

Matthew Devotional

50 DEVOTIONS TO DIVE DEEP INTO THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW AND MORE FULLY UNDERSTAND THE CONVICTIONS OF MATTHEW 25 - TO SERVE JESUS BY SERVING THE LEAST OF JESUS' FRIENDS.



ABOUT

In September 2020, the session of First Presbyterian Church Reidsville committed to being a “Matthew 25” congregation – a designation by the Presbyterian Church (USA) for congregations committed to living Jesus’ call in Matthew 25:31-46, especially in relation to these three foci: Building Congregational Vitality, Dismantling Structural Racism, and Eradicating Systemic Poverty. This devotional is a tool to engage the full breadth of Matthew’s Gospel to better understand Jesus’ words in Matthew 25. This devotional is for those who’d like to better understand First Presbyterian’s Matthew 25 commitment, as well as those who just want to engage with the stories of Jesus found in the gospel.

The gospel is broken down into smaller sections to make it easier to grasp. You are welcome to read it as a daily devotion or weekly. It begins with a passage of Matthew to read – you are welcome to choose your preferred translation. Then is a reflection written by Rev. Wes Pitts, pastor of First Presbyterian, and finally a prayer. Enjoy this time with the stories with Jesus and, hopefully, you can see how those stories still relate to our lives today.

READ MATTHEW 1

WHAT'S IN A FAMILY?

Genealogy has been a popular pastime for generations, but before it was a hobby, it was a lifeline. Who you were connected to could raise your social standing and could be a gateway into a better life. In the case of Jesus, who he was related to was a big deal for Matthew's audience, who were ethnically and religiously Jewish. Traditional Jewish interpretation said the Messiah would be of David's lineage, so it was important that there was a connection to David if Matthew was to convince his audience that Jesus was the real deal. This lineage provides just that.

Aside from David, there are some other interesting names, particularly in the women that are included, as women generally weren't included in a patriarchal genealogy. Tamar is the first woman named, and she was Judah's widowed daughter-in-law who he saw while traveling and mistook her for a prostitute, slept with her, and became the father of twins by her (Genesis 38). It's a troublesome story that most people would probably try and hide, but that it is so specifically called out is worth noting. Rahab is mentioned, too, and she was the prostitute who hid the spies Joshua sent to Jericho as the Israelites were trying to enter the promised land. She's the second woman with a questionable back story, but who played an incredibly important role and is considered a heroine. Then there's Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi who was a Moabite by birth, and when her husband died she elected to stay with Naomi as they sought a way to make a life in a world where widowed women had little to no social mobility. Ruth's commitment to staying with Naomi is immortalized in the words of Ruth 1:16 - "Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." Ruth is a titan of faith, but her foreign ancestry created some problems for her. Finally, "the wife of Uriah" is mentioned, although very strangely, not by name. This woman is, of course, Bathsheba, who David saw bathing on her roof, lusted after her, got her pregnant, and had her husband, Uriah, sent to the front lines of battle in order to have him killed to hide the infidelity (2 Samuel 11). It's perhaps the most shameful episode of David's life, yet it's lifted up in this genealogy.

You could dive into the stories of each member of the lineage and find interesting things about the people, but focusing on the women gives us an incredible insight into the path that led us to Jesus. Jesus' family tree wasn't full of upstanding people, but contained many people with dark pasts - prostitution, incest, foreigners, infidelity, and murder. Jesus' own birth came with its own bit of controversy - resulting from an unexpected pregnancy before wedlock. And because Jesus was not the product of relations between Joseph and Mary, there's the question of whether or not he can claim the genealogy of Joseph anyway. Clearly this is a family tree with a long and difficult history - some incredible stories of faith and resilience, and some unexpected characters no one would expect in a King's family. It's a family tree perhaps like your own.

What Jesus' family tree and birth show us is that the family we are born into (or adopted into) will come with baggage. Everyone's family has it - though some maybe more than others. Despite some of the more unsavory parts of our lineage, we can be assured that God has claimed us and is doing something amazing through each of us. Jesus isn't our Lord because of who he was related to, he is our Lord because God chose to walk among us in the person of Jesus. Likewise, we don't have to be tethered to our family history. We have been claimed as God's own, and it's that claim that is strongest of all.

PRAYER

Holy God, parent of all creation, you blessed Jesus with a rich line of diverse and interesting ancestors. Through him you brought salvation to the people of this world. Bless our families; those we are embarrassed by and those we remember with pride; those related by blood and those brought to us by love. Help us to remember, above all, that we are all part of YOUR family. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Savior, our brother, we pray. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 2:1-12

PROPHECY FULFILLED

George RR Martin's epic fantasy series *A Game of Thrones* begins with a red comet in the sky heralding the fulfillment of a five-thousand-year-old prophecy. The prophecy told of a ruler who would unite the various kingdoms in its world. The presence of the comet convinced many people that they were the promised ruler, leading to factions around each who made a claim and warfare. Sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it? The visit of the magi/wisemen to the newborn Jesus is one of the most storied parts of the birth narratives. Countless legends have been created surrounding these twelve verses - from saying there were three magi (Matthew is silent on an actual number) to the creation of intricate backstories for the magi (which again, is nowhere to be found). In reality we don't know too much about the magi - we don't know where they came from, when they appeared in Bethlehem, or even how many showed up. But what we do know gives us plenty of information to see the importance of their appearance.

The title "magi" itself is telling - the word is likely of Persian origin and speaks of astrologers who looked to the stars to interpret events. Their astrological interpretation powers gave them lofty positions throughout the near east where they'd advise kings, much like Prophets in ancient Israel. It's odd, though, that the magi would respond to a sign for a foreign ruler. In fact, it would be fair to ask how the magi could know about Jewish prophecy in the first place. The logical answer seems to be the Babylonian exile. When Babylon was defeated by Persia and King Cyrus allowed the Jewish diaspora to return to Jerusalem, there were many who stayed in the places they made their home and their faith remained with them, creating pockets of Judaism throughout the region. The magi took the sign of the star in the sky quite seriously, enough so that they likely traveled hundreds of miles to go and celebrate the birth the star pointed to. Their stop to King Herod makes sense, too, because anyone would feel safe assuming the birth of a new king would happen in the realm of the ruling elite, if not the current king's own offspring. That Jesus was born totally outside the purview of the rulers of Judea should tell those of us who put our faith in Christ that he didn't fit into any norms of traditional leadership in that day or any other. Herod had to ask the chief priests about what scripture had to say about this birth, and they quoted passages about David, another unlikely king who did big things for Israel. Finally, Herod told the magi to return to him once they found the child - a very thinly veiled threat.

Once the magi finally showed up to see the baby Jesus they were filled with joy: they fell to their knees and worshipped him and then they gave him extravagant gifts.

I've only wept once at the presence of a child - my own on the day he was born. What it must have been like to walk into a house, in a foreign country, and see a child whose presence made even strangers weep with joy. Even as a baby, Jesus was something special, and those who were looking for God's promise to be kept took notice. The gifts the magi gave Jesus points to their understanding of Jesus being the fulfillment of God's promise to uphold the covenant - gold was a gift for royalty and frankincense and myrrh were aromatic resins used in many rituals, including burial rituals. Even in his birth, Jesus was recognized as a king who would die for the sake of humanity.

Christmas isn't the most important holiday in the church year, not by a long shot, but it being the early signal that God has not forgotten us and has redeemed us is worth celebrating. So, celebrate we will!

PRAYER

Shepherd of Israel, you sent a star to enlighten the wise and a child to topple the tyrant. Make us wise enough to seek you among the least of your children, wise enough to trade our treasure for the gift of overwhelming joy. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 2:13-23

CHRISTMAS VACATION

When I was young, Christmas always involved travel. We'd pack up on Christmas Eve and take off to my grandparents' house in Valdosta, GA. On the trip we'd sing Christmas songs and do activity books my mom bought to keep us entertained on the 3.5-hour drive that felt like it took eons. When we arrived at Grampa and Grammy's, my brother and I would be given snacks - a plate full of olives, pickles, and cheese that we absolutely adored and came to associate with Christmas itself. Then my mom would give us money and Grampa would take us to K-Mart to buy her Christmas present. When we got back from shopping, I hung out on the couch with Grammy watching TV while my brother sat at Grampa's desk doing a puzzle. When we woke up the next morning, the living room was a sea of presents under their little potted Norfolk Pine that had been decorated with red ornaments. On that day, above all others, I felt like the most special person in the world - a day where our poverty meant nothing and we celebrated like other kids our age. The travel stopped when my Grampa died and Christmas never quite felt the same after that. I'm back to travelling for Christmas as an adult, but now to see Liz's family. It's always a hectic trip, but one I look forward to each year because there are so many new traditions I've been invited to take part in that I love. They're traditions I hope Walt will learn to love, too, even as we make our own family traditions around the holiday. Many families have traditions that involve travel around Christmas, and it's not a new thing - even Jesus' family had them.

Matthew's tale of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fleeing to Egypt because of Herod's murderous plot is similar to the story in Exodus of Pharaoh issuing a decree that all Hebrew boys were to be killed. In the Exodus story, Moses was born and was able to survive due to the quick thinking of his sister, who convinced Pharaoh's daughter to raise the child as her own and to hire their mother as a nurse. This connection is more than a neat coincidence - it helped Matthew's audience, who were ethnically and religiously Jewish, to connect Jesus to Moses.

I imagine their trip to Egypt from Bethlehem was fraught. While we have to put up with heavy traffic and annoyed children tired of sitting in the car for too long, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had more serious concerns. They got their warning in the middle of the night, and I can't imagine Joseph waited very long before he got everyone up and out the door, grabbing whatever they could get their hands on before fleeing for their lives. They may not have had time to get many supplies, and it is desert between Bethlehem and population centers in Egypt, so there wouldn't have been many places to stop along the way. And it was an incredibly long trip - Google

says Bethlehem to Cairo (probably not where they went, but we don't know where they went!) is about 260 miles as the crow flies, and likely much longer when travel paths were followed. While they might have had a donkey, it wouldn't have made the trip that much easier. And all with a newborn! It's unfathomable that they made this trip and survived. Their travel is often forgotten in the larger Christmas narrative, but it's worth remembering.

Travel may or may not be part of your plans this year, but it'll return. And when it does, we can remember that Christ, too, took a Christmas trip. His kind of travel was a whole lot different than ours, rather than a trip for fun and family, his trip ensured he'd be able to walk among us, teach us, and die for us. It's a memory we should hold onto, thankful for the gift of refuge in a foreign land. May we remember Jesus' need for safe harbor and find ways to welcome all those in need of a refuge from life's storms.

PRAYER

Savior of the nations, you ran away from danger in order to walk among us. And when the time was right, you ran to danger so that we might walk with you. May we cherish the life you have given us by your dying and rising again, and hear your call to work to work for justice, ensuring no child would ever need to flee from evil again.

Amen.

READ MATTHEW 3:1-12

REPENT!

When I think of vipers, I don't usually think of the snake, but of Dodge's sports car of the same name. It's likely a result of us not having the reptilian viper native to these parts - if I think of a snake, it's almost always a black snake or a water moccasin - and the auto version coming out in my childhood, when I was particularly obsessed with such things. As such, I don't really know much about the snake that was at the heart of John the Baptist's insult to the Pharisees and Sadducees who showed up at the Jordan to be baptized by John. It turns out, after doing a little research, that in the ancient world vipers were associated with the murder of parents, as they kill their mothers when they are born. It's a creepy little fact, but knowing it makes the insult John gave the religious leaders cut deeper. It's not just "you slippery little devils," but "you parent killing snakes!" And it was more than a simple insult because John didn't like them, he was insulting how they lived their faith. Ancient peoples, including the forefathers and mothers of our faith, considered the murder of parents to be one of the worst crimes imaginable, one that invited divine retribution. This insult essentially said that the Pharisees and Sadducees were guilty of murdering their heavenly parent by how they misled and abused their power. Those same Pharisees and Sadducees would go on to plot the murder of Jesus, who is God among us, therefore making them guilty of the crime John's insult implied. His call for them to repent was a way to get them back on the right path before it was too late.

John's message of repentance wasn't just for that brood of vipers, but for all people. Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon on John the Baptist, called him "God's Doberman pinscher." He tested those who claimed they wanted what God was offering and confronted all the misguided assumptions about what following God means. His call to repent was that confrontation, and people responded because it was a gift. For many of us, hearing "repent!" brings to mind street preachers shouting fire and brimstone through a bullhorn. It seems more of a threat than a gift. But what if our idea of repentance is all wrong? In her sermon, Taylor went on to say that most of us were taught that repentance is all about checking our pride - in humility we announce our terrible behavior and seek forgiveness - but pride isn't really the problem for most people. Instead, she says, pride is the opposite of the real problem - despair. Too many are afflicted with feeling "that things will never change for us, that we will never change, that no matter what we say or do we are stuck forever in the mess we have made of our lives, or the mess someone else has made of them, but in any case that there is no hope for us, no beginning again, no chance of new life." Repentance, then, is about not letting despair get the best of us. It means trusting in

the fullness of God's promise, allowing us to participate more fully in God's reconciling work through Jesus Christ. This is a definition of repentance that can transform us from hopeless, beat down by all that is not in our control, to hopeful, reliant on all that's in God's control.

The Pharisees and Sadducees weren't willing to put their trust in God. They talked big, but when it came down to it, they only trusted in their own power and were constantly trying to protect it out of fear. That led to widespread hopelessness and injustice. John has offered a pathway to hope - trust in God's promises, live like you actually believe them, worry more about how to move forward through those promises than past misguided behaviors, and you will find hope. This message at the beginning of the Gospel, before we're even introduced to Jesus' ministry, is critical for us to be able to engage in all he teaches. Let us therefore repent, trusting in the promises of God, that we may be prepared to meet the fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

God of promise, you sent a messenger before you to give us a path to hope that is found only in your love and grace. May we find true repentance, turning away from despair and offering you our full trust and devotion, knowing that because of you, new life is not only possible, but guaranteed. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 3:13-17

AN UNUSUAL REQUEST

I'm a part of a small group of Presbyterians that can say I remember my baptism. It's not because I have a particularly stellar memory - I don't - it's because I was baptized in a tradition that does not baptize infants. I had a "Believer's Baptism" and was dunked, not sprinkled, when I could articulate my own desires for that Baptism. This is one of the biggest differences between Presbyterians (and Methodists and Episcopalians) and more evangelical denominations. Nowadays the arguments about what constitutes a "true" baptism boil down to simple theological differences at the best of times or petty name calling at the worst, but at one time it was serious business, even leading to armed conflict between Presbyterians and Anabaptists! We baptize infants, recognizing that God claims all of us, and believe it's time when the whole church recognizes that claim and promises to raise the child in the faith and support them as they grow in that faith. Others believe it's a personal decision about one's own desires to enter a life of faith. If I'm to be totally honest, when I was baptized at 7 years old, it had nothing to do with my own desires. It was because I thought it's what my dad wanted, so I answered the alter call and was baptized the next week. And it's not just me, for many people, that's what baptism is - something you do because it's expected. As Christians, we've done a poor job of articulating what baptism is all about, leading to this strange expectation of a sacramental practice without reason. And that brings up a common question about this passage - why was Jesus baptized?

John offered his own kind of baptism - a ritual cleansing to show that you had committed yourself to changing your ways, turning away from sin, and turning toward God. Jesus, however, did not sin, so his request to be baptized by John was strange. Even John thought so - he wanted Jesus to baptize him instead! But Jesus said no, it had to happen "to fulfill all righteousness." Very cryptic. Righteousness is one of those big theological words that gets thrown around a lot without much explanation or meaning, but it means divine justice. In this case, one might see the righteousness Jesus was fulfilling as divine approval. Indeed that's what happens here, Jesus is dunked as and he rises out of the water God's Spirit descends upon him and God's voice booms, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him." Unlike my baptism, which also occurred on the foundations of parental approval, there was more happening here than Jesus making God happy. It wasn't his being dunked that was important, it was God's claim of him after that mattered. God's approval of Jesus was proof of who Jesus was and what his ministry was all about. By being baptized, Jesus wasn't saying he needed forgiveness for sins or to create a new

life for himself, he was being announced as God's beloved. Karl Barth put it well, "Jesus Christ is the Lord who became servant by going into the far country and concealing his glory. But by his condescension into servanthood, the Lord does not disfigure himself. He reveals his true nature as one who came not to rule but to serve." This baptism was about service.

In our baptisms our parents and the congregation make promises to help us - they, too, become servants. They are serving us by being our teacher, friend, counselor, companion, etc. They serve God by teaching the faith to a new generation, thereby living into their own faith. One of my favorite descriptions of a sacrament is "an outward sign of an inward promise." Baptism is the outward sign of water sprinkled on a little head and promises being made by God's people, a reminder of the promise that God has claimed our lives as God's own. That inward promise reminds us of God's grace and forgiveness, of Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection, and of God's call on our lives. Even though many may not be able to remember their baptisms, we can remember the promise of them in our own willingness to serve. So, serve we will.

