THE LIFE OF

JESUS



VOLUME 2

READINGS, DEVOTIONS, POEMS

FISHERS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

The life of Jesus has been centermost to Christians for over 2000 years. His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension are central to the faith for believers all around the world. Everything that came before Him is B.C. – Before Christ. All that has come since is A.D. – Anno Domini, a Latin phrase that means, "in the year of our Lord." Indeed, Jesus is the centerpiece of history.

This study of Jesus' life provides a means to slow down and spend a year getting to know Him more deeply, more authentically, more intimately. His life is told in the four Gospels of the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This study merges them together into one chronological series of 260 readings, at five readings a week. Sometimes an episode from Christ's life is told in only one of the four Gospels. Other times it is told in two, three, or even all four of the Gospels. In those instances, the reference for all of the Gospel occurrences is noted.

Now a little reminder. While this is a chronological study of the life of Jesus, nobody can piece together all of the events in Jesus' life in the exact order they occurred. This study follows a plausible sequence of events. But it is good to remember that the gospel writers weren't overly concerned with these sequential matters. They had a story to tell. There is great merit to reading each Gospel on its own from beginning to end. But that is for another time. Here, we will attempt to look at the overarching story of the life of Jesus in roughly chronological order.

There are several components to this year-long exploration into Jesus' life:
1. Daily Scripture Readings – Actually, they are five days a week. Consider reading each weekday to anchor your day in Christ. (In This Booklet)
2. Daily Devotions – These are written by me and correlate with the daily readings to help you think more deeply about what you are reading. (In This Booklet)
3. Daily Poems – These are written by my sister-in-law, Rev. Dr. Martha FrizLanger. They will help you imagine Jesus' story through poetry. (In This Booklet)
4. Weekly Studies – These studies, written by my colleague Rev. Dr. Ben Greenbaum and others, are great tools for small groups and classes.
5. Weekly Sermons – If you cannot attend worship with us in person, you can always go to fishersumc.org/resources/sermons to view online.
6. Weekly Podcasts – Ben and I will spend some time each week dialoguing about that week's readings.
7. Seasonal Opportunities – There will be varied opportunities for children, youth, and adults to connect with Jesus deeply throughout the year.
Many of these components are available online at fishersumc.org/the-life-of-jesus or in our Fishers UMC app that is available to download free in your app store.

Throughout my devotions, I use capital letters when referring to Jesus: Son, King, Messiah, His, He, Him, etc. This sets Jesus apart from other mere humans. An exception is when talking about his relationships (e.g. "Mary's son"). I do the same for references to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The hope is that we are all drawn to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this study as One who is Holy, yet approachable through His kindness and salvation.

All Scripture references are NIV unless otherwise noted.

Enjoy the journey!

Rev. Mark A. Ellcessor
Senior Pastor, Fishers United Methodist Church

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 28TH - WEEK 14, DAY 1

Jesus Teaches About Judging

☐ Read Matthew 7:1-6, Luke 6:37-42

DEVOTIONAL

Living with a judgmental attitude creates a judgmental atmosphere, which will come back to bite the judger! Jesus doesn't seem to be saying we should live a judgment-free life, as He Himself called people hypocrites and told His followers to expose false prophets (Matt. 7:15-20). Even in this passage he says the eventual goal is to "remove the speck from your brother's eye" (v. 5).

And later the Bible says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (James 5:19 ESV). Also, Paul instructs the pastor Timothy to "preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage" (2 Timothy 4:2). Being accountable to one another demands some level of judgment. Still, Jesus called people to self-examination before launching into judging others. Today's passages are laden with metaphors to make this point:

From Matthew:
- The measuring system you judge with will set the standard for how you are judged (v. 2)
- Take the 2x4 out of your own eye, so you can see to pick the speck from somebody else's eye (v. 5)
- Don't waste the sacred on dogs or toss pearls to pigs (v. 6)

From Luke:
- The way you judge, condemn, forgive, and give will boomerang back on you (v. 37-38)
- A blind man cannot lead a blind man (v. 39)
- Students become like their teachers, not superior to them (v. 40)

What grabs your attention from today's reading?

POEM

Trampolines and Boomerangs

At times we think
By jumping upon
Another's faults
We will spring
Higher
Above
Like jumping on a
Trampoline
But often we are propelled
Uncontrollably
Off balance
Beyond the boundaries
And can find ourselves
Broken
By our own
Conceit

By throwing sticks at
Another's weaknesses
We will stand
Stronger
Greater
Like throwing a
Boomerang
But often we are struck
Surprisingly
Unconscious
As the blow returns
And can find ourselves
Wounded
By our own
Arrogance

NOTES

TUESDAY, MARCH 1ST - WEEK 14, DAY 2

Jesus Teaches About Prioritizing God & Others

☐ Read Matthew 7:7-14, Luke 11:9-13

DEVOTIONAL

Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking. The NLT gets the tense of these verbs right, conveying the meaning that we shouldn't make our prayers a one-and-done, drive-thru episode. Rather, prayer is a way of life. God wants to bless us through His relationship with us, just like human parents give good gifts to their children out of a lifetime of being in family with them.

Today, rest on the promise of Jesus in Matthew 7:11: "how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!" Luke captures this teaching on an even higher plane: "how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (v. 13).

Do you want God's good gifts? Keep on asking!

Do you desire God's Holy Spirit? Never stop asking!

Keep on asking with confident expectation. Keep seeking the face of God with reckless abandon. Keep knocking on the doors of heaven with bold assurance. The gate is small and the road is narrow, but Jesus promises an awesome journey for the person who truly seeks Him. Take a moment and list some "asks" that you are making to your Father in heaven!

POEM

If God

If God came to me in a dream and said,
"Ask whatever you want from me
And I will give it to you."
How long would it take me to sift through
The long birthday/Christmas list
Until I said, "Give me You."

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2ND - WEEK 14, DAY 3

Jesus Teaches on Bearing Good Fruit

☐ Read Matthew 7:15-29, Luke 6:43-49

DEVOTIONAL

Bear good fruit. If you don't, you might as well be a rotted apple tree that is good for nothing but firewood.

Do God's will. If you refuse, Jesus just might say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Obey Christ's words. If not, your carefully constructed life might come crashing down like a house of cards.

Obeying and living God's way is not optional for followers of Jesus. He told us to enter through the narrow gate that few seem to find, and avoid the widely traveled road that only leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13 -14). Jesus has little tolerance for people who live the lie of looking like gentle lambs on the outside while inwardly being ferocious wolves. This kind of life is bound to be exposed.

Rather, Jesus wants authentic inward purity and outward obedience. Romans 10:9-10 says that, we must confess with our mouths (outward) and believe in our hearts (inward). Our fruit must match our root!

What is an area of your life where the inward you is out of alignment with the Spirit of God? What about the outward you – is there any area where it does not line up with the Word of God? Is there any aspect of your life where the inward and outward just don't match?

Take a moment and ask Jesus to help you bear good fruit, do God's will, and obey Christ's words inwardly and outwardly in your life!

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POEM

Connected

There are some things I count on in life
When I plug a lamp cord into a socket
I expect it to be
Connected
To the electrical grid
And thus bring power to the light bulb
So I can read my book

There are some things I count on in life
When I turn on the faucet for my morning shower
I expect it to be
Connected
To the plumbing pipes
And thus deliver fresh clean water to my tub
So I can wash my body

There are some things I count on in life
When I flush the toilet in the restroom
I expect it to be
Connected
To the sewage system
And thus transport the human waste away
So I can live in a fresh home

There are some things I count on in life
When I click the icon on my computer
I expect it to be
Connected
To the internet
And thus open up my information grid
So I can do my work and communicate

There are some things I count on in life
When I scroll through the channels on my TV
I expect it to be
Connected
To the satellite dish
And thus receive movies and shows
So I can be entertained and relax

There are some things I count on in life
When I sit around the table with my family
and friends
I expect to be
Connected
To their hearts and minds
And thus delight in our conversation
So I can be a part of their lives and share Mine

There are some things I count on in life
When I live this life of faith in Jesus Christ
I expect to be
Connected
To the Vine
And thus be enlivened and strengthened
So I can glorify God and enjoy God forever

THURSDAY, MARCH 3RD - WEEK 14, DAY 4

Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant

☐ Read Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10

DEVOTIONAL

A centurion was a Roman officer in charge of 100 men. In Luke's account, this man "sent some elders of the Jews to [Jesus], asking Him to come and heal his servant" (v. 3). These Jewish religious leaders honored the centurion, saying, "he loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (v. 5). Here is a coming together of disparate cultures and classes: Roman (Gentile), Jewish, officer, slave/servant, religious elders, rich, poor…

When Jesus was close to the centurion's house, he sent some more people (this time his friends) to intercept Jesus. This officer in the mighty Roman military said a couple striking things:

- "I do not deserve…" – It was important for him to acknowledge his standing before Jesus. Even a powerful officer is unworthy before the Son of God.
- "But say the word…" – It is equally important to acknowledge the power and authority of Jesus! His words from a distance could heal the servant.

In Matthew's account, Jesus uses this pagan officer's faith as an opportunity to teach: "many will come from the east and the west (pagans? Gentiles?), and will take their places…in the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11). Then in verse 12, "But the subjects of the kingdom (religious? spiritual leaders?) will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus is not interested in people being cultural Christians, made that way by birth. Rather, Jesus longs for committed Christians, made that way by their new birth! Were you born into a Christian family? Yes or no, what really matters is whether you have given your life to Jesus! Take this moment to say Yes to Jesus!

POEM

Now's The Time

You're on the top
Authority's hand
With just one word
Slaves scour the land
For what you want
For what you need
Your every word
Is their decree
You're in control
Your strength is strong
You're in the game
Nothing is wrong
But now's the time
To make the call
And ask Jesus
To keep you small

You're on the top
Authority's hand
With just one word
Slaves scour the land
For now you want
For now you need
A servant's health
You start to plead
Your heart is broke
Your guard is down
There is no hope
For miles around
So now's the time
To ask for aid
Healing's the need
To Jesus pray

You're on the top
Authority's hand
With just one word
Slaves scour the land
For now you want
For now you need
To share your thanks
For healing deed
Your heart is full
New life is giv'n
Your eyes have seen
The power of heav'n
It is the time
Your arms to raise
To shout "Amen!"
To offer praise

FRIDAY, MARCH 4TH - WEEK 14, DAY 5

Jesus Raises a Widow's Son

☐ Read Luke 7:11-17

DEVOTIONAL

Two crowds meet with completely different hopes and expectations. The "large crowd" with Jesus and His disciples was no doubt hoping to see more of what they had seen Jesus do in Capernaum. The "large crowd" from the town that was with the funeral procession was marching toward a burial in the cemetery. Jesus exceeded the greatest imaginations of both crowds.

The story of Jesus raising the widow's son in Nain is found only in Luke. I usually picture a boy, but the text clearly says he was a man (v. 14, 15). This "only son of his mother… a widow" (v. 12) was certainly her only means of survival. She needed him to earn money and support her for the rest of her life.

In Luke, Jesus is often shown having compassion on the poor and outcast. It makes sense that Luke would recount this episode. Today, who are those who need the touch of Jesus in order to have hope for the future? Perhaps everyone, to some extent.

I wonder how many of the funeral crowd joined the Jesus crowd, ready to travel with Him and see more miracles. We know that Jesus did not disappoint them: "At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind" (Luke 7:21). These signs and wonders made people receptive to the deeper works of God – the good news of the gospel. As the funeral crowd said after the dead man sat up, "God has come to help his people" (v. 16).

How about you? Are you traveling with the crowd on the way that leads to death? Or have you gone all-in with Jesus in the way that leads to life?

POEM

He's All I Have

My husband's gone
I have no station
My future's in
This Son of mine
He's my last hope
He's my last hand
It's Him or death
He's all I have
My pride is gone
I have no station
My future's in
God's Son of mine
He's my last hope
He's my last hand
It's Him or death
He's all I have

NOTES

MONDAY, MARCH 7TH - WEEK 15, DAY 1

Jesus Describes the Identity of John & Himself

☐ Read Matthew 11:1-19, Luke 7:18-35

DEVOTIONAL

From prison, John the Baptist heard about the signs and wonders Jesus was doing. So he sent messengers to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3). The question clearly has messianic implications.

Jesus answered by saying He was actually doing (Luke 7:22) what He had said He would do (see Luke 4:18-22), which is a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (see Isaiah 58:6-7; 61:1-3). If John's real question was, "Are you the Messiah?" then Jesus' real answer was, "Absolutely!"

Still, the religious leaders refused to believe in Jesus (Luke 7:30). The austere life of John did not make them weep and repent; the miraculous life of Jesus did not make them dance and believe. Their hearts were hard and their eyes were closed. These religious scholars couldn't see what was right in front of them.

Indeed, Jesus said that John was the greatest man who ever lived (far above the religious elite). Yet in God's kingdom, even John is nothing compared to the deaf, blind, lame, diseased, or poor person who has received the good news. Neither spiritual elitism nor violent authoritarianism (Matthew 11:12) has any power to stand up to the gospel of God.

Do you believe that Jesus is who He said He was? Do you believe that He is God's Messiah? Do you trust in Him for your salvation? Are you following Him with your life?

Pray this prayer: Dear Jesus, I believe in you. Come into my life and save me from myself. Make me a new person. Show me your will. Empower me to do it. Amen.

POEM

Are You The One?

When first I was called to the speaking for you
My heart swelled with passion.
I had so much energy, discipline.
Even able to fast and wait patiently.
I was so close, so tied to the promise
It never crossed my mind to ask,
Are you the One?

As I rose in my career as a prophet
Yelling out against injustice
Proclaiming judgment and begging repentance
I felt your Spirit's power upon me.
I could speak truth to even the most powerful
And I never would have doubted
You are the One.

That day you came personally to me
That day you entered my little parish,
My little flock beside the baptismal waters
I said to my most cherished ones,
"There He is, the One for whom we have all waited!
Run to him, learn from him, stay with him.
He is the One!

Oh, what joy! What rapture to have you in our midst!
Oh, what grace! To hear your voice from heaven!
Oh, what miracles, what wisdom, what rapture!
Oh, what culmination to hear the Word from The Word's lips!
Oh, the delight of seeing the promise of ages incarnate!
There was no doubt! All was clear...
You are the One!

But then, as the crowds dispersed and ran after others
As it seemed the power was failing
As the words you gave me fell on deaf ears
As the persecution seemed stronger than your grace
As the opposition came for me, and threw me down
As I sat in the prison of despair, the Tempter asked me,
"Is He the One?"

Dark Prison, place of no light,
Stop the shrieking and accusing
Saying my life and my call were all in vain--a joke!
I plug my ears to your voices, I shut my eyes to your doom.
O Lord of Light, who spoke through the prophets
And once to me. Where are you in my suffering?
Are you the One?

My days now are numbered.
The mockers laugh and spit at me.
My shame and execution are near.
Was I not faithful? Did I not hear clearly?
O Doubt, stop your voices.
O Strength come to me!
Are you the One?

Dear Friends, pray for me.
Dear Friends, beg for me.
Dear Friends, pursue until the truth is told.
Dear Friends, speak to me of Life!
Go to Him--ask him; let him know I am ashamed,
Confused, feeling betrayed, knowing abandonment.
Are you the One?

I will sit here in the prison of Joseph.
I will remember, despite the walls and the stench,
Despite the circumstances of doom,
That You are with me.
I will remember, that even if I am not saved
Like my brothers being thrown to the fire,
My God is One!

Hear me, Messiah, Anointed One
Whose sandals I am not worthy to untie!
Hear me, Dear Cousin, whose presence caused me
To leap in my mother's womb.
Have mercy upon me, O Lamb of God,
Who takes away the sin of the World...
...Are you the One?
"Go and tell John what you see and hear..."

TUESDAY, MARCH 8TH - WEEK 15, DAY 2

Jesus Chastises Unrepentance

☐ Read Matthew 11:20-24, Luke 10:13-15

DEVOTIONAL

A little geographical context might help. Bethsaida was the hometown of many of Jesus' disciples. Capernaum was the home base of Jesus' entire ministry. Chorazin was nearby both. Jesus did many amazing things in those town. Yet most of the people did not repent. They longed for and loved what Jesus did for them, but refused to change their hearts and minds and ways for Him.

So, "Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent" (Matthew 11:20). Ouch. Even worse, Jesus compared these Jewish towns with pagan cities. Tyre and Sidon were relatively close cities that were part of Phoenicia. The people of these cities had a long history of interaction with the people of Israel, yet they produced false gods (Judges 10:6) and the wicked Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31).

