

©2018 by individual authors and Facebook Narrative Lectionary Group.

This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. This means you may share this work only if appropriate attribution (to both the author of the original piece and to the Facebook Group which compiled it) is used, and ONLY if you are a noncommercial entity. Any derivative work using this intellectual property must also be freely shared, as this booklet is. Individual churches throughout the world may make copies of this booklet for their congregations in their entirety or may use individual pages from this book. The full copyright notice above must accompany any use of this book, or any extract from it, as well as the byline and the name of the individual author.

Please consider posting the Narrative Lectionary Facebook Group if you use this, and providing feedback on the work. We welcome that.

Thanks to the authors who contributed:

Jason Adams  
Andrea Allan  
Mary Austin  
Allison Byerley  
Chris Deacon  
John Dumke  
Beth Gedert  
Sonny R. Graves  
Peter Hamm  
Rachel Helgeson  
Julie Holm  
Anne Knighten  
Matt McCaffrey  
Hope Molozaizy  
Shari Jacson Monson  
Robert Stutes  
Daphne Grant Urban  
Cristine Warring  
Tara Wilkins

Front Cover: Rest on the Flight into Egypt



## Son of God:

A Lent Devotional on the Gospel of Matthew

A Narrative Lectionary  
Devotional for Lent

Written by members of the Narrative Lectionary  
Facebook Group.

2019

March 6

## Dust to Dust

Julie Holm

*Matthew 1:1-17*



Last fall I traveled, with my sister and two cousins, to Italy to explore the past of my grandfather, who immigrated into the United States in 1907. Only two days before my arrival in Naples, my chief genealogist cousin had finally received a document, the death certificate of my great-grandmother, which told us the true address in Naples of the family. So the day I arrived, Janice and I headed there.

The apartment was then, and back in my grandfathers' day, deeply impoverished. Smaller than my office today, it was in a very poor and depressing neighborhood, and would have included both the tailor shop and the home for a family of five. Depressingly poor. Ashes.

A few days later we traveled to the town the family had come from: Solofra. There we met

a distant cousin and discovered that our family most likely came from Spain as Jewish *conversos*, forcibly converted, at pain of death, to Christianity. It rocked our understanding of ourselves and reminded us of the times our Christianity had oppressed and terrorized others. It also increased my understanding and sympathy with Sephardic Jews.

Jesus' lineage likewise includes people who were poor and oppressed; especially the women of his genealogy. These sit side by side with the great kings, with David and others. Throughout this history we are reminded that whatever great happens, we come from and go to ashes. In our lives and in our histories.

*Loving God, teach us to move from pride in our lives and our accomplishments to the realization that we all come from ashes, and we all go to ashes. Let us move to new commitment to humility and love of our neighbors, as we move into this season of Lent. Amen.*

*Rev. Julie Holm is the pastor of the Brush Valley Fusion of Faith, three UCC and ELCA churches in rural central Pennsylvania.*

March 7

## Fishing

Allison Byerley

*Matthew 4:18-22*



Peter and Andrew fished for a living, so they knew all about the fish they were after, such as how conditions on the lake affected the fish, where they liked to hang out, how deep they liked to swim...you get the picture.

On a recent trip to Israel, we took a boat out on the Sea of Galilee, and the captain showed us how to fish with a net and invited a passenger to toss it in the water. When the net emerged, a handful of tiny fish tumbled onto the deck, amazing the captain and our guide! Usually, the net is empty when it comes back in the boat.

Why? Because the tourist doesn't know the fish or the lake.

When Jesus invites Peter and Andrew to follow him in this passage, he isn't interested in

catching fish on the Sea of Galilee. He knows that the brothers know all about that. Rather, his invitation is to come and do a different kind of fishing that he will show them.

Jesus invites us to come fishing, but too often we act like we are tourists pretending to fish, astounded when there is anything in our nets. Our mission, given by Jesus, is to make disciples, and that means we need to know our setting like Peter and Andrew knew the Sea of Galilee. Otherwise, we are more like tourists tossing a net anywhere and not really expecting to catch anything.

*Prayer: Jesus, show me the best fishing waters and teach me how to fish.*

*Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Pastor of Mariposa UMC in Mariposa, CA.*



## March 8 God's Kingdom

Anne Knighten

*Matthew 4: 23-25*

Those in the crowd had various reasons for coming to Jesus. Some were there out of curiosity, wondering about this new teacher who spoke as John the Baptist had about repentance. Some may have heard John the Baptist state that this new teacher was even greater than he was. Others heard Jesus preach in the synagogues about the kingdom of God being good news, and they may have wondered if Messiah was coming at last to free them from the oppression of the Roman Empire. Some had heard stories about miraculous healings of mind, body, and spirit, about people suffering from incurable illnesses being restored to health. People came from all over the region, Jews as well as Gentiles. They brought their sick to him, and he healed them of their illnesses.

This is the kingdom of God: a gathering place of all nations, a place where sin and its effects are banished, a place of restoration to health and wholeness, a place of abundance. The kingdom of God is a restoration of what has been broken and diseased, not just in the human body but in human society and the world.

*God of restoration, we see the effects of sin in the brokenness and affliction that exist in our world. We proclaim the good news of your kingdom where all will be made whole. As we begin this Lenten journey, may we turn away from sin and turn toward you.*

*Anne Knighten is a senior in the MDiv-Distributive Learning program at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. She and her husband live in Redlands, CA.*

March 9  
Don't Worry

Peter Hamm



*Matthew 8:18-22*

It is all too easy to come up with reasons I can't do something, or that some undertaking isn't possible, or, to be frank, just some excuse why I won't do something. (Spoiler alert: Everything is too hard if you really want it to be too hard.)

Much has been made of the meaning behind this man's desire to bury his father before following Jesus. But compared to Jesus, who literally lived in such a way that he had no home, any of our impediments to following God seem very insignificant don't they.

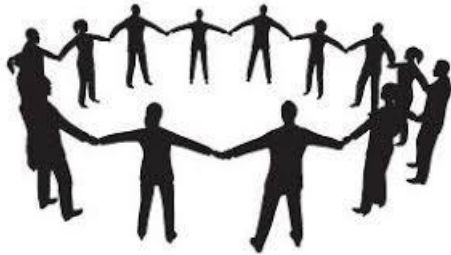
But I see something else in this passage that perhaps you haven't seen before. When Jesus says "let the dead bury their own dead" maybe he was saying something along the lines of "Don't worry about the responsibilities you will seem to leave behind. It will all be taken care of if you just follow me, live and love like me, and change the world with me."

*O Lord it is often hard for us to follow, but you said your yoke is easy and your burden is light. Help us to recall that when we face challenges doing the right thing and making the right choice.*

Peter Hamm is a husband, father, and bi-vocational pastor and worship leader who is delighted and honored to serve Grace United Methodist Church in Norwood, Ohio.

March 10  
Relationship Matters

Tara Wilkins



*Matthew 5:21-26*

“Actions speak louder than words”, my third-grade teacher would tell us. She wanted us to understand that we did or didn’t do, mattered more than what we did or didn’t say. We can’t say we love God and not care for one another. We can’t say we are the church of Jesus Christ, and not live like he taught us to live.

In these anxious and troubling times, we hear people claiming compassion, but building walls. We hear religious leaders shaming the LGBTQ community, but not addressing sexual abuse in the church. We hear churches saying

that all are welcome, but not standing with the immigrant. We hear some Christians claiming Jesus, but not living like Jesus.

On this first Sunday of Lent, we remember the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount, the way Jesus provided guidelines for the Kingdom of God. His edict to us all was to love, to care for, to protect, to stand up for, to be present with. Lent invites us to examine our actions and our words and challenges us to be reconciled to God, after first being reconciled to one another.

*Holy One, may our words and our deeds be reconciled with you and with one another. In the coming weeks, grant us the courage to examine our own lives, so that we may live and be like Jesus. Amen.*

*Rev. Tara Wilkins is the pastor at Bridgeport United Church of Christ in northeast Portland, Oregon.*

March 11  
Embodying  
Truthfulness

Beth Gedert

*Matthew 5:27-37*



The words we speak have sacred connections. There is a profound principle in place behind the law, “Don’t lie.” This is about having an integrity that is so deep that you don’t need to prop up your promises. The oaths Jesus mentions go in the same category as, “I promise I’m telling the truth ...” and “I swear on my mother’s grave ...”

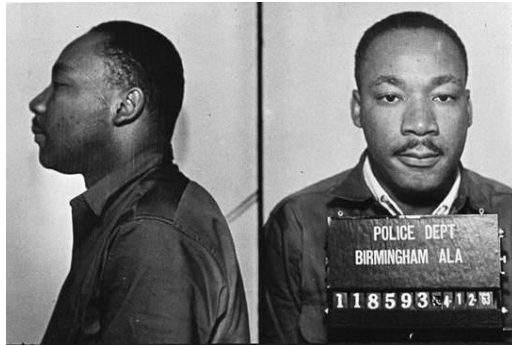
Jesus calls us to live such a truthful life that everyone who interacts with us knows that the smallest word from us will be the truth, whether it’s “Yes” or “No.” Any further need to embellish reveals the insecurity we feel because we are not always truthful.