PRAYER

Servant God - in a simple act of baptism Jesus was announced as your Son, your beloved child, the servant king of creation. May your Spirit descend on us, whom you love, that we may dedicate our lives to your service as we teach the faith to friends and strangers and as we offer help to those in need, healing to the sick, freedom for the prisoner, and food to the hungry. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 4:1-11

TEMPTATION

Temptations abound in our lives - food, drinks, entertainment, power, sex, et cetera. Some temptations are given into quite easily, things like dessert after a big meal. Such temptations are simple and harmless, not really affecting anyone or anything, except maybe our waistlines. Others are fraught decisions, given into out of necessity, like a parent tempted to steal food because their child is hungry and they cannot afford a meal. These are clearly given into not because of a lack of morals, but because survival itself is at stake and the wrong seems less bad than the alternative. Then there are temptations that occur out of chance: you're having drinks with friends at a bar and you're hit on by an attractive person which leads to an affair you'd never thought yourself capable of committing, or you're given a job that seems too good to be true, making money you'd never thought you'd be capable of until you realize that the company you work for is engaging in illegal activities, but don't want to tell anyone for fear of ruining your financial security. These are things we all say we'd never be tempted to do until we find ourselves in the situation and then realize it's much more complicated than we thought. And there's the temptation to control and seize or gain more power. These are the temptations that lead politicians to seek illegal campaign contributions so they can influence people/events or win reelection, or rapists who hurt vulnerable people out of sick desires for control and power. Temptation is everywhere in various degrees, some relatively tame, some life altering. The only constant is that we all face them to one degree or another, even Jesus did.

Who is Jesus? That's what his temptation in the desert following his baptism strives to show. Jesus went into the desert directly after John baptized him and the Holy Spirit descended upon him proclaiming that Christ is God's beloved son. Everything that Jesus was tempted to do was something that the Israelites gave into during their own time in the wilderness. Jesus was told to turn a stone into bread to ease his hunger, but he refused the temptation. When the Israelites complained about their hunger and God provided them food, they hoarded it, not trusting that God would continue to provide for them (Exodus 16). Jesus was tempted to throw himself off the highest point trusting that God was with him and would protect him from danger, but he refused the temptation. When the Israelites found themselves thirsty, they questioned whether or not God was really with them until Moses could prove it with a sign (Exodus 17). Jesus was tempted to give into the devil in exchange for all worldly power, and again he refused the temptation. The Israelites thought Moses had left them when he had been on God's mountain for too long, so they created an idol out of gold to replace God (Exodus 32).

What Jesus refused, humanity has given into. So, who is Jesus? He is the one who can do all that we have failed to live into. He is God and he is human. He is our savior, offering a redemption we've never been capable of.

PRAYER

Beloved Savior - we have been tempted in many ways, with food, pleasure, and power, and we have given in too often. But you, God's Son, have resisted all temptation on our behalf, that our giving in wouldn't have to be our eternal downfall. Save us from our times of trial, that we may be reconciled with you in your perfect unity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 4:12-22

A NEW BEGINNING

After Jesus' time in the wilderness he encountered a new kind of problem. While he successfully resisted temptation, he now found himself facing a reality where he had to deal with the consequences of his refusal to give in. John the Baptist was arrested by Herod Antipas, creating a dangerous situation for Jesus. Sources of the day say John was arrested because he criticized Herod, specifically by calling out what he saw as immoral practices, including economic policies that resulted in the death of many poor people. Jesus hadn't even started his public ministry, and already it was in trouble because the one who announced his coming had been arrested by the Empire for preaching a message that Jesus would only intensify. Our translation makes Jesus' leaving Galilee and settling in Capernaum sound hum-drum, but it's not at all. The verb translated as "went" in verse 12 is actually a word more like "fled" - it's only going somewhere if you go because of a threatening circumstance. John's arrest was that threatening circumstance, already setting up a challenge between Jesus' authority and Rome's as Jesus prepared to begin his public ministry. Jesus settling in Galilee, we're told, was to fulfill prophecy. Matthew quoted Isaiah 9, which began, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." It is clear that Matthew is calling Jesus the light to shine on Rome's darkness. But the prophecy of light shining in darkness was not the only reason for the move. If you've been counting, this is now the fourth place Jesus has lived - he was born in Bethlehem, fled to Egypt, returned to Nazareth, and finally moved to Galilee following John's arrest. It's a fitting origin for an itinerant preacher. But it isn't just a clue that Jesus would always be in motion, Galilee was a gentile center, so it also points us to the fact that Jesus was a savior for all people, Jews and gentiles alike. That great light Isaiah told of was being shined for all people.

In Galilee Jesus could have decided to lay low, waiting for the uproar surrounding John's arrest to calm down, but he did not. Instead, he got to work, despite all the dangers he faced in that work. He began his ministry by preaching the same message that John did, calling on people to repent because God's kingdom was at hand, and by calling followers. The first two called were Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew, who were fishermen. It's notable that these followers were not powerful people but ordinary laborers. Without any hesitation, they left their jobs, their family, and anything else they might have had, and began to follow Jesus. Jesus then called another set of brothers, James and John, also fishermen, who left their jobs and family to follow Jesus. These first four followers were risking a great deal by accepting Jesus' invitation. Leaving a job meant they couldn't guarantee the ability to feed themselves

or provide for any of their other most basic needs. James and John leaving their father very likely meant they were also giving up any chance of inheritance. They gave up everything to follow Jesus. The job they were to do, as Jesus put it, was to “fish for people.” This new job meant they were to disrupt other people's lives just as Jesus disrupted theirs, and call them to help create God's community. Risk abounded in this call.

We don't have to give up much to follow Jesus. Christianity is still the dominant force in our country. But that dominance hasn't amounted to much. Violence, hatred, division, hunger, poverty, and more continue to plague our communities. These are not signs of God's kingdom. In the face of danger, Jesus chose to continue on. He called followers who gave up everything to face that danger with Jesus. We are being called to the same. To be a true follower of Christ is to give up our own lives of privilege and comfort in order to face the dangers of this world with courage and integrity, seeking to transform our society not by hatred and violence, but by love and justice. What are we willing to give up in order to follow Jesus? And if we do give up our lives, will we call others to join us?

PRAYER

Loving God, you call, but we have been hesitant to answer. We cling to our lives, thinking we are too good to deserve to experience the insecurity that can come from following Jesus. But your truth tells us that the only real security in this world comes from you through Christ. Help us to trust in your love, to know that it is all we need, and from it we can rebuild our lives and community into what you envisioned for us.

Amen.

READ MATTHEW 4:23 – 5:12

THE GREAT TEACHER

Think about the greatest teachers you've ever had. I've had many - in high school a teacher that cultivated a love of history, in my church a youth leader who helped foster my curiosity about my faith, in college and seminary professors who worked with me to grasp difficult material, and more. But one in particular stands out. I had a professor in college who would frequently go on tangents in lectures because he was so passionate about the material he taught. The tangents were so much fun, even if they distracted from the agenda of the day. His love and passion were infectious. While his classes were great fun, he was also a notoriously difficult grader, but students in his classes worked as hard as they could to try and do a good job for him. One of his little quirks was his use of the classic writing style guide by Strunk & White. Papers were allowed two Strunk & White errors before they were each worth 3 points off your grade. Even if you presented the material perfectly, errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and style could reduce your grade by huge amounts. One of my greatest achievements in college was getting a perfect score on a paper in one of his classes. I may not remember those style rules today, and I'm sure I now break them frequently, but it stands out as a proud moment of accomplishing something I didn't believe to be possible because of how much I respected that professor. Maybe you have your own memory of an achievement or success that happened because of a great teacher. Great teachers inspire their students, helping them achieve things they might not otherwise believe they can.

Jesus was that kind of teacher. As Matthew outlines the beginning of Jesus' ministry, we're given a clear understanding of how he operated. He met people wherever they were, traveling constantly, throughout modern Israel, Syria, and Jordan, and then meeting their most pressing needs. He offered them hope. He healed their illnesses. He cast out those things that plagued body and mind. He held back from no one. What he was doing was so important and meaningful that crowds followed him everywhere he went. They left their homes, their livelihoods, their family, their friends, all to follow this amazing teacher who gave them so much. When the crowd had grown considerably Jesus decided to offer the people a lesson, and Matthew recorded what is Jesus' most famous sermon (also his first). In this sermon Jesus did something pretty incredible, he told the masses who the truly blessed are. The CEB translates the word most often translated as "blessed" as "happy," but the meaning is the same. In this first recorded sermon, Jesus flipped the script about our assumptions of happiness/blessedness. According to Jesus, the truly blessed are the poor in spirit, the hopeless, the grief stricken, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the humble, the

peacemakers, the merciful, and those persecuted for their righteousness. To be clear, this is the exact opposite of what most people would say. Blessedness or happiness is generally thought of as an aspect of being privileged in some way - wealth, supportive family, good job, etc. Jesus' indication of blessedness being attached to difficult circumstances is a reflection of what God values vs. what the world values. God values peace and justice, while the world values a might-equals-right kind of power. Those who work for God's values will inevitably have a difficult life, because the world is against them. They are blessed because they eschew the world's values for God's, no matter the difficulties they encounter because of it. The point of Jesus' sermon was to encourage those following him to keep on in their fight, knowing that when more and more joined in and rejected the ways of the world in order to commit themselves to God's ways, the real fruits of their blessedness would begin to show. Blessings aren't about immediate reward - if we seek immediate rewards, we're better off at an arcade where we can turn in tickets for cheap prizes. The blessings God offers aren't cheap and they're long in coming. But they're worth waiting for. Jesus' entire ministry began with this notion of coming hard fought blessings. He was honest and upfront about what it would take, and people flocked to him anyway. He was that kind of teacher.

PRAYER

Loving God, we celebrate your blessings even as we struggle to come to terms with the weight of them. Help us to seek a long-term peace rather than short term security. Help us to hear Jesus and trust that the fruit of his blessings will come to us if we keep working for his peace. Help us to have the courage to follow the words of your son, our great teacher and Lord. Amen.

MATTHEW 5:13-48

A NEW WAY

When we were children, there were countless things we didn't understand about the way the world works. That truth was made especially apparent when we became adults and left our parents' houses for the first time. Becoming an adult is a rude awakening for many of us because we believed certain things about what being an adult means that simply weren't true. As kids, we thought our parents had things easy - no homework, money to do whatever they want, they can eat whatever they want, etc. But as an adult, coming home after a long, hard day of work, when multiple bills are due, and when you've put on weight that you can't seem to shake, you realize it was all a lie, being an adult is harder than it looks through the rose-colored glasses of children.

While children have those rose-colored glasses yanked off at adulthood, many of us never get the tinted lenses of religious piety removed. We believe being a faithful follower of Jesus is simple - all we have to do is trust in him and things will be good as gold. But in Jesus' sermon on the mount, he told us that our presupposition wasn't quite right. Again and again he said, "you heard it was said... but I say to you...", and every time he did, it made things more difficult for his followers. It's not just "thou shalt not kill," but "thou shalt not do or say anything that kills someone's spirit." It's not just, "thou shalt not commit adultery," but "thou shalt not look at another with lusty eyes." It's not just, "thou shalt not make a false solemn pledge," but "thou shalt have your words be so meaningful you never have to pledge by anything." Once people could look at the commandments of God (the ten commandments and otherwise) and say about themselves, "I do these, I must be better than others," but Jesus told us that we're all guilty. None of us can proclaim innocence, none of us is better than another.

We try to make things as easy as possible, we have whole industries built on easy, but Jesus has made a new way, and it's the opposite of easy. But following God shouldn't be easy. It should be something we work for, something we strive for with every fiber of our being so that it matters. The easy in our world is usually chosen over the difficult because the decrease in quality is worth the savings in time and effort. Faith simply can't be a place where there are shortcuts. It demands the highest quality, the most commitment, the very best. But all that effort has value, because it brings us closer to the one who also didn't take the easy way for us. Jesus died on a cross in unimaginable agony for us, because it was by that agony that ours would be spared. Our devotion, therefore, is to reflect Jesus' devotion to us.

PRAYER

God, you are the author of life and the creator of justice. You have given us a set of rules to follow so that we can live into the justice you've created. As faithful followers of Jesus Christ, whose own love sent him to the cross on our behalf, help us to seek full devotion instead of easy and comfortable. Help us to see that the difficulty of following these commandments isn't because you're an unkind God, but because we've created an unkind world, ignoring your commandments. Guide us. Sustain us. Encourage us. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 6:1-18

HOW TO PRAY

I don't know about you, but my prayer life isn't as strong as I'd like it to be. I'm really only speaking of a certain kind of prayer, though, the practice we generally imagine when we think of prayer - physically sitting down and invoking the name of God through cries of help, thanksgiving, and/or awe. Finding time, outside of meals, to intentionally communicate with God can be hard, with innumerable distractions competing for our time and attention. But prayer is more than clasping your hands and closing your eyes to talk to God. Prayer is also physical, in how you live and act. It's being intentional about using your God given gifts for good. It's in sharing time with loved ones. Prayer is much more than what we tend to think of it as; so long as we engage in the world with the Holy Spirit guiding our lives, anything we do can be a form of prayer. Even so, there's something special about spoken prayer. Just like seeing a loved one face-to-face is better than talking to them by phone, spoken prayer feels more intimate and real. Despite that intimacy, it's something most Christians struggle with. Jesus has provided us with a means by which we can get stronger and better, a prayer that is quintessential to our lives and provides a framework from which we can base all future prayers.

If someone knows nothing else about the Christian faith, they will likely know the Lord's Prayer - even if we say it differently, depending on our tradition. And no matter the words we use, the meaning remains the same. It is a great example of prayer because it does everything prayer is meant to - offering God praise and thanks and seeking God's guidance - in a simple format. It begins with proclaiming the holiness of God's name and seeking the fulfillment of God's kingdom. In this act we simultaneously praise God and commit ourselves to working for God's aims, because saying "thy will be done" means we're making sure God's will is done through our own actions. Then there's an ask for bread, which doesn't literally mean a loaf of honey-wheat, but food in general. It's an acknowledgement that all we have that gives us life comes from God. Next is seeking forgiveness, but it's not just God forgiving us, it's God offering us forgiveness in the same way we forgive others. This is yet another way to commit ourselves to doing God's work. Jesus even reiterates that God forgiving us is dependent on our ability to forgive others - we can't expect God to give us something we're unwilling to give others. Finally comes the ask for help - a general "may we not be led into temptation" which covers a myriad of needs and will be understood differently depending on the one offering the prayer. Our traditional format adds in "for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever, amen," but it's missing in

the prayer Jesus actually taught. The addition, though, is nice, because it bookends the prayer with another proclamation of praise, acknowledging God's eternal rule.

When we offer God our own spoken prayers there's no need for complex words or flowery language. So often I hear people say they can't pray aloud, but Jesus shows us that it's really simple. All we need to do is tell God thank you, you're great, and help us. That's it. Prayer *can* be simple, if only we let it be. The prayer below is my own take on the Lord's Prayer. Feel free to create your own. Let Christ's example guide you in a practice that is relevant to your own life and your own needs. It can become your go-to prayer, a mantra to say again and again, so that we no longer need to feel badly about our prayer life lacking. Jesus gave us the guide, let's put it to use.

PRAYER

Creator God - you are holy and awesome! Your name is glorious because it has brought us life - and not just life, but life eternal. May your will be done among us, and may it begin with us. Provide for us the nourishment we need to work for your peace and justice. Show us mercy when we wrong others, and may we be humble enough to offer the same mercy to those who wrong us. May your Spirit guide our lives so that we do not easily give into temptation but stay on the path your love has shown us. Your word reigns supreme, its glory cannot be surpassed. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 6:19-34

WORRY

One phrase I say a lot is, “it’ll be fine!,” and it drives Liz absolutely crazy. Sometimes I say it because I genuinely believe there’s nothing to worry about. Other times I don’t want to deal with whatever is worrisome, so I say “it’ll be fine” as a way to ignore the issue at hand and/or try to make it fine out of sheer force of will. It’s that latter use that makes Liz mad, and for good reason - not putting energy into something that’s truly of concern isn’t a healthy way to approach things. But refusing to worry as a means of getting out of proper planning or preparation isn’t the same as not worrying because God has provided you with everything you need. This is a distinction that should be made because there are some who try to use Jesus’ words in Matthew 6 to guilt people who feel worried about really important things, like how they’ll make their next rent payment, where their next meal will come from, their loved one’s health, et cetera. There’s a kind of worry that motivates us for good and a kind of worry that motivates us for bad, and it’s the kind that motivates us for bad that Jesus is calling out.

Before warning the people about worrying, Jesus warned them about hoarding and creating an idol out of wealth. These are behaviors that stem from a basic fear of not having enough. Think of the beginning of the pandemic - people were worried that stay-at-home orders would affect the manufacturing of necessities, like toilet paper, so they hoarded them, causing them to actually become scarce. The people who hoarded felt secure because they didn’t have to worry about running out, but their security caused many, many others to worry about basic cleanliness. Jesus isn’t talking to those worried about the lack of toilet paper in this passage, he’s talking to the hoarders. If your worry causes you to engage in behavior that makes life more difficult for others, you have acted unrighteously. Righteousness stems from trusting that by acting in love and being concerned for the well-being of others, we will never need to worry and we will always have enough. This is a fundamental belief in the Christian faith - God made the world good, and not only is God’s creation good, but abundant, so that if resources are used justly and if people treat one another with the respect due to a child of God, no one will ever need to worry about anything. Everyone will always have enough because that’s how God created the world.