But the ultimate insult was to be compared with Sodom, which God destroyed because of their evil practices (Genesis 19). Jesus said to his new hometown people of Capernaum, "I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you" (Matthew 11:24). Double ouch.

Today we in the United States live in a culture where the Church can freely do and be anything God calls us to be. Yet so many people are content to allow the Lord to bless us without being willing to bless Him with changed lives.

Question: How is God challenging you to change your heart, mind, and ways for Him? What is your next step?

POEM

Prayer

Dear Lord, I need a softer heart
In fact, one that is fluid
So when a word from you comes near
It drifts along
Becomes my song
And rolls along in grace

Dear Lord, I need a reined in will
In fact, one that is bridled
So when a calling comes my way
My head is turned
Old path is spurned
And down your Way I travel

Dear Lord, I need a open mind
In fact, one that's discerning
So when your wisdom shines a light
The old is thrown
Your new thought grown
And thinking is renewed

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9TH - WEEK 15, DAY 3

Jesus Offers Rest for the Soul

☐ Read Matthew 11:25-30

DEVOTIONAL

It's all about relationship. Jesus said that He and God the Father have a special relationship. They know each other intimately. And because of that, Jesus said, "all things have been committed to me by my Father" (v. 27). Through Jesus, the mysteries of God have been hidden from the wise and learned religious scholars and revealed to the humble and hungry people with childlike faith (v. 25).

The best news is that Jesus wants to have a relationship with you too. Do you feel like you don't measure up? Wonder if you have sinned too greatly? Doubt if Jesus could break through all the muck and murkiness of your life? Feeling broken? Abandoned? Forgotten? Weary? Burdened? Jesus answers all your questions: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (v. 28).

A yoke was a wooden harness that was placed over the necks of two oxen to keep them pulling a farm implement in unison. Jesus said to unyoke yourself from the burdensome ways of human struggles, and to yoke yourself to Him. He will do the heavy pulling. He will mend your burdened heart. He will provide rest for your weary soul.

Believing in Jesus is as simple as saying a prayer. But following Jesus means yoking yourself to Him, walking where He walks, going where He goes, doing what He does.

It's all about relationship. Do you simply believe in Jesus, or do you have a daily relationship with Him? His offer is open: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

POEM

Heart Theater

When morning comes, sleep dissipates
My eyelid curtains draw back
My soul looks out and takes all in
Upon the screen of my heart.
Pictures are stored.

As movies play before my eyes
The camera in my mind records all
Without editing---every scene, every take,
Every word, every attitude, every action.

I'd like to say that I have the ability
To cut and toss scenes not pleasing to my God
Or those which would defile my heart;
My thoughts betray
But the camera keeps rolling in this Heart theater.

How do I find the scenes of inspiration,
The words well spoken,
The beauty, the blessed
If my eyes are constantly open to
The filth and darkness of this world?

Where is the Light which will illumine,
Redeem and sanctify all the horror movies
In my heart theater?

Director of my film,
You must write the script
And take me to the places
Of beauty and truth.
Minimize the volume of those voices of darkness
And instead, cause my heart to rewind and rewatch
That which is life giving
In my heart theater.

Teach me to close the curtain of my eyes,
To silence the films,
To not sell my soul to buy the tickets
To those clips which would bind my heart
To evil and imprison me in cinemas of sin.

Instead, call me to your best pictures;
Teach me discernment
So that when the movie is done
And has played thoroughly,
The credits have your name
Not mine
Emblazoned upon my heart
As its producer.

Then may my eyelids close
With a clean, unstained screen
Returning home with joy in my soul.
Create in me a clean heart theater, O God,
And edit out anything that is not righteous
Within me

THURSDAY, MARCH 10TH - WEEK 15, DAY 4

A Woman Anoints Jesus

☐ Read Luke 7:36-50

DEVOTIONAL

It is hard to say whether the anointing of Jesus happened one, two, or three times (see Matthew 26, Mark 14, John 12). But there are differences which suggest several different episodes. In Luke 7, it takes place in Galilee [in the north, near Jesus' hometown] at the home of a Pharisee [a religious leader] during the middle part of Jesus' ministry.

In Matthew and Mark, He is anointed in Bethany [in the south, near Jerusalem] at the home of a leper [who would not even be welcomed by the Pharisees] just before Jesus was crucified. In these episodes the woman anoints Jesus' head.

In John, it takes place in Bethany, but at the home of Lazarus [whom Jesus had raised from the dead, causing the Pharisees to want to kill both Lazarus and Jesus] prior to crucifixion. Here and in Luke, the woman anoints Jesus' feet.

The focus on this episode on Luke 7 was not on the cost of the perfume, but on the cost of repentance. Jesus had just said that He was called a "friend of sinners" (v. 34). This story proves the point. The religious leaders focused on "what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner" (v. 39). But Jesus focused on her love, forgiving her and offering her a life of peace (v. 47-50).

In fact, He embarrassed the host Pharisee by pointing out that he failed to provide the customary oil, water, and kiss for a guest, while this "sinner" saturated Him with perfume, tears, and kisses.

Where are we too full of ourselves to risk everything for Jesus? How is God calling us to this kind of extravagant love and faith toward Him no matter what the cost? And where, like the Pharisees, have we put up barriers to others who truly want to seek forgiveness from Jesus?

POEM

What Did It Cost?

What did it cost
For Jesus to travel
From heavenly home
To earth's broken gravel
The cost of the ticket
The cost of the loss
The cost of forgiveness
The cost of the cross
What does it cost
For our hearts to travel
From sinful and cold
To repentant, unraveled
The cost of confession
The cost of full turning
The cost of believing
The cost of heart burning

NOTES

FRIDAY, MARCH 11TH - WEEK 15, DAY 5

Women Accompany Jesus and His Disciples

☐ Read Luke 8:1-3

DEVOTIONAL

It is not unusual that Jesus had a dozen male disciples, or that He was so often accompanied by large crowds of men. What was unusual in His culture was the way He treated women. In this passage, we see that several women were with Him as He set out "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God" (v. 1).

Jesus went counter-cultural, encouraging women to learn, grow as disciples, and use their resources to make a difference. These women financially supported this traveling band of brothers. They were women Jesus had healed from diseases and liberated from demons, in particular Mary Magdalene is noted. Out of gratitude, they were all-in as the financial foundation for the ministry.

It is interesting that one of the women who followed and financially supported Jesus was Joanna, whose husband managed Herod's household. To save face, Herod had John the Baptist decapitated, and later abandoned the opportunity to rescue Jesus from His captors. Certainly news of Jesus had traveled from Joanna back to Herod via the palace grapevine. It makes you wonder why Joanna was convicted and convinced, while Herod remained unmoved.

Still, many women stayed with Jesus and His disciples to the bitter end, witnessing His horrific crucifixion: "Some women were watching from a distance... In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there" (Mark 15:40-41). They also anointed His body for burial (Luke 23:55-56) and were the first to discover the resurrection (Luke 24:1-8). Yes, both Mary Magdalene (formerly demon-possessed) and Joanna (wife of Herod's CFO) were still faithfully serving, becoming the first Easter evangelists (Luke 24:9-11).

Praise Jesus for the way He sees both women and men!

POEM

Banner Unfurled

A tightly rolled scroll
Its seal is released
Begins to unfurl
Its volume increased
From city to city
More banner exposed
From county to county
Good news is disclosed
The more that it opens
The more join the throng
The more that it spreads
The more pilgrims belong
The banner, a pennant
Unrolls 'long the way
It's over, it's under
It heralds new day

For blind, poor and prostitute
Sick, crazy, mad
Wherever the banner unfurls
They are glad
Ecstatic, in fact
As Love's banner flies high
For Jesus declares that
God's kingdom is nigh
So unfurl the banner
And join in the throng
Let Love fly atop you
It's where you belong

NOTES

MONDAY, MARCH 14TH - WEEK 16, DAY 1

People are Divided Over the Identity of Jesus

☐ Read Matthew 12:22-37, Mark 3:20-30, Luke 2:8-20

DEVOTIONAL

Throughout Jesus' ministry, there was debate over the identity of Jesus. In today's readings, we see that Jesus' own family thought He was out of His mind (Mark 3:21) and the religious leaders thought He was demon-possessed (Mark 3:22), while the demon-possessed called Him the Son of God (Mark 3:11). Most people would crawl into a hole if their family called them a nut job, their pastors called them demonic, and spiritually bankrupt people said they were true believers.

Rather than feeling sorry for Himself, Jesus used this to demonstrate God's authority and power. He says that He has the power to enter Satan's stronghold, overpower him, and strip him of his weapons and belongings (Luke 11:22). For this, we give glory to God. But, if we use God's work and attribute it to Satan, this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will condemn us.

This is a hard teaching. Jesus said, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Luke 11:23). In these passages, Jesus leaves little wiggle room for Sunday Christians or Occasional Attenders or Divided Interests or Spiritual Lukewarmness. Following Jesus is an all-in or all-out proposition. Jesus put it like this: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28).

C.S. Lewis said that Jesus is either Lord, Liar, or Lunatic. He was either a lunatic (mistaken about being the Son of God), a liar (knew He wasn't God's Son but deceived us), or the Lord (who was correct about His true identity).

You cannot read His claims and actions and simply declare Him a good man or a prophet. Jesus did not leave us that option. People all around Jesus struggled with His identity. We have to get our Christology right. Who do you say He is?

POEM

Standing Right in Front of You

He's everything you'd ever want
He's everything you'd ever need
And He's standing right in front of you
Will you not listen?
Do you not see?
Will you not respond?
A greater prophet than Jonah!
A greater offer than John's!
The Greatest in the universe!

NOTES

TUESDAY, MARCH 15TH - WEEK 16, DAY 2

Jesus Speaks About the Sign of Jonah

☐ Read Matthew 12:38-45, Luke 11:24-32

DEVOTIONAL

In this teaching, Jesus compares Himself to Jonah and Solomon. Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days, came forth, and preached to the people of Nineveh who repented and turned to God. With an obvious foreshadowing of His upcoming death and resurrection, Jesus told these religious skeptics, "now something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:40). But they refused to listen.

Jesus goes on to mention Solomon, who was so wise that the Queen of Sheba traveled a long distance just to hear him. Jesus said, "now something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:43). But they refused to listen.

Indeed, Israel had experienced centuries of idolatry, followed by Holy restoration, only to be followed by more idolatry. Jesus compared this to a person who is cleansed of an evil spirit, only to be in worse shape when seven more evil spirits re-enter the person.

Following Jesus is not simply a matter of saying a prayer, getting baptized, and joining the church... no more than living your life is a matter of being conceived, emerging from the womb, and getting named. Being a disciple of Jesus is a lifelong pursuit. It is embracing the One who is greater than the greatest prophets or wisest kings. It is pursuing the Holiness of God in order to live a life worthy of God. It is receiving and walking in the Holy Spirit rather than our own strength or accomplishment. It is continually saying Yes to Jesus!

POEM

We Can Not

We can not wink an eye
To conjurers who babble
To sorcerers of lies

We can not sit on fence rails
We can not neutral be
As demon's voices do assail
As souls long to be free

We can not be divided
We can not sleep in bed
While weak ones are derided
While wickedness is fed

We can not lust for miracles
We can not be lukewarm
But heed the hidden oracle
And by Christ be transformed

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16TH - WEEK 16, DAY 3

Jesus Describes His Spiritual Family

☐ Read Matthew 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35, Luke 8:19-21

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus had a family. After the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph went on to have other sons and daughters. Imagine what it was like to grow up with Jesus as an older brother, hearing all those stories about angels, Bethlehem, the wise men, angry King Herod, and their time as refugees in Egypt. When twelve year old Jesus stayed at the temple, his younger siblings probably heard Him tell their parents, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:41).

Then Jesus began His public ministry at age thirty. His siblings heard people calling their brother the Son of David (a sign that He was God's Messiah) and the Son of God (a sign that He was God Himself). They watched as Jesus drew massive crowds for teaching and healing. One crowd was so huge that Jesus couldn't even get away to eat. Mark 3:21 says, "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'"

A few verses later they find Him and someone said, "Your mother and brothers [some manuscripts say "and sisters"] are outside looking for you" (Mark 3:32). Jesus pictured His mom and his younger siblings, no doubt a bunch of young twenty-somethings. "Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3: 34-35). Luke paraphrases this a bit differently: "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 8:21).

Being part of an earthly family is a matter of biology. Being part of God's spiritual family is a matter of obedience. The demands of discipleship are much steeper than "every eye closed, every head bowed." Indeed, it might be described as, "every eye opened, every head engaged, every mouth speaking, every hand reaching, every foot going, every resource used!"

POEM

The Test

How long must one study
To pass the test
To prove one's fitness for the
Call?

Will the appetites of the
Belly take precedence
Over the hunger of the
Soul?

Is one allowed to presume
To test the faithfulness of God
By pulling out the stops of
Sensationalism?

And how much can be sacrificed
For the ego stroking moment of standing
Center stage, stealing God's glory in the
Limelight?
Pass or fail?

NOTES

THURSDAY, MARCH 17TH - WEEK 16, DAY 4

The Parable of the Four Soils

☐ Read Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:4-15

DEVOTIONAL

In this story of Jesus, the Word of God lands in four kinds of soil:

1. Hard Path People – these are non-believers who stubbornly reject the gospel altogether. We should pray that there would be a "softening" in their lives to receive Jesus as their Savor.
2. Shallow Soil People – these are seekers and new believers who get enthusiastic for Jesus only a short while, until their faith is challenged. We should disciple them to reorient their worldview to put down deep roots in their faith.
3. Thorny Patch People – these are believers who want to become committed followers of Christ, but who are choked by cares (worries of life), riches (the lure of wealth), and pleasures (desire for other things). We should disciple them to develop a lifestyle grounded in God's Word.
4. Good Ground People – these are fully devoted followers who disciple others and change the world. We should develop and deploy them to a waiting world.

A hard heart. A shallow heart. A divided heart. Or, as Jesus put it, "a noble and good heart" (Luke 8:15). It is only with the latter that Jesus can change the world. So first, invite Him to change your heart! Then you will…

- hear the word, understand it, and produce a good crop (Matthew 13:23)
- hear the word, accept it, and produce a good crop (Mark 4:20)
- hear the word, retain it, and produce a good crop (Luke 8:15)

++

POEM

Strong Seed

The heart is often hardened
Whether by heavy and frequent pounding
Or even concrete poured
It's tough from constant abuse--
Over use--
And has learned its lesson well
That new life is not welcome
Only neat, arid barrenness
Evil is a hungry bird

Strong seed, how can you even enter such a heart?

The heart is often rocky ground
No time for rich humus soil to develop
Or softening rain to enter and break
It's rough from constant neglect--
Being rejected--
And has learned its lesson well
That new life is short lived
Hope is empty, promises are broken
Trouble and persecution wither away faith

Strong seed, how can you grow in such a heart?

The heart is often weedy
Deep stable roots of bitterness
Or poison gluttonous for any nutrients
It's crowded with cares, worries--
Hurries, flurries--
And used to the space being covered and layered
With a different pace
Sabbath and grace are crowded out
Storing up wasteland treasure

Strong seed, how can you persevere in such a heart?

I pray, Sower, for my heart
To become a bed for your incarnation
May your true Vine roots creep under my worn path
And break up all the hardness
May your gentle Spirit kneel down
And lift out all the stones
May your scarred Hands dig deep
And remove all roots of sin
Only you can provide growth

Strong seed, can you wait a while longer?

May my heart, our hearts, be good soil
Welcoming, warm, fertile
And making space, finding a place
For the incarnation to be birthed--
Grown in wisdom, stature--
Favor with God and neighbor
Vine strong and branches blooming
May new, fresh fruit hang heavy, plentiful
Yielding, lovely, fragrant

Strong seed, bear your abundant, white harvest.

FRIDAY, MARCH 18TH - WEEK 16, DAY 5

The Parable of the Lamp

☐ Read Mark 4:21-25, Luke 8:16-18

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus compares keeping our faith private to lighting a lamp and covering it up. Senseless. The people who say, "I never discuss religion or politics" are the same ones who say, "The only things certain are death and taxes." Senseless. If you are going to face death someday, you better be talking about your faith. And if you have to pay taxes, you might as well discuss the politics that require them!

So many people say, "Faith is a private matter." They consider their faith a personal thing between them and the creator. This is the exact opposite of the truth – Jesus called us the light of the world! Try to keep it secret; it will be brought into the open. Try to conceal it; it will be brought to light.

