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Lent 2016

Lent 2016

For centuries, Christians have seen Lent as a time set apart -- an opportunity to take stock of our lives so that we might let go of those things that keep us from faithfully following in the way of Jesus.

Often, the 40 days of Lent are compared to the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness before the beginning of his ministry. As we know, these were days of fasting -- a time in which Jesus surrendered many things so that he could focus on the only one who is worthy of our praise -- the only one able to give us life (see Luke 4).

As we enter Lent this year, an invitation is extended to you. It is an invitation of surrender and focus. In these next 40 days we have the opportunity to reflect on what we may need to surrender, and in doing so, focus our heart and mind, words and actions, on the only one able to give us life.

This guide takes the passage from the previous Sunday morning and builds on it. We suggest that you begin by re-reading this passage and then engaging the reflection and questions for personal reflection.

You'll also find daily readings that follow the lectionary (a tool used by millions of Christians around the world). Reading these passages will root you in the stories associated with Lent.

Reflection 1: the week of 2/15

Read Luke 11:1-13

Prayer is quite common. It shows up in movies (Dear baby Jesus...), at holiday tables, or in a moment of desperation. And yet, despite its widespread practice, we often struggle to understand prayer. What exactly is going on when we pray? What is its purpose? Is there a right way (and therefore, a wrong way) to pray?

In Luke 11, Jesus' disciples are trying to learn about prayer too and so they ask: "Lord, teach us to pray." The example and parable that follows offer a great deal to consider. But for this reflection, I want to focus on one phrase: "how much more" (verse 13).

Growing up, we always had enough, but we rarely had much more. Hand-me-downs, rusty cars, and generic brands were commonplace. To be honest, though, I had a great childhood. None of this mattered much to me -- that is, not until I made the basketball team in high school. Because that year, everyone on the team decided to get the latest, greatest basketball shoes for the season (the Reebok pumps, of course). It was going to be awesome! But there was one hitch. How to pay for them. So when I got in the car after practice I had my sales pitch ready.

I passionately relayed to my mom about how these shoes would prevent injury and up my game (oh, and they'd help me fit in). I can still remember her response.

The answer was 'no', but what I saw and heard in her voice was a deep desire to be able to say 'yes.' She couldn't buy those shoes but she wanted to. Like any mom, she wanted to give me this good gift.

Jesus affirms this basic principle: human parents -- despite their brokenness and imperfection -- give their kids good things. No parent gives their child a snake when they ask for a snack. Well, Jesus tells us, "how much more" is this true of God?

If human parents give an egg instead of a scorpion, how much more will your Father give you the Holy Spirit?

If human parents desire to provide for their children, how much more does your heavenly parent desire it?

If human parents instinctively love their children, how much more does God instinctively love you?

If human parents know how to give good gifts, how much more does God know how to give good gifts to you?

How much more?

Take the best, most devoted, most patient, most wise human parents. Bottle up all of the incredibly qualities and instincts that drive their good parenting and you will only begin to catch a glimpse of how much more good God is as our heavenly Father.

Questions for reflection:

1. Let's start with an opening question about Lent in general. As we begin this journey what thoughts, habits, or patterns of living do you think might be standing between you and what God has for you?

2. Many times we struggle to believe "how much more" because when we have unmet desires, we struggle to believe God cares about what we want. Do you believe God will give you the desires of your heart? Bring your unmet desires before God. Ask God to show you how your desires matter.

3. Our understanding of God as a parent is often influenced by our experience with our own parent(s).

- For those of us who had an exceptional parent(s), this may be a fairly easy comparison. If that's true for you, in what ways do your earthly parents reflect God's care for you? What did you see in them that might teach you something about God?

- For those of us who did not have great parent(s) growing up, we do have an example to look to. There is someone who is the best picture of what God is like, and that someone is Jesus of Nazareth. What do you know about Jesus that teaches you about who God is?

Lectionary Readings:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Prayer:

God of wilderness and water,
your Son was baptized and tempted
as we are.

