

2019 #UPGRADE

Churchwide Corporate Fast



First Baptist Church East Martinsville
March 6, 2019—April 21, 2019

Join First B as we embark on our 40-day Lenten Journey with prayer, fasting and offerings as we #Upgrade our faith-walk. Let us pray, grow and be guided as we mature and be brought closer together in God!

Rev. Charles R. Whitfield, Pastor

Ash Wednesday, March 6

“Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” —Mark 1:15

We are here again at the beginning of Lent. Our humanity is at “full stretch” before God and before the community of faith. Some of us approach hesitantly: Why wear the sign on our foreheads? What sign is this anyway? Others come gratefully, memories of Ash Wednesdays past flooding the memory, remembering the sign on the forehead as a sign of hope, a sign of their baptism. Our baptism initiated us into a community of conversion. We made promises to live our life in God, a life of following Jesus. We surrendered to a life of constant conversion, of constant change. It is this promise that might be the hardest to keep; no wonder we need reminders of it. Change is hard. We get used to the way we do things. We get used to our environment and our ways of being in the world. Even in difficulty we would rather lean on the familiar. Darkness can easily sneak up on us, making us forget that we are beloved children of God, making us forget that we can come home again. Ash Wednesday acknowledges that our willingness to change requires trust, and trust requires safety and community.

Today as we gather, we provide a safe place, a place where we reclaim our humanity and our need for grace and forgiveness. We also provide a reminder that we are not alone as we see the mark on our brothers and sisters, the mark on our friends and our foes. Look around! The kingdom of God is indeed among us!

Breath Prayer:

Loving God, . . . help me trust.

Thursday, March 7

“But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place.” —Matthew 6:6a

Prayer is the primary practice of life in God. Prayer is conversation, connection, and growing intimacy. Prayer is both an individual and a communal action. Prayer sustains, connects, and transforms.

As pastor I often field questions about prayer. It seems like most of us struggle with sustaining a life of prayer. We are busy, we do not know what to say, we get easily distracted or maybe find ourselves too tired to stay awake. You are not alone. It is a constant struggle for most followers of Jesus. It is a struggle for me.

I grew up in a family that prayed. My father would read a psalm and pray with us before going to school every morning. My mother would read us a devotional and pray with us in the evenings. I also have vivid memories of seeing and hearing my parents pray. They prayed in very different ways, my father quietly on his chair, and my mother out loud while walking around. I am sure that if I asked them they too would say that they struggle with praying.

Today remind yourself that prayer is relationship, that God is always there to hear and always there to speak. Today remind yourself to take at least five minutes of your day and find that “closet” where you can connect with God. Five minutes of breathing and the prayer found here. Prayer is not magic; it is relationship, and as we get to know God better, we become more like Jesus. So deep breaths, five minutes a day, a time to hear God and to become the one that God has made you to be!

Breath Prayer:

Speak, O Lord, . . . I am listening.

Friday, March 8

Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? —Isaiah 58:6

Fasting is one of the practices that guides our springing into a deeper life with God. The Christian tradition has mostly fasted from food. We are not alone in this practice, for many other religious traditions see fasting from food as a key practice to connect with the divine. There's something about the pangs of hunger that remind us of our desperate need for God's grace and presence.

We know though that fasting from food can be harmful. It can be a way to exercise control in the midst of the uncontrollable, a way to convince ourselves that God's favor is earned, not a gift of grace, or like the Pharisees of old, a way to show others how spiritual we are.

This Lenten season, remember that fasting is about abstinence. The purpose is to remove distractions so that we can focus on our relationship with God. To take the time to focus on God's presence in prayer, worship, or service.

Food gathers us and is pivotal to our social lives. There are many other things though that I think might be good things to fast from: gossip, slander, workaholicism, spiritual apathy, judgment. The list is endless. In the end if the fast does not help you deepen your relationship with God, self, and neighbor, then it has not been fruitful. It does not matter how many chocolates you give up, or sweets, or swearing, or consuming; if it is not replaced by an intentional practice of connection, then our fasting is for naught. What fast are you going to choose?

Breath Prayer:

Nourishing God, . . . I am hungry for you!

Saturday, March 9

“But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” — Matthew 6:3

There are so many needs in the world. I often find myself overwhelmed by the news, smartphone notifications, and the latest updates on the radio. Added to that are the struggles in the communities where we live, work, and play. Crime, poverty, homelessness, healthcare, and education are only some of the many problems or needs that we are faced with every day. It is hard to choose how to help.

What we do know is that Jesus calls us again and again to help those in need. The Gospels are filled with examples of Jesus helping those who had little and calling his disciples to do the same. This help took on many forms: healing, exorcising of demons, and proclaiming good news to the poor. Each encounter freed the person and the community into a more abundant and connected life.

Giving to the poor is another of the foundational practices for our springing into a deeper life with God. But we must be careful that we do not ignore it or do it in order to feel good about ourselves. We must practice it out of a sense of gratitude to God for what God has done in us, a sense of a call to generosity, and as a way to connect with (be in relationship with) those who are less fortunate than we.

When the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, our almsgiving is rooted in an understanding that when we see the poor, we see Jesus. An understanding that when we see Jesus in the poor we are converted, transformed, and renewed.

Breath Prayer:

In the poor, . . . let me see you.

First Sunday in Lent, March 10

And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”—Luke 3:22b

I love baptisms. There is something so warm, joy filled, and mysterious about them. For infants to adults, baptism is an obvious marker in a person’s life. Life is never quite the same after that moment.

In my first appointment, the baptismal font was made of white marble. It was not huge but it fit the space, and since the rest of the sanctuary was wood paneled, the white marble stood out. My oldest son, who was 18 months old, would come into the sanctuary during the week and go straight to the font, stretch his arm up as he stood on his tippy toes, and say, “Watta.” I would pick him up and let him play a bit with the water and say, “Always remember that you belong to God!” That was fourteen years ago. Since then my son has seen many infants and adults baptized and he is no longer fascinated by the font inside the sanctuary. He is asking interesting questions about God, the church, Jesus, and why all of it matters. I am thankful that he is asking these questions, but the truth is that the answer has not changed. The one thing that I want him to remember is that he belongs to God, in him God is pleased!

As we begin this Lenten season, you might be wondering about your place, your identity, your reason for reading this guide. As we continue, hear the invitation of Jesus, for you too are beloved, you belong. Baptism has marked you forever. In the weeks ahead, may you hear God’s call to go on this adventure!

Breath Prayer:

In me, . . . you are well pleased.

Monday, March 11

“Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” —Matthew 4:19

God always invites. There’s no need for coercion, manipulation, or force. The invitation is always rooted in relationship, a desire to restore connection so that we can live into fullness. It is a two-way street. God wants us to reconcile and wants us to follow on a different path. Often we convince ourselves that the path that we have been on is the path toward fruitfulness and new life. We then ask God to bless our path, to come with us along the way. This Lenten season, I

want you to remember that God is inviting us to follow in a different path, in the path that God showed us in Jesus.