We aren’t yet at a point where we cannot worry. Not until we confront our own selfishness and our own tendencies to hoard the resources given to us can we truly say, “it’ll be fine” and know that it will because there is nothing to worry about. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert and they were afraid of going hungry, even when God told them they’d always have enough, they learned their lesson when

their hoarded bread spoiled and crawled with maggots (Exodus 16:20). What we hoard out of fear and mistrust may not spoil in the same way, but our relationships will suffer. And no sense of security is worth the destruction of relationships. It's the reconciliation of relationships that Jesus came to give us by his own death and resurrection.

PRAYER

God of Abundance, you created the world and everything in it. You created humanity in your image. Help us to trust in your vision for the world - that the abundance you gave us is enough if we use it justly. Help us to put relationships above our own insecurities, seeking love and justice rather than wealth. We know that when we live as Christ taught, everything will be fine. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 7:1-12

CHRISTIAN PLATITUDES

Everyone has heard various Christian platitudes at some point in their life. These are things like, “When God closes one door, God opens a window,” or “God never gives you more than you can handle,” or “let go and let God.” Maybe there are some platitudes that you genuinely like or that have been helpful to you at some point in your life. Or maybe you detest them. Even though they’re used again and again by many people - hence their being called platitudes - theologians tend to look down on them. It’s not because of their overuse, but because of their lack of substance. What’s really being said when someone going through a hard time hears, “let go and let God?” Is that person being told to ignore their problem and God will just handle it? And if that’s the case, does God just not care about personal responsibility? It’s the questions that arise from platitudes that are at issue. There’s almost always truth buried within them, but they’re too shallow to offer any real insight and tend to be manipulated depending on the person using them.

Jesus makes several statements in these first twelve verses of Matthew 7 that some might consider to be platitudes: “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged,” “Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye,” “Don’t throw your pearls before swine,” “Ask, and you will receive,” “you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you.” While some people may use Jesus’ words as a simple moral saying, they’re so much more. Context is everything - these aren’t just simple truisms that Jesus threw out, but part of Jesus’ most important sermon to the crowds beginning to follow him. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus established the basis for who he was, what his ministry was all about, and what it means to be a child of God. We can get a clear understanding of Jesus’ message by looking at the bigger picture of all these sayings.

The first big point is about how individuals relate to one another. Jesus’ multiple examples were to underscore a fundamental principle we must all understand - no one person is better than another. All of us, from the most important to the least significant, stand as equals in the eyes of God. We all have equal worth, we all receive equal love, we are all equally called children of God. Because of that equality, we may never, for any reason, claim to be superior to another. This does not mean that we cannot point out the moral failings of others, but it does mean that we should also realize that all of us have had our own moral failings, too, and God alone serves as the judge of us all.

Secondly, Jesus reminded the crowd that God, as parent of all, will give us anything we ask for. We could be like Janice Joplin and pray, “Lord, won’t you buy me

a Mercedes Benz,” but that isn’t the point of Jesus’ proclamation, nor is God likely to purchase any of us a new car. The point is connected to the first - because we are God’s children, if we seek forgiveness for our own moral failings, we will receive it. None of us will be prevented from receiving the one thing that is absolutely necessary - God’s love and mercy. And if it’s available for us, it is for others, too.

These aren’t meaningless platitudes, but an instruction manual for how we should live our lives and interact with others. Jesus needed people to know that creating any system that calls some better than and others worse than is antithetical to God’s creation. God is the author and ruler, and God will treat us all with the love and respect we deserve as God’s children. We should do the same for one another.

PRAYER

God of Mercy, in a world where your words are twisted to be shapeless, toothless, and without meaning, give us the wisdom to see the great joy that comes from your law when treated with reverence. Help us see that love is the rule by which you created the world and call us to your service. In love forgive our failings, and through love recreate our lives so that we can model what we have received because of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 7:13-29

“ON CHRIST THE SOLID ROCK I STAND...

...all other ground is sinking sand; all other ground is sinking sand.” So says the refrain of the popular hymn, “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less.” It is a wonderful, uplifting hymn with a great tune, and it’s found in nearly every denomination’s hymnal - Baptist, AME, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Methodist, etc. - 80 modern hymnals in all. But, while the majority of the verses and the refrain are uplifting, the final verse comes with a hope that’s a little less certain: “When he shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in him be found, dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.” It’s a hope that we might be found righteous in Jesus’ second coming, and the way it’s framed makes it seem like it’s not a certain outcome. Reading verses 21-23 show why there’s that kind of uncertainty. It’s a little off putting to hear Jesus say to those who feel as though they’ve done everything right, “Get away from me.”

Jesus’ ending to the Sermon on the Mount comes with a big, scary caveat. If I preached what Jesus did, I don’t think many people would be particularly excited about my ministry here. But the difference is, I’m no Jesus. Jesus has an authority I simply do not have, nor will I ever have. So often the Sermon on the Mount is taken in small chunks, which makes us lose sight of the big picture. When Jesus talked about the narrow path, he’s specifically talking about all he’d just laid out in the Sermon, especially in how Jesus reinterpreted the people’s understanding of the Old Testament Law. He wasn’t saying that there are unknown qualities that ensure our salvation, but laying out a very straightforward fact - to be his follower means very specific things, anything less is unacceptable. To be a follower of Jesus is to be radically kind in all that you say and do, to be humble and private about your faith, and to trust fully in God. It’s an orientation for living that isn’t simple and is so diametrically different than what is the norm that it is actively uncomfortable, but Jesus said it was the requirement.

Living in the way Jesus has commanded will be evident by the fruit our life produces, hence Jesus’ tree metaphor. Being a follower of Christ shows, not because we put vinyl decals everywhere announcing how much we love Jesus, but because peace and love emanate from all that we do. Jesus’ other metaphor, upon which the refrain from the hymn was based, is that to be his follower is like a builder building on a solid foundation rather than in the sand. Christ is the solid foundation for our life, but it’s a foundation that will only remain solid so far as it’s whole - we can’t parcel off Jesus’ teachings to what suits our preferred lifestyle or else we’ll find our metaphorical house sagging and unstable, because it was built partly in sand.

It's a hard lesson to hear, but it's deadly serious and absolutely imperative for us to understand. But the good news for us, who truly want to build our lives on the solid rock of Christ, is that the gospel continues from this place. It continued all the way to his death and resurrection, giving us the assurance of Christ's love and salvation and freeing us to worry only about doing our best to put into practice what Jesus taught us.

PRAYER

Loving God - you gave your Son to us so that we might have a solid foundation upon which to build our lives. May we trust in his strength as we begin to construct our lives for your will instead of our world. Help us to know of your forgiveness and grace as we try and fail, and try again, assured by the truth that, ultimately, we'll rest on solid ground because of Christ. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 8:1-17

THE HEALING MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

I'm lucky in that I've only ever had to be hospitalized one time in my life - when I was 5 to have my tonsils removed. I don't remember much about the experience, which isn't surprising considering my age at the time and that it was nearly 30 years ago. Others are far less fortunate, suffering various maladies that require intensive treatments by all sorts of medical professionals. What many sick people go through was something totally foreign to me until I was chaplain at Wake Forest Baptist hospital. There I was assigned two areas to serve - the surgical waiting room and a floor of the cancer center filled mostly with people who were undergoing treatment for various cancers of the mouth. The two settings could not have been more different. One of the things I learned very quickly in the surgical waiting room was that people there, by and large, are very uncomfortable seeing a chaplain come to them while they waited for news on their loved ones' surgery. They always thought I was coming with bad news, when all I wanted to do was check on them and offer to pray with them in an effort to ease their anxiety. But my presence tended to make people more anxious. It was a very different experience when they asked for my presence, only then could I bring a sense of calm. I didn't have these struggles on the floor of the cancer center. There I couldn't carry on conversations with patients, many of whom had just had portions of their tongue removed or some other procedure making it difficult to speak. I learned there that being present, even if not speaking, could bring calm. Everyone else from the hospital staff that visited them poked and prodded, for many good reasons of course, but my only role was to sit with them and care for their spiritual needs. I had many awkward visits; I've always struggled with silence, but as I became more and more comfortable with the setting, I was able to have some really impactful visits, too. The 9 months or so that I spent at Baptist taught me a lot about the ministry of presence, how it can be helpful and hurtful, especially for those who are sick or worried about loved ones who are sick.

After Jesus preached to the multitude from the side of a mountain about how God really wants us to live, he went out and showed people by his actions. The very first occasion Jesus had to show he meant what he preached was an encounter with a man with leprosy. Lepers were made outcasts for good reason - they had incurable skin conditions, many of which were highly contagious. No one wanted to get anywhere close to them for fear of catching their condition, a real fear which could not only be life altering, but deadly. And not only were the skin diseases dangerous, but Jewish law called any such skin condition unclean, and touching someone would make you unclean and require a cleansing ritual for full participation in the life of the

community. All this made lepers marginal. Princess Diana made world news when she shook the hands of an AIDS patient in 1987, beginning a long process of destigmatizing the disease. Pope Francis, in 2013, made news by kissing the head of a man with neurofibromatosis, which left him horribly disfigured, and again, the act helped destigmatize those with debilitating skin conditions. But before Princesses and the Pope, Jesus did something more shocking and more amazing. A leper approached him, itself a social taboo, and proclaimed to Jesus - "if you want to, you could heal me." It was a proclamation of faith, but also a request to be seen. He didn't demand to be healed or make a scene, he simply came to Jesus, kneeled, and made a humble statement. We know Jesus could have said the word and healed the man, but he took it a step further - he reached out and touched the leper. This would have been seen as unfathomable, but Jesus did it to show not only God's mercy and love, but to show everyone the kind of affection we are to have for one another. Taboo and cleanliness rules were all thrown out, love was the only aim.

The second occasion came in Capernaum, when a centurion approached Jesus. Again, this is a big deal - centurions were agents of the empire and not seen as someone with whom you should be friendly. But once again, Jesus showed love and mercy to someone where everyone expected animosity or division. Again and again, Jesus broke social norms to bring healing. He not only healed diseases of the body, but diseases of culture and society. He was present with people no one else would interact with, and it broke down barriers. Many of us are not trained medical professionals, so the idea that we are called to heal may sound untenable. But we can heal social diseases by being present with those whom society marginalizes. We can recognize the humanity in those who have been stripped of it. In that way, we can bring a healing similar to that of Jesus, even without a medical degree.

PRAYER

Loving God - your presence in our lives gives us love, hope, courage, and so much more. May we, who seek to be more like Christ each day and who have so transformed by his presence, learn to be present with our neighbors. May we recognize their humanity and heal the place society has harmed by offering our love and compassion. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 8:18-34

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

I've lived in a lot of places throughout my life - moving to Reidsville marked the 21st move in 33 years. I moved elementary schools 6 times. I've lived in three states and two countries. It's a lot. When I tell people about all my moving they inevitably offer me sympathy or say how difficult it must have been, but really, I think it has made me better suited to interacting with various people, no matter where they're from or what they're like. In every new place, whether it was down the street, across town, or in a new country, I've had to learn to engage new peoples, and sometimes entirely new cultures, in order to find a niche and begin to settle. Maybe I was already wired that way, but the moves I've made have enabled me to befriend a wider array of people than I otherwise would have. At the end of the day, I think it makes me better suited for ministry, because I have to use those skills if I'm going to be successful in my leadership roles in the church.

Jesus, too, was a traveling man. He even said he had no real place to call home - his life was traveling to new places, encountering new people, and offering them his gospel message of truth, love, forgiveness, and change. After healing many people, he and his disciples traveled to another region, this time "on the other side of the lake." That might seem close to us, but the other side of the lake, which was Lake Gennesaret (aka the Sea of Galilee), was an entirely different place, filled with people of a different culture and different religious background, and traveling there was a risky decision. As if to underscore the danger they faced in this trip, the weather also did not cooperate, creating deadly waves that threatened to sink their ship. We should understand this storm as not just a physical storm that brought real dangers, but also a metaphorical storm describing the dangers they were stepping into by crossing this divide and encountering the people that lived in what was then known as Gaulanitis, now known as the Golan Heights. The solution for the metaphorical and physical was the same, however - faith. Jesus calmed the winds and the waves while simultaneously calming the fears of his disciples by again showing his true self - he was God's son, through whom all things will be reconciled, even the seemingly impossible.

Despite Jesus' show of power, the trip didn't go as well as they'd have liked. Immediately they were accosted by two men who were demon possessed and who lived in the graveyard. Can you imagine a more frightening welcome to a new place? But Jesus again showed his power, casting out the demons, who were subsequently put into a herd of pigs, which then ran off of a cliff. For Jesus' Jewish disciples, it would have seemed to be a great success - pigs were forbidden anyhow, so no big loss. But

this wasn't a Jewish country, they were Greek, and they did not have the same rules about eating or being near pigs, so it was a big deal for them. And in response to losing a whole herd of pigs, apparently more concerned with the pigs than the men who were healed, they begged Jesus to get out of their community.

This was an early test of Jesus' message to the gentiles, and it did not go well. The cultural assumptions the disciples made lead to a complete breakdown of relationship before one could really start. It was a lesson for them, as Jesus would be leading them to many new places, that if they're going to succeed in traveling throughout the region and spreading Jesus' message, they'd need to learn how to interact with peoples of various cultures and backgrounds, because Jesus' message wasn't just for the Jews of Judah, it was for the whole world. We have to learn this lesson, too, if we're going to 1) travel, and 2) be disciples of Jesus Christ in our very globalized society. How can we interact with others, and how can we live into our call without putting up more barriers than already exist?

PRAYER

God of all peoples and all places. We offer thanks for the blessed diversity of your creation, but also confess our frustration, because it can be hard having to interact with so many different people. But you call us to minister and share your love with all people in all places. Help us live by faith, that just as Christ calmed the storm on the sea, he can calm the storm of fear and anxiety that live in each of us. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 9:1-17

HITTING A NERVE

All of us push buttons in some way, shape, or form. It starts when we're young as we learn boundaries. Liz and I are in the throes of this now as Walt continually tests every boundary he possibly can, from climbing the outside of the stairs and trying to stand on the dinner table, to biting and licking, he does it all. But there's a point when it changes from a necessary learning exercise to learn what is acceptable and what's not, to a practice that serves either to annoy or to call out injustice. We might test the limits of someone's patience if we don't like them, and it only serves to make us feel better and make them angry. It's like when we were kids, but old enough to know better, and on a long car ride we bothered a sibling and our mom or dad told us not to touch them anymore, so we hovered our hand millimeters from them so that we technically followed the rule, even though it was more annoying, to both our parents and sibling, than whatever we'd done previously. And that was the point - annoy while technically not doing anything wrong. We get a sick kind of pleasure from pushing buttons in that way, even as adults. There are also unjust rules we purposely test the limits of in order to call out the absurdity of them. I hear stories of people who get a new boss that implements new rules in an effort to "streamline" an aspect of their work, and the rules end up doing the exact opposite of their intended goal, so the employees follow the rules maliciously in order to prove a point. Yes, the boss is annoyed, but they are also forced to see the error of their ways.

Jesus constantly pushed the buttons of the Pharisees and other religious leaders. Often it was done publicly, when he knew they'd be watching, as a way to purposefully engage them and question the rules he thought absurd. Sometimes it can feel like Jesus is purposefully annoying the religious leaders, but it always served a larger point. Matthew 9 gives us two examples of Jesus engaging in public activity that hit a nerve with religious leaders. In the first he had the audacity to forgive sins. We talk about Jesus forgiving our sins every single Sunday, so it's normal for us, but for them, they believed that God alone had that power, and they did not recognize Jesus as being divine. But the point wasn't whether or not Jesus is God, it's on who should be in the business of forgiveness in the first place. And on that, Jesus and the Pharisees were polar opposites. While the Pharisees said that forgiveness comes from God, end of story, Jesus held that because forgiveness comes from God, we all need to practice forgiveness in order to receive it, and he modeled that very behavior. When the Pharisees recoiled at Jesus' words of forgiveness, he showed them up big time. And it's this action that almost looks petty - he healed the man, who then stood up, grabbed his mat, and walked away. It was a mic drop moment, through which he put

them in their place, but also showed who he really was - someone who did have the authority to forgive. The second occasion got not only the Pharisees riled up, but John the Baptist's disciples, too. Jesus and crew ate a meal with Matthew the Tax collector (who was Levi in Luke's gospel) and Matthew's tax collector friends. The Pharisees were angry at Jesus' presence with a group they found distasteful, while John's disciples were more upset that Jesus was eating and drinking so darn much while they spent all kinds of time fasting. Jesus' point to both was the same - what good are rules keeping us away from sinners or fasting in order to increase our faith, when the point of our faith is to reach people and change their hearts? It's a question we have to ask ourselves - what rules are keeping us from living our faith? What societal norms do we need to test the limits of to follow where Christ led? In a way, we're all like toddlers, testing boundaries to find the appropriate limits. But our guide can't be culture, it has to be Christ.

