



The Sermon on the Mount: On Earth as in Heaven



A Devotional through the
Communities for Spiritual Vitality



Communities for Spiritual Vitality

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The Communities for Spiritual Vitality is an initiative birthed through the experience of the Diocese of Vermont, in collaboration with the Diocese of Massachusetts, to foster a spirit of depth and abundance among our lay leadership community during a time of vigorous change in the reality of “church.” The ministry of The Communities has grown, seeking to reach and support lay spiritual formation across the Episcopal New England dioceses.

OUR MISSION

The Communities for Spiritual Vitality supports lay formation through a concerted set of offerings. Yearlong cohorts of lay leaders share spiritual formation, a safe space for mutually vulnerable fellowship, in-person retreats, and regular contact with pastoral companionship. The Communities has also begun to offer one-time retreats open to any lay people in the Province. Finally, this yearly devotional, as well as our website, are meant to be free resources for anyone seeking spiritual renewal. All of our offerings are free or highly subsidized in a spirit of beauty and abundance. Through these ministries, we hope to strengthen the laity to bring spiritual renewal and living hope (1 Peter 1:3) more fully into the mission and practice of their local worship contexts.

If you worship in any of the New England dioceses of the Episcopal Church and have something you would like to offer, or to learn more, please contact us at communities@diovermont.org.



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ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN

IMAGINE BEING ONE of the people gathering around Jesus as he climbs up “the mountain” to deliver what we now know as the Sermon on the Mount. Are there a hundred? A thousand? A multitude? Maybe you are just pulled along in the tide, or a suspicious interlocutor, someone hoping for a miracle, a perpetual seeker. Maybe you are a disciple. Before this Sermon, the Gospel only given three terse verses about Jesus’ public ministry—casting out demons, teaching, healing—but there are no details. So it really is an open question why any of those first listeners were there. Two thousand years later, Matthew still leaves the question open before us: Why have we come to listen to Jesus?

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ inaugural speech in Matthew’s Gospel. While many of its most treasured elements—the Lord’s Prayer, the beatitudes, the Golden Rule, etc.—are in other Gospels as well, and while Jesus certainly teaches in those Gospels, Matthew is the evangelist who frames Jesus specifically as a Teacher. Matthew gathers Jesus’ teachings into five substantial collections, each associated with the central narrative movements of the Gospel. In some way, each collection has something to do with the Kingdom of Heaven—the nature, in-breaking, conditions, and fulfillment of God’s reign. The Sermon on the Mount is the longest of the collections. It is also the most down to earth, defining how we might create and participate in life-giving community within our daily lives. It is the Teacher’s handbook of what the Kingdom looks like in human society. Hence, this Sermon answers that foundational petition of the Lord’s Prayer: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, **on earth as it is in heaven.***

But to really appreciate the sayings of the Teacher, we must perceive who the Teacher is. This has been the primary concern of Matthew’s first four chapters.

First, Jesus the Teacher, is also the King. Through Joseph’s genealogy, the terror of Herod (the worldly sovereign), and the adoration of the Magi, Matthew displays Jesus as the son of David, the one who is to inherit the throne, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the King. If we hear, follow, practice, we will be subjects of (to?) this new realm.

Second, if the Teacher is the Son of David through Joseph, then through Mary and the Spirit, he is also the *Son of God*. The details of his birth, his baptism, the testimony of John the Baptist, and the tests of the Accuser, all intimate something that only faith can proclaim directly: Jesus is God’s supreme Child. If we hear, follow, practice, we will be adopted heirs, seeking to grow in the likeness of our Creator.

Teacher, King, Son; disciple, subject, child. These are the dynamics within which Matthew *hopes* we have come to the Sermon. For Matthew, to be a Christian is not just to believe something about Jesus and to receive his graces. It also implies making a good faith attempt to follow and yield to the dictates of his realm, and to grow in the likeness of his character. As commentator Douglas Hare writes, “Faith and ethics, Matthew insists, are two sides of the same coin, or the coin is counterfeit.” If we long for the heavenly realm on earth, we must let it take root in our own hearts, choices, and communities first.

As we embark on this journey with the Sermon, I suspect that we will each discover elements that make us significantly uncomfortable. There are teachings on divorce, the realities of what it may mean to turn the other cheek, reconciling with all, and challenges toward detachment from wealth in an age of IRAs and other provisions. Our modern tendency is to dismiss or soften these sayings. In some

ways, this is understandable. As I write in my own reflection: we must acknowledge how our human kingdoms, including the church, have used such sayings to demean or exclude others.

On the other hand, when we mitigate the teachings out of pocket, we miss an opportunity for personal growth in the likeness of God and community development in the shape of the eternal realm. We miss an opportunity to dream. In Lent, we remember that Jesus was killed because of how radical and threatening his kingdom is. Whenever I feel myself rattling within a Gospel that feels too domestic, I rewatch movies like Of Gods and Men or Man of God, which portray the sometimes beautiful, sometimes cringy, always un-reason-able way the reign of God appears when Sermon teaching invades human lives. Herod understood; the religious leaders understood. Do we: students, subjects, siblings of the King, understand? Will we let ourselves be shaken up, changed, and exhorted beyond reason, as we read Christ's words together anew?

This Lent: *Why have you come to listen to Jesus?*



STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

THIS DEVOTIONAL COVERS the days between Ash Wednesday and the Second Sunday of Easter. Lent-Easter is really one cycle in the Christian year, and this devotional attempts to give a sense of that unity by including Easter Week reflections.

The entire Sermon is printed (New Revised Standard Version, with portions also in the First Nations Version) at the front of the devotional. *I highly recommend that you take the time to read it through in one sitting at least once.* Get a sense of how expansive Jesus' vision is *before* we get into the weeds.

From Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, the devotional moves verse by verse through the Sermon on the Mount. That said, there are some notable features:

First, the *Beatitudes* are set apart on **Ash Wednesday and Sundays**. They are explored in more substantial reflections by the Brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, MA. Thank you, Brothers, for your life of prayer among us, and for sharing what you have received through your writing for this project. If you would like to know more about the Society's worship, retreats, writings, or vocations, please visit www.ssje.org.

Second, all of the reflections from the **Saturday before Holy Week through Holy Saturday** were written by our provincial bishops. It is such a gift to have the reflections of our spiritual and ecclesial leaders guiding us through that sacred time. Thank you, bishops, for your writing *and* for your care for our common ecclesial life.

Finally, the *Lord's Prayer* is also set apart during **Easter Week**. As we consider how we disciples might live in the light of Easter, this seminal prayer seemed like an appropriate way to conclude the book.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

EVERY DAY INCLUDES several elements: the **Collect of the Day** from Lesser Feasts and Fasts (these have no relation to the Sermon), an **assigned reading** (pericope) from Matthew, and a **reflection**. It is likely that there is more to take in than is possible. You are encouraged to find a way to engage with this material that is *sustainable*. So, pick a path with which you can be consistent. The pages are undated, so you can return to this volume in future years, or in other seasons.

The core part of one's daily practice with this devotional may include reading the assigned scripture portion. Consider what the passage says to you—particularly what your gut or conditioned reactions are. Doing this *before* reading the reflection is suggested. Then, read the reflection and consider what God is offering you through the words of the author.

Finally, close in prayer. Your prayer may be a confession, a petition, a gratitude, adoration, silence, writing, or a conversation. It may include the Collect of the day. Perhaps you will consider praying the Lord's Prayer daily, in preparation for Easter Week. Please, also, *pray for the person who wrote the reflection, their worship context, and their diocese*. Ask God to bless them throughout this day, and give thanks for God's work in their life and their generosity to us.

Throughout the devotional, visual art offers additional opportunities for reflection. (Please do not copy or otherwise reproduce artwork, which is used under license.) You may gaze upon a piece of art and ask the same questions you would ask yourself about the Scripture and reflection. This practice is called *visio divina* and can be surprisingly powerful. God speaks in many mysterious ways!

A final note of sincere gratitude to the bishops of Vermont and Massachusetts, the Rt. Rev. Shannon MacVean-Brown and the Rt. Rev. Julia Whitworth, respectively, for their ongoing encouragement of collaboration, their enthusiasm for resources to support our shared growth in Christ, and their support for the Communities for Spiritual Vitality initiative. This project would not have happened without their curiosity and encouragement. Thank you.

May your Season be blessed and your discipleship deepened as you pray with this devotional.

The Rev. adwoa Wilson, ObJN
Communities for Spiritual Vitality

The Sermon on the Mount: On Earth as in Heaven

The Rev. adwoa Wilson, Executive Editor

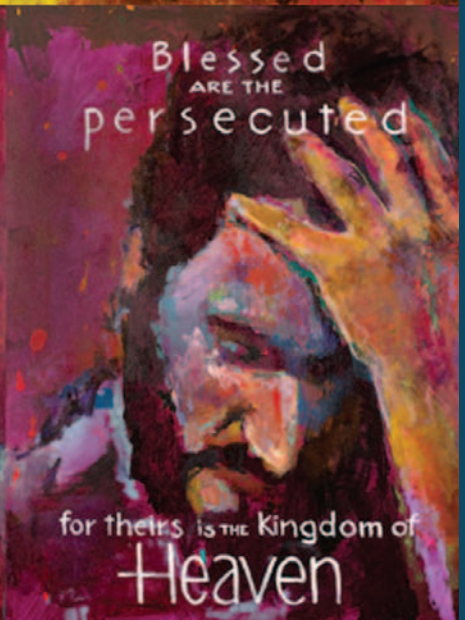
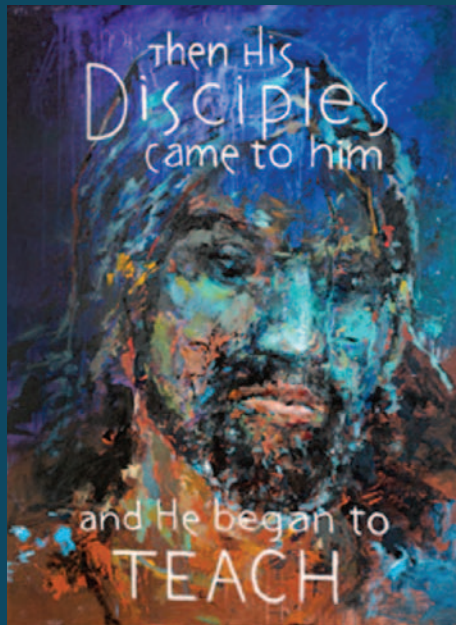
Hannah Cooper, Editorial Administrator

Susan Kochinskas, Designer



“So now I am sending you into all nations to teach them how to walk the road with me. You will represent me as you perform the purification ceremony with them [baptism] in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You will then teach them all the ways that I have instructed you to walk in. Never forget, I will always be with you, walking beside you, until the new age has fully come.”

—Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19–20, First Nations Version)





THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: MATTHEW 5–7

New Revised Standard Version

CHAPTER 5

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

First Nations Version

CHAPTER 5

¹ When Creator Sets Free (Jesus) saw this great crowd, he went back up into the mountainside and sat down to teach the people. His followers came to him there, ² so he took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and began to share his wisdom with them and teach them how to see Creator’s good road. ³ Creator’s blessing rests on the poor, the ones with broken spirits. The good road from above is theirs to walk. ⁴ Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who walk a trail of tears, for he will wipe the tears from their eyes and comfort them. ⁵ Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who walk softly and in a humble manner. The earth, land, and sky will welcome them and always be their home. ⁶ “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who hunger and thirst for wrongs to be made right again. They will eat and drink until they are full. ⁷ “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who are merciful and kind to others. Their kindness will find its way back to them—full circle. ⁸ “Creator’s blessing rests on the pure of heart. They are the ones who will see the Great Spirit. ⁹ “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who make peace. It will be said of them, ‘They are the children of the Great Spirit!’

¹⁰ “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who are hunted down and mistreated for doing what is right, for they are walking the good road from above. ¹¹ “Others will lie about you, speak against you, and look down on you with scorn and contempt, all because you walk the road with me.

This is a sign that Creator’s blessing is resting on you. ¹² So let your hearts be glad and jump for joy, for you will be honored in the spirit-world above. You are like the prophets of old, who were treated in the same way by your ancestors.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² 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. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

CHAPTER 6

¹ “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “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. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “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. ⁶ 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.

⁷ “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. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

New Revised Standard Version

⁹ “Pray, then, in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

may your name be revered as holy.

¹⁰ May your kingdom come.

May your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

(Other ancient authorities add, in some form,
*For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours
forever. Amen.*)

First Nations Version

⁹ Instead, when you send your voice to the Great Spirit, here is how you should pray: O Great Spirit, our Father from above, we honor your name as sacred and holy. ¹⁰ Bring your good road to us, where the beauty of your ways in the spirit-world above is reflected in the earth below.

¹¹ “Provide for us day by day—the elk, the buffalo, and the salmon. The corn, the squash, and the wild rice. All the things we need for each day. ¹² Release us from the things we have done wrong, in the same way we release others for the things done wrong to us.

¹³ Guide us away from the things that tempt us to stray from your good road, and set us free from the evil one and his worthless ways. Aho! May it be so!

¹⁴ “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶ “And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If, then, the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵ “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?

²⁶ 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? ²⁷ And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

³⁰ 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? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³² For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴ “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

CHAPTER 7

¹ “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ² For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ 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.

⁶ “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? ¹⁰ Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? ¹¹ 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!

¹² “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets. ¹³ “Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² 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 mighty works in your name?’ ²³ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you who behave lawlessly.’

²⁴ “Everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.



ASH WEDNESDAY



COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:1–3a

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying: “Blessed...”

When Creator Sets Free (Jesus) saw this great crowd, he went back up into the mountainside and sat down to teach the people. His followers came to him there, so he took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and began to share his wisdom with them and teach them how to see Creator’s good road. Creator’s blessing rests...

THE WORD “BLESSED” comes from an attempt to translate Hebrew and Greek biblical terminology into Old English. Those who spread Christianity to the early English speakers searched for a native English term that captured the same sense of those Greek and Hebrew words, and found the Old English word, *bloedsian*.

Bloedsian referred to something set apart and marked for sacred or holy purposes, but more literally, it referred to something sprinkled with the blood of an animal sacrifice. This sacrifice, offered to a god, was holy, and its blood was used to sacred spaces. So, while *bloedsian* does refer to a thing made sacred, we might more directly translate it to modern English as “blooded.”

Our normal association with the word “blessed” is far less striking. “God bless you,” and “bless your heart” are common phrases, sometimes used almost automatically. Even in the Church, our liturgies often end in a blessing: “The blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always,” and we may hear it simply as a formality to end a liturgy.

Because it is so familiar, we risk allowing blessedness to become banal or a social nicety. I don’t think that’s Jesus’s intention in using the word. It’s true that in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the word we translate as “blessed” does not have the same origin in the sprinkling of blood. But it’s equally true that these languages represent cultures that were very familiar with that practice. And the New Testament writers are ever willing to draw connections between sacrificial animals and the sacrifice of Christ.

Most obviously, Jesus, the Lamb of God—a sacrificial lamb, whose blood is shed—is a central image of the New Testament. The Church continues to employ this image in its liturgy, theology, and music, both ancient and modern. Living in this image, we get the sense of being with the saints in Revelation brilliant white garments are cleansed in the blood of the Lamb. The Lamb takes away sin through blessing, by cleansing with its sacred blood. Of this blood, the Letter to the Hebrews offers a line I find especially evocative: “...you have come...to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the

sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” This blood of Jesus—unlike the blood of Abel, unlike the blood shed of our human violence—speaks at last a word not of cursing, but of blessing.

As we read and pray through Jesus’s famous Sermon on the Mount, we see one of the most well-loved parts of the Gospel. But if we only understand “blessedness” as something sweet, or formal, or a banal Bible-ism, we risk losing something. When we hear of blessedness, our heart should beat a bit faster, our souls should quicken, we should be alert, excited, maybe even uncomfortable. There is a holy strangeness to an encounter with true blessing. As we continue through the Sermon, we should keep two things in mind.

First, we are talking about approaching God. We are talking about nearness to and encounter with the One in whom all have their being. We are talking about piercing the veil, seeing some glimpse of eternity. Blessedness isn’t just nice; it’s the stuff of death, and life.

Second, the lesson of this Sermon is that such a breathtaking, soul-quicken encounter is not reserved for a separate elite. The blessedness of the God who made all things can be found in all things, through our reverence, our respect, our awe of all that God has fashioned. The blood poured out for you, for all the world, has been sprinkled upon the world. In this Sermon, behold, this blood speaks a better word; listen!

Br. Lucas Hall
Society of Saint John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY



COLLECT

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy Name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:13

SALTY VERSE 13, coming as it does directly after the sweetness of the nine blessings, is a bit of a shock; a turn from ecstatic proclamation to cautionary challenge. What is this all-important something that enables us to flavor the whole world, but without which we are *absolutely worthless*?

Until now, I've vaguely thought "Love" and left it at that. This feels valid but hasty. It dismisses Christ's metaphor as a throwaway wrapper on a truism. But perhaps there is more to see.