The path that we are called to follow is a path on which we engage ourselves, the other, and God in the way of invitation. We encounter others with the patience and space of one who fishes. We find the places where others gather who need healing, reconciliation, and new life. We calmly engage, calmly throwing the net to see what we might catch. We go out into the “sea,” the places where we live, work, and play day after day to fish with Jesus for people.

This Lenten season, pay attention. God will never force but is constantly inviting. Constantly calling us to be in relationship with our true self, with the other, and with God. You, too, are being called into a new journey, no longer alone but in relationship with the other, fishing for people, sharing the one who called you.

Breath Prayer:

Speak, Lord, . . . and help me hear your call.

Tuesday, March 12

As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

—Luke 5:11

There is so much left to do. The to-do list is constantly getting longer, our obligations piling up, and we can hardly hear God. As we said yesterday, God is always calling. Are we listening.

One of the common questions from people in the church is about how to discern God’s voice. I think there is a natural hunger in us for God, for the transcendent, for the divine. Often we fill that hunger with many other things. It is easier to work, easier to fill our lives with other gods, easier to give our life to that which we are used to—to the comforts of home.

No wonder so many of us would rather ignore the call! What happens if we listen? What might God tell us? If we follow, what do we have to leave behind? I hate to break it to you, but when we follow, we must leave behind everything that would keep us from being fully present.

Everything!

In the summer of 2017 I had the joy of spending eight days at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. I spent that week in silence, reflecting on Scripture, and taking long walks. Often in those walks I would hear God’s voice calling my name. Even in that environment my initial response was to ignore it, to stay busy walking, reading, or napping. A few days in, I found myself exhausted from fighting God’s voice. The word that flooded my soul? Surrender. This Lenten season, hear God’s voice inviting you to follow. It means leaving everything that would get in the way, but after all, that which holds us captive might not be worth keeping around.

Breath Prayer: Lord, help me . . . surrender.

Wednesday, March 13

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.”

—John 3:1-2

One of my favorite prayers for the morning says, “New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world,” found in The United Methodist Hymnal (The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, page 877). I remember the first time I heard it thinking, “All day long?” It turns out that yes, all day long God is at work for good. God makes love possible, good possible, compassion possible, reconciliation possible, making God’s self known to us and to all of creation. The question is: Are we paying attention?

It is human nature to be doubtful and cynical. There is much in the world that does not match God’s intention for the world. We ourselves fail often and might feel unworthy. Our hearts become hardened by the stuff of life, by our own humanity with its fragility and frailty.

The journey of Lent is the journey of presence and discovery. As we pray, make room for God, and come alongside the neediest among us, we train our souls to see the miraculous signs that God is making known all around us. As we pay attention, our hunger grows to know God more, to ask more questions, to spend more time with Jesus. Today pay attention: Jesus is at work. Invite Jesus into conversation, always remembering that no matter what is happening around us, God spends all day long working for good in your life, in the life of your neighbor, and in the life of the world!

Breath Prayer: All day long, you . . . are working for good.

Thursday, March 14

At that very moment he called them. They followed him, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired workers. —Mark 1:20

My parents were only 19 years old when I was born. I was 25 when our first child was born, and I still felt so young, so I could not imagine what my parents went through having to raise themselves and me at the same time. What I do know is that we grew close and that family mattered to us. Family units were important to the survival of people in the first century. The sons had to work in the family business for themselves and for their parents. In our own time and culture, we put high value on our family ties. Many of us could not imagine a conflict between our life with God and our family commitment. What kind of call is this that seems to place our family ties on the line? The call to discipleship rearranges our priorities. It places our social, cultural, and religious understandings under the lordship of Christ. Our personal preferences and the ways that things have always been no longer hold their power. We no longer answer to the inner voice of duty, ambition, and the way things have always been; instead we begin seeing all of life through the lens of the call of Jesus. I am sure that Zebedee was disappointed, maybe even angry, at his sons. Today think about the assumptions that you have made about the way life should be and ask how the way of Jesus is turning your understanding upside down. What are you being asked to drop so that you can follow?

Breath Prayer: Jesus, help me . . . let go.

Friday, March 15

But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” —Matthew 8:22

The second congregation that I pastored had a cemetery on the land. It was a beautiful, small piece of land behind the church. Often when I needed to take a break, when I was stuck during sermon writing or when I needed to have a difficult conversation, I would walk the cemetery. The dead are unable to bury themselves. In fact often the entire community comes together to make sure that the body is in its final resting place. Yet Jesus reminds us that in order for us to follow we must let go of everything. Yesterday we considered the social, cultural, and religious assumptions that hold our thinking captive. Today, think about the dead stuff: the things in our souls, in our families, and communities that are dead and we can do nothing about. For me, some of these “dead things” are the internal narratives that defeat me before I get started or the stories and experiences that have shaped and marked me. I am sure that as you think about this you too can bring to mind those lifeless situations that need to be left behind so that you can follow Jesus.

The call to be a disciple is a call to identify the things in us and around us that, unlike us, cannot be resurrected. A call to let go and to let the dead bury the dead. Today, what are the dead things that need to be let go of?

Breath Prayer:

Lord of life, . . . let the dead bury the dead.

Saturday, March 16

Afterward, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.”—Luke 5:27

There is a black sheep in every family, community, and congregation: the person who wears their brokenness on their shoulder, the person who is so broken that he or she is constantly hurting others, or the person who seems to have no understanding of the societal mores. These folks go by different names. Sometimes it is how they conduct themselves in their personal lives that labels them a bad seed; sometimes it is the family they belong to; and at other times it is the work they do to earn a living. Levi, a tax collector, was a “bad guy” in his community. He was a sinner who was unapologetic, proud, and greedy.

And that’s who Jesus approached and called to follow him. Does Jesus not know? I thought Jesus cared. The sinner is not welcomed in polite company—what is Jesus doing?

The call to follow is the call to become a disciple. It is the call to do like Jesus does, to become like Jesus as we follow along. This means that we mirror the values of Jesus, seeing beyond the obvious and being open to the possibility that God’s grace is available even to us!

Now, hear the call—yes, you too are called. Jesus, looking deeply into your eyes and knowing all about you, is still interested in you letting go and coming on this journey. No matter how faithful or unfaithful, good or not, you are loved—now follow!

Breath Prayer:

I am following, Jesus, . . . lead me!

Second Sunday in Lent, March 17

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them. . . .”—Matthew 5:1-2

The way of Jesus must be learned. It does not come to us naturally, nor does it become part of our lives by attending worship or by being a good person. A disciple is a student of a master and, in our case, we are students of Jesus. We follow and learn by Jesus’ modeling of the way. Healing, restoring, forgiving, and proclaiming the Good News are some of the practices of the master we emulate.

At the cornerstone of what it means to be a disciple, to do what Jesus does, is a set of values that should guide all of us who follow Jesus. These must be learned again and again. As we learn, we practice them, and as we practice them, we are able to make them part of our lives. We must recognize our hunger and be willing to learn. In fact, we must be willing to be lifelong learners. Growing in God’s love, becoming more like Jesus, requires the re-shaping of our whole self in grace.