Guide us through this season,
that we may not avoid struggle,
but open ourselves to blessing,
through the cleansing depths of
repentance
and the heaven-rending words of
the Spirit. Amen.

Reflection 2: the week of 2/22

Read Luke 10:25-37

There is a man across the street from my house who scares me.

He looks scary. He appears homeless – carries his belongings in plastic Meijer bags and staggers when he walks, as if he's been walking a long time without any rest. Sometimes the people across the street let him stay for the night. Other times he lingers on their porch until they come home and then yells obscenities at them – horrible, ugly, frightening words.

I don't know his story.

I wonder what I would do if I came home and found him on my front porch. What if it was raining? What if it was ten degrees outside and he had nowhere to sleep? What if he told me he was hungry? Lord, surely you can't ask me to consider this man a neighbor!

The Good Samaritan story in Luke 10 is a familiar story to me – maybe for you as well.

What strikes me about this parable is the question the expert in the law asks Jesus: "who is my neighbor?" And then the unsettling answer is woven into one of those infuriating stories where I know, deep in my heart, that I'm identifying with the wrong character.

When I see Shouty McShouterson across the street, I quickly get out of my car and walk up the front sidewalk with determined purpose, counting the days until enough snow melts so I can park in my garage again – back where the most unsettling encounter is me yelling at the fat squirrels that chew on my back porch.

Am I the Levite? Am I the priest? I like to think I show compassion like the Good Samaritan, but the truth is many times I step to the other side of the road. It's amazing what I can pretend not to see when I am afraid.

But here's the thing about the story that has grabbed my heart this time around. The Samaritan did not immediately love the man lying on the road – the Samaritan didn't even know him yet. When Jesus taught about loving one's neighbor, he described an incredible sacrificial action performed before there was any true connection with the injured stranger.

Action first. Love later. Can the two be so intrinsically connected?

The Samaritan may have been afraid too, but his actions show a fierce, protective love for a stranger. This love isn't easy or logical, but starts with a tangible action, one that moves beyond fear. Can we cover the neighbors we encounter with this kind of love? Jesus tells us we can. In fact – he tells us we should.

Go and do likewise. What a scary, brave command! Let's do it together.

Questions for reflection:

1. Think of a time where you felt the Lord calling you to help someone. What emotions did you feel? Did you help? If not, what held you back?
2. Have you ever felt afraid to help someone - anxious about how it would go, scared of what might happen? Can you name your fear right now? What do you need from God? Ask for it, believing God will give it to you.
3. Often the Lord keeps bringing a person to our attention because he wants us to do something. Is there a person the Lord keeps putting in front of you? Write down this person's name or a short description if you don't know their name. Bring this person before the Lord in prayer. Ask for the clarity, wisdom, and bravery to act in a tangible and compassionate way and when the Lord provides the opportunity – do it! Pay close attention to your heart and see how the Lord builds on that first brave step.
4. Write down a time when you were the stranger. How did God send a samaritan to meet your need?

Lectionary Readings:

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

Prayer:

Life-giver, Pain-bearer, Love-maker,
day by day you sustain the weary
with your word
and gently encourage us to place
our trust in you.
Awaken us to the suffering of those
around us;
save us from hiding in denials or
taunts that deepen the hurt;
give us grace to share one another's
burdens in humble service. Amen.

Reflection 3: the week of 2/29

Read Luke 16:1-13

When I turned 10, I was allowed to get a dog and it was the best day of my life. We went to the pound and picked out what I thought was the cutest pup. I can remember the sheer joy I felt on the ride home as this fluffy, face-licking friend joined our family. But soon after arriving home I realized I was in over my head. Way over. The incessant energy and constant propensity towards disobedience of this dog was unnerving. Sure, she was a cute puppy, but she was also a total terror.

The next day a family friend (and long-time dog owner) came over and began to teach me how to train my dog. Without training, she said, the dog would own me, not the other way around.

