

Gospels 2017--Christ With Us: Meditations on the Gospels

INTRODUCTION

The person central to our faith is Jesus, and we must not neglect the books that tell us the most about him. We can immerse ourselves in the four gospels, reading them slowly and thoughtfully in the course of a year. The personality and actions of Jesus thereby form us as his followers, deepening our heart connection to the one who showed us who God is.

MATTHEW 1-4: PREPARATION

January 1

Matthew 1:1-17. Parentage

The good news about Jesus begins with a quick overview of 2000 years of Old Testament history. The means is a family tree and most names evoke a story. There is elegant symmetry in that there were 14 generations each from the start of the Jewish family with Abraham, to the glory of the monarchy under David, to the return to the land after exile, to Christ. The number is somewhat artificial since at least three evil kings are left out between David and the captivity, and Luke gives more generations. But it is elegant!

Each section has strong overtones of Messianic expectations. Abraham was promised that kings would come from his family. David, who became a powerful king, was promised his dynasty would be unending, and even in a diminished position, the less powerful kings who returned to the land kept track of this promise. The end point and central purpose of it all is here: Jesus, the Messiah, the King of all has come.

Do I truly see Jesus as the center of all history?

January 2

Matthew 1:18-24 Promise of God

Because Mary and Joseph were faithful Jewish believers, they expected Messiah to come. When Mary became pregnant we do not know if she felt the quotation from Isaiah applied to her. Perhaps not, because it was in the context of Isaiah's reassuring prophecy to King Ahaz, 6th to the last king of Judah before the exile. But we know that Matthew did not hesitate to make a connection between Isaiah and Christ, seeing a double meaning in the quote. Not only would Israel be rescued in that time, before a young woman's son turned 12 years old, complete fulfillment and rescue would happen through Mary's son.

Does the supernatural in the story--ancient predictions, dreams that matter, messages from angels, a virgin birth--seem possible? Have I experienced things that seem beyond the ordinary and reinforce my faith in God?

January 3

Matthew 2:1-12 Place of birth

This beautiful story has given us many artistic expressions of the wise men journeying to find Jesus, following the star. It is a beautiful reminder that the original promise of blessing for Abraham and his family included the important news that through his family everyone in the world would be blessed. Through the whole Old Testament there is a thread of godly non-Jewish people, and promises that in time all nations will worship the one true God. These wise men from a foreign land were close to all that is good in their quest, despite not being Jewish believers. In contrast, King Herod only consulted the experts to find the prophecy of Messiah's birthplace so he could kill this threat to his kingship.

Their symbolic gifts remind us of spiritual gifts we can give Jesus today:

Lord, show a sign here in my life
That you are born again in me
That I might bow before you
Offering all that I can be.

Here is my gold, my time, my treasure;
Here is my frankincense, my heart;
Here my myrrh, my suffering;
I offer all, every part.

Do I embrace all people from all nations as ones God desires to bless? Do I offer Jesus all that I have to give?

January 4

Matthew 2:13-25 Protected

The Holy Family in flight for safety evokes for us today the millions of refugee families who leave their home countries to save their lives. In our Nativity plays, Christmas cards, and Christmas carols, we do not focus on the terrible and horrifying actions of Herod's massacre of children. Yet Matthew sees it as central to Jesus' birth. Even as an infant, he was opposed by an evil man, and that opposition would ultimately result in his crucifixion.

For us it evokes the tragedies of children dying from war, disease, famine and poverty. It also evokes the history of prejudice that has dogged so many, including Rachel's descendants. But

Jesus and his family returned to safety and the opportunity to introduce the kind of kingship that heals and does not harm.

Can I identify with losing home or children or country? Can I identify with Joseph receiving guidance and protection in a dangerous situation? Can I identify with Jesus, having no say in my family's migration? If not, can I befriend someone with these life-altering experiences?

January 5

Matthew 3:1-12 Preaching by John

Jesus' cousin John was the last of the great Old Testament prophets preparing the way for Messiah, pointing out what he would be like. John had the privilege of doing this in person. Hence there is no greater prophet than he.

But later Christ would say that the most humble person in the Kingdom he was inaugurating would be greater than John. Why? Because now the foreshadowing and predictions were complete and we live in the light of that reality. John preached something similar by saying his baptism was symbolic of repentance, but that Christ would bring the reality it symbolized. He was like a servant and the master was the true center of attention.

John compared people to trees that either produce good fruit or are chopped down. Most of the Old Testament prophets used similar imagery, and it appropriately prefigures the judgment of sin on the cross, a tree stripped of all fruit, which makes possible new and fruitful resurrection life.

Have I exchanged a fruitless life for a fruitful one? Have I recognized Jesus as the one who makes me fruitful?

January 6

Matthew 3:13-17 Prepared by baptism

Baptism is a sign of God's mercy to us. Rooted in purification rituals in the law and connected by New Testament writers to the miraculous rescue from slavery represented by the crossing of the Red Sea, it represents passage from death to life. It prefigures Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

Though he did not need purification from sin, he chose to identify with the human need for this just as his death was a profound identification with our sin, suffering, victimization by violence, and inevitable death. But this identification with death becomes an identification with life as God spoke to affirm Jesus' divine nature and a dove descended.

Do I know I have been raised from death to life in my day to day Christian experience?

January 7

Matthew 4:1-11 Temptation

For many events in Jesus' life we can point to Old Testament stories that have a similar pattern or foreshadow him in some way. The closest parallel to this story is the temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden by the mysterious snake; the difference is Jesus' successful resistance. Satan is introduced in the story of Job, but Satan and Job never met; the contest was between God and Satan.

This story must have been told by Jesus to his disciples since no one else was there to observe. The contest is presented as a grim one, with Satan taunting him to use his powers to avoid the limitations and discomforts of his human nature. The story redefines our enemy as spiritual, not human beings. We too experience these temptations; hunger and all our bodily needs; a desire for honor or attention to meet our psychological needs; and, the pull to worship something other than God to meet our spiritual needs. Jesus successfully resisted, using precisely the help we ordinary humans have: the scriptures.

Am I sensitive to physical, psychological and spiritual temptations? How resistant am I?

January 8

Matthew 4:12-25 Preaching begun

In the rest of this chapter Matthew introduces five principal themes of Jesus' ministry: that he is for all nations, that people must turn from sin to God, that God's Kingdom has begun, that we are called to follow him as disciples, and that he can heal us all.

These themes will be reiterated and explained more deeply in the rest of the book, and they form a framework for our encounter with Jesus today. They raise the following practical questions for us:

Do I share God's love for all nations? Have I turned from sin to God? Am I part of bringing God's Kingdom to earth today? Am I one of Jesus' students? Am I receiving healing?

DISCOURSE 1 -- SERMON ON THE MOUNT 5-7

January 9

Matthew 5:1-16. Changed values

Jesus presents a vision of emotional maturity counter to many of our cultural norms. So different, in fact, that many Christians are actually uncomfortable with this as a model for life.

Jesus calls for having a humble heart that knows "I neither understand everything, nor do I have it all together. I am a person who needs help."

He calls for being emotionally honest enough to be sad. To not be pushy in trying to get our own way or to try to be important, but to be open to receive God's gifts. He wants us to care deeply about justice and to exert ourselves for it. He wants us to be compassionate and merciful rather than harsh and judgemental. He wants complete sincerity in our quest for God, not hidden agendas that have to do with our own egos. Conflict is all around, and he wants us to be skilled at diffusing it. We need to have such a strong inner self and confidence in God that we can handle opposition graciously and without distress.

Jesus follows with the metaphors that we are to be like salt that flavors food, or light that permeates a room. If our counter-cultural character retains its quality and uniqueness, we will have an influence greater than we expect.

Which of these values is a challenge for me?

January 10

Matthew 5:17-48 Deeper laws

Jesus began by affirming his commitment to honor the law, and reinforced its validity. There is great wisdom in the law that has influenced the whole world. But then he set up a series of contrasts between the requirements of the law and his own more intense expectations using the formula "You have heard...but I say..."

Don't just avoid murder, manage your anger. Don't just avoid adultery, be on top of your lust. Don't just divorce honorably, avoid it altogether. Don't just fulfill your vows, keep your everyday word. Don't respond to offenses with justice, overlook them, and respond with mercy. And don't just love your (kind) neighbor, love the unkind who treat you badly.

We are not to be free of the law in the sense that we can live sloppier, more careless lives. Rather, we are called to more, but Jesus gives us the new hearts that enable us to live this way.

Where am I seeing weakness or sin in the way I privately think?

January 11

Matthew 6:1-18. Closet behavior

Jesus challenges us to a private spirituality that cares about God, not attention from others in our giving, praying and fasting. These practices show how much we actually believe there is a

God who listens to us. Our flashy American ways have made TV or radio preaching and giving almost cult-like, and this passage should at least cause to to ask: "What are we doing???"

Jesus promises that prayer brings rewards. I have seen that, but I have also experienced long stretches of waiting that invite doubt that this is so. I am then tempted to just babble or repeat myself. It is helpful to return to Jesus' model prayer which gives us these elements: 1) trust in God as a caring Father, 2) desire that everyone appreciate him, 3) desire his rule and his will to be realized now, 4) request provision of basic needs, 5) give and receive forgiveness, and 6) ask for protection from temptation and evil. This refocusing helps me know that the reward is God's good will and that I can trust his wisdom and mercy and grace.

How is my private spirituality?

January 12

Matthew 7:1-6 Condemnation vs. discernment

It has taken me years to come to terms with the admonition not to judge. Part of the confusion is that one cannot help but be observant and analytical and thereby notice when things are wrong. Further, that there are problems that one should prophetically confront, and Jesus gave the example by calling out the Pharisees in fairly harsh language.

It has helped me to distinguish between discernment and rejection. Even when confronting a wrong, the desire can be for reconciliation or transformation, rather than offering condemnation or contempt. The emphasis is on being humble enough and self-aware of our own flaws before meddling. He immediately followed up by saying we should not give pearls to swine. This sounds judgmental. In reality, if seen as discernment about what is wise to share with whom, it is common sense.

Have I learned to notice wrong things without condemning?

January 13

Matthew 7:7-10 Constancy

The admonition to never give up praying and to genuinely trust that God's will is good is a scripture to which I repeatedly turn. Never quit! Look for the positive gains in every circumstance. These are good mantras.

When tempted to discouragement, it is helpful to look back to prayer journals and see that things actually have happened over time, usually much more slowly than I would prefer. It strikes me that this is my limitation in not recognizing that life is fairly short, and so in terms of a grand scheme, these are quick answers.

What am I asking for that is requiring patience from me?

January 14

Matthew 7:11-12 Golden Rule

It is good to take the golden rule and spend serious time meditating on it. It is not only well known, Jesus told us it thoroughly handles the ins and outs of the Law. A basic charity and fairness to others that does not distinguish between you and me sets up a standard to follow.

But for some reason, we have forgotten this rule in our approach to politics and civic life. We make a place for insults or condemnation or distrust that means we really are not treating others as we would like to be treated.

Where might I be breaking the golden rule?

