**Daily Devotions**

**February 2023**

*02-01*

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

— Matthew 6:34

I have an anxiety disorder. That doesn’t mean I have any more things to be anxious about than anyone else. Everyone finds themselves overwhelmed at times. I don’t know a single person who has not worried about money or a health issue or the way a child is or isn’t functioning. I am in excellent company. But what an anxiety disorder does is make it nearly impossible for me to follow Jesus’ advice. “Stay in the moment. God’s got this.” I might believe that on an intellectual level, but at three in the morning when I’m wide awake with all my challenges endlessly spinning through my head, God never enters the picture.

I’m one of the lucky ones who responds well to medication—many people do not. And even so, there are times when the issues confronting me seem too much to bear.

Jesus is right there with me. Whether I can even remember his name, whether I have a shred of trust that I can get through this, I am not alone. In ever-patient, ever-compassionate love, Jesus shares in my suffering and holds me in his arms.

Sooner or later, through sleep, medication, therapy, or other support, the anxieties die down a bit, until I can once again recognize the help I’ve been given by God. Then my faith, such as it is, is restored and I can be grateful that when I’m at my messiest and can’t see an answers, God stands ready to make today’s answers clear.

Today’s trouble is more than enough for today. Thank you God for helping me trust that you’ve got tomorrow’s trouble well in hand.

What things are the hardest for me to turn over to God?

*02-02*

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”

— Matthew 7:15-16b

It’s so easy to judge—to decide who the wolves in sheep’s clothing are. I can point to stories about any number of such “false prophets” who claim to follow Jesus while spewing hate.

Then I look down and see the fleece and I’m well aware that’s not my natural fur covering. In fact, the very act of judging others as false anything is pretty disingenuous.

It’s a good idea for me in most—okay all—moments of decision and action in my life to examine my motives. I have to ask myself, essentially, what is the fruit that this is potentially going to bear? If it’s just about what I can get or get away with in order to feed my own ego, I probably ought to just sit down and keep my mouth shut. If it’s truly about being of love and service to God and neighbor and I benefit, well, hey! Win-win!

Of course, I can’t control outcomes. Like any farmer, I can plant the seed and lavish love and attention on it, but whether or not it bears fruit is dependent on random factors. I can, however, trust God with outcomes. If my motives are sound, and I’m not disguising them with sheepskin, then it’s up to me to take whatever actions are indicated and turn over the rest. Then even when there is good fruit as a result, I can have the humility to know that I did my best, but God did the rest.

When does my own ego get in the way of bearing good fruit?

*02-03*

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

— Matthew 7:21

Lip service just doesn’t cut it. I’m good with words. I love them, in fact. They’re the pallet I use to paint pictures with. But no amount of wordsmithing, no critical mass of devotions or prayers I write, are going to get me into heaven.

You know what’s going to get me into heaven?

God.

“But,” you might say, “Jesus says doing the will of God is what gets you into heaven.”

Except who can do that without God? Who can even be certain what the will of God is? I don’t have faith apart from the Holy Spirit. I can’t discern right from wrong without the Holy Spirit. And even with all three persons of God pulling for me with all their divine power, I’m gonna miss the point and mess up now and again. (And again and again).

Yes, I love my job writing about God, reflecting on scripture, constructing liturgies, telling the stories for kids. And yes, I believe this is God’s will for my life at least for the moment. But even so, it doesn’t earn me a free pass to heaven.

No, the free pass was issued when Jesus went all the way to hell and back for us a couple millennia ago. And it’s for everyone, without exception. So I’m not even going to mention the old “actions speak louder than words” cliché, unless it’s to say that Jesus’ actions have spoken loud enough to drown out death forever. The end.

Do I ever feel like I have to do things “right” in order to be gifted with eternal life?

*02-04*

“The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.’”

— Matthew 8:8

Talk about humility. This guy was Roman soldier bigwig—he says he has people he commands and they do whatever he says. And at the same time he cares enough about his sick slave that he goes to Jesus for help. He has the faith that Jesus can actually heal, but also the knowledge that he’s part of the oppressor regime who makes the life of Jesus’ people miserable. While it’s unlikely given the context, just maybe he also recognizes the injustice of owning another human being, no matter how much he cares about that slave’s well-being. Mind you, it’s not like he’s renouncing his position or taking any action to rectify the oppression caused by his regime. But his complete candor comes as a total surprise to Jesus.

At this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ ministry is still fairly new. The crowds have only just begun following him. He has yet to experience the constant pestering of the Pharisees and scribes. But he says quite clearly, “in no one in Israel have I found such faith.” Obviously Jesus has seen enough to know that those who are supposedly God’s chosen have fallen egregiously short. So much so that when approached by one whom he could have blamed for the oppression of his people, he instead extends God’s reign to include the centurion. It strikes me—particularly in Matthew, where the gospel writer is so focused on using Hebrew Bible scripture to prove that Jesus is God’s messiah to an audience of Jews—that so early in his ministry Jesus blew open the door of heaven for the gentiles.