Imagine how alive you would feel if you trusted your friends and family to always be truthful with you. Imagine how alive you would feel if you knew that you could trust yourself to be always truthful. This kind of truthfulness changes us and the people around us. In our culture you have to be big and loud and work hard to convince people. A simple yes or no, with no additional need to justify yourself or reassure the other person, would be a powerful witness in a world that thrives on exaggerations, half-truths, and fake news. A life of integrity is also a life without fear. It demonstrates that we are not afraid of the truth, but that we really believe that the truth will make us free. Lent is an invitation to let go of all pretense and live in the light of God's truth.

*God who is Truth, open our eyes to recognize the lies that surround us. Give us the courage we need to live with integrity, knowing who we are and whose we are. Your grace and love for all the world are truth and life to us. Help us to experience them and share them. Amen*

*Rev. Beth Gedert is the pastor of Zion United Church of Christ, an Open and Affirming church seeking to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God in Delaware, Ohio.*

March 12  
Jesus' Most  
Radical  
Message  
Beth Gedert



*Matthew 5:38-48*

Right here with Jesus is the first-ever recorded example of loving our enemies, not as a trick, and not as a way to get a reward from God, but because it's the most radically reconciling way to live. If we really want to change the world, loving our enemies is the only way to do it. Anything less radical will not be enough. Jesus has just finished describing the cycle of violence that gets perpetuated when we take an eye for an eye, urging us to instead turn the other cheek and go the extra mile.

Loving our enemies is shocking. It is counter-cultural. It is complete, mature, and as perfect as the love of God. It will stand out in a society powered by a system that runs at cross-

purposes to the Gospel. The hard truth about loving our enemies is that sometimes it's going to cost us. Your enemies may beat you; they may force you into backbreaking labor; they may humiliate you; they may take the very shirt off your back. And in that moment the very power of God alive in you will empower you to absorb it without flinging it back at them. Far from being a weak activity, this is the strongest thing a human being can do. It takes far more courage, integrity, steadfastness, and faith, to see injustice for what it is and to let your very body be the site of revealing its evil. And when we choose to do that, we will be in very good company. Because that was the path chosen by Jesus himself.

*God who sees no enemies, empower us to live in love, creatively resisting the forces designed for physical and spiritual oppression. Make us into everyday radicals and set us free. Amen.*

*Rev. Beth Gedert is the pastor of Zion United Church of Christ, an Open and Affirming church seeking to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God in Delaware, Ohio.*



March 13

## Attention?!

Jason Adams

*Matthew 6:1-6*



“Hey look at me!” he says, as he jumps off the top step. “Look what I can do!” she shouts, as she dangles from the monkey bars. As children, many of us loved to get the attention of parents, our peers, and just about anybody, when doing something new, bold, or interesting. Getting attention is an affirmation that we matter, we are doing something worth looking at, or setting an example. It’s all too human. Taken to the extreme, seeking attention might lead us to risky behaviors, unhealthy endeavors, or blatant egotism. We like to be affirmed, and at times we crave attention. With social media, the temptation is even greater. We’ll show off our new purchase, home improvements, or even what we ate for lunch. Now we crave “likes” and “shares.”

Jesus teaches that those who follow him do things differently. They’re not after attention from religious leaders, not seeking status upgrades from the powers that be, and not working for the approval of others, but in acts of worship and service, living for and giving their attention to God first. Those who need attention will get it. Those whom Jesus calls know that the attention he gives is all they need. It comes in the form of mercy, love, and new life. This counter cultural attitude directs our efforts and attention away from ourselves and toward one who knows even better than us, what we really need.

*Lord Jesus, turn us from ourselves and turn our hearts to your grace always. Amen.*

*Rev. Jason Adams is Senior Pastor of Reformation Lutheran Church (ELCA) in downtown Las Vegas, NV.*



March 14  
The Master of  
Light

*Andrea Allan*

*Matthew 6:22-24*

If only we had just two masters to choose between. These days it seems we have many things competing to control our life all around us. Many masters so to speak pulling on our attention, trying to get us to follow them – in the media, our phones, the internet, social media, consumerism, other people in our life, and the list goes on and on. There are so many voices telling us what to do, how to live our lives. Whether we have two competing options or a thousand, Jesus reminds us who the strongest voice in our life needs to be – the voice of God. Whether we hear God through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or that voice inside of us, it is not always easy to discern where the voice is coming from; is it from God, or something false pulling us away from God.

There are times when we know what the voice of the true master is calling us to, but that path feels long, difficult, and exhausting. The voice of the world can feel like an easier, happier, quicker journey, and yet in our heart we know that is not the path to light and true happiness. The voice of our true master God, will always call us toward the light, though it is not always the easy path, and yet, a life full of light is more fulfilling and joyous than a life in the shadows.

*Action: In this season of Lent, people sometimes choose to give up something as an act of solidarity with Christ. This week, perhaps you may decide to give up one of the masters who feeds your head with false voices – social media, Netflix, the internet, or buying unnecessary stuff. Try removing this false master for even for a few days and see if the voice of God is stronger for you.*

*Rev. Andrea Allan is a United Church of Canada minister in Southern Ontario. She lives with her husband and daughter in Stratford Ontario.*

March 15

## Genuine Pressure

Matt McCaffrey

*Matthew 7:15-20*



I am among the many who absolutely loves my “Instant Pot” pressure cooker. In our busy household with two active clergy, sometimes the only path to a hot homemade meal, eaten together, is blazed by this simple time-saving appliance. A vast community of fellow acolytes shares information and recipes.

We weren’t always head-over-heels with this appliance. In fact, it’s not even our first. We thought we’d purchased a genuine Instant Pot about three years ago. It certainly looked like one. It had the special lid and electronic displays that are hallmarks of this little cooker. Still, despite outward appearances, it was not the genuine article. We grew increasingly frustrated as we tried to follow recipes. The instant cooker that looked so authentic lacked the features and controls of the real Instant Pot. No chili! No

beans! No rice! No cheesecake! We grew bored with the four dishes we could actually prepare with this impostor.

Eventually, we gave up and saved up for the real thing.

I wish we’d been warned.

When Jesus came along, his was an epiphany that brought people into relationship with God. They flocked to hear him preach. They marveled at his gifts for healing and discernment. And, I’m sure they wondered at his words about “false prophets.” Wouldn’t it be easy to tell those who mislead from the genuine article?

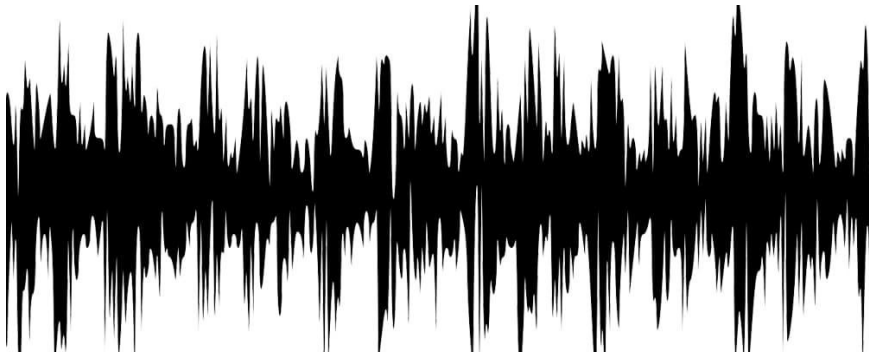
It would not. But, if you’re getting the same four boring “meals” from whoever you follow, maybe that’s a sign of the “bad fruit” he describes.

*God of Wisdom, help me to discern your life-giving word and works in my journey. Amen.*

*Matt McCaffrey is Interim Minister of North Madison Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Connecticut.*

March 16  
The Voice of God

Rachel Helgeson



*Matthew 7:21-23*

Have you looked at your schedule lately? What does it say? Is it full of things? Things that keep you busy or things that you are called to do?

Spiritual directors are great at asking this question. What is God calling you to do? And while this question seems easy to answer, yes or no, quite often we can't discern God's voice in it as our schedules are too clouded with everyone else's voice.

So let's be real this passage is not easy. In fact it's one we'd rather skip over because it's hard to hear. Are we really doing Christ's work? Are we really responding to God's call? Or are we just patting ourselves on the back, filling our schedules with all things, to look and feel like we are doing something important.

For a moment pause and look at your calendar. Ask is this what God is calling me to do? Sit in the silence and listen. The answer may not surface right away but the answer will come.

