

Lenten Devotional 2020

Matthew 8-13



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Matthew 8:1-4

After finishing his teaching, Jesus walked down the mountain, and large crowds stalked him. In the midst of one of these crowds, a leper approached Jesus and kneeled before him. The leper's behavior was scandalous, for the law did not allow lepers to be within close proximity of anyone except other lepers, for all lepers were considered unclean. Indeed, lepers were the most excluded class of people in Israel, for they were prohibited from even being within Jerusalem's city limits.

From his position of servitude, kneeling before Jesus, the leper spoke, "Lord," he confessed, "if you are willing, you can make me pure." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the leper, thereby joining himself in the leper's state of being "unclean" in the eyes of the law. Then Jesus stated his intentions plainly, "I am willing," and joined intent with power, "Be clean – made pure and whole – able to join in the new community of people who follow the rule of God's Sovereign love." In that instant, the leper was made pure.

Jesus said to the leper, "Don't tell anyone I did this for you, but do go show yourself to the priest. Express your gratitude in obedience to the law that directs you give a gift as a witness to God's goodness."

I saw a leper today, walking toward me in the grocery aisle.

He greeted me by name, for we are work colleagues, but no one likes him.

His name I could not remember and his cutting words I will never forget.

I saw a leper today, standing on a street corner with a cardboard sign.

Her greasy hair and leathered skin are an embarrassment to our community.

I bet she smells, too.

I saw a leper today, crossing the desert.

She had four children with her – they looked tired and thirsty and despairing.

I called the police because they don't belong here.

I wish I knew what this Bible story was supposed to mean?

It seems to be about Jesus' power to clear up skin diseases.

I'm going to pray now that Jesus take away my wrinkles.

He'll do that for me, right?

Lord, make me an instrument of compassion,
when stirred, let me act,
When my heart is touched, let it remain open,
when I see, let me do.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to avoid, as to connect,
to hide, as to seek,
to judge, as to cleanse.
For our shared humanity is a gift
that soars upon broken wings,
and blessed is the one who helps another fly.

Go into the world... Notice your attraction to others. Note: not your attractiveness but your sense of being attracted to or repelled by others. Are there some folks with whom you cannot connect? If so, be open to what the Spirit might be telling you. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 8:5-13

After healing the most excluded kind of person in ancient Israel, a leper, Jesus went to Capernaum, a Jewish city on the Sea of Galilee, where he was confronted by the second most excluded kind of person: a Gentile. Gentiles were allowed within Jerusalem's city limits, unlike lepers, but not allowed within the Temple.

The Gentile who confronted Jesus was a Roman soldier, one of Israel's oppressors, and he asked Jesus for help. "Lord," he confessed, "my house servant is paralyzed and suffers terribly." "Shall I come to your house and heal him?" Jesus asked, which was scandalous, for good Jewish folk like Jesus were not supposed to taint themselves by entering a Gentile home.

The Centurion, whose rank was akin to a Master Sergeant in the army, replied, "Lord, I am unworthy of the honor of your presence in my home, but just say the word and my servant will be made whole. I know how this works, for I, too, am a man of authority. I say 'jump,' and my men ask, 'How high?'"

Jesus was amazed. He looked around at his followers and said, “Do you see this? This is the way of faith. Let me lay some truth on you: folks are going to come from the four corners of the earth, from north and south and from east and west, to join in the Great Feast when the fullness of God’s rule of Sovereign love appears. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be there sitting at the head table, and this guy, this Gentile, will be right there with them, but those who most think they *should* be there, those who claim a kinship with God, they’re going to be left outside. The doors will be locked, and when they look in the windows while standing in the moonlight, their only option will be to say, “Aaargh!”

Jesus looked at the Gentile, the soldier, Israel’s oppressor, and said, “Go home. Your servant is whole.” And the servant was – in that very instant.

The man was enormous.

Adam was his name, but not like the biblical one, his parents just liked the name.

Adam played football – in the NFL no less!

Adam was enormous.

Adam walked down the hall of my church, filling virtually the entire hallway,

I thought about the wisdom of what I had done:

should I really have invited this guy to come talk to my youth group?

Have I mentioned Adam was enormous?

He showed us his Super Bowl ring.

He told funny stories about people we had watched on TV.

The youth loved him.

And then Adam told the kids about Jesus.

He wept gentle tears and told us about his brother, who has Downs Syndrome.

He talked about prayer and meeting his future wife and what he’ll do after the NFL.

None of us cared Adam was enormous.

Lord, make me one who looks beyond rank,
where others see position, let me see a person,
where others put people in a box, let me see then in their belovedness,
where others seek the front, let me seek to be where I am needed.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to see the shell, as to look for the soul,

to engage the personality, as to encounter the person,
to judge, as to accept.

For it is not our tribe or clan or race that matters most
but the truth that we are beloved of God,

and it is not to me but to the Holy One to say who is welcome here.

Go into the world... Notice surprises. Who looks sketchy but is deeper,
more loving, and more wondrous upon your second or third look? Be
open to being surprised by others this week. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 8:14-15

A third time Jesus encountered one of the “excluded.” First the leper – not allowed within Jerusalem – then the Gentile – not allowed within the Temple – and then a woman – not allowed in the Temple’s inner sanctum in ancient Israel. The woman happened to be Peter’s mother-in-law, who was sick with fever, confined to her bed. Jesus extended himself and touched her hand: the fever fled, and Peter’s mother-in-law got out of bed and began to serve Jesus.

Trembling voice, like a scared bird, she spoke her truth.

As we listened, she unleashed an ocean of pain,

but would we hear the cries of Tamar?¹

Will Amnon always have his way?²

All powerful – without consequence?

Impunity mixed with self-righteous anger and garnished with self-pity is

a cocktail I do not think I can bear to drink

again and again and again.

Again.

Lord, make me a vessel of empowerment,

when others doubt, let me believe,

when the powerful throw shade, let me shine light,

when voices are silenced, let me create space into which they may speak.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to protect the powerful, as to guard the least, the lost, and the last,

to affirm might makes right, as to declare

justice without shalom is a perverse mirage,
to ensure my voice is heard, as to allow all voices to be heard.

For the dignity we desire is the measure we must offer,
for we are all God's children – each broken in unique ways,
but all made whole by the same grace.

Go into the world... Notice how you notice women—as objects or as *imago dei* – those also created in the image of God? How do you share space, voice, authority, and respect? In your encounters with women, do your actions express and attitudes reflect gender justice?

Matthew 8:16-17

The response to Jesus' healing touches was predictable: as evening approached Jesus was inundated with requests, with cries for help, with pleas by those who had given up hope. Those with mental affliction were given clarity. Those with spiritual affliction were given purity. Those with bodily affliction were made whole. All this happened to fulfill what the truth-teller from a former age, Isaiah, had spoken:

The Suffering One embraced our brokenness
and carried our affliction into his own self.

*The mother leans over, cries out, agony upon her face.
Yet also the intuition that this suffering is for joy,
and the child who will be borne is already of her, and always will be.
The father wakens from slumber, heart pounding, mind clearing.
A sound in the night has roused him,
and he will not sleep again until his family is safe.
Theologians call it "cruciform life," a fancy phrase for caring so deeply that
"I" and "Thee" are inextricably "We."*

Lord, make me a vessel able to hold suffering,
the pain of others, may it open me,
the cries of the innocent, may they enflame me,
the laments of the oppressed, may they haunt me.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to avoid all suffering, as to bear it with integrity,

to seek the easy way, as to live the blessed life,
to turn away from pain, as to bring it into the light of your love.

For it is the way of the Cross to care deeply,
to train the heart to love without abandon,
and as Jesus has done for me, so may I walk in his steps.

Go into the world... Notice pain – your own pain and that of others. Notice your response to pain. Do you avoid it? Does it make you uncomfortable, tempt you to an unhelpful co-dependency? Or does pain lead you toward a deeper community that invites hope? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 8:18-22

Jesus looked at the crowd that surrounded him and still gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake – to move from Jewish territory to Gentile land. A scholar of Torah, the Law, approached Jesus and said, “Rabbi, I will follow you wherever you go, even into lands that will make me unclean.”

Jesus replied, “To follow me will take you beyond unclean and into places of suffering. Foxes are cared for and birds are nurtured but the Son of Humanity is homeless, a vagabond with no pillow beneath his head.”

Another wanna-be disciple said to Jesus, “Lord, I’m down with the notion of following you but I’ve got responsibilities. At some point in the future my dad will die, and it will be on me to honor him with a proper burial. Once I get this part of my life sorted out, I’m all in.”

Jesus replied, “What part of ‘follow me’ is unclear or ambiguous? There will always be future responsibilities – now is the time to follow, so let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead.”

Now not later.

“On my deathbed, I’ll...”

Now not later.

“I’m too busy with career, but in the future...”

Now not later.

“Between job and kids, who has time? Perhaps...”

Now not later.

“I just want to sow a few oats. After all, you’re only young once...”

Now not later.

“Dear Jesus, please bless mommy and daddy and grandma and grandpa...”

Now and later.

“Child of the Covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father...”

Always.

Lord, make me a disciple for right now,
where others say no, let me say yes,
where others delay, let me leap,
when tempted to digress, let me keep to the Way.
O Divine Master, let me not so much seek
an easy claiming, as a life-forming identity,
a breezy following, as an eternal destiny,
a convenient discipleship, as the true obedience that alone gives life.
For the Way of Jesus is a difficult and costly grace,
it is costly because it costs us our life,
it is grace because it gives us the only true life: the life of Jesus.³

Go into the world... Notice your desire for ease and comfort. Does your desire for ease interfere with your willingness to do the work of costly discipleship? Does comfort keep you from being the blessing for others to which God has called you? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 8:23-27

Jesus boarded a boat and his disciples followed him. While on the lake, a furious wind arose suddenly, waves sweeping over the rails, rocking the boat and the disciples, yet Jesus slept. Now the place where one could sleep on an ancient boat was in the back, which was also the place from which the boat was guided. The disciples, seeing Jesus in the way, woke him, shouting, “Don’t just lie there – Save us, Lord, or we’ll all drown!”