January 15

Matthew 7:13-29 Spiritual perception

Jesus told us that Kingdom life is not easy. He compared it to four things: a narrow gate, watching out for wolves in sheep's clothing, noticing good and bad fruit, and building on a rock, not sand. Each of these required discernment that what seems good may not be, and we have to choose carefully. He warned that not every miracle-worker is actually working for God.

After telling us not to judge at the beginning of the chapter, here he says we must have the good judgment to perceive the true and the false. In our overly rich media environment, we are challenged by too many voices and insufficient discernment re to whom to listen. People too easily believe lies, and conspiracy theories. It is not difficult to get a following for teaching fake faith. "Don't be so gullible!" says Jesus.

What criteria am I using for faith leaders to whom I listen?

HEALINGS AND MIRACLES 8-9

January 16

Matthew 8:1-17 Willing to ask

Matthew continued his practice of connection with the Old Testament by quoting Isaiah 53:4. It refers to the Messiah taking our diseases and removing our sickness. Old Testament promises and examples of healing prefigured that this would be a marker of the Messiah and his transforming power.

Jesus, in three healing stories, helps us see not only that he was Messiah and had this power, but also gave us principles regarding healing. At that point in time, leprosy was incurable though in our time it can be cured quickly with pills. But we have other incurable diseases. Jesus can heal those and just as Jesus sent the man to the priest to verify that he was well, modern healing can pass a doctor's scrutiny.

The Roman centurion did not even need Jesus to be physically present for his servant's healing, and we, too, can expect prayer from a distance to make a difference. Jesus also used this example of faith to point out that the Kingdom and its benefits are for all people from all nations.

The third healing, Peter's mother-in-law, reminds us that our response to being healed can be grateful service. So these three things--verification by doctors, healing for all people, and responding with service--still apply to us today.

Can I think of someone who needs healing and pray for them now?

January 17

Matthew 8:18-27 Waiting for help

The costs and benefits of following Jesus are starkly laid out here. His choice to be homeless means that we may be called to give up the security of home. His choice to leave his family may mean we also leave our families to follow him. These costs are high and many decide it is better to stick with a conventional life rather than giving up everything to follow him.

But we see the benefit in the next story. The insecurity caused by a dangerous storm has been used as a metaphor for any difficult and frightening experience we might face. The miraculous intervention in the natural world to calm the storm parallels our experiences of reassurance from God's presence in our stresses. The resulting delighted astonishment and peace in any circumstance are not at all a small benefit.

Is my commitment to follow Christ 100% no matter what?

January 18

Matthew 8:28-34 Wanting help

This story introduces more details to the theme of casting out demons that runs through Jesus' healing ministry. Again, it is a confrontation with spiritual opponents that are damaging mental and physical health.

In some gospel stories demons were associated with epilepsy, crippling, deafness, muteness, and blindness. In the Old Testament demons were associated with idols (e.g. Deuteronomy

32:17) and Paul made the same connection (I Corinthians 11:10,20). Idolatry, such a prevailing theme in the Old Testament, is never mentioned in the gospels. Instead, the focus is on these mysterious spiritual forces that harm people in some way and Jesus' power to remove them.

Have I ever experienced something I would label demonic?

January 19

Matthew 9:1-8 Watching

This story delights me because the emphasis is on the faith of the friends. They loved their friend enough to bring him to Jesus, and as Mark will tell us, to take off the roof to lower him in. This encourages me to exercise faith for those in my life who are suffering.

The religious people, horrified that Jesus took a God-like role of forgiving the man's sins, were silenced by the man walking. The Old Testament promises that in the Messianic age the lame would walk had come true before their eyes.

When my husband went through a time of not being able to walk, this story filled me with a sense of promise, and when it was fulfilled, I was delighted.

Is there someone in my life for whom I need to have faith?

January 20

Matthew 9:9-17 Feasting

Jesus brought a new kind of spirituality. Rather than avoiding outcasts, he welcomed them and ate with them and even called one to be his close friend. Even today, overly squeamish church people can react like the Pharisees who did not realize that Jesus opens the door of his love to all people.

He quoted Hosea's call to mercy rather than religious ritual. The call is in Psalms and other prophets as well and warns that even something given to demonstrate mercy (sacrifice) over time can be distorted into self-righteousness.

The complaint that Jesus' disciples didn't fast reminds us that we do not have a gloomy faith. Jesus compared himself to a bridegroom and his presence as a time for celebration. The new wine of the Spirit is always on the verge of bursting its old forms.

Am I rigid about what is spiritually appropriate behavior? How can I open myself to people I think of as unsavory?

January 21

Matthew 9:18-32 Healing

In this interlocking chain of five healing stories we see the importance of faith for ourselves and others. It begins with a father asking for help because his daughter has died. He has faith Jesus can raise her from the dead with a touch. On the way a woman believes that touching Jesus' robe will heal her and he says "Your faith has made you well."

Jesus raised the little girl, perhaps from a coma. After leaving her home, two blind men appealed to him and when he asked if they believed, they replied yes. He responded "Because of your faith it will happen.". Almost immediately people brought him a man who was mute. There was no mention of faith, but Jesus removed a demon and could speak.

In the travels that followed he felt compassion for the crowds. He healed because their problems were great. He told the disciples more workers were needed, and in the next chapter he would send them out to heal. From a man with faith for his daughter, to a woman and blind man with faith for themselves, to those brought to Jesus where faith is not mentioned, we see that the fundamental reason people were healed was because of Jesus' compassion and power. That seems relevant for us today as a focus when confronting illness in ourselves or others.

Is my primary response to illness of any kind one of compassion?

DISCOURSE 2: SENDING OUT DISCIPLES

January 22

Matthew 10:1-15 Sent out

Having modeled preaching and healing, Jesus called twelve friends and gave them authority to do what he had been doing. He then instructed them. Were I to modernize his instructions for us, I might say, "Select one people group to focus on. Tell them that God's reign has come. Do medical missions. Do what needs to be done in terms of medicine, nutrition, healthy water, sanitation, emergency food, etc. to keep people from dying. Work on cures for the most challenging diseases, offering healing for the mentally ill or traumatized. Be generous to any who are in need.

"Don't worry about having a good bank balance to do ministry. Travel light and simply. Don't check an extra bag. Buy what you need locally. Be willing to stay anywhere, no matter how humble. Be a courteous guest. If you are not well received somewhere, don't worry about it, and move on."

Can we do this? Can we today be disciples that engage the world in the way he said? I see many people making an effort, and central to the task is respect for others, service, and not

being materialistic. We have models of people doing this with great love, and those are the ones to emulate.

Do I have a sense of purpose in life that comes from my calling to follow Christ?

January 23

Matthew 10:12-42 Safe in God

As Jesus instructed his disciples, he warned them to expect opposition, even to the point of being arrested, threatened, and even killed. Jesus' program is a challenge to the status quo and doing the right thing in following him will create resistance, perhaps even in one's own family.

But mixed with the warning are words of comfort: God knows such details as the number of hairs I have; Jesus will acknowledge us in heaven if we acknowledge him on earth; if we give up our life for Jesus, we will find it; and, welcoming others, even giving a cup of water, will not go unrewarded.

Ministry can be difficult, but it is rewarding. Christ does not make the mistake either of over or under-selling what we can expect if we follow him. He is realistic.

Do I handle conflict well, or am I startled when it comes up? Am I accepting of delayed gratification when ministry is hard?

CONVERSATION 11-12

January 24

Matthew 11:1-19 John's disciples

John the Baptist, who had pointed to Jesus as Messiah, once he was imprisoned, wondered and doubted and sent his followers to inquire. Jesus sent back reassurance, saying all the Messianic prophecies were being fulfilled. Then the focus turned to John and his role as the very greatest prophet, the climactic one who the scriptural stories led up to, the one privileged to point out Messiah. From Moses to Samuel to Isaiah to Jeremiah to all the rest, the hints and promises of Messiah were woven through the scriptures, but as Jesus said, it all "looked forward to this present time."

My life has not been in the wilderness wearing odd clothes and eating odd food, so I have sometimes underappreciated John's importance as the last of the great Old Testament prophets. Jesus affirmed the value of John's teetotaling and fasting ways, and perhaps we would benefit from more of his austerity.

Am I willing to choose suffering and to accept unwanted suffering as a spiritual service?

January 25

Matthew 11:20-24 Judgment

Jesus told us that there will be a day of judgment when all will be put right, and he gave us insight into how judgment is determined. The Old Testament judgment on Sodom was for economic injustice as well as immorality, and their destruction was total. The total destruction of Tyre was for their cruelty.

Yet Jesus says those extreme cases will be better off than the towns where he has been doing miracles and people have not repented. Their greater opportunity to know what is true had made them more culpable.

As a teen I was troubled by the idea of judgment, but realized that my ideas of fairness were derived from scriptural morality. Here is one of those principles: What you know, not some objective abstract standard, is the basis for judging your response. It helps with queries about those who never heard the gospel or who lived before Christ. Apparently we can have confidence that all mitigating circumstances will be taken into account in God's assessments.

Do I have confidence in God's justice and mercy, or do I struggle with this?

January 26

Matthew 11:25-30 Rest

If we are the childlike people who Christ commended, then we will be able to rest and relax in his ultimate control over all things. The well-known call to come and let go of heavy burdens, to receive rest, and to carry Christ's light burden is encouraging. If we are stressed or anxious or feel overly responsible, these verses come as a challenge or an antidote. My heavy burden can be that of carrying responsibilities not intended for me. I need to put them into Christ's authoritative responsibility, to experience that deep soul rest that knows he will manage things far better than I can.

Jesus had not long earlier sent them to do ministry with the warning that they would be opposed. But here he gave a benefit that implied that no matter how hard they were working, or no matter how much people disliked them, they could live with a God-given relaxation.

It is a little head-spinning that Christ, God himself, said he is humble and gentle. In the Old Testament we have become accustomed to seeing God exercise power, often with drastic consequences, but even there he never forced belief or obedience. Christ's gentleness causes us to look back at the old stories and see that quality in his centuries of patience with the people.

Have I learned to receive the rest that Christ gives?

January 27

Matthew 12:1-21 Pharisees

Having just spoken of the amazing gift of the rest he gives, Jesus then discussed how that connected to the Old Testament image of rest, the Sabbath. In Genesis 2 the Sabbath is said to commemorate God's rest after creation, and in Deuteronomy 5:15 it is said to recall their liberation from the hard work of slavery. In all references it is seen as a great gift to be appreciated, but centuries of tradition had distorted the gift and rigidly defined what work might be.

Jesus wanted to take them back to a less legalistic appreciation of the gift of rest. He used the counter example of priests working on the Sabbath, and pointed to David's violation in a special circumstance.

Their rigidity defined his powerful healings as work, and he countered that what he was doing was good, not at all a contraction of the Sabbath. Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 for the second time, calling for mercy over ritual. Their response: a desire to kill him. Jesus' response to the opposition was to keep teaching and healing. Matthew quoted Isaiah who had predicted he would not fight, raise his voice, or crush the weak, but that his name would be the hope of all the world.