PRAYER

Abundant God - as your son pushed the boundaries of the Pharisees, questioning their rules and creating a new path forward, we ask that we may be similarly pushed.

May your gospel make us uncomfortable. Help us begin to look at the world differently, not as something that shapes us, but as something we shape. Give us the courage to be good citizens of the kingdom by instituting practices that reflect your values rather than the world's. May Christ hit a nerve in us, that we may change.

Amen.

READ MATTHEW 9:18-38

THERE'S NO PLEASING SOME PEOPLE

No matter what you do, how hard you work, or how many changes you put in place, there are some people who simply will not be satisfied. If you ever are unfortunate enough to work in customer service, you know this all too well - there are some people who can be downright cruel no matter how much you try to be kind and helpful. It can be a hard lesson to learn, especially for those who find value in making others happy. I've had to learn this as a pastor - we're doomed to fail if we attempt to make everyone happy all the time. It can feel like you have a heart of stone, but sometimes doing the right thing means not trying to be everything to everyone, it's an impossibility. There is value in seeking to do right by people, but those who refuse to be satisfied will destroy you if you let them, and we must not.

The Pharisees were such people. Nothing Jesus did made them happy despite the wonder of his works. In the span of just a few hours he was approached by the poor and wealthy alike, commanding their devotion, healing all sorts of maladies, and even bringing a little girl from death to life. Any person should have been able to see why that made Jesus someone special, but the Pharisees wanted nothing to do with him. They were so threatened by Jesus' power that they did everything they could to turn people against him. If Jesus was who he said he was (spoiler alert, he was), and he willingly chose to interact with the least and the lost, then their whole way of life was wrong. And if their way of life was wrong, they lost hold of their power. So they had to decide - do we want to hold on to power or seek the truth? They chose power. They witnessed the resurrection of the dead and the healing of the sick beyond anyone's imagination, and they claimed he must be evil if he can so easily throw out evil. Worse than the Pharisee's demented attempts to hold onto their power was the fact that people believed all of their gaslighting. All evidence clearly showed that Jesus was not only special, but divine, yet the Pharisees were so persistent in altering people's perception of Jesus' divine reality that they were able to get people to ignore seeing the truth in front of them.

These power dynamics still exist. Some people will simply never be happy unless they have absolute power and control, but absolute power and control belong to God alone. We have to contend with our own kinds of Pharisees who will say and do anything to hold onto power, even in the face of undeniable truth. To fight these battles, we must turn to Christ, who is the author of truth, not to those who claim to speak for Christ, when all they really speak for is their own selfish desire for power. Where does Christ lead? To the lonely, the lost, the ones in deepest need. Anyone who

says otherwise hasn't heard the truth from our Lord. The work is great, and "the Lord of the Harvest" is calling.

PRAYER

Merciful God, we confess that we can get so caught up in the attempt to please others that we forget our only purpose is to please you by working for equality and justice. Help us to see your truth and tune out all those who try to usurp your message for selfish desires. May we answer your call and work for your harvest, for the work is great and there are too few willing to work for your kingdom. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 10:1-25

SENT

It feels good to have purpose in life, I think most of us would agree. Finding that purpose, however, is easier said than done. Many people, especially now, bounce around ideas and career paths to find that thing that both drives them and, hopefully, pays them a living wage. Others find purpose in hobbies, family, advocacy, etc. There are some, though, that never find it, and it can feel utterly defeating, like your entire path through life is but aimless wandering. Hopefully, though, we can find purpose not in just one thing, but in a multitude of things, including, but not limited to, the care of loved ones, a meaningful career, restorative hobbies, and a deep faith. Purposeful living might sound like the theme of some silly self-help book, and it probably is, but it's more than that, too, it's affirmation of our faith. If we believe that God created us, and in God's image no less, redeemed us in Jesus Christ, and sustains us by the power of the Holy Spirit, then we can surely believe that that same God gives us purpose. The example of Jesus' disciples and the mission they were sent on shows us just what that purpose may be.

The 12 were sent to every corner of Israel - although specifically not Samaria or Gentile communities - to pronounce the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven and to provide healing. It's pretty incredible all they were charged to do, which included raising the dead. These were the things that Jesus did that made him so sought after and drew so many crowds, so for these fishermen, tax collectors, and other extraordinarily normal people, it was a tall order. But they could do it because Christ gave them the power to do it. We might think to ourselves, if Christ could empower them for such miraculous works, why can't we also be empowered? I can't walk into the cancer wing of a hospital and offer healing to those I meet. I wish I could, but it's not going to happen. But that doesn't mean none of us can offer healing. We do have a special purpose given to us by Christ - to be his disciple. The mission the disciples were given is the same as the mission we have been given, although it looks a little different today. And we have been empowered by Christ by our faith. We have been empowered to offer welcome for those who have been ostracized. We have been empowered to offer hope to the hopeless. We have been empowered to give voice to the voiceless. We have been empowered to bring the marginalized into the center. It's through acts like these that we announce the arrival of the Kingdom and offer a spiritual healing to all in need. And when it comes to physical maladies, we can ensure all of God's children have access to the miracles of modern, high quality health care, so those needs are taken care of too. Our purpose is simple - to know that we have been loved and to offer the same love to those around us, especially the "least" among

us. In acts of love the risen Christ continues to change us and transform our communities to mirror his Kingdom. Through that love, people receive healing and can live into their purposes, too.

PRAYER

Holy Triune God - creator, redeemer, and sustainer - we praise you for your miraculous powers of creation, love, and healing that continue to transform our lives. We thank you for the call to follow in the footsteps of your son, Christ Jesus, and offer the same love and healing he showed us in his life, death, and resurrection. We pray for the wisdom to nurture the purpose you have given to us in faith, that we would find meaning and life in sharing the good news of your gospel. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 10:26-42

SCARY STORIES TO TELL AT CHURCH

You know how people sometimes say, “no offense, but...” and then say something offensive? It’s like they’re trying to prepare you for the blow so it won’t hurt you as much, but it never works, and then they have the gall to be upset at you for taking offense to their rude comment. But there is no half-hearted preamble that will soften the impact of a rude statement. We give similar kinds of preambles to other kinds of statements. “Don’t be mad, but...” when we’ve done something wrong. “I know you said [blank], but...” when you’ve gone against the wishes of someone you care about. And just like “no offense, but...,” they hardly ever work out like we’d wish. Jesus gave his own kind of preamble to scary news he had to share with his disciples. It came just after giving them instructions to go out to all cities of Judea to spread the good news of the gospel. Those instructions came with a warning, however - you might not get a very warm welcome when you arrive. But Jesus told them to simply dust themselves off and keep on moving. They weren’t supposed to become overly worried about it because they could announce the inhospitable welcome they received - a big no-no for that culture - to other people and trust that God knew who received them well and who didn’t, and they’d have to answer to God for their actions. It might have been a comforting thing to hear, but then Jesus continued, and his next message was much, much more difficult. He hadn’t come to bring peace after all, he’s bringing a sword. And scarier still - you can’t love your own family more than him. And scariest of all, if you aren’t willing to pick up your cross, which is to say, to be crucified, then you aren’t worthy of him.

So, what’s the deal? Why all the scary language? Isn’t Jesus supposed to bring us comfort and joy? Yes and no. Yes, he brings us comfort and joy, but not as a blanket promise without us having work to do, too. You see, to be his disciple, to risk going into the unknown to spread the good news, is to know some danger. We have to be willing to take the risks of discipleship to actually live into the title. And those risks involve conflict. Jesus engaged in conflict constantly - his offer of healing and feeding on the sabbath led to conflict with the religious leaders, his call to people to drop everything in order to follow him led to familial conflict, his forgiveness of sins led to conflict about who could offer that kind of forgiveness. Nearly every aspect of his ministry involved some kind of conflict because the ways of the world, which we have participated in, is frequently diametrically opposed to the way of God. So, to live into God’s way is to be at odds with the world. This is why we can’t love our families more than Christ and must be willing to give everything, even our own lives, in service of Christ. We trust that in following Christ all will be taken care of, so giving into other

kinds of passions, even with the best of intentions, can lead us in the wrong direction. The path to life is Christ, and it is in Christ alone. It's a hard truth to have to tell, but it's a truth that is actually freeing once we get over the inherent scariness of it all. It's freeing because we can be released from all the other things that hold us captive, focusing only on our commitment to Christ. And through that commitment, we'll find the peace and joy we seek.

PRAYER

God of the good news - sometimes the news you give us sounds less than appealing. We prefer easy solutions to the difficulties of discipleship. But you have promised love and care to all who devote themselves to being faithful disciples. Help us answer the call. Help us to be ready and willing to be uncomfortable with the conflict our faith might lead to. Guide us through it all so that we can find the ultimate peace promised in Christ. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 11:1-19

REFLECTIONS FROM THE DARK

When we are in a dark place, it can be very easy to be overwhelmed by anxiety and fear. You lose your job and you might think, “what will I ever make of myself?” You end a relationship and you might think, “who will ever love me?” The darkness of our situation tends to amplify our feelings, usually for the worse. A therapist might call this behavior “spiraling” and it can be very destructive because it causes you to lose sense of reality and any semblance of hope. John the Baptist has found himself in prison - for what it is unclear from Matthew - and he is in his own dark place. Remember just months, or possibly years, before this, John was preaching his fiery message in the wilderness and attracting huge crowds and baptizing many people, including Jesus. Jesus seemed to fit the bill of what John knew his call to be - to prepare the way for the coming messiah. But in prison, with a grim outlook on life, he doubted everything. To find some sense of reality, he sent disciples to Jesus to find out the truth.

Jesus didn't offer a simple yes or no answer. And who can blame him? When we're spiraling out of fear, we usually need more than a yes or no to end our downward descent. We need something to bring us back to reality, so it needs to be grounded in something we can wrap our minds around. For John, Jesus knew words wouldn't do it, but actions could. So, he asked John's disciples to report to John the actions that had followed Jesus' ministry - profound acts of healing, even the resurrection of the dead. Actions will always speak louder than words, which is why there are cliches built off that very premise. Once John's disciples left with their message, Jesus turned to the crowds with a lesson - and it's a lesson for us, too. What we see might not live into our expectations. John certainly didn't for many, yet he was among the greatest prophets. Despite his obvious piety, he was still derided as a kook and ended up in prison. He wasn't what was expected by those in power, so he wasn't accepted. But Jesus has called us to ignore our preconceptions and look to the actions. Actions speak volumes. Action is where we find truth.

When we're in our own dark places and have doubts about even our most deeply held beliefs, we, too, look for action to get us out of the funk. We have all experienced the joys of reconciliation and the peace that comes from deep love. We have all seen the truth of our faith in action. And it's that action that guides our lives. When we don't know what else to hold on to, we receive the same message relayed to John the Baptist - look for the truth in action.

PRAYER

God of action, we offer you our praise for your good works - the work of creation, the work of redemption, and the continued work sustaining our lives. Help us to see your activity in this world. May we trust in it and in our call to model it in our own actions. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

READ MATTHEW 11:20-30

WHEN WORK IS WORTHLESS

In college I went on a couple of mission trips to Guatemala. The focus of the trips was never on work projects, rather it was about building relationships and learning the history of the marginalization of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. Nevertheless, we always engaged in some kind of project. On my first trip that project was at a new “hospitalito” in Santiago Atitlan - a small, non-profit clinic serving the Maya population of that region where there was no other medical care. Our group arrived as the hospitalito was preparing to finally open its doors to the community. Much of our work was outside in the construction of a wall to surround the building and protect it from storms. It was incredibly difficult work, but we all felt proud of what we accomplished in the few days we had to give, especially knowing that this new clinic would provide healthcare to so many in desperate need. Then, in October of the same year, a tropical storm hit Guatemala dead on and a mudslide wiped out the hospitalito. It was absolutely devastating for that community. But we, who worked on a wall that turned out to be utterly useless, also felt devastated. Our disappointments were obviously far less than those whose lives were destroyed in the storm, but there is something disheartening about knowing work you did made absolutely no difference in the lives of others. The wall didn't keep the mud back - not that it ever stood a chance against tons and tons of mud traveling at more than 60 miles an hour from the top of a volcano.

The work that Jesus did throughout his ministry was always far more important than that of college students in a foreign country during Spring Break, but even his work sometimes came to yield no results. He preached and taught and healed, yet even some of those who witnessed his grandeur or experienced his healing said, “no thanks,” and continued on with their lives as if he had never appeared to them. Those of us who have faith in Christ more than 2,000 years after his death find it unbelievable that there could have been some who met him, who saw him work, who experienced in ways we cannot the power of his presence, and did not accept him as the Son of God. Especially befuddling was the fact that the places called out - Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum - were Jewish cities where the majority of the population were steeped in the belief that the messiah was coming. Yet they did not believe when he appeared. Jesus' work there yielded no results; it was worthless.

But, it wasn't really worthless. No work ever is. Even our little wall that could not have held the mud back wasn't worthless. That hospitalito only stayed closed for 16 days. They reopened in a makeshift clinic and operated that way for a couple of years until they could get a new building built. And this time they had the eyes of the world,

as so many heard about the plight of this community and came together to build a modern facility far larger than they ever dreamed before. A tiny setback led to a huge payoff. And it was the same for Jesus' ministry. Sure, three important cities rejected him, but it did not diminish his work. And even if many in those towns didn't change their lives, there were really important things that happened there that did change lives. Among these important things is this - Peter, Andrew, and Philip were all from Bethsaida and they gave up everything to follow Jesus, and after Jesus' death and resurrection, they led the church and helped make it what it is today. So Jesus' work was not worthless. We might never know the fruits of our work when we do it. It might even seem like a total failure in the moment, but good things are always happening. God's work is never finished, the good will prevail.

PRAYER

God of hope - when we are feeling dismayed, you present us with new possibilities to turn fear and disappointment into joy. Failure is turned to success. Hatred is turned to love. Death is turned to life. Thank you for this good gift - may we never lose sight of all of your goodness. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 12:1-21

LAW VS LOVE

My brother had a very short-lived career as a police officer after he got out of the Marine Corps. While I don't remember much about that time, I have a very vivid memory of his graduation from the police academy. The graduation speaker (who knew there was a graduation speaker at a police academy graduation?) implored the graduates to use empathy when applying the law. He told a story of a traffic violation in which he pulled a woman over for not having her child in an approved child seat. The woman was beside herself and said she couldn't afford a booster seat. According to the letter of the law he should have written her a citation. But he knew that if she couldn't afford a child seat she couldn't afford the fine associated with the violation, and there was no justice in fining a young mother for her poverty. Instead of berating her or writing her a ticket, he let her know that the local fire department had seats they'd give her. He even escorted her there to make sure she'd arrive safely and got her set up with a seat so that her child would be safe and she wouldn't have to worry about getting a ticket in the future. I've thought about that story often, as it exemplifies the best of humanity - empathy, helpfulness, and kindness offered to someone in need.

While most people would agree that the world would be a better place if more people lived into the lesson offered by that police officer, it's not what happens. Too often humanity's desire for power and "being right" wins out. When the disciples plucked heads of wheat (or barley) from stalks in the field as a snack, it technically broke the commandment to rest on the sabbath since harvesting is work. It didn't matter to the Pharisees that they were not actually engaging in farming, but simply eating raw grain straight from the fields. Later the same Pharisees asked Jesus whether or not it would be lawful to heal on the sabbath. Again, healing is technically work, so technically breaking the 4th commandment. The logic behind Jesus' refusal to accept that he'd broken the law was simple - what does God truly desire, legalism and rigidity or mercy and love? The answer was clear, as spelled out by the prophets - God wants mercy and love, God wants true justice. At the end of the day, love is the very heart of the law, so if the application of the law is not in love, then the law is not being applied. While law in this case is specific to "The Law" of the Torah, it can be applied to all aspects of our lives. The enforcement of all rules and laws should be merciful and grounded in love. Any law not rooted in the love of God and that which God has created, is not just, it's that simple. Of course, it sounding simple does not make it simple, which is why we are so divided over what defines things like "justice" and "law." While we may be in conflict over these things, we can't go wrong by simply

following Jesus - showing mercy if someone is in trouble, offering kindness when someone is hurting, and using our God given gift for empathy.

PRAYER

*Creator God - you have claimed us as your children, and we must confess that, like children, we can be selfish and apathetic. Help us to see how your gift of love created the world and all that is in it, how your gift of love restored the world when our sinful ways wreaked havoc, and how your love continues to be our guide. May we let your gift of love into our lives. In the name of Christ, who is your love embodied, we pray.
Amen.*

READ MATTHEW 12:22-50

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Abraham Lincoln famously quoted Matthew 12:25 in a speech (called “The House Divided Speech”) to the Illinois Republican Party in 1858 when he was their candidate for US Senate. In it he spoke of the issue of slavery as the division causing “the house,” i.e. the United States, to not be able to stand. Among the most famous lines were these seemingly prophetic words, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved - I do not expect the house to fall - but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.” The speech was not popular at the time, as most felt as though it provided more ammunition to his opposition, Stephen Douglas, who’d advocated for continued policies of division among free and slave states entering the Union. Indeed, Lincoln lost that election. While the speech may have cost him a place in the Senate, many of his contemporaries - at the time angry he’d given the speech at all - came to believe it propelled him to the White House. It was the absolute wrong political statement to make in 1858, but Lincoln held to his convictions, and the political tide turned in his favor by 1860, making him president, but also leading to further division as southern states began to secede from the Union following his election.