Jesus replied, “Tsk, tsk. Oh, you little faiths – bless your hearts! Why the worry? Why the anxiety? Why are you so afraid? Then Jesus stood, but he did not concern himself with guiding the boat but rather

spoke to Creation, to the winds and to the waves, “Be still,” and Creation obeyed its Creator.

Awe consumed the disciples. And wonder. “What kind of man commands the wind? Who is he that waves obey his voice? And the storm was no more, only stillness.

In the shadow of Syria’s civil war, a bird sings.

Media circus fills my newsfeed, and my child naps.

Office politics dominate my day, and the stars still shine at night.

The opioid crisis is a real thing and a big deal and blessing still exists.

Awake I am asleep.

Asleep Jesus is more awake than I will ever be.

I pray that he will direct the events of my life:

cure the cancer, get me the job, protect our soldiers.

Instead he speaks truths much deeper,

impacting the primordial waters of my living, moving the tectonic plates of my being.

“Stop,” he commands,

“being afraid,

“running so hard and going nowhere,

“setting your sights on lesser things.”

“Learn,” he invites,

“the gift of stillness,

“the gentle rhythms of the lilies of the field,

“the sated appetites of the birds.”

“Remember,” he reminds,

“I got this.”

Lord, make me an instrument of stillness,

when rushed, let me calm,

when myopic, let me look above,

when fear grips my heart, let me trust in you.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to do everything, as to do the right things,

to be a world champion, as to be my truest self,

to have everything figured out, as to be assured I am in your hands.

For resurrection only comes through death,

and none of us get out of this life alive,
so teach me to live fully. Here. Now. For you.

Go into the world... Notice your rhythms. When are you harried and distracted? When do you need more focus or urgency? How does your daily rhythm encourage *shalom*? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 8:28-34

A Gentile village was on the other side of the lake. When Jesus arrived on its outskirts, he was accosted by two men who had been twisted inside-out by demonic forces, so violent no one journeyed that way. “What have you to do with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Your time will arrive in its fulness when all darkness will be burned away. We know this, so why are you here now? Do you want to get started early?”

In the distance was a large herd of pigs, attended by pig herders. The twisted souls within the men knew Jesus had authority over them and that Jesus willed that the men be restored to wholeness. They begged Jesus, “Please don’t unchain us from these bodies, but, if you do, send us into the pigs!”

Jesus said to the dark, malevolent forces within the men, “Out!” And out they rushed, straight into the pigs. The entire herd was in a frenzy, and the pigs stampeded down a steep bank into the lake and drowned. The pig herders, knowing their jobs and perhaps their lives would be in jeopardy when news about the pigs spread, ran into town to tell the news themselves. They also mentioned what happened to the two men, that they had been freed from their bondage to the demonic forces.

The town was in an uproar! Ignoring the good news about the men, they lamented their economic loss – those pigs had been their livelihood! They looked at Jesus, saw him, and asked him to leave them alone, which he did.

The storm lives within my heart.

The fury to which I am too easily tempted has overwhelmed.

Fire rages in my soul.

Why can I not know peace?

I am a deer panting for water and live in a desert.

Help me, Son of God!

*Yet do not ask me to return to the community from which I had come,
to embrace the twisted values of those who
exile the broken into the wilderness for their own convenience and
desire profit over human well-being – over my well-being!*

Lord, I would rather journey with you.

And if I cannot do that,

I prefer the pigs.

Lord, make me an instrument of freedom,
from twisted values, give me charity of vision,
from dehumanizing systems, give me the power to confront,
from being my own worst enemy, give me
ears to hear and a heart to believe all your Spirit speaks.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to control, as to embrace,
to argue, as to listen,
to fear, as to love.

For the demonic confronts me every day,
each a temptation for me to lose something essential: my humanity,
the conviction that I am the Beloved of God.

Go into the world... Notice the moments when you are invited to forget grace and to remember it. What situations provoke you to act as if God's love is not enough? How are you reminded that you are a child of God? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 9:1-8

Jesus again entered a boat and crossed back to Capernaum. Men brought a paralyzed man strapped to a mat before Jesus. Jesus looked at the men's faith but said to the paralyzed man, "God-courage fill your heart, son. You are free from your sins."

Hearing Jesus, some of the religious scholars thought to themselves, "What? He can't do that! Only God can forgive sins. This man is disrespecting God!" Jesus did not need to be a mind reader to

guess what they were thinking – he could see it on their faces, and, besides, it was the conventional wisdom of the day.

Jesus asked the scholars, “Why dance with darkness? Don’t let the Evil One twist your heart! Which is easier: to proclaim forgiveness or practice healing? I want you to know the Echo of Humanity has authority – authority and power – to forgive sin. Jesus then addressed the paralyzed man, “Stand. Take. Go. Walk home.” The man obeyed: he stood, took, went, went home. The crowd was awed when they saw this – they flipped out! Praising God, marveling, they wondered how Jesus had been given such authority.

*The first glimmer of orange appears over the horizon –
behind me black is giving way to purple and blue,
before me my heart is giving way to hope.*

Past need not be prelude.

History is not destiny.

A new day dawns.

*I look around and see the dew on cactus –
prickly yet life giving,
mean and beautiful in their own way,
they will endure long after I am gone.*

*Like the mercies I see in this new day,
as night gives way to light.*

Lord, make me an instrument of mercy,
to the paralyzed, let me give God-courage,
to the incredulous, let me bring scandal,
to all, let me guide them toward home.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to enforce rules, as to invite wonder,
to tell others what they cannot do, as to marvel at all they can,
to tell others who they are, as to remind them they are beloved.

For your mercy is for blessing to both self and other,
to free one from a past that cannot be changed,
and walk into a future that is already new.

Go into the world... Notice mercy. How often and in what ways do you offer it? How often and in what ways is it offered to you? When offered mercy, for goodness' sake accept it. And be thankful – always thankful. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 9:9-13

Jesus journeyed forward, always forward, and as he went encountered Matthew, whose name in Hebrew means “gift of God,” sitting at the tax collector’s booth. Tax collectors were despised for, though Israelites themselves, they worked for the Romans, Israel’s oppressors. Jesus eyed Matthew and then spoke, “Follow me,” he told him. And Matthew did just that. He followed Jesus.

One of Matthew’s first acts of following was to invite Jesus into his home, along with Jesus’ devoted and many of his own friends – a rowdy bunch of sinners all. Into this mix of sinners and devoted came the Pharisees, who considered the mixing of righteous and rowdy unseemly, especially if it included sharing a meal, which implied true kinship. “Why does your rabbi *eat* with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing the Pharisees’ question, Jesus responded, “The broken and wounded need the doctor, not the healthy and whole. Remember the Scripture: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I have not come to invite the righteous but sinners.”

*God's gifts are sometimes broken:
twisted thinking borne of cultural bias,
pain skewered hearts, the result of trauma,
good people doing bad things – cogs in the system.
The world would have us sacrifice
these people –
the broken, the twisted, the skewered, those who are cogs –
on the altar of righteousness, with
their blood crying out, as
Abel before Cain, Uriah before David, Naboth before Jezebel,
Jesus silent before the Religious.
And God answers: “You are Gift.”*

Lord, make me an instrument of holy desire,
not sacrifice, but mercy,
not perfection, but journey,
not boxes, but fellowship.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to always be right, as to always be growing,
to surround myself with goodness, as to go forth offering grace,
to avoid the rogue, as to welcome their fellowship.

For it is not the whole that need the doctor but the broken,
it is not the righteous that need mercy but the sinner,
it is not my public self but my true self that needs Jesus most.

Go into the world... Notice brokenness with an accepting heart and gentle spirit. How many people do you encounter who are “putting on a good face” to hide their pain? When you see such a person, say an “arrow prayer” for them – “Lord, be with...” Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 9:14- 17

“The disciples of John the Baptizer approached Jesus to ask a question. “We need some perspective: we and the Pharisees fast as part of our regular, disciplined practice, but your disciples don’t. What’s up with that?” (John’s disciples were looking at Jesus as if he was an ordinary rabbi.)

Jesus responded as God’s Anointed, “Fasting is a spiritual discipline for perceiving God’s presence. The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from my disciples, then they will seek and pray and, yes, fast in the hope of perceiving. For now, the bridegroom is among them, and they need only open their eyes and their ears and their hearts.

“One doesn’t slap a new paint job on an old jalopy and expect the car to win a race against a Ferrari. Neither does one use new words to express the same tired ideas and expect a ‘Eureka!’ moment – that will just give you a headache. The new wine of God-love requires a new wine bottle of God-life.”

*I prefer a bold red: a Chianti or Burberry or Old Vine Zinfandel.
I confess, I cannot taste the “nutty aroma,” or “hint of blackberries”*

*but my lips revel in the boldness,
the lingering zest upon my tongue an invitation to joy.
I confess, too: once I dropped six bottles.
Crossing a bridge in Venice – yes, that Venice! – the cardboard box gave way.
The spillage upon the brick and stone matched the sour expression upon my wife's face*

—
*“Why didn't you hold the box from beneath?”
I confess again: I don't know why I did not hold that box from beneath.
It was obvious after the fact.
The box so weak, unsupported, an utterly preventable accident.
So zesty the wine! Big and bold! Ready to delight!
A gift from God!
Destroyed by a faith that wasn't paying attention.*

Lord, make me a vessel full of zest,
when prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
when inclined to ignorance, Lord, it bites me in the backside,
when tempted to coast, Lord, help me attend to your Spirit's nudge.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to go with the flow, as to commit to bold loving,
to go along to get along, as to practice courageous faith,
to get with the program, as to follow wherever you lead me.
For as Abram was called from Ur and Jesus from your right hand,
so may I be willing to journey to places unknown,
especially the depths of your heart.