Salt is not exactly a food; you can't sit down to a nice bowl of salt. Instead, salt serves food, brings out what it is, sets it right. By casting the world as food and his followers as salt, Jesus implies that the world is good but incomplete, and that our job is to become part of it, inseparable from it, as he did, in order to serve it. Like salt, we're meant to bring out the flavors that make God's creation and kingdom a delight to God. We are not meant to balloon away from the world like the Wizard leaving Oz; we are grains shaken out over it, dissolved into it, so that together, like the salted sacrifices of the first Law (Leviticus 2:13), we might make a dish fit for God.

Salt is also a preservative; its role in Levitical ritual was not only to flavor the offerings but to imbue them with the imperishability of God's love, making them "a covenant of salt forever" (Numbers 18:19).

When we manifest God's delicious and imperishable love, Christ is in us and the world, and the world tastes right in God's mouth. When we fail in love, we are, as Jesus says, dust. And we do fail. As we confess weekly, we fail to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves. After twenty centuries we are still, I think, only beginning to know how to be salt. Contemplating our lack of flavor can be, frankly, depressing.

Yet Jesus didn't utter his ringing, hyperbolic cautions to depress us. His tone isn't scolding but explosive, provocative, crackling with dry wit. He addresses us equals. This is speech meant to jolt love into motion, not nail it to the ground with shame.

How, then, to be salt—to change and preserve and persist? It will differ for each of us and at different seasons of our lives. Sometimes this means doing what is pleasant and welcome, like refilling the wine. But we are blandly useless if we never add sting or bite, never do what may puzzle, offend, or provoke. Challenging norms isn't an end in itself, but it's unavoidable. And it's scary: Jesus told us to "take courage" (John 16:33) because he knew we'd need it.

Let us, therefore, go forth into the world, salting it with daring difference.

Larry Gilman

The Parish of St. Andrew and St. John, Mount Desert Island, ME
Episcopal Diocese of Maine

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY



COLLECT

Support us, O Lord, with your gracious favor through the fast we have begun; that as we observe it by bodily self-denial, so we may fulfill it with inner sincerity of heart; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:14–16

JESUS' COMMAND here could not be clearer: we are to broadcast our light, making sure our good deeds are seen by others. Yet how do we square this command that we publish the good we do, thus eliciting the praise of others, with his warning that “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11)? The answer, I believe, might lie in John 8:12: “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

At first this may seem only to further complicate matters: “You are the light of the world;” “I am the light of the world.” Which is it?

The literal “light of the world,” of course, is the sun. The energy that pulses through every creature that has ever lived, from the smallest mycoplasma bacterium to the largest blue whale, has its source in the sun. A plant, pushing up and through the soil, fueled by energy stored from the sun, reaches toward its source to renew the cycle, thus assuming and sharing its glory. There are even creatures living in the darkest depths of the ocean, far deeper than the sun’s rays can possibly penetrate, whose life is still fueled by the sun’s energy, stored in the cells of creatures whose remains drift down to feed those living in the deep. All living things, in a very real sense, are the light of the sun.

Just as all life is the light of the sun, all goodness is the light of Christ. It is Christ who shines through us in all the good we do. Our light is Christ’s light. Letting our light shine therefore makes Christ visible to others. To hide our light under a bushel is thus to hide Christ. “I am the light of the world”/ “You are the light of the world”: this may be a paradox, but it is a productive one—source of all that is good in the world.

“A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.” It shines for all to see. Of course, this also makes its inhabitants more vulnerable to attack. We may be tempted to hide the light of Christ from those threatened by what it illuminates. Yet living in darkness, are we ever truly safe? This Lenten season, as we witness the return of life-giving light, let us ask ourselves how we might throw off our cloaks of darkness, with their counterfeit security. How we might let our light more fully shine forth, proclaiming our faith in the Good that is our one, true refuge?

Craig Irvine
St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Brattleboro, VT
Communities for Spiritual Vitality Board
Diocese of Vermont

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY



COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth your right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:17–18

EVEN AT FIRST GLANCE, these verses stand alone in strength and clarity. Yet their deeper meaning comes from their place in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, near the beginning of his teaching, Jesus speaks of his purpose and authority. He comes not to dismiss the Law and the Prophets—the heart of Israel’s covenant life with God—but to fulfill them.

To “fulfill” is more than completing a checklist. It means embodying God’s reconciling love, living it fully in word and deed. Jesus becomes not only teacher but living Torah, the Word of God dwelling among us (John 1:14). His life interprets the Scriptures with compassion, justice, and mercy. His life fulfills all that the law commands.

As we walk through Lent, following Jesus from Epiphany’s light to the cross and resurrection, these verses put the fulfillment of the law of love in context. In this season we meditate on the real costs of following reconciliation to the end, and Jesus’s willingness to incur those costs. This should invite us to reflect on our own purpose. What does it mean for us to be disciples shaped by the fulfillment Christ brings?

In the climate of division and polarization that we share with Matthew’s audience, discipleship is not merely private piety nor intellectual assent, but an active, sometimes costly, choice of allegiance. To follow Jesus is to stand with God’s reconciling love above all competing voices or our time: money, power, fame, or political allegiances.

Invitation

This Lent, consider how might you live out God’s reconciling love in your particular context? Where might you be tempted to follow from a safe distance, and where are you invited to step closer?

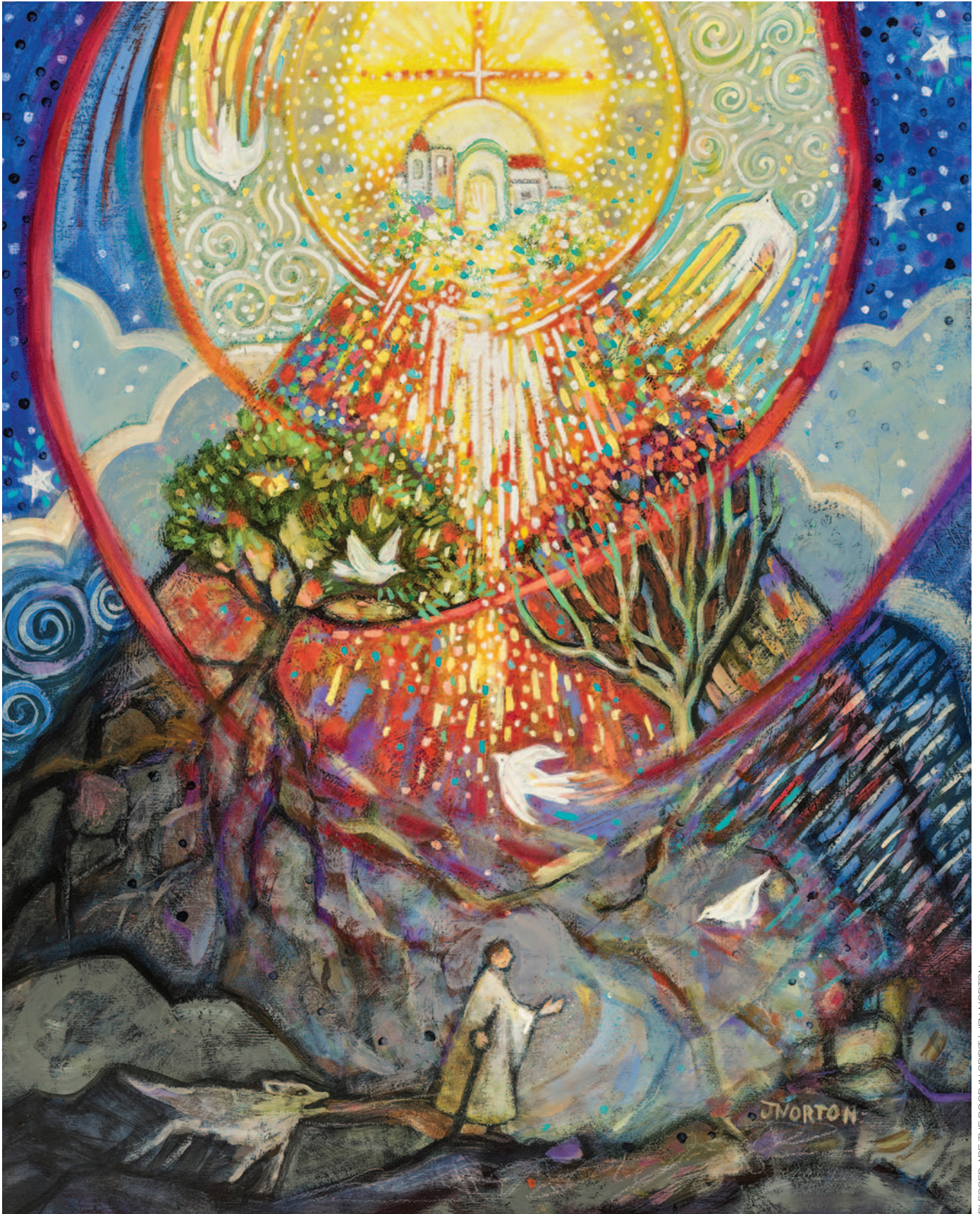
For me, the temptation is to remain in my head—an introverted intellectual trying to walk this journey alone. Yet discipleship presses me into community, into relationships where love becomes tangible.

What about you? Ask God for whatever you most need to live as a follower of Jesus this Lent. Trust that in Christ, you not only have a Savior, but also a model and a path to follow.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you fulfilled the Law and the Prophets in love. Teach us to walk in your way, to embody your compassion, and to find our purpose in you. Grant us courage to follow, even when the path leads us beyond ourselves. Amen.

The Rev. Fred Chisolm
St. John’s Episcopal Church, Walpole, NH
Episcopal Church of New Hampshire



BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT | JEN NORTON

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT



COLLECT

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:3

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Creator's blessing rests on the poor, the ones with broken spirits. The good road from above is theirs to walk.*

I OFTEN STRUGGLE to pray.

This may be a strange admission from a monk. I am so rich in so many ways: responsibilities, relationships, interests. I am rich in so many ways, and I feel my poverty distinctly when I am invited to set all of that aside and be with God in prayer. I feel the poverty of my own divided attention, of competing goods pressing in on me, of fears and anxieties for myself and for the world.

Above all, I feel the poverty imposed on me by my own expectations: that I need to meet God in a certain way, in “correct” language, showing only my best self, as if God didn’t know everything already.

I often struggle to pray—and in that struggle, I have become acutely aware of Jesus’ words to those who are “poor in spirit.”

The word used for “poor” in this passage from Matthew’s Gospel does not include what we would call the “working poor”—laborers hustling to make ends meet and put bread on the table. Rather, the word refers to those who are utterly destitute and dependent on the goodwill of others: those who must resort to begging for their daily bread.

The “poor in spirit,” then, are those whose spiritual lives—whose relationship with God—are in a state of utter dependence, crying out for mercy.

Jesus invites us into the incredibly uncomfortable place of noticing and naming where we lose control, where we lack resources, where we feel most adrift. Jesus calls us to gaze at that place and enter it.

Two examples from Scripture help to illustrate this.

First is the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee from Luke’s Gospel. Jesus draws a contrast between the Pharisee, who trumpets his own riches, his accomplishments and righteousness: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income” (Luke 18:11–12).

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT CONTINUED

We are all formed—by our families and peers, by our culture—to focus on how we are doing well. All our incentives push us to present a strong face to ourselves, to the world . . . and to God. The Pharisee in the parable may be proud, yes, but proud in a way that is utterly normal for how we have learned to operate in the world.

The tax collector, by contrast, shows humility before God: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). A despised agent of the Roman state, the tax collector nevertheless is honest in gazing at his own poverty of spirit and naming it before God.

What is holding you back from a similar honesty before God? What of the world and its expectations do you cling to as you stand before God in prayer?

And second, Jesus himself. Jesus calls us to stand before God in our poverty, and he provides the model. Saint Paul writes to the church at Philippi that Christ Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . And being found in human form, he humbled himself” (Philippians 2:7, 8).

Jesus meets us and shows us what it means to stand before God in the poverty of our creatureliness. This can be a scary place. But Jesus assures us that we aren’t alone there.

In his own humility and obedience, in his Passion and death, Jesus shows us that whatever poverty afflicts us, however we find ourselves without resources or support, in all those places we fall short, Jesus is there with us, standing with us, crying out with us, giving us strength to know that what we face now is not all there is for us. As we begin to walk through Lent with Jesus, he invites us to turn our gaze onto our own poverty and utter dependence, to name it and own it before God. In doing so, Jesus assures us that we will know and have the promises of the kingdom of heaven.

Br. Lain Wilson
Society of Saint John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA



BLESSSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT DETAIL | JEN NORTON

MONDAY IN THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully increase in us your gifts of holy discipline, in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting; that our lives may be directed to the fulfilling of your most gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:19–20

PERFECTION. That bar of righteousness—exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees—is a high one, so most of us can't help wallowing in verse 19, falling short in meeting the demands of the law and encouraging others to go along in order to get along. We want to do better; we want our children to ignore our stumbles into hypocrisy and live as we say, not as we do.

And yet, in the space of just two sentences, we see Jesus not simply calling us to account but also assuring us of his mercy. Have you dropped the ball somehow? It's all right; you aren't excluded. He still wants you to join the throng around the throne in heaven. You might be called least in the kingdom, but you're there. And so are all your friends and family members, and even those whom you could never abide because they always seemed to be perfect.

It strikes me that the righteousness exceeding that of Jesus' contemporary religious authorities is Jesus himself. While we may not achieve perfection, the glory of God is a human being, fully realized. Emboldened by the promise that the Kingdom is already ours, what might Jesus be calling us to be? How might we be inspired to live our lives?

Adrienne Southgate
Grace Episcopal Church, Providence, RI
Diocese of Rhode Island



BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT DETAIL | JEN NORTON

TUESDAY IN THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Grant to your people, Lord, grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow you, the only true God; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:21–22

I CAN IMAGINE the crowd gathering around Jesus and the disciples. Artisans, farmers, merchants, religious workers, the old and the young, and people with different abilities. Folks heard of this curious man named Jesus preaching and decided to put down their tools, close their shops, walk around the corner, and climb a hill to listen to Jesus say the words recorded as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus starts preaching from the Ten Commandments. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder.’” Jesus knows his audience.

The predominantly Jewish crowd is familiar with the Ten Commandments, which form the core of the Ancient Jewish tradition and practice given to them by Moses. They also may have been familiar with the method of Jesus’s interpretation: midrash. Midrash is what Wilda Gafney defines as a Jewish interpretive method that reimagines the “dominant [narrative] readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings” (Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 2017). Jesus takes what the people know, and, while not abrogating the law, addresses the underlying human condition and relational dynamics. I can hear Jesus saying, “It’s easy to pat yourself on the back, saying, ‘I haven’t transgressed the furthest boundaries of the law: murder.’ But have you considered the transgressions you harbor against your sibling?” Midrash opens new possibilities and frontiers for curiosity and wonder, as well as questions that aren’t easily answered. Midrash is a textual method, but I wonder: in this season of Lent, how might the ancient wisdom of midrash invite you to reimagine your practices and theologies?

Practices and theologies shape our lives from the small and big things we believe and do each day: worshiping God, serving others, sitting around a table with friends and family, or walking in nature as spring buds forth. Some of these cherished practices or theologies may once have been meaningful in your youth or in a different season of life. However, it may be time to reimagine them alongside new practices or theologies.

Take a moment to reflect on a practice and theology that’s meaningful to you that you are sensing God inviting you to reimagine.

Take a few deep breaths and hold before God the practice or theology you are reimagining.

Offer a prayer that’s bubbling up in the moment.

May your life, like scripture, remain alive, growing, and responsive to the Spirit’s voice. Amen.

Milton Gilder
Episcopal Church of Saint Paul and Saint James, New Haven, CT
Episcopal Church in Connecticut

WEDNESDAY IN THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Bless us, O God, in this holy season, in which our hearts seek your help and healing; and so purify us by your discipline that we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:23–26

PRACTICING THE RECONCILIATION modeled by God’s love and creating a more just and merciful world are fitting focuses, especially in Lent. According to Matthew, these disciplines should always be done before placing our gifts on the altar.

Let us say that Hunda has struggled up the nave of the sanctuary. (When I heard this scripture many years ago now, I thought of the nave in St. Alban’s Abbey in England, which has the second longest nave of all the English churches.) Placing her gift, Hunda felt what seemed to be a tap on her shoulder. Turning, Hunda did not see anyone, but heard these words in her mind: *Are you bringing your gift with an unincumbered conscience and an open heart?* This brings her up short—there was that grievance with Cousin eating away at her. Dropping her gift, she went to search for this cousin to sort out the grievance.

If there had been as many believers leaving their gifts as Hunda did, the space in front of the altar would have had as many gifts laid down as there were sacrificial animals in Jesus’ day.

All our attitudes and behaviors that disrespect other people are disrupters of right relationships that God calls us to foster in our daily lives. As Leo Tolstoy once said, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”

If we are to be agents of change, which I believe God calls us to be, we need to start with ourselves; a genuine connection with God will be blocked by unresolved conflict with those about us. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Relational harmony is a prerequisite for a spiritual offering.” Sometimes the journey to forgiveness can be long and arduous, but as Christians, we will continue to work to find this harmony.