There are certain comparisons to be made between the political environment Lincoln found himself in between 1858 and his death in 1865 and the religious environment Jesus found himself in throughout the gospels. While there’s debate to be had about what Lincoln’s true feelings were on slavery, he astutely recognized that it had become the political football government kept kicking down field, as they hoped to find a better, more permanent solution later on, but tensions only grew. Likewise, Jesus recognized that poverty and corruption were causing incredible strife in the lives of most Palestinians, and the Temple, which was supposed to be the solution to such problems, was only causing the problem to worsen by refusing to address the root causes. Jesus stepped in and began to take action, and those in high places did not like it at all. After failing to trap Jesus in violation of the Law of Moses, the religious elite began to get desperate and hit at Jesus with low blows. “He must be in league with the devil!” they said, because who else could cast out the devil but the devil. It was an absurd argument and Jesus picked it apart thoroughly. He made the point that action and truth come from those who truly follow God’s will just as evil comes from those who seek evil. Not only are those who follow the ways of God able to do good, but they are members of the household of God, as Jesus claimed them as his own family. It wasn’t a popular message, at least from the opinion of those who’d

benefitted from the corruption of the Temple, but it's a message that has stood the test of time and continues to ring true today - whoever isn't with Jesus, who refused his message of justice and peace, is against him and God.

PRAYER

Great and faithful God, in Jesus you have called us your children, members of your own household. May we allow ourselves to be rooted deeply in your word, that we may seek unity in Christ rather than disunity in selfish ambition and personal wealth. May we be greeted by Jesus with the words, "Look, here are my mother and my brothers (and sisters)." Amen.

READ MATTHEW 13:1-23

SEEDS

Modern farming is an absolute wonder. The fanciest tractors today come with advanced GPS and all sorts of other gadgets that allow the farmer to know exactly where each seed is planted in their fields. They can be driven remotely with all its work being monitored by the farmer with their iPad, and much, much more. Visiting a farm where all this technology is utilized feels very futuristic and surreal, and can make the type of farming Jesus speaks of in his parable seem laughable. Whereas today each seed is planted in precisely the right spot to allow for the best yield, Palestinian farmers spread their seed far and wide, throwing them seemingly wildly, hoping some of them would take root and produce. In reality it wasn't as random as we might think, but that's not really the important thing because the point of the parable isn't Palestinian farming techniques but what the seeds, and the places the seeds landed, represent. Jesus tells us precisely what is what - the seed is God's word and the various landing zones are the people who hear the word.

The description Jesus gives for each makes sense in his context - of course there would be some who heard what Jesus was doing and rejected it, some who'd get into it for a little while but not do anything to grow, who got too overwhelmed by life, et cetera, as they lived in a pre-resurrection reality. But the world, just like farming, has moved forward in dramatic and incredible ways. Like in farming, where we can now determine how to precisely get the best yield out of our seeds with technology and improved technique, we can also improve the yield of our faith. The first big development is the resurrection - the truth of God's word was made real for all to see and hear. Trusting in the resurrection gives our faith the roots it needs for the biggest yield possible. But there's more. Because of technology, what was once hidden knowledge is now available for everyone. Once scripture was only accessible in the church read by the priest, but now everyone has a bible in their homes and nearly everyone has access to one on their phones. And then there's biblical history and archaeology, scriptural interpretation and theology - it's all accessible if you just look for it. We have incredible tools available to us to ensure the word has a chance to grow in us and produce fruit. There can be trouble in finding good sources that aren't heavily influenced by partisanship or ideology, but that has always been problematic. The solution, though, is simple - God's word flourishes in love. If what we see/hear is not rooted in love, then it isn't from God because God is love. May we be good soil, where the seed of the Kingdom can root and grow in and through us.

PRAYER

Great God, you gently prepare your people to hear and accept the truth of your kingdom. In love you sent Jesus to show us the fullness of your promises, and in his death and resurrection you fulfilled them with finality. May we hear and heed your commands, allowing our lives to be fruitful gardens of love and justice. In Christ's name, Amen.

READ MATTHEW 13:24-58

KINGDOM PARABLES

The Kingdom of Heaven is like... Good seed planted in a field? A mustard seed? Yeast? Hidden treasure? A merchant searching for fine pearls? A net? There doesn't seem to be much of a common thread among these, yet Jesus has used them all to describe God's kingdom. What's the deal, and why are they group together so?

We need simple ways of understanding something much bigger than us if we're going to have a chance at grasping it. The problem is, simple doesn't describe big very well, since so much is lost in making it simple. So we get lots of simple explanations and have to piece together common threads to understand the whole. Or as much of the whole as possible. Among the common threads in Jesus' six parables are growing, valuable, and worth fighting for. The kingdom may look insignificant, like seeds or yeast, but it expands rapidly when conditions are favorable. It's something sought after by many. And its potential is worth exerting ourselves for. These, of course, are not the only ways we can describe God's kingdom. There is much, much more for us to know. But these give us glimpses that can direct our behavior. If the Kingdom expands rapidly when conditions are right, what can we do to make those conditions? If it is sought after by many, how can we help them find it? And if it is worth exerting ourselves for, how can we keep ourselves focused on that value? These parables aren't meant to be an exhaustive description of God's kingdom, nothing can describe it fully. But, they can help us catch a glimpse of the kingdom, and that's the point.

To catch glimpses of God's Kingdom, even if only small ones, helps remind us that it is real, it is here, and it is for us. Living in the Kingdom gives us assurance that God is reigning, and if God is reigning, then there is nothing that can happen to us that God cannot make whole again. Jesus showed that as he was cast out of his hometown, rejected by friends and neighbors, yet it wasn't the end. While it assuredly was a difficult moment, it wasn't the last moment - God's love intervened and Jesus kept moving forward. He kept moving forward until his love intervened for our sakes, too. May we catch glimpses of God's Kingdom in big and small ways, assuring us of God's presence and eternal reign.

PRAYER

Reigning God - your Kingdom has been built on love. That love created the world, redeemed us despite our sin, and sustains our lives in every moment. May we continue to see evidence of your present Kingdom even as we commit ourselves to continue to build it, so others may see it, too. In Christ, Amen.

READ MATTHEW 14:1-21

A DEVASTATING REALITY AND INCREDIBLE HOPE

Up to this point in Matthew's gospel, John the Baptist had been mentioned off and on. Jesus was baptized by him in chapter 3 and he was arrested in chapter 4. In chapter 9, when his disciples questioned Jesus about who he really was, he was still in prison. And here he is again, still in jail, but now it's the end, as we hear the sad, and somewhat gruesome, story of his death. The cause of his imprisonment and death is finally made clear - he criticized someone in power and it cost him his life. This was the hard reality of life in Roman Palestine - the wrong statement could cost you everything. Rulers, like Herod (a different Herod than was ruler when Jesus was born), held an absolute control on power and would rid themselves of anyone they deemed a threat to their power. It's inconceivable for American readers of scripture who hold the right to free speech to be sacred in its own right, but most of the world has lived under these conditions since the dawn of civilization - the wrong words, said at the wrong time to the wrong people, could be a death sentence. And it wasn't just words, but actions. If what you did was seen as a way to undermine the State, you could find yourself in prison or worse.

Understanding that devastating reality is key to unearthing the hope of the miracle of the feeding of 5,000. When readers of scripture encounter the feeding of the 5,000, it generally isn't in the context of Jesus finding out that John had just been killed for daring to criticize Herod's choice to marry his sister-in-law. That context is important, however, because it speaks to the difficulties of living in such a rigidly controlled society. Even food was controlled, as Rome saw itself as the breadbasket of the world with the ability to feed every hungry person, so long as they submitted to their power, of course. But Jesus offered something else, a subversive kind of hope because it bypassed all that Rome believed itself to be. Theologians can argue about the miracle of this feeding all day long - was it Jesus providing something out of nothing, or did Jesus get the people to understand that God had already given them abundantly and they could experience that abundance if they but shared their resources? But in the end, either interpretation is fine because it demonstrates that God provides. Whether God provided in the moment or had already provided and the people hadn't recognized it isn't the issue at hand. The people needed hope that rulers like Herod, who controlled every aspect of their lives, wouldn't win the day, and Jesus gave them that. Jesus' actions showed the people that in God's reign the people are cared for, not abused. He showed them that their basic needs, like food and healthcare, would be provided. All it took was a little faith that it is possible, that God not only can, but already does, rule. May it be so.

PRAYER

God of abundance, in the face of devastation and fear, you provide your people with hope. We are given the hope of love, of nurture, and above all, of life. May we trust in your reign, giving ourselves to it completely and joining in the mission of Jesus, whose death and resurrection has released us from the captivity of scarcity and fear. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 14:22-36

WALKING ON WATER

Jesus clearly had something up his sleeves, so to speak, when he told the disciples to cross a very large lake ahead of him so he could be alone for a while. They agreed, so they clearly believed he could get across without any problems. Would he hire a water taxi to catch up? Would he get on board another fishing vessel? Whatever they assumed, it wasn't that Jesus would walk across the lake, as evidenced by their awe and fear when they saw him walking up to their boat through the fog while still far from land. Once everyone's nerves were calmed, Peter decided he wanted to join Jesus out on the water, but he wasn't expecting how scary it'd be. Fishermen like Peter had a healthy respect for the water - it was their life, source of income, and they knew how dangerous it could be if disrespected or not treated carefully. That history of experience overwhelmed him as strong winds blew him off balance, and he was understandably terrified at the prospects of drowning. But Jesus grabbed hold of him and even calmed the winds. Peter was called out for not having enough faith, but we might not really understand what kind of faith Jesus was talking about. The faith wasn't in who Jesus was but in what he could do. The disciples, of course, had witnessed Jesus healing people before, but controlling wind and water was a whole new level of power. It's impossible to get into the minds of the disciples to know what they had thought of Jesus. We know that they called him "Rabbi" and confessed faith in him, gave up their whole lives to follow him, but apparently they were still holding back on what they believed was possible for him to do in God's name. It's probably not due to a lack of faith or trust, but a lack of imagination. They hadn't considered what might be possible for the Messiah. This lack of imagination wasn't just a problem for the disciples, but for the whole earth. And it continues to be a problem.

What is Christ willing to do to bring about the Kingdom of God? That's the bigger question of this text, and one all Christians should consider not just with this popular story, but all the time. Jesus showed what he was willing to do: he traveled to places considered to be dangerous, he healed whoever was sick, he challenged authority, he walked on water, he fed multitudes, he died and rose from death. Clearly there was nothing Jesus was unwilling to do. So, the next question is ours. What are we willing to do to follow Jesus? While we might not be capable of breaking the laws of physics, we have tremendous power. How will we use it to show our own trust?

PRAYER

Loving God - in the face of the impossible, you offer possibility. In the face of scarcity, you offer abundance. In the face of fear, you offer peace. In the face of hatred, you offer love. Help us to trust in all that you offer, so that it becomes our present reality rather than a far-off wish. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

READ MATTHEW 15:1-28

A LESSON LEARNED

The Pharisees constantly attempted to trap Jesus, and they constantly failed. In the case of Matthew 15, Jesus turned the trap into a lesson for his disciples - he knew he couldn't change the minds of the Pharisees who were so focused on hating him, so he turned his attention to correcting the mistruths they spread. In this case it was a question of what "contaminates" a person - what one does to purify themselves vs one's actions. Jesus maintained that ritual - the act of purification - was empty unless one lived up to the same expectations in all their lives. It's a pretty simple lesson, not at all difficult to grasp. But grasping the idea is different than living it, because living it is difficult. Luckily, it wasn't long before an occasion presented itself where they could see just how it was to be lived - as a Canaanite woman approached them.

If you've read any of the Old Testament, you'll know that the Canaanites were not well liked by the Israelites. They occupied the land God had promised Israel and practiced a kind of religion that Israel found to be detestable. In the hundreds of years since the Israelite's first interactions with them, things had not changed, even through all the upheaval the region had undergone in that time. Good Jewish Palestinians did not interact with Canaanites. It stands to reason, then, that Jesus' disciples wanted him to send this Canaanite woman away, even as she called him 'Son of David,' a name synonymous with "messiah." In this situation, the disciples fell back into their most basic instinct, to keep their distance from "those people." Jesus, being God incarnate and thus all knowing, knew who this woman was and her intentions, so he let the encounter play out in order to teach his disciples a lesson. The woman wouldn't be denied an audience with Jesus, so she kneeled at his feet with a direct request for help for her sick daughter. Jesus gave the response expected of him, saying the thing the disciples were thinking out loud - if she, a Canaanite, were to receive help, it would remove the help he was supposed to give the Israelites. Jesus even threw in a common epithet for Canaanites, calling her a dog. But she was not deterred, coming back with her own response and showing how even a little of God's grace was enough. Jesus applauded her great faith and her daughter was healed. In this encounter, Jesus showed a lived expression of love and grace. He had announced God's free grace to all who trusted, and here he showed it wasn't just nice words, but real. In the same way, we are to live into all the things we profess. Faith isn't going to the right church, giving the right amount of money, saying the right words, it's about living out what is professed.

PRAYER

*Gracious God - though we contaminate our lives in many ways by refusing to love as you have loved, you have still offered us grace. May we live into the love we have received, allowing our actions to be informed by the faith we profess. In Jesus' name -
Amen.*

READ MATTHEW 15:29 – 16:12

THE MIRACULOUS AND THE MALICIOUS

Miracle stories are among the best loved of Jesus' life because they give people of faith such hope - if God, in Christ, could do such an amazing thing then, what will God do now? Perhaps no miracle story is as great, at least in scale, as the story that ends Matthew's 15th chapter. In short order Jesus was able to do something incredible - he healed a huge number of people with a wide array of illnesses and then fed all the masses that had gathered with him for healing with a few fish and loaves of bread. Four thousand men, plus untold numbers of women and children, were present - we don't know how many of those were healed, but we can assume a large percentage since the text says that was why they had gone to Jesus in the first place. Over the course of just a few days, by his healing and feeding, Jesus gave definitive signs of who he was and everyone present was forever changed by the experience. News of such a transformative occasion would have likely traveled fast, spreading far and wide. It would have been a boon to Jesus' fame, especially for those desperate for all he represented. But there would have been others threatened by his signs - the Pharisees and Sadducees chief among them. After Jesus had performed untold numbers of healings and fed every hungry soul present, the religious leaders demanded a sign for themselves, testing to see if Jesus was who everyone said he was. Such a request didn't sit well with Jesus - he isn't a circus performer who does tricks on commands - and his response showed his frustration as he essentially asked, "Why were people so adept at knowing the weather based on patterns but so blind to God's work happening right in front of them?" The charge was essentially that the Pharisees and Sadducees had become so blinded by their power that they no longer had any connection to God, thus any sign that Jesus gave them would have been meaningless. We must remember that when Jesus performed miracles it was always preceded by faith, and it was clear that the Pharisees and Sadducees had none, or at least not any faith in a God who is concerned with the plight of God's people. Jesus compared their teaching to yeast, something not permitted in Jewish bread, and a metaphor for something that spreads very quickly. Jesus had also described the Kingdom of God as yeast, and for a similar reason, but in this case it's an insidious kind of spreading.

The miracles of Jesus were, and continue to be, a gift. They are proof of God's love for humanity. Miracles still occur, of course, whenever people are led by faith to meet the needs of others. Our actions of love, whether they be simple or drastic, make a difference in the lives of others. That difference can lead those we interact with to living a fuller life, and even if we don't think much about what we did, the fact that a

simple action can lead to big changes is a miracle. We don't need to demand to see proof of God's working to have faith; we live by God's love and the proof will be in the life we live.

PRAYER

Miraculous God - we see you working among us most clearly when we, ourselves, act in love for your justice. May we continue to follow your way, and by our faith, perform miracles and change despair into hope. We do this because Christ changed our despair into hope. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 16:30-28

AN ATTABOY AND AN ADMONITION

It's a wonderful feeling to receive heaps of praise after giving the right answer. In school, especially, it can be the motivator one needs to keep working hard and looking for the answers to questions posed in class. There can be an unfortunate outcome, however, if we get a little too cocky after getting praised and then believe we're smarter than everyone else. That ego can lead us to being a little too sure of ourselves even when we don't have the right answer. I'm a big fan of sparkling water, especially La Croix, and for a long time I assumed it was pronounced with the French pronunciation - "La Kwah." On a youth mission trip one year I stocked the fridge at our lodging with La Croix for myself, and one evening asked one of the youth for a "la kwah" from the fridge. They all stared at me and said, "that's not how it's pronounced," to which I scoffed and said, "it's French, that's how you pronounce it." And then I got smug about it. To settle our argument one of the youth pulled out their phone and asked Siri how it's pronounced, and the answer came back, "actually, it's pronounced 'La Croy' as it's named after the La Croix river in Wisconsin." And, just like that, I was put in my place, embarrassed in front of all the youth - and it was an embarrassment they'd not let me forget.

