's contemplation is intended to foster further reflection and prayer throughout the day. In addition, space is provided for you to document your thoughts on how you hear God speaking to you at this time. May you be blessed and transformed through the Holy Spirit as you ponder God's word during this most holy of seasons. ++ *Provided by:* Community Missions Inc., 1570 Buffalo Ave., Niagara Falls, NY 14303, Phone: (716) 285-3403, [www.communitymissions.org](http://www.communitymissions.org)

### Where Do I Begin?

Begin each day with this Prayer of Illumination to help, prepare your heart to hear God's word for you. Read "to be formed and transformed rather than to gather information...Read with a vulnerable heart. Expect to be blessed...Read as one awake, one waiting for the beloved. Read with reverence."\*

Let us Pray a *Prayer of Illumination*:

All-Seeing One, above me, around me, within me —

**guide my vision as I engage with your sacred words.**

Look down upon me, look out from within me, look all around me.

**See through my eyes, hear through my ears, feel through my heart.**

God of Wisdom, touch me where I need to be touched;

and when my heart is touched, give me the grace to lay  
down this Holy Book and ask significant questions:

**Why has my heart been touched by you?**

**How am I to be changed through your touch?**

All-Seeing One, I need to change, I need to look a little more like You.

**May these sacred words change and transform me.**

Then I can meet You face to face...when I shall be healed forever.

Your Word and the touch of your Spirit bring healing...

a healing that will last.

**O Eye of God, look not away.**

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,**

**and put a new and right spirit within me. Amen.**

Adapted from *A Tree Full of Angels* by Macrina Wiederkehr [As quoted in *A Guide To Prayer For All God's People*, Job & Shawchuck, The Upper Room]

*A FULL LIST OF THE REFERENCES AND RESOURCES QUOTED IN THIS  
DEVOTIONAL SERIES IS AVAILABLE AT THE END OF THIS GUIDE.*

**ASH WEDNESDAY - Day 1**  
*A SEASON OF CELEBRATION*

2 Corinthians 5:17 - 6:2

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...So we are ambassadors for Christ...we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

*LENT IS OUR "HOLY SPRING"*

During a time when we are steeped in the dead of Winter, the Season of Lent reminds us to prepare for the newness of Spring: "See, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Indeed, Lent [from *lencten* meaning: Spring] can be seen as the Church's *Holy Spring*.\* There is anticipation in this season; there is a looking forward from a time of darkness to a new light, a new hope.

*Thomas Merton, in his book Seasons of Celebration, says:*

"Even the darkest moments of [worship] are filled with joy, and Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten fast, is a day of happiness, a Christian feast." Indeed it is a time to rejoice in our deliverance from darkness into God's marvelous light. As we begin this Season of Celebration\*, this season of remembering the Christ's journey to Jerusalem, and to the cross; let it be for us not only a time of solemn reflection but also a Season of Celebration as we move through these 40+days of Jesus journey from wilderness to resurrection glory.

*PRAYER*

Almighty God, as we enter this most holiest of seasons, may we search our hearts, and renew our minds seeking forgiveness and reconciliation in you. Prepare our hearts, dear Lord, to be renewed in our faithfulness as we

journey with you through this Season of Lent; make it be for us a Season of Celebration and hope in your merciful grace - not only in this season - but throughout our whole lives. Amen

*FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

However you choose to document your thoughts, you may begin here. It can be full sentences, short thoughts, even pictures. The question posed for each day is only a suggestion. Give your heart and mind free range. First question: In what ways do you consider Lent to be a "season of celebration"?

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## THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY – Day 2

### CHOOSE LIFE

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life for you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

### RECOMMITMENT BRINGS JOY

Lent is a time for recommitment; and time for us to search our hearts and with joy and sorrow assess how we have - and have not - lived in faithfulness to God.

Moses reminds the Israelites that they always have a choice whether or not to love the Lord their God, who delivered them from slavery, and from the oppression of Pharaoh. They can “walk in God’s ways and observe his commandments, decrees, and ordinances” and claim the blessings of the promise God gave to Abraham: fruitful land, abundant descendants, and peace among nations; or they can choose to “bow down to other gods” and perish.

Now is the time for us to choose life, but to also admit that we have not *always* chosen well. For those times when we have *not* chosen well, we express sorrow and seek forgiveness; and in our confession we recommit to “walking in God’s ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances.” And when we have searched our souls and repented, there is joy in the freedom of forgiveness, and restoration of the blessings and promises of God.

### PRAYER

My God, you are the very ground of my being. Help me Lord, to recommit my life to you each and every day, and to immediately seek forgiveness when I err in my ways. You set obstacles before me each day. Help me turn every obstacle into blessings for your glory in your everlasting faithfulness and love. I call upon heaven and earth as witnesses today that I choose life in you, whatever obstacles my come. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

In what ways does *choosing life* change the way I currently live?

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**FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY – Day 3**  
*FASTING BY BEING MERCIFUL*

Isaiah 58:4-6

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight,  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
To let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

*TRUSTING IN THE LORD'S MERCY*

We often think of Lent as a time to give up something: chocolate or smoking or another habit that needs correcting. As so *fasting and mercy* seem an odd combination, and yet according to Isaiah the two are indelibly linked. Fasting involves some form of denying self, to refrain from something. And so perhaps fasting is more than going without something. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus discusses fasting in the context of piety, he says, “whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show other that they are fasting...” (Matt. 6:16). This sounds like the kind of fasting that Isaiah is railing against. According to Isaiah fasting as a justice concern.

Thomas Merton\* says that however you interpret *fasting*, “it is necessary that at the beginning of [a] fast, the Lord should show Himself to us in His mercy.” (p. 6). How this is acted out in real life extends beyond giving up a meal or two. It is more of an exchange, denying one’s self (giving up something) in order to provide another person something that they lack: like the dignity of just treatment in the case of standing up for someone who is being cast out or treated unfairly, like using what you gave up (in the case of time) to work to make laws more fair and equitable,

or even (in the case of money) giving sacrificially to a cause that matters to you. These are all ways of enmeshing fasting with mercy.

*PRAYER*

Teach me, O Lord, the ways in which I may honor you with my fast. Help me to see where injustice is prevalent. Give me the courage, strength, and wisdom to *loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.* Amen

*FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

What is one thing I can fast from this Lent to show mercy?

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**SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY – Day 4**  
*FASTING FROM MALICIOUS SPEECH*

Isaiah 58:9b-12

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness,  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.  
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many  
generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

*LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS*

Faith is a journey in which *the Lord will guide you continually*. To rely on God in a world that focuses on success and results and self fulfillment is to go *against* the mainstream of society. We read the headlines, and listen to the news, and we say, “O isn’t it awful the way *those people* act, isn’t it terrible that those kids are so violent, isn’t it a shame that so many kids are hungry.” Or we justify not giving money to beggars on the street because “they’ll just use it for alcohol or drugs.” Meanwhile *some people* cook up special meals for their \$1500 dogs, and lament that because of the pandemic they can’t take their usual winter holiday, and others have not checked on their elderly neighbor whom they have not seen for days.

Lent is a time to ponder our priorities. As Paul said in his letter to the Corinthian churches: *I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.* (2 Cor. 8:13-14)

And so let our *light rise in the darkness*, however God guides us; perhaps it is to *satisfy the needs of the afflicted*, or it may be to repair a broken relationship, or restore something that has been lost. Lent is a time to assess the present in order to change the future.

*PRAYER*

Open my eyes, Lord, and help me see how to serve you better. Reveal to me how I am complicit in the events that I find most horrendous. Give me the courage and strength to be involved in ways that make real and lasting change. Keep me from *pointing the finger and speaking evil*. Help me, Lord, to be part of the solution, not just a spectator to the problem. Help me to illumine your light and your love in the world. Amen

*FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Where are my own *parched places* that I need God to satisfy?

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**FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT – Day 5**  
*THE IMITATION OF CHRIST*

Luke 4:1-4

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

*HOW DOES JESUS DO IT?*

Frank G. Honeycutt<sup>ff</sup>, author of *Marry a Pregnant Virgin*, asks that question as he ponders this foray of Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days where *he ate nothing at all during those days!*

While reflecting on this formative event that happens at the beginning of Jesus ministry, right after his baptism, Honeycutt recalls a childhood memory where at every family event there would be the same stories told so that those stories became the very fabric of *his* story too. He likens that to the church, where every week we gather and share these stories of the Bible: from Noah and Moses to the sons of Jacob, we hear about the law and the prophets, the promises and the prophecies, and we hear these stories about Jesus year after year. And somehow these stories, they sustain us, year after year.