Let us work to enter the Easter season with a clear conscience and a full heart, being reconciled with our neighbors as a fitting offering to God.

The Rev. Dn. Catherine Cooke
Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Burlington, VT
Diocese of Vermont

THURSDAY IN THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Strengthen us, O Lord, by your grace, that in your might we may overcome all spiritual enemies, and with pure hearts serve you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:27–28

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT lays out a vision of a world transformed, a society and community radically altered into a vision of kinship and wholeness. This implies a transfiguration of orientation as well as action, making new both heart and hands.

Jesus can sometimes be direct about this reorientation. Give up your wealth; give it to the poor. Lay down your occupations, your burdens, and follow me. In this verse, Jesus takes up the commandment against adultery and lays bare how the kingdom of heaven is different from our social and political context.

In both Jesus's first century context as well as our own, patriarchal sexual violence is intertwined with and undergirds oppression based on ethnicity, wealth, and status. These connected systems both create and justify hierarchies of power. Sometimes referred to as a *kyriarchy*, both we and Jesus's first listeners are enmeshed in a social and political context where some people are regarded with human dignity and others considered subject to degradation and violence.

Jesus applies the commandment against adultery to condemn the dehumanizing objectification that is at the heart of sexual violence. The lust that Jesus refers to, deforming human dignity and relationships, is not a matter of innocence and taint. Rather, it is that some bodies and souls, created in God's image, are considered *things* to be *consumed*. The issue is an excess of dominating power, not a lack of moral purity.

The commandment exposes how human dignity can be distorted into a spectrum of honor based on wealth, gender, and the exercise of power. When we are aware of this, avoiding adultery isn't just about covenants and laws; it is about subverting the ways that sex and oppressive power are linked together, deforming relationships and degrading human beings.

The direct line from look to lust to adultery does not feature in a kingdom of heaven where the poor, the downtrodden, the meek, and the oppressed are sustained and supported and empowered into a fullness of human dignity. But in a society where sexual violence and oppression undergird the pomp and circumstance of imperial antichrists, Jesus calls his listeners to be mindful that even one's gaze has an impact when deployed with improper power.

Will Harron

The Episcopal Church of Saints James and Andrew, Greenfield, MA
Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts

FRIDAY IN THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Lord Christ, our eternal Redeemer, grant us such fellowship in your sufferings, that, filled with your Holy Spirit, we may subdue the flesh to the spirit, and the spirit to you, and at the last attain to the glory of your resurrection; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:29–30

EVERY SATURDAY, my wife and I sit down together to enjoy a series on YouTube called “Smosh Reads Reddit Stories.” It’s much like it sounds—a rotating cast of comedians reading and responding to anonymous stories posted to various forums on the platform Reddit. We enjoy these videos for a few reasons—the stories are entertaining (some even taking twists M. Night Shyamalan would be jealous of), the comedians are comedians, and we end up having long conversations about how we might respond in the described scenario.

There are some recurring themes in these stories: relationships, gaslighting, and infidelity. I cannot tell you the number of stories that center on some kind of infidelity. And, while these stories range from innocuous to downright cruel, the “Redditors” in the comment usually only respond in one way: Dump Them. Divorce Them. Cut off the hand.

Let me be clear, sometimes that is the correct answer. However, as followers of Christ, we are called to forgive those who have sinned against us. We say so every Sunday. Hello, Lord’s Prayer!

And my goodness is that forgiveness difficult. Not only must we forgive others; we must also take accountability when we are seeking forgiveness.

Forgiveness and accountability are muscles that require constant (and sometimes rigorous) exercise, particularly when the wound (literal or metaphorical) has cut so deeply.

That, I believe, is Jesus’ true challenge to us. He is not telling you literally to cut off your hand. Rather, examine why you sinned in the first place, and make a continuous effort to not do so again.

It is so easy to be the anonymous Redditor telling a girl you may never meet to dump her boyfriend. But it is much harder to look the sinner in the face, look ourselves in the face, take accountability, and forgive.

Sophie Kitch-Peck
Bishop’s Staff
Diocese of Vermont

SATURDAY IN THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O God, by your Word you marvelously carry out the work of reconciliation: Grant that in our Lenten fast we may be devoted to you with all our hearts, and united with one another in prayer and holy love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:31–32

WE TEND to hear Jesus’ teaching on divorce through the lens of individual moralism. *If I get a divorce, if I get remarried, if I marry a divorced person: I am a sinner.* These interpretations are certainly behind why my grandmother—a faithful and devout woman of God—was not permitted to teach in her interdenominational bible class; why some people stay in abusive contexts rather than seek help and healing; why those who do seek such relief were once categorically denied communion. Alas, any teaching has the potential to be co-opted by our warped human tendency to define and separate the “outsider.”

There is no way to make this divorce teaching easy. However, let us remember this is Jesus speaking. What themes might we find if we listen closely, expecting to hear only the abundant goodness intended by the Crucified Lord of Love?

Justice: Notice that Jesus speaks to *men* in this passage about how their dismissal of vulnerable women impacts them. Do you remember John 8, the story of the woman caught in adultery? Do you remember that *only* the woman was brought to Jesus for judgment? Oh, how we humans are eager to judge the vulnerable and excuse the powerful. But here, Jesus speaks to the one with power: *If you abandon her, what she must do to survive in her vulnerable state falls on your head.* As disciples, our lives belong to others, through Christ. Especially when we have power, we have a responsibility to use our entitlements cautiously—there is always a vulnerable party on the other end.

Growth: We often make vows at the height of our enthusiasm and delight. So it was when I made my oblate vows (a secular religious commitment to a Rule of Life). But life rarely stays euphoric. That is when the vow is a sturdy container that holds us when life gets tough and we want to flee; it holds us in the furnace of our refinement in Love. Of course, even here, Jesus makes provisions for acknowledging when a marriage (or other vow) has already been ruptured: adultery for sure. Abuse also comes to mind. But there is, nonetheless, a hard teaching here: growth sometimes comes when we stay the course that we no longer want. It is often right then, usually with the help of a supportive community and a sound spiritual guide, that we learn how to rely more deeply on the miraculous power of God, enabling us to persevere *and thrive* beyond what we could imagine. Every now and then, in my pastoral ministry and friends, I hear someone say with awe after many years, “I have a good marriage.” Something in the way they say it gives the impression that this is a hard-won knowing that emerged through the painful seasons of growth, to deeper intimacy and personal integrity on the other side.

SATURDAY IN THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT CONTINUED

The Imago Dei: This passage reminds me that God made a covenant with us at the moment of creation, sealed it in choosing a people as a prized possession, and doubled down by ratifying [Her] covenant on the cross.

God has not divorced us.

Living in a fallen world with brokenness of our own, we cannot always live up to this. But, to recall that God's commitment to us will remain sturdy until the end of time is such an encouragement to me. Every moment of appropriate endurance in my own life is the likeness of God's commitment growing in me, showing me something of [His] nature, and preparing me for the Reign of God, when we will be able to live into our vows with full integrity and peace, at last.

Though we cannot always live up to it fully here, I am glad that Jesus has laid before us a vision of justice, growth, and the Imago Dei both as it is in eternity and how it *could* be in our practice of fidelity to one another.

The Rev. adwoa Wilson
Communities for Spiritual Vitality



HANNAH GARRITY | RECONCILED | A SANCTIFIED ART



BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN | JEN NORTON

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT



COLLECT

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:4

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk a trail of tears, for he will wipe the tears from their eyes and comfort them.*

JESUS' PROMISE in this beatitude has sustained and given solace to the bereaved down the ages. God's consoling presence in the face of death and the pain of loss is assured.

The Greek word used here, *pentheó*, is multivalent in expression: to mourn, to lament, to grieve whether for loss, pain and suffering, or in repentance. Mourning is a cry of the heart that turns to God for help, healing, and hope. It encompasses both the personal and the communal in expressing profound sorrow, giving emotional, spiritual, physical voice to human struggles.

Jesus' own passionate expression of sorrow and grief is directed toward God in his public tears mourning the death of his friend and joining in lament with his friends and loved ones (John 11:28–35). Jesus fully embodies and expresses God's own sorrow as he weeps over Jerusalem for the sin and suffering which destroy its peace (Luke 19:41–44). Jesus prays with a yearning for God's presence during difficult times and in confidence that God is always present to our cries. On the cross, Jesus' vulnerability and pain expressed in lament are transformed through his compassion into strength and consolation in death.

The promise of comfort for us who mourn is not only emotional but also a spiritual assurance that God walks alongside us in all circumstances as Jesus did. To mourn with God is to know God's comfort.

The Greek *paraklethesontai* translates “will be comforted” implying that those who mourn, grieve, and lament will be strengthened (English *com-fort*, with strength) with God's consolation to endure and see the transformation of their grief. The Greek verb also includes the sense “to call to one's side.” Our honest outpouring of mourning and lament—acknowledging our vulnerabilities and need of God—itself becomes the *means* of our experiencing God's *ever-present* compassion, support and healing in our times of sorrow. We are strengthened in our weakness as God's power is made known.

'Lord who throughout these forty days / for us didst fast and pray, / teach us with thee to mourn our sins, / and close by thee to stay.' Claudia Frances Hernaman (1836–1898)

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT CONTINUED

Mourn, grieve, and lament with Christ this Lent, so that comfort, strength, and hope may be brought near. Seek to be drawn into the loving healing of God, to be freed from self-centeredness, and to experience Christ's presence *now*—that it may be imparted to others—participating in Jesus' passion, death, and rising to new life.

Br. Jonathan Maury
The Society of St. John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA



INVITED IN | ALAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

MONDAY IN THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Let your Spirit, O Lord, come into the midst of us to wash us with the pure water of repentance, and prepare us to be always a living sacrifice to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:33, 34a, 37

LEADING UP to these verses, we see Jesus taking some well-known guidelines to what one might consider “an extreme.” In this passage though, Jesus tells his followers not to do this with their words. He tells them not to go to extreme measures to defend how right or honest they are, nor swear that they are telling the truth, but instead, to show with their lives, to establish with their actions and faithfulness, that they mean what they say and they can be counted on to speak truth and follow through.

Let us consider: *What pulls us away from follow-through with the intentions we speak, from the things we meant when we said them, but that later seem harder to uphold?*

Maybe we make promises, plans, or set our intentions before we know the whole story, before we hear all perspectives or realize the full impact of our actions.

Maybe we try to control things we can’t control, or try to fix things temporarily instead of dealing with a deeper issue.

Maybe we’re afraid of the unknown, so we try to work it out on our own, instead of waiting for clarity and guidance.

As people who follow Jesus, we are challenged to keep our minds and our hearts open. Jesus’ lessons and stories are often intended to shift our perspective in unexpected ways. Here, we are reminded to thoughtfully consider our words before we speak and to truly *mean* them when we say them. We build trust with each other and with God by investing in our relationships, taking time to see and know each other and to follow through with our intentions. Jesus tells us that our focus should not be on promising, but on *being* and *doing*. In this we are encouraged to stay close to God and each other, listening and learning and waiting, with an openness that comes from knowing that we’re part of something bigger.

As we move through this life, following Christ:

May we first listen, seeking understanding

May we take our time, reflecting and thinking before we speak.

When we do speak, may we do so in a way that recognizes the impact on others and the bigger picture.

May we put our words into actions, showing that we can be trusted without needing to promise.

Amen.

Julie Carew
The Episcopal Church of Saints James and Andrew, Greenfield, MA
Diocese of Western Massachusetts

TUESDAY IN THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O God, you willed to redeem us from all iniquity by your Son: Deliver us when we are tempted to regard sin without abhorrence, and let the virtue of his passion come between us and our mortal enemy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:34–36

AS I MESSAGE bottled color throughout my increasingly gray hair, I chuckle at Jesus' passage about not being able to make one hair black or white. With hair color, I do it all the time! But the point still holds, I can't change my hair color at a molecular level. Things happen to me as a human being all the time which are outside my control. To swear by my head, by the seat of my life and authority, is not as concrete an oath as it might seem at first glance.

Taking oaths, swearing by certain things, was a common practice in ancient Judaism. In the Jewish Talmud there is a whole section about oaths, which verify the validity of the words of an accuser or defendant in the judicial system. It gives the example of swearing to another "by the life of your head" to prove your statement is true. More guidance comes from Deuteronomy 10:20 where it says, "You must revere YHWH your God:...by His name shall you swear." There are many other examples.

To swear falsely, to perjure yourself, was a great sin, a desecration of God, and an action for which God would withhold blessings. Israelites took their oaths seriously because of possible divine repercussions. In other words, swearing was an integral part of Jewish life and ethics, establishing truth and integrity.

Yet here comes Jesus saying to stop swearing and taking oaths! Not because truth and integrity don't matter, but because they matter even more than an oath can capture. Our integrity should be so absolute that swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or our own lives should be unnecessary.

Throughout this section of the sermon, Jesus stresses that our internal thoughts and external actions must match. Jesus seeks a seamlessness between what we think and what we do. Don't just refrain from murder (external action), but actually love your enemies (internal thoughts). Don't just refrain from adultery (external action), but actually look at women/men without lust, seeing them as valuable children of God (internal thoughts). Don't just swear an oath in order to be trusted (external action), but actually be a person of truth and integrity (internal thoughts).

How do your thoughts affect which actions you take and the attitude by which you do them? Is there integrity between your internal thoughts and external actions?

The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury
St. Mark's Church, Southborough, MA
Diocese of Massachusetts

WEDNESDAY IN THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O God, you so loved the world that you gave your only- begotten Son to reconcile earth with heaven: Grant that we, loving you above all things, may love our friends in you, and our enemies for your sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:38

YES, JESUS, we have heard that said many times! How is this ancient saying still one that we know today? It speaks to a darkness at the core of our human brokenness, a darkness that speaks to something that all humanity unfortunately has in common...the desire for revenge! How is it that this creation of God's love (human being) can have such a thirst for vengeance? Some things never change; humans have been vengeful since the beginning of time. We really have not evolved that much over the last 2000 years since Jesus came to show us the way. It is as if we think that we can prevent ourselves from getting hurt by saying, "If you hurt me, I will hurt you in return."

Jesus is reminding us of a saying we all know too well: "I will cause you pain for the pain you have caused me." We think we want this...but can you imagine if every hurt you ever caused was returned to you? We often think we want a world that is "an eye for an eye," but that would be an even more broken world than what we have today. Mercy is missing in the world that wants "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." And luckily for us, Mercy doesn't care what we think we want. She (Mercy) is still here, jumping up and down to get our attention and saying, "choose me!"

Did you notice that Jesus used the past tense in this verse? It WAS said, not it is said... Is Jesus telling us that this phrase is about to become history...have we listened to Jesus? How can we make this phrase one that no longer lives in the darkness of our souls? How can we give Mercy the victory over vengeance?

The Rev. Dn. Kara Maslowski
Grace Church, Manchester, NH
Episcopal Church of New Hampshire

THURSDAY IN THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O Lord, strong and mighty, Lord of hosts and King of glory: Cleanse our hearts from sin, keep our hands pure, and turn our minds from what is passing away; so that at the last we may stand in your holy place and receive your blessing; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:39–41

WHO among us can truly say we have done this?

And whether we have or not, who among us can truly know whether, when the chips are down, we would do it next time?

These are good things to do: they meet cruelty with subversive nonviolence, imitating Christ in using our body's weakness to shame the oppressor's strength. They are also hard things to do and do rightly. Resistance to violence can become a mirror that reflects and reinforces it. Non-reactivity can slide into passivity, then into complicity.

Jesus shows us a third way. Faced with an intolerable binary and a center that cannot hold, Love—the trickster, the fool, the prophet—makes a new path in the wilderness. The wisdom of the serpent and the innocence of the dove are reunited. In the beginning, after all, they were cut from the same cloth.

As for us, we don't know how we will react when we are struck in the face, or sued, or forced into labor. These are extreme circumstances, to which people react in unpredictable ways. And even in our daily tasks, we never meet the same circumstance twice. What we have done before does not necessarily dictate what we will do in the future.

All we can do is train our will to meet the moment: plant the seeds that Jesus gives us and patiently water them, weed them, nurture them. Seeds of asceticism will bear fruits of strength. Seeds of humility will bear fruits of compassion. Often we are encouraged by seeing the gradual growth. Yet even here, we must let go of our desire to succeed. When the moment comes, we may be able to meet it, or we may not. Even Jesus failed in faith, at the very end: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And things turned out OK anyway.

Sr. Gregory Simmons, n/OCC
Haven Religious
The Episcopal Church in Connecticut

FRIDAY IN THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Grant, O Lord, that as your Son Jesus Christ prayed for his enemies on the cross, so we may have grace to forgive those who wrongfully or scornfully use us, that we ourselves may be able to receive your forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:42

THE ACT of giving changes us. It is a spiritual discipline—acts of mercy—that is a gift to us from God to remind us to hold our things loosely and to put our trust in God. This verse is a foreshadowing of the passage from later in Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and goats. He concludes, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

There is a profound simplicity to God’s invitation here: if someone asks, give. What is noticeably lacking is any mention of judgment, need to qualify, and no accountability for the receiver. This practice of mercy works in me a detachment from security in things outside of God. Yet, I cannot always follow this directive from the beatitudes. Frequently, practicality and a lack of willingness to engage prompt caution and prudence.