Peter had his own kind of embarrassing smug moment, and it was also one no one would let him forget. It came just after a huge attaboy given to him by Jesus - Jesus wanted to know what his disciples thought of him and Peter called him the Christ, the first time it was said aloud, and Jesus praised him mightily for it. Peter got a new name (before this moment he was "Simon," although also frequently called "Simon Peter") and Jesus told him that he'd be the central figure for the church. It was all a very big deal, and Peter must have felt pretty good about himself. He had just been told he was the pinnacle of discipleship, everyone else must have to look up to him, so he began to act that way. But then Jesus said that he had to be killed so that he'd rise again on the third day and Peter wanted to hear none of it. He had just been called the stone on which the church would be built, and the stone said "no" Jesus would not be killed, and not only would he not be killed, Peter said "God forbid!" as if he could speak for God. Remember that Peter was saying this to the one he just proclaimed to be the Messiah, apparently the irony was lost on him in the moment. And Jesus was quick to respond, and harshly, saying that suffering was precisely what God had called for. It wasn't just his own suffering, but all those who call themselves his disciples because changing the world to match God's visions was going to be a painful experience.

It's a lesson for all people of faith. It's not just that faith is difficult and we'll all have our own struggles to overcome. More importantly, we have to be willing to see beyond our way of envisioning God's workings around us. The way God works will likely make us uncomfortable, things that make us want to jump up and say, "God forbid!" but that's us talking, not the Spirit. May the Spirit put us all in our place (gently), so that we, like Peter, can realize that we've been doing faith wrong - it's not about us, it's about God and God's justice.

PRAYER

Sometimes we feel we're too smart for our own britches. We know what it means to be faithful and don't need anyone else to tell us. But we do need that instruction, O God. And you have given it to us in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Give us the courage and wisdom to listen to him and trust his news to be good. When we can move beyond what we "know" is right to listening to what you have actually said is right, we'll be in a better place. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 17:1-23

WHEN SEEING IS BELIEVING

Only six days after proclaiming Jesus to be the Christ, Peter (plus James and John) traveled with Jesus to a mountain top where Jesus was transfigured before their eyes, appearing in dazzling white alongside Elijah and Moses. The appearance of the two prophets was an allusion to the belief that they'd appear before the "end of the age," and was thus a sign that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. If the miracles he'd performed weren't proof enough, they now saw a stunning display, including God's own voice calling out of the heavens, that couldn't be anything but proof of Jesus' Lordship. They were suitably confused by the whole encounter - who wouldn't be seeing two figures appearing out of thin air - but the point was made nonetheless. Not only were they given proof of Jesus' Messianic status but were told that John the Baptist was the reappearance of Elijah, a person the religious authorities dismissed and the Romans had killed, and that Jesus would suffer the same fate.

Upon rejoining the rest of the disciples, Jesus was immediately accosted by a distraught father who was upset that the disciples were not able to heal his son. We may remember that Jesus had already given the disciples the ability to heal, so this is a surprise that they were not able to. Frustrated, Jesus healed the boy. Maybe they sensed Jesus' frustration with them because they pulled him aside and asked why they couldn't do the healing. Jesus' response was that it was faith, or a lack thereof, that had prevented it. Apparently, they hadn't even had faith the size of a mustard seed, because that's all it takes to do great things. When Jesus then again predicted his imminent death, they were stunned - chastised for not being able to perform a simple healing with the power given them because of a lack of faith and then hearing they'd soon be without their Lord. The obvious question is why they had such a lack of faith? Hadn't they been with Jesus throughout his travels and witnessed all the things done by him that no one but God should be able to do?

Unfortunately, the problem that plagued the disciples also plagues us. We're hesitant to trust in the promises of God, so we are unable give fully of ourselves to work toward God's aims as we've been empowered to do. The truth is, actions led by faith can achieve more than we can imagine. While the disciples were heartbroken at the news of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are not - it emboldens our faith, proof of God's salvific love. If we can profess the impossible, the defeat of death by Jesus, then we can trust that our acts of faith can likewise do what we thought was impossible. Poverty can be defeated. Inequality can be wiped out. The Kingdom God promised can be a reality. All it takes is a mustard seed.

PRAYER

Our hope lies with you alone, O God. May we not lose hope in your promises and trust in your great love. We need only the faith the size of a mustard seed. Enable us to muster even that, and from the works that come from even such small faith, grow it until it cannot be overcome by anything. In Christ, Amen.

READ MATTHEW 17:24 – 18:9

OF TAXES AND BEING GREAT

Taxes are never a pleasant issue to discuss, but the tax Jesus speaks of in Matthew 17 isn't a tax like you or I pay to the state and federal government. The Temple Tax was a fee all Jewish people paid to the Temple in Jerusalem for its upkeep (sort of like offerings you might make to the church). Jews from all over the world would pay it annually, with huge convoys taking the money into Jerusalem each year. On the one hand, this was a deeply held tradition, dating back all the way to Exodus, which commanded an offering of half a shekel. But on the other hand, the Temple leaders were not using the money justly, so it had become yet another corrupt system whose continuation was antithetical to God's intent. In paying the tax, but using money found in the mouth of a fish, Jesus found a middle ground where he appeased the temple rulers but didn't use his own money to fund something he didn't approve of. Jesus already knew he was going to confront the injustice of the religious elite, so this wasn't the time for action. But the disciple's next question to Jesus gives us instruction for how we can deal with similar situations.

Every competitive soul thinks about it - who is the greatest? Jesus' answer isn't what we expect, but his answers never are. Not only are we to be like children - innocent and uncorrupted by the world - but we are also not to cause others to fall into sin. The first part is hard enough, but to add in not becoming a stumbling block for others means that it's not only our actions that matter, it's all facets of our life. If and when we are put into a similar situation as Jesus was in his temple tax conundrum, it feels like a lose/lose, no matter what happens. If we refuse to participate in an unjust system, at best we'll be criticized, at worst we'll be arrested or harmed. If we do choose to participate in that system, we're tacitly supporting the injustice of it. Jesus falls hard on the side of not participating and taking the consequences no matter how severe they are. It's not a particularly practical solution, and it's one that takes incredible amounts of courage. But more than courage, it takes a commitment to understanding God's sense of justice to know where to draw hard lines we will not pass. Our society will frequently use the language of justice and injustice to entice people to act, but they're not always in line with God's sense of justice. People are even convinced that acting in violence will be the more just way of being, and that can never be true. True greatness, a kind of greatness that is evident in how we respond to injustice, comes from deep trust in God's promises and a commitment to live according to God's word. It's not a simple task, nor is it easily definable, but it can be discerned when our aims match God's, something scripture tells us is simple - love. If love, not for ourselves, but for others, especially the least

among us, is our aim, then we are acting with righteousness. And that's the best we can do, trusting that Christ has paved the way despite our faults.

PRAYER

Loving God - you are the way. By your love you created the world and all that is in it. Out of deep love you continually offer forgiveness to your children. And through love Jesus died on our behalf. May we trust in your love and commit ourselves to living it, and through our living it, be creators of justice. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 18:10-35

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FORGIVEN

In our interpersonal lives, forgiveness can be hard fought for and even harder to give. When we're in the wrong and seek forgiveness, we beg for it - knowing we've hurt someone we love is a difficult pain to bear. When we've been wronged, the pain of being hurt by someone we love is even more difficult, which is why forgiving can be so hard; it's much easier to hold a grudge. In our faith, we've been assured of our forgiveness. The forgiveness we've been given is for much worse than we could do to someone else, it's forgiveness for generations of building societies antithetical to what God has asked, and thus, increased separation from our Creator. But we've been given forgiveness because God knows that reconciliation, though difficult and painful, is worth what can come. As a people who have been given forgiveness, we're also supposed to forgive, doing as much as we possibly can to achieve the reconciliation that has been gifted to us.

The hardest part of this is what reconciliation actually means. We can't just say "I forgive you" while continuing to be angry about whatever caused the separation - that's obvious - but we also cannot say we've forgiven someone and allow our relationship to be changed in any way. We have to seek for the relationship to be made completely whole. And that's where the work comes in. Especially in today's world of hyper partisanship, we've forgotten what it means for wholeness in our relationships. We can "agree to disagree" - which usually just means you agree to not talk about something as to not fight. In that way, it is a great way to cover up a problem, but it does nothing to address any of the underlying issues that remain, therefore the relationship is not whole. This doesn't mean we have to agree about every little thing, that would be impossible, but to have wholeness in a relationship when there's that kind of disagreement means we *do* talk about the underlying issues and seek to understand one another. When we seek to understand each other's viewpoints we can have empathy for one another, and the problem is no longer a place for division, but a place for celebration of diversity. It's in that diversity that we can actually work together for common goals as a unified body.

The forgiveness we've been given in Christ should lead our lives. It should be the influencing factor in all that we do, especially in our relationship with one another. It's not just what we *should* do, but what we *must* do if we are to be the people God wants us to be. Without God's forgiveness we would be nothing. And unless we can forgive in the same way that we have been forgiven, and seek wholeness with all we encounter, we will return to nothingness. It is forgiveness that gives us life, so we must live it.

PRAYER

Holy God - though we have done wrong to you and your creation, living in hate rather than your love, you have given us a second chance. And not just a second chance, but every chance we might need to finally know what reconciliation really means. Help us to find the life you have given us in Jesus Christ, and that by living it, we might be co-creators of the world that you have envisioned for us. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 19:1-15

JESUS ON DIVORCE

Just about everyone has heard that, in the United States, about 50% of marriages end in divorce. While it's a sad statistic, there is positive news as the number of divorces has been decreasing steadily over the years (but the number of marriages is also decreasing). Marriages end for all kinds of reasons, from infidelity to money problems to no longer being compatible with one another. And that doesn't even mention the especially horrible situations like abuse and neglect. When I do premarital counseling, my goal is to always give a couple the tools they'll need to begin their marriage with open lines of communication so that they can continue to develop a strong, supportive relationship, even using disagreements as a way to draw closer together. But it doesn't always work. There are some Christian communities that take what Jesus says in Matthew 19 as law, even taking away his "except for sexual unfaithfulness" caveat, allowing for no divorce for any reason whatsoever. Would Jesus be okay with a marriage ending because of abuse? I feel certain he would, despite what Matthew 19 says, because Jesus was only responding to a very particular question in Matthew 19.

In yet another attempt to trap Jesus, the Pharisees asked Jesus about the Law and divorce, specifically if a man can divorce his wife for any reason. Their question goes back to Deuteronomy 24, when Moses says divorce can be allowed, and specifically when a husband discovers something terrible about his wife. She was then free to remarry after receiving a divorce certificate. This was huge for two reasons - first it created a fair system for ending a marriage with cause rather than allowing a man the ability to divorce for any reason, and secondly, it gave divorced women permission to remarry, something that had previously not been allowed and thus gave women agency and security in a patriarchal society. It was a law that protected the institution of marriage while also protecting those involved in the case of a separation. The way the Pharisees presented the question to Jesus entirely missed the intent of the Law as Moses presented it - can a man divorce his wife for *any* reason? No, not for any reason, marriage is still a holy covenant. Jesus' hard reaction was one to the question "any reason" and was all about recognizing that marriage was an important structure that shouldn't be entered into lightly. Jesus understood marriage to be the embodiment of partnership as God had established in the creation of all things. Jesus' answer was not, and shouldn't be read as, a blanket statement that all divorce is bad, his was only a blanket statement on the holiness of marriage in the first place. Life is almost never black and white like we'd prefer; it's full of grey areas, and divorce is particularly grey. It's a sticky, hard subject, and when we try to make it simple we hurt people. In the

case of divorce, Jesus' teaching isn't really as clear as some might like, but we know he believed it to be important because it's a God ordained partnership. When that partnership dissolves or becomes dangerous, we can't be certain what Jesus might say because he never responded to that situation. But we can be certain that Jesus sought to protect the vulnerable and help the struggling, and that is our call, too. Whenever we're faced with a difficult situation, unsure of how to respond, loving others is the only answer.

PRAYER

Creator God - this great world of ours is messy and confusing. There are times we think we know what you want, and we end up hurting ourselves or others. Other times we feel like we have no clue what you want us to do and we wander aimlessly. May we learn from the life, love, and death of Jesus, that no matter the situation we find ourselves in, we will act in love to protect the most vulnerable in our midst. You will take care of the rest, you have promised us that. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 19:16-30

BUYING YOUR WAY INTO HEAVEN

There are certain professions that, when people learn of, engender all kinds of questions. Most famously are doctors; if someone finds out the person they're meeting is a doctor they're likely to take the opportunity of their meeting to ask about a concerning mole or some odd symptom they've been experiencing. I know I've been guilty of this - it can be very handy to be in the midst of an expert when you're in need! The same was apparently true of Jesus. People approached him constantly to seek healing as well as the answers to all of life's questions. Take the rich man from Matthew 19. He didn't know Jesus, but he'd heard about him, so he found him on the street and took the opportunity to ask about how he might get into heaven. It's certainly a question that many people wonder about, and if the guy with the answer happens to be in your town, why not ask it? But notice how he asked - "what good thing must I do...". He assumed humanity's relationship with eternal life was entirely transactional - a person does this thing (or things) and they win their ticket. But that's not quite how it works. Jesus brilliantly spelled out what one must do, first by saying that one must keep the commandments. At first glance that seems to be a transactional response - do these things and you're in. But then, when the man needed more information, Jesus spelled them out. And not a single one is something that anyone can simply check off their to-do list, they are lifelong pursuits. The man assumed they were simple, and as a faithful Jew he'd done all those things, or so he thought. But Jesus once again increased the level of difficulty, telling the man, "sell what you own, give it to the poor, and follow me." Jesus wasn't adding requirements to the answer he'd already given, he was specifying what it meant to follow them. One cannot build fabulous wealth while keeping the commandments, especially in a world where wealth was built primarily in agriculture, which meant it was built on the back of someone else's labor. The commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself makes it impossible because you cannot use your neighbor to build your wealth while your neighbor stays poor and claim that as love.

The rich man didn't like the answer. He liked the life he led, he wanted to keep on with his status quo and still have assurance of eternal life. But following Jesus isn't about keeping the status quo, it's about disrupting the systems of oppression and inequality that exist in this world so that God's kingdom can flourish among us. It only happens when we choose to follow Jesus. We can't buy our way into heaven, but we can seek to live lives of meaning by loving as Jesus loved. When we inevitably fail in large and small ways, we are assured of our forgiveness because of Christ's love, a love

so deep that it bore the cross that sin might not keep us from God's presence. It's all possible because of God's love in Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Merciful God, we give you thanks for the love of Jesus, a love that has given life meaning, a love that has offered salvation, a love that assures us of eternal life. May we reflect his love in all we do, that others might know of your Kingdom. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 20:1-19

A LESSON IN GENEROSITY

Why is it that we get offended if someone is generous to someone else? Is it that we hate the feeling of being left out? Or do we suddenly view what we have with disdain after someone else receives something similar (or, worst of all, if they receive something even better)? It's a constant emotional battle playing out in our lives from the earliest days of childhood, when we don't want to share toys or food and will throw fits if the child we didn't want to share with gets something that we wanted, to adulthood, affecting how we interact with neighbors (in our efforts to keep up with the Jones') to national and international politics (refugee policy, student loan debt, the list goes on and on). Some people might claim that they do not have this kind of jealousy, and it's different for everyone, but we all do in some way, shape, or form. And we need to learn to grow beyond it.

Jesus' parable hits at a deep, emotional place - it has to do with money and self-worth. A vineyard owner hires some day laborers early one morning and agrees to pay them the standard wage for a day's work. This was, and still is, a fairly normal practice - unskilled laborers gathered in a central place waiting for the wealthy landowners to come and hire them, but at a certain point the amount of work available would dry up, and the leftover workers would have nothing to do and no chance of bringing home a paycheck that day. In the parable the vineyard owner went out to that central place many times and continued to hire workers, all the way until 5:00 in the evening, an hour before quitting time. At six the vineyard owner distributed the wages, giving every single person he hired the same wage, and the earliest arrivers were livid that they worked hard all day for the same wage as those that worked an hour. It should be mentioned, too, that those that worked fewer hours didn't expect a full day's wage, but were certainly happy to receive it. By most standards it isn't a fair system, hence the jealousy evoked by the story, but neither is a system where many poor people have to wait around hoping for a chance to work to make enough money to support themselves and their families. The parable's vineyard owner simply used his own wealth to ensure everyone had a chance to provide for themselves and their families. Our own egos prevent us from seeing the larger injustice of systemic poverty, pushing us to want "fairness" that isn't really fair because the system isn't fair.

If we're unable to move beyond our own emotional response to see the justice of the vineyard owner in the parable, how can we make ourselves ready to see the justice of God's love in Jesus? Directly after the parable Jesus predicted his death and resurrection, the fulfillment of God's love. It was an unjust death at the hands of an unjust system, but he beat it by beating death. And he did it for all people, not just

those who had faith the longest or who did all the right things. Is it fair? By the world's standards, maybe not, but any system of fairness that would deny love to those needing it isn't fair. Jesus redefines fairness for us, and that new definition sets us free.