The answer to how Jesus was able to do it, how Jesus was able to not only *resist* the temptations that the devil set before him but to really put the devil in his place, is that Jesus *knew* the law and the prophets! All of his life he had been brought up with the stories of his people; their struggles and their blessings, their slavery and their deliverance, their trials and their tribulations.

These stories that so molded his very being armed Jesus with a faith in God so unshakable that he could even stand before the devil - lips split and gums bleeding from lack of food and water, skin burnt and cracked from exposure to the elements, cheeks sunken into his skull and every bone in his body visible through a thin layer of skin - he could stand before the devil and say with conviction in his heart and mind, “One does not live by bread alone... Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him... Do not put the Lord your God to the test!” (Luke 4:4, 8, 12). And

Jesus returned to the Galilee full of the power of the Holy Spirit! (Luke 4:14)

*PRAYER*

Heavenly Father, prepare me to live in this world through trust in your holy word. Strengthen me to resist temptation. Embolden me to speak your truth when lies are all around me. But most importantly: *Search me, O Lord and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* (Psalm 139:23-24) Amen.

*FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

How does my relationship with God help me to overcome the temptations of the world?

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## MONDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT – Day 6

### TURNING TOWARD OUR NEIGHBORS

Matthew 25:31-40

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?...a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?...[or] sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

### FALLING MADLY IN LOVE WITH GOD

This text is as clear as any in scripture in its description of what Jesus requires of us. One of my favorite monks: Carlo Carretto, in his book, *Why Me Lord*<sup>ff</sup>, says that in order for him “to be happy on earth [he] must fall madly in love with God...Then...in time of suffering the easiest way to ally the suffering...is to get out of myself - yes, get out of myself; visit someone who is suffering worse than I am, do something to remind me of the sufferings of the world, set my heart in order if I feel a residual dislike of someone...answer a tiresome letter from someone who wants me to tell him whether hell exists, or what he should not do to leave his nasty possessive wife. In other words, perform an act of love that requires patience and honesty.”

The frankness with which Carretto speaks is so sincere, there is no mistaking his misgivings at his own weakness in suffering. And in his faithfulness to the God, to whom he has pledged his life, he does what he knows God expects and requires and does not give in to his own desires. As disciples of the Christ, we have to do what is required of us, not just

what we feel like doing at the time. The Prophet Micah answers the ultimate question: *I have told you, O Mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.* (Micah 6:8)

### PRAYER

Loving and merciful God, help me to see when my actions are not the ones you would have of me. Help me not to take my blessings from you for granted. Forgive me Lord, for the error of my ways and increase my faithfulness to you. Amen.

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

What was my last act of charity? Why did I do it?\*(p. 13)

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**TUESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK – Day 7**  
*TURN FROM EVIL AND DO GOOD*

Psalm 34:11-15

Come, O children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.  
Which of you desires life,  
and covets many days to enjoy good?  
Keep your tongue from evil,  
and your lips from speaking deceit.  
Depart from evil, and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their cry.

*WANTON LOVE*

The Psalms provide daily prompting for the Christian searching to have revealed his/her own offense toward God. As the wayward son who squandered his inheritance before his father even lie on his death bed, we may all cry, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son [or daughter].” (Luke 15:21) The Psalms put into words timeless circumstances, human emotions, and actions that are as true today as they were 2500 years ago.

The Psalmist’s cry for the children to listen is one all loving parents implore: ‘Listen my children, love what is good, *seek peace and pursue it*, enjoy life and keep from doing what is wrong. It may not seem so important to you now but later on you will see the wisdom of my words, you will reap the fruits of doing good.’ *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry.*

Let our hearts not be deceived, God sees the actions of *all* of us. But here is what makes the difference, when we seek God’s face, when we grow in our relationship to our Lord, then all we want to do is please him. And when we fail, which we all do, we realize our suffering is because of *our own* sinful ways. And then we return to the Father, in fear yes, but with the full assurance that the Father’s love will far exceed any punishment we may receive. As in the case of the wayward son, the Father is already planning a feast to celebrate the son’s return, barely even listening

to the son’s heartfelt confession. Such is the love of God for us. Perhaps our own *fear of the Lord* is that we become so united in the Father’s love, when we err we fear breaking his heart, and, as a consequence, our own may be broken as well.

*PRAYER*

Loving and gracious Father, keep my lips from speaking lies. Help me *do good and seek peace*, inform me of the error of my ways. Keep your eyes and ears *open to my cry* for mercy, enable me to listen well to your teaching, and let me know the fear of you for my own good, and to your glory. Amen.

*FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Recall a time when you knew you deserved punishment but received mercy instead?

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## WEDNESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK - Day 8

### UNCOVERING OUR INNER LIGHT

Luke 11:33-36

No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lamp stand so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.

#### TRUTH AND LIGHT

As Christians it often appears that we are straddling two different worlds: the world of light, which Christ Jesus promoted; and the world of darkness, where evil dwells. The problem is in the grey area, where the stumbling blocks are. Most of us know pure evil when we see it, but *good* seems to be more relative. Where is the light of Christ when we must deny ourselves so that others may have a fair measure? Our life in *the world* influences how we see in the light. If the situations we face in life cause us to continually be in the darkness of pain and despair, a bright *flash* may blind us to the true light of Christ, which is always love.

When our own power or way of life is threatened, we may discern the true test of our faith in God. James C. Fenhagen, in his book *Mutual Ministry*,<sup>t</sup> says “to become a disciple means to see for oneself the values that energized the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We must struggle with them, until that moment when, by the grace of God, they become our own. We must be committed to building an ongoing and disciplined enrichment of our relationship to God. We must affirm human need and worth in the face of the harmful ‘principalities and powers’ that control our lives. We need to increase our desire to serve life out of love, not to gain power or reward. We must identification with the poor and the hungry and the oppressed. These are values that we can see in the life of Jesus.”

When we consider this, may we always know the difference between a blinding flash, and the enduring light of Christ, which is de-

pendable, consistent, and always true. “The Law...was given through Moses, grace and *truth* came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17)

#### PRAYER

Almighty God, you who created light to pierce the darkness, penetrate my heart with the warmth of your mercy, illumine my life with the radiance of your compassion, surround me with the light of your presence, and enfold me in your overflowing grace. Be with me, Lord, as I grow in your love and reflect your light for all to see. Amen

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How does your life reflect the truth and inner light of Christ?

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## THURSDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK - Day 9

### SEEK GOOD AND YOU SHALL FIND IT

Matthew 7:7-11

Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

### HARVESTING THE GOOD

Seeking and serving God “is more than simply doing good...it is something *Christ does* in us, through us, and with us.”<sup>1</sup> In this season of Lent, we seek to deepen our relationship with Jesus as the Christ through confession and repentance. But confession and repentance are only part of what makes us whole in Christ.

Jesus says when you search you find. In that process of searching and finding there is an unspoken hope that your *actions will reflect* what you claim to have found. At that point you may ask God what it is that he wants from you. Jesus says you may be assured that when you ask it will be given. You may have to listen with patience, taking into consideration where God has placed you at this point in your life—a point where you are pausing to question God’s call upon your life. Listen to the whispers of your heart. Consider your surroundings and what manner of situation has God placed you in his kingdom.

You know that God has great things in store for those who believe; and so dare to ask for your heart’s desire! In your wildest dreams, if you could serve God in any way that you would choose, what would it be?

The Apostle Paul encourages us: “rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known

to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)

### PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I pray for your glory to be revealed in me. I pray for discernment, dear Lord, that you may show me how I may serve you. Reveal your gifts in me, and help me to use them for your glory—for doing good in the world. Let me hear your call, and with a willing heart let me walk through the open door to serve you in love and faithfulness always. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

What is a “good gift” that God has given me to be used for God’s glory?

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## FRIDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK - Day 10

### TURNING AWAY FROM OUR SINS

Ezekiel 18:21-24

But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the LORD GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.