As I have prayed with this passage, I find myself drawn to a balance between acts of mercy, and that holy practice of saying “no.” Some days I’m not able to give, and especially as a woman in this society, the expectation that I will always have something to give and that I should be focused on giving, creates a level of internal pressure and burnout that I do not believe is God’s desire for me. Perhaps this is why in scripture, mercy is so often married with justice. Justice is the sacred ability to say “no.” No to being treated as less than, no to being exploited, no to violence. Mercy is the sacred ability to soften, to exhale, to release. This leaves us in the bewildering place of discernment, which requires prayer and pause to determine how our actions, our letting go, and our boundaries align with our God who asks us to do justice and love mercy (Micah 6:8).

The Rev. Rachel Field
St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, Northfield, VT
Communities for Spiritual Vitality Board
Diocese of Vermont

SATURDAY IN THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Grant, most merciful Lord, to your faithful people pardon and peace, that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:43–44, 46–47

“ABIDE NO HATRED.” **WRITING** about the 2017 uprising in Charlottesville, The Bitter Southerner—“an Athens, Georgia-based independent media company...that connects an activated and vocal global community working to make the South, and America, a better place”—launched that iconic phrase to sum up a call to social transformation.

It’s nothing short of a Gospel truth, and one we hear right here in today’s verses.

Maybe we’d feel on steadier ground if the task were just, “Love your neighbor,” which, we know, can be pretty hard to do. And yet here comes Jesus with a, “but wait, there’s more,” calling us to love not only our close and dear ones, but the ones across the tracks, across the aisle, over there on the other side of whatever line you might care to draw. The ones whose visions and desires don’t mesh with your own, whose will runs counter to yours. The ones who do not wish you well, or do not work for your flourishing.

Knowing how hard it can sometimes be to love those who love you back: How in the world to stretch that love across to the other side?

It’s not easy.

Matthew’s Gospel leads us to this moment with a survey of some of the folks it could be a chore to love: folks who deliver a face-slapping insult or a grasping lawsuit, who demand conscripted cooperation or who want something from you, borrowed or begged. Those are the ones, though, to whom we are directed to give: more cheek, more coat, more company, just: more. Ouch.

But there it is: Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. (And I expect that the prayer Our Lord has in mind is NOT “Rain down fire from heaven on their heads.”)

It’s not easy. If it were, Jesus suggests, any random human could manage it on their own. How can we possibly?

Our help (of course) is the name of the Lord—and can be found in the prayer offered just a little further on in Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus teaches us to pray, day by day by day, for the help we need to align our wills, and our loves, with God’s.

The Rev. Canon Kelly Sundberg Seaman
Canon for Formation and Vocation
Episcopal Church of New Hampshire



SPRIT LED | LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN



BLESSED ARE THE MEek | JEN NORTON

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT



COLLECT

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:5

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk softly and in a humble manner. The earth, land, and sky will welcome them and always be their home*

IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY, Aidan, a monk on Iona in Scotland, was sent to establish a monastery on Lindisfarne in northern England. Like Columba who led much missionary work out from Iona, Aidan led great evangelism from Lindisfarne.

Aidan sent monks out, two by two, into the neighboring villages and countryside. He gave two noteworthy instructions: First, travel on foot, not horseback. Second, do not carry a knife or any sort of weapon for defense. Travel then was very dangerous, so this was remarkable.

Aidan instructed ways to live like Jesus, not simply speak about Jesus. Walking instead of riding, they went like their neighbors, as equals instead of with additional power and privilege. Without weapons to fight, they resisted violence with vulnerability. Aidan and the monks embodied the gospel, and they were well received. Offered humbly and meekly, good news spread quickly.

“Humble” and “meek” are similar and from the same word in Hebrew. Humility is a lowliness, not thinking too highly of oneself. Meekness is a gentle, strong patience waiting and seeking justice. When Jesus taught that the meek will inherit the earth, he was quoting Psalm 37.ⁱ The Book of Common Prayer puts the “lowly shall possess the land” (verse 12), where many translate it “meek” and a few “humble” will “inherit the earth.”

Psalm 37 says that amid prospering and violent evildoers, we are to trust, take delight in, and commit our way to the Lord who cares, upholds, and provides. Such strong patience includes not fretting, being jealous of or enraged by those who “succeed in evil schemes” (verse 8). The meek know and focus on the long view. As the psalmist says: “For the power of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous” (verse 18).

Scott Bessenecker wrote: “The reason that the meek will inherit the earth is that they are naturally disposed to use power in the way it was designed by God to be used—as a guard for the weak and to preserve the common good—in contrast to those with MONOPOLY™ power, who consolidate wealth and status in a single set of hands at the expense of everyone else.”ⁱⁱ

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT CONTINUED

Gentle and strong patience does not mean giving in or giving up. The meek are not weak. They use power, often choosing restraint and downward mobility, surprisingly for good. Jesus showed love and leadership by riding a donkey, not a stallion, and by washing feet. Aidan and monks, traveling on foot without weapons, boldly lived and shared the good news.

Consider how you feel the push today for more profit and prestige. Who has modeled meekness for you personally or historically? What might be an invitation to trust God more now with gentle, strong patience? Looking to Jesus who demonstrated love feet first, how might you practice being vulnerable and meek? Ask for the imagination to use your power, including with restraint, for guarding the marginalized and furthering the common good. Like Aidan, may you live the gospel.

Br. Luke Ditewig
The Society of St. John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA

ⁱ Scott A. Bessenecker (2009) *How to Inherit the Earth: Submitting Ourselves to a Servant Savior*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, p23.

ⁱⁱ Bessenecker, p15.



MERCIFUL MOTHER | JESSICA JANE LYNCH

MONDAY IN THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Look upon the heart-felt desires of your humble servants, Almighty God, and stretch forth the right hand of your majesty to be our defense against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:43–45, 48

ENEMIES come in all shapes and sizes. They could be annoying people we work with or our boss who is abusing their power; they could be the inconsiderate next door neighbor; they could be an ex-spouse or romantic partner; and in our polarized society, we could inadvertently view half of the country as enemies. If you've ever created a "them" in your mind, Jesus would call that an enemy. "Them" is anyone our heart is closed to.

Every year during Lent we return to the deep work of becoming who God created us to be. "Be perfect," Perfection here is closer to being whole, mature, or ripe than it is to flawlessness. When a piece of fruit is ready to eat, it is perfect, but it isn't necessarily without blemishes. When Jesus calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, he is not asking us to *feel* something. He is inviting us to take a step toward spiritual maturity. Jesus is inviting us to ripen into the kind of people who don't let hatred or bitterness have the final word.

The risk to us in having enemies, as natural as it is, is that we stop seeing them as human beings. They can become archetypes. They might even become the embodiment of something we morally revile. *And that is more a danger to us than it is to them.* This is the point where Jesus intervenes with his wisdom, teaching about loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us.

Praying for our enemies helps *us* hold onto *our own* humanity. It is good for our hearts and our brains. To pray for an enemy is to resist becoming the mirror image of the harm we have received. It is to stretch the heart toward wholeness. It is neither forgiveness or accepting persecution, abuse, or oppression (that is all for another scripture passage!). But it is wishing the enemy well, good health, inner peace, and ease of mind.

've noticed that Jesus' teachings often point us toward a wise life, toward ripeness. But he rarely tells us *how*. We have to intuit and discern the path ourselves and with our communities. This Lent, I recommend a simple practice drawn from the Buddhist tradition called Loving Kindness meditation. Before you pray for an enemy, practice praying for yourself.

May I be safe, protected, and free from inner and outer harm. May I be happy and contented.

May I be whole.

May I experience ease of well-being.

May I be free.

Next, choose someone you love and pray for them.

MONDAY IN THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT CONTINUED

May they be safe, protected, and free from inner and outer harm.

May they be happy and contented.

May they be whole.

May they experience ease of well-being.

May *they* be free.

Next you might choose someone you have neutral feelings for, and pray the prayer for them. Work up to your real enemy, the person (or people) who your heart is closed to, and hold them in your mind and heart as you say the prayer. It can take a while to be able to actually pray for an enemy; may this season and this practice help us ripen into the wholeness Christ imagines for us.

Rebeca Hall
Iona Collaborative
Communities for Spiritual Vitality Board
Diocese of Texas



STARDUST | LISLE GWYNN GARRITY

TUESDAY IN THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom you have given a fervent desire to pray, may, by your mighty aid, be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:1

SOMETIMES I wonder about Jesus.

I wonder how often he felt hunger. Or thirst. How often fatigue weighed him down. Whether He grew impatient. Disillusioned. Wanted to give up because not even his disciples, his chosen ones, seemed to “get it.”

Yet he showed up. Consistently. Perhaps occasionally even reluctantly.

Sometimes quietly with almost no witnesses at all. Pleading, afterwards, for secrecy. Sometimes standing before a large and clamoring crowd. Teaching the improbable. Doing the impossible. I wonder how he determined when it was best to be silent and unobtrusive versus bold and charismatic. When he judged that the deed itself was enough—more than enough.

And what about now?

I wonder how he'd view those who publicly wear the symbol of his torture and death as visible signs of piety while simultaneously ripping protections from those who need them most. Whereas others, adorned with the same symbol, place their bodies between vulnerable peoples and those who wish them harm. Would he harden his heart, turning away from pastors who preach the gospel of empire? Or offer unearned, unending grace?

I wonder how we, as Christians, can best decide when we should cloak ourselves with invisibility or take our gospel of love to the streets. Be on the front lines. Risking our safety, our lives.

It is said that our motivation—whether we wish to be seen by others—should be a deciding factor. And that's not wrong. But. Can any of us clearly discern if, at any given time, we are Jesus-driven or ego-driven? Powered by the Holy Spirit or led astray by vanity? I can't.

And quietly seeking a heavenly reward in the future is surely a righteous, soul-deep desire. But isn't it equally righteous to publicly support our neighbors, protect the earth; honor all God's creation in the here and now?

So I wonder about Jesus. I seek counsel from fellow Christians. I pray for discernment.

In troubling times, where should we land? Where do you land? And why?

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful. And enkindle in us the fire of your love.

Cathi Beattie
Trinity Episcopal Church, Cranston, RI
Diocese of Rhode Island

WEDNESDAY IN THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Give ear to our prayers, O Lord, and direct the way of your servants in safety under your protection, that, amid all the changes of our earthly pilgrimage, we may be guarded by your mighty aid; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:2–4

IN MY GROWING UP, this passage was often used to talk about keeping our financial giving secret as something personal just between God and the individual. If we even acknowledged our giving to ourselves, it might make us proud or boastful. While I don't think we ought to be out boasting about it on the streets, secrecy around giving sometimes leads to a quiet sense of superiority that can be at least as destructive as public boasting. Secrecy can deny the communal impact of our individual decisions, and secrecy around money only tends to add more power to its already large influence over our lives.

Which is why I love that when we gather an offering in worship, the very next thing that happens in many parishes is that we sing about it. We don't hide the money away, but we lift it up to God in blessing. Of course we do not (hopefully!) sing in praise of ourselves, but in praise of God. Often, we use the familiar words of the Doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Praise God all creatures here below!"

Lent is a time to reflect on spiritual practices. And offering our resources for the sake of the world is a deep and powerful spiritual practice that is counter to our cultural norms that celebrate financial wealth and private ownership of resources. This passage invites us not to push away or hide that important spiritual practice, but to embrace it as a way to celebrate God's abundance rather than our own benevolence. Perhaps our left hand doesn't know what the right is doing because it is lifted up in praise to God for the blessings we have received and that we are sharing for the sake of the world.

For reflection: Where have you experienced generosity in your life? Where are you being called into deeper generosity?

The Rev. Canon Steven Wilco
Interim Canon to the Ordinary
Diocese of Western Massachusetts

THURSDAY IN THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Keep watch over your Church, O Lord, with your unfailing love; and, since it is grounded in human weakness and cannot maintain itself without your aid, protect it from all danger, and keep it in the way of salvation; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:5–6

WHEN YOU GET right down to it, a word is simplicity itself. To form words, we take basic building blocks and arrange them a certain way until we suddenly have something with meaning. And though words themselves are simple, they can sometimes convey things to us that are radical. Jesus starts this passage with such a radical word, teaching us on how we are to act when we pray. And while the instruction on modesty in prayer is important, even more so is the base assumption communicated by the word “when;” *if* we are going to pray is not a question.

Being a Christian, following Jesus, is rooted in prayer. But besides being a Christian thing, prayer is also fundamental to our humanity. To pray is to beg, to ask deeply and earnestly for something. But you can’t receive something without it being given by somebody else. And because prayer requires both a giver and a receiver, it requires connection. That connection is at the heart of who we are. Humans need to be connected, to form relationships and because we are made in the image and likeness of God, and God is Three in One. Humans are not made to be alone because God is never alone. And so we pray, always seeking to deepen that relationship with God, who seeks the same from us.

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that Lent is a time observed by acts of discipline and self-denial. For many people, that can mean giving up something good or pleasurable, such as candy or meat. But discipline can also mean adding something to your life, including a practice of prayer. These two things seem to be opposites of each other, but they serve the same purpose. They are there to deepen our relationship with God. And by forming a deep, even intimate, relationship with the One who is Love, we are transformed. That is why we need seek no reward from others: the new life granted by relationship with God as made manifest in Jesus is all we need.

Angel Figueroa
Diocese of Massachusetts

FRIDAY IN THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Grant us, O Lord our Strength, a true love of your holy Name; so that, trusting in your grace, we may fear no earthly evil, nor fix our hearts on earthly goods, but may rejoice in your full salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:7–8

LET US PRAY: Thank you, Lord, for teaching us about prayer. Amen.

In this reading, Jesus talks about prayer. Versions from three Bibles are given below for verse 7; one is given for verse 8, which is the same for each Bible.

⁷ And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (RSV).

⁷ When praying, do not repeat the same words over and over again, as is done by the gentiles...(A New New Testament).

⁷ In your prayers do not babble as the pagans do...(New Jerusalem Bible).

“Heaping up phrases,” “repeating words endlessly,” and “babbling” are ways of speaking for speaking’s sake, not for the sake of praying. They distract us, expose our need for attention, and take us in the wrong direction—away from praying.

In verse 7, Jesus says that people are concerned about God’s paying attention to them. But this concern is another distraction, for God knows us, hears us, and loves us. As verse 8 reminds us, God knows what we need before we ask. God knows our feelings and attitudes. He knows how we pray, and how we do not. In his teaching on prayer, Jesus first leads us into self-awareness, a first step to an ever-growing understanding, faith, and love. These two verses clear away clutter, to reveal the truth of prayer.

Following these verses, Jesus balances what a prayer is not, with what a prayer is, by giving us The Lord’s Prayer—a prayer that does not heap up empty phrases, repeat and repeat, nor babble. Verses 7 and 8 prepare us for His prayer.

Let us pray: O Lord, thank you for showing us how to pray. Help us to see what to pray for, in honesty and humility, in simple words, that we may grow in faith and love. Amen.

Ed Darling
All Saints Episcopal Church, South Burlington, VT
Diocese of Vermont

SATURDAY IN THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: Grant us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:14–15

IS FORGIVENESS transactional or transformational? Maybe it's both. When we forgive, we change; we interrupt the flow of anger and resentment. We free ourselves and the other. We allow the Spirit into our space, to mend our relationships. We take a risk, but it's a chance for hope. Forgiveness means softening our hearts and opening to love. We let go of one thing to make room for another.

As *The Message* translates Matthew 6:14–15, “In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.”

As Jesus teaches us in words, he also teaches us in example. In his prayer from the cross, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do,” he gives us the ultimate example. In facing torture and death, his plea frees him from holding resentment and condemnation by turning to the Father and letting go.

I have a friend who once said, “I will never forgive her for that,” and years later she still held on to that offense. I had another friend who refused to forgive her elderly father for a perceived slight and severed her relationship from him and her remaining family. Any attempt on my part to try to soften or open these women was met with further resentments. It's like a hardening of the arteries: once it takes hold, it's more difficult to soften and eventually leads to blockage.

Forgiveness is about looking forward, not back. And I might argue that it's not just about a heavenly reward, but a reward for the here and now. Every act of forgiveness is an attempt to repair a broken community—a beloved community. In the end, forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves and the forgiven one. And it's a gift that God gives to us generously, constantly, abundantly.

Instead of thinking of the forgiving father in the Prodigal Son as God, why not think of the father as you?

Vicki MarkAnthony
Christ Church, Easton, CT
The Episcopal Church in Connecticut



HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS | JEN NORTON

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT



COLLECT

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:6

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Creator's blessing rests on the ones who hunger and thirst for wrongs to be made right again. They will eat and drink until they are full.*

WHAT DOES it look like to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and what does Jesus tell us about how those desires will be fulfilled?

Food and water are essential to life. When our bodies demand nourishment, the impulse to eat or to drink comes from deep within, at the very core of what makes us human. In this Beatitude, Jesus invites us to recognize another vital hunger: the longing for belonging and love, as expressed through right relationships. This way of right relating is what scripture calls *righteousness*.