*Holy One, help me sit in the silence to hear your voice in the midst. Remind me where you are calling me in all that I do and say.  
In Christ's name we pray, Amen.*

*Biography: Rachel Helgeson is the Head of Staff pastor at Northminster Presbyterian Church in Endwell, New York home of the 2016 Little League World baseball champions.*



## March 17

# Faith of the Centurion

Daphne Grant Urban

*Matthew 8: 5-13*

The centurion was a heathen, a Roman (non-Jewish) soldier, but he was a godly man! The centurion was reluctant to be visited by Jesus but his faith was stronger than his concern for not being Jewish. As the master of his servant, he proves to Jesus that he has great faith. The centurion is just a human vessel, like the rest of us. He embraced his own humanity and reflection. Believe and you shall receive. See the power of Christ, the power of faith. The centurion shows Jesus that he believes in him, believes that this Son of Man has divine power. He believed that Jesus could, and would help his servant. Humble souls are made more humble by Christ's gracious dealings with them. The centurion compares the Lord's position with his

own. Christ has authority over disease similar to how the centurion has authority over soldiers. He believed in the miracles that only Jesus can provide. He believed that Jesus would save his servant, by healing him from his sickness.

*God of Hope, the healing is yours to give and ours to receive. Open our minds and our hearts to find and accept the belief in faith that we need during this time of lent. Amen.*

*Daphne Urban is a Luther Seminary Student and ELCA Supply Pastor from Bemidji, Minnesota*

March 18  
Name Your  
Fear

Cristine Warring  
*Matthew 8:23-27*



I don't know about you, but if a skyscraper sized wave was headed my way, and I was in a little 12 foot bass boat maybe, I would be terrified too. Rather than rebuke the disciples for their terror, let's think about a way to live \*in\* the terror – because sometimes the storm is not calmed.

What if we name our fears as we experience them? I believe God knows what we are afraid of, yet sometimes I think that if I speak the fear out loud and possibly enable it to run loose in the world, then things will be worse than ever! So I keep my fears bottled up inside – losing focus, losing strength, and losing sleep. Perhaps I might take a deep breath and name my fears out loud?

What if we name our fears as we experience them? Could the very act of evicting our fears out of our heads and expelling our fears out of our hearts – out into a communal space – could this possibly produce a miracle? From the body of Christ around us? Calming the winds and seas for a bit so we can catch our breath?

What if we name our fears as we experience them? Name them and acknowledge them? Then, cry out as the disciples did – with a twist. Perhaps we can name our fears and ask for help in living \*in\* them, with hope for the unknown miracle to come – as we ask for help in remembering the Holy's presence and trusting for the rest.

*ACTION: Just for today – write out a fear on a sticky note and hold it up to God. Speak your fear out loud and pray – help me faithfully trust Your presence in my fears, O God. Write in a different color “God is present” across the fear as a reminder of your prayer. Place the note somewhere as a memory touchstone – coming back to it as you need to.*

*Cristine Warring is the pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Girard in rural southeast Kansas.*



March 19

## Demonic

Sonny Graves

*Matthew 8:28-34*

I wonder If Jesus was still tired from calming the storm and the disciples? I wonder what a demon sounds like? I wonder if it's unfair to make swine bear the death when they were simply grazing nearby? I wonder why the town people were scared of the power of God?

Jesus meets us in the most broken and beautiful possibilities of our lives. I love that Jesus is unafraid to go to this place of death. A place humanity decided is irredeemable. Demonic. Violent. Untouchable. Impassable. Beyond repair and hope.

Can we read this passage and imagine the parts of our lives, our communities, or our world that we have decided are beyond healing and hope? I wonder are these the very parts that

most to come out from the tombs and into the presence of God?

Whether we are willing or not to come to God, in Jesus God comes to us. Loves us unconditionally. Loves especially what we believe is beyond hope. The power of that grace will feel like a casting out. Our despair and disbelief will be run off of the cliff of our souls to perish in the waters. I wonder at so many townspeople who encountered that power and begged God to leave. I wonder however, if there were a few in that crowd forever changed... and who believed?

*God whether or not we are willing to come to you – you find a way to come to us. Heal us of our demons of despair, of oppression, of suffering, and of hopelessness. Draw us from the tombs and into your presence where we need not wonder at all if your love is waiting for us.*

*Rev. Sonny Graves (preferred pronouns he/him) pastors with the priesthood of all believers at New Spirit UCC in Indigenous Dakota Lands/Savage, Minnesota..*

March 20  
Mercy, Not  
Sacrifice

Hope E. A. Molozaizy



*Matthew 9:10-13*

Beloved poet, Mary Oliver, wrote in her poem “Wild Geese:” “You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.” Are you trying to be extra “good” this Lent? Have you given something up or taken something on? Are you repenting in your hair shirt, crawling across the sand?

There is much good to be gained from a Lenten fast or from an increase in our spiritual disciplines, in this or any season. But however we strive to improve ourselves – however excellently we pray, however tirelessly we work for God’s justice to be made real on earth, however diligently we worship and study – no amount of improvement will make us worthy of God’s love. Jesus gave his presence – his compassion, his mercy, his nourishment – to tax collectors and

grave sinners. He gives the same to us. We hear this over and over again, and yet it’s still a challenge to accept as truth. Wouldn’t Jesus like us better if we were better? No, not really. Oh, he wants us to live our very best life, yes, indeed. But his love for us, his care for us, his willingness to stop everything else and sit down to dinner with us could never be greater than it already is on our worst day. And that good news makes me hope I can be better.

*Oh Lord, we want to be good. Help us grow strong in our faithfulness. But whether we’re strong or weak, sinning or repenting, you call us in and circle us in love. Thank you. Amen.*

*Hope E. A. Molozaizy is the pastor of The Community Church of Richmond, UCC, in Richmond, IL, and always a mom.*



March 21

## Healer

Julie Holm

*Matthew 9:18-26*



I have a two year old granddaughter; she is the joy of my life. Since she lives across the street from me, I get to see her every day, and I just love her to pieces!

It hurts my heart to try to imagine my granddaughter ill to the death like the girl in this story; but in raising 3 children, I have experienced them hurt and sick in ways I could not remedy, and know the sorrow of being helpless in the face of my child's suffering.

And I can understand the struggle of the woman with the issue as well, having struggled with "women's" illnesses including uterine fibroids and breast cancer.

For Jesus, as for most first century Jews, these women, their lives, and their faith had

value. Unlike most first century Jews, Jesus could do something about it.

Jesus still can. We might not see the dramatic miracles that we read of in Jesus' day, but our Christ is with us through all our illnesses, walking beside us always. Even though today he works through the miracle of doctors and nurses and radiation technicians, and even the people who mop the floors to make sure that random germs are eliminated.

What is more, Jesus can touch the ills that are within us so deep we share them with no one: our loneliness and isolation, our fears, our deepest sorrows, indeed even our sin. Jesus is the healer of every ill.

*"Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow, grant us peace beyond our tears, and hope beyond our sorrow." –*

*Marty Haugen*

*(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFYcjaquht>)*

*Julie Holm is the pastor of three small rural churches in central Pennsylvania, and works within both UCC and ELCA traditions.*

March 22

Yes, Lord.

Shari Jackson Monson

*Matthew 9:27-31*



As you read today's passage, do so using all of the senses you possess. If you like, close your eyes, and listen to it read aloud by another voice. Put yourself in the sandals of the two blind men. Imagine how difficult it must have been to make your way along first century roadways. Do you think others helped them out, or not? We do not know how long these men have been following Jesus, but even a mile must have been difficult. As you hear their cry for mercy, what comes to mind?

Listen again from Jesus' perspective. Keep in mind, he has previously healed others in public settings. Why do you suppose Jesus chose to speak with the blind men privately?

There are many possibilities. Here's one. Had the men kept quiet they may have continued

on the journey with Jesus all the way to the Jerusalem. For reasons we're not told, the will to heed Jesus' warning was simply not present. Instead, verse 34 says, 'they went away and spread his fame through all that district'.

We are invited to deepen our discipleship with Jesus by paying attention to what he asks. Sometimes the invitation is to keep quiet. How hard is this for you to do?

*O Lord, we come to you this day, believing that you truly are a merciful Savior. Help us, in our belief, to be open to whatever it is that you have in store for our journey with you. Yes, Lord. I will follow you. Amen.*

*Shari Jackson Monson is the interim pastor of John Knox Presbyterian Church in Normandy Park, near Seattle Washington.*

March 23

## Aggravated or Amazed?

Mary Austin

*Matthew 9:32-34*

FOR GOD  
SO LOVED  
THE WORLD  
THAT HE  
GAVE HIS  
ONE AND ONLY SON  
THAT  
WHOEVER  
BELIEVES  
IN HIM  
SHALL NOT  
PERISH  
BUT HAVE  
ETERNAL  
LIFE  
JOHN 3:16

At a recent church meeting, a longtime member got angry about our church financial situation, and a proposal to generate some funds. “You haven’t done this and you haven’t done that,” he said accusingly. In fact, the church had done all of the things on his list, and he just didn’t happen to know about it.