On the contrary, if we press into what Jesus is saying, He will reveal even more to us. Perhaps it is like being married. The more closely you pay attention to one another, the better you know each other and the more each person reveals about themselves.

Conversely, there is no place for "casual Christianity." Jesus made it clear: those who aren't listening carefully will have taken away from them even what they think they understand. Following Jesus is an all-in or all-out adventure of a lifetime!

Take a moment to consider whether you have privatized your faith, taking the light Jesus has given you and hiding it from a dark world. Perhaps it is time to take that light and set it on a stand to light up someone's dark places.

Remember, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

POEM

Some People Say

Some people say
"Just go to church;
Attend the holy days.
With this routine
At death the scene
Will be a Heaven's welcome."

But corporate faith
Does not replace
The personal relation
Where you know Christ
And He knows you
A personal connection

Some people say
"It's not polite
To talk about religion.
It causes conflicts,
Awkwardness
Just stick to sports and weather."

But private faith
Does not replace
Your public testimony
In which your lamp
Is trimmed and bright
And Light from you is showing

NOTES

MONDAY, MARCH 21ST - WEEK 17, DAY 1

The Parable of the Growing Wheat Seed

☐ Read Mark 4:26-29

DEVOTIONAL

Some kingdom parables point toward the value of human effort (be the right kind of soil; remove your lamp from hiding and let it shine). But this parable points to the sovereignty of God. While some human effort is required (scattering the seed on the ground and harvesting the crops), everything else (sprouting, growing, budding, ripening) happens naturally. Christ's kingdom grows in a person "night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up" (v. 27).

This parable takes some pressure off the "I must accomplish this for God" concept of kingdom works. It can be discouraging to see so many churches in decline for decades. The same can be said for many Christians. Too many believers have been stagnant or declining in their faith, some for a thirty year period or more. But we must remember that God's Word is powerful and His Kingdom unstoppable.

Clearly the kingdom of God doesn't automatically grow in every "field" where there is a church or believer. Some intentional nurturing is required. This is where discipleship becomes so important. But we must not become overly discouraged when our efforts don't get the "results" we had hoped. Trust God's sovereign will to be accomplished!

As the Apostle Paul wrote, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

To God be the glory!

POEM

Little Bitty Tiny Seed

Little bitty tiny seed
Laying in my hand
So small and insignificant
I toss you to the land

I forget you, much to do
God brings forth the water
Sun shines bright, soft moon light
Earth plays alma mater

Life awakens deep within
Risking shoot emerges
Nutrients, hope, promises
Through you, plant now surges

Spreading branches, vibrant leaves
Crown your trunk stout hardy
Regal birds soon make a nest
Seedling trust, so worthy

NOTES

TUESDAY, MARCH 22ND - WEEK 17, DAY 2

The Parable of the Weeds in the Field

☐ Read Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus loved to use everyday examples to illuminate truths about God's kingdom. Once again He returned to a farming parable in communicating to the agrarian society of His day. In this parable, Jesus provides the key (vs 37-39) for what each element of the story stands for:

The Sower = the Son of Man (Jesus)
The field = the world
The good seed = people of the kingdom of God
The weeds = people of the evil one
The enemy = the devil
The harvest = the end of the age
The harvesters = angels

Now read again the parable (vs. 31-35) and the interpretation (vs. 40-43) that Jesus provided. The meaning and impact are painfully clear. There is a real eternal place called heaven, filled with God, His angels, and all those who belong to Jesus. It is as glorious as the shining sun is bright. And there is a real eternal place called hell, filled with the devil and those who died in their sins. It is as torturous as a being caught in a never-ending blazing furnace.

The Bible is clear. Everybody has sinned and nobody deserves to be in heaven (Romans 3:23; 6:23). But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus made a way for us. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.... While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8).

2 Corinthians 6:2 says, "now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Make this the day that you offer yourself to Jesus to save you from your sins. Then, tell a Jesus follower what you have done so they can walk with you!

POEM

Thistles

Thistle seed, Prickle leaf
Thorny weed a growin'
In the garden of my heart
Thistledown a-blowin'

Shrouding love, clouding joy,
Crowding fruitful planting
Hogging water, soil and sun
Nutrients a-panting

Let them grow? Do not pull?
Harvest time together?
Fire burn, thus, in turn
Wheat in barn do gather

Sowing God, Blowing God
Enemy allowing
Stake my stem, Prune me true
Fruitful life a-boughing

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23RD - WEEK 17, DAY 3

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

☐ Read Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19

DEVOTIONAL

Mustard seeds are very small. Yet it grows into a very large plant. It doesn't take a dramatic portion of initial faith in you to grow into a life-changing, world-impacting follower of Jesus!

Mustard seeds are very small. Elsewhere Jesus said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you" (Luke 17:6) and "if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).

Mustard seeds are very small. Many Christians don't think they have what it takes to be used by God. They take their mustard seeds of faith and bottle them up, hiding them in the back of the spice rack.

Mustard seeds are very small. Many other Christians trust that God will use whatever they have been given to bless others. They plant their seeds of faith, nurture them, and allow others to help them grow into shade -producing plants.

Mustard seeds are very small. With time, patience, and intentionality, we can grow into tree-uprooting, mountain-moving, life-changing, world-impacting followers of Jesus!

What are you doing with your mustard seeds of faith?

POEM

Perfect

Have you ever felt the perfect soil?
Crumble black moisture
Have you ever smelled the perfect earth?
Vibrant green dewy
Have you ever seen the perfect patch?
Warm yellow balmy
Have you ever heard the perfect vale?
Breezy blue watered
Have you ever tasted the perfect air?
Sweetened white vapor

Little mustard seed of faith
Find the perfect place in me
Nestle in where good and safe
Grow God's perfect fruit to be

NOTES

THURSDAY, MARCH 24TH - WEEK 17, DAY 4

The Parable of the Yeast

☐ Read Matthew 13:33 Luke 13:20-21

DEVOTIONAL

Like the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the yeast is about something that starts very small and grows into something much larger with a much greater purpose over time. In this instance, Jesus said the kingdom of God "is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." He left it to the imagination of the hungry listener just how much delicious, hot bread that would make!

We often underestimate the power of just a little exposure to God's kingdom over time. We don't have to read the entire Bible in a day. But daily exposure to a portion of God's Word will change our lives. We don't have to attend twelve-hour worship services, or pray for twenty four hours straight, or fast for a month at a time with no food at all. But regular times of worship, prayer, and fasting will change our lives.

Building relationships and sharing your faith naturally will usually have more impact than standing on a street corner with a bullhorn. Working hard and generously giving at least a tenth of your income to the work of the church will usually have more impact than quitting your job and giving everything at once. Getting with Christian friends to disciple each other week after week will usually have more impact than preaching a fiery sermon.

What do all of these have in common? Time. It takes time for yeast to make dough rise. It takes time for a mustard seed to grow into a large plant. It takes time to mature into the purposes God has for your life.

If you are new to the faith, be patient. But also be intentional. Become fertile soil, don't worry about the weeds, and allow God to do His work in you!

POEM

Yeast

Flour for a dozen loaves
A little pinch of yeast
Turns weighty, heavy, doughy mess
Into a blessed feast

And so it is in trials sore
A word from up above
Turns burdensome and grievous days
Into a day of Love

NOTES

FRIDAY, MARCH 25TH - WEEK 17, DAY 5

Why Jesus Taught Using Parables

☐ Read Matthew 13:34-35, Mark 4:33-34

DEVOTIONAL

In His public ministry, Jesus used stories and illustrations to teach the crowds "as much as they could understand" (Mark 4:33) about "things hidden since the creation of the world" (Matthew 13:35). Each parable has a single point, illuminating an aspect of the eternal mysteries of God.

These parables must have captured the imagination of people's minds just like the miracles did their hearts. Picture a man going home to his wife, seeing her use some yeast, then saying, "Do you know what the Rabbi said about the kingdom of God?"

In His private ministry with His disciples, Jesus "explained everything" (Mark 4:34). His explanation of the Parable of the Weeds in the Field (Week 17, Day 2) has already been explored. Is this how all of Jesus' explanations looked and sounded? Did He also explain healing and miracles and prophecy? Did He talk about social issues and theological doctrines? Did He give them private sermons on Old Testament Scriptures? Did He answer any question they had about faith? Bottom line: How did Jesus prepare His disciples to start and lead the Church after His ascension?

Perhaps there is something for us in this. As we begin our faith journey, we need understandable teachings that will lead us to the simple truth of Jesus and His kingdom. But as we mature in the faith, we need to be exposed to deeper, more difficult teachings that will stretch us and shape us into the people God wants us to become. The more you become a disciple, the more you will want Jesus to "explain everything" so that you can live into your calling and purpose.

Take a moment and ask Jesus what He wants to teach you in this season!

POEM

Story

If you give me a list of facts
Some dates to memorize
My brain might learn them for a while
And then they'll vaporize

But if a story is your gift
One interesting and turning
My brain will keep a-pondering
And soul will keep a-yearning

NOTES

MONDAY, MARCH 28TH - WEEK 18, DAY 1

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

☐ Read Matthew 13:44

DEVOTIONAL

In the parables of the mustard seed and yeast, the kingdom of heaven was compared to something small that grew into something large. In the parable of the hidden treasure, it is compared to something of great value that, when discovered, is worthy of a person selling everything they own to possess it.

In early Christianity, where there was much persecution, this had to have a profound meaning. People literally put everything on the line to become a follower of the Way. This is still true in many parts of the world today. In our affluent and tolerant American context, this parable loses some of its punch. Becoming a Christian in America almost never means loss of life or income.

Still, so many people hold back from going all-in with Jesus, perhaps because their attachments to possessions and pleasure and partnerships are so strong. What does it mean to "sell everything" in order to have the kingdom? What are the things we refuse to part with? If we detached from those things, how different would our kingdom-life look?

Recall Jesus' words from Week 13, Day 4: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21).

Make a list of the kingdom of heaven treasures. What will you do to possess them?

POEM

Treasure Hunt

Coffee shops, now out of style
For first date meeting's venture
Instead the flea market's the place
For fun, it's now the clincher

For intense hunting is the game
To find a precious treasure
Because the hunt is much the craze
And gives the seeker pleasure

Of course, our God knew all along
This natural disposition
And thus the kingdom's truths are hid
So pilgrims join the mission

To find the truth, and then sell all
A sacrifice worth making
For once the Love of life is found
It's worth the rest forsaking

NOTES

TUESDAY, MARCH 29TH - WEEK 18, DAY 2

The Parable of the Pearl

☐ Read Matthew 13:45-46

DEVOTIONAL

Everybody has heard of the Hope Diamond. But have you heard about what I call the "Filipino Pearl"? According to Forbes, it is worth over $100 million! A fisherman found it inside a giant clam off the coast of the Philippines. How much would you give that fisherman for his pearl? A thousand bucks? Everything you own? Maybe borrow a cool million to buy it from him? No brainer.

The great part of the story of the "Filipino Pearl" is that the fisherman who found it did not know what it was worth. So he hid it under his bed for a decade for good luck.

The kingdom of heaven makes the "Filipino Pearl" look like chump change. Having all the bounty of heaven in your life is invaluable. Pursuing it will take all of your being. Possessing it will demand all your life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis during World War II. He said that grace was free, but it was not cheap. He wrote, "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession… grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ…" (The Cost of Discipleship)

Indeed, grace is free, paid for by Christ on the cross. But it is also costly, because it calls us to follow Jesus at all costs. Bonhoeffer went on to write, "Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field… the pearl of great price… the gospel which must be sought again and again."

What are you doing with the kingdom God offers you? Hiding it under a bed, or displaying it for the world to see?

POEM

Great Cost

I thought I loved quite deeply
I thought my heart was pure
Until a stranger entered
Who toppled all my world

I did not like her manner
Her attitude destroyed
There was not one thing in her
Which didn't cause annoy

My dislike turned to hatred
My hatred to disgust
I daydreamed about murder
Though truly that's not just

I prayed to God my Father
About the path to take
He said, "What are you willing
To give, this ill to shake?"

"It must be something precious
A purchase for the prize
Are you willing to give up all
Your hatred to revise?

"For love, it is expensive
If this the treasure be
Surely you've an offring
C'mon now, let us see."

He took me to my jewel box
A necklace, precious, there
"I want you to give this to her
A garland for to wear."

The string of pearls He wanted
For me to give to Him
To place upon my Enemy
Was gift from my husband

A wedding laurel I had worn
From fiancee, beloved
A gift I treasured mightily
When vows were made of love

"Yes, Lord, I want Your treasure
More than my stubborn will
I give you what is priceless
My hating heart to still."

I wrapped the pearls in beauty
And offering, a sum
A sacrifice in perfect love
For this unwanted one

It did not change her manner
Her attitude remained
But on that day a pearl received
My heart lost all disdain

A field was bought, a pearl unearthed
My attitude delivered
For love was born, hate crucified
A healing full considered

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30TH - WEEK 18, DAY 3

The Parable Of The Fishing Net

☐ Read Matthew 13:47-52

DEVOTIONAL

As with the Parable of the Weeds (Week 17, Day 2), Jesus reminds us that it is the business of God, not us, to determine who will be in heaven and who will be in hell. So, we are like farmers, broadcasting seeds of faith, not fretting over the weeds that spring up. We are like fishermen, casting our nets widely, not worrying that some of the fish drug in will be no good.

But unlike weeds (which cannot change into wheat) or pufferfish (which cannot become tilapia), people can change from self-centered, far-from-God sinners into others-centered, close-to-God forgiven sinners! The key to moving from unrighteousness to righteousness is not being a better person. The key is repenting and giving your life to the only truly righteous person – Jesus!

So what do these parables say about sharing faith with others? We are not to be selective. We are not to plow up an entire field only to plant a single seed for fear that too many weeds might come along. We are not to stand by the lakeshore, pole in hand, waiting for the prize fish to swim along before we drop the line right in front of it. No, we are to broadcast the seed far; we are to cast the net widely.

At the conclusion of all these parables in Matthew 13, Jesus asked, "Have you understood all these things?" (v. 51). The question is for us as it was for them. When they said, "Yes," Jesus challenged them to become teachers who know the Word of God and disciples who know the Living Word, Jesus!

This teaching of Jesus reminds us of the call to participate in the Great Commission. Think of everyone you will come into contact with this week. Will you sow seeds of faith and cast the net of the gospel their way?

POEM

Casting Wide

Casting wide
My little net
Upon surrounding waters
Who will be listening
Who'll be caught
Up into Kingdom's glory

Once this day's
Fishing is complete
A new net I'll receive
To cast far wider
Stronger fill
Upon the open sea

NOTES

THURSDAY, MARCH 31ST - WEEK 18, DAY 4

Jesus Calms the Storm

☐ Read Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25

DEVOTIONAL

All three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) have Jesus asleep on a boat during a fierce storm, while the disciples are trying to sail across the Sea of Galilee. Only Mark says that "other boats followed."

You have to wonder what was taking place on the other boats. Did they even know that it was Jesus who had instantly ceased the squall? Or were they so busy bailing water that they never knew they were tangential beneficiaries of Christ's power? Either way, when Jesus acts, others are blessed.

When the Church brings about change in people's lives through transformation in Christ, entire communities and societies are calmed for easier sailing. Hospitals are forged. Universities are built. Homeless shelters are begun. Disaster response teams are formed. Food pantries are stocked. Marriages are restored. Families are rescued. Businesses are redeemed.

We know that the disciples went from being disillusioned with Jesus during the storm ("don't you care that we are going to drown?") to being terrified of Jesus after He calmed it ("who is this man? Even the wind and waves obeyed him!"). What is worse than the fear of drowning in a horrific storm? The fear of being in the presence of One who calms that storm!

The power of God is to be feared more than the force of nature. Let's trust Jesus to calm a world torn by violence, injustice, and disaster – bringing people to fear and faith in Him! And when Jesus calls us to be the Church – the body of Christ in the world – let us lean into the storm and trust Him to bring a calm that will benefit all the boats on the lake.

POEM

Going Deep

When you stand on dry land
and just look at the sea
You can't know the wonder, the wind blowing free

If you dip your bare toes into water so cool
You begin to experience God's cleansing pool

As you climb into ministry, go for a sail
The Spirit's fresh breath you begin to inhale

Then out in the deep where the journey's enticing
The awesome fear, wonder your soul finds inviting

If wave, though, encompasses,
pulls you down under
It's here that real faith in Christ turns into wonder

When deep down you spiral,
a sure hand He gives
You'll walk upon water, You truly will live

NOTES

FRIDAY, APRIL 1ST - WEEK 18, DAY 5

Jesus Heals a Demon-Possessed Man

☐ Read Matthew 8:28-34, Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:26-39

DEVOTIONAL

In Matthew's account of this story, there are two demon-possessed men, while Mark and Luke relay the story of just one. Perhaps the second man was not the lead character, or maybe this was a different episode, or possibly Matthew remembered something beyond what was passed down to Mark and Luke.