The English word *righteousness* may evoke a courtroom image and legal judgement. But in the Hebrew scriptures that shaped Jesus' life and teaching, the word had a more expansive relational meaning. Righteousness as signified by the Hebrew word *tsedaqah* expresses right relationship with God, with neighbor, and with creation. It is not only about right and wrong, but about seeking equity, harmony, and the flourishing of all. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to ache for the world to be restored to its intended order as a networked community of care where all are fed and no one thirsts.

Jesus returns to the image of hunger and thirst several times throughout the gospels. In John 4, Jesus meets a woman of Samaria at a well. She has come to the well to draw up water for her household's daily needs. Jesus asks her for a drink, then tells her about the living water he has to offer, saying "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (John 4:14). At first, the woman is eager for literal water, but she then realizes that what Jesus offers will quench her deeper thirst for inner healing and restored relationship with her community and with God. Through Jesus, her longing for righteousness is fulfilled.

Several chapters later in John 6, a hungry crowd finds Jesus, hoping that he will replicate the previous day's miraculous feeding of 5,000 people with only five barley loaves and two fish. When Jesus tells them about bread from heaven, they ask him to give them this bread, eager for physical nourishment. Jesus responds, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). Again, Jesus offers something that satiates a deeper hunger, that offers satisfaction beyond the physical.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT CONTINUED

The Beatitude's promise, "for they will be filled," is not the promise of a one-time satiation through a drink of water or a meal of barley loaf and fish. It is an invitation to right relationship with God, with neighbor, and with creation through following Jesus. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for the message of righteousness that Jesus brings to the world.

Br. Jamie Nelson
The Society of St. John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA



• THE BEATITUDES •



KELLY LATIMORE | THE BEATITUDES

MONDAY IN THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O Lord our God, in your holy Sacraments you have given us a foretaste of the good things of your kingdom: Direct us, we pray, in the way that leads to eternal life, that we may come to appear before you in that place of light where you dwell for ever with your saints; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:16–18

IN THIS TEXT, Jesus tells his followers not to “disfigure their faces to show they are fasting.” Instead, he instructs, “put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious you are fasting.” So that it will be known to God alone what you are doing.

Blind rule-following, or worse, performative piety, will not suffice, says Jesus. This isn’t a coercive statement to intimidate followers into compliance. It isn’t a threat. The message here is simply that performance isn’t Jesus’ goal. He’s asking us to give our hearts. It’s about belonging, not performing, because our truest connection with God is personal.

But it feels so good to have others think well of us! When our choices are validated and we feel affirmed, all can seem right with the world. Yet here is Jesus telling us to turn away from those “warm fuzzies” for something else.

Something better.

Performing can only be a gateway. We all perform new things before we develop competency, before we own and can use them as our own. We all use community cues to help us learn how to live. But Jesus is asking for a further step...a belonging that runs deeper than even a community of people sharing a common behavior.

Jesus asks us to claim and enact our belonging with God.

By making our fasting known only to God, we reduce external motivations and rely more fully upon the health and strength of our own relationship with God. Not feeling warm and fuzzy enough? That tells us something about a need for a tune up in that relationship. We can use fasting and community to help us lean in, but those are not substitutions for allowing God to occupy the full space of our souls... for our belonging to come through The Divine.

We fast not because God wants us hungry. We fast not because we want others to see us and affirm our choices. We fast because we need help remembering our frailty, and we need help right-sizing our own importance in a cacophony of distractions. We fast because we need God, and turning to God alone will bring the deepest, truest belonging. Jesus wants nothing less for us.

Emily Keniston
Episcopal Diocese of Maine

TUESDAY IN THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O God, with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light: Quench our thirst with living water, and flood our darkened minds with heavenly light; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:19–21

WHEN I WAS in formation to be ordained a deacon, I was given an assignment to go out into the neighborhood and ask people where they saw God. As I wandered through downtown, I approached a parking enforcement officer and asked her that question. She paused for a moment before replying, “I see God in the dogs, at least they see me as a person.” Her response pierced my heart. In those few words, she revealed both her deep pain and a profound truth about the human need to be seen and valued.

As I reflected on her words, I was reminded of how easily life can harden our hearts. Too often, we are shaped by forces that lead us toward unkindness, competition, and self-interest. We store up treasures of pride and control, forgetting that such things ultimately corrode the spirit. Yet Jesus invites us to store up a different kind of treasure, one found in the mercy, compassion, and love freely given to us.

I am deeply grateful for these gifts of mercy and love that God pours into our lives. I feel closest to God when I strive to share them with others, when my attention turns outward, and my heart opens to the interconnectedness that binds us all. No one is more worthy than the next; we are all indelibly one in the heart of God.

In a world where unkindness and division are all too familiar, we are called to live differently, to let our hearts rest where true treasure lies. Each act of compassion, each moment of forgiveness, becomes a deposit in heaven’s treasury, shaping us into reflections of God’s love. When we treasure mercy above achievement and love above self-interest, our hearts draw nearer to the heart of God. Living in that love not only changes our hearts, but enables us to help heal the world God so loves. So, I wonder: in a world so often hardened by fear and indifference, how are you orienting your heart to share the gifts God has so freely given? Where is your treasure?

The Rev. Dn. Derek Scalia
Chair of the Micah 6 Commission
Episcopal Church of New Hampshire

WEDNESDAY IN THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O Lord our God, you sustained your ancient people in the wilderness with bread from heaven: Feed now your pilgrim flock with the food that endures to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:22–23

I LOVE to read, but I have a condition called dry eye. Apparently, I don't blink enough, and when it kicks up, words become blurry, which makes it difficult to read for a long period of time. It's particularly annoying when I'm engrossed in a novel and can't wait to find out what comes next.

Lent is a good time to consider what I am seeing clearly, what is a little blurry, what I want to be aware of but don't have the capacity to truly see, and what has me so engrossed I can't wait to see what comes next.

God is always ready to be noticed. Sometimes I see and know God's presence clearly. I have a good sense of what God wants me to do, to think, to say, or to pray about. Those moments are true gifts.

Other times my vision of God is blurred. Usually, if I am honest, it's because I have not been giving God my full attention. My prayer has become haphazard, and I have failed to let God's presence in. Like my trusty eye drops, being more intentional about my prayer tends to clear my vision.

And other times, the nearness and magnificence of God, usually known through nature or some pretty remarkable—or even random—people, is so vivid that I will do anything to keep the vision alive, because it is a true gift from God.

Lent is also a time to consider how I can be light to another. Am I kind? Am I present? Do I hold the other in prayer? Do I lighten the life of another, or am I just another storm cloud that in life we must endure?

Lent is a time of growth and transformation. Letting in the light—the light of Christ—can surely allow this to happen, for me, for you, and ultimately for the world. And then, to let the light of Christ shine through us can help this growth and transformation happen for others and bring light to our sadly broken world.

The Rev. Susan Wrathall
Trinity Episcopal Church, Cranston, RI
Diocese of Rhode Island

THURSDAY IN THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Almighty and most merciful God, drive from us all weakness of body, mind, and spirit; that, being restored to wholeness, we may with free hearts become what you intend us to be and accomplish what you want us to do; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:24

THIS VERSE is a familiar and seemingly straightforward nugget from many sermons of the past. It can be so incredibly difficult to hear that wealth gets in the way of serving and loving God—especially in this capitalist market and current social climate. Wealth has become a god to us, ruling our hearts and minds, and placing us firmly in a scarcity mindset. It is so easy to focus on and worry about what we lack, what we need, what there is not enough of. However, if we could radically shift our mindset to a place of abundance, we would better exemplify God’s outpouring of grace, pouring out of ourselves into this hurting world. Can you imagine approaching life from an abundance mindset?

As I prayed with this text, the image of “two masters” also suggested the idea of some competing “master” or “deity” in our lives, vying for our attention, overcasting God. That could be so many things! What are the other “masters” in your life that prevent you from serving God? What do we devote ourselves to, causing us to despise (yes, despise, not simply ignore!) God?

For me, the “master” of “hustle culture” is something I feel deeply. *Go, do, run, multi-task, eat, sleep???, talk, read, work, go, go, go!* Worries and anxieties are stockpiled like a squirrel’s winter food collection. It is exhausting and puts me right back into the scarcity mindset. God is something I’ll have time for later, maybe.

During this past November’s “Teach Us To Pray” retreat, co-hosted by the Communities for Spiritual Vitality and the Society of St. John the Evangelist, we opened each of our three Compline services with the following prayer, taken from the New Zealand Book of Prayer (Night Prayer). It struck me then, almost like God nudged me to say, “listen to this:”

The angels of God guard us through the night, / and quiet the powers of darkness.

The Spirit of God be our guide / to lead us to peace and glory.

It is but lost labor that we haste to rise up early, and so late to take rest, and eat the bread of anxiety. For those beloved of God are given gifts even while they sleep.

Hannah Cooper
Communities for Spiritual Vitality

FRIDAY IN THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O God, you have given us the Good News of your abounding love in your Son Jesus Christ: So fill our hearts with thankfulness that we may rejoice to proclaim the good tidings we have received; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:25–30, 34

I LOVE this passage because it always reminds me of my delightful niece Leah. When our children were young, our families lived across the street from each other, and we often shared meals together. Invariably, before the meal was finished, Leah would ask, “What are we having for supper tomorrow?” She grew up to be a vegetable farmer, providing food for many in the area where she now lives, so perhaps she never really outgrew that concern for what we will eat tomorrow!

How often have you been concerned about what is to happen in the future, only to have the plans you’ve made become an entirely new scenario? In this passage, we are reminded of how very precious every moment is and are even given a cure for anxiety! Who could ask for more? We are told to look to nature: See how God has provided for all creation? Are you not part of that creation as well?

Every day we are given twenty-four hours. Be present in those twenty-four hours instead of worrying about what the next will hold. The next day will come soon enough. We can deal with that when and if it arrives, but for now, be present to the moment in which we are living. Today will have sufficient troubles of its own to care for. Trust that we will find not only what we need for ourselves, but sufficient means for those around us as well. It is in the giving and receiving—seeing the beauty of each moment of this day along with its diversity and abundance and giving thanks—that here we are today alive and able to do what we can do with what we have.

I know for myself, there is so much more room for being more generous with what has been given to me both spiritually and physically. I live with such beauty and abundance all around me. I must never take it for granted and be ready to share it whenever and however I can. God is good and with us in every moment. Look around you; notice it; consider. Give thanks and be glad in it.

Winifred Grace
Trinity Church, Rutland, VT
Diocese of Vermont

SATURDAY IN THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Mercifully hear our prayers, O Lord, and spare all those who confess their sins to you; that those whose consciences are accused by sin may by your merciful pardon be absolved; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:25; 31–33

RICHARD SLEEPS outside every night, all year, quietly making camp off the beaten paths, away from people and with only the resources he can carry. His day is structured around food, because he is hungry and must rely on the generosity of others through food pantries and meals provided in church basements at specific hours on particular days. Once he knows where he will eat that day, he is not worried about food. He pays attention to clothing his body adequately for the sub-zero nights of rough sleeping, and once that need is met, he no longer worries about it.

He struggles to access water for drinking and hygiene and pays attention to what is and is not available to him, as a homeless person. His experience with living in the world is learning how to meet his needs and then primarily focusing on what gives life meaning. All of us rely, in some capacity or another, on someone else to provide the things we need. Some of us can purchase the things other people make or grow; some of us make the things others buy. The cycle of supply and demand, provision and purpose, are met through the gifts of God that we each bring to the world.

I ran into Richard one morning, after a sub-zero night, and mentioned that I was worried about him. His response was to remind me, again, that he has what he needs and that his focus is on living into the fullness of a life centered on God. Life is more than meeting the needs of existence. Worry through the lens of perceived scarcity is replaced by peace through the lens of trusting in God's abundance.

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness.”

The Rev. Dn. Margot Page
All Saint's Episcopal Church, North Adams, MA, and Cathedral of the Beloved, Pittsfield, MA
Diocese of Western Massachusetts



A BRAVE AND QUIET HEART | JANET MCKENZIE



BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL | JEN NORTON

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT



COLLECT

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:7

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Creator's blessing rests on the ones who are merciful and kind to others. Their kindness will find its way back to them—full circle.*

IF SOMEONE is begging you for mercy, you know exactly what they mean. We all have a gut sense of what the word “mercy” means even if we have a hard time defining the word. Mercy is hard to explain; but Jesus was clear about the importance of mercy. The problem most of us have, including myself, is figuring out how to practice mercy in our day-to-day lives.

The good news is that we all have plenty of God-given opportunities to practice mercy. Sometimes these opportunities to practice mercy will be obvious. Situations like forgiving a resentment, giving someone the benefit of the doubt, or having patience with someone you disagree with are obvious opportunities to practice mercy. Other times, these opportunities to practice mercy will be subtle. For example, not getting angry at bad drivers or letting go of your pet peeves. The important thing is that we do not waste these opportunities.

In my own life as a monk, when I contemplate mercy, I usually start with a feeling. I try to feel in my heart as richly as I can what it would feel like to be more merciful. I ask myself what it would feel like to be more generous, more compassionate, more forgiving, and more understanding of how I perceive the faults of others. When I do this contemplative exercise, I always feel a lightness in my spirit. I feel an expansiveness in my heart and a sense of joy that I want to share with others.

It might help to think of mercy as being contagious. Normally we use the word contagious to describe something bad that can be spread from one person to another but try considering the word contagious in a positive light. Try to imagine the mercy you feel inside as being contagious to all those around you. Try to imagine how much more peaceful the world would be if we could all spread a little bit more mercy each day of our lives.

I do my best to take that feeling of contagious mercy and apply it to my life. I consider how I can be more merciful to others, especially in my thoughts towards them. Personally, I find being merciful in my words and actions towards others to be much easier than being merciful in my thoughts!

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT CONTINUED

I also try to be more merciful to myself. I try to pay attention to how I am talking to myself and ask myself if I have neglected to apply that feeling of mercy inwardly as well as outwardly. Of course, this is all easier said than done, but as I said before, God gives us so many opportunities for practice.

If you ever feel stuck in your journey with mercy or wonder why it is important, consider how merciful Jesus was in his earthly ministry. Think of all the time and energy he spent healing the sick, practicing patience with those who reviled him, and calmly teaching the truth to all who came to him. Jesus was also a merciful leader with his apostles as they squabbled amongst themselves, misunderstood what he was saying, and even abandoned him. Jesus kept coming back to mercy again and again throughout his earthly ministry. We must do the same. Above all else, remember that God is with us on our journey with mercy. Our most merciful God has our back. We can always fall back on the mercy of God.

Br. Jack Crowley
The Society of St. John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA



DEPTHS | CARMELLE BEAUGELIN CALDWELL

MONDAY IN THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Be gracious to your people, we entreat you, O Lord, that they, repenting day by day of the things that displease you, may be more and more filled with love of you and of your commandments; and, being supported by your grace in this life, may come to the full enjoyment of eternal life in your everlasting kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:1–2

SOMETIMES DRAWING a line in the sand can be the most merciful thing you can do. It is easy to take Jesus' statement as one of allowing anything to be alright. Yet, we all know that there are actions that are right and actions that are wrong. Indeed, I am intensely aware that my actions are not always in line with Jesus' teachings. This is where Jesus' words on judgement may be most helpful.

The judgements I put on others are most often the areas in my own life that I most need to correct. My judgements are a mirror of my own faults and scars. Every time I find myself in judgement of another, I have to back up and look at myself. So, in a way, my tendency to judge can be a part of God's mercy to me—a way for me to pause and find my way back to where I need to be.

I am grateful that baked into the service every Sunday is a confession, a time to pause and think through our week and lay it all before God: the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is also when we can accept the mercy of God. For what we all hope for, and what we hope for others, is the mercy of God. So, look for the ways you can have mercy on those around you, and on yourself, and leave the judgements in God's hands.

What has rubbed you the wrong way this week? What does that say about what you need to look at in yourself? Pray for God's mercy for yourself and those around you.

Linnae Himsl Peterson
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Goffstown, NH
Episcopal Church of New Hampshire

TUESDAY IN THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Almighty God, through the incarnate Word you have caused us to be born anew of an imperishable and eternal seed: Look with compassion upon those who are being prepared for Holy Baptism, and grant that they may be built as living stones into a spiritual temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:3–5

I AM CONTINUALLY amazed at the concept of synchronicity. You know, those moments when it seems as if you are walking in a world which is open to harmony and simultaneously occurring meaningful events. I think the concept of synchronicity infers that something is being reflected back to ourselves through our actions and the actions of others. Carl Jung felt that synchronicity was an “acausal connecting principle,” part of his concept of *unus mundus*: one world that has underlying order and structure (dare I say “God”).

This passage in the Bible speaking of “removing the speck” from your neighbor’s eye is Jesus’ way of saying “Look at your reflection, look in the mirror.” This is the structure upon which we build the *unus mundus*. We would see this connection more clearly if we could only remove the cobwebs, specks, logs, etc. out of our eyes. I find that when I look for goodness in others and display good will, I generally will find it. Once the good will changes to ill will, the obstruction, the speck, the log returns to the interaction. Something is blocked. Was this what Jesus was trying to say?