It was a reminder, for me, about communication, going both ways. I could have done a better job sharing the steps the church had taken. I’m also sure I would have responded more kindly to him if he had asked, instead of telling. “Have we tried this...?” He spoke with authority out of ignorance, in the same way that the religious leaders respond to Jesus. The crowd

sees new possibilities in what Jesus is doing, and the religious leaders can only imagine one possible answer for what Jesus is doing.

As we follow Jesus, lots of experiences elude our categories. We witness healings or changes in people’s spirits that defy explanation. We see the power of evil defeated by good, and the force for good can be so tiny we imagine it can’t possibly do much. We can respond with ignorance, or with wonder. We can assume that if it’s not done the way we would do it, it’s wrong. Or we can take up the spiritual discipline of being amazed by Jesus all over again. Awe opens the door to Lent’s gifts.

*This Lent, wonderful God, quiet our rational minds, we pray, and open us again to awe. Teach us to live with questions and to love them as much as we love answers.*

*In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

*Mary Austin is the pastor of Westminster Church of Detroit, a multi-cultural Presbyterian. She is the author of meeting God at the Mall.*

March 24

## Sheep Without A Shepherd

Robert Stutes



*Matthew 9:35-38*

Have you ever had the experience of seeing a vacant church building? For me it can be a surprisingly emotional moment, especially when it is a building which holds memories of worship, activities, and relationships. Even if another congregation overhauls that building into their own worship space, it still leaves me feeling an odd sense of loss.

Once as I reflected on that sense of loss, something dawned on me. I realized that the empty building drew more emotion from me than did the lives of the women, men, girls and boys who lived around that building. Did I really hurt more for the bricks and mortar than I did for

flesh and blood?

Chapter 9 of Matthew is full of healing activity. Jesus heals a paralyzed man, a woman who has suffered long from hemorrhages, two blind men, and a mute demoniac. In verse 36 of the chapter we see a glimpse into what Jesus saw when he looked out on the crowds of people. They are described as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

So how did Jesus react? It’s very simple. Jesus had compassion for them. Instead of seeing a spiritually barren landscape, Jesus could already see the potential harvest. I’m thinking he cared more about empty lives than empty buildings!

I’m so glad that when I feel helpless, I do know that Jesus looks at my bewilderment with a heart of compassion. During this season of Lent, I will seek to look at others in the same way.

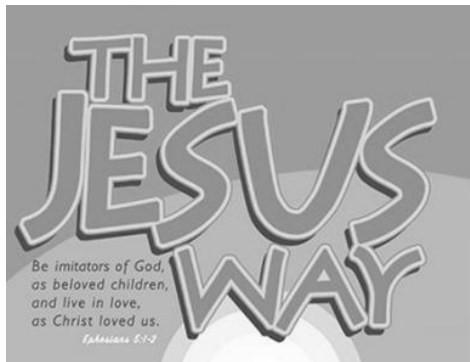
*Good Shepherd, I praise you for your compassionate heart. And I ask you to give me a measure of that compassion. Amen.*

*Robert Stutes is pastor of Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church in Roanoke, Virginia.*

March 25

## Say What?

John Dumke



*Matthew 10:5-8*

Say What? Didn't Jesus come into the World for the sake everyone, not just a select few. Why prohibit the Kingdom of Heaven (Jesus' Way of living) to be limited to the very people who had gotten it wrong for so many years?

This just doesn't seem right and goes against my image of Jesus as Savior of the world. Yet, when I embrace the text, I begin to realize that this make perfect sense as the disciples know the culture and the people. Jesus is giving them an opportunity to practice how to live and

teach the Jesus way with people they can relate to. Later they are sent out to a diverse group of people, Gentiles, Samaritan, and even Romans. The last command that Jesus gives them(us) is to live, teach and share the Kingdom of Heaven with anyone. As we grow in our practice of living the Jesus' Way, we become equipped and empowered to connect to people in ways that make sense to them!

*Bringer of the Kingdom of Heaven instill in me the desire to practice The Jesus Way of living so I may grow in my relationship with You and build relationships with others.*

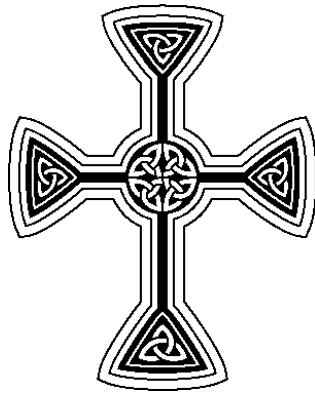
*Amen*

*John Dumke is the pastor of Our Saviors and Skogdalen Lutheran Parish in Westby Wisconsin.*

March 26  
A Worthy  
Listener

Tara Wilkins

*Matthew 10:9-15*



A 7th grader approached me at middle school church camp upset that her friend, who was known to tell secrets, shared some private information with the whole cabin side. I listened to her feelings and her fears. I asked her if this had ever happened before. And she said, “All the time”. As the words flowed out, her expression shifted and she realized that perhaps this friend isn’t trustworthy, as least with her most personal feelings. I suggested she consider who she shares her private treasures with more carefully.

Author and researcher, Brene Brown advises, “Our stories are not meant for everyone. Hearing them is a privilege, and we should always ask ourselves this before we share: “Who has earned the right to hear my story?”” When we

are vulnerable to people who aren’t prepared to hear our tenderness, shame and hurt are often triggered. It doesn’t mean they are a bad person, rather they just weren’t ready to be present in the way that was needed.

Jesus suggests that we be open in a new place, but if someone isn’t receptive, bless them and move on. Don’t waste your time, or your heart, on those who aren’t ready to hold your treasure.

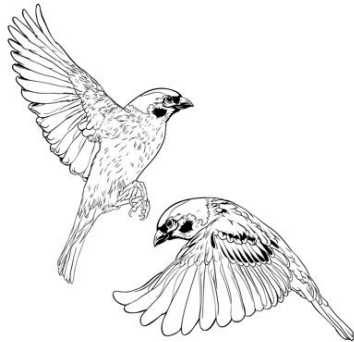
*Gracious God, help me to be receptive to listening carefully when someone approaches me. And forgive me if I miss an opportunity to share your love in this way. Amen.*

*Rev. Tara Wilkins is the pastor at Bridgeport United Church of Christ in northeast Portland, Oregon.*

March 27

## The Make-Weight

Allison Byerley



*Matthew 10:26-31*

I ran across a story about the sparrows Jesus talks about in these verses.

A young boy became a devoted Christian, and someone asked him about his fervor. The boy explained that someone had given him a New Testament and he had read about two sparrows being sold for a penny, and he realized that Jesus knew about selling birds. The boy caught and sold birds, and for two coins, he would throw in an extra bird, a make-weight, of no account.

He went on, “Now, I think to myself that I am so insignificant, so poor, and so small that no one would think of counting me. I am like the extra bird. And yet, Jesus says that not one of them is forgotten before God. I have never heard anything like it! No one but he could ever have thought of not forgetting me.”

There are times when most of us feel like make-weights, of no account. When have you felt of no account, forgotten, ignored?

Jesus tells us that is not true. We are not forgotten. We are not of no account. We are precious in the sight of God who knows even the number of hairs on our heads.

Notice what Jesus wants us to remember in addition to that. Do not be afraid. Don't let our fear of being wrong or awkward or laughed at or tongue-tied or whatever other fear grips us hold us back from following Jesus.

*Jesus, remind me how precious I am in God's eyes and forgive me when I let fear overshadow faith.*

*Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Pastor of Mariposa UMC in Mariposa, CA.*



March 28  
Know Jesus  
No Peace?  
John Dumke

*Matthew 10:34-39*

*“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

What is happening here? I thought Jesus was the Prince of Peace, the One of Love who came to save us not to condemn us! He was the promised savior!

Wasn't Jesus going to bring people together not tear them a part? I believed that his ethic of Love and Forgiveness would bring peace - not lead to destructive relationships.

What's he up too? Perhaps, just perhaps, Jesus is messing with us, causing us to stop and think about what it means to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' Way of living is very intentional and has consequences for us and our relationships. This can cause disruptions in

relationships when we strive to reset our priorities, our actions, our entire life to his way of life.

Jesus invites, no commands us to ask what our life is based upon. Our family, our church/congregation, our political party, our pursuit of happiness, our hobbies, etc.

Perhaps Jesus is challenging us out of Love to live our life grounded in “the Jesus Way” so that we can live a full and meaningful life!