Am I overly defensive and protective of how things should be done? Do I set myself up as a judge of the spiritual practices of others?

January 28

Matthew 12:22-37 Accusations

Jesus' ability to heal the demon-possessed provoked a second accusation that he was in league with Satan. Jesus pointed out how illogical this was and warned them that blasphemy against God's Spirit is a terrible thing. He warned that what was in their hearts would come out in what they said. Their words would stand in judgment.

This passage brings me up rather short. I have a tendency to wonder how legitimate dramatic ministries are, and doubtless I have critiqued things I know nothing about. Unfortunate and judgmental words have come out of my mouth. I plead for forgiveness for all my arrogance.

Has Jesus helped me produce good words from a good heart or do I need to repent of things I have said?

January 29

Matthew 12:38-42 Jonah

Jesus compared the miraculous sign of his death and resurrection to Jonah's three days in the whale. In this way he set a precedent for looking at Old Testament stories and finding analogies to his life. Once we look, the scriptures are full of them, and it truly is the case that, as he said, "All the scriptures speak of me." In Jonah's prayer there was a hint of resurrection: "You, O Lord my God, have snatched me from the yawning jaws of death!"

He used the repentance of those to whom Jonah preached in Nineveh as a contrast to his unrepentant hearers who were not recognizing their great privilege to hear him. He contrasted the openness of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon with their closedness toward him. Responsiveness versus unresponsiveness. He said they were setting themselves up for a negative judgment.

Do I have an open, responsive heart?

January 30

Matthew 12:43-50 Family

In Jesus' critique of his unresponsive listeners, he gave an alarming picture of how spiritual unresponsiveness resulted in an even worse condition than when one began. From one evil spirit to seven, the person was far worse off because they did not come near in faith. We have seen how bad choices lead to deterioration in addictions, for example. It can be turned around, but often takes hitting the bottom before being willing to change.

In contrast, as his family waited to see him, he extended that intimacy to all who do God's will. What a contrast! Our choice is the misery of being tormented by depression and confusion or being drawn into closeness and joy in Jesus' family. We know that God is our Heavenly Father, but it impacts us even more to realize that Jesus, God himself, has a mother and brothers and sisters who knew him well. How gracious that we have been invited into that family!

What spiritual choices am I making today? Toward Jesus or away from him?

DISCOURSE 3: KINGDOM PARABLES 13

January 31

Matthew 13:1-23 Prepared hearts

Jesus' theme of the Kingdom of Heaven which had been prefigured by a political nation with human kings, land, wars, and a temple for worship, was now revealed. But for anyone

expecting a resurgence of political power and independence from foreign domination, it was a bewildering message.

Jesus told it in stories that made analogies one had to struggle to understand. The disciples were puzzled at why he told stories and he explained that those who are open will gradually understand more, whereas those who are closed will turn away, something he reinforced with a quote from Isaiah.

In this instance he laid out what each element in the parable meant. The obvious application for a follower of Christ was to desire to be truly receptive so that maximum fruitfulness would be possible.

Is my heart truly open to receive the good news of the kingdom?

February 1

Matthew 13:24-29, 36-43 Good and evil

Since Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of Heaven as his core message, it does us good to immerse ourselves slowly in these stories of the Kingdom. This parable gave an intriguing vision of why we live in a world mixed with good and evil. Not only is there an enemy who has planted weeds among wheat, the two things are nearly indistinguishable and will have to be sorted at the end of time.

Jesus gave an explanation of the analogies once alone with the disciples. A reason to leave them growing alongside one another is that the wheat could be hurt if the weeds were pulled. This is a puzzling idea, since my simplistic view is that the faster evil is removed, the better. However, in Helmut Thielicke's meditations on the parables, he offered some helpful thoughts.

"But when the Lord in the parable nevertheless counsels caution and restraint, he certainly does not intend that we should be vague, timid and indifferent in our judgment about these things, that we should cultivate a characterless, hazy tolerance. Of course we should "distinguish between spirits." Of course we must call what is godly godly and what is satanic satanic. The Lord Christ himself did this.

"But when we examine the weed patch most closely and try, on the basis of what we know about sin, blasphemy, and nihilism, we encounter a strange difficulty. We find that nobody is merely a blasphemer or merely a nihilist, but always at the same time a misguided child of God. ... Who dares to separate wheat and tares here? Ought we not rather wait for God's great day and pray that God may mercifully prosper these. Must we not rather love, in order that in this very venture of love we may learn to realize that wheat is sown in even the most weed-ridden lives and that God is waiting and yearning for it to grow?" (The Waiting Father, p.80)

Am I able to realize what a mixture of good and evil I am and be gracious toward the mix in others as well?

February 2

Matthew 13:31-32 Process for change

Jesus compared the Kingdom of Heaven to the tiniest of seeds. Miniscule. How seemingly insignificant and without importance. Yet it grew into a bush large enough for birds to find rest. The idea seems simple and yet how astonishing the notion must have seemed to people expecting a powerful king and powerful kingdom.

For us, perhaps one phrase in scripture or a song, or an experience of nature or art or love, serves as a seed of the Kingdom in us. We do not forget it. That moment grows in significance in our minds and hearts and begins to change us and then perhaps others around us. The goodness of that tiny thing spreads and becomes something nurturing.

We tend to like big, flashy, highly impactful, rapid, overnight spiritual successes. Jesus pointed us to the almost invisible seed, the slow growth, something so natural we might not notice it as the healthy model for spiritual growth. We have a choice which path of growth to seek.

What small kingdom seed am I aware has come into my life recently?

February 3

Matthew 13:33-35 From small to great

Jesus offered another parable of starting small, but penetrating and impacting something larger. Not only does this seem to apply to us as individuals, but it well describes the start of Christ's team from one person to twelve to now a third of all people on earth who identify with him. Fewer and fewer people have never heard of him.

I think of this when I see beautiful churches, or hear great scripture-themed music, or see hospitals or schools or other social services founded in Christ's name. I think of this when I look at great scripture-themed art, or read wise books or hear from the hearts of believing people.

Matthew continued his practice of quoting Old Testament scripture to connect prophetic passages to Christ. Here it is a verse from Psalms that spoke of teaching mysteries through parables. The point was made that Jesus used stories and visual imagery to teach. We have learned over time that these things are most memorable. The word picture of a woman making bread takes me to childhood bread making sessions with my mother. I could see on a weekly basis how impactful yeast must be.

How patient am I with the process of spiritual growth in myself and others?

February 4

Matthew 13:44 Something valuable

This parable might be a good reminder or theme for anyone involved in a church. The kingdom is so valuable that we can let go of everything else--material, social, psychological, even our ideas about spirituality. But to get this extraordinary treasure we need to buy the land where it is located. The field might have a lot of drawbacks or not be a particularly attractive piece of land. Consequently, we put up with any inconveniences or problems for the sake of that great treasure which we know is hidden there. This perspective causes me to gently ignore a lot of flaws in Christian churches, ministries, or the messy history of Christianity. As long as the treasure is findable there, it really does not matter that there are some surrounding problems.

Is my primary focus Christ and his kingdom or am I distracted by the surrounding environment?

February 5

Matthew 13:45-46 Purchased by God

This parable is very similar to the previous one, but this time there was no extraneous field involved. Instead the pearl merchant found such a wonderful pearl, he sold everything he had to buy it. Later there will be a story of a wealthy young man who wanted to follow Jesus, but when told that he should sell everything, he went away sadly because he had a lot of things and was not ready to let go of them. In contrast, the man in our story recognized that the kingdom, the chance to follow Christ, was so overwhelmingly valuable that nothing else really mattered.

For our conventional Christianity we are never really called to see how stark our choices are, and we compromise with the call to many possessions or many distractions. What we need to listen to is that call to an unconventional commitment that lets go of everything in favor of the greatest thing.

The parable can also be read with God himself as the merchant, giving up everything to purchase the valuable and precious members of his kingdom. That meaning helps us reciprocate in giving up anything!

How complete is my commitment?

February 6

Matthew 13:47-52 Parting good and bad

This parable seems like a parallel to the story of the wheat and tares. Good and bad fish are caught in the net together and the sorting process takes place at the end of time. Jesus ended by asking if they understood, and when they said they did, he said that those who know the Old Testament and also are disciples of the kingdom can draw on both resources. And, in fact, Jesus himself did that here.

A strong theme in all the Old Testament prophets was that sin will be punished, that God's mercy will rescue some, and that the people of God--Israel and Judah--were a mix of bad and good that needed purification.

The image of fishermen to catch people was from Jeremiah (16:16), and there the image was about catching the sinful. Here Jesus changed the imagery to include the godly that were picked up and packed in crates. There was a great deal of mercy expressed in the Old Testament, but there was even greater mercy expressed in Christ. The kingdom is always a hopeful message even when the consequences of evil are pointed out.

Do I see Christ and his message clearly prefigured in the Old Testament, or do I struggle with the image of God presented there?

February 7

Matthew 13:53-58 Rejection

The hometown rejection must have stung. The people that knew his social class, his mother, and his siblings, somehow thought that invalidated the reports of his wisdom and his miracles. Our proverb, "Familiarity breeds contempt" parallels "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country."

Perhaps we have experienced being minimized by our family and friends, or perhaps we have done some of the minimizing. Either case is tragic and we need to seek the humility of seeing others, including family, as better than ourselves. Criticism, contempt, minimizing and ignoring others are what we want to avoid. Openness, interest, attention, respect and serving others are our alternate goals.

Is there someone to whom I am failing to offer respect?

MIRACLES 14-17

February 8

Matthew 14:1-12 Prophet killed

The martyrdom of the one Jesus called the greatest prophet tragically prefigured Jesus' own death. It was engineered by a corrupt ruler whose lusts led him to marry a powerful and

ruthless woman, Herodias. The immediate cause, we presume, was his lustful enjoyment of his step-daughter. A head being delivered on a dish to this cruel woman is truly horrible.

Who was she? She was Herod the Great's niece. In her politically powerful and wealthy family that ruled under Rome's auspices, murder was a familiar solution to difficulties. Herod killed her grandmother, father, an uncle, and her great uncle was drowned in the palace swimming pool where she grew up. She was in an arranged marriage with her half-uncle when she fell in love with Herod Antipas (or at the least was attracted to greater power). He was her husband's brother, but she divorced and remarried, and took her daughter from her first marriage with her. The relationship was costly for Herod since she insisted he divorce his first wife. In turn his first wife's father (from Petra, his grandmother's people) attacked and defeated him. He was forced into exile and died there. Herodias went with him and we know no more of her.

Her uncle tried to kill Jesus as an infant, and her husband was involved in Jesus' trail. She, her daughter, and her husband were instrumental in John's death. People who cared more about their own position and power rather than justice would deliver Jesus to his death. Being prophetic and getting killed seem to go hand in hand. This murderous royal family is quite the opposite of the loving, peaceful, just royal family Jesus adopted us into.

Is my commitment to Christ, to truth, to justice, strong enough to remain fearless in the face of death?