### THE GOAL IS LIBERATION

What is God's intention? What God wants is for God's people is to live life in freedom and joy. God wants them to live both in this life and in the life to come. And so the Divine poses this scenario to the Hebrew people: If you are wicked and you turn away from your sins you will live. But if you are good and then you become wicked I won't even remember any of the good things you did, and you will die. For the believers of Ezekiel's day, there is no defense if you were once righteous and then you fall from grace. In Ezekiel's world it was from God's word to Ezekiel's lips.

God's forgiveness given through Jesus the Christ changes everything. So how then are we to understand Ezekiel's words in the light of Christ—the one who answers the question “How many times must I forgive?” with this answer: “Not 7 but 70 times 7!” (Matthew 18:21)

If you have ever been forgiven you know, the goal is freedom! There is no greater feeling on earth than having your guilt lifted, but to know that you have to have experienced it! Once that merciful forgiveness happens, you never - NEVER - want to go back! And so I wonder about *the righteous people* who *turn* from their righteousness. Is this about whether someone is good or bad, or is it about *false piety* - about those who *pretend* to be righteous? Jesus railed at the Pharisees

and scribes who positions *assumed* their righteousness, and yet Jesus called them *white-washed tombs*. (Matthew 23:27) He *saw* their pretensions, and *loathed* their hypocrisy. Those who are truly righteous confess their iniquity, and rejoice in their freedom it brings!

### PRAYER

Holy One of God, help me to turn away from my sins. Reveal to me your lovingkindness and your merciful forgiveness. Let me hear you call me Beloved. Turn me toward *your* righteousness, and give me the freedom of knowing and loving you, now and forever. Amen.

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Name a time when you truly felt forgiven and free?

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## SATURDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK - Day 11

### LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

### LOVING AND LETTING GO

How hard is it for us to see that God made our enemies in his image, just like God made *us* in his image? Or to put it another way, how hard is it to see *Jesus* in the face of our enemy? And yet, that is what Jesus asks us to do. What if we begin by saying, "God loves me, God loves you, God even loves \_\_\_\_\_." [you fill in the blank].

Jesus says, *pray for those who persecute you so that YOU may be children of your Father...* So, in order to be considered God's beloved children, WE must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. In order to be God's children we MUST pray for those who hate us, those who hurt us, those who seek to destroy us.

But let us *not* misunderstand. Jesus is NOT saying that you must continue to let someone persecute or abuse you! That is *not* what this passage is saying. Jesus says *pray* for them, and do not harbor resentment against them because in the end, harboring resentment against someone only hurts you—that would be like *you* taking poison hoping the *other* person will die!

Loving and praying for your enemies allows forgiveness to seep in. Praying for those who persecute you helps to make us realize and accept that they are *also* created in God's image. Although they are not *acting* as God wishes, the proper way to keep them from hurting you

further is to *love* them, *pray* for them, and ultimately to *forgive* them and let them go. That's not easy, but it is what God calls us to do.

Jesus states a fact: God sends rain on everyone - both the righteous and the unrighteous. And the sun rises on everyone - both the evil and the good. God does not discriminate - sun and rain fall on all creation. The difference comes in how we *respond* to the truth that sun and the rain falls on *all of us*. We are called to follow God's command to Love: love your God; love your neighbor; love your enemies. When we do this, God's grace will come to bear on *all* people, and his mercy will bless us *all*.

### PRAYER

Give me, O Lord, the courage to love my enemies, and the strength to pray for them. Help me to see beyond my own understanding, and reveal to me your beloved child in them. Earnestly and fervently I pray. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Name one person who has hurt you and pray for that person.

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## SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT - Day 12

### AWAKENING TO THE LORD'S GLORY

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings - one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" - not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

### ENCOUNTERING THE CHRIST

The refrain from the popular Christian song by MercyMe comes to mind: *Surrounded by your glory, what will my heart feel? Will I dance for you Jesus, or in awe of You be still? Will I stand in your presence, to my knees will I fall? Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all? I can only imagine, I can only imagine...*

But we really can't *imagine*. When we put ourselves up on that mountain and are overshadowed by that cloud; when we hear God speak, our hearts pounding out of our chests, what will our heart feel? Well, the disciples were *there*, and the text says they were *terrified*.

After God announces that Jesus is the Chosen Son, three words follow, *...listen to him*. But the disciples still have to face their own *cloudiness* about who Jesus is. Peter has previously proclaimed Jesus, "The Messiah of God," and Jesus has followed that up by telling them that he "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. [And that] any who want to become his followers [must] deny them-

selves and take up their [own] cross *daily...*" (Luke 9:20, 22-23) Then they ascend the mountain to pray and distinctly hear the voice of God tell them: *This is my Son...Listen to him!* But did they really *hear* the ramifications for their own lives, and even imagine the weaknesses they would have to confront in themselves? I can't even imagine...

### PRAYER

Heavenly Father, help me to listen to your Son Jesus. Give me the courage to follow him daily, taking up my cross daily - however that is defined by my life. Give me strength in my weakness, and sustain me in your loving care. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

What is the cross I bear when trying to live out God's call?

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## MONDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK - Day 13

### HUNGRY FOR THE KINGDOM

Luke 6:20-26

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

### BLESSED ARE...

We have been in this Lenten study for almost 2 weeks. Perhaps you are taking the call to repentance seriously and you wonder when you will turn the corner and *feel forgiven*. Or perhaps the appeal to give sacrificially has generated some *push back* from those closest to you: family, friends, colleagues or spouse. If that is the case then be encouraged.

Walter Russell Bowie, in his book *The Compassionate Christ*,<sup>11</sup> points out that this sermon given by Jesus in Luke 6 is directed at the disciples. Bowie says “it is as though [Jesus] said, *I know all about it. You are bothered about what you left behind and what you do not have. You get so discouraged you could almost cry. Sometimes you are afraid. A little more and you might pity yourselves. But do you know what the truth is? You are the ones on whom the blessing rests. You’re the ones who can be glad. Look up, and look ahead. Yours will be part of the victory of the kingdom of God; and having been poor and hungry and sometimes scared will seem to have been nothing in comparison with the joy of that!*”

But we can see the message is broader even than that. The message is “for all those who could be called poor.” Bowie points out that Jesus knew what it was to stand before an unjust judge; and Jesus “saw

the quality of soul that could develop” in those who were treated unfairly. Jesus knew the patience, courage, and faithfulness generated by their struggle.

Furthermore, in Jesus’ scolding of the rich and satisfied, he is encouraging and highlighting his concern “for the poor and the afflicted; for social righteousness, and [Jesus’] indignation against all callousness and cruelty of the strong against the weak.” Jesus is leading his disciples, and us, to the same awareness.

### PRAYER

Almighty God, thank you for all the blessings you have bestowed upon me. Give me the strength to endure whatever challenges may come as I continue to follow you. Give me discernment and wisdom as I seek your will. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Name one thing you struggle with and pray for God’s help?

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## TUESDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT - Day 14

### *DOING JUSTICE*

Isaiah 1:10, 16-17, 21-28

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before you eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan plead for the widow...

The faithful city ... that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her -- but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes! I will turn my hand against you; I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.

### *THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM*

In the United States it has become a common theme to talk about our rights and freedoms: freedom of speech and the right to bear arms are two that currently come to mind. And so we must look hard at those *freedoms* and be sure not to violate them. But with freedom comes responsibility. As human beings our responsibility may be to live and let live; but as Christians, our responsibility is to love our fellow brothers and sisters.

Thomas Merton, in *Lent and Easter Wisdom*,<sup>iii</sup> says, "Our abdication of responsibility is...an abdication of liberty." What I think Merton is talking about is that to *leave it there*, to say, "O that is your right to say whatever you want," or "yes that is your right to point your gun

at me because you feel threatened," is to sidestep the issue of freedom. As Christians, both our speech and our actions are to reflect the love of Jesus the Christ.

I think the Apostle Paul said it best, "'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other." (1 Corinthians 10:23-24) Our goal as those who follow the Christ should be to seek justice and righteousness in the world through faithfulness to God's loving kindness.

### *PRAYER*

Almighty God, guide me toward peaceful and loving ways, using my freedom to bring peace and justice to a hurting and wounded world.  
Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Name one injustice that you know of that needs rectifying?

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## WEDNESDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK - Day 15

### THE NEED FOR RE-FORMATION

Jeremiah 18:1-17 (edited)

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O House of Israel, just as this potter has done? Says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand...At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now...from your evil ways, and amend them.