I find this story a great comfort, imperfect as I am. I know I benefit from white supremacy and the unjust systems it creates. I sometimes feel unworthy of Jesus’ help, when I know there are so many others whose suffering is greater. Jesus’ love is big enough for all of us. The doors of heaven are blown open, and Jesus is ready to welcome us in.

Have I ever found it hard to ask God for what I need or want? Why or why not?

*02-05*

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

— Matthew 7:3

Main Idea: Although we may be quick to judge, Jesus calls us to look inward and refrain from judging others.

People judge each other every day. Most human brains are wired to put all the stimuli we receive into categories. It helps us process the overwhelming input we get. Our brains learn to tune out the sounds that aren’t alarming: the hum of an air conditioner or the din of the city. We categorize what we see—I need to pay attention to the stop light; I don’t need to do anything with the wrapper on the ground across the street.

And we judge people. In some ways, this can be to our benefit. If walk down the aisle of a grocery store and someone far bigger than me runs at me screaming, I’m going to run the other way. My experience has taught me to categorize this person as dangerous at worst, unpredictable at best.

The problem comes when we judge people based on size, race, gender, clothing, age, or behavior that we may not understand. In those cases, we are judging people not on their value as human beings, but on our own biases against people with similar sizes, races, genders, etc. We fail to see the person and instead only see the label we’ve placed on the person.

The problem also comes when our judging turns into behavior of our own. It’s when we treat others as less-than simply because they’re different from us.

The problem also comes (and Jesus was very intentional in pointing this out) when we sit in judgment on others and fail to see the limitations within ourselves. We cannot use other people to deny our own imperfections. We cannot use other people to make us feel better about ourselves.

Most of us are hard-wired to judge. But we are also given the capacity to learn, to grow, to evolve, and to do something different with the input we receive. We have it within us to change our perceptions of others (in fact, no one else can change us but us). Jesus calls us to be better, to look inward for things to judge and improve.

*02-06*

“Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked.”

— Psalm 37:16

I get the sentiment here but it makes me thoughtful. Is this any consolation for those living in poverty who are perfectly wonderful people but can’t put food on the table? Is it any deterrent for those who live in big houses and travel the world and dine at all the best restaurants, with the knowledge that their wealth comes at the expense of others? It feels almost a little dismissive: “You should be happy with what you have—God will reward you eventually.” That just doesn’t cut it when you’re suffering from generational trauma and hungry to boot.

Taken a completely different way, am I then cleared to judge those who have abundance as “wicked” simply because I choose to live a small, simple life? Do I get to consider myself “righteous” because I don’t have a six-figure salary and a chalet in southern France?

That such a simple phrase can be so loaded with ambiguity just makes the case that the Bible is meant to be read, experienced, and discerned in community. We need one another (and the Holy Spirit) to tease out of scripture what God’s call to us as individuals might be. Left to my own devices, I am often judgmental of others. In community, I am drawn into vulnerability and compassion.

I do think there is, at its core, truth to this verse from the psalm. It is better to live a small life in good conscience than to be driven by greed to harm others in the pursuit of wealth. But life is not always that simple.

How do I interpret this verse for my own life today?

*02-07*

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

— Matthew 9:13

Sin and sacrifice were central to Jewish faith. If you broke any of the laws of Moses, you had to atone by sacrificing a specific animal or other produce based on the law that was broken.

Matthew was a sinner with a capital “S”—a tax collector who not only worked on behalf of the Roman oppressors, but also pocketed extra money for himself. Apparently he had not offered the appropriate sacrifice to atone for his sins, at least to the knowledge of those who were questioning Jesus’ decisions to hang out with the guy. Why would Jesus, who was clearly someone special in the eyes of God, choose someone like Matthew as a disciple?

I often find myself with those questioners in the story, if I’m honest. I hear about people who have caused me or others harm achieving success or I read about people who have done morally reprehensible things being touted as heroes and I shake my head. Why them? Aren’t others more deserving of what seems like God’s favor?

Jesus looks me straight in the eye and says, “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I know who it is that needs me. Oh, and by the way, you’re one of them.” Thank God for the mercy of Jesus, which pulls me out of my judgment and self-pity and reminds me that I am forgiven in spite of myself. Maybe I ought to take a play out of Jesus’ book.

Where do I see myself in this story? Am I Matthew? Another of Jesus’ followers? A Pharisee?

*02-08*

“A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.””