February 9

Matthew 14:13-21 Provision

Jesus' miracle teaches us a great deal about food, and in our time when eating well is difficult for so many of us, there are lessons worth learning. First, he was willing to take responsibility to feed others unexpectedly. He was willing to do so even though his plan A had been to be off by himself for a much needed break. He did not reproach the poor planning of others. Secondly, he was not intimidated by the limitations of the supplies or their simplicity. Third, he made a hospitable space, and he blessed the food. He got help from the disciples to share it. The gift of more than enough meant they gathered up leftovers and saved them.

Am I willing to follow Jesus in these ways? To be inconvenienced, to take responsibility to feed others, to have confidence there will be enough, to be creative with whatever supplies are on hand no matter how simple or basic, to be flexible in managing hospitality, to not try to do it all myself, and to be frugal and saving. Our tendency today is to be haphazard or last minute and to not see sharing food for what it is: a beautiful way of serving others.

What do I need to learn to be more responsible about food?

February 10

Matthew 14:22-36 Peace in trouble

Movies have used the motif of the impossible walk on water, and in many cases transformed it into something with a clever and rational explanation. We don't have a rational explanation here for either Jesus' or Peter's actions, but the story has become a metaphor for being in an overwhelming situation and being rescued by Jesus. It is a metaphor for his rescuing us when our faith fails.

But for the disciples, it was a real moment of being convinced that Jesus was God's son. It was bookended by another attempt for Jesus to be alone to pray, and being interrupted to exercise compassionate healing power. I take to heart his words: "It's all right. I am here! Don't be afraid.". I need that kind of reassurance in the heavy waves of life.

Do I find peace and reassurance in Jesus' presence?

February 11

Matthew 15:1-20 Purity

It has been a recurring problem to mix cultural norms with the faith and to reach a point where those norms override the faith. For example, the religious justifications for colonialism and slavery are clear examples. More recently, our mix of politics and religion has become toxic and compromised.

In Jesus' day the same thing had happened with the Law. The good principles there had been elaborated and embroidered to a point that those cultural norms overrode clear statements in the Law. When Jesus pointed this out, the Pharisees were offended. This is a common reaction when some deeply held idea is challenged by a New Testament verse. For example, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" would surely have a corrective effect on a lot of toxic political Facebook posts. But Jesus' advice was to ignore the Pharisees, and this can be a practical strategy for us. We are in danger of honoring Jesus with our lips, but not our hearts, just as Isaiah said.

Am I aware of any cultural norms around me that seem accepted by people of faith, even when they contradict scripture?

February 12

Matthew 15:15-20 Our hearts

The Law contained instructions on what to eat and what not to eat that provided good health guidelines and ways of avoiding infection, particularly in an era without refrigeration. This had, unfortunately, developed rigidity. The Pharisees had elaborated the Law's injunction to wash (another good health idea), but they had made it a ceremony.

Jesus pointed out that this was not the deepest reality for staying pure. What mattered more was what is in the heart. I have been startled and alarmed at times at what can come out of my heart. My words can reveal a defensive, proud, critical, overly responsible or angry nature, and I plead for forgiveness and correction. I don't want a Pharisaical image of goodness, but a transformed nature.

What do my words reveal about my weak places?

February 13

Matthew 15:21-28 Plea of faith

Jesus went to a Gentile area, reprising something Elijah did when he blessed a widow in the same area. In his first sermon (Luke 4:18-27) he had pointed out this story as an example of how God extended mercy beyond Israel. Knowing this background one is struck by Jesus' level of rudeness to the woman and wonders why he used a racial slur, surely something inconsistent with his respect for the marginalized. His rejection and indifference to her as a Gentile seems inconsistent with his compassion.

His point was that his focus was to be on Israel. Her clever retort that even as a Gentile dog she could have some crumbs, elicited a response of commendation and healing. His parables will increasingly contain the theme that those called by God (the Jews), have failed to respond, and the door is open to all nations. Here Jesus repeated the work of Elijah in blessing a Gentile woman. We have the same calling today.

Is my humility and faith at all comparable to that of this woman? Do I have compassion on all, no matter what their background?

February 14

Matthew 15:29-39 More provision

Jesus' compassion and mercy led once again to healing all who came to him and feeding them as well. This time people had come prepared with three days worth of food, but they had run out, and similar to the previous instance he multiplied a small amount, all ate, and they gathered up the leftovers. Jesus' kindness met the physical needs of health and food as miraculous signs of the kingdom.

I see these same signs of the kingdom today. There was a period in our lives when my husband could not walk and all the verses about the lame walking leapt off the page. When he could walk once more, I felt I was seeing these miracles reenacted. I felt Similarly with crowds of hungry people who received very necessary food in midst of a refugee crisis.

Our need to reenact Jesus' acts of compassion does not stop. We have a calling to heal and feed, and as we will be told in Matthew 25, to visit those in prison, clothe the naked, and invite strangers into our homes. In whatever small measure we can do these things, we are being Jesus' true followers.

Is there some way I can show compassion and mercy today?

February 15

Matthew 16:1-12 False teachers

Jesus flatout identified the Pharisees and Sadducees as false teachers. His main complaint seemed to be their unrealistic adherence to principles that got in the way of loving others.

Have we not often fallen into that error today? We identify people who don't think as we do as enemies, we say unkind things, we reject those who don't measure up to our moral standards, and we spend way too much time on details that are not very significant.

First the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus asking for a demonstration miracle as though there had not already been many and as though they had a right to ask him to perform on demand. Jesus refused and said the sign would be that of Jonah, a cryptic prophecy of his death and resurrection.

Then as the disciples worried about being out of food, he contrasted the yeast of the kingdom with the dangerous yeast of these false teachers. Even a small dose of rigidity or lovelessness can have a widespread effect.

How discerning am I of loveless false teaching?

February 16

Matthew 16:13-20 Peter's prophecy

Matthew had repeatedly used prophecies of the Messiah and connected them to Christ, but here Peter was able to make that connection himself. Jesus responded that he had received a supernatural revelation.

Some interpret that his declaration--that Jesus is Messiah--is the foundation of the church, and that Peter's leadership of the group to be formed is simultaneously affirmed. The mysterious promise that he will receive the keys of the kingdom made keys Peter's symbol in Christian art. It clearly was an indication of spiritual authority given to connect the interlocking events of heaven and earth. Spiritual authority was now delegated from Christ to human actors.

Christ told them not to publicize that he was the Messiah. A movement, perhaps a political rebellion, could gather behind him, and his humble mission of teaching, healing and dying needed to come before the power of the resurrection.

Do I see Christ as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Messianic prophecies?

February 17

Matthew 16:21-28 Carrying crosses

Jesus' example in the crucifixion and resurrection taught us that loss, suffering, and death are essential prerequisites to life, joy, and power. Here he gave a prophecy of what was coming, warning his disciples. Peter resisted the idea, saying the negative, dark side of life had nothing to do with Jesus. But Jesus resisted this overly sunny view as a temptation and a strictly human viewpoint. Since we want happiness, success, health, prosperity, and blessing, we are often on Peter's side in this argument, rather than Jesus'.

But Jesus made it clear that selfishness, ambition, and holding on to what we think we deserve are antithetical to his call for us to give up everything for him. If we do, we have the chance to save our souls.

It reminds me of two phrases from Madeleine L'Engle. The first is in a reflection on Good Friday: "Experience is painfully teaching me that what seems a NO to man from man's point of view is often the essential prelude to a far greater YES." (p. 90 Irrational Season). The second regards resurrection: "The strange turning of what seemed to be a horrendous NO to a glorious YES is always the message of Easter." (p.110) We are called to hold both of these realities in a creative tension in our lives.

What do I currently perceive as the way I am giving up my life?

February 18

Matthew 17:1-13 Place of revelation

Three privileged disciples saw Jesus in extraordinary beauty on a mountaintop. His face shone like the sun, and his clothing was dazzling white. When one of these disciples, John, later saw Christ in a vision, the emphasis was again on dazzling light: eyes bright like flames of fire, head and hair like white snow, his feet white hot like metal in a furnace.

What do we make of this vision of bright light coming from Jesus? Even after the resurrection there was nothing quite like it. Perhaps somewhat close was the bright light and voice from heaven that converted Paul. This is not the same familiar companion on the road that these disciples had known. They had already recognized him as Messiah and seen astonishing things like his walking on water that convinced them he was the Son of God. But this moment when

Jesus' appearance changed, when great figures long-dead appeared, and when a voice from a cloud affirmed his as God's son, this supernatural experience eclipsed everything else.

My moments of seeing something transfigured--glory in a set of clouds, music of beauty and power, art that challenges or uplifts me--are wonderful. But they pale in comparison to seeing Jesus shining in great light as these disciples did. It seems one would be changed forever, but it did not prevent Peter's denial, or prevent all the disciples' sincere puzzlement at the news of resurrection.

When have I come closest to seeing Christ's glory?

February 19

Matthew 17:14-20 Possessed child healed

As people have heard teaching about healing and become more confident in praying for it, I have noticed an unfortunate side effect. More than once, people have explained their disappointment that someone was not healed by blaming the sick person's lack of faith.

This story challenges that perspective. The disciples and the father of the epileptic boy were disappointed that the efforts to heal had not worked. Jesus proceeded to heal the child after scolding the father and disciples for their lack of faith. When the disciples asked about their failure Jesus told them they did not have enough faith. This firmly took the responsibility from the one who was ill and put it on the one doing the praying. In contrast, apparently even a small smidge of faith can do seemingly impossible things. May my faith grow!

What is my current challenge and am I seeing it through a lens of faith?

February 20

Matthew 17:22-27 Paying the tax

Jesus once more prophesied his death and resurrection. The grief-filled disciples understood the death part, but did not at all understand the joy of the resurrection.

The coming confrontation leading to death was mildly prefigured in the temple tax collectors assuming Jesus would not pay. Despite his disagreement that any such tax was due, he conveniently arranged for a miracle to pay up. Jesus' knowledge of what others said out of his hearing, or where there might be a coin in a fish Peter could catch was another proof that this was no ordinary person.

I like to apply this story to financial needs. If one chooses to live as Jesus did with no income and so live on a hand-to-mouth basis, exceptional things need to happen to provide for exceptional needs. "Don't lay up treasures, don't worry about tomorrow, and sell all you have

and give to the poor” are all teachings that only work if you can count on getting a coin from a fish when necessary! I have my own fish stories that I treasure.

Do I have confidence in God’s provision, even in odd and unexpected ways?

DISCOURSE 4: KINGDOM GREATNESS

February 21

Matthew 18:1-11. Relax in God

Jesus disciples spent far too much time wondering about their future greatness once their friend had become king. They wanted to be sure to get a great position. Over and over he emphasized that the goals were humility, simplicity, service, and not having power to lord it over others.

Once more he took a child into his arms to show them that this smallness was their real goal. He said “anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me.”. I think of this when caring for children. When tempted to be impatient or disrespectful or bored or ready to be with adults, this verse reminds me that being with a child is a remarkable privilege. If I look more carefully and attentively will I see Christ in them? Playing with a child tends to diminish my self-importance and invite me into being present now.

Is there a child in my life I can love today?