But they say, “It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.” Therefore, thus says the Lord: Ask among the nations: Who has heard the like of this? The virgin Israel has done a most horrible thing...All who pass by it are horrified...like the wind from the east, I will scatter them before the enemy [they will see] my back, not my face, in the day of their calamity.

### THE TENSION THAT MOLDS US

Paula Ripple, in her book *Growing Strong at Broken Places*,<sup>1</sup> recalls a discussion she had with a female potter. She sees that *tension* actually shapes the pot: “tension between the pressure applied from the outside and the pressure of the hand on the inside.” And that “life, like this pot, is the result of what happens on the outside and what is going on inside...”

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We can hear the tension: God’s will to mold Israel God’s way, and Israel’s pressure from the surrounding community to conform to their way of life. And so the pot is *spoiled in the potter’s hands*. But Ripple’s potter claims that “the tension is God’s gift...that doesn’t permit us to escape its presence.” She claims that the tension creates a “gnawing discomfort” in us as we seek to be “faithful to who we are and who we can become.” We suffer consequences and cry for deliverance. And God, through loving mercy for ‘spoiled vessels and cracked pots’, remembers God’s covenant, reworks the plan, and delivers them once again. A loving parent does not fail to discipline his/her child, but always welcomes them home.

### PRAYER

Lord God, thank you for your never giving up on us. And even when it creates a tension between us Lord, step in and make a way for us to be united once again. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Name a time when you were reworked on the potter’s wheel.

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## THURSDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK - Day 16

*BARREN BUSHES*  
Jeremiah 17:5-8, 10

Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals, and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit...

I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

### *IN WHOM DO WE TRUST?*

To trust is a dangerous and scary action. To trust means to believe something is true. To trust means having faith in something. To trust also means to have confidence in someone, to be able to rely on them.

James M. Eford, in *Jeremiah Prophet Under Siege*,<sup>11</sup> says that Jeremiah prophesied in a time “when no one could trust anyone else.” He goes on to say that “There can never be a possibility for a good life for anyone unless people can basically trust other people. But in the land of Judah at that moment in history no one could trust anyone.”

I wonder how far we have advanced as a society when, 2500 years after Jeremiah spoke, we still (or once again) live in a society where *no one trusts anyone*. So much of our media is slanted one way or the other that no one seems to know what the truth is anymore. We don't trust politicians, we don't trust religious leaders, we don't trust family members. Yet, our text says, *Blessed are those who trust in the LORD*.

So what can we do to gain back our ability to trust? I believe it begins with prayer. And prayer begins by developing an *inner life*. And developing the inner life begins in *solitude*.

According to Charles de Foucauld,<sup>111</sup> “the soul will bring forth fruit exactly in the measure in which the inner life is developed in it.” Jeremiah claims that those who trust in the LORD are blessed, that even in a year of drought they do not fail to bear fruit, and that the LORD tests the mind and searches the heart according to the fruit produced. So, pray to be blessed, bear good fruit, and trust in the LORD our God.

### *PRAYER*

Lord God, help me to develop the kind of life where I can trust in your guidance. And send me a faithful witness that I can trust to lead me in your way everlasting. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Name something you have done to bear fruit for the kingdom.

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## FRIDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK - Day 17

### *THE SECRET TO GIVING AND PRAYING*

Matthew 6:1-8

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

### *PRAYER AND*

Jesus says *beware of practicing your piety before others...* *Piety* is a devotion to religious observance, but *prayer* is entering the heart of God.<sup>i</sup> Richard Foster, in his book *Prayer*, says prayer “is about a love relationship: an enduring, continuing, growing love relationship with the great God of the universe, and overwhelming love invites a response.” Our response to God’s *overwhelming love* for us is to love well in return. So, “to be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers...real prayer comes not from gritting our teeth but from falling in love”—falling in love with God. Prayer and giving alms is an outgrowth of that love.

Foster says the key to the heart of God is prayer, and that Jesus is the door. Jesus teaches us the way to God’s heart; and reveals the God’s love for us through his (Jesus’s) healing ministry, powerful witness, and inclusive love for all people. Prayer and giving alms is our humble and grateful response.

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### PRAYER

Help us, O God our Creator, to be always loving. Help those who observe us to see only the humility and love we have for you, and no selfish motive for recognition and praise. Thank you for your overwhelming love for your people. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

What are your thoughts about praying and giving in secret?

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## SATURDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK - Day 18

### COMPASSIONATE LOYALTY

Micah 7:18-20

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over the transgression  
of the remnant of your possession?  
He does not retain his anger forever,  
because he delights in showing clemency.  
He will again have compassion upon us;  
he will tread our iniquities under foot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.  
You will show faithfulness to Jacob  
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,  
as you have sworn to our ancestors  
from the days of old.

### PARDONED AND FREE

*Who is a God like you...?* the prophet asks in awe and wonder, who indeed! Who is this God that allows God's people numerous millennia to get to know, and learn to love their God? Who is this God that obliges us to suffer the consequences of our sins, but only for a time; eventually having compassion and pity on God's people and lifting them out of their murky existence. Who is this God whose steadfast love is unsearchable and unconditional, even in the most trying of circumstances?! Who is this God who *casts all our sins into the depths of the sea* and remembers them no more?

Who is this God who does not break the covenant, even when people repeatedly break their covenant with God? Who is this merciful God that commands that we love our neighbor, bring justice to the oppressed, and take care of the orphan and widow?

Who is this God with unwavering loyalty to humanity, sends God's only Son as a sign of God's new covenant with them? Who is this God who gave this Son so that whosoever believes in him shall have eternal life? Who is this God that allows us to kill and destroy God's Son because we cannot bear the darkness of our own souls that his witness reveals? And who is this God that raises God's Son from

the dead to prove to all who believe that he is indeed the Messiah, the one sent by God to show God's love and forgiveness to all, and to set all people free.

Indeed, it is the one true God who *swears faithfulness...and unswerving loyalty* even today, as *God swore to the ancestors in days of old!*

### PRAYER

Almighty and compassionate God, thank you for loving and forgiving me. Help me to see my sins of which I still need to repent, and lead me in your way everlasting. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How has God shown unwavering love and faithfulness to you?

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## THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT - Day 19

### STAND FIRM

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 8-10, 12-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did... We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer... So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

### WILDERNESS WARNING

The Apostle Paul reaches back into Israel's history to the event that defines them: their deliverance from Egypt and the 40 years of wilderness wandering that followed. Imagine being there and witnessing all of the plagues that God brought on Pharaoh, then the Passover, the parting of the sea, the water from the rock, manna, quails, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. All of it, and yet they grumbled against Moses and tested God.

And God got totally fed up and told Moses his plans to "disinherit them" (Numbers 14:12) Moses pleaded with God to forgive them, and "then the Lord said, 'I do forgive, just as you have asked; nevertheless - as I live... none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have... not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ances-

tors; none of [them] shall see it.'" (Numbers 14:20-23) They wandered in the wilderness and died there because they tested God too many times.

It is the same with us, our life goes better when we trust God. Then when trouble comes our way, God strengthens and guides us so that we are able to endure it. Paul warns, *Do not do as some of them did...* don't spend your whole life in the wilderness, trust God and it will go well with you.

### PRAYER

Help me Lord to trust in you, and when temptations come my way help me to lean on your wisdom and strength, and remember your faithfulness and love for me. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

When were you tested and God provided a way out?

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## MONDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK - Day 20

### *FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING*

Luke 4:16-22

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

### *THE FULFILLMENT*

Jesus has returned to the Galilee from the wilderness *filled with the power of the Spirit*. (Luke 4:14) Word is spreading throughout the region about him, and he comes to Nazareth, his hometown and enters the synagogue where he is handed the scroll from which to read.

We don’t know anything from scripture about Jesus’ life from the time he was twelve (Luke 2:41-52) until he begins his ministry at thirty. So there is a lot we don’t know about Jesus’ formative years.

When I think of my own formative years between the ages of twelve and thirty, there were periods that definitely were wilderness times: dangerous times, times when temptations overcame me, and times when I was able to resist. And so when I think about the people who knew me during those years it is not surprising that many of them did not understand my *conversion*. My outlook on life and my lifestyle changed drastically, but they still remembered that *other* person. Some could only talk about it this way: *She got religion*.