The next few weeks we’ll dig more deeply into the guiding principles of discipleship. We’ll take the time to sit with Jesus as he teaches us again what it means to follow, what it means to be a disciple, and what it means to experience conversion.

Jesus is calling us to the mountain. Are we ready to hear? Are we ready to learn? Are we ready to take the time needed, to make the space for what is coming?

Breath Prayer:

Guiding God, I am ready . . . to learn your way.

Monday, March 18

“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”—Matthew 5:3

The last few years I have thought much about hope. About what it means to live into this state of waiting for the unfolding of God’s purposes. About what it means to wait actively in the midst of disappointment, despair, and disease.

Often we try to avoid hopelessness. It never feels good to be in that dark place, and staying rooted when the world seems to be spinning out of control around us is difficult. It is hard to think that anything is hopeful when we find ourselves in the shadow of our lives.

Yet again and again the feelings of hopelessness come visiting. The things that used to give us life no longer do. Our patterns at home and work seem trivial, maybe even boring. We find ourselves overwhelmed with the many ways that the kingdom of God is not being made known in us, in our neighborhoods, and in our congregations.

This season, sit there a while. Reflect on the ways that healing is needed around you. What places need peace, wholeness, completion, integration, and good news? How can your congregation share in your hopelessness of a kingdom that is here and not yet?

As you slow down, look around, and find community in the midst of hopelessness, you’ll begin to see again. As you slow down, you begin to see what others might miss: hopeful imagination

emerging, the seedlings of the kingdom in you, in your community. Take heart, you are not alone, remember that the kingdom is yours!

Breath Prayer:

God of hope, let the kingdom . . . be sown in me!

Tuesday, March 19

“Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.”—Matthew 5:4

I was in a Walmart parking lot around 8 o’clock in the evening when I noticed a family piled up in their car. The man who appeared to be the father came out of the car and made his way into the store as he reached into his pocket and counted a few dollars in his hands. He shook his head as if he did not have enough.

We both entered the store about the same time. He asked the greeter at the front door where he could find something. He tried his best to communicate, but his English was limited. I came forward and asked him in Spanish what he needed. We chatted and he told me that they were traveling and didn’t have much, but the baby needed diapers. I helped the best I could, bought what I needed, and returned to my car. As I left the parking lot, I noticed that they seemed to be settling in for the night in their car.

Tears came to my eyes, and soon I found myself weeping.

Since then my eyes have been opened again and again to the many ways that injustice seems to rule the day. They have also been opened to the ways that I might be a companion in justice making. This weeping births kingdom life in me and in the communities where I live, work, and play. My eyes are opening to the reality that “weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5b NKJV).

Breath Prayer:

Amazing grace! . . . Joy will come in the morning.

Wednesday, March 20

“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.”
—Matthew 5:5

Humility for me is about being rooted, about reality, about recognition that I am human. Being human means that I am not perfect, that the world does not revolve around me, that I am not God. It also means that we live among other humans, with their own stories, struggles, and shortcomings.

Though humility is a key virtue of the Christian life, we often fall to patterns of self-centeredness, arrogance, and pride. Our culture’s constant diet of consumer goods and services lull us into the myth of being selfmade. Our heroes are the ones who create something out of nothing, pull themselves by their ever-present bootstraps, and have control of their own destinies.

The right job, the right clothes, the right car, the right network—these are needed to have a great life!

Lent prepares us for one who became a suffering servant, who did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. —Philippians 2:6b-7a

Lent asks that we die to pride so that we can be born anew in Christlikeness. Lent reminds us that life brings with it humility, community, and difficulty.

Today, stay rooted; remember that you are human and that you are not alone. Remember that only God creates out of nothing. All blessings come from God, and community, not stuff, gives us abundant life.

Breath Prayer:

Loving God, . . . keep me rooted.

Thursday, March 21

“Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.” —Matthew 5:6

In the Spanish translation of the New Testament, the Greek word *dikaiosuné* is translated as “justice,” whereas English translators render it as “righteousness.” An English translation of the Spanish translation would then read, “Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for justice, because they will be fed until they are full.”

Doing justice is doing what God does. So today we are told that we will be glad, blessed, happy if we are hungry and thirsty for doing what God does.

Often we are hungry for those things that seem right to us. Our human condition and limited imaginations cause us to be myopic and to struggle to understand our neighbor. We are so focused on ourselves that we cannot see the many ways that our fellow human beings are not experiencing what is right in God’s compassionate eyes.

Being a disciple means that we do what God does. It means that we develop a hunger, a longing for that which God requires. Being a disciple means that we, by the power of the Spirit, develop a gospel palate.

As you go about your day, look around. Pay attention to those things within you and around you that seem to give you a “justice tooth.” It is in that hunger that we become agents of God’s activity in the world. In satisfying a hunger for justice our souls become more deeply shaped in Christlikeness. But be careful, because the more hunger for justice that is developed the harder it is to satisfy!

Breath Prayer:

For justice, Lord, . . . help me hunger.

Friday, March 22

“Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.”

—Matthew 5:7

We know that following Jesus means doing what Jesus does. Yet often we excuse ourselves by telling ourselves that we could never be like Jesus, that we are human, that we are never going to be perfect. Since we are never going to be like Jesus, then why try?

I recognize that the demands of discipleship seem impossible. Loving God, loving enemy, forgiving as we have been forgiven, turning the other cheek . . . the list seems endless. Why add another difficult thing to the already long list?

Mercy requires empathy, the ability to see ourselves in the other. Mercy requires compassion, awareness, and humility. In some ways these marks of discipleship begin to build upon each other; we are growing with each step, expanding the horizons of our understanding of ourselves and God.

Now we recognize that as we grow in mercy, as we grow in connection with the other, the other grows in connection with us. We grow in our understanding of our shared humanity and shared need for compassion, forgiveness, and new life.

The merciful are people who know how much they have been forgiven. Each of us is growing each day more deeply aware of our continued need for and access to divine grace. The merciful are people who model benefit of the doubt, who constantly humanize the other, especially when it is difficult, and who in the end extend mercy, like Christ would. At times it might seem exhausting, but as we grow, we begin to recognize mercy all around us. Mercy to us and toward us, and mercy coming from us.

Breath Prayer:

Merciful God, . . . help me see mercy.

Saturday, March 23

“Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.”

—Matthew 5:8

I am not a big fan of the word purity. The word has been used so often as a tool for shame, exclusion, and hatred that I wish we could rid ourselves of it. The word feeds the human tendency toward self-righteousness. Often those like us are the pure ones, those unlike us, well . . . ?

Some people understand purity to be a matter of the right intellectual belief. Only some of us have it; the rest of you need to find it. Then we will be pure; then we will be worthy; then we will be acceptable to God. Often the most powerful people just so happen to be the ones that claim purity of thought and action.

What if instead of pure in heart we would say, “Blessed are people who have clean, uncluttered, transformed, open, available hearts”? Or, “Blessed are people who have hearts with no agendas, no strings attached, no baggage, no prejudices, no false assumptions”?