*Teacher, savior, comforter, challenger, implant in the core of our being the willingness to struggle with your words that invite us to grow in our understanding of what it means to live into your Kingdom. Amen*

*John Dumke is the pastor of Our Saviors and Skogdalen Lutheran Parish in Westby Wisconsin.*



March 29

## God Says

Anne Knighten



*Matt 11: 16-19*

The first time I ever heard “You Say” sung by Lauren Daigel, I was amazed that Daigel and her cowriters had expressed so clearly what it means to be a beloved child of God. The world tells us that we are weak, that we are not worthy, that we can never be enough. In contrast, God tells us that we are strong, that we are loved, that we are worthy. It is a message I need to hear again and again, louder and louder, until the thought becomes as natural as breathing: GOD loves me, God LOVES me, God loves ME.

Today’s reading reminds me that what ultimately matters is not what the world thinks about me, but what God thinks. The world rejected Jesus, unable to see how his life conformed to his Father’s commands. Jesus ate with sinners, he befriended the marginalized, he demonstrated the wideness of God’s mercy. He was treated with scorn and contempt by those who could not see him for who he really is. Jesus is love incarnate. He is love that stooped down to raise us up. He did not live by the world’s rules, dancing to the world’s tune, but to God’s. To put it into positive more modern parlance, you could say that he “lived his purpose.”

*Listen to “You Say.”*

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slaT8Jl2zpl>*

*How is God speaking to you about your identity? Who does God say that you are? Do you believe what God says about you even when the world tells you something different?*

*Anne Knighten is a senior in the MDiv-Distributive Learning program at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. She and her husband live in Redlands, CA.*

March 30

## Letting Go is Hard



Cristine Warring

*Matthew 11:28-30*

“No, let me do it!” My 4 year old daughter defiantly glared at me. She had accidentally popped off her Barbie doll’s head and was dutifully attempting to replace it. But her eye-to-hand coordination and her ability to tolerate a frustrating longer-than-expected task was lacking. Anger, mixed with fear, quickly took over. Throwing the doll’s body across the room, she screamed, “I never wanted this dumb doll anyway.”

I knew better. And I was learning to step back and let her reach her limit, before gently asking if I could help.

Perhaps that’s Jesus talking too? Perhaps Jesus knows that our human-ness is going to hold

out as long as we can stand it before coming to him, weary and burdened. Notice Jesus does not invite folks who have it together, are well rested, and have light burdens. He invites us who are ready to make a switch.

But letting go of burdens that have become a part of us - part of our identity - is hard. I am an adult child of alcoholism. Yet, as I continue to let go of that marker of identity, and its burdens and exhaustion, I find familial alcoholism blending into a beautiful mosaic that makes me \*me\* – in my entirety. My family’s alcoholism no longer claims the largest part of who I am.

Could letting go of all that holds us in tyranny \*be\* the rest for our souls that Jesus mentions? And – with his yoke, might we finally become whole?

*Holy One, we cling and hoard and hide our heavy burdens, perhaps out of fear of the transformation you offer when we let them go. Today, gently give us a vision of our wholeness that you offer. Help us loosen our grips, finger by finger, until our palms open wide. To let go and to receive. Amen.*

*Cristine Warring is the pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Girard in rural southeast Kansas.*



## March 31 New Vision

Peter Hamm

*Matthew 12:9-21*

As I write this, I have just reviewed this whole chapter and the adjoining chapters for a sermon, and once again, I am astounded at how obtuse we humans can be when it is more important to us to oppose something and stay part of whatever group we are part of... rather than confront the truth and mercy of a loving God.

We can almost understand the Pharisees intent if they oppose Jesus when he eats unclean food, or perhaps if he claims things about Scripture that they don't yet understand or know, or something obvious like that. But in this case, Jesus performs a miracle right in front of their noses, and still, they viciously oppose him, even seeking to destroy him.

We live today in a highly charged political and social environment within which we see this kind of thing against politicians or ministers or celebrities all the time, so maybe it's nice to know that it's always been this way. But when we see obvious signs of God's work in the world, even from people we don't think should understand it... how do we respond?

*Lord, allow us to see with your eyes, allow us to celebrate the hope for the nations that flows from Jesus' new reality, no matter what it does to our understanding of the way things are. Help us to respond in grace and truth, and never judgment and hatred.*

*Peter Hamm is a husband, father, and bi-vocational pastor and worship leader who is delighted and honored to serve Grace United Methodist Church in Norwood, Ohio.*



April 1

## Love, Justice, and Peace

Andrea Allan

*Matthew 12:22-32*

If you are not with me, then you are against me. How often we have heard these words used to force us into a choice that we know is wrong. It is a favourite phrase of politicians who want us to go against what we know is right, to go against our core beliefs of love and peace and justice.

Jesus faced much opposition and supposed leaders who took great joy in pointing out their perceived faults of Jesus and his leadership. Today in our reading Jesus has had enough and he faces against the Pharisees to tell them what awaits them if they do not listen to Jesus' teachings.

Quite often Jesus is painted as a mild, friendly guy, who spreads joy and peace everywhere he goes. Today we are reminded that it is good to speak out against those who simply want to stand back and be a bully in the face of true love and justice for all. Today, Jesus' words remind us that it is good to stand up against the bullies who would rather steal hope and joy from others. Our society often dissuades us from showing our anger, we have Jesus as our example of when it is right and just to use our anger to show the truth. Jesus reminds us this day and every day to stand up for our beliefs of love and peace and justice for all.

*Action: Today, why not stand up against hate and injustice using the righteous anger Jesus*

*shows us. Fight for those without a voice and call the bullies to account for their wrongdoings. Who around you is being bullied and how can you stand up for them today?*

*Rev. Andrea Allan is a United Church of Canada minister in Southern Ontario. She lives with her husband and daughter in Stratford Ontario.*



April 2

## God Among Us

Tara Wilkins

*Matthew 12:46-50*

In 2003, a show aired called Joan of Arcadia. In the first episode, Joan prays to God that she will do anything, if God will let her brother, who was in a bad car accident that left him paraplegic, live. God first appears to her as a cute college guy, who assigns her a task. In each subsequent episode God gives her a different task, but appears to her as a different person; an elderly woman, a teenager, a small child, the bus driver, a passerby.

The effect of watching the show became that with each encounter of a person that wasn't a regular character, you began to listen closely to see if that was God presenting a new assignment. The show's theme song, What if God Was One of Us?, posed an interesting question.

Jesus' words to the crowds remind us that the family of God extends beyond our family of

origin. What connects us is that God is in us and among us, each of us. In a culture of deep division, we tend to see ourselves by our differing characteristics or ideas. We must remember that we are not red people or blue people, but God's people. What if instead, we first ask the question of each person we encounter, what if God is indeed one of us?

*Dear God, help me to see you in everyone I meet. Amen.*

*Rev. Tara Wilkins is the pastor at Bridgeport United Church of Christ in northeast Portland, Oregon.*



## April 3

# Work the Soil

Chris Deacon

*Matthew 13:1-9*

So often, we hear this text as describing different people as the different types of soil. This type of person is like the path, that type of person is rocky ground, and any seed planted will go to waste. This person, usually a person like us, is good soil. That is where we should plant.

What if this misses the point of this parable? What if Jesus isn't telling us to judge what type of soil to avoid? What if Jesus isn't telling us to share God's Word far and wide, with the hopes that some of it will land on good soil? What if Jesus is telling us to pay attention to the soil!

I used to serve in a primarily agricultural community, but know nothing about horticulture. I can't even keep a houseplant alive. I did learn

that you must work the soil, when planting crops. You have to care for the soil. Rocky ground can be broken up. Thorns can be cleared. Any soil can give life to seeds, if it is cultivated enough.

If we interpret the seeds as the Word of God, this is a passage about evangelism. We are called to cultivate the soil, to enter into relationships with them. What is more effective, asking somebody, "if you died tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?" or getting to know somebody and letting them see how Christ is working in your life. Not to "save" them or to get anything from them, but because they are a beloved child of God. When we treat evangelism that way, we may find the rocky ground a little less rocky.

*Almighty God, help us to plant the seed of your Word that will further your kingdom on Earth. Help us cultivate the soil through authentic relationships built out of love and compassion for your other beloved children. Amen.*

*Rev. Chris Deacon is the pastor of the United Parish of Bowie, a joint UCC/PC(USA) congregation in Bowie, MD. He is also the author of "Louder than Words."*

April 4

Dusty

Jason Adams



*Matthew 13:18-23*

Here in the desert, the soil is dry and sandy, and underneath it is a layer of rock called caliche which is notoriously difficult to dig through. It's the reason houses here don't have basements. I'm also really bad at gardening, so I don't do a lot of planting. A potted plant on my desk has lived for about 5 weeks and it's a new record. It's just barely hanging on. I can only imagine how it would do if it had some nice, rich soil, and fertile land to grow in, how it might blossom and bloom. Jesus tells a story about a sower, who seemed to throw seed just about everywhere. Like fertile soil, those who heard and trusted in this good word were bound to grow into something beautiful and bear an abundance of fruit!