Those who knew me well could see the *real* me beginning to blossom, but for many it was, and still is, a mystery. So it not surprising that when Jesus returns to his hometown, *filled with the power of the*

*Holy Spirit*, and identifies himself as one *anointed to bring good news to the poor...sent to proclaim release to the captives...to restore sight to the blind, and to bring justice to the oppressed*, the townspeople just have a hard time wrapping their minds around that...but this is *Joseph’s son*...

### *PRAYER*

Almighty God, you can transform each and every one of us into who you want us to be. Allow your Spirit to change us in ways that reveal your power and glory, and make us faithful servants for your purpose. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

When have you emerged *from the wilderness* a different person?

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## TUESDAY Of THE THIRD WEEK - Day 21

### *DOING, DOING, DOING*

Matthew 7:21-27

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.”

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall!”

### *LISTEN AND HEAR*

There is more to following Jesus than being a perpetual motion machine. Henri Nouwen<sup>ii</sup> talks frequently about being in communion with God. Nouwen says that “A lot of people are asking for the spiritual life and what they really want is to feel good about themselves.” What some fail to realize is that doing God’s will comes from being in relationship and communion with God. We cannot know God’s will for us unless we spend time getting to know God.

Jesus uses the illustration of a man who builds his house on a rock. Nouwen sees how Jesus chooses his twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-19) as an apt illustration of the rock:

“At night he went up to the mountain to pray. In the morning...he called his disciples together. In the afternoon he went out with them...preached the word of God and healed the sick... Communion with God, community, ministry. That is the order of things...pray...form community, and then with community to minister.” But we reverse it: we want to do things and then when they don’t work, we ask the community, and then when that doesn’t work we pray about it.

If we want to *do the will* of God, as Jesus did, then we must foster a relationship with God, as Jesus did. Nouwen suggests we use the order that he sees Jesus using in order to seek God’s guidance for action. Nouwen’s whole premise is that *we are God’s beloved*, and God wants to spend time with those whom he loves. That is the rock on which we stand. When we spend time with loved ones, then we can most effectively serve and minister on their behalf.

### *PRAYER*

Heavenly Father, lead my heart to pursue your presence. Help me to “claim my beloved-ness” in you and seek to do your will from that place in your heart. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

In what ways do you *claim your belovedness* in God?

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## WEDNESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK - Day 22

### HEAR AND BE BLESSED

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you...

See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

### PASSING THE TORCH

As Moses is preparing the Israelites to enter the land promised to them, "these are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan - in the wilderness...in the land of Moab:" (Deut. 1:1, 5) And then the book of Deuteronomy proceeds to repeat for the people the abridged version of the law of God as laid out in the previous four books: God's statutes and ordinances, which they are to observe diligently. It is sound instruction from the man who has led them out of their slavery in Egypt, and mediated and advocated for them with God throughout their forty years in the wilderness.

Now Moses is getting ready to leave them. He will *not* accompany them into the promised land; he has been told to pass the torch to Joshua. And so Moses speaks his final words to the people, *just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you...*"

Jesus says a similar thing to his disciples after his resurrection, when he is preparing for his ascension into heaven. He meets with his

disciples in the upper room and says to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And he breathes on them and they receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:21-22) And so the torch is passed onto the disciples. They are in charge of passing on the entire law as fulfilled in Jesus, the abridged version relayed in one word: Love. And so throughout the generations, the torch is passed now onto *us*: *Watch yourselves closely, don't forget what you have seen, observe diligently the statutes and ordinances God has give you, tell these thing to your children and grandchildren.*

### PRAYER

Almighty God, may we heed the wisdom of your statutes and ordinances, living out the law of Love that we see in your Son Jesus the Christ. Help us to be faithful to that witness. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Name one thing you did today to share the Love of Christ.

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## THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK - Day 23

### *FIRST: SEEK THE KINGDOM*

Matthew 6:25-34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

### *STRIVE FOR THE KINGDOM*

Prior to this text Jesus warns against "storing up treasures on earth" and instructs us to "store up treasure in heaven."

(6:19-20). Later on he says, "You cannot serve God and wealth."

(6:24)

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus says the kingdom is *near, here, and within us*. The kingdom is community; it is the beloved, peaceable kingdom where everyone is fed and clothed and no one goes without. It seems in our society that the kingdom of God is so far away that we can't even see it; and yet Jesus says it is near, and we must strive for it and meditate on it, because it is *within* us, within our grasp.

*Striving for the kingdom* means putting someone else's needs above our own. *Striving for the kingdom* means working for justice where we see injustice; it means when we have two coats we give away one; it means buying groceries for our hungry neighbor; it means being a

point of contact (using what influence and connections we have) to get someone a job so they can have stability and dignity of feeding their family. Our society is not set up to be the kingdom, but it could be—the kingdom is within us. We need to help bring it into being. We who call ourselves Christian must work to usher in the kingdom, one where people do not need to worry about clothing, or food, or shelter—a kingdom where a rescue mission *goes out of business* because no one is in need.

### *PRAYER*

God of Justice, enable me to use the kingdom within me to usher in the kingdom here *on earth as it is in heaven*. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

List one thing you can do to bring the kingdom of God near?

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## FRIDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK - Day 24

### RETURN TO THE LORD

Hosea 14:1-4

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,  
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.  
Take words with you  
and return to the LORD;  
say to him,  
“Take away all guilt;  
accept that which is good,  
and we will offer the fruit of our lips.  
Assyria shall not save us;  
we will not ride upon horses;  
we will say no more, ‘Our God,’  
to the work of our hands.  
In you the orphan finds mercy.”

I will heal their disloyalty;  
I will love them freely,  
for my anger has turned from them.

### UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Why does God do it? Why does God, throughout all these generations, put up with his people? God doesn't really *need* us - God created the whole world and everything in it. It is so evenly balanced in fact, that it would run just fine on its own - except that God's last creation - human beings - were added to the mix. So why does God continue to seek us, continue to work with us, continue to change God's mind about destroying us? Catherine of Siena says it is because, “God has fallen [madly] in love with what he has made!”<sup>1</sup>  
Catherine claims our God: the eternal, infinite, wise, beautiful, merciful, charitable, generous, Father God who gives us refuge and hope and is eternally good; is “drunk with desire” for our salvation. When we run away God comes looking for us, and when we stray God draws us even closer. The evidence of God's amazing and unconditional love for us is found in Jesus the Christ. God's ultimate act of

love was to “clothe [God's self] in our humanity,” to become one *with* us through his Son, to walk with us and show us the way to *live* the kingdom. So great is God's love for God's creation!

### PRAYER

Merciful Lord, help us to be merciful as you are merciful, loving as you are loving, and forgiving as you are forgiving. Do not give up on us, but reveal to us your wisdom and with discernment help us to usher in your kingdom, that all may know Love because we are followers of you. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Name one guilt that still needs healing, and one way that you have returned to the Lord from a time of wandering away.

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## SATURDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK - Day 25

### REJOICE AND BE FREE

*Psalm 51:7-15*

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return you.  
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.  
O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.

### READINESS

The Psalmist asks to be *purged with hyssop*. Hyssop was used as a sign of purification, its stems were used to sprinkle the blood on the doorposts of the Israelites at the Passover. It was used to sprinkle blood and water as a sign that a leper had been cleansed, or a home had been sanctified. A vinegar soaked sponge on a hyssop branch was offered to Jesus as he hung on the cross. The purpose of *purging with hyssop* would to drive out impurity and then to use the hyssop as a symbol of that purification.

When we ask God to *Create a clean heart...and put a new and right spirit within us*, we pray for the *readiness* or *willingness* to accept God's will for our lives, we pray for a heart that is free from the desire for retribution, and a spirit that is steadfast in love for all of God's creation.

But opening ourselves up to God's desire is risky. It leaves us vulnerable to those who would use our willingness against us. It leaves us open to persecution, misunderstanding, and perhaps even *crushed bones* and *bloodshed*. Yes, opening ourselves up to God's desire - or surrendering to God's will - is risky. But it is worth the risk to rejoice in the freedom of deliverance from all of these things, and praising God with a pure heart!

### PRAYER

God of mercy and all righteousness, give me the courage and strength to look inside myself and have you cleanse my heart. Make me a faithful witness to your never-ending love and sustain me with your presence always. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How has God put a new and right spirit within you?