Go into the world... Notice zest. Who has it? Who invites it? What triggers it in you? What would happen if you committed to a day of all-zest, all-the-time? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 9:18-26

While Jesus was speaking about new wine, a religious leader – one of the privileged elite – approached him and dropped to his knees before Jesus. Prone, practically groveling, and desperate, the father said, “My heart has died, but enter my home and place your hand upon my daughter,

and she will live again.” Jesus stood with the man, as did his disciples, and together they walked – the whole lot of them.

As this gaggle of folks began to walk, a woman snuck up behind Jesus. She had a mysterious illness that made her bleed, which according to the Law also made her unclean. Her illness had lasted for 12 years, which is as long or longer than the religious leader’s daughter had been alive! The woman grasped the hem of Jesus’ robe, her embrace making Jesus unclean also. The desperate thought of her mind was, “If only I brush the merest thread of his hem, even this small act will bring me wholeness.”

Jesus turned toward her. Jesus saw the woman. “My dearest beloved, courage and hope and love remain: and your trusting has made you whole.” The woman was healed in the instant.

A noisy throng was present when Jesus entered the religious leader’s home. They were mourning according to the customs of the day: wailing and crying and playing flutes, a sacred racket intended to comfort. Jesus ordered them to leave. “Get out. The beloved daughter is not dead but sleeping.” Even the ancients knew the difference between death and sleep, so they laughed at Jesus, mocking his ignorance of the ways of Death. Jesus sent them out. Once the crowds were cleansed from the home, Jesus entered. He grasped the beloved daughter’s hand, and just as Elisha the prophet had healed the Shunamite woman’s son,⁴ so Jesus the Anointed healed the religious leader’s daughter. And good news of this event spread like wildfire.

Death and Desperation – such common playmates.

*From playground to courting, these two lovers grow ever closer
until their marriage is consummated in grief.*

*Death and Desperation make for ornery lovers,
and bear off-spring quite different from each other—unique siblings all!*

Faith and Hope – the laughing twins whose energy is contagious,

Despair and Bitterness, youngest and oldest children, respectively, whose legacies linger,

Questions – is there really only one such child?

There seems to be more than just one of her, and last but not least

Love – the “golden child” who can do no wrong.

Lord, make me an instrument of comfort,
where there is mourning, let me abide in silence,
where there is grieving, let me remain in prayer,
where the weight is too heavy, let me share its burden.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to avoid the pain of others, as to share it,
to ignore the pain of others, as to share it,
to take away the pain of others, as to share it.
For the Way of Jesus is the way of the cross,
cruciform spirituality embracing suffering in this world,
sharing not avoiding, sharing not ignoring,
sharing what cannot be taken away.

Go into the world... Notice discomfort. Is it in yourself or others? Is it physical or social or emotional? Perhaps it is spiritual? Name the discomfort your notice and bring it to God in prayer. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 9:27-34

As Jesus continued walking throughout Galilee, in northern Israel, two blind men sought him out. Hearing that Jesus was near, they called to him, crying out for mercy, using a political title with spiritual connotations, the title associated with God's Anointed: Son of David! Jesus continued walking and the blind men continued following. Upon entering a home, the blind men followed Jesus into it. He asked them, "Do you trust me? That I am able to show you mercy?"

"Yes!" they exclaimed.

Jesus reached out to them. He touched their eyes and married words with actions, "As you have trusted, so may it be fulfilled in you." Their eyes saw again and anew, reawakened. Jesus warned them, using his serious, teacher voice, "Don't say anything to anyone!" And Good News about Jesus spread like wildfire.

As the sighted men left, a man in whom much evil thrived entered. This man was mute, as if the Accuser had stolen his voice. As Jesus gave sight to the men, so he gave voice to the man – again and anew the man spoke, his voice reawakened. The gathered watchers were

amazed! “Did you see that? We’ve never seen anything like this in Israel – not ever!” But the religious leaders, like hall monitors in a school, objected. “He must be a friend of evil to command it so.”

*As soft rain drops upon the desert, its sound like crackling fire,
my heart begins to sing – again and anew,
reawakened to possibility.*

*To see cactus bloom, again and anew, invites my spirit to dance to the rhythm
of the song my heart sings, and*

*I begin to imagine the Accuser shall not always hold sway over
airwaves and coffee tables and pillows – all the places where conversation is
used as a weapon.*

No.

It shall not always be.

The rain has stopped now – the desert in stillness waits.

And my heart bursts forth in song, again and anew – reawakened,

“Son of David! Have mercy upon us all!”

Lord, make me an instrument of reawakening,
when distracted, let me find focus,
when over-burdened, let me find release,
when asleep, let me be roused.

O Divine Master may I not so much
tolerate sleepwalking through life, as to find my path,
accept being silenced by crowds, as to insist my voice be heard,
insist mine is the only voice, as to listen to the experiences of others.
For life is brief – as Summer turns to Autumn, and your Spirit is waiting,
inviting me to participate fully in the one life you have gifted to me.

Go into the world... Notice being present. Notice others who seem unusually present in the moment. What gifts come to you when you are mindful? Name the presents in being present? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 9:35-38

Jesus journeyed to and through towns and villages, nowhere too small, teaching the religious, restoring to wholeness the broken and bruised, sharing, always sharing, that the God-life is Good News. When Jesus saw the gathered crowds, and actually *see* them he did, his guts spilled out upon the ground,⁵ heart burning with desire on behalf of the people, who were harassed and helpless, beleaguered and abandoned – imagine a flock of sheep surrounded by wolves, with no shepherd to protect them. In dismay Jesus said to his disciples, “Lots of work out there, not a lot of workers. Fruitful labor awaits, if we could just find folks willing to harvest what the Lord has nurtured. Pray harvest workers will be sent.”

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.

Harassed and helpless....

Prone to leave the God I love.

Beleaguered and abandoned....

Take my heart, Lord, take and seal it,

Be Thou, my shepherd....

for Thy courts, Lord, up above.

Be Lord of the Harvest in and through my life.

Lord, make me an instrument of harvest,
when harassed, be my protection,
when helpless, be my strength,
when beleaguered, by my peace,
when feeling abandoned, show me your presence.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
ease as purpose,

pleasing distractions as meaningful work,
my abundance as your harvest.

For the harvest is plentiful,
ripe and ready and right next door,

waiting, waiting, waiting for someone, anyone, to tell them Good News.

Go into the world... Notice the symptoms of being harried. What does it look like when you see someone who appears hassled or harassed? Are

they a parent or a child? Alone or with others? Notice the person(s) and pray for them in the moment of your noticing. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:1-4

In those days, disciples approached a rabbi and humbly asked to become a disciple – a disciplined follower of all the rabbi’s teachings. Disciples were expected to memorize everything their rabbi said, so only the best and brightest could be disciples.⁶ Jesus was different. Jesus’ disciples did not choose him but rather Jesus chose his disciples – twelve of them. Indeed, he called them – part invitation, part command, full freedom yet compelling in a way that prevented them from saying no. Jesus not only called twelve disciples but gave them authority to cleanse and restore, to build up and make whole, body and soul, people and communities.

These disciples, disciplined followers all, became apostles, the “sent ones.”⁷ Their names include sets of brothers, fishermen and doubters, and both a tax collector (who worked for and with the Romans to oppress Israelites) and a zealot (who worked against the Romans as an agitator, a part of the Resistance), and even Judas Iscariot who later betrayed Jesus and helped the religious leaders arrest Jesus so he could be handed over to the Roman political leaders. Jesus’ disciples were a motley crew indeed.

The playground never really leaves us.

I remember the pride and the shame,

giddy joy or cheeks burning – blotchy red creeping up my cheeks.

Chosen (or not).

Playgrounds give way to school dances:

pulse pounding, awkward hyperventilating,

I’m so glad the gym was dimly lit!

Chosen (or not).

Dances give way to jobs and careers and proposals:

the child within never really leaving,

*only the stakes are higher – personal, family and community well-being –
at least that’s what we tell ourselves. Yet, still,*

Chosen (or not).

Is there ever a moment when the choosing stops?

When worry and doubt and anxiety are shown the door?

When I can rest assured,

*my shortness, my fatness, my stutter, my baldness, my hips, my nose, my curly hair,
my straight hair, my laugh, my sneeze, my driving, my Facebook posts, my hobbies,
my political party, my race, my country of origin, my opinion on “the most urgent issue
ever,”*

*my wandering eye, my loose tongue, my uncontrolled temper, my cynicism, my despair,
my, my, my—no longer matters?*

Am I really God’s Chosen?

Lord, make me an instrument of following,
when called, let me respond,
when challenged, let me accept,
when absolutely and utterly freaked out, let me trust.

O Divine Master, let me not so much seek
to have a plan, as to walk the Path,
to have life all figured out, as to find life along the Way,
to be working on my American Dream, as to seek first your Kin-dom.

For when Christ calls one, he bids them come and die,
this is costly, for it costs one their life,
it is grace for it gives the only true life – that found in Jesus Christ.⁸

Go into the world... Notice those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Without judgment, notice how they live: in words and deeds, through tone and attitude. What do you learn about living with Jesus from observing his followers? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:5-8

Jesus commanded the apostles – the sent ones – to go and show the Good News. “For now,” he said, “stick to Israel – avoid both the Samaritans and the Gentiles while you’re still wearing training wheels. Going to Israel is hard enough, for they are like sheep wandering and alone.