February 22

Matthew 18:12-20 Reconciliation

I like seeing these two teachings--seeking a lost sheep and correcting a fellow believer--as speaking to one another. We know Jesus compared himself to a shepherd and the obvious and meaningful connection is that he sacrificially seeks those who wander. But since we are to be like Christ, we also have a responsibility to seek out the straying ones. Sometimes Christians are a little too willing to leave those in spiritual trouble to fend for themselves, and this inspires us to have the shepherd’s heart and make an effort.

That shepherd’s heart is the one with which we need to approach someone who has harmed us personally. A private conversation might sort things out, but if not, one can get help. Sometimes the form this can take is a judgmental “trying to prove I am right, and you are wrong” and the friends brought are there to validate one side of the story. But if I and my friend are pursuing another with shepherd’s hearts, the point will be healing and reconciliation.

If a church community cannot draw someone back into reconciliation, then the option is to be polite, courteous, and gracious as one would be to any unbeliever. A friendly and inviting open

door for either pagan, taxpayer, or estranged believer is the right approach. None of this is rejecting. It is tenderhearted, seeking behavior.

Is there a "lost sheep" in my life I need to seek out?

February 23

Matthew 18:21-35 Real forgiveness

This pointed story makes the obvious comparison of how hypocritical we can be. If God has forgiven us our impossible indebtedness, how can we be so arrogant as to fail to forgive another human being. The protagonist in the story is sent to prison to pay everything he had. Jesus says the same thing will happen to us if we fail to forgive.

This is a challenging story. In the first place, it can be difficult to forgive, particularly if the offender keeps repeating his offenses. Peter thought he was being magnanimous to propose seven times for forgiving the same offense, but Jesus multiplied that to a point there would be no sense in trying to keep track.

Secondly, there are people like the servant in our life who really do not want to forgive us our offense and let a matter go. They persist in letting us know we are still not off the hook and that we really do owe them. Since the debt is unpayable, reconciliation is impossible, and we are left never able to make things right. Our offenses are real and no one can just say "that's okay.". The slate needs to be wiped clean. An important principle is that we can forgive whether or not the other person has managed to do so. We cannot reconcile unless they are also willing to forgive, but we can be ready and open.

If we put ourselves in the story as the unforgiving servant, we learn that we must let go of offenses. If we put ourselves in the story as the unforgiven victim, we learn that God and others will stand up for us and demand we be let off. If we put ourselves in the story as the friends who are appalled by the lack of forgiveness, we see it is right to appeal to God to change the situation.

Is there someone in my life I need to forgive?

TO JERUSALEM 19-22

February 24

Matthew 19:1-12 Confrontations

The Pharisees specialized in coming up with tricky questions, hoping Jesus would contradict the Law and give them cause for some formal accusation of blasphemy or wrong-doing. They

asked if divorce was okay. In our time we've seen a shift in the church toward answering "yes" to this question.

Jesus went back to the creation and first marriage to say that marriage was intended to be indissoluble. They objected by citing Moses. The passage referred to is Deuteronomy 24:1: "Suppose a man marries a woman but later discovers something about her that is shameful. So he writes a letter of divorce, gives it to her, and sends her away." In the context she remarries and the point is that if her second husband divorces her or dies, she cannot remarry husband #1.

The assumption is that the continuation of the marriage or ending it is the man's decision, so the very explanation affirms patriarchy. Jesus challenged this by describing "hard-hearted wickedness" to such a decision, and described the man's second marriage as adultery. The disciples did not like such a view of marriage that put such a high standard on working out marriage problems.

The Pharisees did not get the contradiction of Moses as they had hoped, but as in the Sermon on the Mount, he raised the standards from what is permitted in the Law to a higher ideal. He also affirmed singleness as a legitimate and obedient choice for one's life--not less than marriage. If we have experienced divorce or feel it must happen to escape abuse of some kind, I Corinthians 7:15 tells us it is more important to live in peace than with unresolvable strife or struggle.

What are my observations and feelings about marriage both as ideal and reality?

February 25

Matthew 19:13-15 Children

Jesus treasured children as exemplars of God's Kingdom. Before life confuses and confounds us, the simplicity, curious, exploring, learning, and the affectionate joy of childhood, is normal. For me, the biggest challenge to a childlike perspective is taking on responsibility to manage my life or that of others. Unlike a child, I am not always trusting the "grownups". Curiosity, learning, affection and joy are not as challenging as trust in God's ability and willingness to take responsibility. Perhaps others have other challenges, but Jesus' call to see children as kingdom people is a challenge to return to trust and hope.

What aspect of childhood challenges me?

February 26

Matthew 19:16-30 Choosing poverty

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told us to serve God rather than money, and this story is an instance of someone failing to take up that challenge. It is a truly counter-cultural story for us Americans who, whether Christians or not, value wealth. Even as the wealthiest people in history, we are quite attentive to our net worth.

So the fact that “this does not actually apply to me” is our preferred default. In my case, however, my parents were missionaries who had modeled putting God over money. In fact, I am rather delighted with Jesus’ finale that anyone who has given up houses or family for him will get a 100 times back, along with lasting life. My parents are quite visible examples of this with a ridiculous amount of property that came through various means after their years of simplicity and sacrifice.

Even if we “sell all”, things necessary for daily life easily accumulate again, and so repeated efforts to dispose become possible or necessary.

How willing am I to let go of material gifts from God?

February 27

Matthew 20:1-16 Getting paid

This is a good parable for anyone involved in ministry. Originally, it doubtless was intended to contrast the privilege the Jews had to follow and serve God, and then the opportunity Gentiles would have to join in. The Jews might feel like it was unfair for the Gentiles to have the same privileges, but in God’s justice he decided to treat all the same.

In the same way, if we are sure of our theology, have gone to seminary, become missionaries, served in a successful ministry, or are healthy, high-energy people, we may feel like we’re the ones who started work early. We may feel that we have suffered and sacrificed in ministry enough that we deserve extra appreciation and recognition. If someone in secular life, someone with shaky theology, or someone who has seemingly lived selfishly or had many failures, gets recognition or approval, we think we obviously deserve more and can become irritated.

Jesus said that is a false perspective. Our focus needs to be on what he wants from us and our reward needs to be from him rather than other people. It is a big mistake to compare ourselves either from the position of the longtime hard worker, or from the position of someone new. Or perhaps we feel like the late laborers who say they were never offered a chance to serve. He said it is never too late to get started. Approval and appreciation come directly from him without regard to others.

Do I get my reward directly from Jesus for any service I offer?

February 28

Matthew 20:17-29 Crucifixion coming

Jesus once more predicted his death. This prediction included more details. In Matthew 17:22 he said he would be betrayed and then killed. Here he specified that he would be betrayed to the priests and religious teachers who would sentence him to die. Then he would be given to the Romans, mocked, whipped, and crucified. This is the first explicit prophecy of the crucifixion.

As in the previous cases, he said he would be raised on the third day, something they clearly did not grasp. Here Peter did not protest, and we are not told they were filled with grief; we are given no reaction at all.

Jesus' concrete prophetic knowledge and his willingness to share it with these close friends was a privilege, yet something that went so counter to their expectations of the Messiah was difficult to grasp. Despite these repetitions, when these events unfolded they were shocked and horrified.

We want to anticipate good and hopeful things in our lives. The prophecy of the resurrection sounds good to us. Unfortunately, sometimes a cross intervenes and we need to be prepared to face it with courage and acceptance. But the "third day" is always coming.

Do I accept both the cross and the resurrection as realities for life?

March 1

Matthew 20:20-28 Creative leadership

Jesus redefined leadership for us. The disciples assumed, as we do, that it means being the center of attention, the most powerful, and able to impose one's will. Jesus said his kind of leaders need to be less noticeable, humble, and carrying out the will of others. This redefinition has not always caught on in Christian circles, and we conform to the celebrity leader our culture offers. Jesus connected great sorrow with his kind of leadership and pointed out that it would mean he would give up his life.

If we believe that all of us are called to be leaders in the kingdom, perhaps this helps many who have a personality not given to command or attention-getting. For those who do have that personality, perhaps it is a challenge to soften their style and keep servanthood in mind. This becomes even more obvious in the cross-cultural context of missions. Our American style is to unconsciously feel we know how things can be better, we can mobilize resources, and so we need to be the decision-makers. But even in secular development circles, it has become clear how important it is to defer to local leaders and trust their instincts. If we can truly put ourselves at their service, amazing things are possible.

Do I truly take on my identity as one who leads by serving?

March 2

Matthew 20:29-34 Healing blind men

There is a Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 35:5 that said, "And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf." Today medical science has made great advances, even in healing blindness or deafness. But Jesus was the first to do this. There was another Messianic prophecy to King David saying, "I will raise up one of your sons and I will make his kingdom strong...I will establish his throne forever." (I Chronicles 17:11,12)

Perhaps it was the combination of these things that caused two blind men to call Jesus both "Lord" and "Son of David" and appeal to him for mercy and healing. This parallels the healing of two blind men in Matthew 9:27-30 who also called Jesus "Son of David" and appealed for mercy. Jesus had compassion on them and healed them and they became his followers.

Even when medical science contributes to our healing, we can be grateful to the scores of people who have developed the interventions with the gift of God's wisdom. In the same way, we can apply this spiritually and acknowledge that Jesus heals our blindness and deafness.

Do I acknowledge that without him I cannot see my way clearly or hear what I need to hear--I am blind and deaf and in need of healing?

March 3

Matthew 21:1-11 Christ entered the city

Once more Matthew connected a prophetic scripture from Zechariah 9:9 to an event in Jesus' life, continuing to build up his proof that Jesus is the Messiah, fulfilling all the predictions. There it is said that the king would come riding humbly on a donkey. In the context, there are promises of peace for all nations and a kingdom stretching to the ends of the earth. It speaks of a covenant sealed with blood. He will rescue his people like a shepherd rescues his sheep, and they will sparkle like jewels in a crown.

Jesus had been teaching the kingdom, saying it had arrived with him, and yet he was humble, servant like, seemingly powerless, even victimized. We know that even if still incomplete, the good news of a blood covenant, and of a shepherd seeking his sheep has gone out all over the world in a partial fulfillment of this prophecy. Someday the sign of peace signaled by Christ's entry to Jerusalem will be complete.

Am I anticipating the kingdom and participating in bringing it to earth to the best of my abilities?

March 4

Matthew 21:12-17 Confrontation in the Temple

The temple, and the tabernacle that preceded it, are the great Old Testament sacred spaces where people could encounter God. That sign of God's presence was something Jesus appropriated and applied to himself. As such, it was to be a place of worship, prayer, reconciliation with God through sacrifice and purification, and communion. In the Old Testament there was no provision for it to include a market where people could sell sacrificial animals and change money for those from out of town.

Jesus went about purifying it from its crass commercialism by forcing out the merchants and turning over their tables. He combined a line from Isaiah and a line from Jeremiah to explain his actions. Then he turned to his work of healing within the temple. Children were calling him the Son of David as he healed the blind and lame, an acknowledgment of him as Messiah.