It is interesting that the demon-possessed man recognized Jesus as being the "Son of God" while those closest to Jesus were often confused about His identity. This man was a complete social reject: a naked, crazy, cutter who lived in a cemetery. The townspeople were no doubt familiar with him when they came to the burial caves for a funeral. But they quickly went back to "out of sight, out of mind" when they left him there with their deceased loved ones. There was no room for this outcast in their normal lives.

Once the man was freed from his legion (thousands?) of demons, his life immediately took a U-turn. The most curious sentence in this passage is when he was "sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid" (Luke 8:35). When the man was a naked, crazy, grave-dweller the people could simply avoid him. But now that he was a clothed, sane, Jesus-follower they were afraid... maybe of Jesus' immense power, maybe of this transformed man, maybe of their own wrecked view of reality.

Their fear was so great that they asked Jesus to leave! Rather than lean into the "Son of God" for hope and healing, these Gentiles told the Jewish rabbi to go packing. The saddest sentence is this: "So He got into the boat and left" (Luke 8:37). Imagine the transformation they could have experienced if they had only invited Jesus to stay with them and give them what He had given to the liberated fellow citizen!

POEM

Demoniac

My world is filled with lies and fear
I chase the shadows here and there
I run from love
I'm stripped, you see
Of all that's good
Of all that's free

I can't recall a time when I
Did not hear all condemning cries
I live for pain
I'm sick, you see
Lash out at you
Lash in at me

Abandon me as others do
You can't expect to tame this shrew
I have no worth
I'm bad, you see
No good is left
No guarantee

So to the tombs
I have been sent
To howl and bruise and not repent
I have no hope
I'm mad, you see
There is no help
There is no key

"Then Jesus gave the command
And the evil spirits departed."

NOTES

MONDAY, APRIL 4TH - WEEK 19, DAY 1

Jesus Heals Bleeding Woman & Raises a Dead Girl

☐ Read Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 8:40-56

DEVOTIONAL

After cleansing the Gentile man from a legion of demons, Jesus and His disciples sailed back, probably to Capernaum, where a large crowd "welcomed him, for they were all expecting him" (Luke 8:40).

In the midst of this crowd was a twelve-year old girl's father, Jairus, the leader of the local synagogue. His little girl was dying. These local synagogue leaders had not always been kind to Jesus. They couldn't accept His claims to be the Messiah from heaven. Yet, desperate times call for desperate measures. His daughter was dying, and he hoped Jesus had the ability to heal her. His girl's life outweighed theological and political correctness. Jesus went with the man, and the crowd followed.

People pressed close to one another, bumping & pushing & touching as crowds do. In the flow of this moving mob, Jesus felt someone "touch" him, and asked who it was. Peter and the disciples pretty much said, "Uh, everyone is touching you." To which Jesus replied, "But not like this person who zapped power from me." The guilty party was a woman who had been constantly bleeding for as long as the little girl had been alive. She had gone to every doctor available and had bankrupted herself in the process. Like Jairus, she was desperate.

A twelve-year old girl, her life before her. A woman bleeding for twelve years, worn out by life. One was dead, the other desperate. Enter Jesus, whose specialty was the dead, desperate, and disenfranchised. Where there is no breath, Jesus gives life; where no hope, He gives peace; where no possibilities, He makes a way. In what area of your life are you desperate for the touch of Jesus? Do you need a physical touch? A spiritual word? An emotional comfort? A relational tug? A habitual push? Fight your way through the crowd. Take a risk. Reach out to Jesus and expect Him to heal you today.

POEM

Synagogue Fingers

The room was filled with men
Rocking, swaying, mumbling
The prayers
Their fingers upon the fringes
of their shawls
Remembering, recounting,
re-trusting

A young man rose and moved
Undressing, caressing, adoring
The scroll
The congregation's fingers
Rising, reaching, kissing

An elder cleared his voice
and spoke
Solemnly, reverently, majesticly
God's promises
The others' fingers
Following, touching, perceiving

The bleeding woman
pondered
Believing, courageous, hoping
God's love
Her fingers
Longing, stretching, reaching

The Master turned in wonder
Knowing, seeing, encouraging
God's daughter
His finger
Summoning, beckoning,
healing

NOTES

TUESDAY, APRIL 5TH - WEEK 19, DAY 2

Jesus Heals Two Blind Men

☐ Read Matthew 9:27-31

DEVOTIONAL

"Do you believe that I am able to do this?" Jesus asked this question of two blind men who were following behind and shouting out to him. They cried out for His mercy. They wanted to see more than anything else in the world. And they had heard that Jesus had miraculous healing powers. So, He asked a simple question: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

I wonder how often Jesus asks us a similar question: Do you believe I can heal you? Do you believe I can remove that temptation from your life? Do you believe I can give you everything you need to accomplish everything to which I have called you?

The blind men answered, "Yes, Lord." As Jesus touched their eyes He said, "According to your faith let it be done to you" (v. 29). It is interesting that Jesus did not say, "Because of my power… or my touch…" Rather, He said "Because of your faith, it will happen" (NLT). It really matters how we answer the question, "Do you believe I can…?"

Prayer: Today, Lord Jesus, my answer is, "Yes!" I believe you can heal me. I believe you can free me from my sinful ways. I believe you can restore my relationships. I believe you can empower me to accomplish your will. I believe you can! Right now, Lord, I receive what you have to offer me. I have faith. May your healing be done to me. May your will be done in me. May your call be done through me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

POEM

Able

Able bodied
Abled lives
Yet deep sin
'Neath mask disguised
Blinding darkness
Soul's true eyes
Covered, hidden
Buried

Are you able?
Do you care?
This deep sin
Kept hidden there?
Blinding darkness
Can I see?
Light and hope
Risen?

I am able
I can heal
All the sin
Not blind to me
Let me open
Scales remove
Open, glorious
Vision

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6TH - WEEK 19, DAY 3

Jesus Heals a Mute Demon-Possessed Man

☐ Read Matthew 9:32-34

DEVOTIONAL

Just as the healed blind men left (see yesterday's reading), "a demon-possessed man who couldn't speak was brought to Jesus" (v. 32). This time Jesus didn't ask the man questions – at least none that Matthew recorded. Jesus simply "cast out the demon, and then the man began to speak" (v. 33). Still, this required a measure of faith from the person(s) who brought the man to Jesus, and the man himself for allowing it to happen.

In the presence of Jesus, the blind could see and the mute could talk. Demons were cast out and the power of God was displayed through Jesus! These activities caused two equal and opposite reactions. The crowds were amazed and put their faith in Jesus (v. 33). News spread like wildfire and Jesus gained popularity. Crowds swarmed Him, longing for His compassionate touch and comforting words (see v. 35-36).

On the other hand, these gospel teachings and miraculous signs were met with skepticism and derision by the Pharisees, who concluded that only a head sorcerer could have authority over sorcery (v. 34). These religious elite doubled down their efforts to silence Jesus and disperse the crowds back to the safe synagogues in their various villages.

Here is a question worth contemplating: What causes some people to draw near to Jesus and others to push away? Why do some have a soft heart and others a hard heart when they examine the life of Jesus?

Here's maybe a better question: In what ways do you have a hard heart that is pushing away certain aspects of the Christian gospel you find skeptically distasteful?

POEM

Mute

Though I might chatter all day long
I'm silent about Jesus
A demon holds my tongue in reins
I'm silent about Jesus

Not only mute, I'm paralyzed
My mouth won't move for Jesus
It's demon fear, It's demon pride
My mouth won't move for Jesus

Unlock my mouth, loosen my tongue
O, saving grace of Jesus!
I want to sing the Kingdom's song
O, saving grace of Jesus!

NOTES

THURSDAY, APRIL 7TH - WEEK 19, DAY 4

Jesus is Rejected in His Hometown

☐ Read Matthew 13:53-58, Mark 6:1-6a, Luke 4:16-30

DEVOTIONAL

In Matthew and Mark's account of Jesus returning to His hometown of Nazareth, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue. What He said is not quoted, but it did leave everyone amazed, wondering, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" (Matthew 13:54). It appears that the primary problem was that they knew Him. Familiarity breeds contempt. They "scoffed" at Him, pointing out His inherited profession (a simple carpenter) and His normal family (mom, four brothers, and several sisters). Matthew 13:57 sums it up: "And they were deeply offended and refused to believe in him" (NLT).

Jesus was amazed as well – at their unbelief. He acknowledged the difficulty of a prophet gaining honor "in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home" (Mark 6:4). Interestingly, because of their unbelief, Jesus couldn't do miracles there as He had done in other places (Mark 6:5). Faith, and the lack of faith, are powerful ingredients.

In Luke's account of Jesus' homecoming, more context is provided. Jesus' words in front of the synagogue are provided, showing Him quote from Isaiah 61:1-2, which had messianic overtones, then boldly stating, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). At first, everyone patted Him on the back with one of those "good sermon, preaching" comments that church people make. But Jesus went on to reference two other Old Testament prophets who did miracles among the Gentiles during a corrupt period in Israel's history. Jesus seemed to be claiming to be the Messiah for the outsiders as well as / instead of the insiders.

This angered them so much that they tried to push their longtime neighbor over a cliff to His death. Face it, Jesus was no hometown hero.

POEM

By Thine Own Rejected

How many people in this land
Have gifts of wisdom sure?
How many speak the truth in love
Proclaiming light most pure?
How many raise the prophet's voice
Injustice meant to cure?
And yet, because of sheer offense
The message is obscured.

Ah, Holy Jesus...
By Thine own rejected.

"Why speaks he thus? Who taught this one?
By who's authority?
We know his past, his simple life--
Where are his framed degrees?
Was not his mother cast in shame?
His fate, his destiny...
Do they not speak of God's disdain?
He has no pedigree!"

Ah, Holy Jesus...
By Thine own rejected.

Now pow'r is absent in that place;
The gates of Doubt secure.
The Unbelief went on and on
'Til Truth became obscure.
Though Grace was knocking at the door
This is a truth most sure:
Within the town of Unbelief
No miracles occur.

Ah, Holy Jesus...
By Thine own rejected...

NOTES

FRIDAY, APRIL 8TH - WEEK 19, DAY 5

Jesus Tells His Disciples to Pray for More Workers

☐ Read Matthew 9:35-38

DEVOTIONAL

What was true in Jesus' day is still true today: people are sick and confused and helpless. Echoing the words of Ezekiel 34:5-6, Jesus said people were like sheep without a shepherd. When Ezekiel penned these words from the Lord some 600 years earlier, he was upbraiding the nation's political and spiritual shepherds who "only take care of themselves while neglecting their people" (Ezekiel 34:2-4). Because of their self-absorbed neglect, the nation was conquered and exiled into Babylonian captivity.

Now, Jesus was making a similar comparison to the people of his day. Political expediency with Rome led the political and spiritual shepherds of Israel in Jesus' day to embrace the same sort of self-absorbed neglect. But rather than expect people like Herod and Caiaphas of His day to step up, Jesus called on his dirty dozen to become the spiritual shepherds the people so desperately needed.

It's all too easy to stand back and post a rant about the way our political or spiritual officials are running things. Why aren't they making a difference? It's a whole other thing to be the difference maker. Jesus' emotional response to a lack of shepherds was compassion for the wayward flock. Too often, the emotional response of the modern church to lost people is not compassion, but indifference. Sheep who are wandering will stay lost without someone to shepherd them.

Jesus compared the lost masses to a farmer's harvest, ripe for picking but lacking the work force to do it. Lost sheep stay lost; unharvested crops fall to the ground. Shepherds and harvesters are needed, and Jesus urged His disciples to pray for that need. Later Jesus sent out the twelve disciples (Luke 9) and seventy-two messengers (Luke 10). Prayer, training, experience, and mentoring were all part of the strategy Jesus used to tell the world about the Good News!

POEM

Cheer Up! Get Up! Come Along with Me!
The Kingdom's coming!
Shout for joy!

Cheer Up! Get Up! Come Along with Me!

Hear the Herald!
Join the throng!

Cheer Up! Get Up! Come Along with Me!

Raise your wine glass!
Cut the cake!

Cheer Up! Get Up! Come Along with Me!

Don your new clothes!
Dance for joy!

Cheer Up! Get Up! Come Along with Me!

Kiss your bridegroom!
Enter in!

Cheer Up! Get Up! Come Along with Me!

NOTES

MONDAY, APRIL 11TH - WEEK 20, DAY 1

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve Disciples

☐ Read Matthew 10:1-15, Mark 6b-13, Luke 9:1-6

DEVOTIONAL

First, we need to remember who the twelve disciples were. They were a ragtag collection of men that included several fishermen, a pro-Roman tax collector, an anti-Roman zealot and a greedy thief. Jesus had noted that the people of Israel were like sheep without a shepherd (see Week 18, Day 5). Now he looked at this unlikely team of disparate parts and told them that they were the shepherds so desperately needed.

Jesus gave them power and authority over demons, unclean spirits, diseases and sicknesses, telling them to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons" (Matthew 10:8). How overwhelming.

Jesus was the miracle worker, not them! Now Jesus was transferring His power and authority to them. And they were to go to the "lost sheep" of Israel, those already under the control of the neglectful political and spiritual leaders in power. How intimidating.

Further, they were to take nothing. No money. No bag. No change of clothes. They were to be completely dependent upon God to lead them to people who would welcome them into their homes and provide for them. How unnerving.

Each of these men had heard Jesus' call to "Follow Me." Now they were hearing His call to "Go for Me." It's one thing to be a passive recipient; it's another to be an active participant. Jesus is looking for people who will face the overwhelming, intimidating, unnerving request of Jesus to receive His power and authority and take it to the "lost sheep" of their culture.

Will you receive that commissioning?

POEM

From Audience to Stage

We first meet up with Jesus
To watch the things He does
We listen to His teachings
We marvel at His power
We lean in close, we root Him on
As miracles appear
We bring our friends along to watch
We marvel and we cheer
It's safe there in the audience
Just sitting in the chair
We rifle through the playbill scenes--
A distant love affair

But then one day our name is called
Audition on the stage
We're given lines of Gospel truth
The people to engage
We're stripped of everyday attire
New robes, costumes are given
Authority now in our mouth
And power sent from heaven
Our props are few, the cast is small
The stage's scene is set
The cue to make our part to shine:
To give more than we get

Once solo act, Jesus now stands
Director off the stage
His monologue now is our script
His conduct now our gauge
There'll be some scenes of happy dance
Some music and some joy
There'll be some moments filled with awe
Some new skills we'll employ
But tragedy will also come
Rejection, suff'ring, pain
But in the end, after the bow
The show will play again

For new folks in the audience
Will come, replace the cast
New ways to say the ancient script
The Message unabashed
New feet will walk onto the stage
New voices join the singing
New longing ears will hear the hope
The troupe will then be bringing
The spotlights shine, the mics recharged
New sets come into view
But in the end the story--same
Leaves audience renewed

NOTES

TUESDAY, APRIL 12TH - WEEK 20, DAY 2

Jesus Warns His Disciples of Persecution

☐ Read Matthew 10:16-42

DEVOTIONAL

In this continuation from the previous reading, where Jesus sends out the Twelve, He goes on to tell them that it might not be a bed of roses all the time. He warns them of persecution for them and those who will hear their message. Even families will be ripped apart (v. 21, 35-36). What matters is their trust, courage, honor, honesty, and humility. God will give them a way of escape, words to speak, and acknowledgment that their message is being received.

This was not a good-and-safe mission trip. This was an all-in, life-or-death way of life…a calling, a mission. But was this speech meant for their mission excursion during Jesus' life, or what they would do after Pentecost, or even a general call for all of us? Jesus said to them, "you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (v. 23). Does this mean He would come find them, or is it a reference to His resurrection, or maybe to His second coming? Curious. Still, we are all called to go for Him regardless of the cost.

The transition sentence between yesterday's "Win one for the Savior" speech and today's "Be prepared to suffer" speech is found in verse 16: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Yes, you will have power and authority to do miraculous things, but not everybody will appreciate what you do. Taking the ministry of the kingdom of Heaven into the kingdoms of Earth requires both an empowered shrewdness and a humble innocence.

In the end Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (v. 28). Who are you afraid of? Who do you aim to please? Who do you not want to offend?