As you go, speak Good News to those you encounter: "The God-life is here! Closer than our own breath, knowing our thoughts before we think them, our needs before we ask for them." Bring wholeness to the broken, bring life to the dead. Care for both outer shell and inner spirit. As you have been filled with grace, let it overflow the brim of your being; be poured out into the life of the world. As you receive, give, give, give!"

Tolkien wrote, "Not all who wander are lost."

*But some who wander are
in need of Jesus, for they are
alone,
in need of God-life.*

*What must it be like to encounter One who is closer than my own breath?
Who knows my thoughts before I think them?
Who knows my needs before I ask for them?
From whom the far side of the sea is not too far away?
For whom a Cross was not too much to bear?*

*I need this God-life! Even though I
live in community,
have been found by Jesus,
and only go where I definitely know the right directions. Maybe that's why I'm
lost.
Maybe I need to wander.*

Lord, make me an instrument of generosity,
when receiving, let me give,
when receiving freely, let me freely give,
when receiving generously, let me generously give.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to share of what I have, as to share from what you have given,
to share only in deeds of compassion, as to share also in words of life,
to share about God, as to share God-life.
For we all wander through this life, alone and together,
and upon both you and me the journey takes its toll,
but for us and for all, our wandering need not take our soul.

Go into the world... Notice being sent. How has God sent you from one thing to another, to a new place or new people or to do a new thing? How does God “send” you daily, throughout each day? Notice your Spirit nudges when God is inviting you to act, to love, to care, or to speak. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:9-15

Ministry is not about having the best resources: gold plated pulpits and silver communion ware don't matter. Showing up in a fancy car, with a huge cross hanging round your neck, carrying a large-print Bible doesn't cut it. God's worker should be given what she or he needs: food and shelter – enough.

When you enter a village look for hospitality – welcome is a sign of a heart belonging to God. Don't bounce from home to home, looking for bigger or better. No couch surfing allowed for God-work is about the people not the bricks.

When you enter a home, show it grace. If those in the home welcome you, shower them with peace. If they reject you, don't grovel. Some folks do not, will not or cannot listen to words of peace; trying to convince them is silly. As you leave, return to them all you have received, even the dust from your feet, so they cannot say you have taken advantage of them. I tell you truth: on the Last Day it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that village.

It's not about Bling,

*Big hair, teeth-whitened smile, and a tie that says you love Jesus
may draw crowds but*

do not heal hearts or mend the brokenness within one's soul.

Only grace and peace do that – heal and mend.

*Only the welcome of brother or sister – holy hospitality,
an open heart kissing a broken soul.*

Lord, make me an instrument of welcome,
welcome for the random dude with bad-breath at church,
welcome for the tattooed Millennial with a nose ring,

welcome for the silver-haired with a mongo-huge hearing aid.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to be noticed by others, as to look for the lonely,
to be greeted by friends, as to search for the shy,
to be the center of attention, as to wander the margins.
For the Gospel compels with a centrifugal force,
until inside and outside no longer exist,
but only wider and wider circles of grace.

Go into the world... Notice the ill at ease. Are they “misfits” or merely shy? How might you show welcome and hospitality to them? What is necessary to draw, invite, or coax them toward a strong sense of belonging? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:16-20

“I am sending you out innocent in the midst of terror, sheep among wolves. It’s okay to be shrewd but not deceitful, wily but not manipulative, wise as snakes but harmless like doves. And for goodness’ sake be careful! Know going in you will be arrested, even beaten, and will be made to stand before the full weight of government because you speak truth to power in my name. You will suffer but your suffering with conscience will be its own message, first to the religious and also to those who could care less. So when the powers arrest you, don’t have a speech written out and don’t worry your words won’t sound eloquent. Speak from the heart. Let the Spirit do the heavy lifting and God’s message will resound because of you.”

Truth to power:

from synagogues in Pittsburgh let it ring,

from pulpits in Puerto Rico still without power let it ring,

from city streets and coffee shop counters and voting booths let it ring.

Let every voice that has breath speak

Truth. To. Power.

And when suffering comes,

and it will come,

*pray that grace may so abide in
my heart, your heart, our hearts,
the long arc of the moral universe that bends toward justice¹⁰ might bend a bit more
sharply, shrewdly, with wily intent so that
love will win the day
while victory coos like a dove.*

Lord, make me an instrument of shrewdness,
when tempted to forget my values, let me shout yes to truth,
when invited to forgo my morality, let me speak yes to truth,
when eager to win at all costs, let me whisper yes to truth.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to adopt the ways of the world, as to overcome them,
to be a pawn for power, as to submit to your greater authority,
to walk the way of the wolf, as to lie down with lion and the lamb.¹¹

For though you and I may only say yes to truth in a whisper,
even our whisper unveils the thunder of God's passion,
for justice to live in the Land.

Go into the world... Notice power dynamics. Who has power and who doesn't? What are the power dynamics you observe between different races, genders, and ages? Who wields power with compassion and who wields it as a weapon? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:21-25

“Brother will rise up against brother, sister will hand sister over for slaughter, fathers and mothers against sons and daughters, children rising up to slay their parents. When like a fog evil descends, no one sees truly, and you are more than likely to be hated because you belong to me. Living gospel values will not make you popular. They will only make you whole. When people attack, you need not remain still and accept abuse: move on, run if you must, flee to the hills, but escape. The sorry truth is that you will not even finish sharing gospel values in the villages of Israel before the Son of Humanity is revealed in Golgotha. What's more, the student is not above the Master. As the teacher, so the student; as the

Master, so the servant. If they call me ‘Devil’ just imagine what they’ll do to you?”

Surely Jesus was talking about ancient times:

Rome or Jerusalem or the Mongol hordes?

Surely Jesus was talking about other places:

Nazi Germany or genocidal Rwanda or somewhere they martyr missionaries?

Surely Jesus wasn’t talking about us:

Charlottesville or Parkland or Las Vegas or

Orlando or Pittsburgh or

my own Thanksgiving Day table?

Surely Jesus was talking about

Caesar and Herod and Atila?

Surely Jesus was talking about

Hitler and Kagame and the Taliban?

Surely Jesus wasn’t talking about

marching in the streets or refusing to accept exclusion or

welcoming migrant caravans or feeding hungry people or

changing laws to reflect the light and love of my Master?

Surely.

Lord, make me an instrument of willingness,
willing to stand and be counted,
willing to speak the truth in love,
willing even to be persecuted, if such is needed.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
the path of comfort, as the Way of conscience,
the path of ease, as the Way of engagement,
the path of popularity, as the Way of the Prince – the Prince of Peace.

For you never promised living the Gospel would be easy,
just that it would lead to You and to a life worthy of your Name,
so I await the next chapter of this grand adventure.

Go into the world... Notice your willingness. Are you willing to live Gospel values always? When are the times and what are the circumstances that lead you to resist, to push back a bit, to want to rebel? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:26-31

“Fear not your enemies. All secrets will be unsealed. All that is hidden will be unveiled. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light. What I what I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops.

“I say again: fear not. Fear not those who can kill the body but cannot touch the soul. If you must fear, fear the One with authority to destroy both body and soul, with power to dispose of your whole being as though taking out the trash. And yet, it is that One who knows the value of a sparrow and that you are more valuable than a flock of them. It is that One who sees when the sparrow rises and falls and ensures they are cared for with love. He even counts the very hairs on your head – yes, each one! – so fear not.”

*Fear raises its ugly head with every blunt word spoken,
jack-hammered into our consciousness,
we cannot run, we cannot hide, there is no escape.
Cold comfort knowing secrets will be revealed...someday.
Someday the truth will be unveiled.
Someday darkness will turn to light.
When, precisely, will this someday come?
Until that day, I must choose:
faith or fear?
Hope or despair?
Turning inward or standing with my brothers, my sisters,
the least and the lost.
I choose...*

Lord, make me an instrument of enduring faith,
when tempted to turn away, let me stand,
when overwhelmed, let me sink to my knees,
when fear cripples my heart, may I cry out confident you will hear.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to avoid hardship, as to engage it,
to worry about myself, as to live with a glad and generous heart,
to fear my enemies as to love them.

For so easy is the way of surrender,
so tempting the invitation to live afraid,
but Gospel truth lays a claim upon my life,
a claim that cannot be denied.

Go into the world... Notice the many ways you are invited to embrace trust? (It would have been soooooo easy to ask you to notice the ways you are invited to fear, but we all know these too well! They are obvious in our world.) More subtle and nuanced are the invitations to embrace trust – and harder work to notice. Get to it. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:32-33

Jesus continued, “Know and be known, and be open about it. Brothers vouch for brothers, and sisters vouch for sisters, and I will vouch before my Father all who admit to knowing me. But if someone is embarrassed to say they belong to me and I to them? What will I say, then? To be open in community, whether on earth or in heaven, is the only true freedom.”

I was not Presbyterian.

Why on earth be that?

Nice enough people, perhaps, but stodgy prayers, funereal hymns: the frozen chosen.

But I went to his Presbyterian church as a college freshman,

a friend invited me,

but it had not a rock band or lights or anything else I was used to.

I didn't go back.

Weeks later I saw him on the street – the minister, the Presbyterian pastor!

I had gone to his church and not gone back!

(I was unaware of the holy custom of “church shopping.”)

Would he think I blew him off? That I didn't like him?

Then I was comforted: surely he wouldn't remember me – it had been weeks ago!

“Hey, Brad,” he said, “how's it going?”