Pure hearts are hearts that are open to the work of the Holy Spirit. Hearts willing to recognize their need for God. Hearts that are constantly searching and hungry for the divine heart.

Now a picture opens up, possibility emerges, and hope rises. Blessed are those who live purely because their desire will be granted, for their heart is ready to receive what God has to give.

Today, what needs to be decluttered, removed, and cleaned from your heart in order to make room for God? to make room for a deeper and more focused discipleship?

Breath Prayer:

O God, create in me . . . a clean heart!

Third Sunday in Lent, March 24

“Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.”
—Matthew 5:9

There seem to be so much enmity, strife, and violence in our world. The notifications on our phones and the news in our browsers seem to be a constant listing of the latest skirmishes, arguments, and battles. In our own churches we witness strife, arguments, and hurtful words and actions. I wonder if we have become desensitized to it all.

Today I am thankful for the reminder that to follow Jesus, to be a disciple, means to be a peacemaker. Peacemaking does not require a lack of conflict. Conflict is part of life; it means that we have opinions, varied stories, and different passions. Conflict means that there is something at stake, that there have been some misunderstanding and a disconnect.

Being peacemakers means that we are committed to wholeness, healing, and integration. We, as people who model the way of Jesus, help others find common ground in the midst of difference. We model the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation and the art of healing.

This movement begins with us, in our hearts and lives. It begins by doing the daily work of self-examination and asking in what ways do we need to make peace at that moment? Whom do we need to forgive? To whom do we need to be reconciled? How do we need to heal so that we no longer harm the other? As we practice peacemaking, others will see that indeed the kingdom of God is near.

Breath Prayer:

Lord, make me . . . an instrument of your peace.

Monday, March 25

“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”
—Matthew 5:10

Last Thursday, we reflected on the word righteousness and its core meaning being justice. So, then, today’s verse could be translated as, “Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are just.” Or we could say, “Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they do what God does, what God requires,” or, “Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they love like Jesus loves.”

It should not surprise us that loving like Jesus loves might lead to trouble. This Lenten journey is one of self-examination, sacrifice, and preparation for our dying in Christ. Christ died because he showed us what God looked like, because he loved too deeply, because he welcomed too

broadly, because he was a threat to the powerful and those in control. Why do we think it should be any different for us?

This does not mean that we should develop a martyr complex. We are blessed that most of us do not suffer the persecution that our sisters and brothers in other part of the world experience. We attend worship (or not) in peace, we can say our prayers, and we can serve neighbor without obstacle. But let us not get complacent. Often I wonder if maybe I am not loving enough, welcoming enough, or accepting enough to find myself at odds with the world. Or as the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, would say, Am I being “vile” enough for the gospel? For Wesley (The Journal of John Wesley, April 2, 1739, entry), being vile meant stepping outside of proper society to preach to commoners outside the walls of the church.

Breath Prayer:

Surprising Lord, . . . help me be vile for you!

Tuesday, March 26

“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven.”

—Matthew 5:11-12a

Oscar Romero was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador in the late 1970s. He was chosen as archbishop for his quiet demeanor, his intellect, and his love for the status quo. Even though the poor were being abused in his country, he refused to speak out against the powerful. At first, he thought that the church should not get in the way.

Then one of his priests and close friends was murdered by the state for his service and loyalty to the poor. It changed everything! Bishop Romero was converted! He changed his ways and began speaking on behalf of the poor and forgotten. So he was assassinated. This past Sunday was the 39th anniversary of his death.

When we do what Jesus does, when we live out our discipleship, it will not be popular and it might cause trouble. Today Jesus reminds us of the difficulty of discipleship. Today Jesus once again lays the groundwork for what would happen in his own life. Today we have a glimpse of what we will see a bit later in our journey of Lent.

Hold on tight. Lean on the love of God. Continue to do what Jesus does. Do not be discouraged; the world needs to know the salvation of our God.

Breath Prayer:

Give me courage . . . to love like you love.

Wednesday, March 27

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again?”

—Matthew 5:13a

When I was a young teenager, my mother went to a meeting, leaving me and my younger sister at home. We had been taught how to cook a few things, and mom bought the ingredients so that we could make dinner and have it ready when she returned.

My sister and I made a huge pan of ground meat for a spaghetti dinner. Halfway through cooking I realized we had not put salt in the sauce. I knew that salt was important, that it helped highlight the flavors, so I went running to the pantry. I put in a good helping of salt and went back to my video game playing.

My sister too had the realization that we had not put salt on the meat, so she too came into the kitchen to remedy the situation. To say it was salty would be an understatement! And since we were young, we decided to fix it by adding sugar!

Just so you know, adding sugar did not help—it was still salty but now also sweet. It was worse than it was before, and we found out later from Mother that the only thing that would have helped was more meat.

Maybe we have lost our saltiness for the good news because our lives have become crowded with so many other things. Today make a covenant to simplify so that your saltiness remains!

Breath Prayer:

Way-making Lord, . . . remove my distractions.

Thursday, March 28

“You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden.”

—Matthew 5:14

I wonder if we see ourselves as a community of disciples who are indeed a “city on top of a hill,” impossible to ignore and a source of light for the surrounding area. A city on a hill is also a gathering place, a safe place. A city on a hill is an important landmark that allows travelers to find their bearings.

Claiming to be a disciple is acknowledging our visibility. This goes beyond yard signs, billboards, and church signs. It is about the light that we carry, our loving, compassionate, and peacemaking posture in our everyday life. It is also about our humility, our willingness to acknowledge when we have failed, and our continued efforts of reconciliation.

Lent reminds us of our identity and calls us to action. We, as light, have a responsibility to live into the way of Jesus in the world. We, as scattered disciples, can indeed make a difference if we take seriously our being Jesus in the world.

It is so easy to become complacent. We go about our lives thinking that being the church means being gathered for worship. Today we are reminded that we are the church and although our gathering for worship matters and shapes us, the real transformation of the places where we live, work, and play happens when we carry the light of Christ with us, when we live into our shared identity as the city on a hill.

Breath Prayer:

Lord of light, . . . help me shine.

Friday, March 29

“Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Don’t condemn, and you won’t be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

—Luke 6:37

Judging is so easy to do. After all, we have our opinions, our ways of looking at the world, and our ways of looking at our faith. We know that one of the ways that human beings connect with one another is by sharing information about others; we also know that human beings are quick to make assumptions in microseconds in order to categorize people and circumstances. No wonder one of the key marks of being a disciple is not to judge or condemn but to forgive.

And yet we still judge all the time.

In my own life I am reminded that the times when I am able to keep from judging others are the times when I recognize I have too much to worry about in my own life. There are so many ways in which I fail to live into the way of Jesus. So many times when all the evidence was stacked against me, all the times that I longed for forgiveness and reconciliation.

This does not mean that we do not keep one another accountable for our walk with Jesus. Often I hear people’s concerns that in our rush to not judge we might fail to help one another grow in faith. We know better. We know that the best way to keep us on track is in loving relationships in communities that help us be our true selves and challenge us in love.