++

POEM

The Man Said

At the meeting today
The Man said,
"It's time to get ready
to go out into the neighborhood."

Of course, my first thought was,
"Am I ready? What shall I say?
What am I going to do?
What shall I take?"

The Man said,
"Pack light. This isn't a vacation.
Take a partner. One will pray
While the other speaks."

My Buddy and I looked at each other.
Excited? Yes. Scared? Certainly!
Can we trust God to work through us?
Wouldn't that be cool!!

The Man said,
"Your mission is not about you.
Your mission is to the least.
Walk by faith."

We started out, looking around
For someone to "mission" on;
After all, we were "prayed up"
And had something to give out.

The Man said,
"If you forget about yourself,
You'll find me and yourself
Right smack dab in the middle of a miracle."

We went and hit some bad stuff--
Trials, mocking, persecution, challenges
Fear crept into our souls
We wanted to run.

The Man said,
"This is not a magic show
Where you are the center attraction.
This is kingdom business and You are the messengers."

With focus on the Man,
Our eyes were opened to our neighbors
Our hands held the paralyzed
Our knees lowered to pray.

The Man said,
"Even a cup of cool water
Even a tender word or touch
In My name, is power!"

We came home telling stories
Our families could not believe.
They saw in us a change.
We met the Man in the mission.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13TH - WEEK 20, DAY 3

Herod Arrests & Kills John The Baptist

☐ Read Matthew 14:3-12, Mark 6:17-29, Luke 3:19-20

DEVOTIONAL

Herod Antipas could not escape the influence of Jesus. Thirty or so years earlier, his father, Herod the Great, became paranoid when he heard that the "King of the Jews" had been born in Bethlehem. He ruthlessly ordered the slaughter of all the boys in the vicinity who were two years old and under. This is the atmosphere in which Herod Antipas was raised. Now, Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist were in the height of their ministry and influence.

Herod was an insecure man. He was annoyed that John had publicly decried his illegal marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias. Yet he liked listening to John, was intimidated by his righteous and holy lifestyle, and was afraid of the masses who considered John to be a prophet (Matthew 14:5; Mark 6:20). So Herod wanted to kill John, but he ended up protecting John from his wife, who wanted to kill him even more.

To accomplish this task, Herodias used Herod's insecurity against him. Herod gave a birthday party for himself, inviting the political, military, and influential leaders of Galilee. His wife had her daughter dance in front of all the pleased dignitaries, inducing Herod to make a rash offer to the girl. Through her mother's prompting, the girl asked for John to be beheaded. To save face, Herod removed John's head.

Most people think that becoming a follower of Jesus will only make your life better. But this week's readings highlight the potential for persecution even to the point of death for proclaiming the truth of God. Jesus would put it plainly, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25).

POEM

The Birthday Gift

On Persian rugs
They lounged and gorged
Their appetites unsated
Hypnotic drugs
Incense erotic
A den of lies created
A sexual dance
The swirling cloth
Arousal now was bated
The birthday gift
Adulterous queen:
The head of John was plated
O woe! O sorrow!
Grief Divine...
How patiently you've waited.
Will crooked roads,
Steep mounts of lust
And paths ever be straighted?

NOTES

THURSDAY, APRIL 14TH - WEEK 20, DAY 4

Herod Wonders if Jesus is John Raised from Dead

☐ Read Matthew 14:1-2, Mark 6:14-16, Luke 9:7-9

DEVOTIONAL

When Herod Antipas had John the Baptist executed, he no doubt was filled with anxiety. Remember, Herod was afraid of the people who thought John to be a prophet and was intimidated by the bold holiness he saw in John's life. Still, what's done is done.

Meanwhile, Jesus had been growing in popularity. Massive crowds followed Him everywhere. Word spread about his healings and miracles. People hung on every word. They followed Him like a throng of paparazzi. Reports about Jesus were brought to Herod, "for Jesus' name had become well known" (Mark 6:14).

Rumors were flying around about the identity of Jesus. Some thought Jesus was the reappeared Elijah, who had lived some 900 years earlier. Others thought Jesus was one of the other Old Testament prophets, resurrected and performing miraculous signs. But Herod himself agreed with those who figured Jesus was the resurrected John the Baptist, whom Herod had beheaded just recently.

Confusion over the identity of Jesus is an ongoing theme in the gospels. People look at what Jesus said and did, then try to make sense of it. Jesus Himself claimed to be God's Messiah (Christ), the very Son of God. Yet this self-revelation didn't satisfy many of the people of His day, nor does it in our day. We try to make sense of Jesus' identity, even if the logical conclusion is that He was a resurrected prophet who had been beheaded!

Once again, take some time to consider the identity of Jesus. Who do you say that He is?

POEM

Just A Carpenter?

He planted
And watched the growth
Pruning and straightening
Patiently waiting
Until ready to use

He harvested
And trimmed off the excess
Scraping and re-firing
Expertly seeing
The possibility for use

He planed
And sanded the rough areas
Smoothing and refining
Intuitively knowing
Its future use

He constructed
And brought together other pieces
Joining and abutting
Intentionally placing
All together for use

He bedecked
And polished His masterpiece
Gifting and glorifying
Powerfully embodying
His Church for use

NOTES

FRIDAY, APRIL 15TH - WEEK 20, DAY 5

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand Families

☐ Read Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-15

DEVOTIONAL

As far as I can tell, this story is the only one that appears in all four gospels between John the Baptist preparing the way for the beginning of Jesus' ministry and Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey at the end of His ministry. It obviously made a huge impression on the disciples and gospel writers.

The context is the disciples returning from their Galilean missionary journey, reporting the miraculous things they had done. At least a few of them had collected the beheaded body of John the Baptist, buried it, and then brought that news to Jesus. Facing physical fatigue, emotional exhaustion and intense hunger, Jesus and His disciples went away to a deserted place for some much needed rest.

But the people would have none of that. The Sea of Galilee is a fairly small body of water. It's really more of a large lake. While Jesus and his disciples were in the boat sailing for Bethsaida, "many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them" (Mark 6:33). Rather than turning the boat around when He saw the huge crowd, Jesus "had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34. See also Week 19, Day 5 and Week 20, Day 1).

So Jesus "welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing" (Luke 9:11). At the end of the day, Jesus miraculously fed five thousand families with a boy's lunch, gathering up twelve basketfuls of leftover bread.

Have you ever wondered if God has the compassion or capacity to meet your needs? This story answers that question with a resounding yes!

POEM

On A Bright Sunny Day

Attracted by miracles
The crowd sought The Man
Distracted by magic
They thought this the plan
On a bright sunny day

Abstracted the prophecy
The hopes in their hearts
Compacted together
No coin in the purse
On a bright sunny day

Distracted by hunger
The crowd mumbled low
Attracted to Jesus
A little boy showed
On a bright sunny day

Extracted the fish
The loaves barley broken
Exacted the blessing
By The Man was spoken
On a bright sunny day

Attracted leftovers
The baskets o'erflowing
Impacted disciples
In awe at the knowing
On a bright sunny day

NOTES

MONDAY, APRIL 18TH - WEEK 21, DAY 1

Jesus Walks on Water

☐ Read Matthew 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-52, John 6:16-21

DEVOTIONAL

After the feeding of the 5000, Jesus said good-bye, sent the people home, and told the disciples to take their boat across the lake. Then Jesus "went up on a mountainside to pray" by Himself (Mark 6:46). Think about this for a moment. Jesus is the very Son of God. He is the co-creator of the universe. Even on earth, He could heal the sick, free the demonized, and raise the dead. Yet after a grueling day when He learned about John the Baptist's death, ministered until dusk, and fed 5000 families with a boy's lunch, He chose to spend the entire night in prayer. I probably would have crashed in front of the TV.

Not only that, but Jesus kept on praying through a fierce storm. Meanwhile, the disciples were out in the middle of the lake, fighting their oars against the wind and waves. The Bible doesn't say anything about them being afraid until they saw Jesus walking on the water. They thought He was a ghost. Jesus simply said, "It is I" (Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20). The Greek for this phrase is "ego eimi," which literally means, "I AM." This could be a direct reference all the way back to Exodus 3:14, when God revealed His name as, "I AM who I AM." The disciples thought the man on the water was a ghost. Jesus basically said, "You couldn't be more wrong. I AM. I am God. You don't need to be afraid."

Peter seemed to understand what Jesus was saying. "Lord, if it's you [God Himself]... tell me to come to you on the water" (Matt. 14:28). Peter did, then doubted, then sank, then cried out for Jesus to save him. When he and Jesus got in the boat, the storm stopped. Then all the disciples started worshiping Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:32).

Again, it's about the identity of Jesus. He is the Great I AM. Who do you say that He is?

POEM

A Walk On The Lake

There are many who find walking on the beach
Along the water's edge
Peaceful and rejuvenating

Some engage in activities along the lakeside
Fishing, sharing a picnic, painting the scene
Recreational and creative

But few have taken a walk on the lake
Challenging the boundary edge of faith
Trusting and life-changing

For them, and only them, come the words
"Courage! It is I! Come ahead!"
Assuring and affirming

NOTES

TUESDAY, APRIL 19TH - WEEK 21, DAY 2

Jesus Heals All Who Touch Him

☐ Read Matthew 14:34-36, Mark 6:53-56

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus was remarkably a man of few words when it came to healing people.

⇒ "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would!" (Matthew 8:13)
⇒ "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." (John 5:8)
⇒ "Go, show yourselves to the priests." (Luke 17:14)
⇒ "I am willing. Be clean!" (Matthew 8:3)
⇒ "Be opened!" (Mark 7:31)
⇒ "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43)

But in this passage we see that He sometimes said nothing at all. As Jesus traveled from place to place, people put their sick friends on mats and placed them in the marketplaces of those communities. When Jesus came by, "they begged Him to let them touch even the edge of His cloak, and all who touched it were healed" (Mark 6:56). Now that is faith!

Previously we explored the account of Jesus being rejected in His hometown of Nazareth (less than twenty miles from Gennesaret, where today's reading takes place). There in Nazareth, "because of their unbelief, He couldn't do any miracles among them," except a few healings – presumably among those who believed (Mark 6:5).

Where there was unbelief, even the Son of God couldn't say or do much.

Where there was strong belief, the Son of God didn't have to say or do much.

Prayer: "Lord, give me great belief in you, to know that I can come to you and receive whatever you have to offer.

POEM

A Single Word, A Single Touch

A single word, a single touch
From many this would seem not much
But from the lips who spoke
"Let there be light!"
Or from the hand which molded
Clay to creation
Or from the lips which breathed
Life into nostrils
Or from the finger which wrote
The Word upon our hearts
A single word, a single touch
Brings forth the New Creation

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20TH - WEEK 21, DAY 3

Jesus Says, "I Am the Bread of Life"

☐ Read John 6:22-40

DEVOTIONAL

After feeding 5000 families, walking on water, and healing all who touched Him, the demand for Jesus escalated. The synagogue in Capernaum was no doubt overflowing with people who wanted more miraculous signs. When they realized that Jesus was not going to comply, they said, ""We want to perform God's works, too. What should we do?" (John 6:38, NLT). If Jesus wouldn't become their continual bread factory, they wanted the secret formula to his powers.

Jesus simply told them that they have one job: "believe in the one [God] has sent" (v. 29). They pushed back, comparing Jesus' single event feeding with bread to their ancestors eating the bread like substance called manna that fell from the sky for forty years, feeding their ancestors during the time of Moses some 1500 years earlier. Jesus upped the ante, declaring, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry" (v. 35).

I am the bread of life.

I AM.

On Day 1 of this week we looked at this phrase "I AM" from the Greek "ego eimi." It is a clear reference to God's self-revealed name given to that same Moses who was their ancestral hero. When Moses was in charge, the people got bread from God every day for forty years. That's nothing. Jesus was offering bread for all eternity! Here is how He put it: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day" (v. 40).

Jesus is the Great I AM. He is God in the flesh. He is the bread which eliminates spiritual hunger brings eternal life. Will you feast on Him?

POEM

Spiritual Diet

Some foods go right through you
Delicious
Don't last
Their saccharine will tempt you
Your hunger
To dash
They call to you, "Eat me!"
Fill up on
Me so
But this promise empty
Again you
Will go
Right back to the source of
The cookie
Jar plenty
Only to discover its
Pledges
Are empty

My bread is the kind that will
Stick to
Your ribs
My bread is the kind that the
Spirit
Will give
You can't find it hiding in
Comforts
You know
This nourishment different will
Cause faith
To grow
You start with the milk then
Move on
To steak
The will of My Father your
Hunger
Abate

NOTES

THURSDAY, APRIL 21ST - WEEK 21, DAY 4

Jesus Teaches on His Flesh and Blood

☐ Read John 6:41-59

DEVOTIONAL

Once again, there is a debate over the identity of Jesus. The people began to grumble. "How can this guy claim to be the bread from heaven? We know his dad and mom. He's just a human like the rest of us!" Their thoughts are echoed down through the millennia. Today many people only see Jesus as a good teacher, a trusted prophet, or a decent man.

As they were grumbling and debating, Jesus interrupted and un-muddied the water. He said that the Father had sent Him, that those who heard Him were taught by God, that only He had seen the Father, and that those who believe would receive eternal life (v. 44-47). Yesterday's feeding of the 5000 seemed like a distant memory. Their bellies were hungry again, but their heads were full… of confusion. Finally, Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (v. 51).

Their only response was, "How? You're just a guy like the rest of us!"

Then Jesus went next level, adding the imagery of blood sacrifice which they had been observing since the days of Moses. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day" (v. 53-54).

This is His body. Take and eat in remembrance of Him.

This is His blood. Take and eat in remembrance of Him.

POEM

Food In The Wilderness

"Why didn't God let us die in comfort in Egypt
where we had lamb stew and all the bread we
could eat?"

We are such cowards, LORD
We have so little faith
The comfort shackles hold us back
Our hungers shape our fates.
How will we ever change?
Turn from our needy ways?
Teach us the path
Of the wilderness
Trust you for bread each day

We are such whiners, LORD
We challenge every call
Our arrogance stuffs up our ears
Obedient response becomes small
When will we ever learn?
When will we trust your love?
Teach us the path
Of the wilderness
Believe your Word from above

NOTES

FRIDAY, APRIL 22ND - WEEK 21, DAY 5

Many Disciples Desert Jesus

☐ Read John 6:60-71

DEVOTIONAL

"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (v. 60). Sounds familiar doesn't it?

Two hundred years ago Thomas Jefferson took a razor blade and cut out the passages in his Bible related to things like Jesus' healings, miracles, and resurrection.

Beginning in the 1980's a group of scholars called themselves The Jesus Seminar, and used colored balls to vote on which things in the gospels Jesus actually said and did, calling into question most of Jesus' healings, miracles, and teachings. According to them, one of the things Jesus never said was, "I am the bread of life."

"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Jesus replied, "Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before!" (v. 61-62). In other words, they wouldn't believe even if they saw Jesus ascend to heaven.

Then comes the saddest verse in the Bible: "From this time many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer followed Him" (v. 66). Just yesterday He had fed them with a boy's lunch. Just last night He had walked on the water and calmed a raging storm. Just this morning He had healed the sick by allowing them to touch the edge of His garment. And now, they stopped following Him.

"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

++

POEM

To Whom Shall We Go?

To whom shall we go
When baby's disfigured?
To whom shall we go
When the croup gives no pause?
To whom shall we go
When the larder is empty?
To whom shall we go
When lost is our cause?

To whom shall we go
When addictions enslave us?
To whom shall we go
With an unwanted child?
To whom shall we go
With the sick and the homeless?
To whom shall we go
When our demons are wild?

To whom shall we go
When the bullies surround us?
To whom shall we go
When we can't make the grade?
To whom shall we go
When they tweet, twitter mock us?
To whom shall we go
When our shame's center stage?

To whom shall we go
When we ponder our future?
To whom shall we go
When betrayed by our friends?
To whom shall we go
When our values are challenged?
To whom shall we go
Singleness never ends?

To whom shall we go
When we meet someone special?
To whom shall we go
As we try to discern?
To whom shall we go
When emotions o'er take us?
To whom shall we go
'Gainst temptations to warn?

To whom shall we go
When at altar we stand?
To whom shall we go
Covenanting in life?
To whom shall we go
When we want to spend money?
To whom shall we go
When our life's full of strife?

To whom shall we go
When we're overjoyed, happy?
To whom shall we go
When our tears never end?
To whom shall we go
When we want faithful guidance?
To whom shall we go
When we haven't a friend?