Sometimes in our lives we might feel dusty and dry like the desert sand. It might seem like nothing good could come from us, and we sink into despair. We can't change our hearts ourselves. We long for that word - that someone could speak God's love into our lives again, and we might be able to grow once more. Like a good and faithful gardener, God does not neglect us in our deepest need. Through the cross, God redeems us and makes us new again. Through the Word, God awakens us and brings us to life. Through the Spirit, God refreshes and sustains us, that we would bear fruit again.

*Lord, make my heart into good soil. Help me to hear, trust, and understand you more. Amen.*

*Rev. Jason Adams is Senior Pastor of Reformation Lutheran Church (ELCA) in downtown Las Vegas, NV.*



April 5  
Piles and  
Pearls

Matt McCaffrey

*Matthew 13:44-50*

I have an eye for treasure. My home study is a testament to the various pearls I find in my daily travels. When I attend a convention or a trade show, I make room in my luggage for the various goodies pressed into my hands by exhibitors. They remind me of the trip, and some of them are useful.

But: my home study occasionally overflows with all those tchotchkes and pamphlets and books. It's hard to derive pleasure from a "fidget spinner" with your denomination's logo printed on it when it falls on your fingers from an overhead shelf...for the third time. It's frustrating to walk into the room and navigate around boxes full of demo equipment that (in my mind) is valuable, but has no practical use in my work

It occasionally drives me to tears when I can't find the one white paper I need, somewhere in that stack of 27 brochures.

Weeping? Check. Gnashing of teeth? Oh, yes.

That's when I understand parables like these in a much more personal way. The "end of the age" is not something under my control. Still, I hear Jesus' words as a more intimate invitation. It takes an angel—my spouse—to help me see the treasure in my particular field, and to spot the pearls in my particular stash. As we work together, I begin to understand discernment in a whole new light. For today, I'll work in my own field. For today, I'll choose what is precious and upcycle the rest.

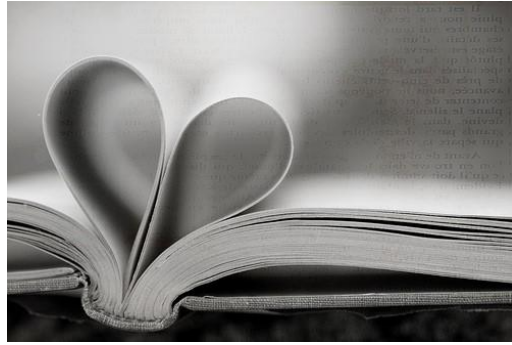
*May your Spirit's discerning wisdom continue to grow in me, compassionate Jesus. Amen.*

*Matt McCaffrey is Interim Minister of North Madison Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Connecticut.*



April 6  
The Lens of  
Love

Rachel Helgeson



*Matthew 15:10-20*

While in seminary I had 2 friends, Dave and Deb Trevino, who were able to see the world in a completely different way. A few years later when they met my daughter, who was 2 at the time, they delighted in her activity, the joy in her voice, her intelligence, and made every effort to let me know how much joy my little one brought into the world.

What you may not know is that Dave and Deb are both blind. Reading today's scripture I cannot separate hearing Deb and Dave's voices from Jesus' voice to Peter. So often we think that blindness is a physical malady but as Dave and Deb reminded me time and time again they were not the ones who could not see the world as it was it and is for their hearts knew more than

mine and others around us.

How often are we like Peter doubting and shielding our eyes from the beauty that God has set right in front of us? Perhaps it's the gift of music? Perhaps it's a small child incessantly asking questions about the world around you? Perhaps it's the friend who brings the hard roll and sausage you love that you aren't able to get on your own.

Whatever it is this is what Christ calls us to, to love and to see the God given world through the lens of love instead of malice.

*Holy One,  
Remind me to set aside my own preconceived notions  
of the world and those I interact with on a regular and  
not so regular basis. Lead me in the ways of love  
instead of malice.*

*We pray this in Christ's holy name. Amen.*

*Rachel Helgeson is the Head of Staff pastor at  
Northminster Presbyterian Church in Endwell, New York home of  
the 2016 Little League World baseball champions.*

April 7

## Faith of Canaanite Woman

Daphne Grant Urban



*Matthew 15: 21-28*

The Canaanite woman is from Palestine and is known to be a pagan. But the distress and trouble of her family, namely her daughter, brought this woman to Christ. This is similar to a lot of people, there is often a need that drives people to Christ. Christ is merciful and never drives people away. This woman begged Christ for his mercy, fully knowing that she's a sinner. The disciples however didn't like this form of public attention at all.

A strange woman crying after them? Just awful! Jesus didn't listen to this woman initially, did he? But it is the duty of the parents to pray for and to get help, for their children. And this woman said that her daughter had "demon-possession." Christ alone can heal people who have been captured by the devil. Christ's grace heals people who are in dark and perplexing places. This Canaanite woman believed this, so she begged for Christ's mercy to help heal her daughter. This woman, when she begged for Jesus' help, was not offended at the implication of being called a gentile dog. She was quick to respond in a way that could give her advantage. She talked about how little dogs eat crumbs that fall from their masters. This shows that she had great faith in Jesus. He granted her wish and healed her daughter.

*God, you have called us to love you and show you mercy. Thank you for loving us even if you disagree with us. Be with us as we call out to you! Amen.*

*Daphne Urban is a Luther Seminary Student and ELCA Supply Pastor in Bemidji, Minnesota*



April 8

## Who Am I?

Chris Deacon

*Matthew 16:13-18*

Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” This question is understandable. Jesus and the disciples had been traveling and he had been doing some incredible things. People were talking about Jesus and he wanted to know what they were saying.

Jesus then turns it to the disciples. “Who do you say I am?” While Peter correctly says that Jesus is the Messiah, he later shows that he doesn’t understand what it means to say that Christ is the messiah. He rebuked Jesus and rejected that Christ would die in Jerusalem. Later, after Jesus’ arrest, Peter denied him three times.

There is a difference between knowing and knowing. When my wife and I were engaged, many people told us that marriage is hard work. We

replied, “Oh, we know.” Now, fifteen years later, we know marriage is hard work. Peter knew who Jesus was, but he didn’t know who Jesus was.

Who do people say Jesus is? This is an important question to answer. During the disciple’s time, not everybody knew who Jesus was. Today, most people have an opinion who Jesus is. More importantly, who do you say Jesus is? How do you know him? How do you know you know him

*Holy God, your love, grace, and power are revealed to us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to know him and to know you, so that we may faithfully follow.  
Amen.*

*Rev. Chris Deacon is the pastor of the United Parish of Bowie, a joint UCC/PC(USA) congregation in Bowie, MD. He is also the author or “Louder than Words.”*

April 9  
God of Flesh  
Sonny Graves



*Matthew 8:28-34*

God in the flesh tells us that he will die. The disciples are greatly distressed it says, they are filled with grief. After this moment their ministry together gets more urgent - emboldened -there are bigger risks they take for the good of the most outcast and vulnerable.

Death and facing it together can be a clarifying moment. When you think of your own mortality, how do you honor your grief? Does it convict you to remember what really matters in our earthly life? Does it empower you to value each moment deeper, to savor your relationships? Are you more open to the ways God calls us to be disciples of care and justice? Does it feel as Jesus says, “nothing will be impossible for you”?

When I was in my early twenties my best friend died suddenly. Everything about that death felt unfair and unjust. Yet that loss taught me

something truly valuable. That our time and our love is both fleeting and precious. Death will come for us all. So how will we choose to live and follow Jesus? What heaven on earth becomes possible to create from that clarifying perspective?

Years later I remember sitting in a dark room rocking my nephew to sleep in my arms. As I looked at the sweetness of his face snoozing I suddenly felt and smelled the presence of my friend’s spirit fill the room. My heart was no longer distressed, but grateful for her presence in a resurrected form. My heart was no longer grieved, but given this taste of new life with the child in my arms. Jesus tell us he will die and arise to live in a different way. Then they get to work in the precious time that is left in this world.