Our world is broken in many ways. There are many who I take issue with for their harmful actions and words, but I do not want to return that harm, even though I am only human and have feelings of ill will also.

At the time of writing, there was quite a disturbing incident in our country, the assassination of a young conservative activist. I watched as the responses of many who blamed and condemned “the one side” dominated the news cycle. But the response that spoke the loudest to me was the words of the young man’s widow who forgave the killer, saying “I forgive him because it is what Christ did.... The answer to hate is not hate.” Truly, she saw the speck of hatred in her own eye but wanted to remove it, and was able to, with Christ at her side. Others (on both “sides” of the political divide) were not so kind, stating that they cannot help it but will continue to hate the other.

Our vision can be clouded in our most intimate relationships and friendships, but also in the wider communities of our towns, cities, our country, the world. How can we build on the moments that bring us to the synchronicity, the connection that God wishes for us? How can we help each other remove the specks present in our vision?

Which image, mirror, reflection will we choose to give to the world? There is only one answer, the image of who we truly are: Christ’s own expression of Love in the world.

Deborah Jerard
Christ Episcopal Church, Montpelier, VT
Diocese of Vermont

WEDNESDAY IN THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

Almighty God our heavenly Father, renew in us the gifts of your mercy; increase our faith, strengthen our hope, enlighten our understanding, widen our charity, and make us ready to serve you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:6

“A Meditation on Our Inner Pearls”

THIS VERSE offers a profound invitation—one that goes beyond external discernment—and calls us to a radical act of internal self-compassion, modeled on the very heart of God.

As a psychotherapist, I’ve come to appreciate a framework called Internal Family Systems, developed by Richard Schwartz, which offers a transformative way to understand our inner lives. It teaches that deep within each of us is a wise, compassionate core Self—what our tradition calls the *Imago Dei*, the very Image of God. Alongside this Self, we have many different “parts.” Some are our most precious treasures, sacred gifts from our Creator: our creativity, vulnerability, and joy. These are the holy “pearls” this verse describes.

Of course, we also have protective parts that live in fear, forgetting they are beloved in God’s eyes. These are often our inner critics, whose job is to judge us in an attempt to keep us safe. These well-intentioned protectors can act like “dogs and swine.” When we turn on our God-given sensitivity or shame our creativity, we are throwing our pearls before parts of us that have forgotten their own divine worth. They can feel trampled by self-criticism and mauled by the resulting shame.

So, what if we chose a different path? What if we became gentle stewards of the sacred space of our own hearts? Perhaps we can start right now.

Take a moment to breathe and still your heart before God. Turn your attention inward to that holy space where the Spirit dwells. Ask God to help you see, with gentle eyes, a hidden and beautiful part of yourself—a creative impulse, a sensitivity, a quiet hope. See if you can bring this pearl, this gift from God, gently into the light of God’s presence. Let this precious part of you know that its worth is not earned; it was sealed by the One who made it. It is already holy, a pearl in God’s eyes.

This tender inner work is never for our benefit alone. When we learn to cherish the divine image within ourselves, we can’t help but become more generous. The compassion we receive and cultivate for our own parts is the very same compassion that naturally extends to others. By tending to the sacred space of our hearts, we partner with the Spirit in creating a surplus of grace that can’t help but spill over, enriching the world.

The Rev. Elizabeth Marshall Casasola
Trinity Episcopal Church, Castine, ME
Episcopal Diocese of Maine

THURSDAY IN THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O God, you have called us to be your children, and have promised that those who suffer with Christ will be heirs with him of your glory: Arm us with such trust in him that we may ask no rest from his demands and have no fear in his service; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:7–8

AMONG THE MANY memorable sites of Ireland, an old door tops the list. Secure in the Anglican Cathedral of St. Patrick's in Dublin, the "Door of Reconciliation" is the last remnant of the old Chapter House. Its significance stems from a decades-long feud that came to blows in 1492 over a power struggle between two prominent families. One sought an assured sanctuary in the Chapter House, soon to be pursued by his rival.

Through the door they argued for hours until the aggressor promised peace. Suspicious, the opponent refused to open the door. To demonstrate his sincerity, his rival took out his axe, cut a hole through the door and extended his arm. They shook hands and made peace, giving birth to the phrase "to chance your arm."

The simplicity of Lent affords permission to consider how complicated life has become. Rarely do we simply knock. Many install cameras to see who is coming. We may text to make sure we will be received. Numerous daily tasks vie for our time and attention. As for knocking on the door of a church? The tragic reality is that for some, bad experiences and misunderstood impressions compel them to simply walk by. Or if they do knock, how often are the doors locked? We can get so caught up in ourselves that we can't see the forest for the trees. We fret, worry, hash and rehash, seek answers and advice until we are dizzy.

Jesus' message is simple: Stop. Where you are. Knock. The door will be opened. And what will you find? The mercy, compassion, and treasures of faith. Because when you "chance your arm" with Jesus there can only be good news.

The Rev. Jennifer Kezirian West
Grace Episcopal Church, Providence, RI
Diocese of Rhode Island

FRIDAY IN THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O Lord, you relieve our necessity out of the abundance of your great riches: Grant that we may accept with joy the salvation you bestow, and manifest it to all the world by the quality of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:9–11

GOD’S LOVE for us is eternal and He is the giver of gifts. We forget all the gifts God has given us.

Jesus is our greatest gift from God. He bore the burden of our pain, our mistakes, our ignorance, our wrongdoing...wiping away the past and creating a new future where all are welcomed to receive mercy, forgiveness, hope, and love.

Before he gave of himself, he took time to reflect on his commitment. He took time to question his intentions, his obedience to God, and his love for us. We, too, must prepare to reflect, just as Jesus did, on the giving of ourselves to others and our commitment to God as Christians.

As God prepared Jesus for his ministry and sacrifice by helping him see that he is a gift to the world, God can help us do the same. What can we give? What would God like us to commit to that will impact the world and the community around us?

Two years ago, for the Lenten Season, I decided I wasn’t going to give up chocolate or meat or do the usual dietary exclusion ritual. I decided I would “give” for Lent and change my mindset from trying to encompass “sacrifice” as the sole reason for Lent, because everything God does for us comes from the mindset of “giving” and “loving,” which naturally takes sacrifice when it is true and good.

So, two years ago, as I thought about my Lenten ritual, I decided I would “give” away my \$20-a-week budgeted coffee money to someone in need. I would make my coffee at home and give that \$20 to someone else. It could be a mom not being able to pay off her groceries or a Dunkin Donuts gift card for the homeless man on the corner of the street on my way to work. Or I could come across a charity trying to raise money. But every week it needed to go to someone else other than just me and my enjoyment of drinking varied cups of coffee. There was never a week when I couldn’t find someone to give this \$20 to. God made sure He provided me with the opportunity to give because He knew I had made the commitment.

Through this simple practice, Lent changed for me. Now I reflect on how I can give of myself to the world as Christ did for us.

The Rev. Dn. Dinushka De Silva
Yale New Haven Hospital
The Episcopal Church in Connecticut

SATURDAY IN THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT



COLLECT

O Lord, in your goodness you bestow abundant graces on your elect: Look with favor, we entreat you, upon those who in these Lenten days are being prepared for Holy Baptism, and grant them the help of your protection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:12

FOR YEARS, when I reflected on this passage, I would reflect on all my wishes and wants and the ways I wished others would offer to me a kind word, a note of appreciation, or an “atta girl” along the way. I would also think of the ways I offered these affirmations to others. As I have continued to walk with this passage, however, I think Jesus is calling me to a deeper understanding.

Don’t get me wrong, giving other people affirmation for their doing or their very being is a gift to others. It is a way to say, “I see you and you are a blessing in my life.” But, I believe what Jesus is pointing us to is what the Baptismal Covenant explores when we are asked, “Will you respect the dignity of every human being?” Respecting the dignity of every human being is beyond polite affirmation of those who walk in our circles of everyday life. It is actively working to serve the basic human needs of others.

This past Thanksgiving I had the gift of serving at a local parish’s community meal. It is a place where “All are welcome.” The homeless, the food insecure, the lonely, the persons who didn’t feel like cooking, the parishioners who wanted to spend the day with their church family—all of them gather around the table. For me, this was the Kingdom of God showing up for a meal. And yet, two thoughts walked with me that day. I kept thinking about those who were not with us because they did not feel safe leaving their homes and those who were with us who are home or food insecure. I wondered about their stories, the challenges and the roadblocks they confronted in their journeys. The question in my heart was “Where did we as their community go wrong? How did we turn a blind eye to their dignity?” I wondered how my actions and inactions had let them down. And, how does respecting the dignity of every human being call me to lean into new questions and new ways of being, to help create the changes our communities, churches, and country need to lean into to offer that respect?

Kind words are great. Affirmations are great. And Jesus calls us beyond that to respect the dignity of others that both includes those in our everyday circles of life and those beyond that everyday circle. How can we deepen our commitment to this ministry? I know it is the work I was called to through my baptism—and it is the work I shall continue with God’s help.

The Rt. Rev. Laura J. Ahrens
Bishop Suffragan
The Episcopal Church in Connecticut



HOSANNA | LAURA JAMES



PURE OF HEART | JEN NORTON

SUNDAY OF THE PASSION—PALM SUNDAY



COLLECT

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:8

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Creator's blessing rests on the pure of heart. They are the ones who will see the Great Spirit.*

THROUGHOUT HEBREW SCRIPTURE, the heart stands for the hidden essence of our humanity. The soft or tender heart is receptive to wisdom, spiritually pliable, agile: it can bend, turn, and change. The hardened heart is defiantly unreceptive. It is no longer made of flesh, but of stone. It has calcified by its own volition, choosing itself over God.

In his own teaching, Jesus elaborates upon the heart-wisdom of his ancestors. In his parables and sayings, the heart is a source of good or bad treasure. It is soil that receives seed. It is the arena of our inmost thoughts, imagination, & faith. The heart is an abode for the indwelling Holy Spirit given to us.

For his disciples, Jesus is the heart of the God we worship, and in Jesus this God has a human heartbeat.

What Jesus calls a *pure heart* is an icon of this humanity in right relationship with God. This pure heart is alive to itself and therefore rooted in a real interior life. And it is alive with compassion and connection to others, created in God's likeness. Each mysterious creature is endowed with their own miraculous heart, different from our own, yet fashioned by the same Maker and set on fire by the same Lover.

But *pure* can be a hard word to swallow. Did Jesus not name and denounce a fixation with purity in the dominant religious culture around him? Purity cultures in the church look suspiciously Pharisaical, imposing impossible and often inhuman ideals. Sadly, they often end up driving sincere disciples (or would-be disciples) away from the God of mercy. The *Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist* offers words I find helpful, about purification in relation to the mystery of Christian prayer: "Our love must be purified and tested by many times of darkness, loss, and waiting" (Chapter 21). Of course, you don't have to be a monk or nun to know what this is like. Any serious disciple learns soon enough that making decisions based on the gospel will set us at odds with neighbors, employers, politicians, or even friends or family; that there will be seasons when prayer is clouded by distraction, boredom, or the agony of feeling nothing; that the confident trust we felt when we entered upon a vocation or made a vow will be shaken in ways great and small. There is a purity God grants in and through our patient, faithful endurance, but it is more akin to *integrity* or *wholeness* than an immaculate conscience.

Blessed are those *distilled to their essence* by the ups and downs of sticking with Jesus: collected, recollected, concentrated, condensed, made real, and offered up to God upon the altar of the heart.

SUNDAY OF THE PASSION—PALM SUNDAY CONTINUED

When the response to God's love that we call prayer becomes the center of who we are, many other dimensions of our carefully manicured and cherished self-identities fall away. With each layer, a new response of freedom is possible. And a new vista of God's infinite love opens before our astonished and tearful eyes.

What do those eyes see?

More of God than we thought possible, it seems. On the whole, the Hebrew scriptures agree with God's words to Moses in Exodus 33:20: "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." Yet seeing God—however partially or imperfectly—would become a major Christian image for the transfiguration of our spiritual perception, begun in this life and coming to fullness in eternity.

What opens our eyes—and what those eyes see—is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). This is seeing with the eye of a purified heart. Tradition has come to call the fullness of this sight in the bliss of heaven the *beatific* (or "happy-making") vision. It is fitting that the term for this consummation of our spiritual seeking and beholding shares a root with the word beatitude. Both teach us where true joy is to be found, and how.

Br. Keith Nelson
Society of St. John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA



DAY OF THE LORD | HANNAH GARRITY

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK



COLLECT

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:13–14

THE ROAD to destruction is easy. The road to real and authentic life is hard. God/Jesus centered life is hard. This is not a surprise to so many people of the global majority, people who live their lives on the margins, to those seeking justice.

I'm drawn to this passage these days. Really all of the 7th chapter of Matthew. I typically favor Mark's Gospel because of his urgency and straightforwardness. Perhaps the directness of this part of the Sermon on the Mount reminds me of Mark's inescapably direct and unvarnished Jesus. Jesus presents a clear and challenging path for discipleship which cannot be obscured by the niceties and customs of a society fueled by coercive power, conquest and the valuing of people based on the proximity to wealth, power, or a particular ethnic/racial category.

As our country contends with the demons of racism and unchecked capitalism, Jesus' words in this passage offer us strength and courage when we might like to play it safe or delude ourselves by making room for understanding what leads some to choose cruelty. In a time when the challenge of Jesus' call to discipleship is so obscured by the lure of individualism and false equivalencies, it is refreshing to hear so clearly the call of the Gospel.

To follow Jesus, to be a disciple of Christ, is and has always been a counter-cultural undertaking. The cosmic Christ opens the road to the nuances necessary to help us apply the Gospel to the realities, challenges, and uncertainties faced by every generation. But the Jesus of Matthew 7:13–14 narrows our focus to consider how we will each live today as individuals called to the collective work of justice and love assigned to the Body of Christ in every age.

The Rt. Rev. Shannon MacVean-Brown
Bishop Diocesan
Diocese of Vermont

TUESDAY IN HOLY WEEK



COLLECT

O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:15–16, 20

“Beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

WHO ARE the false prophets among us, in both our civic and church life, whose message may seem very attractive, but who lead us into pathways that are simply dangerous? As political campaigning builds steam, we see plenty of candidates running for office whose appetite for power is more for the satisfying of their own wolf-like appetites than for the common good.

It would be easy for us to hear this portion of Jesus’ sermon as merely about those we see on a debate or rally stage. But what if Jesus is also challenging our own integrity? Do I hide my own wolf-like nature behind soft tones and devout messages? Does my faith align with outward meanness, oppression, racism, classism, or any kind of condescension over those who don’t resemble me? If clothes maketh the person, what am I seen to be wearing?

A wise lay leader in our diocese once said that she could tell a lot about a nominee for the ordained ministry when she took them out to lunch at a restaurant. She would observe how they treated the wait staff. Did they express kindness and respect, show interest in the servant? Or did they just ignore the waiter, without offering a hello or a thank you when water was poured—without honoring the dignity of the one who was dependent upon their tips? Sometimes a talented preacher or a touted leader in their home parish failed to live up to the Judith lunch test. That may sound harsh, but some of Jesus’ most important lessons were taught at a table. And here we are, soon to remember the events around the table in the Upper Room.

At children’s soccer or hockey games, I have seen, and sadly, shamefully even, failed to object to, parents shouting obscenities, sometimes blatantly racist, at players from the opposing teams, and then returning to their minivans with bumper stickers that say “God Loves You, Without Exception!” Sorry—Episcopalians are not exempt from Jesus’ warning.

In the depths of Holy Week, we recall that most of the disciples did even worse. They followed Jesus into humanity’s suffering for as long as it seemed a popular thing to do, and then they hid themselves at the crucifixion. Even wolves sometimes wear wool.

They needed forgiveness. So do we.

The Rt. Rev. Rob Hirschfeld
Bishop Diocesan
Episcopal Church of New Hampshire

WEDNESDAY IN HOLY WEEK



COLLECT

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:17–19

DURING MY YEARS at St. Michael's in Brattleboro, VT, we often joined with Trinity Lutheran and First United Methodist to worship during Holy Week. One year, Trinity Lutheran hosted the Good Friday liturgy, and they had erected inside the chancel a huge maple tree; the genius of a parishioner who found it lying in the woods, probably too tender to survive a windstorm. When we walked into Trinity, practically the only thing we could see was the bare-branched maple tree.

In this part of St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks plainly and uses easy-to-understand images to say that a whole-life means linking our words with our actions. Our Lord speaks about good trees and bad trees, bad fruit and good fruit, and about cutting down trees that don't bear good fruit and throwing them into the fire. His listeners then, as we do today, would have understood that he was speaking metaphorically, yet truthfully.

We are making our way, once again, to a tree, to the cross, expecting the solemnity of Holy Week to give us new insight, or change us, or yes, to challenge us. We make our way to the foot of that cross trusting that tree to become for us the way of life; trusting God to cultivate us to be a church who consistently bears good fruit.