This parable is one of the most difficult to understand in the Gospels. Why is Jesus commending a dishonest (and apparently lazy) manager? For this reflection, we'll focus on verses 10-13. Here, a couple of things become clear. First, money can own us. Plain and simple: you and I can serve a master that is never satisfied. Second, it's not supposed to be this way. We are to have one master. And what's more, we are to own money. Or to put it another way, we are to master the money in our possession, using it to do good things like build relationships and lift burdens.

One final point: it is interesting to note that the money in this parable does not belong to the shrewd manager. Perhaps Jesus wants to remind us that the money we have, has been given to us. Ultimately, it is not ours. We have been given what we have in the hope and expectation that we will be faithful and trustworthy with it.

As a 10 year old I remember how daunting it felt to train my new dog. There were many, many times when she won the day. I often felt like I would never master her. But with more and more training (which had great implications for what I did and did not do!) the tide began to turn.

We may feel the same about money, that it's pull is too strong and its control too sneaky. We'll never master it. But God is more than capable and ready to help us.

Questions for reflection:

1. Perhaps the first step in being faithful with our money is to acknowledge its source. The Scriptures (and this parable) teach us that all we have comes from God. Yes, we've worked hard for our paycheck, but the ability to work hard and the gifts needed to do our job can all be traced back to God's generosity. Take a 60 seconds to write in the space below as many things as you can list that God has given to you:

2. Jesus tells us that we are to be trustworthy and faithful with what we've been given. What do you think that means? Specifically -- what would it look like for you to be trustworthy and faithful? How would you know if you were being these things? Be specific.

3. Living generously is one of the best ways to ensure that money does not master you. As you loosen your grip on money it loses its grip on you. Take a few minutes to sit silently in prayer. Would you say that you are living generously (this can be hard to judge for ourselves so it might be worth asking someone who knows you well). Is there a specific way God is asking you to be more generous?

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalms 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Prayer:

Faithful God of love,
you blessed us with your servant Son
so that we might know how to serve
your people with justice and with
mercy.

We gather the needs of ourselves
and others, and offer them to you in
faith and love, seeking to be
strengthened to meet them.

Shape us and transform us by your
grace, that we may grow in wisdom
and in confidence, never faltering
until we have done all that you
desire to bring your realm of shalom
to fulfillment.
Amen.

Reflection 4: the week of 3/7

Read Luke 13:1-9

When tragedy strikes, we want answers. Why did it happen? Who's to blame?

Jesus references two recent tragedies of his day -- one is the result of a maniacal king, the other appears to be the result of shoddy construction. In both cases, the crowds have been trying to make sense of it all.

Jesus' response provides some help in understanding what has happened. Make no mistake, Jesus tells us, both of these events cannot be blamed on the victims' sins. This was not divine punishment. God didn't strike them down because they were somehow worse than everyone else. This is important for us to hear given that many in our world -- including many Christians -- try to pin disaster and calamity on the sins of the victims.

But this is where Jesus' explanation ends, which to be honest, I wish this wasn't true. I would have appreciated a logical, easy-to-follow, once-and-for-all explanation of just how we make sense of evil and destruction in this world. Instead, Jesus turns his focus and his words to those who were standing with him that day.

Verse 3: And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God.

Verse 5: No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.

"No!", Jesus says. The sins of those caught up in these tragedies did not cause their death. If it had, we would all be dead for we are all sinners. But Jesus says -- you're alive! You're here. And while you are, you must turn back to God. The parable of the fig tree illustrates verses 1-5.

As long as breath is in our lungs our purpose is to produce fruit. And when a tree doesn't produce fruit after many seasons, the expected result is that the tree would be cut down. But in this parable, a conversation ensues and instead of cutting the tree down, extra care is given to it.

Make no mistake - repentance (which is turning and moving toward God) must happen. If we don't, we will perish. But even when we are barren, the Gardener is doing everything possible so that we might bear fruit.

Questions for reflection:

1. Take a few minutes to consider what Jesus means by the word "fruit." It's a pretty Christian-y word that we might breeze past. In the space below, write down what you think fruit looks like in general (Galatians 5:22-23 and Luke 10:25-28 for a big picture answer) and what it looks like specifically in your life.