To whom shall we go
When we're making decisions?
To whom shall we go
When our kids won't behave?
To whom shall we go
With a new call upon us?
To whom shall we go
When loved ones face the grave?

To whom shall we go
When our fortunes are soaring?
To whom shall we go
When our purse empty is?
To whom shall we go
When we're making decisions?
To whom shall we go
When life gives a pop quiz?

To whom shall we go
When our homes start to empty?
To whom shall we go
When our loved children fly?
To whom shall we go
When our bodies start failing?
To whom shall we go
When we're going to die?

"Lord, to whom shall we go? Only you have the words of eternal life."

MONDAY, APRIL 25TH - WEEK 22, DAY 1

Jesus Teaches on Legalism

☐ Read Matthew 15:1-11, Mark 7:1-15

DEVOTIONAL

For some people, religion has three ingredients. Rules. Regulations. Rituals.
But becoming a follower of God is not simply about keeping the right appearances – ceremonial hand washing, eating kosher foods, wearing the right clothes, singing the right hymns or praise choruses. You get the idea. The list goes on and on.

The rules of legalism are usually made by the legalists. The Pharisees were a sect of the Jewish religious establishment who made their mark by setting rules for others to follow. They had developed over 600 religious regulations that had to be followed to the letter by every Jewish person within their reach. Their battles with Jesus on what was and was not allowed on the Sabbath are epic. Here, they challenged Jesus and His disciples over their rules about ritual purification through washing. They asked Jesus, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" (Matthew 15:2).

Jesus responded to their pointed question with an even sharper question, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:30). He highlighted their hypocrisy of ignoring one of the Ten Commandments to honor their father and mother by taking the money that should be used for elder care of their parents and claiming it as Temple gift. Talk about a religious loophole. Jesus made it clear that authenticity is expressed from the inside-out, as is our inauthenticity. And He made it even clearer what God thinks about these empty rituals when He quoted from Isaiah 29:13,

"'These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.'

POEM

Don't Be Afraid

Don't be afraid
But fear the LORD
For the commands are
True Nannies
Custodians
and Guardians
To guide and protect you

Don't be afraid
But have reverent awe
For the "you shall nots" are
Strong hedges
Fences
and Walls
To keep and protect you

Don't be afraid
But obey the LORD
For God's warnings are
Great grace
Freedom
and Victory
To the fruit of the tree of Life

NOTES

TUESDAY, APRIL 26TH - WEEK 22, DAY 2

Jesus Teaches on Outer vs. Inner Purity

☐ Read Matthew 15:1-20, Mark 7:1-23

DEVOTIONAL

Straight up, Jesus called the rule-following Pharisees "hypocrites." Ouch. They were the blind leading the blind. Following legalists will only land you in a legalistic ditch. Don't miss out on the blessings of God by keeping the rules of humans.

So does that take us off the hook? Are we free to do whatever we want as long as we believe in Jesus? Hardly. Jesus went on to say, "For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person" (Mark 7:21-23). Double ouch.

Jesus clarified it all in Matthew 15:20, "These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them." Jesus was not saying that outward actions don't matter. Just the opposite. He was saying that things that don't matter... don't matter. Foods and worship songs and church activities are preferences, not signs of spiritual richness or poverty. Aligning our hearts with God's heart will align our actions with Godly actions. That matters!

Curiously, Jesus says faith is not about rules, regulations and rituals, but it is about obedience. In John 14:15 He said, "If you love me, keep my commands," and in Luke 11:28 He said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."

Following Jesus is not about blind legalism in which others make the rules. Neither is it about open narcissism in which we make our own rules. Following Jesus is about... following Jesus. A disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who knows, loves and obeys Jesus. Are you a disciple?

POEM

Pollution Control

There are places we try to avoid:
Sewage ditches
Vomit filled toilets
Poison saturated lakes
Pollution heavy airspace
The stench
The danger
The harm each may cause
Keep us away

And yet...

There are places I tempt to go:
Sewage publications
Vomit filled speech
Poison saturated unforgiveness
Pollution heavy arrogance
The stench
The danger
The harm may be a blind spot.
Keep me away!

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27TH - WEEK 22, DAY 3

Jesus Heals a Demon-Possessed Girl

☐ Read Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30

DEVOTIONAL

Several times Jesus had talked to His disciples about the people of Israel being lost sheep without a shepherd. When He sent the Twelve on their mission, He sent them only to the lost sheep of Israel. And here He made a stark statement to a Gentile woman begging for relief for her demon-possessed daughter, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 15:24).

Was this just to get her to display her faith? For Jesus helped many non-Jews (the official's son, the woman at the well, the naked tomb dweller, and more). Perhaps Jesus simply wanted to have His disciples see that faith is all that is required for Jesus to bless someone. It's a curious statement considering the action that followed.

The fact that Jesus traveled outside Israel with His message of the Kingdom is a sign that salvation is for all who receive Him. In her desperation, this Greek woman didn't care that Jesus was a Jew. She just wanted her daughter well.

Indeed, she didn't care that Jesus called her a dog (which was a derogatory term that Jews often used for Gentiles). Rather, she turned it into a metaphor in her favor – a dog sitting patiently at the feet of a master, waiting for table scraps. This expectant faith delighted Jesus, who healed the little girl from a distance with just a few words. Combine great faith with great power and get great miracles!

Are there any reasons that you feel distant from God, outside the grace of Jesus? Past sins? Spiritual apathy? Bad role models? Wrong ethnicity? Unfaithful lifestyle? Right now, offer all of it to Jesus, and just see if He might have some bread crumbs even for you!

POEM

Jesus, Would You Please Take Care of Her?

She came into church and took her pew.
Her heart so overflowing with grief
That she began crying
Sobbing uncontrollably
Making a scene
Making me uncomfortable
After all, I came to church
To fulfill my duty
To put in my time
So Jesus,
Make her stop
Get her out of here
Isn't there a cry room somewhere
Where she can go
So the rest of us are not disturbed?
Jesus, would you please take care of her?

He came into church and took a pew
His body so overflowing with stench
That people got up and moved away
Whispering uncontrollably
His presence made a scene
Making us uncomfortable
After all, we came to church
To see our friends
To catch up with news
So Jesus,
Send him away
Get him out of here
Isn't there another church somewhere
Where his kind go
So the rest of us are not put out?
Jesus, would you please take care of him?

I came into church and took my pew
My temple so overflowing with hypocrisy
That the Holy Spirit was quenched and moved away
Disappointed and grieved
Making me dead inside
After all, I came to church
To get a pat on the back
To be comforted in my status quo
So Jesus,
Despite my blindness
Get me to the table
Isn't there a place for even me there
Where my kind can be transformed
So the rest of your Body is not defiled?
Jesus, would you please, please take care of me?

THURSDAY, APRIL 28TH - WEEK 22, DAY 4

Jesus Heals a Deaf and Mute Man

☐ Read Mark 7:31-37

DEVOTIONAL

As we have seen, sometimes Jesus just spoke just a few words and others were healed. Sometimes He did this from a distance. Other times, people touched Him and received the healing. Still other times, He touched people, like when He put mud on the blind man's eyes. Here Jesus used a peculiar combination: He put his fingers in each of the man's deaf ears. Then He spit. Then He touched the man's tongue. Finally He spoke just one word, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). And the guy could hear like an owl and talk like a parakeet.

Once again, Jesus was in Gentile territory. He left Tyre and Sidon, which were north of Jewish territory, and traveled east of Jewish territory to the Decapolis (which literally means "ten cities"). This ten city Gentile region was on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee and Jordan River. It was in this region that Jesus had freed the naked tomb dweller, sending his legion of demons into very non-Jewish pigs.

Just like He had often done with Jewish crowds, Jesus commanded this Gentile crowd to keep everything on the down low. And just as with Jewish crowds, the Gentiles completely ignored Him. The more Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone, "the more they kept talking about it" (v. 36). They just couldn't help themselves. As Luke 7:37 says, they "were overwhelmed with amazement."

In what ways are you overwhelmed with amazement at the ways of Jesus in your life? Take a moment and recount all that you have read about Jesus so far in this year-long study. Breathe in and reflect on all that Jesus has done for you in your life. Be amazed. Be overwhelmed. Be contagious and keep on talking about it until somebody listens!

POEM

I.M.M.E.D.I.A.T.E.L.Y.
I - Invitation given
M - Movement new
M - Meaning! Finally!
E - Endeavor obedience
D - Dare changed life
I - Invoke Holy Spirit
A - Answer truthfully
T - Testify to wonders
E - Expend all energy
L - Lengthen faith
Y – Yes!

NOTES

FRIDAY, APRIL 29TH - WEEK 22, DAY 5

Jesus Heals Many People

☐ Read Matthew 15:29-31

DEVOTIONAL

Have you ever wondered what Jesus did and said on all those days where the details were not recorded by the four Gospel writers? Perhaps some of them looked like this day, when "Great crowds came to Him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at His feet; and He healed them" (v. 30). How were they healed? Maybe some touched Him. Perhaps He touched some of them. Probably He spoke a few words to some. Possibly He healed some from a distance. All in a day's work.

One of those who was with Him every day for His three years of public ministry said, "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book" (John 20:30). In his next chapter, John concluded his gospel by adding, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

While we cannot know all that Jesus did while He was on Earth, we can know why He did it. Why did Jesus heal? So that people could have a healthy life in every way. When He healed others, "The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel" (Matthew 15:31). John gives us a more personal understanding: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Do it today and claim eternal life in His name!

POEM

Does It Bother You?

Does it bother you
When a picture is crooked on the wall?
When a brother or sister starts to fall?

Does it bother you
When your house is a mess?
When evil is left unaddressed?

Does it bother you
When flower beds fill with weeds?
When people spew forth violent seeds?

Does it bother you
When the trail is steep?
When the church falls asleep?

Does it bother you
When the deep valleys shadow?
When those without hope do not know?

NOTES

MONDAY, MAY 2ND - WEEK 23, DAY 1

Jesus Feeds Four Thousand Families

☐ Read Matthew 15:32-39, Mark 8:1-10

DEVOTIONAL

How hungry are you? Are you hungry enough to spend three whole days with Jesus without eating?

Jesus was still in the Decapolis, the Gentile region of Ten Cities on the non-Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee and Jordan River. We have seen that Jesus ministered to Jews and Gentiles alike, and that often the Gentiles came to Him with just as much spiritual hunger as His own Jewish people.

These folks stayed with Jesus out on the mountainside three days, bringing all their friends for His healing touch (see yesterday's reading). Once again, we get a glimpse of the heart of Jesus, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance" (Mark 8:2-3). Keep in mind that Jesus hadn't eaten for three days either.

You would think that His disciples would have reminded Jesus that He fed over 5000 families with a boy's lunch, so this crowd of 4000 families should be no problem. But they had short memories. Or little faith. His disciples just said, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" (Matt. 15:33). Who could blame them? They only had seven loaves of bread (which was two more than they had when Jesus fed even more families). And they had witnessed Jesus reprimanding people because they wanted Him to be a walking bread-making factory (see Week 21, Day 3).

Nonetheless, Jesus did it again. He fed them, sent them home, and got in the boat to head back to Jewish territory. Their hunger was satisfied. How hungry are you?

POEM

Grocery Check Out Line

Give me, Give me
I want more!
See the candy
in the store?
I see this
And I want that
Grabbing, grabbing's
Where I'm at
As you're in the
check out aisle
Don't you see
the candy pile?
Instant pleasure's
My desire
I'll consume--
You be the buyer.

Stop it now
You naughty child
You're desires are
Wicked, wild
Stop this pester--
Testing God
Lean upon His
staff and rod
Hush, now stop this
selfish whining
God's in charge of
your refining
You He'll feed
With priceless food
Are you hungry?
This is good!

NOTES

TUESDAY, MAY 3RD - WEEK 23, DAY 2

Jesus Refuses to Perform for Religious Leaders

☐ Read Matthew 16:1-4, Mark 8:11-13

DEVOTIONAL

When I was a kid, my mom often spoke the well-known ditty:

Red sky in morning, sailors take warning;
Red sky at night, sailors' delight.

I knew this was an old adage, but as a child I didn't know just how old it was. I can picture Jesus being taught pithy wisdom from His mom when He was just a kid too.

After all the miracles and healings that Jesus performed, "The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven" (Matthew 16:1). This kind of prove-it-to-me prodding wore Jesus out. Mark says that Jesus "sighed deeply" (Mark 8:12). Three straight days of healing people without eating didn't get Jesus down. But hypocritical questioning exasperated Him.

You can read the sky. You can smell a rain coming. You can feel a storm brewing. So you think that there must be some sign that will prove who Jesus is and what His kingdom is all about. Jesus pointed to His coming crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection on the third day. When He was crucified, "It was… about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining" (Luke 23:44-45). Jonah was in the belly of a fish three days. Jesus would be in the belly of the earth three days. Then He rose "just after sunrise" (Mark 16:2). If that won't convince you, you're not really interested in signs from heaven.

Dark sky of mourning, sinners take warning;
Bright sky in morn, sinners reborn!

POEM

That Feeling…

You know that feeling?
When someone mocks something precious?
You are thrown off guard.
You want to fit in.
Secretly, you want to be faithful
To a value, a moral, a friend
But something inside you
Tempts you to just stay silent
Or even
Possibly
Betray
Or
Deny

So what will it feel like
When we are before God's throne
Shaking in our shoes
Longing to be let in
Secretly knowing the times un-faithful
To the Gospel, the rescue, the Spirit
No longer can you rationalize
Not in the presence of Truth
For even
Jesus can
Say
I don't know
You

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MAY 4TH - WEEK 23, DAY 3

Jesus Warns About the Yeast of Religious Leaders

☐ Read Matthew 16:5-12, Mark 8:14-21

DEVOTIONAL

After Jesus' encounter with the sign-seeking Sadducees and Pharisees, He turned to His disciples and said, "Be careful.... Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6). Jesus had just called those religious leaders "a wicked and adulterous generation" (Matt. 16:4). He didn't want their self-centered, hypocritical thinking to corrupt His followers.

But, as usual, the disciples didn't get it. I like those guys. They speak for me. They were with Jesus 24/7 and were clueless most of the time. They were with Jesus for three years. I just went to seminary for three years. So, the Chosen Dozen took Jesus literally when He talked about the "yeast" of the religious establishment. They thought Jesus was jabbing at them for forgetting to bring bread on the boat trip. Jesus must have rolled his eyes and quizzed them:

"When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand [Jews], how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They replied, "Twelve." Jesus went on, "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand [Gentiles], how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." Jesus just looked at them and said, "Do you still not understand?"

The twelve basketfuls of bread symbolically demonstrated that Jesus was the Messiah of all the twelve tribes of Israel. The seven basketfuls gathered in non-Jewish territory likely demonstrated symbolically that Jesus was the Messiah for all the Gentiles as well (see Deuteronomy 7:1).

The disciples were concerned about bread for the belly. Jesus was concerned about being the Bread of Life for all the world. Even now, Jesus is looking at us and asking, "Do you still not understand?"

POEM

Oops! I Forgot the Bread

As I packed my lunch today
I made sure the carrots were trimmed
And in their zip-locked bag.
I made sure I had two cookies,
(Only two--no more, no less
Just as my mother had taught me)
And my milk money.
(When had the price gone up from
Two cents to over a dollar?)
As the apple weighed down
My brown bagged lunch,
I thought all was complete
But
Oops! I forgot the bread.
The peanut butter sandwich was
Left behind on the counter.
The center course,
The nutritional protein and
Carbohydrate combination
For sustaining energy through
The tests at the end of
The semester.
How could I forget the main course?

As I prepared for my day
I made sure to shower and
Deodorize the body to keep it fresh.
I made sure my hair was coiffed,
(Foundation, blush, liner, mascara--
Just as my mother had taught me)
And my cup of coffee in hand
(When had the price gone up from
Fifty cents to the Starbucks' fiver?)
As the Apple laptop weighed down
My leather satchel
I hit the road in my car
But
Oops! I forgot the Bread.
The presence of the Spirit was
Left behind, uninvited, on the dusty cover
Of my Bible--
The power of Christ and
The love of God
For sustaining energy through
The trials and temptations of
The day.
How could I forget the Mainstay of my course?

NOTES

THURSDAY, MAY 5TH - WEEK 23, DAY 4

Jesus Heals a Blind Man in Two Stages

☐ Read Mark 8:22-26

DEVOTIONAL

Bethsaida was an important community to Jesus. It was the hometown of Peter, Andrew and Philip. It was the site of the feeding of the 5000 families. And it was condemned by Jesus for lack of faith despite the witnesses He performed there.