I can't do what the Lutherans did many years ago, so you won't find a maple tree in my house on Good Friday, but I do listen to a lot of music during Holy Week. A favorite is Jesus Springing. Maybe it will be a means of grace and truth for your journey....

I am the heart that houses the cone
I am the cone enclosing the cedar
I am the cedar sawn for the cradle
forest of the body, body of the tree
I am the cradle rocking the baby
I am the baby containing the man
I am the man nailed on the cross
tree of the body, body of the forest
I am the cross sawn from the cedar
I am the cedar enclosed in the cone
I am the cone housed in the heart
here in my heart, Jesus, springing

Text, Kevin Crossley-Holland; music, Bob Chilcott

The Rt. Rev. Thomas J. Brown
Bishop Diocesan
Diocese of Maine

MAUNDY THURSDAY



COLLECT

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:21–23

HERE, Jesus speaks a hard word, but a necessary one: “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.*” It is a saying that carries both promise and warning, reassurance and unease, all at once.

Jesus is warning his hearers that not everyone who claims his name to legitimize their words actually belongs to him. There will be people who speak fluently about faith, who invoke God’s authority, who even point to religious accomplishments as evidence of their standing—and yet have missed the heart of what God desires. They are not merely mistaken; they are false. They are lying about who they are, and they are lying about what Jesus expects.

That sentence is not easy to write. But history shows it’s true. People have repeatedly shown that speaking “in the name of Jesus” can be an effective way to gain power, secure loyalty, justify cruelty, or silence dissent. Sometimes the deception is crude and self-serving. Sometimes it is wrapped in sincerity and conviction. But the result is the same: Jesus’ name is used as a tool, as a weapon, and God is made to serve someone else’s will.

The promise in this passage is that such falsehoods do not endure. They may flourish for a time, but they are temporary. God’s Reign does not finally belong to the loudest voices or the most confident claims. When the kingdom of heaven comes fully into view—when God’s justice, mercy, and truth are unmistakable - things built on deception will simply not stand. The reckoning Jesus names is not vindictive; it is clarifying. Reality asserts itself. What is false falls away.

But the deeper challenge here lies closer to home.

Jesus’ words are not aimed only at obvious frauds or public hypocrites. They reach into the quiet places of our own self-understanding. They confront the ways we can deceive ourselves even while believing we are faithful. How often have we recognized manipulation or self-interest in someone else’s religious claims and failed to notice similar patterns in our own lives? How often have we been confident that we were doing what Jesus wanted, only to discover later that we were really defending our preferences, our fears, or our sense of control?

Self-deception is subtler than outright lying and often more dangerous. We can sincerely believe that Jesus is Lord of our lives while quietly reserving whole territories for ourselves. We can construct an image of Jesus shaped by our desires, who conveniently agrees with us, blesses our instincts, and asks

very little that would unsettle us. And then, without realizing it, we appeal to that constructed Christ to justify what we have already decided to do.

That is the uncomfortable edge of this saying. The question Jesus raises is not simply whether we use the right words or perform the right actions, but whether our lives are actually aligned with the will of God. Not whether we know how to say “Lord,” but whether we are learning, slowly and imperfectly, how to listen.

This passage invites humility rather than fear. It calls us not to anxious self-scrutiny, but to honest openness before God. It asks us to loosen our grip on certainty and control, and to trust that the real Jesus—who knows us better than we know ourselves—is more faithful than the versions we invent. In that trust, the warning becomes grace, and the hard word becomes an invitation to live more truthfully in the light of God’s Reign.

The Rt. Rev. Nicholas Knisely
Bishop Diocesan
Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island



WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME? | LAURAN PITTMAN

GOOD FRIDAY



COLLECT

Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:24–27

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock...”

GOOD FRIDAY

is not a day for easy conclusions. It is a day when the winds rise, when the rain falls hard, when the ground beneath us feels uncertain and thin. It is a day when we stand exposed to the storm, rather than protected from it.

And still—here we are, hearing Jesus speak about foundations.

Matthew places these words at the close of the Sermon on the Mount. After blessing the poor, commanding love of enemies, and calling us into challenging righteousness, Jesus ends not with comfort, but with a question: What will you build upon?

On Good Friday, that question becomes unsettlingly real because the cross does not look like a rock; it looks like failure.

It looks like vulnerability.

It looks like everything the world warns us against if we hope to endure.

Jesus tells us that the wise builder is not the one who merely hears his words, but the one who acts on them—who lives them when the sky darkens and the winds begin to roar. When obedience costs something.

And where do his words point, finally, if not the to very life we see enacted on this day:

Love that refuses to turn away.

Truth that does not serve itself.

Mercy that absorbs the blow rather than deflecting it.

Forgiveness spoken with a body breaking under its weight.

On Good Friday, we discover that the rock is not certainty; it is faithfulness.

It is not strength as the world measures it; it is love that remains.

The storm Jesus describes is not theoretical. The storm comes as grief and betrayal, injustice and fear, and bodies that fail and hopes that collapse. The storm comes to every house. The question is not whether the storm will arrive, but what endures when it does. Here at the cross, the house does not look intact. The builder himself is nailed down. The rain is falling. The wind is loud. And still—this is the foundation.

Because nothing can dislodge this love. It goes all the way down.

Good Friday asks us to examine honestly what we have trusted to hold us: our competence, our certainty, our institutions, our ability to manage the tumult of our lives. Some of these things are useful. None of them are rock.

The rock is Christ—crucified and faithful.

Christ—who does not avoid suffering, but enters it.

Christ—whose obedience is not abstract, but embodied, costly, and real.

To build upon this rock is not to be spared the storm. It is to discover that when everything else gives way, God does not.

So today we keep vigil.

We do not rush ahead to Easter.

We let the storm speak.

And we dare to trust that beneath the cross—beneath the grief, beneath the silence—there is a foundation which cannot be shaken.

Thanks be to God.

The Rt. Rev. Julia Whitworth
Bishop Diocesan
Diocese of Massachusetts

HOLY SATURDAY



COLLECT

O God, Creator of heaven and earth: Grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 7:28–29

LIKE THIS BRIEF PERICOPHE from Matthew, Holy Saturday can often be overlooked as simply a placeholder between the “really important” parts of the story.

But there is much to be learned from these two verses from Matthew. Coming at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the author of Matthew tells us that there is much to be learned, not just from the content of Jesus’ teaching, but in its impact on those whom he taught.

How they experienced the teaching that comes before prepares them for the miracles and calls to discipleship that come next.

This passage speaks of the transformation that occurs in the “in between time.”

Most congregations don’t hold a service for the observance of Holy Saturday. And though it takes up just one page in the Book of Common Prayer, Holy Saturday is one of my favorite liturgical moments in the church year. I am grateful for the Altar and Flower Guilds in my ministry who have paused their work to pray this service with me.

Holy Saturday has become important to me, as I’ve come to believe that it is where most of us spend a great deal of our lives; somewhere between the very worst life can bring us and the realized promise of new life and an empty tomb.

For most of us today, Holy Saturday is a time we spend simply traveling, waiting, planning, and getting things ready for Easter.

But for the followers, friends, and family of Jesus, Holy Saturday was a very different experience. They did not know Easter was coming. They did not know the empty tomb would greet them the next day. They did not know that death would not have the final word, nor that the life and love of God would win the victory. Though Jesus tried to tell them.

To his followers, that Friday was anything but Good, and that Saturday was not yet known to be Holy.

I imagine they spent that first Holy Saturday asking questions in their fear and deep grief.

“What has happened? How can this be? What comes next?”

“What do we do now?”

These questions come to us, too, in the Holy Saturdays of our own lives.

HOLY SATURDAY CONTINUED

Perhaps you know something about sitting in the in-between of life, with only questions on your mind and fear and grief upon your heart.

The Good News, of course, is that, unlike Jesus' family and friends on that first Holy Saturday, we know Easter is coming. We know, eventually, the tomb will be empty. We know new life awaits us, even if we don't know when. Even if we can't yet see it or claim it.

Sometimes, our hearts are not ready for Easter. We may need more time in Holy Saturday, or have more questions we need to ask before we can bear to roll the stone away and enter into the new life that Jesus won for us. And that's okay. There is no right way to go through the many Holy Saturdays of our lives.

And so we wait, expectantly, between what has happened and the resurrection life that comes next. And we pray.

"O God, Creator of heaven and earth: Grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, for ever and ever. Amen." (BCP p. 283)

The Rt. Rev. Jeff Mello
Bishop Diocesan
The Episcopal Church in Connecticut



FRANK WESLEY | CRUCIFIXION



BLESSSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS | JEN NORTON

EASTER DAY



COLLECT

O God, who made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the Lord's resurrection: Stir up in your Church that Spirit of adoption which is given to us in Baptism, that we, being renewed both in body and mind, may worship you in sincerity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Creator's blessing rests on the ones who make peace. It will be said of them, "They are the children of the Great Spirit!"

THERE WAS "PEACE" in Jesus' day. It was called the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome, and it was the product of the Roman Empire using its superior military force to beat down its opponents to the point that they were no longer able to resist. It was a "peace" that was *obtained* and *maintained* by violence. Jesus lived in Roman-occupied Palestine and was well acquainted with the *Pax Romana*. He saw how the Romans maintained this "peace" by dominating their subjects with brute force. Roman peace relied on daily intimidation, quick and cruel punishment (including crucifixion), and the constant threat of retaliation and destruction. Resistance to Rome was met with crushing violence.

This was not the peace which God had promised, nor was it the peace the prophets envisioned. That peace was *shalom*, and it meant wholeness, safety, and well-being for an individual or a group. *Shalom* extended beyond the mere absence of conflict. It was a gift from God, representing completeness in one's relationship with God and harmony in one's relationships with others. *Shalom* is what Jesus was offering when he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27). *Shalom* overcomes our anxieties and fears with a deep and abiding calm that results from placing our whole trust in God.

The peace that comes from God is a gift, but it is also a peace for which we can and must strive. Jesus blesses the *peacemakers*, which goes beyond those who simply *enjoy* peace to those who actually work for peace. *Peacemakers* are called "the children of God" because their peacemaking reflects the generosity and benevolence of God, who "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

There is a difference between "peacekeepers" and "peacemakers." Peacekeepers are those who seek to maintain peace by avoiding conflict. They typically downplay tension between individuals or within a group to maintain the façade of peace. They will sacrifice their own inner peace to keep others happy. Peacekeepers hate rocking the boat and are uncomfortable with discord, so they do their best to steer clear of conflict.

EASTER DAY CONTINUED

Peacemakers, on the other hand, are those who are willing to resolve both outer and inner turmoil to establish peace with others and within themselves. Inevitably, peacemaking requires engaging in conflict and tension to help bring the situation to a solid resolution. Peacemaking is active, engaging with differences to find resolutions, while peacekeeping is passive, keeping things as they are by separating parties or smoothing things over.

Jesus was and is a *peacemaker* who embraced our human condition, confronting and overcoming the power of evil that enslaved us, speaking the truth with compassion, and offering us a lasting, authentic peace, a peace that the world could not give. When God raised him from the dead, God vindicated him and proved for all time that God's strength is greater than human strength, that God's love can and will prevail over human hatred, that God's wisdom and truth is everlasting. The peace that God gives is true peace, not the false peace that is obtained and maintained through power and violence. We can choose to live in that victory during this Easter season (and beyond) and challenge ourselves to be peacemakers, actively addressing the conflicts and tensions that arise between humans and offering compassion and understanding and real solutions that enable us to move forward.

Receive God's peace, share God's peace and work for God's peace in this season of joy and victory.
Shalom!

Br. David Vryhof
The Society of St. John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA



DETAIL FROM BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS | JEN NORTON

BRIGHT MONDAY



COLLECT

Grant, O Lord, that we may so live in the Paschal mystery that the joy of these fifty days may continually strengthen us, and assure us of our salvation; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:9

Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Instead, when you send your voice to the Great Spirit, here is how you should pray: O Great Spirit, our Father from above, we honor your name as sacred and holy.

WHAT does it mean for something to be “sacred and holy?” As an unabashedly pedantic person, I can rattle off the definition without hesitation: to be sacred means to be set apart for ritual use. “Set aside for special occasions” calls to mind my grandmothers’ fragile china and tarnished silver—hardly an image that inspires my enthusiasm.

But I was recently struck by another framing of the word—when thinking about what I would take with me if evacuating a house fire. I found myself describing a crucial object, something irreplaceable that I could not get through the day without, as “sacred.” Something sacred in this way, rather than being put aside for certain times, is drawn so deeply into my existence, my sense of meaning and purpose, that it becomes impossible to picture a world without it. This is the sacredness that Jesus invites us to experience with God.

Children have a particular way of pouring their whole identities into the things and activities that matter to them. The 1945 movie *National Velvet*, about horse-crazy teen Velvet Brown, is a perfect example of this tendency for me. Velvet’s horse, The Pie, and their training for the Grand National steeplechase define her so completely that she not only wins the race but also refuses financial gain from The Pie’s resulting fame, preferring instead to cherish him privately. *He* is the reason she gets up in the morning, not the economic value he could generate. He is sacred to her.

Is my relationship to God as indispensable in my life as The Pie is in Velvet’s? In this first line of the prayer that Jesus teaches us as a framework for how to relate our “Father from above,” He gives us a reminder to consciously make God the thing we turn to before everything else, apart from any rational hope of gain. After all, our Abba is the sustainer of the world, the breath of life, and the true reason we all get up in the morning. I strive to learn the art of hallowing from people like Velvet Brown.

Lio Cook
Church of Our Father, Hulls Cove, ME
Diocese of Maine

BRIGHT TUESDAY



COLLECT

O Lord, you have saved us through the Paschal mystery of Christ: Continue to support your people with heavenly gifts, that we may attain true liberty, and enjoy the happiness of heaven which we have begun to taste on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:10

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Bring your good road to us, where the beauty of your ways in the spirit-world above is reflected in the earth below.

AMONG ALL the instructions for the ethical life that appear in the Sermon on the Mount, how are we to pray this grand, abstract petition that God's kingdom come and God's will be done?

Modern theological writers have understandably balked at language of kings and kingdoms and frequently suggest a sound-alike, more democratic term, "kindom," since all sentient beings are "kin" to each other as a part of God's creation. As I write this, daily "Praying with Creation" devotions point out my kinship with creatures ranging from moths to blue-tailed skinks and remind me that kinship implies obligation and stewardship.

The more problematic term for me is "your [God's] will." I grew up in a household where it was assumed that God had a very specific plan for my life, and it was my job to follow it or else. Over decades I have learned that God accompanies me on all my paths, comforting, encouraging, and forgiving me along the way.

When I did graduate work in Medieval Studies, I was appalled to learn that Crusaders had carried out their slaughter of Muslims and Jews under the banner "*Deus vult*" or "God wills." How could so-called Christians make such an assumption?

Yet we moderns also use the notion of God's will in strange ways. The speaker in Nick Flynn's poem "God's Will" describes a woman tearfully sharing the news that her brother had died of an overdose:

"... she knew it was God's will. We all want to be held a little higher."

The pathos of these lines breaks my heart. We may no longer think that God's will endorses slaughter, but yes, indeed, "We all want to be held a little higher," and so we attribute to a vague "God's will" the heartbreaks and tragedies of life that God is not responsible for.

Perhaps as we ponder following God's will, at a minimum we need to keep in mind the prophet Micah's exhortation and ask ourselves: "How does this do justice? How does this show mercy?"

And even more importantly, "Am I walking so humbly with God that I am not in danger of mistaking my ego-driven wants and desires for God's will?"

A. Joan Bowers, SCHC
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Concord, NH
Episcopal Church of New Hampshire

BRIGHT WEDNESDAY



COLLECT

O Lord, the life of the faithful, the glory of the saints, and the delight of those who trust in you: Hear our supplications, and quench, we pray, the thirst of those who long for your promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:11

Give us today our daily bread.

Provide for us day by day—the elk, the buffalo, and the salmon. The corn, the squash, and the wild rice.

All the things we need for each day.

I’VE ALWAYS BEEN intrigued by the problem of translating literary texts accurately, especially when new translations of such classics as *The Iliad* or *War and Peace*—and even the Bible—get reviewed in the media. Capturing the nuances of an original text is difficult, if not impossible. In the case of Matthew’s Gospel, recent translations of the phrase “daily bread” have augmented my appreciation for the Lord’s Prayer.

The first English translations of the New Testament, the Tyndal and King James versions, render Matthew 6:11 in the manner we are most used to: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Most contemporary translations keep this phrasing, though several add a footnote that the Greek adjective translated as “daily” might actually be the Greek adjective meaning “for tomorrow.” In her translation, *The Gospels*, Sarah Ruden makes this observation: “There is no good basis for translating this adjective as ‘daily’; a word expressing the idea of ‘a future’ or ‘tomorrow’s’ loaf appears the best choice...” The editors of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* state that the original Aramaic meaning would render the phrase as “bread for tomorrow,” referring to the *coming eschatological banquet* and reinforcing the prayer’s earlier petition, “Thy kingdom come.”