As you continue this journey, beware of the temptation to judge and condemn. When it comes, ask yourself: Why am I focusing on the other when I have so much within myself? Practice forgiveness of yourself and others.

Breath Prayer:

No judgment, . . . just grace!

Saturday, March 30

“This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”

—John 13:35

It is simple, but it is not easy. We hear it again and again as we walk with Jesus: love in word and deed. We see it modeled in the way Jesus is present to all whom he encounters, where they are and how they are.

I think this love is difficult to practice because we have trouble believing that it is real or possible. We have convinced ourselves that we are not Jesus so we will never be able to love in that way. Yet the promise of the Spirit is that we can indeed be like Jesus, we can love like Jesus loves. This kind of unmerited love becomes the key mark of those who follow Jesus.

It does require practice. Our sin-sick souls are marred by our tendency toward merited grace and earned love. Our culture is used to transactional relationships and self-centered responses. Our own life experience often creates a hardness of heart.

Lent tells us the story of our faith and models for us the love of God: a love from the very beginning of creation, God’s image imprinted in all of humanity. Even when we fail, God’s love endures. God became human to show us what that love looked like. Now we can see it and model it.

Today take a deep breath and remember you are loved. I think the more that we accept that reality for ourselves—the reality of an unmerited and no-strings-attached love—the more we’ll live into that love for others.

Breath Prayer:

Praise the Lord! . . . I am loved by God.

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 31

Jesus called the Twelve together and he gave them power and authority over all demons and to heal sicknesses.

—Luke 9:1

I’m always asking about what happens when we live out our discipleship. In Luke 9 we get a small glimpse and what happens is hard to believe!

Hearing of disciples performing miracles as Jesus does should make us curious. The more we read of the amazing signs and wonders the Twelve made (and in Luke 10, the seventy-two)—healings, exorcisms, and bringing people back to life, the more I am in awe of the work of the disciples. I am also humbled.

This week pay close attention to how God uses us when we live into God’s love in the world. We too are sent out each week into the world. The “go in peace” in worship is much more than a dismissal but a reminder of our charge! Go in peace! Go and spread God’s shalom—God’s healing, wholeness, completion, integration, salvation—in the world. Go—you have authority; you have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ in the world.

Look around and pay attention to those around you who are bound and need freedom and those who have any type of dis-ease (the sick, the dead, the walking dead, the poor). God is calling all of us who claim to be disciples of Jesus to go and claim the healing and freeing power of Jesus over them. As we go, we too are transformed, we too are healed, we too experience the joy of the good news of Jesus!

Breath Prayer:

Where I’m needed, Lord, . . . send me.

Monday, April 1

As the disciples made their way, they were picking the heads of wheat. The Pharisees said to Jesus, “Look! Why are they breaking the Sabbath law?”
—Mark 2:23b-24

It is part of human nature to forget the reasons for some of the social, ethical, and religious guidelines that we have been taught. It is also common that many of us were never taught the “why” of some of the guidelines that we hold sacred. I remember as a child learning to pray. My parents prayed with me every night. They taught me to brush my teeth, wash my feet, and then to pray. Not just to pray but to assume a posture of prayer: to kneel by my bed, put my hands together, lower my head, and close my eyes. Prayer meant all of those things! It was in my mid to late teens that I realized that I could pray in other ways. I remember learning that I could pray with my eyes open and how empowering that was to me. As I grew, I realized that the purpose of the postures that my parents taught me was to help me focus on my conversation with God. When we do what Jesus does, religious people might question our faithfulness. Are we being religious enough? Are we ignoring the guidelines that we have always known? Why? Have we forgotten who we are?

Remember that you are sent in Jesus’ name to be an agent of God’s love. Remember that generally the reasons for many of our religious guidelines have been our growth in that love. If you are living in and through the community called the church and if you are engaging purposefully in the name of Jesus, don’t worry about what the “religious” say. Remember, people are desperate for healing, wholeness, and new life.

Breath Prayer:

Help me love . . . God and neighbor.

Tuesday, April 2

A huge storm arose on the lake so that waves were sloshing over the boat. But Jesus was asleep. They came and woke him, saying, “Lord, rescue us! We’re going to drown!”
—Matthew 8:24-25

Discipleship does not mean that we will be free from fear, struggle, and challenge. We are going to find ourselves in situations that will make us afraid and that will challenge what we claim. Life happens and I am sure that you can already think about a moment—or moments—in which you felt like you were going to drown.

Often our despair comes in the midst of losses. Maybe loss of our health, a broken relationship, the loss of a job, or the despair of one we love. During these times even the most faithful and most rooted can begin to question if God is present, if God will do something. Are you asleep, God? Don’t you see that I am struggling?

Occasionally feeling despair is a normal part of life, even with God. It does not mean that we are lacking faith, nor does it mean that there is something wrong with us. It means that we are human, that we recognize God’s presence, and that we know that our “help comes from the LORD” (Psalm 121:2).

As we live our discipleship, God is present. God is not asleep but will make God's self known. This is no magic but the fruit of our being Christ in the world, our growth in love, our doing what God does.

If you are facing trials today, if the winds and the waves seem to be overwhelming, cry out! You are not alone! The community of disciples is with you and they will embody the presence of Jesus as you continue to go, heal, and grow.

Breath Prayer:

Lord, when I fear, . . . rescue me!

Wednesday, April 3

“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and throw out demons.”

—Matthew 10:8a

Often, we wonder what God wants us to do. We go to church, talk with friends, and might even pray for an answer. At times I wish God would call me and give me my list so that I would know that I was doing exactly what God wanted me to do.

Jesus did tell us. The problem is that what he has called us to do is hard work!

When I have a difficult assignment, my tendency is to procrastinate. I find small, insignificant things that all of a sudden need my attention. I question if the assignment is the right one. I re-read the guidelines. Sometimes I even do things that I normally hate, like washing the dishes, doing laundry, or cleaning the cat litter, to avoid dealing with the reality of what I have to do.

It is no different in our life of faith. Jesus tells us again and again. Discipleship is about being, being God's love in the world, being agents of healing, wholeness, and new life, being the people that do what Jesus does.

Today, do not procrastinate! You have the power of the Spirit to be like Jesus. You also have the community of disciples to help you, come alongside you, and remind you how your gifts, graces, and abilities can uniquely transform the places in which you live, work, and play.

Breath Prayer:

Powerful Spirit, . . . give me courage.

Thursday, April 4

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him forward.” They called the blind man, “Be encouraged! Get up! He's calling you.”

—Mark 10:49

Sunday mornings are interesting times. We gather together for worship, check in on our friends, maybe go to brunch. It would be easy to check off the “went to church” item on our list and

continue to the next to-do item. Maybe that day worship caught our attention, and we might think about what we heard, what messed with us, or how we might apply what we learned.

Our focus on our own need for Jesus might blind us to those around us who need the encounter more. Such was the situation that the blind man was in. He wanted to see Jesus; he needed Jesus more than those who gathered around him, but the crowd quieted him. They wanted a piece of Jesus first.