One of those miracles is recorded in today's reading. This episode is full of questions for me:

- Why did Jesus lead the man out of the village of Bethsaida to heal him?
- After healing him, why did Jesus tell the man not to go back into Bethsaida on his way home?
- Why did Jesus spit on the blind man's eyes? Other times He did something similar, but other times He did not?
- Why did Jesus restore the man's sight in two stages
- Why didn't Jesus use spit for stage two?

By this far into the life of Jesus, it's not that fact that Jesus healed a blind man that is startling, but the quirky details are captivating. Maybe Jesus was just mixing things up a bit. Or perhaps He was teaching His disciples something – like keep persisting in prayer and faith when you don't see instant results. Or possibly it took two tries due to the lack of faith in the community, like when Jesus couldn't do many miracles in his own hometown of Nazareth because of their lack of faith (see Week 19, Day 4). It's hard to tell.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you have faith that He can do anything? Do you trust Him enough to "beg" Him to touch you at your place of brokenness? Do you have confidence to bring your hurting friends to Him? Do you believe in Jesus?

POEM

Why So Long?

I know that you are able
I know you hold the key
To any trial I'm facing
To any unmet need
I know within a moment
A word from you suffice
A touch, a look will fix it
Your healing is precise
So Lord, I ask this question
Please do not say I'm wrong
But when it comes to my hard things
Why do you take so long?

NOTES

FRIDAY, MAY 6TH - WEEK 23, DAY 5

Peter Proclaims Jesus as the Christ (Messiah)

☐ Read Matthew 16:13-20, Mark 8:27-30, Luke 9:18-21

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus asked His disciples two questions. The first one was, "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asked this probing question in an interesting setting. Caesarea Philippi was well-known as a pagan city that worshipped the half-goat fertility god Pan, as well as a multitude of other gods. The people had even carved niches into the rock wall of the mountainside for each of the gods' statues to be placed for worship. I picture Jesus sitting with His disciples at this place of Greek mythology and asking the question, "Who do people say that I am?"

Nobody said that people thought of Jesus like one of those Greek gods. But they did say that some people thought of Jesus as a reincarnated Jewish prophet. Hardly an upgrade.

Jesus' second question was, "Who do you say that I am?" It's always easier to quote the word on the street than to stick out your own neck with your own answer. Yet Simon Bar-Jonah did just that, proclaiming, "You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Then, glancing toward the pantheistic niches carved in the rock face, and motioning toward Simon for his solid answer, Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter [which means "rock"], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:17-18).

Jesus is not just another god in a long line of them. He is not simply a good prophet. He isn't merely a moral teacher. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. We have to get this right. Our Christology (that is, our study and understand of who Jesus is) matters. Because of Peter's rock-solid answer, Jesus offered him "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Here's the question for today: Who do you say that Jesus is?

POEM

Who Am I?
Though Jesus
Asks the question,
"Who am I?"
I just realized
My answer
Each day
Determines
Who I am.

NOTES

MONDAY, MAY 9TH - WEEK 24, DAY 1

Jesus Predicts His Death for the First Time

☐ Read Matthew 16:21-28, Mark 8:31-9:1, Luke 9:22-27

DEVOTIONAL

Bold Peter. He was the first to proclaim Jesus the Messiah and Son of God. Now he was the first to rebuke Jesus for predicting He would be killed. For the first act, Jesus called him "Rock," and for the second one, Jesus called him "Satan," because what he was saying was just as tempting as Satan in the wilderness.

At that point, Jesus called the crowd to join Him and His disciples (see Mark 8:34). So much of the time Jesus is with many more than the Twelve. It was to this entire crowd that Jesus gave the offer to follow Him through self-denial, up to the point of martyrdom.

Today, many pastors decide whether to stay in a church derived from their own popularity and comfort. Many churchgoers do the same, based upon whether their consumeristic wants are satisfied. It's all the rage these days to talk about making disciples of Jesus. But not many look at following Jesus as a life-sacrificing, world-surrendering, self-denying endeavor. Few people choose a church because it challenges them to subjugation to the authority of God. Most choose and stay in a church because they like the worship style, the friendships, and the opportunities offered to them and their families.

I wonder how often Jesus would say to us all, "Get behind me, Satan.... You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns" (Mark 8:33). In yesterday's reading, the disciples answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Today, Jesus answers an unspoken question, "Who do I say you are?"

Anybody can follow the pantheistic gods of the world which feed our narcissistic desires. But who can follow the One True God who calls us to set our desires, even our lives, aside for His purpose? It's a thought worth considering.

POEM

Back Seat Driver

There is nothing more ridiculous
Than to have a child of three
Strapped in his safety seat
With a pacifier
Clipped onto his bib
Telling his father
How to drive
Or
Which way to turn

Jesus,
Put this ridiculous picture
Of a toddler
Back seat driver
In my mind
Every time I question
Your will
Or
Your way

NOTES

TUESDAY, MAY 10TH - WEEK 24, DAY 2

Jesus is Transfigured with Moses & Elijah

☐ Read Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36

DEVOTIONAL

Broadly speaking, the Old Testament is expressed by the term "the Law and the Prophets." Moses is the champion of the Law, as God gave the first five books of the Bible to us through him some 1500 years before Jesus. Elijah is the champion of the Prophets, as he is among the first of many people God spoke and acted through to correct His wayward people, ranging from 900 to 400 years before Jesus. Moses and Elijah were iconic figures, representing all of Hebrew Scripture.

A week earlier, the disciples told Jesus that the word on the street was that He was a reincarnated prophet, including possibly Elijah. Here Jesus proved that He was not a thousand year-old resuscitated prophet. Rather He is the eternal Son of God!

In this mountaintop experience with Peter, James and John (the three people in Jesus' inner circle), Jesus is transfigured (or transformed) right in front of their eyes. His face shone like the sun and His clothes were variously described as bright as light (Matthew), bleached fabric (Mark), and lightning (Luke). Appearing with Jesus were none other than Moses and Elijah, the bastions of the Law and the Prophets, the forebears of faith itself. They too "appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus" (Luke 9:30).

Picture the scene. Jesus was in the presence of Moses and Elijah (the pillars of the Old Testament) and of Peter, James and John (who would forge the New Testament after Jesus' ascension). In the midst of that powerful scene, God spoke from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5). A few decades later Paul met with Jewish leaders in Rome. "He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus" (Acts 28:23). Everything points to Jesus!

POEM

Can't We Just Stay Here?

As a child
Vacations were rare
There was a lot of work
And some play
But mostly the routine
The mundane
Of chores and meals
And clean up
And baths
Of homework
And ironing
And canning
You know
Life

But one in a while
We'd get in the car
And drive to new vistas
And see bubbling streams
High mountains
We'd sit around campfires
And sing and tell stories
Can't we just stay here
Just never move
From this joy
And intimacy
And beauty
You know
Love

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11TH - WEEK 24, DAY 3

Jesus Heals a Demon-Possessed Boy

☐ Read Matthew 17:14-20, Mark 9:14-29, Luke 9:37-43a

DEVOTIONAL

The problem with mountain-top experiences is that they must inevitably come to a disappointing end. Ask anyone who has been to church camp, a mission trip, the Holy Land, or a revival. Life on the plains just looks different than it does from the mountain perch. That brings us to the Other Nine. While Jesus was up on the Mountain of Transfiguration with the Inner Three, the Other Nine were at the foot of the mountain. They were surrounded by crowds of needy people, barbs from argumentative scholars, and cries from the desperately broken.

Without Jesus, Peter, James and John, the Other Nine no doubt felt rudderless and leaderless. The crowd must have sensed their anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, for when they "saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him" (Mark 9:15). Jesus wanted to know what all the commotion was about. What a contrast. Jesus had just been declared the Son of God by the Father Himself. What glory! Now they were met with the harsh realities of life away from the mountaintop: disagreement and argument and helplessness.

The topic of discussion was that a man had brought his son to the Nine for healing. This was reasonable, for Jesus had given the Twelve authority and power to cast out evil spirits and demons, and to heal every kind of disease and illness (see Week 20, Day 1). But the Nine couldn't heal this boy, leaving his life at risk. At this Jesus must have looked at the Nine when He said, "You unbelieving generation… how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19). Ouch. But the boy's daddy proclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

The Other Nine not only missed experiencing the Transfiguration, they also missed experiencing the glory of God because of their lack of faith. Like the boy's father, let us proclaim, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

POEM

The Process

an ore
must come out of the mine
go into the fire
shaped by the hammer's blow
then into the water
in order to become
true

a son
was out of his mind
thrown into the fire
lived with epileptic suffering
tossed into the water
in order to meet
Truth

a disciple
must have renewal of the mind.
receive Holy Spirit fire
endure the press of persecution
be buried in baptismal water
in order to be
transformed

NOTES

THURSDAY, MAY 12TH - WEEK 24, DAY 4

Jesus Predicts His Death for the Second Time

☐ Read Matthew 17:22-23, Mark 9:30-32, Luke 9:43b-45

DEVOTIONAL

The first time Jesus told His disciples that He would suffer, be killed, and rise from the dead, Peter reprimanded Him and said, "Never, Lord!... This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22). This time it simply says, "the disciples were filled with grief" (Matthew 17:23), while Mark and Luke point out that they really didn't understand what he was saying, but were afraid to ask. Who could blame them? The last time Jesus called one of them Satan.

I wonder which part they didn't understand and which part filled them with grief: "betrayed... killed... [or] raised..." The prediction that one of them would betray Him might have evoked denial, that He would be killed might have brought on grief, and that He would be raised from the dead might have elicited confusion. Who knows?

I suppose it is human to want Jesus to keep on feeding, keep on healing, keep on teaching, and keep up with what we're needing. The Christmas Jesus is one of victorious majesty – God becoming flesh, angels singing praises, and people bring gifts. But the Good Friday Jesus appears to be one of inglorious defeat – God strangely silent, demons bringing darkness, and people bearing nails. When Jesus was preaching, teaching, and healing, His disciples were in awe. When He spoke of betrayal, death, and resurrection, they just didn't have a compartment for their emotions to fit into neatly. They gave up their lives to follow Jesus. Now Jesus was giving up His life?

We're back to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Take a moment and reflect on who Jesus is, from His creation of the universe to His incarnation in the womb of Mary to His miraculous life to His crucifixion and death to His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

POEM

The Wisdom of God

The Wisdom of God
Cannot be written upon
Fortune cookies
Costume jewelry
Rubber bracelets
Inked tattoos

The Wisdom of God
Cannot be diluted into
Catch phrases
Sing-song slogans
Silly banter
Acronyms

The Wisdom of God
Is to be written upon
Clean hearts
Praying lips
Open hands
Teachable minds

NOTES

FRIDAY, MAY 13TH - WEEK 24, DAY 5

Jesus Tells Peter to Find a Tax Coin in Fish's Mouth

☐ Read Matthew 17:24-27

DEVOTIONAL

The Jews were taxed for all kinds of things by the Roman occupiers: road tax, bridge tax, grain tax, wheel tax, animal tax, etc. But they also had to pay a Jewish Temple tax for the upkeep and repairs on the Temple in Jerusalem, even if they were far away in Capernaum. This two-drachma temple tax was required to be paid by Jesus and His disciples there, because they had made Capernaum their base of operations.

Just as a son of a king is exempt from duties and taxes imposed by his father, so Jesus, as the Son of God, was exempt from the Temple tax. He didn't seem to be challenging the tax itself. But as King of Kings, Jesus and His disciples should have been free from paying it.

But Jesus didn't want to offend anyone, so He told Peter to go catch a fish out of the Sea of Galilee. That fish would have a four-drachma coin in its mouth for Jesus and Peter's Temple tax.

Only Matthew, the former tax collector, tells this story, which had to be one of thousands of things Jesus said and did that were not reported, or reported by only one of the Gospel writers. Perhaps Matthew wrote it down because of the impact of seeing God provide the finances to pay a human tax. Certainly, Matthew had seen people squirm and beg and cry when they couldn't pay the taxes he was collecting on them.

When he walked away from the tax collector's booth, Matthew might have thought he was walking away from taxes. Not so. As followers of Jesus, we live in the world as responsible citizens, even though our true citizenship is in heaven (see Philippians 3:20).

POEM

Lessons for a Fisherman

To learn to fish
It takes some gear
A pole, a reel, a hook
A fly, a net, a pail, a boat
A seat, a day, a book

To catch a fish
It takes some skill
A watchful eye, a knowing
Right time of day, a fish's way's
And patience must be growing

To pay your tax
It takes some coin
Fore thought, savings, intention
I'd never think my fishing skills
Would head in this direction

To learn from Christ
It takes some turns
In my will and my thinking
He says go fish to pay my tax?
I follow without blinking

NOTES

MONDAY, MAY 16TH - WEEK 25, DAY 1

The Disciples Argue About Who is the Greatest

☐ Read Matthew 18:1-5, Mark 9:33-37, Luke 9:46-48

DEVOTIONAL

These days, a lot of chatter goes on about who is the G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time).

- Brady or Manning?
- Messi or Ronaldo?
- James or Jordan?
- Federer or Djokovic?
- Greenbaum or Ellcessor?

Iconic boxer Muhammad Ali famously said, "I am the greatest." Later he retracted his statement by saying, "I'm not the greatest. I'm the double greatest. Not only do I knock 'em out, I pick the round. I'm the boldest, the prettiest, the most superior, most scientific, most skillfullest fighter in the ring today" (Reuters, 6/4/2016).

It's no surprise that Jesus' testosterone-laden tribe of Twelve were literally arguing with each other about which one of them was the greatest. I can just hear the conversation.

Peter: I was the first to call Him the Messiah!
Andrew: Yes, but I brought you to Him!
John: Fine, but I'm the disciple whom Jesus loves!
Judas: But I've got the money!

Jesus just stared at those guys and flatly stated, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). To demonstrate, Jesus picked up a little child in that culture which devalued children, then told His tag team of Twelve to become like that in humility and love. As always with Jesus, the way up is down. Do you want to be the GOAT? Become a scapegoat.

POEM

Like A Child

When I was a child
I spoke like a child:
I'm hungry.
I'm tired.
I'm happy.
I'm sad.
It hurts.
Let's play!
Yipee!
I'm scared.
I want my Daddy.

Simple sentences.
No complications
Or multi-syllable words
To confuse
Or impress
Anyone.

So when Jesus
Tells me to become
Like a child---
Maybe it is the
Simple
Basic
Bare bones
Naked communication and trust
He is requesting from
Me

May my faith and my prayer
Be like a child's--
I'm hungry.
I'm tired.
I'm happy.
I'm sad.
It hurts.
Let's play!
Yipee!
I'm scared.
I want my Daddy.

NOTES

TUESDAY, MAY 17TH - WEEK 25, DAY 2

John Reports Forbidding Use of Jesus' Name

☐ Read Mark 9:38-41, John 9:49-50

DEVOTIONAL

In the last reading, we saw Jesus correcting His disciples' egotistical debates about which one of them was the greatest. They got it. All twelve of them were a team. They were all equal. But at least they were THE Twelve!

Today, we see that John came to Jesus, upset that outsiders were using Jesus' name to cast out demons. Just a few verses earlier, in Luke 9:40, we saw that nine of Jesus' disciples working together couldn't cast a demon out of a single boy. It must have infuriated them that someone outside their group was driving out multiple demons. John, one of the Inner Three, joined forces with the Other Nine, because they were all part of the Chosen Twelve. All for one and one for all, I suppose.

Jesus simply said, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). Contrast this with Matthew 12:30, when Jesus said, "Whoever is not with me is against me." Jesus wasn't interested in whether a person was in a particular group. Rather, He cared about what the activity and trajectory of their lives revealed.

In this passage, Jesus also said, "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me" (Mark 9:39). So, rather than criticizing people in other churches or denominations, we should be encouraging them to do mighty things in the name of Jesus. That is what will expand the kingdom and transform the world!

Take some time right now to pray for followers of Jesus from other churches or networks or denominations than your own.

POEM

Who Made You House Sheriff?

A comic once told a child story
Of stealing some food from the frig
A serving of jello---
Offended one bellowed
"My brother! He ate it!
No fib!"

The brother who stole the gelled dainty
After the hard spanking was given
Then turned to the other
"You mean little brother!
Who made you house sheriff?
You Louse!"