An “End Times” interpretation resonates with me. In that reading, the “bread of tomorrow” indicates for me the feast that the kingdom of heaven will provide at the Second Coming.

But haven’t the End Times already begun? Elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, Christ states, “[W]here two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” and “[T]he kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Can we please have a taste of this kingdom—now? In John’s Gospel, Jesus states, “I am the bread of life.” Can the Lord’s Prayer be our communal petition for a taste of the bread of life—today?

It is in this spirit that Garry Wills, in his book *What the Gospels Meant*, proposes the translation that moves me most: “*Our meal still to come grant us today.*” When I pray these words, I like to modify the petition slightly to say, “*even* today.” Yes, God, I would like a taste of the heavenly banquet *even* today, as amazing as that would be.

I think the mainline Church is failing to communicate the real presence of the Second Coming of Jesus—right now, right here—spiritual nourishment everywhere, all at once. Once we relearn how to perceive this truth, to live in and trust the foretaste of that truth *today*, it is our urgent commission to communicate that truth. Christ Jesus will do the rest.

William Secord
St. Martin’s Episcopal Church, Fairlee, VT
Diocese of Vermont

BRIGHT THURSDAY



COLLECT

Let your people, O Lord, rejoice for ever that they have been renewed in spirit; and let the joy of our adoption as your sons and daughters strengthen the hope of our glorious resurrection in Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

Matthew 6:12

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Release us from the things we have done wrong, in the same way we release others for the things done wrong to us.

“Released for Reconciliation”

STANDING next to my husband as he cautiously lifted the metal clasp of the live trap, I watched as he released the captured chipmunk into the woods behind our home. The little fella sat dazed for a second, not realizing the metal door was lifted, and then he bolted out to newfound freedom.

Releasing a chipmunk back into its created environment: isn't that what happens when we experience forgiveness, whether we extend it to others or have it extended to us? We are released to reconcile and come back to the way God intended—to be in community with God and with one another. Releasing gives us and others a newfound freedom.

I like the First Nations Bible use of the word “release” for forgiveness. While forgiveness is a difficult word to explain, much less do, release gives it a practical approach. Releasing mostly connotes a physical action. We release a sigh, a sound, or something we are holding. It is the motion of relinquishing something that we are controlling. It is our choice to let it go.

In releasing the things we have done wrong, and the wrongs that have been done to us, we relinquish its control over us. No longer are we trapped by fear, shame, guilt, anger, or bitterness. When we allow those feelings to become free, we experience a freedom that comes then, not only for the released recipient, but for ourselves. Releasing allows us to have emotional room for something else: we create a space within ourselves for God to work in our lives. We can begin again in relationship with God and with one another.

When Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, He knows that for us to be truly free, we need the two-part process: asking and accepting the forgiveness that God gives us, alongside our choice to forgive others, including ourselves. For how can we not? As Easter shows us, Christ's death and resurrection released us from the wages of sin and reconciled us to God. We, in response to His love, are free to go forth and share that freedom through our forgiveness and release of others.

As we pray to God for the release of our sins, let us also note what we need to release. What are we holding over another person? A grudge? Resentment? What are we holding for ourselves? A bad habit? Wounded pride? How can we let those captured sins go and give freedom to our thoughts, actions, and relationships with others? How can we bring about reconciliation to God's created world through the Easter message of forgiveness?

Virginia Ruth
Trinity Episcopal Church, Cranston, RI
Diocese of Rhode Island

BRIGHT FRIDAY



COLLECT

God of infinite mercy, you renew the faith of your people by the yearly celebration of these fifty days: Stir up in us the gifts of your grace, that we may know more deeply that Baptism has cleansed us, the Spirit has quickened us, and the Blood of Christ has redeemed us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:13

*And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.
Guide us away from the things that tempt us to stray from your good road, and set us free from the evil one and his worthless ways. Aho! May it be so!*

THIS PAST OCTOBER, some of us walked the road from Natick to Watertown, tracing with our footsteps a terrible time of trial for the Natick Nipmuc. Although they were converts to Christianity—the Praying Indians—they were marched to Watertown to be brought by boat to their beautiful Deer Island to starve, to freeze, to weep, to die. How could our religious ancestors love Jesus and do this to their brethren in the church? Surely this shows the work of the evil one and his worthless evil ways.

Upon this rock, this trial, this dominion of the evil one and his ways, is built our culture that has become American Christianity. Now I find I pray these words of Matthew with sincere fervor: Rescue Us God! We need Your help! Guide me, and guide the church to re-orient away from the power of the evil one. Guide our feet back to the good road.

A fragment of Sappho, 12, looks like this, and let the spaces be breath:

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BRIGHT FRIDAY CONTINUED

Her poetry, a thought, a prayer: Respect holy ground. I hear instructions for intimate knowing of the good road, for intimate knowing of God:

*Take off your sandals
I wish to speak with you
through and in this holy ground
and the ear for this speech
the eye for these words
is the sole of your foot
the organ of perception
with which you may find my sacred Way*

The Rev. Rita Powell
Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy, Cambridge, MA
Diocese of Massachusetts



HOLY GROUND | LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

BRIGHT SATURDAY



COLLECT

O God, by the glorification of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit you have opened for us the gates of your kingdom: Grant that we, who have received such great gifts, may dedicate ourselves more diligently to your service, and live more fully the riches of our faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 6:13 parenthetical

*(Other ancient authorities add, in some form, For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.)
Aho! May it be so!*

ONE OF THE MOST BELOVED LINES of the Lord's prayer is actually a footnote, not included in many of the ancient manuscripts of the bible.

Matthew 6:13f has been translated, "for thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, for all the ages." Some liturgies and translations leave this line as a footnote. Others include this line directly in the biblical text as the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer. Either way, these words highlight the importance of the concept of the Kingdom of God within the Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount as a whole. A significant portion of the Sermon on the Mount includes new interpretations of some of the ten commandments. For example, murder is more than taking a life, it extends to being angry or insulting a brother or sister (5:21–22). And some of these new interpretations of the ten commandments are interwoven with mysterious and vague descriptions about the Kingdom of God. For example, new interpretations of the ten commandments are interspersed with descriptions of the Kingdom of God as belonging to the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted (5:10).

The teachings show that how one interprets the commandments affects that person's place in the Kingdom of God. Those who break these commandments are considered least in the Kingdom of God. The greatest are the ones who keep and teach the commandments (5:19).

What would the disciples think about this concept of the Kingdom of God? How can the Kingdom of God be related to the poor, the meek, and the hungry? How can it be a kingdom when it is not linked with power, but with perceived weakness?

Were the disciples inspired to ask for instruction on how to pray so they could better understand the Kingdom of God? Was this line added to the Prayer in response to the portion that asks to be delivered from evil, or the power and glory of the Roman Empire? The footnote would then be a reminder that the Kingdom, the power, and the glory belong to God, and not necessarily the Roman authorities, no matter how it looks on the outside. To that end, the footnote reminds the person who prays this prayer that the meaning of the teachings of the Kingdom of God may not be clear, but the pray-er can be assured that all is in God's hands and has been throughout the ages.

The Rev. Valerie Bailey
Priest in Charge, St. Andrew's, Allentown, PA, and St. Georges, Hellertown, PA
Recently Chaplain of the College, Williams College, Western Massachusetts



BLESSSED ARE THE PERSECUTED | JEN NORTON

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER



COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 5:10–12

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Creator's blessing rests on the ones who are hunted down and mistreated for doing what is right, for they are walking the good road from above. Others will lie about you, speak against you, and look down on you with scorn and contempt, all because you walk the road with me. This is a sign that Creator's blessing is resting on you. So let your hearts be glad and jump for joy, for you will be honored in the spirit-world above. You are like the prophets of old, who were treated in the same way by your ancestors.

“The Bad News Precedes the Good News”

WHAT IS the “back story” to Jesus’ Beatitudes? Jesus was surrounded by a culture of duplicity and oppression. Earthly powers were misaligned to Jesus’ mission of mercy. The Beatitudes offer us a deep encouragement; however, they do not promise an intervention from suffering. Our encouragement is threefold.

First, the promise of Christ’s companionship. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death—which we may do more than once in this life—we are not left alone. Jesus is God Emmanuel, God with us. Saint Catherine of Sienna endured a terrible time of physical suffering when she felt abandoned by Jesus. After a miraculous recovery, she had this agonizing question for Jesus: “Where were you when my heart was so tormented?” She heard Jesus respond, “I was in your heart.” And so for you. Jesus will make good on his promise that he is with you always. You are not alone in the best of times and in worst of times.

Secondly, we cling to the gift of hope. We do not hope for what we can see. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We stand in life at midnight; we are always at the threshold of a new dawn.” Cultivate God’s gift of hope by drawing from your own memory how you have survived, even thrived, to this day. You are probably a walking miracle. Saint Paul prods us with the encouragement to “hope against hope.”

Thirdly, we hear Jesus’ promise that God’s blessing is forthcoming. Will we know the fullness of God’s blessing in this life? I don’t think so. We will need the healing of death and the perspective of eternity

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER CONTINUED

to realize how God's blessing has formed our whole life. In the meantime—and we are now living in a very mean time—we co-operate with God who so loves the world. Be especially attentive to those who captured Jesus' own heart: the least, and last, and lost. In this life, they will know Jesus' promise of blessing through us. And we will know Jesus' promise of blessing, if not now, then forever in the life to come.

Br. Curtis Almquist
The Society of St. John the Evangelist
Cambridge and West Newbury, MA



THE POOR ARE INVITED IN | JESUS MAFIA



ABOUT PRAYER IN WORD AND IMAGE: LECTIO AND VISIO DIVINA

There are many words in this book, and many pictures as well. In our post-Enlightenment or consumerist cultures, we are conditioned to skim for something new. We may gulp up what we ‘like’ and flip past what we find distasteful. We may debate rather than enter dialogue with a passage, image, or writer. All of this is about mastery of the mind. Yet, this is a book offered for formation of the heart and soul toward God. God cannot be mastered.

But God can be loved...

...which is a slow, tender process of discovery. It is nurtured by curiosity about self (what is happening in my body? What is my gut reaction? Where did *that* come from?) and about Other (Where are you here? How does this reveal you? Who are you apart from my assumptions?) These questions are part and parcel of prayer, requiring a stilled mind and a tender heart.

Lectio divina and visio divina are two practices that support this prayer. They may be of use in navigating this book and in your ongoing spiritual life.

Lectio Divina

- Invite the Holy Spirit into your time
- *Lectio*: Slowly read or speak the chosen passage. As you do, attend for a word or phrase that ‘winks’ at you.
- *Meditatio*: Read the passage again and allow the word to settle in. Perhaps repeat it under your breath several times. What God might be saying to you through associations, memories, other Scripture connection to the word. Try not to analyze or be impatient to make meaning. Just stay with your word and listen.
- *Oratio*: At this point, perhaps after a third reading, you can respond to God. A journal may be helpful or simply speaking in prayer your questions, feelings, longings, commitments.
- *Contemplatio*: Take some time simply to rest in God’s presence as in a Lover’s arms. No need to speak. Just be together for a few minutes before going to the next thing.
- *Close*: Perhaps with a word of thanks of the Lord’s Prayer.

Visio Divina

- Invite the Holy Spirit into your time
- Gaze on the image with receptivity. Allow its hues, contours, whole, detail, texture, etc., come toward you. Slowly await one element to call your attention.
- Let your attention gather around the element that called to you. Let everything else about the image remain, but in the background. What stirs in you? What memories, sensations, other Scriptures or stories, feelings, etc. arise? Allow them all. What might God be revealing through them all?
- Respond to what you are seeing and experiencing. Words, song, additions to the image, a new image, journalling. What responses and mode of responding arises for you? Follow it.
- Take some time simply to rest in God’s presence as in a Lover’s arms. No need to speak. Just be together for a few minutes before going to the next thing.
- *Close*: Perhaps with a word of thanks of the Lord’s Prayer.



ASCENSION | JESUS MAFA



The artists in the devotional represent a range of Christian denominations/faiths, known and unknown. Brief statements from many about their vocation as artists or their specific works are included below.

Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell, www.carmellebeaugelin.com, sanctifiedart.org

Rooted in Haitian art traditions, theopoetics, and her South Floridian upbringing, Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell is an interdisciplinary artist and visual theologian exploring themes of ancestral memory, sacred imagination, and cultural migration. Her practice weaves together color, texture, and spiritual inquiry.

Of her piece, *Depths*, Carmelle shares “...when the deepest depths have been reached, who hears us when we call? As we echo prayers from the depths of each of our lives, we can rest in the assurance that we are heard by a God who meets us at rock bottom.”

Frank Wesley

Frank Wesley (1923–2002) was born in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, into a fifth generation Christian family of Hindu and Muslim descent. A member of the Lucknow school of painting, his paintings reflect this influence and that of the Chughtai school of painting that flourished in India at the turn of the century. Wesley made art based on both biblical and secular themes. He used watercolors, oil paintings, miniatures, and wooden carvings.

Hannah Garrity, www.hannahgarrity.com, sanctifiedart.org

A founding creative partner for A Sanctified Art, Hannah passionately believes that in God’s images, we were each born to create. In all facets of her professional work as an artist, she strives to lift up and support the innate ingenuity of each person.

He Qi, www.heqiart.com

He Qi was the first among Mainland Chinese to earn a Ph.D. in Religious art after the Revolution (1992). Thomas Hastings, ED of the Overseas Ministries Study Center writes, “He Qi is influenced by the simple and beautiful artwork of the people in rural China. With bold colors, embellished shapes and thick brush strokes, he blends Chinese folk art and the iconography of the Western Middle Ages and Modern Art.”

Hyatt Moore

Hyatt says of his *The Beatitudes* (on nine paintings, acrylic on canvas, each 40"x30", viewed together, 22 ½ ft. long): “*The Beatitudes*...have been a source of inspiration and guidance for all time and worldwide, ever since they were uttered. Here they are depicted in visual, graphic strength with the use of faces revealing emotion appropriate to and consistent with the statements and the promises of Jesus. Complementing the sense of completeness is the use of the full color spectrum as background. Then, added to the eight truths is one more painting, that of Jesus himself,...identifying as he always did, with all humanity.”

Janet McKenzie, janetmckenzie.com

Janet is a Vermont artist who is well-beloved in the Episcopal Church, among others. Of her work, *A Brave and Quiet Heart*, created in response to the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, June 2016, Janet writes:

“As an artist I have a responsibility to be a voice for change, even hope. I have no interest in making art that is violent or negatively reactionary. My art comes from that universal and sacred place within that connects us all, beyond gender, beyond race, beyond perceived differences.

The subject within *A Brave and Quiet Heart* offers a gesture of possibility...flanked by doves symbolizing this person's inherent sanctity, something that is so often forgotten or dismissed. My hope is that *A Brave and Quiet Heart* will serve as a visual testament to hope over despair, to love over hate.”

Jen Norton, www.jennortonartstudio.com

Jen makes artwork that celebrates the traditions of faith with a contemporary, colorful twist. For Jen, painting is a form of prayer that helps reveal her mission as a Christian woman and the power of the Holy Spirit. Further artist statements and biography are provided on Jen's website.

The images featured in this devotional were also published in “Arise to Blessedness,” a journal retreat with eight modern saints who lived the Beatitudes, by Ave Maria Press.

Jesus MAFA

Vie de Jesus Mafa (Life of Jesus Mafa) was an initiative undertaken in the 1970s to help teach the gospel in Northern Cameroon. French Catholic missionary François Vidil worked with Mafa Christian communities...to build a resource that would help Mafa people to teach from the Bible in a way that connects with their community. ‘The Life of Jesus Mafa’ is a set of 63 pictures from the life and teaching of Jesus, viewed by the artist as if the events had taken place in a village in Cameroon.

Kelly Latimore

Iconographer Kelly Latimore says of *The Beatitudes*: “The Beatitudes are Jesus. In Matthews gospel Jesus is poor in spirit, he mourns at the death of Lazarus and as he is in the garden of Gethsemane. He's meek when he's falsely accused and yet says nothing. He thirsts on the cross. He's merciful when he says, ‘Father Forgive them...’ He's pure in heart when he says, ‘Not my will but yours.’ He's a peacemaker when he tells peter to put away his sword. He's persecuted and reviled by the priests, scribes, soldiers and bystanders during the entire passion story.”

Laura James, www.laurajamesart.com

In addition to painting sacred images from various religions, Laura James portrays women, families, and scenes of everyday life; blending intricate patterns, text, vibrant colors and sometimes surreal imagery into what she calls “art for the people.” Her work reimagines sacred and everyday narratives through a distinctly Black lens, and a more inclusive vision of sacred art.

Lauren Wright Pittman, www.lewpstudio.com, sanctifiedart.org

A founding creative partner and director of branding for A Sanctified Art, Lauren (she/her) is an artist, graphic designer, and visual exegete.

Lisle Gwynn Garrity, www.lislegwynngarrity.com, sanctifiedart.org

Lisle (pronounced Lyle), is a Presbyterian pastor, retreat leader, artist, and founder and creative director of A Sanctified Art: “a collaborative ministry providing art and multimedia resources for worshiping communities.”

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WATERCOURSES | HANNAH GARRITY



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