Disciples of Jesus are called to pay attention. We are called by Jesus to pave the way for those who need healing, wholeness, and new life to have an encounter. We are called to remember that the first will be last and the last will be first.

You have encountered Jesus, and he is with you. You now need to look around and pay attention to those who need to see, to walk, to hear, to be freed. They are hungry for Jesus. As you continue this Lenten journey, hear the call of God to “call them forward,” to be the emissary of Jesus wherever you go!

Breath Prayer:

Help me say, . . . “He’s calling you!”

Friday, April 5

The seventy-two returned joyously, saying, “Lord, even the demons submit themselves to us in your name.”

—Luke 10:17

“We cannot believe it!” I have often heard this exclamation from people who have seen miraculous things happen through them. It can be as simple as that moment when we know that God has spoken to us, or the moment when a friend or neighbor whom we have invited to worship finally comes, or the moment when we pray for something and it comes to pass. It is exciting to know that somehow God is using us.

I wonder if we are settling for less. In our modern and enlightened times, are we living into our potential as disciples of Jesus? I believe that we, like the seventy-two long ago, can be God’s instrument for those who are bound. We too can heal, can reconcile, can free. We too can see miraculous things happen through our everyday life.

Like the seventy-two, we are sent. We go into our world—home, work, and marketplace—in Jesus’ name. As we practice love, as we find ourselves seeing the needs for salvation, and as we come alongside embodying Jesus, we pave the way for others to experience salvation.

Today, believe it! As you move through your days, may you see the opportunities to make a difference in people’s lives. See the opportunities to practice love, compassion, reconciliation, and forgiveness. As you see God at work, give thanks to God, rejoice, and be glad—God is at work in you!

Breath Prayer:

With God, . . . all things are possible.

Saturday, April 6

“You are witnesses of these things.”

—Luke 24:48

According to Google’s dictionary, a witness is someone who “sees an event”; as a verb, it means to “give or serve as evidence of,” to “testify to.” If being a disciple means to be a witness, what are we witnesses to?

Even two thousand years later we are witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We who call ourselves disciples, Christians, members of the Church are called by Jesus to “give evidence of” his life, death, and resurrection. We become the bearers of the good news of Jesus by the ways we live our lives.

Sometimes we think that being a witness has to mean talking about Jesus. There are times when this is called for, especially for those who might have no idea who Jesus is. For those of us in the United States where there seems to be a general knowledge of Jesus, we have the difficult task of showing what Jesus is like. On the other hand, we have the opportunity to show others what Jesus looks like!

Do you know the story of Jesus? If you are not sure you do, I invite you to read one chapter of the Gospels a day, and in ninety days you will have read all of the Gospels. As you get familiar with the story of Jesus, as you “see the event” again and again, you’ll be able to “serve as evidence of.”

Being a witness means that you, like Jesus, live in community with other disciples. It means that you become familiar with the story of Jesus and that we day by day act like Jesus. Today remember that we are the only Jesus that people will ever see!

Breath Prayer:

Help me be a witness . . . to your love.

Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him.

—Matthew 4:1

No one wants to talk about temptation. The mere mention of it makes us uncomfortable and nervous. Sometimes the “holy” attitudes at church make us feel even more shameful about our temptations. We feel unable to speak about them, judged if we do, and pushed to act like it does not happen to us.

As we begin to walk toward the cross, we must recognize that temptation is part of our life with God. Discipleship is not easy and temptation is the primary way that we become distracted, discouraged, and/or defeated. Temptation hits our human weaknesses, it pushes our buttons, and comes at our most vulnerable times.

If Jesus was tempted, why are we surprised when we are?

Our journey toward the cross demands that we walk vulnerably in community. This means that we must find a small group of believers whom we can trust enough to share the ways that we,

like Jesus, are tempted to walk another way. It is in these communities of fellow saints/ sinners that we are able to stand up to the temptations that visit us as we walk the way of Jesus. Today, I invite you to recognize that temptation is part of the journey and that being tempted is not a failure. By the power of the Spirit we can resist temptation and help others do the same. Discipleship is difficult and only through the power of the Spirit can we live into its tough seasons.

Breath Prayer:

Do not let me fall . . . into temptation.

Monday, April 8

When they were alone, the people around Jesus, along with the Twelve, asked him about the parables.

—Mark 4:10

It does not matter how long we have been disciples— we still don't get it. Every time that I read through the Gospels, I am encouraged that I am in a long line of disciples who constantly need explanation after explanation. The Twelve, like disciples since, recognize that something important and life transforming is found in the stories of Jesus but have difficulty getting to what that kernel of truth is and what it means for them.

As we worship, reflect on Scripture, and live the day-to-day of discipleship, may we not get discouraged by our struggle in understanding it. The way of Jesus is more about action than understanding. We do what Jesus does and tell the stories of our faith, but more importantly we tell our own stories.

Our own encounters with God can become key aspects of our gospel witness. Our own stories of encounters with God provide fertile ground for others to connect with the larger story of our faith.

Today, think about the “God moments” in your life. How would you tell those stories? How would you explain those God moments to people who have become curious? How do you encourage others to identify the ways in which God is showing up in their life?

Our world often wants explanations. As we continue to walk toward the cross, may we recognize that one of the difficulties of discipleship is that we can't comprehend it fully along the way.

Breath Prayer:

Help me tell . . . your story, Lord.

Tuesday, April 9

“I begged your disciples to throw [the spirit seizing his son] out, but they couldn't.”

—Luke 9:40

Toddlers are difficult to deal with. They are moody, clumsy, and hardheaded. They are also not very self-aware. No matter what it is, they always seem to think that they can do it. Eating,

brushing their teeth, putting clothes on, they proclaim, “Me do it!” As a parent you end up frustrated as you watch them attempt that which is often beyond their ability, as they become frustrated and angry, while insisting, “Me do it!” As they insist that they can do it, they leave a mess in their path. Most of dinner ends up on the floor, there’s more toothpaste on the sink than on their teeth, and since two legs cannot fit in one pant leg, the toddler ends up falling and hitting his head. We as parents wish that they would just let us take care of it.

Discipleship requires us to fail. It is difficult to recognize the many ways that we are still unable to make Jesus known. The anger that rises within us as we encounter our co-worker, the judgment as we are at the red light and see the homeless person, and the tendency to gossip as we chat with our friend. We unable to do what Jesus would do!

Today, do not despair, as you are in good company. The disciples could not “throw it out” because this one required a different approach, prayer and fasting. As we continue walking toward Jerusalem with Jesus, recognize your limits. Take the time to gather with other believers to continue growing, asking, and learning to continue to practice the way of Jesus. In failure and disappointment we grow in God’s love.

Breath Prayer:

Loving God, . . . teach me in my failure.

Wednesday, April 10

“Look, I’m sending you as sheep among wolves. Therefore, be wise as snakes and innocent as doves.”