We talked. It was awkward, (at least for me). And that was the day

I became Presbyterian.

Lord, make me an instrument of knowing,
where others forget, let me remember,
where others pretend, let me be honest,
where others don't care, let me see the person in front of me.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to impress others, as to have them know I see them,
to cajole others, as to have them know I accept them,
to condemn others, as to connect in sacred community.
For the life of the Triune God is a dance of holy fellowship,
into which we are each invited – to know and be known,
and it is the only dance that leads to eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice those who appear to be strangers in your midst. Who does not seem to belong...yet? Who has not been welcomed...yet? With whom is God calling you to connect...now? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:34-39

Jesus continued, “Think not that I have come to make nice, to help you ignore real problems and sweep injustice under the rug. As a soldier at the point of the sword must choose his allegiance, so I have come to force a choice. As Micah, the truth-teller from ages past, has written,

Rebellious sons and disobedient daughters –
enemies within one's own home.
Perverting justice a family pastime –
even fathers and mothers betray their offspring for a price.¹²

“If you love this kind of father or that kind of mother more than me, choosing their broken values above the rule of God's Sovereign love, you deceive yourself and have chosen the lesser path. My path is the Way of the Cross, the way of self-emptying sacrifice – only then can you belong to me. Whoever fashions their own 'lifestyle brand' will ultimately find it lacking. Whoever lets go and lets me give you life will find the live worth living.

*Election eve and politicians are still shouting, "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace.
There is no peace without justice.
"Just shut up and let us have our way," the powerful tell us.
There is no peace without justice.
"We are oppressed by our own government," claim billionaires with private jets.
There is no peace without justice.
Do they really fear the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free?¹³
Why do they reject the wretched refuse of other teeming shores?
Will they actually send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed away?
No longer do soldiers force a choice (at least not yet) but ballot box beckons.
What will I choose? What will I do? What will I say?
I will say,
"There is no peace without justice."*

Lord, make me an instrument of justice,
choosing the huddled masses,
choosing the wretched refuse,
choosing the tempest-tossed.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to make nice, as to do justice,
to ignore real problems, as to love kindness,
to sweep injustice under the rug, as to walk humbly with You.
For comes a time when silence is complicity,
when the cruciform life is no longer a choice,
when the only "brand" I can desire is to belong to Jesus.

Go into the world... Notice your ability to choose: little things, big decisions, when to speak and when to remain silent, how to engage, when to remain aloof? The list goes on and choices are always before you. What are your choices saying about your allegiance? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus continued, "Welcome is a spiritual act. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and welcomes the One who sent me. To welcome another as truth-teller is to receive a truth-teller's reward. To welcome

another as a God-lover is to receive a God-lover's reward. And if one offers even a cup of cold water to a little one who follows me, I tell you the truth, that person's reward will be even greater when the rule of God's Sovereign love is revealed in its fullness."

Welcome is a spiritual act:

*mercy in disguise,
agape broken into its core elements.*

So easy to welcome pastor and president:

*lauded and applauded,
expected and respected.*

More difficult to welcome colleague or competitor:

*uncertain of protocols,
unclear they can be trusted.*

Harder still to welcome stranger and foreigner:

*such folk are not like me,
they are Other.*

Though I like many others,

*I do not know Other,
I do not like Other.*

I don't care if welcome is mercy in disguise:

*I do not trust Other.
I will not welcome Other.*

And I cannot for the life of me understand why people say churches aren't welcoming?

Lord, make me an instrument of welcome,
when encountering a friend, opening my home,
when meeting a stranger, opening my heart,
when confronted by an Other, opening my very soul.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to be noticed, as to observe,

to be received, as to open myself to others,
to be welcomed, as to shower with hospitality.

For welcome is a spiritual act that began in Creation,
and is confirmed both by Covenants and the Cross,

Your divine "Yes" to our broken humanity the source of all blessing.

Go into the world... Notice those in need of being greeted, received, and made to feel as if they belong. In your home. At work or school. In public settings such as hospital rooms or departments stores. And, yes, in your church. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 11:1-6

After Jesus finished his lessons to the core followers – the disciplined ones – he journeyed to their towns to show and to share the message about the rule of God’s Sovereign love. When John the Baptizer heard what Jesus was doing, John was provoked to wonder about Jesus being Messiah, for Jesus’ works were the same as those the truth-tellers from ages past had associated with the Anointed of God.

John sent some of his own followers to Jesus with the question, “Are you the Promised One? Or is God’s Anointed still to come?” Jesus did not answer with a simple yes or no but with his resume: “Tell John what you hear with your own ears and see with your own eyes: the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing again, and the dead being raised. Even the poor – those who are last and least in the eyes of the world – have Good News showing up on their doorsteps.¹⁴ Sacred openness belongs to the one who laughs instead of laments at this great reversal.”

“I’m from Missouri, you see.”

What does that matter, I ask?

“You have to show me before I’ll believe.”

But I know the right lingo!

“Are the hungry fed and homeless housed?”

I know the Four Spiritual Laws!

“Are children being loved, nurtured, and educated?”

I know “Great is Thy Faithful” by heart!

“Are laws being crafted to give the least and the last their first, best chance?”

I know between a liberal and conservative and who really loves Jesus!

“Are you, personally, advocating, praying, working that others may have equality?”

I know I’m not part of the problem!

“Perhaps, but how are you showing up for those who need Good News?”

Lord, make me someone that
even a skeptic from Missouri might love,
ready to get my hands dirty,
willing to risk embarrassment,
able to speak and to work for your rule of Sovereign love.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to speak the faith, as to live the faith,
to talk the talk, as to walk the walk,
to say I love Jesus, as to demonstrate my love in service to others.
For Messiah came to show us God’s love in human flesh,
the Anointed One of God touching, healing, moving among us,
whose actions show the Eternal heart of our Creator.

Go into the world... Notice your actions. Psychologists have shown we tend to excuse our own misbehavior while attributing dark motives to others.¹⁵ Stop giving yourself the benefit of the doubt and start noticing what you actually do. How do you actually relate to others, interact with, speak to, serve, and bless them? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 11:7-19

As John the Baptizer’s disciplined ones returned to share with John Jesus’ answer to the question about being the Anointed One, Jesus addressed the crowds. “When you journeyed to the desert to see John, what were you hoping for? A fragile flower flittering in the wind? A comfy, cozy, cherubim waiting for others to serve him? If you wanted that, you would have looked in the king’s suite. Were you looking for vigor? For intensity? For a commitment to the truth at all costs? Of course you were! And that’s precisely what you got with John and then some. John is the one about whom the truth-teller from ages past wrote,

Look! Watch! See! I will send a forerunner, a herald to warn one and all that you are coming. He will till the soil and plant the seeds for your harvest.

“I tell you the truth, in all of human history there is no more important work than the work John has done in preparing others for the Way, yet even the last and the least who live according to the rule of God’s Sovereign love are greater than John. John’s work was not for fragile flowers. Calling others to live obedient to God is not the work for those who love comfy and cozy. The rule of God’s Sovereign love is always a target: argued against and attacked. The whole of Torah speaks with force and is itself forcibly opposed, so it was with John. Believe it or not, accept it or not, but John was the new Elijah come to prepare the Way. If you have ears, listen!

“You say you love John? Hardly! You are like children on the playground who claim to be bored or listening to music but refusing to dance. There’s no pleasing you. John was austere and severe, and you called him harsh. The Son of Humanity eats, drinks, and is merry, and you call him a partier, ‘Look, a drunk! A fatty! He hangs out with a bad crowd! Booooo!’ Say what you want, but the proof is in the pudding. Wisdom wins the day.”

Ministry is a contact sport, like football or rugby.

*Those who serve should expect to be tackled, occasionally,
even more so for leaders,*

for whom a bright, red, bullseye is painted on all their clothing.

Ministry is a contact sport, like one finds in a hospital’s neo-natal unit.

*Unless we connect with another, touching with tender care,
wholeness is not expressed as the love of a God*

who touched the leper and whose hem was touched by a woman in need of healing.

Ministry is a contact sport.

Beware entering the ring

(but know a ring is a thing of beauty),

it is a place where fragile flowers fail

(and flowers smell of incense and prayer),

and where the path to comfy and cozy is littered with broken glass

(and the path to God, though narrow, leads to eternal life).

Lord, make me an instrument of preparation,
for the barren, tilling the soil of faith,
for the beleaguered, planting seeds of hope,
for the bereft, harvesting your eternal love.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to coax, as to invite,
to cajole, as to encourage,
to compel, as to inspire.
For the harvest begins long before the ripening,
hours of prayer and years of compassion planted before
you reap the longing heart at long last.

Go into the world... Notice not the moment, not the event, not the pay-off. Notice all that leads up to the moment. What is required to be prepared for the event, to get to the pay-off? Are you willing to till the soil, plant the seeds, and weed the garden? Or, are you only interested in the harvest? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 11:20-24

Jesus criticized those villages in which his works and wonders had been on full display and yet the wonders touched not their hearts, the works made not a dent in their minds, and they remained steadfast in continuing on their destructive paths. To Chorazin, just north of Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee, and to Bethsaida, just east of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, he said, “Grief! Distress! If Tyre had witnessed my works, they would have turned away from their sin. If Sidon had witnessed my wonders, they would have turned toward the Living God.” (Tyre and Sidon were Gentile villages on the Mediterranean coast.) “I tell you truth: Judgment Day will be more pleasant for these outsiders than for you, Chorazin, or for you, Bethsaida.”

And you, Capernaum, home to some of my own disciples, your town motto celebrates you will be ‘lifted high to heaven,’ but I tell you that even you will be brought down to Hades. Town mottos are no substitute for faithful obedience to the rule of God’s Sovereign love. In fact, if Sodom itself had seen what you’ve seen, heard what you’ve heard,

they would have turned away from their sin and still be around today. But not you! Indeed, Sodom will be better off than you on the Day of Judgment.