The temple he was in had been rebuilt just before this, and was a bright white glorious place lifted up on a mountain. His presence fulfilled prophecies predicting he would come to his temple and that the temple would be the most important place in the world as his teaching would go out. (Micah 4:1-2).

Jesus has passed on to us the privilege of being a place where his holy presence dwells. Paul called each of us who believe and the group of believers God's temple where the Holy Spirit dwells. Perhaps we also need some purification from our crass commercialism.

Do I live as though I am God's purified temple?

March 5

Matthew 21:18-22 The fig tree

Jesus' disappointment in a fruitless fig tree and his command for it to wither is the only "miracle of destruction" we have in the gospels. However, it parallels parables and extensive Old Testament imagery regarding fruitful and fruitless people, becoming a vivid demonstration of those analogies. Flourishing trees represented flourishing spirituality, and fruitless trees represented lives without obedience and meaning.

To apply a miracle of destruction to ourselves, we can see that there are wrong things in our lives, or wrong things in our churches, families, or nations that need to wither. This validates praying for such things to die or disappear.

Jesus concluded with one of his seemingly outlandish promises that with faith anything is possible, and he used the magical sounding example of moving a mountain to the sea. Part of

what makes us question this is that we know magic doesn't work, even when we are calling it prayer. Jesus had already told us that following him is not easy, and we can expect suffering, so simply declaring that life will go my way cannot be what he is saying.

We are to connect faith and reason. If we only operate with rationality, we limit God, and if we only operate with faith, we may not take necessary rational actions. An example of a mountain moved occurred at our church, where the state asked to use their machines to take the dirt to create a freeway, thereby leaving more space for church. parking. This illustrates making a request by faith and the rational way it was answered.

What is my faith request? Are there ways it can be combined with human reason and effort?

March 6

Matthew 21:23-32 Confrontation

Since Matthew wrote a treatise to explain how Jesus fulfilled prophecy, thereby proving him to be the Messiah, he also focused on why the religious leaders, who should have known better, did not recognize him.

Here they challenged Jesus' authority. Spiritual authority in the Old Testament was conferred by a direct encounter with God or by anointing from an existing authority. Priests and kings were anointed, and prophets were called. They wanted to know which of these he was claiming

Jesus evaded them by pointing to the authority of John the Baptist who operated outside their temple organization. They were trapped because they did not believe in John and the people did. Jesus immediately told a pointed story that contrasted those who said they were obedient, but were not, with those who made no claims to be good, but who did the right thing.

Is my focus on obeying God myself rather than criticizing others?

March 7

Matthew 21:33-46 Evil farmers

Jesus did not make any particular effort not to annoy his adversaries. He healed on the Sabbath, criticized their teachings, disrupted the temple, and then he told another insulting story. He compared the history of the Jews to difficult tenants who killed the landlord's representative, including his son. He cited Psalm 118 and compared himself to the rejected stone and then said Jews would be replaced by Gentiles.

They suddenly got the point that they were the villains in the story. Because the people recognized Jesus as a prophet they could not simply arrest him as they were provoked to do.

This escalating conflict with the religious leaders which Jesus had prophesied would result in his betrayal and crucifixion was inevitable, and Jesus did not turn away from it.

It reminds me of the conflicts and jail experiences of so many of our social justice heroes. They knew their confrontations would lead to imprisonment, but they knew that the unjust power structures needed to be challenged and their stranglehold on the people needed to be broken.

Am I willing to take risks and challenge injustice?

March 8

Matthew 22:1-14 The great feast

Each gospel presents certain stories that the others do not, and usually these are reinforcing an overarching theme. This parable is unique to Matthew and once again focuses on the failure of the Jews to respond to him and the opening of his Kingdom to others. While three gospels have the previous story of the wicked tenants, Matthew is also the only one with the story of the obedient and disobedient sons.

So after the challenge to Jesus' authority, three parables are chained together that blast the unresponsiveness of the religious leaders who, if they had humble hearts, would have been the first to eagerly receive him and would have encouraged others to do so. Instead, their places would be taken by obviously sinful people and Gentiles.

We need to take this to heart in largely Christian America where a great percentage of those claiming to be believers are in danger of ignoring the real message of Jesus and attaching to trivialities or even good things that are far less important than the love and mercy of God.

Is there a streak of Phariseeism in me that I need to address?

March 9

Matthew 22:15-22 Clever repartee

Jesus' three parables challenging the religious leaders were followed by three confrontations in which they fought back and try to trap him into a position where they could accuse him of wrongdoing. The first was a question about taxes that they hoped would 1) get him in trouble with the Romans if he said one should not pay them (the revolutionary solution), or 2) get him in trouble with the people who felt oppressed by those taxes if he said they should be paid (the conservative solution).

He recognized this as a trap and said so. But then he came up with a middle way that parsed the question: Give Caesar his money, but give God what is his (a solution of dignity and measured resistance). They were amazed, defeated, and walked away.

In applying this to myself, I think it means I should not ignore any of my secular obligations, but nor should I let them rule or define my life. Living in a world that is not yet conformed to God's kingdom means we must operate in it with wisdom and the willingness to not just bow to all its pressures.

Is there an aspect of my life where I need to either resist more or accept current reality more?

March 10

Matthew 22:25-33 Resurrection

Jesus' next dialogue was with Sadducees who came up with a scenario they thought would demonstrate how absurd the idea of resurrection was. Jesus shot down their story of a fictitious woman who had married seven brothers by authoritatively saying marriage is an earthly bond and does not continue in the next life.

He then demonstrated that the Old Testament teaches resurrection because God identifies himself as the God of people who have already died. Now this is particularly interesting, because even today it is often said that the Old Testament does not teach life after death. Jesus disagreed with that interpretation which was shared by the Sadducees.

Once we picture the "great cloud of witnesses" of the whole Old Testament story, it is beautiful to think we have the opportunity of joining that extraordinary group of people. Plus all the heroes and heroines of faith since Jesus. Resurrection and life after death are a beautiful hope, and Jesus said it is not an empty promise.

Who are your heroes or family members that you look forward to seeing in heaven?

March 11

Matthew 22:34-40 Love is all

The trapping behavior continued and whatever law Jesus picked out as most important, this would surely be grist for argument. But, foiled again, Jesus managed to go straight to the core of all the laws by saying love for God and neighbor summarize them all. He selected and highlighted a verse from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus to make his point.

With that rubric, it is a fascinating exercise to go through the law and see how this works out. One can put the laws in one of these two categories and suddenly gain a deeper perspective of just how much wisdom is contained in the law. It provided practical instruction in love, and as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, the law is valuable, to be respected, not discarded.

We can never meditate enough on what it means to love God or neighbor. Whatever we learn to apply, there is always more. Specific scriptural examples and instruction on how to love more deeply keep us challenged.

How can I love God today? Who can I love today and how?

March 12

Matthew 22:41-46 Jesus' challenge

Now it was Jesus' turn to challenge the Pharisees with his own rather tricky conundrum. He elicited the "right answer" that the Messiah would be the Son of David, and then sprang his trap. Quoting a Messianic Psalm, 110, David addressed the Messiah as Lord. This verse became a New Testament favorite and was quoted ___ times. His question: Normally one does not address one's child as Lord, but the child addresses the parent with respect. How could King David address his descendant as Lord? This seeming contraction was left hanging and Jesus won the "Bible quotation sparring match" yet again.

The resolution is beautiful. Jesus was a physical descendant of David and at the same time, as Son of God, he was the highest and most revered Lord. The incarnation resolved the conundrum. We can never fully appreciate the wonder of this. We try with all of our Christmas festivities, and often amidst the celebration we catch a tiny glimpse of the wonder of God becoming an infant.

How can I worship today the man who was God?

March 13

Matthew 23:1-12 Critique

As if his tossing tables and telling stories and theology sparring were not offensive enough, Jesus proceeded to publically blast the religious leaders. Proud people do not at all like to be criticized in public, but he thought they were so deeply in the wrong that the ordinary people needed to be warned against them, and let the chips fall where they may.

What did he think was so awful about these people? He started by saying they did not practice what they preached, and they made unreasonable demands. They cared way too much about their image. They saw themselves as having a higher status than ordinary people. Don't be like this, he said! See yourself as being on the same level as others. To be great, be a servant. If you exalt yourself, you will be humbled. If you humble yourself, you will be exalted.

That seemed to be the fundamental critique. We also need to avoid pride. It is easy to fall into that if one is trying to be good and obedient. More than once I have been caught up short and recognized some Phariseeism in myself, and needed to repent and rethink. But I've also

experienced surprising moments of exaltation that were completely unexpected and wonderful gifts. That encourages me that perhaps a little humility did kick in.

Am I making any kind of show of my spirituality?

March 14

Matthew 23:13-36 Hypocrisy condemned

Jesus went on an Old Testament prophetic rant against the Pharisees, telling them that their future was dark. Six times he repeated "how terrible it will be for you.". Five times he called them "blind.". Four times he called them "hypocrites", and finally he said the guilt of all the accumulated judgment of centuries would fall on them.

He not only warned his followers, he warned the Pharisees directly that they were distorting God's teaching, focusing on things that don't matter, and were full of death inside. "Whitewashed" was used to describe false teachers in Ezekiel 13.

We get the point! We do NOT want to be like them--majoring in minors. The marriage of politics and religion has definitely created a dangerous Pharisaical space in American evangelicalism. It is fascinating how often we see hypocrisy--people accusing others of sins they are guilty of. How can we avoid hypocrisy? We are back to the call to humility. It is hard to be hypocritical and humble at the same time. Humility makes me more aware of my sins and the needs of others, and hypocrisy focuses on my needs and the sins of others.

Where am I in danger of hypocrisy?

March 15

Matthew 24: 1-22 Destruction of Jerusalem

The Old Testament prophets before the destruction of Judah repeatedly warned of the coming disaster. Temple and city would be destroyed and the people would be carried into captivity. Jesus continued his likeness to the Old Testament prophets by offering the same warning. The Temple would be destroyed and they would be surrounded by war and persecution and would need to flee.

This came about in 70 AD when the Roman Titus came and literally tore out the stones of the Temple to get any gold. He put up a Roman idol and destroyed the city. The generation that had not recognized the Messiah was removed from the land. After another rebellion in 135 AD the Jews were forced out, and only returned in 1948. Meanwhile the disciples scattered and preached through the known world, creating a Christianize culture in relatively a short time.

This first century fulfillment does not preclude a future completion, and the next section shifts more completely into things that have not yet happened. God's real presence in Christ replaced the building, and we his people now continue to carry that presence which makes a connection between heaven and earth. Through us the great promise is being realized: the gospel is being preached throughout the whole world.

How am I participating in the world-wide spread of the good news?

March 16

Matthew 24:223-36 Jesus' return

We have lived through centuries of people claiming the mantle of Messiah or a prophetic role, and Jesus warned us to be skeptics. You will know, he says, when I return because you'll see me arrive on the clouds with power and glory, and with a mighty trumpet blast. All his people will be gathered together.