PRAYER

Loving God - we get so caught up in trying to live into unjust systems that we've missed out on the freedom that we have received in Christ, all because of your great love for us. May we trust in your love and seek to share it with others - those who we think deserve it and those we don't, because you have said all are worthy. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 20:20-34

HOW TO BE GREAT

Everyone wants to be considered great at something - a great friend, a great parent, a great employee, a great athlete, whatever it is, there is something in which we want to achieve greatness. Naturally, this desire also extends to our loved ones. So, it's not surprising that James and John's mom wanted greatness for her boys. They were, after all, among the very first of Jesus' disciples (after only Simon Peter and Andrew), and they had very publicly left their family and careers to follow him. I wonder if she had taken notice of all the things Jesus had done since her boys left home and, acting as a sort of 1st century helicopter parent, wanted to be sure her sons were included in the reward for all the work they had done and all they had given up. But as understandable as it was, it was also short sighted - they had no clue what it really meant for Jesus to come into his kingdom. They didn't know that the "cup" Jesus was going to drink from was the cup of suffering, something that was his alone to bear. And because Jesus' kingdom was/is like no other, he redefined what it meant to be great - to serve. Lording over others is not great (it's not even good), but lending a helping hand, offering love, being kind, those are the things that lead a person to greatness. Not long after telling the disciples how to become great, he showed them. Two blind men heard Jesus was coming by, so they shouted at him. The crowds, who had probably experienced a lot of this already and who might have had to give up a lot to be there with Jesus that day, were upset at the men taking Jesus' attention away from them. But they asked for mercy anyway, and Jesus gave it to them by offering compassion and healing. That show of compassion led them to following Jesus.

In our own quests for greatness, we would do well to learn from Jesus. We might not get recognition or awards, but our goal shouldn't be greatness in the eyes of the rest of the world, it should be greatness in the eyes of the least, the lost, and the lonely. If we really bought into the idea of compassion being the mark of greatness, how differently would our world look? How much better would things be if we bent over backwards to lend a helping hand instead of undercutting and scheming to make ourselves look better? Greatness is possible - for you, for me, for everyone.

PRAYER

Great God - you have told us what to do and how to act, but we have failed. Help us to hear and heed the words of Jesus, that in our discipleship we might recreate our community and world to meet your standards instead of ours. May we seek love and kindness and mercy in all that we do. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 21:1-22

A DRAMATIC ENTRANCE

Jesus entered Jerusalem in dramatic fashion - on a donkey, mirroring the prophecy of Zechariah, to shouts of "Hosannah," which means "save us," by throngs of people. But the drama didn't end with his entrance into the city, he also entered the Temple with a flourish, casting out the money changers and sacrificial animal sellers. Jesus didn't just throw them out, he called the very practice of exchanging Roman currency to Temple currency to purchase sacrifices theft. Needless to say, it angered the Temple leaders, so angry, in fact, that Jesus didn't spend the night in town, he went to the next town over. The next morning was met with even more drama. Jesus woke up hungry and went to a fig tree for some breakfast, but the tree was bare. His response of killing the tree seems over the top, almost like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum, but it was no tantrum, it was a lived parable. It was meant to represent the fruitlessness of the Temple and its leaders - they had not lived into the purpose given to them by God and were, thus, like fruit trees unable to produce, and a fruit tree that doesn't produce is not worth keeping.

The drama of Jesus' entrance set the course for the rest of the week. Each event would be filled with drama and intrigue until his death and, most dramatic of all, his resurrection. But the drama of the story isn't for entertainment - this is no reality TV show. This is not drama for the sake of drama, it's drama because Jesus dared to confront the status quo with an alternative way of being. That alternative excited the poor and disenfranchised, but it made the powerful anxious. Their anxiety over the threat of losing their power created chaos, but Jesus kept forcing his new way, and it was his way that would win out.

We all have our own moments of drama and chaos. Maybe it's because we've made bad decisions and are living with the consequences. Maybe it's because someone else likes to create drama to see what will happen. Maybe it's because there's a struggle for power or privilege. Whatever the reason, it's an inevitable part of life. But through our chaos and drama, we can see glimpses of how God is working to bring us through the disarray and into wholeness, just as Christ made his way headlong through the drama of his week in Jerusalem and from death to life.

PRAYER

In the midst of the drama that surrounds our lives, you are with us, O loving God. While you don't promise a life free from the mess, you do offer a way through. You navigate a path by your love that we may find our way through the chaos and into the comfort of your grace. For that we are ever thankful. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 21:23-46

UNABLE TO SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

They say “ignorance is bliss,” and it couldn’t be more true. Sometimes it’s easier to not know and to not have to see. Would that chocolate bar taste as sweet if we had to be confronted with the reality of the child slavery which harvested the cacao? Would this fall’s newest, hottest fashion be as appealing if we had to witness the poverty of those producing it? Would the latest, greatest technology seem as necessary if we had to face the environmental degradation from mining the rare-earth metals that make it possible? One would think not, but the truth is most of us are at least somewhat aware of all these things, yet our behaviors do not change. It’s not due to a lack of empathy or an abundance of malice, behaviors don’t change because it’s so easy to ignore and not have to think about. In Australia, all cigarette packs come with gruesome images of the effects of smoking; those choosing to smoke there cannot get away from the images - they make their decision despite it. If our clothes, candy, electronics, etc. came with pictures of the cost of producing each of those items, how many would we still consume? It’s a heavy thing to have to consider, but it’s the same scenario that the religious experts found themselves in when Jesus confronted them in Jerusalem.

The religious experts lived in a kind of bubble. Rome liked that they helped keep a steady social order, so they didn’t suffer the same oppression the average Palestinian did and were given many special perks, so long as that order was maintained. They also kept themselves above the average citizens. They could shut themselves off from the problems their neighbors faced while maintaining their religious control on the people, demanding sacrifices or threatening heresy, a threat that could mean death. This system had them so removed from both the people they were to serve and their own faith, that when Jesus appeared before them they were too afraid of losing their power to realize anything else. They demanded to know under whose authority Jesus worked, and when he turned the question back around on them they chose their answers as carefully as possible as to not upset the balance they’d created, but it wasn’t good enough for Jesus. He saw through their farce and was able to force them to admit to their evil ways. It only made them angrier, feeding the fire of their rage so hot that they were willing to do just about anything to get rid of him. Though they still had to think about the order they were to keep, so they bid their time.

If confronted with our own willful ignorance, how would we respond? I don’t mean with things like chocolate, though that is an important conversation, too; I mean with our relationships. We turn a blind eye to the suffering around us, yet are outraged when we are inconvenienced. If told of our own privilege, we either want to deny it

exists or claim that we are somehow more deserving of it than others. We too willingly shape our viewpoints to fit ideologies rather than shape our ideologies to fit reality. Are we like those evil tenant farmers who received much but demanded more and even killed to keep what they had, or can we realize that all we have belongs to God and seek to produce good fruit with what's been entrusted to us? It takes humility and strength to do this, two things that are so often viewed as opposites, but, in reality, are intrinsically linked. This strong humility comes only through Christ, the one whose humility led him to death for our sake and whose strength raised him.

PRAYER

Glory is yours alone, O God, yet too often we seek it for ourselves. May we be like the tax collectors and prostitutes who encountered Jesus and changed, rather than like the religious experts who called themselves holy and denied Christ. Guide us in your truth, and give us the strength to fight the wiles of this world with humility. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 22:1-14

THE WEDDING FEAST PARABLE

In response to the religious leaders who were incensed at Jesus for calling them out for their lack of faith, he told a rather dark parable about something that should be joyful - a wedding feast. The “king as a metaphor for God” trope was common for Judaism of the day, so it was expressly clear to the audience what Jesus was setting up when the parable began with a king. This metaphorical king was planning a wedding feast, which is a fun event in our own time, but was massive in the ancient world. A wedding, and the feast that followed, was one of the fullest embodiments of hospitality in a world where hospitality was among the most highly valued virtues. But, in the story Jesus told, everyone who had been invited by the king turned their backs on him. This type of action was seen as unfathomable - not only had an entire community rejected the hospitality that was so intrinsic in their culture, but they rejected it from the king. The rejection of the invitation wasn't just a simple “no” either, some of those invited went as far as killing the servants who acted as messengers. Then it got even darker, because the king sought revenge on all those who'd acted so callously, burning their city to the ground. But then some light - new invitations were sent to everyone who could be found, both the bad and the good. The only expectation was that they'd show up appropriately. One did not, however, and he was not treated kindly, as he was bound and thrown out into a dark place.

From the outset, the Kingdom of Heaven sounds like kind of a scary place. But this parable was more than a simple illustration to describe what Heaven is like, it examined a long history of God acting for the people and the people rejecting God. The messengers murdered by the invitees might be understood as the prophets who had called on Israel and Judah to change their ways, and who were ignored, ridiculed, and even killed for their messages. In response to the people's rejection, Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were sent to exile. Then the invitation list was expanded, a sign that God was welcoming more than just Israel, but to accept the invitation meant a change - clothes in the parable, but in reality a change in the heart and life of the people. The one who had not changed, and was thus thrown into the outer darkness, was one who rejected the notion that he needed to change. Maybe that was the religious leaders, who certainly rejected such a notion, or maybe it's us.

This dark parable is both a gift and a warning. It's a gift because we know that despite being unworthy, God has invited us to the great feast which God has prepared. It's a warning because the invitation comes with strings attached, although they're not difficult - we're asked to show up prepared. When we invite people into our homes, and they show up surly, complaining about every little thing, and

generally unthankful for anything, we're probably never going to invite them into our homes again and would be offended at their behavior. In the same way, we need to show up ready to receive all that God has prepared for us, which means aligning our lives with what God has given us. We prepare by being ready to change our hearts and lives to match God's expectations. That work may be difficult - change is never easy - but the reward offered at the feast is worth it. So, let's put on our wedding clothes and prepare ourselves for the feast!

PRAYER

We aren't worthy to be invited to your table, but you have made room for us anyway, O God. For that invitation we give you thanks. In our acceptance of the invitation, all you ask is that we love as you love, that we seek to protect the vulnerable, and use the resources given to us equitably and justly. It's a small price to pay for all you offer in return, but still we struggle. Give us the courage to make the necessary changes in our lives. Guide us on your paths that we might be met with your great feast. In Christ's name we pray - Amen.

READ MATTHEW 22:15-46

THE FINAL TESTS

Taking the SATs was one of the most nerve-racking things I've ever done. I read a prep book, but only half-heartedly and was never that confident that I could do well. My first time taking it I got a decent score, nothing anyone would consider great, but okay. I decided to take it again to see if I could do any better, and I only raised it by 10 points. So, that was the end of that - I didn't need the extra stress of cramming for a test I didn't think I could do any better on. One of my classmates also took the SATs twice, but he took it for the second time before he could get the score from the first time. He was convinced he'd done poorly, or at least that he thought he could do better, so he took the next available time instead of waiting to find out what sections he needed to work on, like almost everyone else would have done. It turned out that it wasn't something he needed to worry about, though, because he got a perfect score both times he took it. Some people are just better at tests than others. It also didn't hurt that he was a really smart guy, although he wasn't the top of the class, not even top 10. In the nearly two decades since I took the SATs, many schools have moved away from using it as a measure of how well a student will do. I was a great student, even with my mediocre score, and my classmates' perfect score didn't mean he would be. Sometimes testing isn't the best measure.

The tests Jesus was confronted with were quite different from the SATs, though they weighed equally on his future. He was tested by both factions of Jewish religious leaders - the Sadducees and Pharisees. First was a question about taxes - whether it is legal for a faithful Jew to pay them - and he aced the test, providing an answer they couldn't argue with (that also didn't really answer the question). Then the Sadducees, who, we were told, didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, asked a question about marriage and resurrection. This time Jesus did answer the question, and, again, provided an answer no one could argue with. Finally, the Pharisees wanted another shot, this time asking about what commandment is greatest. Jesus didn't give one answer, but two, and in doing so summarized the entire Law. It showed a mastery of the Law that none of them could muster, and so Jesus pointed his own test at them. He asked a convoluted question whose answer didn't really matter in order to show the Pharisees that they were so wedded to a certain understanding of who God was that they couldn't see how God was actually moving in the midst.

This testing didn't solve anything. Jesus proved that he knew more than the legal experts, and the legal experts got angrier. They didn't see the obvious - that Jesus knew more because of who he was - and, instead, allowed it to fuel their anger toward him. Tests can do that to us, too. The anxiety of taking them and needing to pass, or

looking bad if we don't do well, can blind us from the real goal. Tests were never going to prove to the Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus was the Messiah, they'd already made up in their minds that he wasn't and they were blinded to the truth. Too frequently we also create tests to see if God really is who God says. Instead, we can trust that God is exactly who He says He is, and allow that truth to lead us. Some tests serve a purpose, others only create unnecessary tension. When it comes to God, and Jesus as God's Son, there's no testing needed. Jesus proved who he was and what God is all about by his death and resurrection. Any kind of test is just a distraction.

PRAYER

Sometimes, O God, we test you. We want to see proof of who you are and what you've promised us. But the proof is already in front of us. In Jesus you offered a kind of proof that is more than sufficient to show us how deeply you love us. May we trust in your love and allow it to guide our lives. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 23

A LINE IN THE SAND

In his most forceful attack against the systems of oppression and malice found in the institutional Judaism of his day, Jesus drew a very forceful line in the sand against acts he found to be incompatible with God's vision. The root of this was hypocrisy - the Pharisees and legal experts proclaimed one thing and did another. Hypocrisy in organized religion continues to be a sticking point for many, but it's not the faith that's the problem, it's the people. Human beings are, innately, hypocritical - we all profess certain things and then fail to live up to those ideals. This isn't a problem so far as we're able to recognize our shortcomings and strive to correct our behaviors or moderate our ideals. It is a problem, however, when some build their lives around telling people how to think or act and then have zero interest in living it themselves or believe they are above the rules they set out for others. This is especially true for anyone in positions of power, from parents to pastors to politicians. The Pharisees and legal experts met Jesus' ire because they were the interpreters of the Law for first century Jews and they used that power to demand actions that lifted them up instead of actions that were faithful to God. One of the ways Jesus said this was most evident was in their rigidity with the law of tenth part offerings, an offering that went to the temple and helped make them rich, while ignoring the laws of justice, peace, and faith, which are far more important to God's law. The gift of sacrifice was meant to serve the purpose of justice, not undermine it.

Jesus, in the last few days of his ministry before his death, was finished playing nice. He knew his death was imminent, and that it would be at the hands of the so-called “faithful,” so he exposed them for what they were while also providing instruction for those who followed. In this angry speech, Jesus gave three specific instructions: 1. Don’t let your faith be ostentatious; 2. Don’t follow figure heads - follow Jesus; and 3. Don’t become one of those figure heads. For many, modern Christianity has become cults of personality. Mega churches are filled with people who hang onto every word of their superstar pastor, and those superstar pastors face inevitable downfalls when it comes out that they, too, are human. Their followers feel disappointed in the pastor, and the pastor is shamed. Humility is the only solution. We should remember that we are all human, all make mistakes, and all can fall victim to hypocrisy. But we put our faith in one that is not. That is why Christ is our only teacher, why God is our only father, and why those who serve others are the ones who live their faith best.

PRAYER

In our desire to follow you, O God, we have turned to those with ego and great ambition for answers instead of the teacher you gave us - our Lord and Savior, Jesus. Help us to turn to Jesus' instruction first, living out his rule of love and mercy, that we may discover what faith really means. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 24:1-28

WATCH OUT!

There are few places in the New Testament where things get kind of scary, but this is one of them - Jesus has very ominous things to say! It's clear that Jesus was leaving the temple frustrated after negative experiences with the religious leaders, but what he had to say wasn't said out of anger. He probably was angry, I don't know anyone who wouldn't be in his situation, but the words of warning were practical and needed, not the unhinged ramblings of someone blind with rage. Jesus knew that once he was gone there would be many people who'd use his absence and the stories told of him to build their own fame. Acts has its own stories of people claiming things like being the son of Jesus, so clearly Jesus was correct in his assessment of what was going to happen. Jesus also could very clearly see that the power dynamics he was upsetting, between Rome, the religious elite, and the average Palestinian Jew, were going to explode. And they did. We assume Jesus died sometime around 30-35 CE (the exact date isn't known), but by the year 70 the temple was once again destroyed by Rome as they went to war against the Jewish people, who rebelled against their imperial overlords. It was a period when things were very, very bad. Many of Paul's letters, which fill so much of the New Testament, were written during this time, hence the suffering that is such a constant theme of his writings. This is also the time when the gospels were written, a time when people needed the assurance of the witness of Jesus.

It's no secret that the world goes through difficulties. We can be fairly certain that there are wars being fought in some corner of this world at any given time. People are suffering in every moment somewhere, if not our very own community. These things happen, not because God is not great enough to stop it, but because we are not smart enough to listen to God's instructions, as we get carried away by greed, vanity, power, and worse. How we react to the suffering is what Jesus' words of warning were all about. When there is great suffering, for example, people will rise up and make grand proclamations about what they - and they alone - are able to do. Such people might even claim to be led by God's Spirit. But we must be vigilant in our discernment of any leader, especially one who makes such grand promises. How can we engage in such discernment? By the test of love - does a leader's rhetoric or actions lead us to believe someone is undeserving of love? If the answer is yes, we can be certain that they are not following Christ. It is in our ability to wade through the mess of the world, mess we're partly responsible for, with faith, that shows our devotion to Christ. How strongly can we cling to the love and grace of Jesus in the midst of our struggles and

strife? How can our trust in Christ's salvation help us endure, and not just endure, but thrive? The promise of the cross should be all we need to hold us steady. May it be so.