*The Scripture says God alone is the Judge,
I agree, but only to a point,
for I know how easy I find it
to harden my heart toward neighbor or stranger or Other,
(just like Chorazin),
to ignore the beauty and wonder all around me,
(just like Bethsaida),
to presume with holy arrogance my own assumptions prove my truth,
(just like Capernaum),
and it occurs to me that God need not judge,
for I'm doing a fine job of it already.
And then the Lord, the Almighty, Creator of all that is seen and unseen,
looks upon my puny, petty, inconsequential judgments and says,
"Do you really think you know how to judge?"
With a wink to the angels, the Lord, the Almighty, Creator of all says,
"Hold my beer."
And I am left speechless.*

Lord, make me an instrument of holy wonder,
in the midst of busyness, slowing down to notice where you show up,
in the midst of owning my responsibility, recognizing I'm not in charge,
in the midst of burdens, seeing your grace that changes everything.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to define you in small ways, as to bathe in your Mystery,
to direct how you act, as to sit in awe while I watch you work,
to be in control, as to be amazed.

For your role as Judge is as large and wondrous
as the sun and the stars that extend billions of years into our vision,
a role we do not and cannot comprehend
and about which we should stop trying.

Go into the world... Notice judgment. Though tempting to notice when others' judge, don't start there, with other people. Instead start with yourself. When do you judge? Who do you judge? How does it make you feel? What are the various manifestations your judgment of others takes? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 11:25-30

Awash in the contrast between those who think they are righteous and those aware they are not, Jesus prayed, "Thank you! Thank you, Eternal and Sovereign One, Lord in love, for the way you turn wisdom upside-down and intelligence inside-out and whisper mysteries to babes. Yes, this has always been your Plan, from before the beginning of time, your way of bringing wholeness. All things – spiritual and physical, past, present and future – belong to You, and You have shared them with the Son. Only the Father knows the Son and only the Son knows the Father; well, and those to whom the Son chooses to unveil God's Mystery.

"Come, Tired! Come, Troubled! Let me give y'all Rest! Accept my teaching – a rabbi's yoke¹⁶ – wrap my teaching around your neck. Learn life from me: gentleness and humility from the center of your being that enlivens your souls. My teaching is a yoke you can wear every day.

*God's mysteries are a meal as zesty as they are refreshing,
leaving an after taste of light and wonder,
filling the soul without that heavy, "I ate too much on Thanksgiving" feeling.
God's mysteries cannot be bought or sold,
they do not roam the corridors of power or privilege,
indeed, their best friends are vulnerability and awareness.
God's mysteries come as a friend,
sharing trouble in the dead of night,
waiting for you to accept her call – day or night, yesterday, today or into all tomorrows.*

Lord, make me an instrument of the easy yoke,
when others invoke the letter, let me offer the spirit,
when others burden, let me carry,
when others confuse and complicate, let me keep it simple, saint.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to sound clever, as to guide toward gentleness,
to enforce rules, as to open the way of humility,
to play the sophisticate, as to unclutter the soul.
For the yoke that brings life sees me and others in our full humanity,
broken yet beloved,
in need of the God-life only Jesus gives.

Go into the world... Notice yokes. If a “yoke” is a rabbi’s teaching, what yokes do you encounter in your daily existence? What is the yoke of Madison Avenue? Wall Street? Facebook? Netflix? Church? How are you being molded, shaped, formed and transformed by the teachings with which you are daily bombarded? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 12:1-8

Jesus left the village square and strolled through local farm land – and this was done on the Sabbath.! Jesus’ friends, all disciplined followers, scavenged kernels of grain from the field, for they were hungry. And, of course, the disciples ate what they plucked. Again, this was done on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, who were intensely scrupulous about matters of Law, saw what the disciples did and called 911, for the disciples were breaking the Law by “working” on the Sabbath. “Look,” they exclaimed to Jesus, “your followers are breaking the Law by harvesting their food on the Sabbath!”

Jesus, both bemused, exasperated, and irritated, replied, “You think that’s bad? Have you read what David and his friends did when they were hungry?”¹⁷ (Of course, Jesus knew that the Pharisees knew that David and his men ate bread on the Table in the Tabernacle that was allowed only to priests; indeed, the bread was given to David by the priests!) “They ate the Bread of Presence, which is only lawful for the priests to eat! Or what about the priests in the Temple – by definition they work on the Sabbath and yet are as innocent as a sleeping baby.

“Let me lay some truth on you: the Temple is sacred because it is home to God’s presence. The full *shekinah*¹⁸ lives there, and yet something even greater than the Temple stands before you, in whom the fullness of

God's person is found. If David could eat bread in the presence of the Tabernacle, how much more can my disciples eat grain in the presence of One who is greater than the Temple? If you understood the truth-teller from ages past, "I desire kindness of heart more than scrupulosity to edicts,"¹⁹ you would not judge the hungry. The Son of Humanity is Sovereign over the Sabbath."

I lay exhausted at the end of the day,

less tired from my physical labor and more emotionally tired from laboring

to deal with those who specialize in

missing the point.

Whatever happened to "the spirit of the law" over "the letter of the law"?

Whatever happened to "walk a mile in another person's shoes" before judging them?

Whatever happened to kindness, dignity, and respect as basic, core, human values?

Missing the point,

there are those who allegedly specialize in the art of the deal,

but whose own work burdens others, causing people to labor emotionally and physically, until, exhausted, they wish only for the end of this day.

Lord, make me an instrument of Sabbath rest,

from work, replenished,

from burdens, renewed,

from intolerance, restored.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to prove my worth, as to rest in your grace,

to work harder than all others, as to live with sacred balance,

to be defined by accomplishments, as to be fulfilled by your presence.

For the rule-givers of this world skew regulations in their own favor,

and then condemn all others who fail to measure up,

but not you, O Holy One of Israel,

for you nailed all human regulations on the cross with Jesus,²⁰

and then love all of us – we who fail to measure up.

Go into the world... Notice your work-life balance. How much Sabbath do you observe? What is the rhythm of your Sabbath rest? Is holy rest a burden to be fulfilled or a gift to be welcomed? Ponder how your answer

to this last question reflects upon your relationship with God – your sense of identity before the One we confess is Sovereign in love? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 12:9-14

Jesus went from farmland into the synagogue where he found a man with a deformity – a crippled hand. The Scrupulous knew about Jesus' ability to heal and wondered about his willingness to heal on the Sabbath, which, according to their overly scrupulous, some would say legalistic, interpretation, was against the Law. Would Jesus break the Law? The Scrupulous asked Jesus, "Is it legal to heal on the Sabbath?" They were not idly curious or actually interested in gaining wisdom but wanted to be able to accuse Jesus as a law-breaker, a criminal, unrighteous.

Jesus answered their question slant, like a poet, "Imagine if you will one of you has one and only one sheep, a perfect lamb whose wool you shear to make the coat that keeps your child warm. You love that lamb, but it falls into a pit, on the Sabbath. What will you do? Will you climb into the pit, lift it upon your shoulders, and lovingly bear it to safety, which, of course, is a form of work according to your interpretation of Sabbath. How much more cherished and valuable is one of the Holy One's children? So you tell me: is it legal to do good only at certain times or all the time? Is God's goodness reserved only for special days or is the Sabbath included as part of God's blessing?"

To this point Jesus had not really answered their question but only asked his own, rhetorical questions. He still did not answer the Scrupulous with words but instead chose to express his conviction with actions. "Extend your hand," Jesus invited the man with the crippled hand. The man reached out and was restored, his hand made whole and complete, new, just like his other hand. The Scrupulous were furious! From that moment, they began plotting how to destroy Jesus.

Do good to one another – so simple, so basic: Humanity 101.

Life really shouldn't be so hard to understand this message of our humanity.

Do good to one another.

While in the sandbox our mothers call out, "Play nice!"

Do good to one another.

In the locker room our coaches chide, "Don't be a dick. He's your teammate."

Do good to one another.

"For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer."

Do good to one another.

*So when mothers and children approach a line it is illegal for them to cross,
why do men with guns and armor shoot tear gas at them? At mothers! At children!
Is this what Jesus meant when he told us to do good to one another?*

Lord, make me an instrument of the good,
today and tomorrow, choosing to see those who go unnoticed,
on days ending in "y," choosing to extend myself to others,
even on the Sabbath, choosing to heal a fellow human being.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to obey the letter, as to fulfill the spirit,
to choose what is expedient, as to follow the right wherever it leads,
to avoid trouble, as to be honorable, virtuous, and compassionate.

For if I cannot affirm the dignity of my fellow human being,
indeed the implicit dignity of all things – including your Creation,
my religion is only an exercise in missing the point.

Lord, have mercy, and may it never be.