— Matthew 8:19-20

For the length of his ministry, Jesus was homeless. Sometimes we hear about him staying certain places—Peter’s house, Mary and Martha’s house—but most of the time, we don’t get a glimpse of where Jesus actually lay his head on a day-to-day basis. Did he sleep rough? Were there hospitality laws that obligated people to open their homes to him? There must have been some people in those crowds that gathered around him who had houses where he could stay. Regardless of the exact arrangements, the fact remained that Jesus had no home of his own.

Jesus called his followers into this itinerant life. He asked them to leave whatever comforts they had grown up with and walk with him from place to place bringing good news to the poor, health and wholeness to the afflicted, hope to the oppressed. And here comes this scribe, who we can assume does alright for himself, considering his status, and declares his intention to follow Jesus.

As so often happens, Jesus does not give a direct response. He doesn’t say, “Sure! Come on in!” or “Nope. You don’t qualify.” He just states the truth about what following Jesus entails—giving up comfort, security, familiarity, wealth—and leaves it up to the scribe to make the decision for himself. We are not told what the scribe decides, and so we are left to put ourselves in his shoes and wonder: what would we have chosen?

Following Jesus isn’t always comfortable. It requires sacrifice, humility, and perseverance in the face of obstacles. And while it may not require homelessness, it certainly requires solidarity with those who are homeless. Think about all Jesus asks of us, and let yourself wonder about how to answer that call.

If you were the scribe, would you have followed Jesus? Why or why not?

*02-09*

“When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. Suddenly they shouted, ‘What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?’”

— Matthew 8:28-29

The demons’ phrase “before the time” intrigues me. In the similar story of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5 and Luke 8, there is only one possessed man, but he is possessed with an entire legion of demons. These other texts contain much more detail about this encounter (20 verses in Mark and 18 in Luke compared to 7 in Matthew) but do not include this phrase about the premature nature of Jesus’ encounter with the demons.

I’m sure there’s a textual explanation in terms of what particular meaning Matthew is trying to convey, and I’ll admit I do not know it. So I can read the text with an open mind and invite the Holy Spirit into my wondering about it.

What it says to me is that demons—whatever that term literally means—know their time is coming, that Jesus will, at the end, destroy them all. But in the mean time, said demons expect to be left to their own evil devices, free to wreak whatever havoc on humanity they please.

What it also says is that Jesus doesn’t care about your timeline, O demons (or ours either, if we’re honest.) Just as with the humans in Jesus’ context who thought they knew everything about who God was and how God worked, Jesus turns everything on its head. Again and again, he offers a new, grace-filled and miraculous take on God’s nature and action in the world. That’s what made him so threatening to the status quo—even the status quo of the demons.

Do I find myself stuck in specific interpretations of how God works? Or am I able to open my mind and wonder?

*02-10*

“Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.’ Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well.”

— Matthew 9:20-22

Again, Matthew offers a slightly different take on a well-known story. Like the demons from yesterday’s text, this story appears in a more detailed form in both Mark and Luke, prompting me to wonder about the differences and what they might mean for me today. The chief difference is that in the other gospels, the moment the woman touches Jesus’ cloak, power goes out of him and heals her. In Matthew, the woman is not healed when she touches Jesus’ cloak. Instead, it is only when Jesus acknowledges her and tells her that her faith has made her well that the hemorrhaging stopped. It is not a one-sided transfer of power from Jesus to the woman, but a two-way partnership—her faith, his power—that accomplishes the cure.

I’m not saying that Jesus doesn’t have the power to just heal someone without their knowledge or consent. And I’m not saying that if you don’t experience a miracle cure it means you don’t have enough faith. Let’s just lay those two things to bed right away.

But what this is speaking to me this morning is that I have a role to play in facilitating in the inbreaking of the reign of God into the world today. Okay. Let me translate that seminary-speak: My faith and my actions help make it possible for God’s justice and mercy to show up in the world. Sitting around waiting for God to wave a magic wand and fix everything that’s wrong isn’t going to do any more than the woman touching Jesus’ cloak. But stepping into relationship with Jesus and acting in faith gets results.

When have I felt that my faith in and relationship with Jesus has made a difference in my life or the lives of others?

*02-11*

“These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.”

— Matthew 10:2-4

An apostle is someone sent on a mission. Jesus chose twelve (men) to correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel (Ten of Jacob’s sons, and Joseph’s two sons). All the synoptic gospels make this point (although in Luke, Thaddeus is replaced with Judas, son of James, who, considering naming conventions at the time, might have been the same person). It mattered to the readers of these early gospels—it connected Jesus to their Jewish heritage and understanding of the world. It supported the idea that Jesus was the Messiah, who would come and restore Israel.