We have also had repeated predictions that this end is right around the corner, despite Jesus' warning that no one knows exactly when this will happen. We can pay attention to seeing prophecies being fulfilled that are leading up to this moment. Being alert is wise, but making arrogant predictions is foolish.

A new heaven and earth, the fulfillment of all the kingdom promises, being with Christ, his rule over all things setting all things to right--it sounds terrific! Particularly on days when the news is full of wars and famines and earthquakes, one truly longs for the happy ending we have been promised.

Am I eager for Christ's return?

March 17

Matthew 24:37-51. Stay alert

Given Jesus' plan to return, how should we act? His examples indicate that we need to be attentive to more than our daily life. The example of not paying attention include those who were swept away by Noah's flood. Instead we should be like prudent homeowners who prevent burglary by their alertness.

The idea of being left behind is not just a popular novel series, it is reinforced by the idea of one man taken from the field, another left, and a woman taken from the mill, and another left. I should ask myself: Am I paying attention to more than the fun of life? Am I prepared and excited about Christ's return? Am I faithfully fulfilling my vocation? The thrust of Jesus' sermon is that in light of the great events to unfold, we need to be people with a perspective and good character.

How is my spiritual preparedness?

March 18

Matthew 25:1-13 Prepared women

Having advocated alertness and preparedness for his return, Jesus made the same point by means of a parable. In the story, the young women awaited the bridegroom who was late. The wise young women were prepared with extra oil, but the others were not.

One could apply this by simply saying we need to be prepared for Christ's coming or we could say the oil represents repeated refilling by the Holy Spirit. Or we could say that the light from their lamps were their acts of love and obedience. It is the same message as in the sermon. In light of Christ's coming, be attentive, be prepared, and work responsibly.

In the teaching sections of Matthew we have learned how kingdom people must be, how to engage in ministry, and how to get along and resolve conflicts. Now we have learned how to await Christ's return.

How is my spiritual attentiveness?

March 19

Matthew 25:14-30 Three servants

This is yet another parable to tell us how to act while we await the return of Christ. In this case, it includes instructions on how to work well, and how to carry out our vocation responsibly. We have been given gifts to work with, and while the content differs, our task is to use them well. Doing nothing with what we have been given is not acceptable.

I have mentioned vocation, and it is a very useful idea. Each of us has a purpose, a calling from God, a task that we are uniquely able to carry out, a way of serving others that will help extend the kingdom. It helps us if we can define our vocation, and if we do not know, we can engage in discernment with the help of other wise believers.

If we know our vocation, the questions surround how faithfully we are carrying it out. My own job may be small or not all that visible, but if I am "doubling the investment", I am doing my part.

What is my vocation and how am I doing?

March 20

Matthew 25:31-46 Serving Christ in the vulnerable

If we do not know our vocation, this parable has some great ideas of doable things. It is a big favorite with people like myself who work in social services: feeding people, offering shelter, providing clothing, caring for the ill, and visiting prisoners. Christian people do these things on their own, or organize ministries or non-profits, and while impacts may seem small, the accumulated efforts add up.

The key calling here, however, is to respect those being served because they are images of Christ to us. He takes anything we do as something done for him, and the loving, respectful, and humble attitude we would have for Christ needs to transfer to others. These expectations are for all of us. We cannot simply turn from suffering and claim we are kingdom people.

Where am I seeing these opportunities for practical service? Do I truly see Christ in the suffering?

March 21

Matthew 26:1-5 Passover too risky

The Passover would be in two days, and Jesus gave his final prophecy to the disciples that he would be betrayed and crucified. On the side of his opponents, matters had reached the point of plotting at the high priest's house. They felt that Passover was too risky a time to attempt to arrest him, not knowing that in God's plan Passover was precisely the right time to fulfill centuries of imagery.

The Exodus from Egypt, the great liberation from slavery, was what Passover celebrated. Christ had come to free his people. Death had taken the firstborn of Egypt, but the blood of a slain lamb was the means of protecting them from death. Jesus would be that lamb and his blood would be poured out in the crucifixion. He would also be the firstborn who died because of sin.

We now celebrate this each year as Good Friday and Easter. Our calendar does not necessarily correlate with the Jewish one, but there are many Messianic Jews willing to show how the Passover meal connects to Christ, and it is a privilege to participate in such a celebration. We are in this chapter, then, reaching the climax of every prophecy of Christ, particularly his role as the sacrifice that reconciles us to himself.

Do I treasure the Passover imagery that prepared for Christ?

March 22

Matthew 26:6-13 Jesus anointed

Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, served as Christ's home base during this final week. After Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, he returned to Bethany. When lovingly anointed, the disciples

disapproved and said the expensive ointment could have been sold and used for the poor. But Jesus said it was used for the most valuable purpose possible: preparing his body for burial.

When he contested their attitude, he was drawing from Deuteronomy 15: "There should be no poor among you, for the Lord your God will greatly bless you." (verse 4). "But if there are any poor people in your towns...do not be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward them. Instead, be generous and lend them whatever they need." (verse 7-8) "Give freely without begrudging it." (verse 16) and then the conclusion which Jesus quoted, "There will always be some among you who are poor." (verse 11)

The passage started with the ideal that poverty could be eliminated in a just society, and ended with the reality that addressing poverty is a process that does not stop. We are called to be part of building this more just world. But meanwhile, we are encouraged to make use of what we have to celebrate Christ.

Do I see ways to use my most valuable possessions to honor Christ?

March 23

Matthew 26:14-25. The betrayer

In contrast with the loving generosity of honoring Christ with valuable perfume, Judas switched sides in the escalating conflict and made the fatal decision to betray Christ for 30 pieces of silver. What was in his heart that led him to such a terrible act? The money mattered, but surely it was more complex than that. Had he decided that Jesus was wrong to oppose the religious teachers? Was he embarrassed and wanted approval from the respected people?

Or was he offended by Jesus turning over the merchant's tables in the temple? John wrote that Judas did not care for the poor, but was a thief. Though commissioned to manage the disciple's money, he often took some for his own use. (John 12:6)

Jesus had warned that wrong things are done as a result of wrong things in our hearts. Jesus had warned that there is a choice between greed and money. Clearly greed, theft, and covering up his sin had begun his deterioration. Perhaps pride tipped the scales to betrayal. Jesus was not blind, and so as they ate the Passover supper, he let Judas know that he already knew what he had done. The others were greatly distressed by the idea of betrayal and protested. But when Judas asked if he was the one, Jesus' ambiguous answer let Judas know his secret was known.

Am I falling into greed? Am I trying to curry favor with the wrong people?

March 24

Matthew 26:26-30 The Last Supper

A millennium and a half had led up to this moment. From the time the Old Testament tabernacle was built, through all the subsequent years of temple worship, priests had entered the Holy Place and eaten a sacred meal. Special bread was only for them, and wine was drunk in the presence of the light and incense in a room set apart for worship. In addition, for a millennium and a half, the Passover remembrance included the lamb, the unleavened bread, and cups of wine.

Now Jesus gathered this symbolic history and explained that it has all been about him. The bread represented his body, and the wine represented his blood. There was the old covenant made between Israel and God at Sinai that had been renewed throughout the centuries. Now Jesus said he was making a new covenant that would take everything to a deeper level and create new hearts as Jeremiah had prophesied.

He pointed ahead to their presence with him in God's kingdom when they would once more celebrate. Since that night, for the last two millennia, this meal repeatedly looks back to this moment and looks ahead to the final victory.

Do I treasure the presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion?

March 25

Matthew 26:31-35 Warning to Peter

Not only had Judas joined the other side, Jesus warned that all of them would abandon him. The social pressure against them would be too much for them to sustain. All of the gospels include the story of Peter's denial, the most dramatic and tragic of abandonments. He protested that he would remain firm, but Jesus warned him it would not be so.

It is surprisingly easy when someone is in serious trouble for friends to "not be there." The withdrawal is a sad and inexcusable failure of community life. But knowing that Jesus experienced this can sustain anyone who feels abandoned by family or friend in a crisis.

We also have challenging moments when our faith falters. We can be tempted to let go of our confidence in Jesus. We are all too much like Peter and the other disciples.

Can this story motivate me to be present to any friends in their suffering?

March 26

Matthew 26:36-46 The garden prayer

Jesus had repeatedly told the disciples he would be betrayed and crucified, and now on the verge of this time of suffering, he asked if there might not be another way. He took his closest

three disciples with him to an olive grove and he shared his grief. As he went off alone to pray, he twice asked if the cup of suffering could not be taken away. His close friends once again failed to be with him in this, instead, falling asleep.

It is from his difficult prayer that we learn the very disappointing truth that life is hard and we do not always get what we want. Our faith cannot overcome some struggles or tragedies. Though we know that God's will is good, perfect, loving, kind, it really does not look like it here. In our own lives we face moments when we say, "This is what I want, but I am willing to submit to what you want, even if it is hard."

In Jesus' case we know that all his suffering--abandonment, physical torment, mental agony--resulted in something impossibly good. In our acceptance of suffering, we can hang on to that same confidence. God will be with me in things that are counter to my will, and he can redeem them. Jesus would not have had to go through this if it were not for the sinful choices of others. In our lives, too, if we and those around us did not make bad choices, the suffering would not happen either. But given those realities, God is a master planner and knows what needs to happen. If we let him construct the story, our suffering becomes meaningful.

Do I accept that suffering can be God's (permissive) will?

March 27

Matthew 26:47-56 Jesus' arrest

Three things stand out to me in the story of Jesus' arrest. The first is that even though Judas came as his betrayer, Jesus still called him "my friend.". How kind and merciful! Secondly, he twice emphasized that all of this is happening to fulfill the scriptures. He had a strong sense of how his destiny had been laid out repeatedly in the sacred stories and teachings. Thirdly, he had the dignity to "talk back" and point out the injustice being done.

In this passage we are told about the high priest's servant who lost an ear. John gave us the detail that the one who did this was Peter, and Luke gave us the reassurance that Jesus healed him. All of the accounts reinforce Jesus' message not to violently resist. This is the moment the disciples fled, but John added that Jesus made an appeal for them to be allowed to go.

Can Christ in me enable me to still say "friend" to my betrayer, to rely at all times on the promises of scripture, and do I have boldness to speak up against injustice? Do I have Jesus' courage?

March 28

Matthew 26:57-68 Religious violence

Fundamentalism in all our major religions has shown us how easily it can become violent. How is this possible when God is love, and we are called to respond to him in love? One answer comes from today's brain research which says we either contemplate a wrathful God which develops the part of our brain given to aggression and fear. Apparently the religious leaders had developed this kind of spirituality and felt their aggression toward Jesus was compatible with their faith in God.

The Council knew the outcome they wanted and were willing to lie to make it happen. Jesus' acknowledgment that he was the Messiah justified a guilty verdict for blasphemy. What they did not take into account was the possibility that he was telling the truth.

The alternative in modern brain research is that if we contemplate a loving God, that develops the areas of our brain given to empathy and reason. Clearly, we want to be contemplating Jesus and the vision of God he gives us and our attitudes toward others are more likely to be right.

Is my internal prayer life loving or dangerously veering toward harsh judgments?