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## FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT - Day 26

### *LEAVING HOME*

Luke 15:11-20a

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father.”

### *THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME*

Henri Nouwen in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*<sup>1</sup> puts himself in the parable, in this case in the part of the younger son. He says, “Over and over again I have left home. I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places searching for love! This is the great tragedy of my life and of the lives of so many I meet on my journey. Somehow I have become deaf to the voice that calls me the Beloved, have left the only place where I can hear that voice, and have gone off desperately hoping that I would find somewhere else what I could no longer find at home.” (p. 39)

Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, we leave the comfort of what we know, searching “over the rainbow” only to discover that, in the end, there is *no place like home*. And along the way we are hurt and wounded, impoverished even, but without this wounding we do not mature and grow.

As God’s beloved children we have choices, some call it *free will*. Our free will can lead us into some pretty dark places but God al-

lows that to happen, because God’s hopes that our suffering will lead us home again, into his loving arms. And there, wounded and broken, we bow down and confess: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands*. And the Father, so deliriously happy to see his son or daughter alive, welcomes them home.

### *PRAYER*

Heavenly Father, wherever I stray, give me the assurance that I may always return home to you. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Name a time when you have left home searching for something only to find it when you return.?

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## MONDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK - Day 27

### *DO NOT JUDGE*

Luke 6:37-42

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

He also told them a parable: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye," when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

### *SOUL SEARCH*

I thank the Lord every single day for how blessed I am. And why does God bless us? God blesses us so that we may be a blessing to someone else. But in our blessedness we can get smug, so here's the thing, sometimes the hardest *judging* is for myself. We can see so much need in the world that it gets really overwhelming! We can end up feeling like we are doing nothing at all. But the solution, I think, is to focus our energy on things we can do something *about*, and leave the rest to God.

Pastors, and other people in the helping professions, meet all kinds of people; some just need a leg up in order to get their life back together and some, no matter how much you *help*, will always need some kind of assistance. I once, through the grace of God, helped someone get their life back together, or so I thought. We kept in touch for a while and he seemed to be doing ok, although he had gone back with his ex-wife, the one who had rocked his world when I met him. Although I didn't think this was a good idea he seemed fine. We stayed in touch for a while and then lost contact. I even found a business card with his name on it at the church and thought "he must be doing ok." I should have called him when I found the card.

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Yesterday I received a letter from him - from jail - and things are not ok. To make matters worse he doesn't know how to contact me because I didn't call him when I found his business card; turns out he had lost my number. So, I am judging myself for my own easy life, and finding it hard to forgive myself for not making a simple phone call. The text says, do not judge...do not condemn...forgive... Sometimes the hardest person to apply these words to is yourself.

### *PRAYER*

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

What have you had to *let go* of in order for God to help?

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## TUESDAY OF FOURTH WEEK - Day 28

### LIGHT DISPELS DARKNESS

1 John 2:7-11

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

### INTO THE LIGHT

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus the Christ, or a *Christian*? Tony Campolo wrote a book distinguishing himself as a *Red Letter Christian*. So what is the difference between a *Christian* and a *Red Letter Christian*. And there are other Christians too, there are *Evangelicals* and *Pentecostals* and *Charismatics*; as well as all of the *denominations* that fall into any one of those categories. Each person or denomination bases their belief on something, or a collection of somethings, that they have read in the Bible, or *heard* that is in there. The Bible is our leading authority on the *truth* of God. And even though faiths differ, each one thinks that they have the *truth* of the gospel: "It says it right here in the Bible," they proclaim.

According to my Study Bible<sup>1</sup> this letter of John was written over a dispute claiming "Jesus the Christ was a spirit, not a physical human being." John writes with the assurance that God is Love, and that anything that is not of love is not of God - and is therefore *darkness*. In this passage John asks us to go back to the very beginning: God called *light* into being, (Gen. 1:3) and the *light* came into the darkness. And God called it good.

Then comes Jesus saying, "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) John says you can't hate and be in the light, because God is light,

and God is love. John refers to the old and new commandment as one and true. Jesus says the greatest commandment is *two*: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40) Jesus is the *light of the world*, the light came into the darkness, and God called it good. We call it Love. They'll know we are Christians by our Love.

### PRAYER

Whatever our faith tradition, Almighty God, let it be one in which your light and love for all creation shine forth. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Recall a time in your life when God dispelled hatred with understanding.

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## WEDNESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK - Day 29

### *SPIRITUAL WISDOM*

1 Corinthians 2:6-10, 13-16

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” — these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God... And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritual discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord. So as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ.

### *SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS*

When people learn that I am a pastor, if they themselves do not 'go to church' then they will often follow it up with, "I'm spiritual but not religious." And that may be very true. There may be a spiritual component to their lives that they rely on very much to inform decisions about how they are to live their lives. But I wonder about their definition of religion. For me religion is a discipline that keeps me connected to my spirituality. I need the daily discipline of sitting with scripture - the major tool for both my religion *and* my spirituality - in order to be reminded *daily* that there is a power greater than *me* out there; that the world does not revolve around me.

My daily reading of scripture informs my faith in God even as the Holy Spirit leads me to a greater understanding of the *relevance* of my religion in the world around me. My daily reading of scripture reminds me that there are things that I cannot explain going on in this world, and that there are mysteries beyond my understanding. My discipline provides evidence that forces are at work that I cannot even fathom, forces that bring blessing out of tragedy and sometimes, tragedy out of blessing. *For who has known the mind of the Lord. So as to instruct him?* And so those of us who are spiritual *and* religious dwell in the mystery of God's *wisdom*, and trust in God's *glory* as revealed in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

### *PRAYER*

Strengthen me, Lord, to see your glory revealed in all things; and let your Holy Spirit guide me through it all. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

How do you live your faith: spiritually or religiously or both?

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## THURSDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK - Day 30

### WHAT DO THEY HAVE AGAINST YOU?

Matthew 5:21-24

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

### BE RECONCILED

I know when someone has done something against *me*—something for which I am called to *forgive*. But do I always know when I have done something to someone else? Jesus says if I *remember that I have*, then I must go and make amends.

This is consistent with the 12-Step program of Alcoholic’s Anonymous\* - a program that claims to be *spiritual but not religious*:

- Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
- Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Notice that *six* out of the twelve steps are about making direct amends! One thing that stands out to me in these steps is the *willingness* and *readiness* that must be in place in order for one to accomplish this task. The 12-Step program illustrates the complexity of our actions,

and the difficulty of untangling some of the webs of deceit that we weave into our lives.

It is easy for us to look at The 12-Step program and console ourselves by saying that “well of course if you’re an *alcoholic or drug addict* you have things to confess,” but Jesus does not so easily let us off the hook. Jesus says anger, insults, name calling, all must be reconciled. This humbles us, and reminds us that we are not perfect, helps us to realize that we are *all* imperfect creatures in need of God’s mercy and dependent upon God’s grace. And *that* realization can change our hearts. The Apostle Paul spoke the truth: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one...” (Romans 3:10)

### PRAYER

Show me, Lord, how I have hurt my brother or sister. Give me the courage to see it, and the strength to make amends. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Recall a time when your wronged someone. What would it take to reconcile with that person?

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## FRIDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK - Day 31

### *MESSIANIC RIDDLE*

John 7:33-39

Jesus then said, "I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, "You will search for me and you will not find me" and "Where I am, you cannot come?"

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

### *PLAINLY SPEAKING...*

Was Jesus intentionally being obscure? It seems to me when I read some of the things Jesus says, that Jesus expects those who listen to him to search beneath the surface for answers. It's almost like it's a private joke, where you have to know some background in order to understand. It is worth noting that already there is talk of a plot to kill Jesus.

The setting for this text is the Festival of Booths. This is a harvest festival that takes place in the fall of the year. *On the last day of the festival, the great day*, the 14th chapter of Zechariah is always read. It highlights the events of the day of the Lord's victory, "On that day *living waters shall flow* out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter. And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one." (Zechariah 14:8-9)

When Jesus puts out a call for the thirsty to come and drink; and proclaims *rivers of living water shall flow from the believer's heart*, the Jews in the crowd hear this as the reigning in of the kingdom of God

when there will be peace in Jerusalem. The implication here is that *Jesus* is the one chosen to reign it in.