And it’s woefully insufficient to the way I understand Jesus’ ministry and God’s reign. I love how the subtitle for the beginning of Luke 8 in the NRSV is “Some Women Accompany Jesus.” Like he doesn’t even want to admit it but feels like he has to throw it in because it’s actually what happened. One might argue (as I have heard it said) that these women stayed in their culturally expected roles of doing all the work of cooking and cleaning and caring for the men, who had the important job of being “sent on a mission.” But there is plenty of textual evidence that these women (and others) did far more. That they were apostles in their own right. I read a take on Jesus’ sending out of the seventy apostles to heal and spread the message that posited convincingly that, since Jesus sent the apostles out in pairs, it was logical to assume that each pair was made up of a man and a woman. I have heard the same said about the two disciples walking to Emmaus following Jesus’ resurrection. Cleopas is named while his companion is not (common with women in scripture). Clearly there was at least some deliberate attempt made to downplay the role of women in the early church in the gospels that made it into the Christian canon. As you read over and over about Jesus’ twelve apostles, may you be challenged to consider who the women in Jesus’ inner circle were and how they contributed to the sharing of the good news of Jesus.

Who is my favorite woman named in the New Testament? Why?

*02-12*

“He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.’”

— Matthew 13:24-25

Main Idea: God’s kingdom is far more vast and welcoming than we like to think.

As much as we’d like to claim they are all about us, at the core, these parables are about God’s kingdom, specifically how vast and expanding it is.

The first parable tells of a kingdom that includes wheat sown from good seeds growing alongside weeds sown by the evil one. We tend to focus on the end of the story, where the reapers harvest the good and destroy the evil. Instead, we might look more closely at the kingdom as it grows. In the parable, the wheat and the weeds grew up together.

What does this say about the world we live in now? Even if we were to self-righteously point out who we consider to be weeds (which is a terrible act, and in no way would Jesus encourage us to be judge and jury like that), we have been called to grow up alongside all people. The master of the field directed the servants to leave them alone because trying to pluck up the weeds would also destroy the wheat.

In other words, trying to bring down those we classify as bad, only serves to bring us down too. (Or if we’re honest with ourselves, who’s to say we are the wheat? Maybe we’re all weeds.)

Jesus’ point is that the kingdom is far stronger and more vast than we can imagine. The kingdom is much wilder and more unruly than the tidy way we like to keep things. It is uncontrollable and valuable just as it is. Maybe instead of trying to control it, we could learn to let it be, focusing more on living fully within it.

*02-13*

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!”

— Psalm 84:1

I love my church. The original gothic stone building burned to the ground in 1995, long before I was a member, and on its site, they prayerfully and intentionally built a new church building as an expression of the congregation’s commitment to its call in the community. Gone were the imposing stairs that would have prevented a disabled person from easily entering. Instead, the doors are at street level, with a gentle ramp from the sidewalk so that anyone can enter. Instead of enormous, imposing stained glass windows, the nave has floor-to-ceiling windows on one side that look out into the community where we worship and serve. The pews are comfortable and movable, the décor simple and airy, and the baptismal font is an actual little river flowing through a stone block. At each season the open space is adorned with textile art, candles, and simple accents. Children dance to the beautiful music on the polished maple floors. Love and justice are preached from the pulpit and lived in the mission of the congregation. Joy and comfort, fellowship and mutual support are to be found in the community who gathers in that wonderful building. In short, I love my church. I know God does not live in buildings built by human hands, nor can God be confined to any one place. But I also know that God is absolutely present in every millimeter of that beloved space and its people. How lovely is your dwelling place, gracious God of all creation!

What do I love about my place of worship?

*02-14*

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

— Matthew 10:16

Boy, Jesus sure makes following him appealing. He tells his disciples straight—following me is going to leave a mark. The world is hostile to his message of justice, equity, and humility. Carrying that message and speaking truth to power is dangerous. But Jesus knows that his disciples—that we—can handle it. We just can’t walk into it blind.

It will take both wisdom and innocence to get the message across, Jesus says. I wonder about that. Wisdom makes sense—know who to talk to and how to approach them; don’t go alone; watch your back; have your talking points down cold’ know when to push and when to negotiate. But innocence? Maybe that’s the adherence to the fact that all this work will make a difference. That in the end, Jesus’ message will win the day—people will change, justice and equity will come. Innocence as opposed to cynicism.

I’m not sure which is harder, wisdom or innocence. Probably wisdom. I’ve seen so many great people do so much great work and so few lasting results. It can be disheartening. We need that innocence to keep going. It reminds me of part of the “Non-traditional Blessing” by Sr. Ruth Fox, OSB, in which she writes, “May God bless you with the foolishness to think you can make a difference in this world, so you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.” That blessing was set to music by my friend Bret Hesla—you can listen to it here. I wish that blessing on all of us today.

Which do I think is more difficult in sharing the good news: wisdom or innocence? Why?