—Matthew 10:16

I want a safe path of discipleship! One that is comfortable, that fits me, and does not disturb what I naturally want to do. I want low-maintenance discipleship that asks little of me. If it is not going to be safe, then I want to be able to defend myself. I want to be able to fight back and to protect myself. Don’t we all?

Unfortunately, we are sent into dangerous territory. It turns out that following Jesus can be dangerous. We, like Jesus, could end a failure by the world’s standards. Loving, forgiving, including, and reconciling are always a threat to the way things are, especially to the powerful. We must not be naive. Being wise means that we must be discerning, attentive, and thoughtful, and being innocent means not using the tools of the evil one, such as violence, coercion, and manipulation, to get our way. It would be easier to react and to strike back in the same ways we are struck, but the good news of Jesus calls us to a different way.

Since we know that we are sent like “sheep among wolves,” we must prepare. Our preparation is rooted in community, relationship, and connection to ourselves, our neighbor, and God. As we prepare to die to self so that we can experience new life, may we pay attention and allow the struggles of discipleship to make us more like Jesus.

Breath Prayer:

In struggle, . . . make me wise and innocent.

Thursday, April 11

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.”

—Matthew 16:24

Anything worthwhile takes sacrifice. Growing in our vocation, relationships, or self-awareness takes a willingness to struggle. In the end any fruitful growth takes time and intentionality. Why would following Jesus be any different?

It is difficult to say no to ourselves. We live in a consumer culture, a culture tailored and dependent on believing that is about us. We are special, so we deserve this product or service. We are unique, so we need to buy this item or have this particular experience. Life is short, we are told, so make sure that you have what you want. We become hooked on consumption to the point that we expect the same in our life with God.

Then comes Lent with its insistence that life is not about us. Lent begins with a call to recognize our humanity: we live, and we will die; we sin, and we can be made new again. It continues with constant reminders of self-sacrifice and demands willingness to change, die, and be transformed. Soon we’ll be “treated” to a cycle of servanthood, self-denial, and death. Following Jesus means letting go.

It is good to know that we are not alone. Our cross-bearing occurs in community. Sacrifice is embedded in shared life. Our selfish desires are ordered into common good, our self-centeredness into a communal vision.

Following, letting go, results in life abundant. In letting go of the enslaving scripts we have been following, we find life in death, a life like we have never experienced before.

Breath Prayer:

Help me let go . . . so I can live.

Friday, April 12

But the Twelve understood none of these words. The meaning of this message was hidden from them and they didn’t grasp what he was saying.

—Luke 18:34

My native language is Spanish. Growing up in Puerto Rico, I did take English classes but, truthfully, they did not take. There’s only so much language you can learn without immersing yourself in it. It is hard to truly understand unless you experience it in the everyday of life. When I moved to the United States and was immersed in the language, it began to make sense. At first I grieved no longer hearing Spanish all around me. Language carries more than words; it is about culture, environment, and identity. At first I translated, my brain making the transition from Spanish to English: words, context, and culture being translated so that I could thrive in this new culture.

What was hidden from me became visible in time as I learned and experienced the new language. The language of Jesus works the same way. The disciples need to experience the whole story, to experience immersion in the way of Jesus so that they could learn the new language and become shaped by it.

It is no different now. We too struggle to understand, but as we prepare to enter the last day of Jesus' life, we need to allow ourselves to enter into the story. Only then will we be able to understand its meaning, only then will we be able to grasp what Jesus has been saying. Only then can we die, so that new life can emerge.

Breath Prayer:

Immerse me . . . in your grace, O Lord.

Saturday, April 13

Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus."

—John 11:16

We do all we can to avoid dying. Life is what we know; death is a mystery. We don't like not knowing. Our culture has been called death-denying. Even when we die, we seem to want to look as if we are asleep, normal, unblemished. Terminal illnesses are described as battles to be won, aging as mountains to climb.

Who would want to die?

It happens to be Thomas, the doubter. The one who after experiencing the death of his master and Lord would not believe resurrection till he saw it. Was he serious? Did he really want to die with Jesus?

We will never know for sure. I do have a hunch, though. I think he might have thought that his willingness to die would inspire Jesus to do what he wanted Jesus to do. It is human to align ourselves so that our wishes are accomplished. Almost like saying, "I am with you Jesus, but we really don't need to die, right?"

As we prepare to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem, we too find ourselves torn. We know what is going to happen and we are not sure we will walk all the way. We are wondering if we really want to go all the way. It is easier to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter.

Remember, in dying life is found. Let's go all the way, let's walk alongside Jesus and experience all of it, let's die with Jesus so that we can be born anew to a living hope!

Breath Prayer:

I will die with Jesus . . . and live in hope.

Palm Sunday, April 14

Those in front of him and those following were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

—Mark 11:9

I can imagine the excitement of the people. They heard that the miracle worker and teacher was approaching Jerusalem and they were ready. Someone finally understood their struggles, trials, and pain. I am sure the more they talked about it, the more excited they became and the higher their expectations rose.

That's what happens when you are desperate for salvation, healing, wholeness, and new life. It must have been a sight to see: Jesus entering Jerusalem like one who would liberate. Palms were waving, cloaks placed in front of him, and people pushing each other to take a look as chants of "Save us, Lord!" silenced everything else. You can imagine how the disciples felt, a mix of excitement, curiosity, and angst. They did not know at the time that it would end in disappointment . . .

It would be easy for us to be so lulled by the grandness of Palm Sunday that we chose to ignore the rest. It would be easy to stay with the image of cute kids carrying palms and shouting hosanna. It would be easy to skip the commemoration of all the painful events this week, easy to jump to Easter preparations. Today I invite you to take the more difficult road. Ask yourself, "Am I desperate for salvation?"

Now let's go on this difficult journey of Holy Week, remembering that it gets worse before it gets better.

Breath Prayer:

I am desperate for salvation; . . . Lord, save me.

Monday of Holy Week, April 15

Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it."

—John 12:7

It is human nature to believe that we know other people's motives. We know why the guy cut us off on the road, the woman at the cash register did not even look at us, or our child did not respond to the text. We are sure that what we feel perfectly describes reality. At times we catch ourselves before saying anything, but at others the stress of life removes the filter and we speak what we feel, openly questioning the motives of the other.

Today Mary is the one who knows better. This woman, this "other," is the wise one, the one who gets something that the disciples themselves do not get, as she perceives the need that those closest to Jesus could not (or maybe would not).

Who can blame them? The disciples did not want to hear that Jesus would die (even though he had told them again and again). The "other" turned out to be the realistic one, the disciples becoming the ones living in an alternative reality.

We are prone to live in our own alternative realities, too. We convince ourselves that discipleship is about comfort, inspiration, and people like us. We do not want to be reminded of the difficulties of discipleship, of the call to die to self so that we can live. Today, who is the other that is shaking your understanding of who Jesus is? Who gets it better than you do? How is God getting your attention about the cross-bearing life?

Breath Prayer:

Faithful Lord, . . . help my unbelief!