And so there is disbelief and division among the people. In the next paragraph we see them begin to reason among themselves why this can't be so, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?" (John 7:41) And remember Nathaniel's question a few chapters previous, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth [of Galilee]?" (John 1:46) And so they continue to question if Jesus is the Messiah. Our own *believer's heart* knows that it is true.

### *PRAYER*

Father God, please lend your understanding to the scripture set before us. In Your Son Jesus name we pray, Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

How do you explain "Jesus" from your *believer's heart*?

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SATURDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK - Day 32

*WASH FEET*  
John 13:12-17

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

*MORE THAN SYMBOLIC*

What do you think about touching someone’s feet? Perhaps you don’t mind that much if someone bathes daily and you know they change their socks everyday, and that their shoes are dry. But what about a *homeless* person’s feet that have been walking the streets for days on end. Feet in socks that have not been changed in a week or more. Feet in sweat-soaked socks stiff from being trapped in those shoes for weeks on end. Feet in shoes that have seen more puddles and dirt than even the most playful puppy! What about washing *those* feet?

My son has spent a fair amount of time drug addicted, homeless, and in shelters. He has a memory of a time when a church visited the Mission where he was staying. He said, “Mom, they washed people’s feet! They brought clean socks and new shoes and they removed our old socks and shoes and put our feet in warm soapy water and washed our feet, dried them and gave us new socks and shoes!” He was astonished that people would ever do that knowing how bad his own feet were at the time. It made an impression on him that he will remember forever - the kindness of those people who cared enough to wash a homeless person’s feet!

Following Jesus is REAL. It’s not theory - it’s PRACTICE. It’s not just preaching it but DOING IT! And the witness it gives to the love and compassion of Christ for those who most people prefer to not even *see* is the greatest testimony one can give.

If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

*PRAYER*

Almighty God, help me to see your face in all people. Help me to respond with generosity and a loving and hopeful word. Help me to be your faithful servant always, joyfully serving you always. Amen

*FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Name a time when you did something you did not want to do simply because Jesus called you to do it.

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## FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT - Day 33

### *LOSING AND KEEPING*

John 12:24-32

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - "Father save me from this hour?" No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name. Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

### *ADMIRER OR DISCIPLE?*

I read a story about Clarence Jordan and his experience founding Koinonia Farm - an intentional bi-racial community begun in the 1940's in Americus, Georgia. Clarence had this notion that blacks and whites could live together peaceably in community if given the opportunity. The deep south in the 1940's was not exactly ready for that. "The Ku Klux Klan repeatedly terrorized, bombed, and vandalized Koinonia,"\*\* and businesses boycotted their produce.

"Jordan once asked his brother, Robert...to be Koinonia's attorney. "I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got." Clarence said, "*We* might lose everything too." "It's different for you," Robert responded. "Why is it different?... You and I joined the church...as boys...when we came forward the preacher asked...'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?" Robert replied, "I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point." "Could that point by any chance be - the cross?" [Robert replies] "I follow him *to* the cross, but not *on* the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

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Then Clarence tells him he's an "admirer" of Jesus, but not a disciple, and he should go tell *that* to his church. Robert replies that if everyone who feels like he does did that, "we wouldn't have a church..." But Clarence asks, "The question is, do you *have* a church?" (p. 28) His brother eventually did become their attorney, as well as a state senator and a justice on the state's Supreme Court; and he "boasted that his brother was the greatest Christian he had ever known."

*Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

### *PRAYER*

I need your strength and guidance Lord. Give me the courage to trust in your faithfulness, so that you can trust mine. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Do one thing just for Jesus today. How did it feel?

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**MONDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK - Day 34**

*PRAYER*

*FREE FOR ALL*  
Matthew 5:38-42

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

*RISK LOVE*

Have you ever thought of attachments as idols? Maybe you have four coats and never wear three of them anymore, but you just can’t bear to part with even one—even though you see someone who clearly could use a warm coat.

Or maybe you feel like, because you worked hard for what you have, you don’t have a responsibility to be generous to someone who was not able to work as hard as you. Or maybe your impulse to emotionally protect yourself above all else, keeps you from speaking up when you see an injustice—see someone else being treated unfairly.

The trouble is simple. We are often afraid to give of ourselves when there is a risk that you will not have enough later on—enough money, enough time, enough food, enough security, enough, enough energy.

Yet here is Jesus encouraging us: turn the other cheek, give more than you were asked to give, expend the extra energy even when it’s hard, be generous to those in need. Living compassionately requires effort. Loving our neighbor sometimes even means giving up what we think is our due.

Jesus asks is that we love one another, and take action that shows we care; Jesus asks us to risk love.

Lord Jesus, help me to see the opportunities you put before me to serve you. Give me a creative spirit to work with those you put in my path and lead me in your way everlasting. Amen

*FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Name a time when you took a risk to help someone in need.

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## TUESDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK - Day 35

### LOVE ONE ANOTHER

1 John 3:11-14, 16-18

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death... We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

### TRUTH AND ACTION

From the beginning of all things, our text says, God's message is that we should live a life based on love. The text is actually trying to answer a very deep questions: What is *life* and how can we live it to the fullest? The text says, *We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another*. So living a full life depends on how we love *others* because Christ laid down his life because of his love for us.

And yet, the text also points out that sometimes as Christians we can get bogged down by seeing all the sad, hurtful, and even violent ways people treat each other. Sometimes we even see Christians act in these harmful and sinful ways, all the while claiming that they do it in the name of God. Sometimes we see all this hurt and hate in the world and it causes us to begin to hate as well. We are stung by what we see and experience and we find ourselves wanting to sting back!

What are we to do then, and how do we find our way back to what God has wanted us to hear from the beginning—*that we should love one another*?

This text from 1 John does not leave any middle ground: love your neighbor and help them. Do not hate, even when you see and experience things that are hateful. This text in 1 John asks the hard questions that we need to ask ourselves: "*How does God's love abide in anyone*

*who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"* Then it gives us the clear, simple, and challenging answer: "*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*"

### PRAYER

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life. (St. Frances)

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Is there someone you *hate*? How can you serve that person in the love of the Christ?

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## WEDNESDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK - Day 36

### GOD IS LOVE

1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

#### WHY?

The text asks two questions: "What is Love?" and, "Why did God send his Son into the world?"

The answer to the first question is easy, "God is Love." The answer to the second question is harder, and is more multi-layered. "Why did God send his Son into the world?" In the letter John says, *God sent his only Son into the world so that we might LIVE through him. In this is love...* So there is LIFE in the Love of God, the Love that Jesus brings into the world. God sent his Beloved Son into the world to share God's Love, and to show us how to Love one another in LIFE. Jesus himself says, "I have come that they might have LIFE and have it abundantly!" (John 10:10)

But John also has a second answer to the question: "Why did God send his Son into the world?" *In this is Love, not that we loved God but that he Loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* I am bothered the phrase *atoning sacrifice* because it make it sound like God sent his only Son to earth for the purpose of being put to death to substitute for our sin. But when I look at the Hebrew Scriptures and see the *sacrifice* that God *actually desires*, I see that: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart;" (Psalm 51:17) "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?" (1 Samuel 15:22) "Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me..."

(Jeremiah 6:21) "But this is the command I give them, 'Obey my voice and I will be your God, and you shall be my people, and walk only in the way that I command you...'" (Jeremiah 7:23) "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:7-8)

Jesus was, indeed, *perfect* in God's love—love lived out *sacrificially* in this way: so *if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

#### PRAYER

"Jesus, who has come that we may experience life in its fullest dimensions, give us now that life, and let it ever be in us a river rushing forth to life eternal. Through Christ Jesus." Amen

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Why do YOU believe "God sent his Son into the world"?

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## THURSDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK - Day 37

### *PERFECT LOVE*

1 John 4:17-21

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

### *TRUST LOVE*

A word not mentioned in this text is trust, but trust is a very important component in love. To say you love without trusting the one you say you love, is to be in a constant state of fear. And, as John says, *there is no fear in love*. Trusting leaves us vulnerable to being hurt. But there is something worse than being hurt, and that is not risking love at all. For by risking love we place ourselves in a most wonderfully precarious position where we may receive the most precious gift - the gift of complete and total love by another, *perfect love that casts out fear*.