*02-15*

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

— Matthew 10:34

This text bugs lots of people for lots of reasons. And I get it. I have no love for violent imagery of any kind. This is why I struggle so much with some of the Hebrew Bible’s characterization of a vengeful and destructive God. Jesus, whose message is one of healing, wholeness, justice, equity, and humility suddenly unsheathes a weapon here and we all take in a collective gasp. I personally despair that those who claim to be Christians and who advocate violence for the purpose of gutting democracy and replacing our government with a religious dictatorship are here given biblical validation of their call to violence. This verse would have to be taken grossly out of context, but that’s what Christians have done since the beginning to justify their own points of view and usurpation of power. I feel like Jesus just dropped a powder keg and handed everyone a match.

Context matters, of course. This statement of Jesus comes in the midst of his warnings to his followers that carrying his message (you know the one I mentioned above: healing, wholeness, justice, equity, humility) is going to result in their persecution. They will be abused verbally and physically. Betrayed by their families. Arrested. Killed. Hated. Jesus promises them that it will be okay in the end. God will stand with them, give them the words to say; God knows the number of hairs on their heads and loves them completely. But in the mean time, any among Jesus’ followers who had the idea that this was going to be a cakewalk, that Jesus was going to magically cause peace to come upon the world, need to be shaken out of that delusion. Following Jesus will drive a wedge between them and any who benefit from the status quo and don’t want to see it changed, even those they know and love. I just wish Jesus had said “drive a wedge” (it is a carpentry term after all) rather than “bring a sword.”

How do I understand this violent image in relation to my beliefs about Jesus?

*02-16*

“Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.’”

— Matthew 11:4-6

Show, don’t tell. That’s the mantra of any good creative writer. It’s easy to explain something over four paragraphs of back-story and the inner workings of a character’s mind that you can easily—and far more compellingly—convey in three sentences describing their reaction.

John’s disciples come to Jesus and ask if he’s the messiah that John has been preaching about. Instead of laying out a bunch of theology and justification to try to convince them that the answer is “yes,” Jesus just points to his actions. “Tell John what you hear and see.” What they have heard and seen are miracles of healing, proclamations of justice, and a demonstration of humility. What more can Jesus tell them that his way of being in the world doesn’t clearly convey?

I have to admit that I am not always comfortable saying that I am a Christian. It’s a loaded word, these days, and open to all kinds of interpretation I’d rather not invite. Instead, I try to live my faith in the actions I feel God is calling me to and, if these actions are noticed, then I resoundingly claim my faith as foundational to everything I do. That way, it’s the work of being a Christian that draws attention of Jesus’ message, rather than the name “Christian,” which draws attention to people’s own assumptions and biases.

In other words, show, don’t tell.

*02-17*

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

— Matthew 11:28-30

We are often our own worst enemies. When I was growing up, my father frequently had to say to me, “Rebekah, your standards for yourself are too high.” Neither he nor anyone else expected me to be perfect academically or in any other arena. I heard the words (heck, I remember them to this day) but they never made it into whatever part of my brain might let me off the hook for my mistakes. I can’t imagine having to live up to the 600+ laws of Moses along with the cultural demands of Jesus’ particular context. Then throw in the subjugation to Rome and the corruption at every level of life, and is it any wonder so many who flocked to Jesus were weary and carrying heavy burdens? Then again, I (and so many of us) continue to create standards for myself that are impossible to live up to; rules I can’t follow; goals of perfection I can’t attain.

Jesus promises rest. He promises a gentler way. He will teach what really matters—perhaps cut right through to that place in my brain that clings to self-condemnation and replace it with his grace. All I have to do is carry everything to him.

What do I need to turn over to Jesus today so that I can rest?

*02-18*

“For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

— Matthew 12:8

Sabbath rest is a gift, not a burden. The Pharisees error in this story (and several other places in the gospels) is that they are trying to enforce a particular cultural (i.e. human) understanding of what is a divine practice. God rested after six days of intensive activity—you know, creating the whole universe and all that—and held that up as an example to God’s people to remember to rest and spend time with God.

When challenged about his disciples decidedly un-sabbath-like activities, Jesus says, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” What a cool phrase. To me it says, “The sabbath is bigger than your exacting rules. It’s not about going through the motions or proving piety or any of the rest of it. And it’s certainly not about punishing people when they’re just hungry.”

Jesus turns everything on its head. “Our God,” he seems to say, “is not who you think God is. Trust me—I would know.” Jesus is lord of the sabbath. May you enjoy sacred rest in his presence, but don’t feel like you can’t go get a snack if you need one.

How do I observe sabbath? How do I feel if I don’t observe it perfectly?

*02-19*

“For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

— Matthew 16:26

Main Idea: Jesus asked his disciples to wrestle with the question: What will they give in return for their life?