Go into the world... Notice opportunities to connect in positive, healthy ways. Who do you encounter for whom you can bless their humanity? Speak a word of dignity? Offer a word or a touch of compassion? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 12:15-21

When Jesus became aware of the plot to destroy him – did this mean to kill or merely to discredit him?²¹ – he left the synagogue. Crowds stalked Jesus, and he spread wholeness to everyone but commanded them to keep quiet about him, not to reveal his true identity as God's Anointed. This was to fulfill what Isaiah, the truth teller from ages to ages past, spoke:

My servant, chosen and beloved, pleasure of my soul.
I will empower his proclamation with my very own Spirit.
Justice will he speak to the Gentiles:
neither loud nor ornery,
breaking not a bruised reed,
snuffing not a smoldering wick,
never ceasing until justice is victorious – God’s win for all
creation.
In my servant’s name even outsiders have hope.²²

*In a world of shouting,
where anger is the order of the day,
outrage having replaced Walter Cronkite’s “and that’s the way it is,”
whispers have power.
Kindness becomes a sword,
humility a futuristic laser ray with magical powers,
gentleness the balm of Gilead.
So while I respect those voices that shall not be denied,
raised to the level of a movement,
whose longing cry provokes passion,
I hesitate.
Is my hesitancy a sign of cowardice?
Or do I walk a different path?
For truly we both care about bruised reeds and smoldering wicks.*

Lord, make me a servant,
in a loud world, prone to whisper,
in an angry world, extending kindness,
in the midst of colliding passions, steadfast and gentle.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to harvest reeds, as to heal their brokenness,
to collect all the candles, as to light at least one against the darkness,
to be in charge, as to be one upon whom others can depend.
For the Way of the Cross rejects the path of power,
and all our titles – CEO, the Big Kahuna, Jefe –

are just reminders we have a long way to go before we live like Jesus.

Go into the world... Notice your willingness to serve. Is your instinct to play yourself and your desires first? Is there freedom and joy when you help another or does it feel as a burden? Be intentional this week to serve one person you ordinarily would not serve. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 12:22-32

The crowds, still stalking Jesus with a hunger and longing to experience the rule of God's Sovereign love, brought to Jesus one in whom an unclean spirit resided – broken humanity expressed as blindness and an inability to speak. Jesus vanquished the unclean spirit, restoring to the child of God his voice and his ability to see. The crowds murmured and rejoiced, hugged and high fived. They wondered aloud, "Could Jesus be God's Anointed?" (The term they used was "the Son of David," which was the customary nickname for Messiah.)

The Scrupulous were not amused, nor did they rejoice, because Jesus did not fit the criteria for what they thought Messiah ought to look, sound and act like. So the Scrupulous asserted, "He did it with the Devil's help! How else could he command an unclean spirit?"

Jesus knew the thoughts of their hearts and their disordered thinking; (after all, he wasn't an idiot). He challenged the Scrupulous, "Unity is not division, and divided hearts are not united. Hearts and minds, as households and nations, cannot stand divided. If the Devil defeats devils, he works against his own purpose and will fall into complete ruin. As you, so I: we each heal and make whole by the power of God; both I and you cleanse and restore to make known the rule of God's Sovereign love. Indeed, I tell you the truth: the unclean spirits I have defeated will be your judges, for they know we share the same purpose and walk in harmony toward the same end, even if you cannot see it. I heal and make whole by commanding unclean spirits to leave, and so the rule of God's Sovereign love is restored. I could not do anything if I did not first deal with the one who stands against me – even Satan. But I have indeed defeated him already, and so I plunder his stolen treasure.

“Be with me not against me. Either you are part of the solution or you are the problem. Listen! I understand that I seem different from what you expected of God’s Anointed, so if you bad mouth me you will be forgiven. However, if you cannot see that healing and making whole, that the work of cleansing and restoring, that rescuing a beloved child of God from the clutches of evil is the work of God’s Spirit in our midst, I can’t help you. There is no forgiveness for a mind so warped, a heart so frozen, and a spirit so perverse that you cannot see the Hand of God in what is before you – not now and not ever.”

Clash. Cacophony. Clutter.

Discord, Dissonance. Destruction.

Jesus, is this your heart, your intention, your Spirit at work?

“Unity. Harmony. Wholeness.

Communities sharing purpose, bringing peace, restoring justice.

This is my heart, my intention, my Spirit at work?”

How can we know? Be certain? Discern right from wrong?

What are the signs? The symptoms? Will you not show us the way?

Jesus, why do you make it so hard to know what to do?

“Must I spell it out? B-r-e-a-t-h-e. P-r-a-y. You’ve got this. You know.

I have shown you, am showing you, and will show you.

I am the Way. I am the Truth. I am the Life.”

Lord, make me an instrument of restoration,

making whole what is broken,

making clear what is confused,

making one we who are in discord.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to defeat my opponent, as to find common ground,

to gloat over the fallen, as to enable them to stand once more,

to claim credit, as to share purpose.

For restoration is a team sport,

and “I” cannot win the game alone,

only “we” can know victory, and then only together.

Go into the world... Notice others who are willing to help. Who shares your purpose and passion? Who is willing, able and available to join in common cause? Which of these friends is one you expected and which of them is a surprise you did not imagine? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 12:33-37

“Good tree, good wood, good fruit. Evil tree, evil wood, evil fruit. You are like the Garden’s serpent only in mass – an entire brood of vipers able only to speak evil. How can you do otherwise? From the abundance of the heart one speaks, and your hearts know only scarcity. The good person looks within to find justice and joy, and it shows, expressing themselves through words that create, words that heal, words that bind people together in love. The evil person looks into their heart shocked to experience a barren wasteland – the truth barely a shrub, justice like scrub grass, but their own self-interest a giant sequoia. Listen! When the Day comes to give account, and it will come, your words that planted seeds of love, nurtured truth, and bore the fruit of justice will be evident to all, and so will your words that delayed, deprived, and denied these things to others.

I’m so glad Dr. King didn’t say, “I have a personal preference today!”²³

Words matter.

Our nation was transformed by a King’s Dream.

Words matter.

“Here I stand I can do no other unless convinced by the Word of God,”

said another saint with the first name of Martin.

Words matter.

“Preach the Gospel always and, if necessary, use words,” spoke a saint named Francis.

Words matter.

“A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold, more just,” spoke a pope named Francis.

Words matter.

“I love you.” “I am here, and I am listening.” “I care.” “I forgive you.”

Words matter.

And God said, “Behold! This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”²⁴

Words matter.

And Jesus said, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door..."²⁵

Words matter.

And the Spirit says, "To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God."²⁶

Words matter.

Choose your words well today.

Lord, make me an instrument of peace,

When others are careless, let me choose my words well,

When others are thoughtless, let me still choose to bless with my words,

When others are hateful, let me choose to speak the truth in love.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to win arguments, as to express integrity,

to condescend, as to connect,

to belittle or berate, as to bless – always bless.

For words matter, and our words matter.

With our tongues we bless and with our tongues we curse.²⁷

O Lord, the Eternal Word, may I choose blessing today.

Go into the world... Notice words – your own and others'. Notice whether *your* words bless or curse. Do you tend toward the positive or negative? Toward unveiling truth or obscuring it? Do your words encourage or discourage? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 12:38-42

Some of the Scrupulous and Smart Guys said to Jesus, "Rabbi, delight us with your razzle, dazzle us with wonder." Jesus answered, "Twisted hearts seek razzle-dazzle, and your wishes betray you – says all anyone needs to know about what really matters to you. The only razzle-dazzle you will get is the example of Jonah, the truth-teller from ages past. Like Jonah, so Jesus. As one was in the belly of the great fish, so the other will be in the belly of the earth. As one was spewed on to dry land, so the other will walk the earth anew.

The people of Nineveh, ancient enemies of the Israelites who repented when confronted with the truth, will rise up on the Day of the Lord, rise up and rebuke, rise up and speak truth to power, for they bowed down before the truth, bowed down before the servant of the Lord. One greater than Jonah stands before you – do you think being spewed out by a great fish is anything special? You haven't seen anything yet!

The queen of the South will rise up on the Day of the Lord, rise up and speak truth to power, for she lived to listen, lived to hear God's wisdom from Solomon, and you do not notice, you cannot see – one greater than Solomon stands before you!

Spewed. Interesting word.

I do not think first about Jonah.

*My mind goes to words and feelings and opinions and social media and
NOISE!*

Too much spewing these days (for my taste).

*Yet the spewed we should notice is Jonah –
reluctant spirit of God's judgment,
unlikely vessel of God's mercy,
grumpy instrument of grace,
lesser servant of the one to come.*

Who gives not dazzle – but offers wholeness.

Who disdains dazzle – but longs to share joy.

Who, like the lesser servant, will redefine

Spewed.

Lord, make me an instrument of acceptance,
pleased with the grace I have received,
open to sharing what gifts have been given me,
knowing that God's person, even as shadow, is enough.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to find glitz and glamour, as to share in loving friend and neighbor,
stranger and enemy,
to marvel at miracles, as to find joy in the work of ministry,
to need a sign from above, as to relish the way of the servant.
For new life is hidden in the womb, knit together of desire and love,

brought forth by God as gift – foreshadow of eternity –
so are all God’s blessings hidden until revealed in the *kairos* moment.²⁸

Go into the world... Notice wanting to be impressed. How often at work or church, at home or school, do you desire razzle-dazzle? Are others’ efforts good enough for you? How do you find joy in “lesser offerings” faithfully given? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 12:43-45

“The demonic may leave for a time, even travel the earth, wandering hither and yon, yet will long for home. Finding no home in its travels the demonic will return looking for the familiar rhythms of destruction, the sharp tones of anger, the bright colors of self-absorption. It will recognize you. And upon finding its old “haunt” ready to move back in, the demonic says, ‘Ah, yes, here it is. I recognize this place. But a house is not a home all alone, so let me invite my seven friends over, too. We’ll have a party!’ And the person goes from bad to worse. Do you not see this pattern all around you today?”

“In that moment, while Jesus spoke to a throng of people, his mother and brothers stood outside, desiring to speak to him. Someone shouted to Jesus, “Look! Your family is standing there, outside. They want to speak to you.” And to the one who spoke of his family Jesus said, “I’ll tell you who my mother is, my brothers, my sisters, my family.” And Jesus pointed to his followers, saying, “Here. All around you are my mother, my brothers and sisters, my family. Anyone and everyone who shares a passion for my Abba’s will, who longs to live on earth as it is in heaven, that person is kin, and together we form a kin-dom of God’s heart.”