2. Where do you see fruit being born in your life? Go ahead...it's ok to celebrate! Write some of these things down.

3. What parts of your life are not bearing fruit? Where do you need to repent (turn)? What is one tangible step to take on that journey of repentance.

4. Whenever we turn around (and even before we do), God is with us -- preparing the soil. What do you need God to do in you, or in the circumstances of your life, in order for fruit to be born? Finish your time in prayer asking specifically for those things.

Lectionary Readings:

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalms 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Prayer:

God of the covenant,
you call us to be fruitful servants
within creation, and to offer our lives
as the foundation of your realm.
We lay before you the desires of our
hearts, that we may be transformed
by their fulfillment.

Grant, O God, that the prayers we
offer may be your channel for new
and abundant life not only hoped
for, but worked for,
through faithful word and deed.
Amen.

Reflection 5: the week of 3/14

Read Luke 18:9-14

In this parable of two men praying, perspective changes everything.

The Pharisee considers himself worthy of addressing God in a particular spot and with a particular tone. He spends his prayer highlighting the ways in which he is separate from those who sin and holds obvious religious privilege. From the Pharisee's vantage point, there is no better place to be than standing alone at the front of the temple with a long list of checked religious boxes.

In contrast, the tax collector cannot even lift his eyes from the burden of his shame. This is a downhearted and defeated man who beats his chest and begs for God's mercy. We understand this man to be despised among his community and without allies due to his criminal behavior. From the tax collector's perspective, there is no worse place to be than in his shoes.

Jesus' perspective aligns with the characters in that he, too, does not hold these men as equals. From Jesus' view, only one man is justified, but it is not the one with the religious resume: "[T]his sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God" (vs 14). Here we witness the consistent gospel message that God's judgment is unlike our human assumptions. Jesus is continually putting the "first last" and welcoming the outcasts into his presence (see Matthew 20:16, Matthew 9:10-11, Luke 18:16). In this parable, Jesus exposes the foolishness of the Pharisee's prayer of self-adoration and contrasts it to the tax collector's humble cry for mercy.

I have read this story before, so while I appreciate the core truth, it is not Jesus' closing words that grabbed my attention this time. It is the opening statement. This parable starts by describing its audience: "Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness" (vs 9). Another translation of this verse describes the audience as "complacently pleased with moral performance." After some thought, I identified another description for the target of this parable: me. I can reflect on this story from the various perspectives, but the one that grabs my attention is that of the person who Jesus turns to and says "hey, you over there, this story is for you." The overconfident Jesus-follower. The morally complacent do-gooder. The one who claims to be with Jesus but is too often standing in a corner, speaking in a certain voice about ideals and achievements. The one who thinks this story is about someone else. Perspective changes everything.

In keeping with perspective, it is worth noting that our view of ourselves is a potential pitfall. The Pharisee was mistaken to view himself so highly. The tax collector was mistaken when he thought the weight of his sin was too much for God. I am mistaken when I assume this story is not about me. We desperately need the eyes of Jesus. Perhaps the call in this passage to humble ourselves fundamentally requires setting aside our own viewpoint and taking on the mind of Christ. What might change in ourselves and our world if we did this together?

Questions for reflection:

1. When you read this story, with what viewpoint do you most easily identify? What is it like to consider it from another vantage point?
2. Is there a place in your life where you are tempted to describe your own righteousness before claiming the mercy of God? (ie, around other coworkers, with your family members, on Facebook)
3. What might change in your daily life if you stood in the place of the tax collector? What might change in your daily life if you made an effort to take on the perspective of Jesus?
4. What part of your worldview needs to be turned upside down to see things as Jesus would?

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Prayer:

Creator God,
you prepare a new way in the wilderness
and your grace waters the desert.
Help us to recognize your hand
working miracles beyond our
imagining.

Open our hearts to be transformed
by the new thing you are doing,
so that our lives may proclaim
the extravagance of your love for all,
and its presence in Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Reflection 6: the week of 3/21

Read Luke 15:1-10

We live in a culture that likes to celebrate. We get together with family and friends during holidays, and if you're at all like my family, sometimes several times. We plan elaborate birthday parties for our kids, of which I am definitely one. We celebrate important people and events through marches or parades. We enjoy the celebration.