*God of the flesh, of the tomb, and the resurrection.  
Clarify us with the truth of our mortality. Give us the  
faith to move mountains for your love and justice on this  
earth. Then let us live your holy possibilities till we join  
you in the eternal. Amen.*

*Rev. Sonny Graves (preferred pronouns he/him) pastors  
with the priesthood of all believers at New Spirit UCC in Indigenous  
Dakota Lands/Savage, Minnesota.*

April 10  
Let Them  
Come

Hope E. A. Moloza iy

*Matthew 19:13-15*



My daughter took her first steps on a Maundy Thursday when she was not quite a year old, in the chancel as I prepared for worship. She's six now, and while she often sits with church members for worship, sometimes she asks to sit "up front" with Mommy. I explain again that she may, as long as she's not a distraction to others. She comes into the chancel, with her coloring supplies, her children's bulletins, and whatever else we've brought for our long morning at church. She's well-intentioned, but as I welcome people to worship, she flops onto her belly and spreads out her markers. As we sing the first song, she takes off her shoes. By the time we reach the children's

sermon, our side of the chancel looks like she's moved in for a 9-month visit.

While I pray she's indeed not a distraction, I remember these words of Jesus, welcoming children to him, just as they were, with all their childish tendencies, sticky fingers, and coloring books. I remember the words that my church shares at the start of worship: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." It's good news for us all, especially in this season of repentance and renewal: there's no mess we can make, no stage or phase we can pass through, that will cause God to reject us. May we trust that promise wherever we are in life.

*Today, keep your eyes open for younger people (whatever "younger" might mean in your life). As you see them, offer a prayer that they might know that Jesus loves and welcomes them, no matter what.*

*Hope E. A. Moloza iy is the pastor of The Community Church of Richmond, UCC, in Richmond, IL, and always a mom.*



## April 11 Into the Reign of God

Julie Holm

*Matthew 21:28-32*

*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Reign of God ahead of you.*

Truly I tell you the illegal immigrants and the refugees are going into the Reign of God ahead of you. Truly I tell you the drug addicts and the petty thieves are going into the Reign of God ahead of you. Truly I tell you the murderers, the cheaters, the gamblers, even the folks who voted for that candidate you despise, are going into the Reign of God ahead of you.

Jesus challenges, not all his fellow Jews, but those who believe that their involvement in the community of the Chosen by itself endears them to God, without attention to God's ongoing

request to love their neighbor. We, too, tend to sit in pews and sing our hymns and do our worship, and judge all those who are not among us, who are not, in our view, doing all the right things. Even though Jesus told us explicitly not to judge, told us explicitly that he came so that all might have abundant life. Even though he told us that the *most important thing* is love.

Yes, the prostitute, the drug abuser, the illegal immigrant doing the will of God will be in line in front of those of us who sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" but rarely move ourselves to love our neighbor as deeply as we could. Let our love increase.

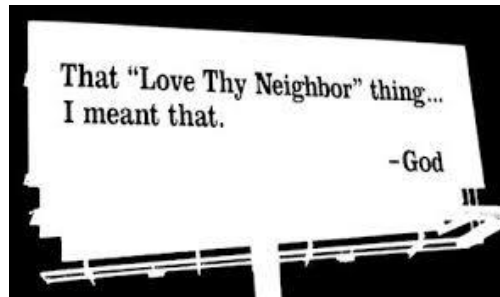
*Saving God, lead me to be more fully the person you call me to be. Help me not to judge others, not to react to what I see on the outside, and instead to love everyone you place in my way. Amen.*

*Rev. Julie Holm is the pastor of the Brush Valley Fusion of Faith, three UCC and ELCA churches in rural central Pennsylvania.*

April 12

## God-Neighbor-Self Love

Shari Jackson Monson



*Matthew 22:34-40*

The image is far-fetched. A billboard highway sign looming overhead. Significant expense paid. Text concise enough to be read by even the zippiest of passersby. Modern context for an ancient truth. The God, whose character is love, knows our love for God is sincere when we love our neighbors. This was big news. Indeed, the truth of it startles us still.

In the ancient world, Israel's identity was wrapped up in what scholars of the day considered the greater laws of God. These, most agreed, could be summed up in a practice called

the Shema, frequently recited as a prayer, which called the faithful to love the Lord your God with all of one's heart, and all of one's soul, and all of one's mind (Deut. 6:5).

When pressed by a teacher of the law as to what God's intentions for us might be, Jesus quotes the Shema. But Jesus includes a second [law] as like it, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself' [Lev. 19:19]. Adding, 'On these two commandments depend all the Law and Prophets'.

Somehow Israel had relegated this second commandment to a lesser law. Jesus took exception to Israel's practice and surprised the audience by putting these laws on equal footing. In doing so he demonstrates that God loves Israel's neighbors as much as God loves Israel.

*Action: Look for signs of where God may be inviting you to show love and concern for people you have previously overlooked or bypassed.*

*Shari Jackson Monson is the interim pastor of John Knox Presbyterian Church in Normandy Park, near Seattle Washington.*



April 13

## Whose Plans?

Mary Austin

*Matthew 26:1-5*

I always wonder about the difference between our plans and God's plans. Sometimes they align, other times they overlap, and sometimes we have wildly different plans. In my own life, God is often like one of those retractable dog leashes. God will let me run for a while in my own direction, and then the leash locks, and I have to stop and reconsider.

Here we hear that both Jesus and the religious leaders know that his death is coming. They both can see ahead to the same event, and yet they understand it in very different ways. The religious leaders think they're getting rid of a problem. It's not clear to us exactly how Jesus understands his coming death, and theologians will debate until the end of time about what it

means. A substitution for our sins? God working through a wrong to make a statement about the limited power of human evil, when faced with God's plans? A tragic miscarriage of justice, mirrored over and over in our human world?

No matter how we understand the death of Jesus, we all agree that God was at work through it, in some way showing that the Divine never gives up on humanity. The plans of human wrongdoers became part of God's plans, as God intervenes to bring life out of evil and death. As we make daily lists and strategic plans, it's easy to miss the plans that God has. Holy Week is an enduring reminder that God's plans come alive in the world, either through us or in spite of us.

*Loving God, tune our hopes to yours, and our dreams to the ones you have for all of humanity. As we make plans, may we find your grace-filled foundation underneath all that we hope to do. In Jesus; name, Amen.*

*Mary Austin is the pastor of Westminster Church of Detroit, a multi-cultural Presbyterian. She is the author of Meeting God at the Mall.*





April 14  
An Extravagant  
Gift

Allison Byerley

*Matthew 26:6-13*

A scion of the church passed away last year. Her family visited our prayer garden and was struck by its beauty. They wanted to give something in her memory to enhance it and offered to install a water feature. I investigated some local options prior to meeting with them and wondered if the expensive \$250 fountain would be in their budget. When we sat down together, I asked about the budget and was told to keep it under \$5,000! I thought the family was joking, but they weren't.

Our church, like so many, is struggling with every day bills, and I confess that the thought crossed my mind of the peace of mind a \$5,000 gift to our operating fund would bring. But I

didn't say anything because I remembered this story and what the anonymous woman did for Jesus.

The disciples were angry because they saw her gift as a waste. Jesus honored her for the offering she made, anointing him as his final days approached. Likewise, this family want to honor God and help others connect to Jesus through a garden devoted to prayer. The concerns of daily ministry will continue, but the extravagant gift of this family in memory of their mother and to the glory of God reminds me that there is more to ministry than budgetary worries.

*God, how can I give you glory today in my life? What extravagant offering can I make?*

*Rev. Dr. Allison Byerley is the Pastor of Mariposa UMC in Mariposa, CA.*

April 15

## Control Issues

Anne Knighten

*Matthew 26:14-16*

God  
grant me the  
Serenity  
to accept the  
things I cannot change  
Courage  
to accept  
the things I can  
and  
Wisdom  
to know the difference

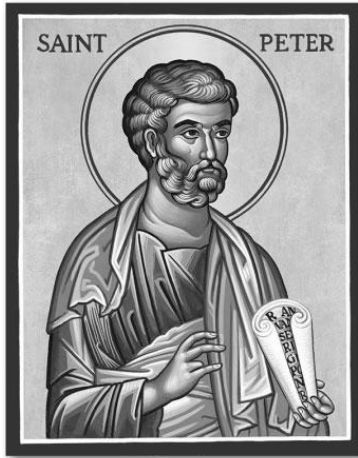
If there was ever a person in need of the Serenity Prayer, it was Judas. Accepting what he could not change, changing what he could, and having the wisdom to know the difference? Not Judas. The catalyst for his actions appears to be Jesus' response to the waste of an alabaster jar of costly perfume, but Matthew leaves Judas' motives to our speculation. Perhaps Judas was outraged that Jesus rebuked the disciples rather than the unnamed woman. Perhaps he believed that Jesus needed to be pushed in the direction of doing something to demonstrate that he was the Messiah and that there was no better time than just before Passover to act. It would seem sensible for Jesus, upon being confronted by the chief priests, to reveal himself as the Messiah and

then raise up an army to free the people from the oppression of Rome.

I have found that whenever I try to tell God that I need to be in control, I end up discovering how wrong I am. I make plans and God sends me in a different direction—and I can see in hindsight that God had the better plan. When I feel resentful or depressed because things do not go according to my plan, I try to remember the words of Isaiah 55:8-9, that God's ways are not my ways.