March 29

Matthew 26:69-75 Peter's denial

In John's gospel we learn that John used his connection with the high priest to get himself and Peter into the courtyard. They had escaped arrest with Jesus, and now they tried to come close.

Peter got caught by his Galilean accent and his presence at the arrest. Three times he protected himself by saying he didn't even know Jesus. What the rooster crowed, he woke up to what he had done. Matthew wrote: "He went away, crying bitterly.". Mark: "And he broke down and cried.". Luke "Peter left the courtyard, crying bitterly.". John just said the rooster crowed. John stayed and Peter left in anguish and remorse at his failure. John tenderly, however, told us the story of Peter's restoration after the resurrection when Jesus asked three times if he loved him, reversing the three denials.

This failure on the part of the one who became the leader of the church is in the tradition of the Old Testament stories that do not whitewash the failures of the leaders. Instead, the point is made that there is redemption and forgiveness for us all.

Are there times I have succumbed to social pressure and denied Christ? Have I grieved and accepted forgiveness for these failures?

March 30

Matthew 27:1-10 Judas' suicide

Though the Council had condemned Jesus, they did not have the right to exercise the death penalty, and needed to involve the Romans. Judas, realizing they would kill Jesus, was filled with remorse. Having heard the prophecies, I am not sure what he had supposed would happen, but now he confessed, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed an innocent man."

Matthew is the only one who included this story. Each gospel writer selected events that reinforced their themes, and in Matthew's case it was to connect Old Testament scripture to demonstrate conclusively that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Judas' death and the decision to use the blood money for a cemetery fulfilled a prophecy from Jeremiah and thus bolstered Matthew's argument.

Though suicide is a terrible decision, it comes from an irrational despair that there is no other way out. For any suicide, I trust God's mercy to understand what went into such a tragic act. For Judas, I hope that his remorse and his confession was received with great mercy by the one he had sinned against.

Is there a betrayer to whom I need to offer forgiveness?

March 31

Matthew 27:11-26 Before Pilate

Matthew has made the case that Jesus is the Messiah who has brought the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. Now a Gentile ruler, the Roman governor Pilate, recognized this. His first question to Jesus was "Are you the King of the Jews?" He went on to twice refer to Jesus as the Messiah. Mark, showed how equivalent these terms are by having Pilate call him "King of the Jews" when Matthew wrote Messiah.

Luke said the religious leaders turned Jesus over to Pilate with the accusation that he said "he is the Messiah, a king.". John included a dialogue between Jesus and Pilate where Jesus responded "I am not an earthly king...my kingdom is not of this world.". Pilate asked, "You are a king then?". Jesus responded, "You say that I am a king, and you are right."

Ironically, the people preferred that someone mounting a violent political rebellion and trying to restore an earthly kingship be released rather than their long awaited king. His kingdom was too mysterious and different from what they were expecting.

Do I recognize Jesus as King of all, even in his suffering?

April 1

Matthew 27:27-30. Jesus the king

The theme of Jesus as king continued even as he was mocked. A scarlet robe over his nakedness, a crown of long sharp thorns, and a stick for a scepter made him a burlesque king. They knelt and acclaimed him mockingly, not aware that someday "every knee would bow" and would acknowledge him as Lord of All. More spitting and beating until they got tired of the game. They put on his own clothes and led him away.

We today claim that Jesus is our king, but unfortunately can set up a parody of who he is and our worship is as false as that of these bored soldiers. Like the religious leaders who did not recognize him because he broke their rules, like Pilate who took his own status too seriously, and like these soldiers who turned his kingship into comedy, there are numerous ways for us to fail to see him. Our rigidity, pride, or cynicism can all get in the way.

Am I allowing anything to interfere with my ability to see Jesus?

April 2

Matthew 27:32-44 Suffering

Even as he suffered in a prolonged and agonizing death, Jesus was acknowledged as king. A signboard above his head said "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Even his mockers said the words "King of Israel" disbelievingly.

They cast up to him his prophecy that he could destroy the temple and build it again in three days, not realizing that this was happening before their eyes. Death and destruction would be followed by life and resurrection.

We have a choice to be among the mockers or to be people who truly see his kingship, who see him as the fulfillment of Israel, who see him as the true temple carrying God's presence in the world. It is a matter of clarity of vision.

Do I see Jesus as Lord of all?

April 3

Matthew 27:45-49 Jesus' cry

In understanding Jesus' death, we can never do so unless we recall that he was God in the flesh. When he cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me", he was quoting Psalm 22. As a student/inspired of scripture, he knew his Psalms, so he knew the whole story in that Psalm.

Yes, his suffering and death tied him to all the suffering and abandonment that we experience. The soldiers gambling for his garment fulfilled verse 18 of that Psalm. Scorn and mockery fulfilled verses 6-8. The physical agony he was experiencing fulfilled verses 14-17.

But he also knew the affirmative portions of the Psalm, how he had been brought safely from his mother's womb, trusted God as an infant, belonged to God from the moment of birth. (verses 9-10). John tells us that his mother was there and she doubtless knew this Psalm as well. He also knew the triumphant conclusion of the Psalm that he would praise God among his people (Psalm 22:22 quoted in Hebrews 2:12). He knew the climactic promise that the whole earth would acknowledge him, all nations would bow, and that his kingship would be complete (Psalm 22:27,28)

Ours is a triumphant faith, even in our moments of greatest disappointment, despair, or death.

How does knowing Psalm 22 put Jesus' cry in perspective?

April 4

Matthew 27:50-54 Jesus' death

When Jesus died, heaven shook the earth. The thick temple curtain was split from top to bottom. Rocks split, tombs opened, godly people rose from the dead. Terror made believers out of the crucifiers.

Mark and Luke tell us there was darkness from noon to three. The first three gospels tell us Jesus shouted, and Luke says his words: "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!" John says he said, "It is finished!" People watching went home in sorrow, the spectacle having become disturbing.

How mysterious that God, creator of all, could be incarnate as an infant, could live and teach and heal, and could die. The death of God is a shocking idea, and we try to reduce the shock by somehow keeping Jesus and the Father very separate at the crucifixion. But our faith is incomplete until we acknowledge the mystery that God became one of us.

This moment divides our way of accounting for history. Before God died and after God. Nothing could ever be the same again. No wonder the created world convulsed. God's solution to mankind's sin was to take all violence on himself.

Does Jesus' death help prepare me for my death or for that of others?

April 5

Matthew 27:55-66 Jesus is buried

The women from Galilee, watching from a distance, included Jesus' relatives and friends. Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body, buried it, and rolled a stone across the entrance. The woman sat nearby watching.

Matthew put a spotlight on the unbelieving priests and Pharisees who set a guard and sealed the tomb to prevent a resurrection hoax. They were afraid the disciples might make an effort to fake a fulfillment of the promise to raise from the dead on the third day. It is interesting that they knew Jesus had said this and on some level actually believed it more than the disciples did, or at least worried about it. The disciples were too distraught to hatch a plot.

The mystery of Holy Saturday we celebrate is one of silence and waiting. The tradition is that Christ rescued the dead while his body was waiting. The first partial day, Friday, followed by the evening to evening Saturday, would last only to the dawn of Sunday.

Starting on sunset on Holy Saturday a set of Old Testament readings connects to the crucifixion and resurrection in liturgical churches. With such scriptures as the crossing of the Red Sea, we are reminded of the long trajectory of history that prepared for this.

Do I accompany those who grieve?

April 6

Matthew 28:1-10 Resurrection

This holiest story of Christendom is one where we feel what the woman felt: great fear and great joy. Our artists and musicians and poets have tried to capture this uncapturable moment for us when a living Jesus met the women and they held his feet and worshipped.

For the Easter vigil the new day comes and the Gloria in Excelsis is sung:

Glory to you who has shown us the light.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill to all people.

We praise you, we bless you, we worship you, we glorify you,

We give thanks to you for your great glory.

Lord, King, heavenly God, Father almighty.

Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit.

Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father almighty who take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us, you who take away the sins of the world.

Receive our prayer, you who sit at the right hand of the Father, and have mercy on us.

For you only are holy, only you are Lord

Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father.

Each day I shall bless you, and I will praise your name for ever to the ages of the ages.

Church bells ring, the Alleluia is sung, the Resurrection account is read, and the joy of Easter has begun. He is risen!

How can I celebrate the resurrection in a way most meaningful to me?

April 7

Matthew 28:11-15 The cover-up

Matthew, the only writer who told about the guards at the tomb and about bribing the guards, made his point. The religious leaders had a chance to let their categories be broken and accept the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah. They instead willfully introduced a false story to maintain their status quo and their comfortable religious reality.

In our own way we tell ourselves lies that protect the view of the world we want to maintain. We don't like uncomfortable facts to enter our thoughts and challenge and upend our world. It is too much work to admit we were wrong, and to have to start over. But since we are called to be humble, we have to be willing to do that, and we have to become as little children.

The resurrection challenges our categories, and it is easy to rationalize and wonder if such a great miracle is true. But why not? We are surrounded by life that is complex and wonderful everyday, and if the creation we know is so amazing, why not explore the possibility that there is another kind of life that Jesus introduced.

Am I willing to acknowledge I've been mistaken and be willing to accept new facts to change my perspective?

April 8

Matthew 28:16-20 Jesus' charge to us

Here is our vocation as Jesus' followers: Draw others to follow him and show them how.

Our first gospel has given us sufficient information on what this means, and has shown us the connection between Jesus and the Old Testament. Now we will turn from a gospel written for Jewish people to one written for Romans. Its sparse style will give us the surprising evidence that not only is Jesus the Messiah, Israel's King, he is an excellent replacement for Caesar, the Roman King.

As participating citizens in his newly inaugurated kingdom, we can conceive of ourselves as ambassadors, secret agents, or publicists for this kingdom. It is a kingdom that spreads worldwide from the work of these first disciples, and we've been tasked with continuing the mission.

How am I engaged in drawing others to follow Christ?

April 9

Matthew: Christ the Jewish King

As we look back over the whole gospel, we see that Matthew's great theme was that Jesus was proven to be Messiah. As part of his proof he used at least 67 scripture quotes or allusions to make the connection between Jesus and this long history.

The structure of the book reinforces the connection by having five teaching sections alternating with action. These have been compared to the first five books of Moses: how we are to live (Matthew 5-8), how to spread the faith (Matthew 10), the quality of the kingdom (Matthew 13), how to forgive (Matthew 18), and what will happen next (Matthew 24-25).

Further, we have seen that he emphasized unique things in Judas' fulfillment of prophecy, the work of the religious leaders to create a false narrative about what had happened, and having Pilate call Jesus the King of the Jews. In the resurrection story Jesus told the women to go tell "his brothers" taking us back to the start of the book which showed his Jewish lineage. When he commissioned the disciples he gave them a very Jewish task: teach and disciple.

Four principle prophetic roles of scripture are taken up by the different gospels:

Matthew, Christ, the Jewish King

Mark, Christ the Champion or Victorious King

Luke, Christ the Prophet

John, Christ our High Priest

Each of these ancient roles was drawn together into one person, the Son of God.

Do I worship the King?