It seems there's no lack of fault finding
In families or churches or work
How easy to blame
Or lay claim to God's name
As we judge or condemn
Each other

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MAY 18TH - WEEK 25, DAY 3

Jesus Warns Against Causing Sin

☐ Read Matthew 18:6-10, Mark 9:42-50

DEVOTIONAL

The setting for this episode is still the argument all the disciples had about who was the greatest. To settle it, Jesus picked up a little child and said, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me" (Mark 9:37) and "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4).

As Jesus was holding the child in His arms, John complained about outsiders doing insiders' ministry work. I picture Jesus rubbing the head of the little child as He said, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). Remember, children were at the bottom of the pecking order in that culture. Jesus used this moment with a child to teach them that, in the kingdom of God, there really is no top or bottom, no first or last, no insider or outsider.

Now, Jesus pushed the metaphor further, saying, "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea" (Mark 9:42). A typical millstone weighed a thousand pounds or more. Try wearing that as a life preserver!

Jesus then turned all this talk about outsiders and inferior others inwardly. He wanted the disciples to stop thinking about who was less important than they deemed themselves. So he pressed them to consider in what ways their own hands or feet or eyes have led them into sin. Rather than inflating our own egos by comparing ourselves with others, Jesus says we should measure our own actions against our perfect God. Indeed, "It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell" (Mark 9:47). Here's the question: How do you measure up?

POEM

Necklace Heavy

Each time a see a set of chains
Of gold around a neck
I wonder what is going on
Why would someone bedeck
Their body so
See, I don't know
The bejeweled turtleneck

Is it to demonstrate their power
The money they can spend?
Is it to show off all their wealth
Yet not a coin to lend
Or give the poor
Those broken, sore
But through the ranks ascend?

A necklace heavy, pendant stone
Will not on me be found
To be cast into lake of fire
And sink to bottom, drown
Be careful now
What's on your brow
Do not a child confound

NOTES

THURSDAY, MAY 19TH - WEEK 25, DAY 4

Jesus Teaches on Ministry with Other Believers

☐ Read Matthew 18:15-20

DEVOTIONAL

Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there is bound to be conflict! If only being a Christian exempted us from human clashes. Human relationships are hard, even among believers. This passage gives us a methodology for restoring those broken relationships.

The goal is that the offender will listen, confess, and reconcile. When irreconcilable differences persist, it is usually because the offender refuses to even listen. It takes great humility to listen and admit wrongdoing. Jesus gave us a three-step approach for the offended person to take:

Go privately and point out the offense.
Take one or two others with you as witnesses.
Take your situation to the church at large.

If the offenders "refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (v. 17). And how did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors? Just ask the author of this gospel, the former tax collector Matthew! Jesus treated them with grace and mercy. He discipled them as real believers and followers who needed mentoring, prayer, friendship, accountability, and correction.

People matter to God, and that includes people in the Church! Does this mean that people can get away with any behavior they want? Of course not. It might be appropriate for the church to ask someone to step away from leadership for a season as they are being restored in their relationships. As Jesus actually said, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (v. 20).

++

POEM

Chopping Block

One day, in the fall at my
grandmother's house,
She took me out back to the barn.
An old tilted shed which served well as a coop
Was surrounded by scratch weathered yard.

She took hold of my hand
as we opened the gate,
Then told me, "Cling close to the fence.
There's a very mean rooster who'll
attack you for sure
If he thinks you are on the offense."

As she clucked to the flock and
she circled the brood
My grandma crept up on that bird.
As he crowed and he strutted, puffed out his
bright pride
She whispered, "Shh...don't say a word."

Then quick as a wink she swooped down
on her prey;
He fought and he crowed and he pecked.
But she, more determined, held on
with strong hands
Then on chopping block stretched out his neck.

With swift, skillful motion she
chopped off his head
Then released. How his body went flopping!
He ran round in circles,
wings pumped up and down
Until spent, his body then dropping.

"Now that that's done, we've more work to do.
The kettle's a-boiling. We'll dip him,
Then pluck him and gut him and wash
him real clean
Then cook him and baste him and eat him."

The process was gory and stinky, for sure,
For city child now in the country.
But by supper time, after potatoes
were peeled,
The table was laid with full bounty.

I think of that rooster today as I read
About sinning and chopping off members.
I think of that rooster and loss of his head
That day long ago in September.

I think of his pride--how he strutted
and crowed;
How he thought himself ruler of all.
I think of the bravery my grandma displayed-
Determined he'd no longer maul.

But were I the chopper defending my soul
From the pride and the sin therein lying
I'd not only need to chop limb or pluck eye
But my whole body, thus be a-dying.

There'd be nothing left flopping
or running around
For it all would be minced if done rightly.
For there's nothing worth saving;
sin's deep to the core.
If honest, it all is unsightly.

So I'm glad for my Savior, my Jesus, my Lord
Who not only warns and then guards me,
But swoops down on my sin and
determinedly holds it
Then goes to the chopping block for me.

He then sets a table--a banquet, for sure--
His labor, my blessing, unmeasured.
We sit down together, he, host, me, the guest,
A meal that I truly now treasure.

FRIDAY, MAY 20TH - WEEK 25, DAY 5

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

☐ Read Matthew 18:21-35

DEVOTIONAL

In the previous passage, Jesus pointed out the eternal nature of earthly forgiveness: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

In today's passage, He talked about the call upon believers to forgive endlessly. The Jewish leaders had taught people to forgive others up to three times. Peter upped that to seven. Jesus blew it up when He said to forgive seventy-seven times. By the way, the Greek here can be translated as seventy times seven. The point is not to count. In our modern world, Jesus might have said to forgive 707 times. For those of you who have forgotten basic math, that's 70x70x70x70x70x70x70. Try to keep track of that on your smart phone.

To illustrate His point, Jesus told a parable that pictures God as a master who has forgiven us a billion dollars' worth of debt, while we hold a thousand dollar grudge against other people. In this story, the king became angry and threw the forgiven unforgiver into debtor's prison for endless torture. Leaving no doubt about the spiritual implications, Jesus said, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (v. 35).

Forgiveness is a blessing that is unmerited, given freely, without limit. We are not to measure the quantity or quality of the sins against us; we simply forgive endlessly and eternally. That is the Jesus way.

Who is in need of your forgiveness? What will you do about it?

POEM

There'll Be A Change in You

If you lose something precious
You'll leave something behind
You'll go out searching
You'll hunt high and low
You'll hope greatly to find it
You'll rejoice when you do
Though others might not notice
There'll be a change in you.

If you're hurt by a neighbor
You'll be tempted to brood
You'll have to move toward him
You'll have to pursue
You'll have to be honest
You'll have to be true
Though others might not notice
There'll be a change in you.

If you're stating a sentence
You'll say yes or no
You'll not be able to change it
You'll have written in stone
You'll have marked it
in heaven
You'll have made it a prayer
Though others might
not notice
There'll be a change in you

If you think someone owes you
You'll have to be careful
You'll have to remember your
own debt
You'll have to be humbled
You'll have seven times seventy
times
You'll feel the exhaustion of
forgiveness
Though others might
not notice
There'll be a change in you.

NOTES

MONDAY, MAY 23RD - WEEK 26, DAY 1

Jesus Leaves for Judea with Large Crowds

☐ Read Matthew 19:1-2, Mark 10:1, Luke 9:51

DEVOTIONAL

In Jesus' day, the land we call Israel was divided into a few parts. In the north was the region of Galilee. It included the Sea of Galilee and was where much of his ministry took place. In the south was the region of Judea, home to the city of Jerusalem and the holy temple. In the middle was Samaria, and it was the territory of the Samaritans, an ethnic group who were despised by the Jews from Galilee and Judea.

In these few short verses, we see Jesus as He was leaving Galilee and headed for Jerusalem, where He would be arrested, convicted and crucified. Luke puts it this way, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). He knew what lay in front of Him. He knew why His heavenly Father had sent Him. He knew that He was, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). So, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. This movement from Galilee to Judea was on purpose and with purpose!

I often picture Jesus, hanging on the cross, dying alone. But I often forget that huge crowds were on His side right up to the bitter end. Just like in Galilee of the north, we see that in Judea of the south "Large crowds followed him, and he healed them" (Matt. 19:2) and "taught them" (Luke 10:1). Jesus was no dead man walking, solemnly marching to his place of execution. With much more to do, and with half of the gospels' narratives to prove it, Jesus used His last months to minister to the needs of the people. He introduced others to the kingdom of God with word and with power!

Did He know that everyone would abandon Him? Probably. But that might be the point. As Romans 5:6 says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Offer your sins to Jesus today!

POEM

Large Crowd Space

We've all been there
The large crowd space
With the noise and the pushing, the shoving

We've all been there
The large crowd space
With the waiting, the sweating, the pressing

We've all been there
The large crowd space
With the hoping, excitement, the tickets

Would I have been there
That large crowd space
With others near drawing to Jesus?

Would I have been there
That large crowd space
Excited for healing, new life?

Would I have been there
The large crowd space
With suspense to see some-
thing amazing

Do I sit there daily
In large crowd space
Excited to commune with the Master?

Do I sit there daily
In large crowd space
To receive touch of healing on brow?

Do I sit there daily
In large crowd space
With the Body of Christ 'round the world?

NOTES

TUESDAY, MAY 24TH - WEEK 26, DAY 2

Jesus is Not Welcomed in Samaritan Village

☐ Read Luke 9:52-56

DEVOTIONAL

Recall that Samaria was the no man's land of ethnic outcasts in between the pure breed Jewish territories of Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. Previously, Jesus had some successful ministry in Samaria with the woman at the well and her fellow citizens. But this time, "the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:53).

This seems like a strange reason not to welcome someone. But remember from the woman at the well story that there was a debate about true worship. Jerusalem, the religious center of Judaism and the religious aristocracy, rejected Samaritans as unclean half-breeds. The right place for pure worship was in the Jerusalem temple, not on some mountain in Samaria. So those Samaritans rolled up the welcome mat when Jesus came their way.

This angered James and John (ironically nicknamed "sons of thunder") who wanted to call for lightning to destroy them. This is a direct reference to 2 Kings 1 when Elijah confronted the king of Samaria for turning to Baal instead of God, telling the king he would die on his bed. Then, at Elijah's request, fire came from heaven and consumed two different groups of soldiers who had come to take Elijah to that king. James and John knew this as a showdown over the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

James and John were trying to protect the Law and honor Yahweh. But they missed the heart of worship. Jesus had told the Samaritan woman at the well, "A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem… when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:21, 23). So, Jesus rebuked James and John, not the Samaritans.

To you, what is the true heart of worship?

POEM

No Room

On a Bethlehem night
There's a knock on the door
"A room, please?
My wife's near her time."
But there was no room
So outside they were turned
His birthing place there in the stall

On a small village day
There's a knock on some doors
"Make ready,
The Master is journeying."
But there was no room
So they continued their walk
His resting place there on the road

On Jerusalem noon
There's a knock on The Door
Great nails pound
In hands and in feet
For there was no room
So outside city wall
His dying place there on the cross

On everyone's day
There's a knock on the door
"I stand here;
Please answer, 'Come in.'"
Will there be a room?
So Christ may abide?
His living place there in your heart?

NOTES

WEDNESDAY, MAY 25TH - WEEK 26, DAY 3

Jesus Teaches about the Cost of Following Him

☐ Read Matthew 8:18-22, Luke 9:57-62

DEVOTIONAL

The man's statement to Jesus sounded so bold, so noble: "I will follow you wherever you go." It's the kind of thing nearly all of us have said to God: "I'll will do whatever you want, Lord, and go wherever you send." But.... There's always a big but. "I will follow you wherever you go," but...

They seem like normal requests: one guy wanted to go home and bury his dad. Another asked to first go back to good-bye to his family. But Jesus said that following Him demands abandonment of even those responsibilities and relationships. Was He speaking here in hyperbole, to teach what dedicated discipleship looks like? Peter followed Jesus, but was still in relationship with his mother-in-law (and presumably his wife). Perhaps Jesus was saying He didn't have time for half-hearted followers, like when He told the man to sell "everything" he had (even the clothes on his back?).

There is a cost to following Jesus. It requires releasing all that we hold dear, all that we think is vital. Jesus' encounters here with some would-be disciples echo the words of Jesus to hate your father, mother, sisters, brothers, possessions, and your own life if you want to follow Him. On one level, these statements seem out of character for Jesus, who calls us to love each other, and the command of Scripture to provide for our families. But family concerns should not eclipse kingdom concerns. Following Jesus requires reckless abandon.

Certainly, most people want to be a Christian with little sacrifice. They look at Jesus like some sort of Willy Wonka offering a golden ticket to heaven. Nothing is required except possessing the pass. But, true discipleship demands sacrificing valued responsibilities, relationships, and possessions.

Decide if you can make the statement: "I will follow you wherever you go."

POEM

Discipleship

My Jesus is calling
"Come now follow me
Into unknown adventures
Life-giving!

But there are a few things
I want to do first
Before making commitment
Strife-living

A parent to bury
Some children to raise
A list long--some tasks
Unforgiving

"Don't put hand to the plow
Then look back
Unless you're a disciple
Unfitting."

If you are to follow
Christ's ordering
Release all in hand's clasping
Forgetting

The Kingdom is coming
Will you tarry?
Or immediately lose life
Then receiving?

NOTES

THURSDAY, MAY 26TH - WEEK 26, DAY 4

Jesus Sends Out Seventy-Two Disciples

☐ Read Luke 10:1-16

DEVOTIONAL

Previously, Jesus had sent out His twelve disciples to do ministry without Him (see Week 20, Day 1). Luke 9:6 says, "So [the twelve] set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere."

On the heels of this success, Jesus "appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go" (Luke 10:1). I wonder if the twelve went with the seventy-two to provide support and guidance. These training opportunities would have prepared the disciples to carry out the Great Commission after Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Think about it. The twelve Apostles get nearly all the attention when we think about Jesus' followers. But when Jesus sent out these seventy-two people on a sweeping witnessing tour, they were given similar instructions: take no provisions, rely on the generosity of people, proclaim the kingdom of God, and shake it off when not welcomed. Jesus appointed and anointed each of them to do His work.

Jesus never intended to do all the kingdom work by Himself. Nor did He limit it to his Inner Three or Chosen Dozen. In fact, even the seventy-two didn't include Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Titus, Priscilla or… you!

In fact, Jesus' model for developing ministry leaders is, well, Christ-like! He lovingly blessed the thousands, expectantly developed the seventy-two, patiently trained the twelve, and intimately prepared the three, all while nurturing His private and personal relationship with the heavenly Father.

Pray for your pastor and church leaders, that they may invest in others who in turn will invest in others!

POEM

Out of the Stall—Bumbled

The Spring air was crisping
The lambs were a-nipping
Chomping at old creaky gate
The green grass was calling
The ewes, they were bawling
Excited to be loosed and escape

The woolly flock tumbled
Out of the stall--bumbled
A ball rolling onto the field
The frolic and prancing
The munching and dancing
Lambs falling head over heel

The freedom, excitement
New vistas, invite-ment
The shepherd a-watching the flock
Unknown to the dancers
The young and the prancers
The wolves hid among the dark rock

And so, Little Sheep
As you care for the meek
Be aware, stay awake, keep alerting
Though the temptation's glorious
To be now victorious
Beware of the enemy lurking

NOTES

FRIDAY, MAY 27TH - WEEK 26, DAY 5

The Seventy-Two Disciples Return

☐ Read Luke 10:17-24

DEVOTIONAL

When the seventy-two disciples sent out to minister returned to Jesus, they were astonished, saying, "even the demons submit to us in your name" (v. 17). Jesus told them, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy" (v. 19).

I have given you authority… to overcome all the power of the enemy.

I have given you authority.

Authority.

In the Great Commission, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20). The twelve and seventy-two disciples had a powerful reference point that surely provided confidence for the overwhelming task.

Authority.

All authority belongs to Jesus (see Matthew 7:29; 9:6; John 14:10). Yes, ALL authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus.

And Jesus gives us His authority… even to overcome all the power of the enemy. Make disciples of people all over the world? No problem. You have the authority of Jesus!

POEM

The Wisdom of God

I must tell Jesus the wonders I've seen
How demons obeyed me, a miracle dream!
The way His authority poured from my frame
How healing was granted to blind and to lame

I must tell Jesus the trials I've had
How anxious I was when the day went all bad
The way Holy Spirit then came to my aid
How saving grace entered, the crooked made straight

I must tell Jesus the song in my heart
How grateful I am for the love He imparts
The way His Word lifts me, instructs me and more
How time in His presence is what I adore

I must tell Jesus His ways still astound
How miracles happen, how grace does abound
The way He reveals holy presence each day
How faithful He leads me each step of the way

NOTES

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