Consider this: What will you give in return for your life? It’s a question Jesus posed to his disciples just prior to his Transfiguration. It’s really got me wondering: what is my life worth to me? And what exactly is my life apart from the things I have? (Especially if what I have includes family, friends, love.) Truthfully, would I give up family, friends, and love for the privilege of breathing? I don’t believe I would. In fact, I know I would gladly give my life to save my children. My children are my life, even more than my own body and the heart that beats within it.

Maybe that’s what Jesus was asking. What is your life? What does it mean to you? What is it worth? How much of your life is the body you live in, and how much is it the things that fill up your life? And what do you fill your life with—possessions, pride, joy, family? Ultimately our life is made up of the things we surround ourselves with that make life worth living. Is Jesus asking us to give up those things so that we might have breath? Or is Jesus asking us to be willing to give our breath for the sake of people, compassion, and love?

In light of Jesus’ Transfiguration, it’s an interesting question. Jesus’ appearance was changed. The idea that his disciples had of him changed. His access to things beyond this world was changed. Perhaps Jesus was trying to tell his disciples that their lives as they knew them were about to change. Maybe he was preparing them to wrestle with the question: “What will you give in return for your life?”

*02-20*

“Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.”

— Psalm 41:9

This part of Psalm 41 makes me think of high school. No, seriously. I don’t mean to minimize the gravity of the psalmist’s pain, but verses 7-9 just scream “adolescence!” to me. How well I remember the feeling that everyone was whispering together about me, when in reality most of them didn’t have the bandwidth to bother about me at all. And this bit about betrayal by bosom friends? I watched this happen to my best friend more than once. One of the times, I was the betrayer (she has long forgiven me, and even claims she can’t remember what I did, but I do.)

This is not to say that this kind of pain and betrayal doesn’t happen among adults. Of course it does. But at least in my personal experience it’s not as rampant. The kind of in-fighting and back-biting that seems epidemic among those whose frontal lobes are not fully formed gives way in adulthood to different kinds of anguish. Sometimes it’s caused by random circumstances while others it is embedded in our relationships. We may not become social pariahs or cast out by our families to the point where people are whispering about us or outright betraying us, but there are plenty of other, more subtle dysfunctions between us that can create tension and might lead to estrangement. In such cases, I can’t say I recommend coming back to v. 10, in which the psalmist asks God to “raise me up, that I might repay them.” Retaliation never works to bring out any kind of satisfactory resolution. Instead, it escalates issues until what began as a mild disagreement in a relationship turns into an all-out war. That’s where the real pain starts.

No, if I were to re-write v. 10, I would say, “But you, God, be gracious to me, and give me the humility to know my own part and the strength to forgive so that I might be free of resentment.”

Have I experienced betrayal in my life? How did God help me in my pain?

*02-21*

“And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’”

— Matthew 13:52

Jesus has just finished a long string of parables. He asks his disciples, “Have you understood all this?” and when they say yes, he makes the statement in v. 52. This is another of those delightful times when I read something in scripture that has never jumped out at me before. I love this verse and what it says to me.

Jesus’ teachings are a treasure indeed. From the beginning of his ministry he challenges long-held notions of everything from social boundaries to dietary laws to the authority of the priests and pharisees to the purpose of the temple. Everywhere he goes he is met with bewilderment, outrage, or adoration—few if any are indifferent to what he has to say.

The scribes are among Jesus’ adversaries because it was their job to maintain the integrity of scripture, meticulously copying the Torah and associated texts. They were complete and total experts of all things Hebrew Bible. Jesus challenged a lot of what was in there and many of the scribes took it as an affront to them—how dare he question their understanding of scripture?

Here, Jesus upholds the scribes, but, as always, with a twist. They are the masters of the old treasure—the beautiful Torah that records the establishment of the covenant relationship between God and God’s beloved people. These treasures are not to be denigrated or discarded. But there are yet new treasures to be had, which may or may not contradict those aspects of Torah which are less than merciful. Jesus says there is a place for the scribes in the reign of God, and that those scribes who are trained for it will have a handle on both the old treasure and the new.

This is a reminder to me (and perhaps many of us who struggle at times with the Old Testament) that there is incredible richness, value, wonder, and love in the “old treasures” and we cannot and should not disregard them in favor of the new treasures taught by Jesus. They are one story, one long, continuous narrative of God’s love for God’s creation from the beginning of time to its end. As Christians, we can find joy in both the new treasures and the old.

What is my favorite Old Testament story? What is my favorite New Testament story? How are they the same or different?

*02-22*

“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

— Matthew 18:4

Main Idea: We are called to become like the people we are called to serve.

Jesus tells us we must “become like children” to enter the kingdom of heaven. One way we might interpret Jesus’ words is to try to pick apart what qualities children have that we might emulate: innocence, trust, generosity, curiosity.

But let’s look a little further into the text. The next thing Jesus says is “If you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me…” If we are to take Jesus at his words, then the “little ones” we are to become like are the ones Jesus has called his disciples to serve. In other words, Jesus calls us to become like the ones we are called to serve. This puts a whole new spin on our perspective of “children.” It’s not the generalized idea of childhood that Jesus is talking about, but the specific “little ones” that are right in front of us.