However, there is a possibility that we may be hurt, but being hurt actually can serve to tenderize us to be more compassionate and more loving. Being hurt lets us know that we are human; it can sensitize us to be more loving toward others - we can empathize - because we know how it feels to be hurt. Because we love our brothers and sisters, we do not want them to be afflicted with the pain that we have endured.

John says that *those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen*. I have heard that sentiment expressed in another way: You only love God as much as the person you love the least in this world.

And so we must ask ourselves, is that how much we want to love God, only as much as the person we love the least? Or do we want to surrender to God's love and *love because he first loved us*? Risk love, allow God's love to penetrate even the most hateful of feelings, obeying the commandment we have from him: *those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also*.

### *PRAYER*

Let me trust in you enough, dear Lord, to risk loving my brother and sister even when I may be hurt in the process. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

When have you had to trust that loving was the best course of action?

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## FRIDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK - Day 38

### COMPASSION Matthew 9:35-38

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

### A MATTER OF THE HEART

As Jesus *went about all the cities and villages*, he was surrounded by people in need. I can only liken it to when I have been with my son and waited for his case manager to take him into her office, to reapply for social services. Seeing all the people in need: mothers with children, unkempt young men in shabby clothes, many with hygiene problems, some with addiction issues, some with mental health concerns, not knowing where to turn and hoping against hope that someone will help them get out of the mess that they find themselves in, many through no fault of their own. I see so much need and my heart actually hurts because I can't fix it, I don't know how to help, and I don't even know what WILL help.

Jesus sees that sometimes we are born into situations that make it hard for us to move forward in life. They don't make it *impossible*, but these situations make it harder for people to make ends meet, harder to have a sustainable life, harder to have a *good life* - whatever one perceives that to be.

Social Service agencies do help people with basic needs, but people need more. They need hope, they need to see a way beyond the help they need in the moment. Jesus sees them as *sheep without a shepherd*.

And so he sends out his disciples knowing the harvest is plentiful - people need the hope, faith, and love that only God can provide; but the workers - the disciples - you and me - we are few. And so we

pray for more help, we pray for *the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest*.

The *churches* are the means of providing for the community. People need a leg up, as much or more than they need a handout. Churches often provide food pantries, thrift stores and soup kitchens: but they could also provide mentors and counselors and people to *walk with* folks to help them get their lives together. In this way we share the love and compassion of the Christ. When we go into the fields and *be* the shepherd who leaves the 99 who are doing just fine to attend to the one who is lost and alone, we are being a laborer for Christ reaping in the harvest.

### PRAYER

Lord, we know the harvest is plentiful. Send out laborers to reap in the abundant harvest of those who are lost and alone. Amen

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

When have you offered hope to someone who was hopeless?

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## SATURDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK - Day 39

### *SERVANT JUSTICE*

Isaiah 42:1-4

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

### *JUSTICE UNDONE*

Carlo Carretto - mystic, monk and author - shares passionately about his deep dependence on the Christ.<sup>4</sup>

“Jesus became a sacrament for me, the cause of my salvation, he brought my time in hell to an end, and put a stop to my inner disintegration. He washed me patiently in the waters of baptism, he filled me with the exhilarating joy of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, he nourished me with the bread of his word. Above all, he forgave me, he forgot everything, he did not even wish me to remember my past myself.”

“When, through my tears, I began to tell him something of the years during which I betrayed him, he lovingly placed his hand over my mouth in order to silence me. His one concern was that I should muster courage enough to pick myself up again, to try and carry on walking in spite of my weakness, and to believe in his love in spite of my fears. But there was one thing he did, the value of which cannot be measured, something truly unbelievable, something only God could do.”

“While I continued to have doubts about my own salvation, to tell him that my sins could not be forgiven, and that justice, too, had its rights, he appeared on the Cross before one Friday towards midday.”

“I realized that he had died in order that I might stop turning to him with questions about justice [for my sins] and believe instead, deep within myself, that the scales had come down overflowing on the side of love, and that even though all...through unbelief or madness, had offended him, he had conquered forever, and drawn all things everlastingly to himself.”

### *PRAYER*

May our own witness of your saving love mirror that of your faithful servant, Carlo Carretto; and may we know your just and forgiving love always. Amen

### *FOR FURTHER REFLECTION*

Describe your own sacrament of salvation.

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## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES USED IN EVERY DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Scripture Verses are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), HarpurCollins Publishers, 1989.

The choice of Daily Scripture texts and reflection questions are taken from *Lent & Easter, Wisdom from Thomas Merton*, Linguori Publications.

### ADDITIONAL REFERENCES AND RESOURCES USED FOR EACH WEEK

#### Day 1-4

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

<sup>tt</sup>Carlo Carretto, *In Search of the Beyond*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Shawchuck and Job, Upper Room Books, p. 138-9.

<sup>ttt</sup>Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2006. From pgs. 2-4.

#### Day 5-11

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

<sup>fff</sup>Frank G. Honeycutt, "How Jesus Hangs On", *Marry a Pregnant Virgin: Unusual Stories for New and Curious Christians*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2008, p. 100-104.

<sup>ff</sup>Carlo Carretto, *Why Me Lord*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Job & Shawchuck, The Upper Room, p. 117.

#### Day 12-18

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

<sup>t</sup>James C. Fenhagen, *Mutual Ministry*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Job & Shawchuck, The Upper Room, pgs. 89- Quote reworded for easier reading. Ibid. <sup>t1</sup> pg.88.

<sup>tt</sup>Walter Russell Bowie, *The Compassionate Christ*, Abington Press, 1965, pgs. 99-100.

<sup>ttt</sup>Thomas Merton, *Lent & Easter, Wisdom from Thomas Merton*, Linguori Publications, pg. 28.

#### Day 19-25

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

<sup>l</sup>Paula Ripple, *Growing Strong at Broken Places*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Job & Shawchuck, The Upper Room, p. 255-6.

<sup>ll</sup>James M. Efrid, in *Jeremiah Prophet Under Siege*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, 1979, p. 100.

<sup>lll</sup>Charles de Foucauld, *Meditations of a Hermit*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Job & Shawchuck, The Upper Room, p. 111.

<sup>i</sup>Richard J. Foster, *Prayer*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1992., p. 2-3

<sup>ii</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Beloved: Henri Nouwen in Conversation*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007. p. 46,48,18.

#### Day 26-32

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

<sup>t</sup>*The HarperCollins Study Bible*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1989, p. 2293

<sup>l</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Job & Shawchuck, The Upper Room, p. 123.

<sup>ll</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1992.

#### Day 33-39

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

<sup>\*</sup>*One Day At A Time In Al-Anon*, Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., Virginia, 1996, pg. 368-369. [ISBN:0-910034-63-X Large Print]

<sup>\*\*</sup>James C. Howell, *Servants, Misfits, and Martyrs*, Upper Room Books, Nashville, 1999. Pg 26-28

#### Day 40-46

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Scripture Verses are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), HarpurCollins Publishers, 1989.

The choice of Daily Scripture texts are taken from *Lent & Easter, Wisdom from Thomas Merton*, Linguori Publications.

<sup>t</sup>Invocation, *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Shawchuck and Job, Upper Room Books, p. 137.

<sup>tt</sup>Carlo Carretto, *In Search of the Beyond*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Shawchuck and Job, Upper Room Books, p. 138-9.

<sup>ttt</sup>Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2006. From pgs. 2-4.

<sup>tttt</sup> www.blueletterbible.org, glorified, using Strong's Lexicon #G1392.

#### Day 47-54

##### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Scripture Verses are from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), HarpurCollins Publishers, 1989.

The choice of Daily Scripture texts are taken from *Lent & Easter, Wisdom from Thomas Merton*, Linguori Publications.

<sup>\*\*</sup>"Free from the Law of Lent", *Lent & Easter, Wisdom from Thomas Merton*, Linguori Publications, p. 102.

<sup>\*\*</sup>"They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love #284, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, Word Music, Waco, TX, 1986.

<sup>a</sup>Prayer, *Lent & Easter, Wisdom from Thomas Merton*, Linguori Publications, p. 103.,

<sup>a</sup>Ibid, "The Power of Easter," p. 104., <sup>a</sup>Ibid, Prayer, p. 105.

<sup>aa</sup>*One Tin Soldier*, by The Original Caste, 1971.

<sup>u</sup>Morning Has Broken #145, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989., <sup>u</sup>Ibid, On Eagle's Wings #143