*God of abundance, you pour your mercies out with an extravagant love. We do not always understand your plan and often act in ways that are unwise. Grant us the wisdom to know when to act and when to relinquish control. In all things, may your will be done.*

*Anne Knighten is a senior in the MDiv-Distributive Learning program at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. She and her husband live in Redlands, CA.*



April 16

Peter

Peter Hamm

*Matthew 26:31-35,*

*69-75*

I am so glad my name is Peter. No joke. It's a comfort to me to know that God found such an amazing use for a blockhead who never seemed to get anything right, and I share his name.

In John's Gospel, right near the end, we learn that Peter is so disgusted with himself that he decides to return to a life of fishing, because he's no longer good enough to serve Jesus.

That's where Jesus restores Peter. And his eventual penance for those acts of denial, which should be harsh by human thinking perhaps, is simple... to follow Jesus (again) and to take care of those Jesus has put in Peter's care.

When we fail, when we deny Jesus through

the choices we make, it is important to reflect on this passage, and perhaps weep over our own sinfulness. But do not forget that Jesus asks us not to dwell on our failings and give up, but to follow Jesus and do whatever work God has put in front of us.

*Lord, we know we fail, and we know we will fail. We fail ourselves, we fail our loved ones, and we fail you. Restore us, Lord, each time, and remind us how very much we are loved and cherished, and how much you love having us as part of your work in this world.*

*Peter Hamm is a husband, father, and bi-vocational pastor and worship leader who is delighted and honored to serve Grace United Methodist Church in Norwood, Ohio.*



April 17  
Teach us to  
Pray

Julie Holm

*Matthew 26:36-46*

Sitting on a hill, in the beginning of this gospel, Jesus taught us how to pray, giving us what we now think of as the “Lord’s Prayer” or “Our Father.” And throughout the gospel, Jesus teaches and shows us how to pray, going off by himself for silence, teaching in depth throughout the gospel on prayer, and modeling it himself.

Here, at the end, Jesus again models prayer for us, taking his pain and his emotion to God, and through it all asking that God’s will be done. It’s all going wrong, as it does in any human life. If you have not had to suffer in this life, just wait, it’s coming. All manner of terrible and horrific things happen in our lives, cancer, the death of loved ones, lost jobs and incomes, homelessness, abuse, addiction, violence. We all have our own

experiences of agony. Sometimes it leads us to question God’s love.

Jesus, here, reminds us to keep our connection with God, even when we are in pain, even when the unthinkable happens, even when we must drink from a cup we would rather have pass away. Even when we would rather have relief than have to live through it. And as Jesus reminds us to pray, again and again, “Your will be done.” Because God’s will wasn’t ultimately achieved on that hill on Calvary. That was human sin. God’s will was done three days later, at an empty tomb. God’s will was, and is, love.

*God of Prayer, give us courage, and remind us that you walk with us through all our Agonies, and that you continue to love us even if we cannot see it. And your will be done.*

*Julie Holm is the pastor of three small rural churches in central Pennsylvania, and works within both UCC and ELCA traditions.*



April 18

## A Disturbing Dream

Robert Stutes

*Matthew 27:11-23*

It is only in Matthew's gospel that we encounter her. But through the centuries, many have found her story quite intriguing.

We're talking about the wife of Pontius Pilate. Only one short verse is devoted to her story. Jesus has been arrested, and then handed over to the civil authorities. Pilate, the Roman governor, finds himself in a no-win situation. It appears he would just as soon set Jesus free, but he perceives that the crowd is out for blood.

And then his wife brings a message to him. She boldly pronounces Jesus "not guilty," and advises her husband not to have anything to do with him. "I have suffered a great deal in a dream today because of him," she says.

Pilate disregards her advice, and he yields to the crowds who yell "Crucify."

But what became of his wife? Some early Christian traditions suggest that this dream was not an isolated incident, and that she eventually converted and became a believer. Some Orthodox traditions even recognize her as a saint – with the name of Procla or Claudia.

Whether legendary or factual, the story of St. Procla can teach us much. Though this dream caused her great suffering, and could not avert the suffering of our Savior, it may well have led to her greatest joy. Something within her was ready to receive the message that others could not have begun to perceive.

Her story causes me to want to pay more attention to the messages I might otherwise ignore.

*Open my eyes, Lord, that I may see. Open my heart, Lord, that I may receive the direction you would have for me, even if it might first seem unpleasant. Amen.*

*Robert Stutes is pastor of Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church in Roanoke, Virginia.*



April 19

## What Remains

Matt McCaffrey

*Matthew 27:24-26*

When I get out of bed in the morning. Before and after each meal. Definitely twice, or more, in the course of a dirty household job. At least once during a restaurant meal. Before I brush my teeth.

I would love to say you've just read a list of my regular prayer occasions. I would love to say that's how often I live up to my ordination vows and set a good example for those who watch my spiritual leadership.

That list is something we are more likely to hold in common. It's a list of how often I wash my hands on a typical day.

Sometimes, hand washing is a ritual. Sometimes, it's a necessity. And sometimes, I perform it as part of a sacrament.

When I witness Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea and representative of Roman justice,

washing his hands, my own hands tingle. I sense his exasperation with the unwanted, irresolvable situation in front of him. I empathize with his guilt at having ordered the interrogation and torture of a human being who is accused of no crime he recognizes. Above all, I identify with his need to separate his identity, his reputation, and his career from the cruelty that has washed up on his doorstep.

In the stream and splash of water dripping from his palms and fingers, the face of Jesus is distorted. The words and bloody actions of the long night could burble into the gutter.

But the gentle words; the look in his eyes; the intersection of humanity and divinity? Pilate could never wash that away. And, neither can I.

*Jesus, who suffered and died for me, may my prayers of gratitude for your sacrifice flow like a renewing stream today. Amen.*

*Matt McCaffrey is Interim Minister of North Madison Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Connecticut.*

April 20

## Waiting with Holy Saturday

Andrea Allan



*Matthew 27:62-66*

God will have the last laugh over death! Even the chief priests and the Pharisees had a feeling that Good Friday was not the last they would hear from this trouble maker Jesus or his devoted followers. After much work and fancy foot work they had achieved their goal of getting rid of the one who was turning their lives upside down, so they were not going to let a few mischievous disciples take that away from them. They were not leaving anything to chance, and so ensured that he was sealed up well inside the tomb.

Holy Saturday is an awkward time. We have just had the somber and contriteness of Good Friday, and since we know how this story ends, we are waiting with anticipation for the next day. We are used to getting whatever we desire right away – groceries are ready to go, buy something with the click of a button. However, there is no speeding past Holy Saturday on the way to Easter. We simply have to wait, just as Jesus waited while sealed inside the tomb. The forced waiting feels like a punishment and yet, I believe it is a gift from God. We so rarely have times where we must sit and wait, so God gives us this time in the form of Holy Saturday. A day when we can rest, or read, or pray, or enjoy the springtime before we head into the joy filled celebrations that are just around the corner.

*Gracious and Loving God, thank you for a time of waiting. Help me to slow down and enjoy this gift of time with You so that I may fully experience the joy when the morning comes, and you Son rises again.*

*Amen.*

*Rev. Andrea Allan is a United Church of Canada minister in Southern Ontario. She lives with her husband and daughter in Stratford Ontario.*

April 21

## Rattling Cages

Cristine Warring

*Matthew 28:11-15*



Jesus' resurrection sure has interesting effects on people. Earlier, the Marys experienced something amazing at the tomb and ran – in fear AND joy – to tell the disciples the news. When Jesus himself met the three women, they worshipped him.

Switch scenes to the guards. Only some of them went to report what had happened. Surely they were terrified, for Roman guards simply did not fall asleep on duty. Perhaps this – and the angel descending from heaven – is why the guards went to the chief priests instead of their military supervisors. Or perhaps the chief priests had a reputation for handing out hush money. It seems a “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” scenario was at work.

Except attempts at sweeping Jesus'

resurrection under the rug failed. Not just because walking out of the grave turned death upside down. Resurrection turned \*power\* upside down. And people in power do not like getting their cages rattled one little bit. No wonder the chief priests instructed the guards to lie – if the truth escaped, the chief priests would lose their tenuous hold on what little power the Roman government gave them. They weren't afraid of Jesus or his resurrection – they were scared of Rome.

What keeps us from running to tell everyone – in fear AND joy – about the resurrection? What are we afraid of losing? Pride? Control? Position? Will we pretend that Jesus is still dead or will we fall at his feet, worshipping him?

*O God who resurrects, grant us wisdom to see the powers we cling to. Grant us strength to let these go. Grant us joy to fall and worship at Your feet. Amen.*

*Cristine Warring is the pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Girard in rural southeast Kansas.*