So, if we are called to serve those who are poor, vulnerable, or sick, then Jesus is asking us to step into the shoes of those we are serving. And more… we are to avoid placing stumbling blocks before them.

For example, then, if we are called to sit by the bedside of someone in hospice, Jesus calls us to sit with them where they are. We don’t need to offer platitudes. We don’t need to solve their medical issues. We don’t need to heal their dysfunctional families. And we certainly don’t need to preach to them about what they must do to ensure their place in heaven. (That would be a stumbling block to be sure). No, we may be called simply to sit with them and avoid creating more chaos. We can be strong when they feel weak. We can be wise when they feel lost.

I once knew a family whose matriarch was dying. She did not consider herself Christian and had never been baptized. She was quite content with the knowledge that she would soon die and had no desire to be baptized. She had family, though, that was devoutly Christian, and who believed only the baptized are saved. During one of her final days when she was in and out of consciousness, her family baptized her without her consent. I have long found that act to be exactly what Jesus was talking about when he said not to be a stumbling block. The choice was hers to make, and the family robbed her of the opportunity to make that decision. While it made the family feel better, it disrespected the very person it intended to serve. Without “becoming like” this child of God—without empathy—the family could not understand or respect her choice.

We are called to meet people where they are. We are not called to fix them, to change them, to convert them, or disrespect them. We are called to serve, and give to them what they need, not what we need. We can serve better if we get out of the way and leave the fixing and changing to God.

*02-23*

“The Lord sets the prisoners free.”

— Psalm 146:7c

Notice that God doesn’t ask what the prisoners are in for. God just frees them. In fact, to my knowledge (which is arguably limited) in all the places this idea of God liberating the prisoners comes up in scripture, at no time is there any discussion of the crimes committed. This says to me that imprisonment as a concept is unjust in the eyes of God. Yeah, I know that’s a huge statement to make. There are true sociopathic serial killers who really shouldn’t be just walking around. I’m not going to pick a fight here.

All I’m saying, having read portions of The New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander, among other sources, is that imprisonment doesn’t work. Not as a way to rehabilitate criminals and not as a way to deter crime. What prison does do is create an illusion of safety for white people while destroying BIPOC individuals and communities. The U.S. prison system, and I would daringly purport all prison systems, are by definition unjust.

What’s the solution? Well, God just sets the prisoners free. And I would assume that means they would also be freed from the prisons of their destroyed mental health, freed from the oppressive systems that prevent them from earning a living, freed from state violence, freed from the power of white supremacy…I could go on. There is a lot of work to be done but that’s no excuse to delay. God calls us to this work of justice and equity. God calls us to set the prisoners free. May God give us the grace to set aside our own biases, fears, and judgments, and the strength to build communities of mutual hope and support without the destructive presence of prisons.

Where is God calling me to work for justice in my community?

*02-24*

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

— Psalm 51:1-3

I used to think everyone kept track of everything I did wrong. I had tantrums as a kid. I fought with my little brother all the time. And my sister. I have this idea in my head that I was “the difficult one” of the four of us. As long as everything was going along smoothly, I held out hope that maybe everyone had forgotten the last umpteen things I had done “wrong.” But then I’d mess up again and realize they were just going to add this latest indiscretion to the laundry list of my bad behavior.

To be fair, it’s possible I had this erroneous belief because I was busy keeping track of everyone else’s offences toward me. I don’t know why. I just remember things, especially when they feed my narrative of self-pity. I’m not good at forgiveness—particularly self-forgiveness. It’s just something innate in me, I think. In the end, the only person keeping track of my bad behavior was me.

I relate to the psalmist here. Not that I’ve ever done something as egregious as King David, whose reprehensible actions concerning Bathsheba are associated with this psalm. But I do know my transgressions and while my sin may not be “ever” before me, it has a tendency to come up regularly at the least convenient times. I need God’s mercy and love. I need the kind of forgiveness God freely gives, so I can break free of the inaction caused by perfectionism and get on with my life. Maybe you can relate.

Do I struggle with self forgiveness? How might God’s love help transform this in me?

*02-25*

“And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.’”

— Matthew 13:57

I wonder why this is. We take to heart all kinds of things spoken by complete strangers. We look at their qualifications, their expertise. We are impressed by their communication. We are convinced of their sincerity. They can change minds and hearts and spur us to action. Then the moment we realize we went to high school with them, and they briefly dated our friend Matt, their credibility evaporates on the spot. They weren’t even mean to Matt. And they were just as compelling in their discourse way back then. But, like, we know them. So they can’t really be an authority figure, right?