Tuesday of Holy Week, April 16

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

—John 12:24 NRSV

About ten years ago I was preparing for the funeral of a farmer. This man had been a man of deep faith, family, and service to the community but had not been much of a churchgoer. One of the children, a member of my church, asked me to lead the small family service at the gravesite. It is difficult to lead the service of someone you do not know. What I knew was that his children were faithful disciples of Jesus and that he was a rice farmer for most of his life. I knew that his grandchildren were all successful contributors to society. I knew that each of them credited this non-churchgoer for their deep faith.

We are each a seed of faith, but it turns out that remaining a seed does nothing. It is our willingness to allow ourselves to grow, germinate, expand that produces fruit. Our willingness to share life with others, to share our faith, and to pass on the wisdom is in the end what paves the way for transformation. Though I did not know the farmer, I knew the fruit of his life. His willingness to die to self over the years had made the harvest of his life plentiful.

We are nearing the last days of Jesus’ life. We have the opportunity to walk with Jesus and die to all that keeps us from life abundant; we have the opportunity to choose the difficult path. Are we going to remain a seed? Or are we going to let go and become fruitful?

Breath Prayer:

Nurturing God, help me . . . bear fruit.

Wednesday of Holy Week, April 17

After he said these things, Jesus was deeply disturbed and testified, “I assure you, one of you will betray me.”

—John 13:21

In Simon Sinek’s book *Leaders Eat Last* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2014), Sinek reminds leaders that a key component of trust is feeling safe. When leaders create spaces where their teams feel safe, trust grows. Leaders who are not perceived as caring for their team’s safety will see a decline in the trust level of their teams. This trust deficit affects not just the relationships but the task at hand, the mission.

Of course Jesus was “deeply disturbed.” He had provided a safe place for his disciples, a place of intimacy and trust. He had walked with them, seen them at their best and at their worst and always provided a loving place for them to figure out their role in Jesus’ mission. Even now he faced his betrayer with honesty, safety, and love.

We too are betrayed, sometimes even by the faith communities that we belong to or those faithful people around us that we trusted to hold our stories. Sometimes that betrayal comes from someone's telling others a story that we have shared; at other times the betrayal is simply neglect. No matter what we do, we are going to be betrayed at times.

As you continue to walk with Jesus, remember not to allow betrayal to turn to bitterness. Like Jesus, call it out in community and in love. Like Jesus, keep on providing safe spaces for others so that trust is rebuilt and healing is possible. The more we practice circles of safety in difficult times, the more that trust will grow and the more effective we'll become in doing what Jesus does.

Breath Prayer:

In betrayal, . . . help me not become bitter.

Maundy Thursday, April 18

“No!” Peter said. “You will never wash my feet!” Jesus replied, “Unless I wash you, you won't have a place with me.”

—John 13:8

So many of us are certified control freaks. We want things when we want them, done like we want them done, and unless we are in charge we do not play. Long ago I mentioned at a meeting that I was not a competitive person, and one of my lay folks looked at me and said, “I don't think that you are not competitive; I think that if you are not going to win, you do not play.”

I have never forgotten that statement.

So many of us are like Peter. We want to be part of what Jesus is doing. We are excited, passionate, and think of ourselves as “all in.” Then something surprises us, our expectations are challenged, our understanding of the way of Jesus is tested, and we find ourselves uncomfortable.

Maundy Thursday is an annual reminder that our way is not God's way. We think life is about power, and Jesus demonstrates servanthood; we think it's about control, and Jesus tells us to let go; we think it's about living comfortably and Jesus shows us it is about death.

Are we sure we want a part of this? Are we ready to get our feet washed and do the same for the rest of the world?

Remember that in the end there's only one way: following Jesus by serving others. This means we'll have to let go. We will have to play knowing that we will not win, at least not in the way that the world thinks of it.

Breath Prayer:

Wash me . . . in your way, O God.

Good Friday, April 19

When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, “It is completed.” Bowing his head, he gave up his life.

—John 19:30

Death is scary, messy, and mysterious. No matter what we do to prepare, it always seems to surprise us. I often remind the people I minister to that death is not a point in time but a process. In some real ways we begin dying the moment we take our first breath. Birth itself is dangerous. You would think that since death is part of life, we would be more comfortable speaking about it. This would open the doors to learning more about death, aging, health, and what it means to be human. In the church we could provide opportunities to discuss the reality of our mortality and how making peace with that reality is a key component of our growth in love.

The Scriptures are filled with calls to death and dying. In the Gospels we are frequently reminded that only through death can we gain new life. Only through the pains of birth can we be born again. Only in our willingness to sacrifice can we participate in that which Jesus completed on the cross.

Today we grieve. Grieving is a sign and symbol of our growing awareness of our own mortality. We grieve for the life that we must leave behind, for the things that we need to let go of in order to experience new life.

Always remember that the work of salvation has been completed. Messy, scary, mysterious, yet completed. Now we can wait in grief and in hope, for only in dying can we be born again.

Breath Prayer:

May my grief . . . lead to life.

Holy Saturday, April 20

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting in front of the tomb.

—Matthew 27:61

I grew up in a parsonage, so by the time I arrived in Seminary I had attended lots of funerals. It was just my life as a pastor's kid. I did not realize that some of my classmates had never been to one.

Funeral visitations can be fascinating. People come to support the family, to grieve with others and to view the body. Even as a child I remember thinking how strange it was that people wanted to sit in front of the body, sometimes for hours, as they visited with others.

As a pastor I quickly realized that various cultures have different expectations of visitations. In some parts of the country people still keep watch throughout the night, in others there's food to feed the entire community, still others are only a family affair.

What unites all of these different cultural expressions is the notion of watching and waiting. The ritual is a type of reality check, convincing us that the one before us is truly gone.

I can imagine this watching long ago. The women, still not believing what has happened . . . the other disciples, still in shock and grieving . . . some disciples returning to life as usual. We know the end of the story, but they did not. I cannot imagine a more hopeless day than this one.

Today, do not hurry the celebration. Sit and ponder a savior who is dead. Rest in the hopelessness; it is there that new life can truly emerge.

Breath Prayer:

Stay with me . . . as I keep watch.

Easter Sunday, April 21

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.

—John 20:18

The first apostle speaks boldly: “I have seen the Lord!” Imagine for a moment that encounter, sadness now turned to joy, fear turned to exaltation, timidity turned to boldness. Something happened on that day—we might not be able to explain it—but something happened, and the women, the first witnesses to the Resurrection, were never the same again.

We have been on a journey. It began with the command, “Believe the good news!” At each step of the way we have experienced the ups and down of life with Jesus. This week we have experienced the difficulty of dying and the grief of letting go.

My prayer is that on this journey, “You have seen the Lord!” and that in seeing him, you have found new life. The old has passed away, and new life is emerging. Now you join the great witnesses of the faith so that others can see the Lord through you.

We have experienced what love looks like, what letting go looks like, and what new life looks like. We know what it means to be a people of resurrection.

Now we know that sin and death no longer bind us. They no longer have power over us, and they are our end no longer, for Christ is risen—and we have seen him!

Breath Prayer:

Alleluia, . . . Alleluia!