PRAYER

Darkness seems to follow us, O God. But your light shines brighter than any star, extinguishing darkness forever. Help us to trust in the light that Jesus has brought us, that we may reflect in it all we do and say, and especially in how we love. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 24:29-50

APOCALYPSE LATER

Matthew's apocalypse is scary, yet somehow it's an Advent text (it's read the first Sunday of Advent in year A of the Lectionary). It seems more fitting for Halloween than the preparation for Christmas, but that's mostly because of how our culture has interpreted it rather than how Jesus interpreted it. Think of the *Left Behind* book series, which takes its basic premise from verses 39-42, and how popular it has been in our culture. This "Left Behind Theology" has conditioned us to believe that at some future time there will be a rapture in which people will literally disappear from the face of the earth in order to be taken into heaven and those that remain will suffer the tribulation. But what if that isn't quite what Jesus is speaking of? The trouble is language - it's not always the case that words in one language have perfect counterparts in other languages. For example, "taken" and "left" from verses 40 and 41. The original words in Greek have very imperfect translations into English. What is translated as "taken" could also be "hauled off," and what is translated as "left" could also be "forgiven." It's wild to think that these words could have such seemingly incongruent definitions, but it all boils down to how they're used. Jesus frequently used the word translated as "left" to mean "forgive" - it's literally the cancelation of a debt (hence our use of "debt" in the Lord's Prayer). We typically believe that the one taken is receiving a reward, but what if the more accurate translation is "hauled off," while the one "left" is actually receiving forgiveness? The context of Jesus' comparison actually seems to indicate that this is the more appropriate reading - he compares it to Noah and the flood. Noah and his family remained because they were faithful and built an ark which gave them shelter from the rising waters. Everyone else was swept away. In that case I'd much rather be the one left, not taken!

The point of all this is that we have built theologies on this passage that entirely miss the point. Jesus' point wasn't for us to focus on an apocalypse yet to come, his point was what we do now, in the midst of the struggles that we face today. How are we staying alert? Our level of alertness is marked not by a sense of personal salvation, but in how we work to alleviate the suffering of others because of our salvation. Being alert means going out and using the tools we've been given by Christ, not resting on our perceived laurels. Jesus' metaphor of the servants waiting on the master is particularly apt, and it hinges on our ability to serve while we wait. So stay alert by keeping an eye out for injustice, replacing it with the justice we know because of Christ.

PRAYER

We worry about so much, including those things you have already taken care of by your grace, O loving God. Lead us not to contrive new ways of understanding your wisdom, instead uphold us in the ways you've already made clear - that the greatest thing we can do is to love you and love our neighbors. When we love as you have loved, we are secure and there is no more need for worry. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 25

WHAT WAITING MEANS

This chapter of Matthew is the whole reason for our year-long dive into Matthew and the reason we've claimed the title of a "Matthew 25" congregation, so it's particularly important for us. Due to the importance of the passage, this devotion will look a little different.

Matthew 24 came with a dire warning - stay alert until Jesus returns! Matthew 25 gives specifics on *how* we should stay alert and what is required of us as we wait. The problem, however, is that the *how* isn't very clear, especially for people who live more than 2,000 years after the fact. The first two parables are not particularly helpful from the outset. Our wedding customs are vastly different, for instance, so we get lost in those details of the first parable before we can understand its meaning. And then the second parable's focus on money and growing wealth makes us too distracted to hear anything other than a story about money, which isn't the point of the parable. There's an additional problem unique to this particular devotion - short form devotions aren't the best format to dive into such deep parables, especially when multiple are stacked together. Each would be better off as an hour-long bible study, but that's okay. It's worth pointing this out now so that expectations can be managed, but there's still an important lesson that is fitting for the format.

Waiting makes most of us irritable. When I have trouble with online orders and have to call or use chat features to get help, my blood pressure goes through the roof. It's that kind of situation that tries every bit of patience I can muster. I'm constantly reminded that being rude helps no one, which I fervently believe. But, when I'm in the midst of waiting, angry that I have to wait and frustrated that it's taking so long and the person I'm speaking with doesn't understand my problem, sometimes I forget that being rude isn't helpful. What's sad is that I can get so bent out of shape so easily, and sadder still is that I'm not alone. It's a common problem for all people, and it can expose the very worst of our sinful nature. When it comes to our faith, and our waiting for the fulfillment of the coming of the Kingdom, the problem is a little different. We're not necessarily frustrated and angry at having to wait so much as we have forgotten what we're waiting for. We're waiting for Jesus to reign. And the proper way to wait for Jesus to reign is to act like he already is (hint: because he is). The answer of how we act as though Jesus is already reigning is simple - treat others as Jesus treated them. He even issued a very basic way to get us to understand, "I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me ... I assure you that when you

have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.” This is a model that is replicable. Where there is need, fill that need as if you were doing it for Jesus. No other questions need to be asked. Obviously, there are limitations as to how much a single individual is capable of doing, but when we orient our lives so that we are receptive to the idea that our job is to provide aid, dramatic changes occur. And that is what it means to wait, because in our waiting and in our loving as Jesus loved, we build the kingdom.

PRAYER

Instead of getting antsy waiting for your reign, O Christ, may we trust that you already reign in power not only in Heaven, but in our hearts and lives. So help us to live into the power and grace you've demonstrated. Help us to see need and not scoff, but see need and reach out with love. It is in our love for others in the same way that you loved us that the transformation you hope for us occurs. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 26:1-35

PREPARED AND READY

Preparing for the eventuality of our own deaths isn't the most pleasant of topics. We'd prefer to not have to think about death and dying at all, but it's inevitable. Our discomfort with talk of death makes trying to communicate final wishes particularly difficult, especially in conversations with our loved ones, but it's also vitally important. Too many families have fought and divided over matters that could have been settled beforehand - and over really simple things, like who inherits what and what to do with jointly inherited items. The disciples struggled with thoughts of Jesus' death, too. When a stranger appeared at Simon's home in Bethany with the ritual perfumes for graves, they challenged her and called her wasteful - they didn't want to have to consider that Jesus would die. But, of course, Jesus corrected them, telling them that her actions were not only correct, but worthy of being remembered. And then Judas did the unthinkable - he betrayed Jesus by making a deal with the religious leaders who had been plotting to kill Jesus, all in exchange for 30 pieces of silver. To our modern ears it sounds like a meager amount to betray a person you've been so dedicated to, but it was quite a large figure - equal to about 4 months salary. For someone in poverty, like the disciples were, it was a life changing figure. But he didn't know it would be so much, he didn't find out what he'd be paid until he asked, so he didn't do it for the money. We can only speculate about what pushed him over the edge - was it the scene with the expensive perfume? Could it be that Judas, upon hearing that Jesus was giving himself up for death, was angry? Did he feel that Jesus was giving up, therefore he must not be the messiah like he'd assumed, so he at least could make a little bit of money after giving up so much to follow him? Again, we can't know. But apparently Jesus did. He knew, and he still invited Judas into the feast which he'd prepared.

We remember this occasion as bittersweet, and the disciples would in time, but it's unlikely they fully understood what was happening in the moment. It was at the table that they learned that there was a bigger plan for Jesus than death - it was the fulfillment of the covenantal promise in which humanity finds forgiveness for their sins. All the disciples promised they'd die before they denied Jesus, a promise they'd all fail to live up to. But that's the amazing thing about the promise of the covenant. Our ability to follow through doesn't matter. The disciples failed Jesus in truly awful ways. But because of Jesus, it didn't define them. That promise is ours, too. Jesus didn't give up, nor does he give up on us.

PRAYER

Your promise is eternal, O God, and for that we give you thanks. May we give our thanks not just in word, but in action. We know we'll fail to live up to the greatness of the promise, but we can live into it, understanding the gift we've received and offering the same love and grace to those around us. In Christ, through whom we've received it all, we pray. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 26:36-75

BETRAYALS

No matter who we are, we have had to suffer betrayals from the people we love and we have betrayed the people we love. Maybe they've been small betrayals - saying you won't see a movie without a friend, but the temptation breaks you and you see anyway, lying to your friend. Maybe they've been big betrayals, like cheating on a spouse. These are unpleasant thoughts, but perhaps the fact that it's a universal experience makes it slightly easier to digest. Even Jesus had to suffer the betrayals of people he loved. We're all familiar with the betrayal of Judas, who gave Jesus up for 30 pieces of silver. It was a betrayal made worse by the fact that Judas signaled who to arrest with a kiss - a sign of friendship and love. He's universally reviled because of his actions, but as bad as Judas' actions were, it wasn't the only betrayal of the day. After Jesus had been arrested and sent before Caiaphas, Peter, who Jesus said would be the rock upon which his church would be built, denied knowing Jesus, not once, but three times. This was also not long after telling Jesus that he'd do anything, even die, if it meant not denying him. But he did it anyway - fear got the better of him and he did what he swore he'd never do.

Why is it that we're so quick to judge Judas for his behavior, but never judge Peter? Maybe we see Judas as having committed the worse betrayal, or maybe we think that Peter redeemed himself with later actions, so we shouldn't hold a grudge against his earlier betrayal. More likely, we just forget all about Peter in the midst of Jesus' passion. Whatever the reason, we should remember both Judas *and* Peter - not because we want to blame them for being bad people, but because it is a reminder for us of our own betrayals. We should remember our own proclivities to betray our loved ones, not out of guilt or shame, but in connection with the forgiveness and grace we receive from Christ. Jesus was actively betrayed while dying for us, and it was a betrayal that was forgiven. It's not a free pass to go out and do whatever we want, but it is an assurance that when we do mess up, causing harm to those we love, that God's love is greater. Our acts of betrayal aren't enough to separate us from God's love in Christ, just as Peter's betrayal - while Jesus suffered - wasn't enough. May we celebrate our forgiveness by seeking to live in right relationship with all.

PRAYER

Loving God, though we have betrayed you and those around us, you have met our weakness with grace. We thank you for your all-powerful love that covers even the worst of our actions. Help us to offer the same love and forgiveness to those who do us wrong, and by our actions of grace, create justice. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 27:1-44

A SENTENCE OF DEATH

Death is assured for all of us, but none of us wants a difficult one. We want to go peacefully, surrounded by loved ones after a long life, and one that was lived well. Untimely or difficult deaths are the stuff of nightmares, but the reality is that there are few dignified deaths for anyone. I've spent more time around death and dying than most people my age, those of family and congregants, and too few have the peace and dignity we hope for. This is one of the most uncomfortable and disheartening truths of our world - it's no wonder our culture has such a hard time talking about death - but there is still hope to be found.

The Good Friday story is perhaps the most gut-wrenching passage in scripture, at least for Christians. There are much more difficult and sad portions, especially in the Old Testament, but Jesus' death sentence hits us hardest. Jesus certainly had a difficult death. It was one stripped of dignity - literally as he was convicted by neighbors instead of the justice system, stripped of his clothing, mocked, and beaten - and full of pain and loneliness. And if that wasn't bad enough, he was crucified, a type of death that is unimaginably cruel. While our deaths, when they come, might be difficult, we can almost certainly say that they'll be easier than Jesus'. We'll most likely be surrounded by people who care about us, whether that's family, friends, or medical staff. We'll most likely receive medication to help ease the pains of death. We'll most likely have some sort of memorial service/burial where people who have known us gather to celebrate our life. Even if something tragic should happen and we don't get to have loved ones nearby or the grace of a pain free death, our death will almost certainly not be celebrated by a large segment of society. Jesus suffered a kind of death that we will never know. It's that truth that gives us the hope we seek in the face of the difficulty of death - no matter what we face, or what our loved ones have faced, we know that Jesus had it worse, and it's something he chose. He chose it for us, that the sting of death may be removed. Jesus bore the full weight so we wouldn't have to. It's this truth that allows us to call the day when the most gut-wrenching passage of the bible occurred "good." The "good news" of the gospel is good because of this. Our faith is wholly dependent on Jesus' suffering for our sake. Through his love he suffered and he died. But death is not the end of the story - the greatest part of the good news is still to come.

PRAYER

Words cannot express our gratitude for your love, O God. You bore the full weight of death for us so that we might not have to, and for that we are ever thankful. Help us to show our thanks by seeking to ease the suffering of those in this world - that no one should be without food, shelter, healthcare, or love. Help us to be as concerned about the needs of others as you are for us. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 27:45-66

IT IS DONE

Not only was Jesus put to shame in the manner of his death, but the world went dark in his suffering - probably an eclipse, but also a metaphor for the light of the world being extinguished. When he gave up his life the whole world shuddered, an action that convinced some people that Jesus was indeed who he had proclaimed himself to be. It was a terrible way to go, a death without dignity, without loved ones nearby, without any kind of comfort whatsoever. Upon his death, Jesus was finally given the smallest of dignities by having his body handed over to a disciple, though it was a rich, and therefore well connected, disciple, not someone from the inner circle or his family. Once Joseph had possession of the body he was the one who prepared it for burial, Jesus' closest friends and family had to wait outside the tomb, unable to give a proper farewell. Then the stone was rolled in front of it and Pilate gave the Pharisees guards to place in front of the tomb to ensure no one entered to take Jesus' body away. From beginning to end, it was an undignified way to go.

We shudder when we hear these details, wondering how anyone could be so cruel to someone so special. But we also treat too many in the same way. We withhold dignity to those we dislike; we find excuses as to why some people should be treated as less than. We see suffering in our midst and dismiss our inaction by proclaiming that the suffering person(s) brought it on themselves. On Good Friday, and throughout the Christian year, we remember that we stand alongside those who condemned Jesus to die, just as guilty as they were for complicity in an unjust death. Our guilt continues in how we treat others - condemning some to suffer and even die because of poverty or hunger or something else. As we continuously encounter the story of Jesus' unjust death, we should have two responses - 1) thanksgiving that Jesus was willing to suffer and die for our sake, and 2) conviction that because of Christ's suffering and our faith in him, no one else in this world should have to suffer the same inhumanity. The inherent salvation of this story can only be true if we trust in Jesus' sacrificial love enough to change the way in which the world operates, so that injustice becomes a thing of the past.

PRAYER

Forgive our complicity and participation in injustice, O Christ. When we see suffering, help us to feel empathy rather than disgust. When we see hunger, help us to reach out. May your suffering and death on the cross for our sake convict us to end suffering and unjust death forever. May injustice be finished by your death. Amen.

READ MATTHEW 28

GO, MAKE, BAPTIZE, TEACH, OBEY, LOOK

After the despair of Matthew 27, we reach the light. Mary and Mary go to the tomb, an angel appears, the guards freeze in fear, and we hear that Jesus has been raised and he's already on the way back to Galilee. But before they could even tell the disciples, Jesus appeared to them, setting their minds at ease. While the women and the disciples traveled to see Jesus, a second plot unfolded aimed at discrediting stories of Jesus' resurrection - the soldiers who were supposed to stand guard at Jesus' tomb were paid off to spread rumors that they had fallen asleep, so Jesus' body must have been stolen. It must have been quite the pay off if these soldiers were willing to ruin their professional reputation, but they also had assurance that the governor would be told of their participation in the deception, so maybe their professional lives weren't at stake after all. The payoff worked at least moderately well, as rumors of the disciples having stolen Jesus' body were still being circulated over 40 years after Jesus' death, which is when Matthew was written. But the rumors don't persist any longer, or at least not in any meaningful way, since most of us would probably say they'd never heard any one mention it, unless they were speaking of this section of Matthew. There's good reason for that, too - the disciples, even through their doubts, did as Jesus commanded them, to **Go** out into the world, **Make** disciples of all peoples, **Baptize** them in the name of the triune God, **Teach** them Christ's commandments and to **Obey** them, and **Look** for the ways in which Christ was still present with them.

As we are a continuation of the same disciples who heard Jesus' call to Go, Make, Baptize, Teach, Obey, and Look, and in fulfilling that call were able to overcome rumors that would discredit their message, we are to do the same. While American Christianity is beset with shrinking congregations and growing disdain from the larger populace, we can overcome what challenges us by following the same game plan the disciples used after encountering the resurrected Jesus - Go, Make, Baptize, Teach, Obey, Look. We are called to exit our homes and congregations and meet people where they are, not wait for them to come to us. In those encounters our love and support helps make new disciples, and we welcome these new disciples through the sacrament of Baptism. We teach what it means to follow Christ, and obey the same rules we teach. And finally we look for how and where Christ is working around us, and put our energies there, too. Through Matthew's gospel we hear the stories of Jesus, learn his teaching, and are given a mission. May we hear and follow where our risen Lord leads.

PRAYER

You defeated death for our sake, O God, and through Jesus you gave us a blueprint for overcoming all we face to build your kingdom. May we who profess faith in the resurrected Christ hear his call to Go, Make, Baptize, Teach, Obey, and Look. Amen.