No wonder so many people suffer from imposter syndrome. As a grant writer, I have heard myself give verbal explanations of what I do and how I do it that are powerful and eloquent and make it absolutely clear that I know what I’m doing. Other people in the room are amazed at my level of expertise and insight. But, like, I know me. So I can’t really be an authority figure, right?

Jesus had no such hang-ups, I’m sure. He knew what he was called to do and he knew he was the only one who could do it. So when he went back to his hometown and they were like, “But we know you. You can’t be a prophet,” he just rolled his eyes (I don’t know about you, but I imagine Jesus was pretty sassy) and walked away.

We, too, have things to offer the world. We can’t let our egos run away with us, but neither can we diminish ourselves and our value because we pull on our pants one leg at a time like everyone else. God calls us to use our gifts and our experience (dare I say expertise?) in service to our neighbor. Don’t worry if your fourth grade teacher remembers you throwing rubber cement balls at him from across the room. It doesn’t mean your opinion is invalid.

How does Jesus call me out of my imposter syndrome and into action?

*02-26*

“Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’”

— Matthew 18:21-22

Main Idea: A community only thrives when forgiveness abounds.

Maybe it’s human nature to hold grudges. Despite all the messages of forgiveness from most faith traditions, people still seem to want to hold on to what they’re owed. This might be money, respect, or reconciliation. People do well at keeping score and don’t easily let go of resentment.

But Jesus sees it differently. When two people disagree, he suggests first trying to work it out between the two. If that doesn’t work, Jesus says it’s ok to bring in one or two others to mediate. If that still doesn’t work, then bring it to the community. If the person doesn’t want to listen to the community, then that person has already isolated themselves. They have made themselves “as a Gentile and a tax collector,” an outsider unwilling or unable to honor the word of the community.

Jesus tells a story of a slave that owed a great debt to a master. The master forgave the debt, but then the slave turned right around and refused to forgive the debt of another. For that he was tortured until he could pay his debt.

Forgiveness only works for a community when everyone in the community contributes to the forgiveness. It’s difficult for a community to become vulnerable enough to trust in each other’s forgiveness. But when a community works toward it together, then that community can thrive. As long as members of the community are willing to trust and forgive, the community can continue to grow in faith, maturity, and deepening relationships.

*02-27*

“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

— Psalm 32:1-2

I had to look up “impute.” I kind of got it through context clues, but wanted clarity. The definition is: “to credit or ascribe (something) to a person or a cause: attribute.” I looked up “iniquity” while I was at it. It means “gross injustice: wickedness.” So we’re happy when God doesn’t attribute injustice/wickedness to us. I’m not sure that means we aren’t unjust, but it makes it seem like God is the only one who can decide whether or not we are to blame for the injustices we do.

I like this. There are plenty of places in the Psalms and elsewhere that we are told we are happy if we are “blameless” or “righteous.” There’s none of that here. We know we’ve blown it. We’ve transgressed. We’ve sinned. We’ve committed gross injustices. Doesn’t matter. God forgives us. God doesn’t lay the burden of our mistakes on our shoulders and beat us up about it.

In fact, I like this so much, I’m willing to go out on a limb and say the last part about our spirit having no deceit isn’t because we’re so honest on our own, but because God sees right through us and knows what we really think. It’s the idea that God knows and forgives us utterly by God’s power and grace alone and not through any action on our part to earn that forgiveness.

Yeah, I’ll leave it at that. I hope you know just how much God loves you today, even if it’s in spite of yourself.

Do I still sometimes feel like I have to earn God’s forgiveness?

*02-28*

“At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; and he said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.’”

— Matthew 14:1-2

Herod was suffering from a guilty conscience. John had called him out on his unlawful marriage to his brother’s ex-wife. Herod would have liked to kill John outright, but he was afraid to set off the crowds of John’s adorers. So he stuck him in jail and figured that was the end of it. But This same brother’s ex-wife—now his wife, Herodias—hatched a plan to force Herod’s hand. In the end, Herod was tricked into executing John.

Now here comes Jesus and everyone is talking about his incredible prophetic powers and presence. Herod starts having a moment like in Edgar Allan Poe’s The Tell-Tale Heart, where his guilt leads him straight into irrational speculation. Jesus must be John the Baptist raised from the dead, he thinks. I killed John and he’s come back even more powerful. Is he going to come for me? Are my days numbered?

Guilt is poison to the mind and heart. It drives us into shame and self-hatred. It separates us from those around us. It makes us question our very sanity. The only antidote to this poison is forgiveness. God’s forgiveness, which is freely given without our even having to ask for it, and self-forgiveness, which is far harder to achieve, but with God’s help is possible. I don’t know if Herod ever found that forgiveness for what he did to John the Baptist. All I know is that there is nothing I have done or left undone that God can’t help me forgive myself for.

What do I need to forgive myself for today?