The thing I've been celebrating most in my house is potty-training success. We rejoice when our two-year-old uses the bathroom. We praise her and clap and cheer and give her all the affirming words we can. Sometimes we dance or even offer a special treat. We celebrate.

In Luke 15:4-6, the shepherd searches for his lost sheep and when he finds it he goes back home and celebrates with his friends and neighbors. He rejoices over his lost sheep. In Luke 15:8-10, the woman who loses her coin delights with her community over finding it once again.

At first glance the message behind the parables seem obvious. We know we are the "lost sheep" or "lost coin" and that we are lucky enough to have a God that will search for us when we wander off course. And while I think this is an important message, I think the other piece to consider is whether we celebrate when we, or someone we know, has found their way home.

In order to celebrate, we need to know who was lost in the first place, and that takes vulnerability. Are we vulnerable enough to step forward to say, "I'm lost"? Some people are lost in their relationships, whether it be with a sibling, parent, or a spouse. Some are wondering in faith, asking questions and feeling ignored. Some of us are wandering back from being lost not too long ago. But do we let people into these places with us? If we don't, then we are missing out on the something we do best, celebrating.

And even though we are excellent at celebrating--who doesn't love balloon animals, confetti, and a good bounce house?--our celebration cannot compare to the rejoicing that takes place in heaven when a lost child of God finds their way home (see Luke 15:7).

It's clear that we need to celebrate with one another, and we need to let each other have access to our lives in order to do that. But just as we celebrate, our Father is celebrating even more, delighted and joyful that the "lost sheep" is found.

Questions for reflection:

1. Where do you feel lost today? Find some time and space to dwell with God in those lost spaces. Listen.
2. When have you felt like the 1? When have you felt like the 99?
3. Celebrating our return or another person being found requires that we are close enough to be vulnerable. Where do you see this kind of vulnerability in your life? If you don't, what is keeping you from vulnerability?
4. As you reflect on these things, where do you feel like God is leading you to repent [turn away from something] and turn toward God? Take a moment to write down what specifically you need to turn from.

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 19:28-40

Prayer:

God of patient love,
you await the return of the wayward
and wandering and eagerly embrace
them in pardon.

Through baptism you have clothed
us with the glory of Christ
and restored our inheritance:
give us generous hearts
to welcome all who seek a place
at the table of your unconditional
love.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our
Lord. Amen.

Holy Week: the week of March 21

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalms 22

Hebrews 10:16-25

Luke 22:14-23:56

As we enter into Holy Week, it's easy to give in to the temptation to skip over the messiness and begin making Easter plans. After all, there's meal preparations to make, eggs to decorate, and baskets to fill. We are great at celebrating Easter and maybe even good at celebrating the resurrection.

But when we skip all the hard stuff that comes before it, we miss out on the full knowledge of what has been accomplished at the cross. Though you might be tempted not to engage in the darkness of this journey, try to make space and time for it. Dwell in the text. Find yourself in the story. Live in the tension. Consent to the darkness and wait for the light.

Friday might feel like the end, but Sunday is coming.

Questions for reflection:

1. As you read the story of Jesus' journey to the cross, where do you see yourself in the story? Is there a person you identify with or a moment that holds your attention?
2. Reflect back on your Lenten journey. Where did you sense the Spirit stirring a new thing in you?
3. As you consider holding new possibilities before you, what might be holding you back? Fear? Hurt? Anxiety? Words? A story? or an idea? Is there something you need to confess and let go of before new life can emerge?

Prayer:

In this holy time,
as we remember the sacrifice of the cross,
we offer the prayers of our hearts,
that through them we may be transformed
to be servants of justice, love and peace.

Make us steadfast witnesses of our Savior's reign,
that we may live in the pattern of Christ,
who was faithful in all things,
even death, and whose darkest hour gives light and hope.
Amen.