*Kin-dom looks beyond dogma, sees beyond denomination,
to the heart of a life being lived,
to the rhythm of a life seeking blessing
for neighbor and stranger, enemies and “frenemies,”
anyone and everyone who longs for a kin-dred spirit born of
love amidst the noise,
justice and joy amidst sorrow,*

connection with God, self, others and creation:

I to Thou as all in all.

*You see, the demonic can't return to its former home if
Kin-dom fills the empty spaces,*

Lord, make me a vessel filled to the brim,
full of Spirit nudges,
Spirit calling overflowing,
Spirit rhythms the dance of my life.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to wallow in my emptiness as to rejoice in your fullness,
to fret about what other folks say as to delight in your words,
to make a home for the demonic as to be at home in you.

For your kin-dom makes of me a part
of something greater than I can imagine,
a place where the first are last and the last are first,
where powerful are brought low and humble lifted up,
where kin are found when and where I least expect them,
a place—the only place—worthy of calling home.

Go into the world... Notice when you feel empty (as in depleted, unfulfilled, longing for something and you don't know what). When these moments come, do they occur in a particular setting or occasion, around certain persons or tasks? Take note of your emptiness and choose what you will do to fill it in a healthy, positive way. Whichever you choose, do so with intention. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:1-9

Jesus left the crowded house and went to sit by the sea, but his solitude did not last long. Crowds surrounded Jesus, pressing upon him, so he got into a boat while the crowd packed the beach. Jesus told them stories.

Hear! Listen! Understand! A farmer threw seed upon the land—all over and everywhere. Some seed fell on the walking path, and birds quickly pecked the seeds up. Other seed fell amidst rocks, where soil is

shallow, thus the plant had no deep roots and was scorched by the sun. Other seed fell among abundant but unruly growth without space to breath or to flourish and therefore gagged upon its own excess. Still other seed fell into the rich, dark soil of Mother Earth. This seed flourished and flowered and bore fruit—abundant fruit to feed a community. If you have ears, hear! Listen! Understand!

Throwing seed that leads to abundant fruit.

*Fruit to feed a family, and, even more,
a village.*

The fruit of loving-kindness and laughter and lessons on simplicity.

The fruit of care and compassion and sorrowing together.

The fruit of mercy and forgiveness and learning to live together anew

as the Reconciled and the Reconcilers,

as those so profoundly holy they are always humble,

as those who understand sacred should not lead to sanctimonious.

A village

needs such fruit, and, even more,

those who dare to throw the seed.

Lord, make me like a basket of fruit,
with the sweet taste of love and joy,
sliced into pieces of peace and patience,
filling a pie with kindness and generosity,
faithfulness and gentleness sprinkled on top,
and baked to perfection with self-control.²⁹

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to choose the soil in which I am sown as to grow where I am planted,
to worry about sun and water as to trust your harvest will be plentiful,
to direct what I shall be as to accept who I am.

For I am yours, O Sovereign Lover of all Creation,
and my life finds its meaning as I bear the fruit of your love:
in ways small, medium and large—30, 60, 100-fold—
but always for the sake of your glory, honor and praise.

Go into the world... Notice the fruit of the Spirit in yourself and others. Notice and celebrate what you do well. Notice and appreciate what others do well. Ask God for more! Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:10-17

Those closest to Jesus, his devoted, wondered aloud, “Why do you speak like you do? Your teaching sounds like riddles.”

Jesus replied, “I speak thus because God’s mysteries are only fathomed as intimacy—one must be known to know—and accepted as a gift. Those who grasp and grab lose what little they try to hold on to, but those who receive a gift with open hearts and open hands, will be given more than they can imagine. What you call riddles, I call Stories of God’s Ways, as Isaiah, the truth-teller from ages past, said:⁵⁰

They see yet are blind; they hear yet are deaf.
You say you see but do you understand?
You say you hear but do you perceive?
O People of God, whose hearts have become stone,
if you stop your ears, if you shut your eyes,
how can you expect to understand?
How will you ever turn to me that I may heal you?

But you who are my devoted, blessed are your eyes that see and blessed are your ears that hear. I tell you the truth, truth-tellers and justice-seekers have longed to see what you see and did not see it; hear what you hear and did not hear it.”

*The act of looking is different from seeing,
the act of hearing different from listening.
My wife calls from the bedroom closet while I am in the kitchen:
two walls and three corners separate us.
Does she not get it that I cannot understand what she says?
And yet, because I love her,
I stop what I am doing and walk to the bedroom and say,
“Did you say something, dear?”
I want to do more than look—I want to see.*

I want to do more than bear—I want to listen.

I want more than riddles—I want understanding,

For I long for the gift of God's intimacy—to know as I am known.

Lord, make me an instrument of holy listening:
to my beloved,
to my kinfolk,
to the gathering of saints,
to the hurting among us,
to the least, the last and the lost,
to those without voice.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to insist my own voice is heard as to listen to your Word,
to tune into the world's NOISE! as to listen for your Spirit's whisper,
to learn the ways of Empire as to become an apprentice of your reign
For your realm is the path of mystery only embraced as a gift
and leads to a holy intimacy for those with ears to hear and eyes to see.

Go into the world... Notice what draws your attention. When are you focused, tuned in, fully present? When are you distant, distracted, there but not there? Covenant to the practice of being present for 5-20 minutes today. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:18-23

“Listen! Here is the meaning of the story of the seeds and dirt and the farmer with a bad arm or bad aim or, perhaps, a better plan. When someone hears the Story of God's Sovereign love but doesn't get it, can't comprehend the how or why, it's like the Evil One himself has snatched away the Word from their heart. This is the seed on the walking path. The seed amidst the rocks is like someone who gets jazzed when hearing the Word but has no rhythm, and the music quickly fades. When a discordant note sounds—trouble or tribulation because of the Word—the music stops altogether. The seed that fell among the abundant but unruly growth had no space, couldn't slow down enough even to take a breath, and choked on its own schedule. There was life for a time but no fruit—it's

hard to bear fruit when you can't breathe. But the seed thrown into the rich, dark soil of Mother Earth is like someone who looks and sees, who hears and listens, who gets it—gets the Word!—and their abundance comes from God, not just to them but through them to those close and far, to their family and neighbors and the entire village.”

Amazing this grace from a God who has neither a bad arm nor bad aim but a better plan than I could ever imagine.

Surely God, the Sower, knows about land:

the hard, dirt path,

the rocky soil,

the parcel overrun with thorns.

And yet God sows the seed

anyway

you might hear the Word, know the Word, trust the Word,

bump into God's love by accident or happenstance or design,

stumble across grace,

tumble down the stairs that lead to Hell only to find a sign that says

next stop Heaven,

if you can only trust that God has

a better plan than you could ever imagine.

Surely God, the Sower, knows about you.

Lord, make me a thrower of seed,
not just to those I know want to hear the Word,
not just to those I suspect are willing to hear the Word,
not even to those who I guess will tolerate the Word,
but also to the closed-minded,
and the hard-hearted,
and the clenched-fisted.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to compel as to suggest,
to argue as to wonder,
to persuade as to live a winsome life.

For it is the nature of your grace
not to draw lines with which to define who is in and who is out,

but to hope—always hope—that those out in the cold will one day enter the warm embrace of your love.

Go into the world... Notice when and to whom you are willing to speak of the God-life. What seems to give you “permission” to speak? What holds you back? Covenant to asking a question about the God-life of another (with whom you do not ordinarily have conversations about God). Please note the covenant is to ask a question, not make a statement. Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus told the devoted yet another story: “The rule of God’s Sovereign love is like a farmer throwing good seed in his field. At night while the farmer slept, the farmer’s enemy came and tossed weed seeds all over the same ground and then snuck away. The good seeds sprouted wheat and at the same time the weed seeds sprouted and looked quite similar to the wheat.

“The farmer’s hired hands approached and said, ‘I thought you threw good seed. Where did these weeds come from? Do you want us to go pull the weeds?’

“The farmer responded, ‘No, don’t pull the weeds because you might harm the wheat. My enemy did this. It’s not your problem to worry about—leave the weeds. Good wheat needs to be nurtured even if it means letting some weeds grow alongside it. When the harvest comes, we’ll sort the wheat and the weeds. That which is weeds will be burned like garbage and that which is wheat will be part of my celebration.’”

In one and the same soul.

The dividing line between good and evil.

Living side by side.

Breathing the same air.

Seeing the same face in the mirror.

One nurtures the eternal,

while the other becomes fuel.

One feeds body and soul,

while the other spreads like disease.

*One remains,
while the other is consumed.
What of my today is wheat?
What is weeds?
And do I recognize the difference?*

Lord, make me a farmer of wheat,
throwing seeds of compassion,
watering the growth of justice,
nurturing a land that leads to *shalom*,
enduring the indignity of waiting to judge,
accepting it is not my job,
rejecting the temptation to pull others' weeds.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to stand in judgment as to kneel before your Cross,
to look for the speck as to remove the log,³¹
to decide who's in and out as to live as if
the rule of your Sovereign love guides all that I do.
For only that which belongs to you will endure,
the weedy part of me will become fuel for eternal fire,
and the part of me that belongs to you
will sit around the Table of your Harvest Celebration.

Go into the world... Notice your intentions. What motivates you? How conscious are you, in the moment, of your intentions and motivations? As you examine yourself, are you kidding yourself or being honest? This is between you and God, so don't worry about having to prove something—are you living according to your True Self, your best you? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:31-32

Jesus told yet another story: “The rule of God’s Sovereign love is like a strand of DNA—invisible to the eye yet containing all that is necessary to grow life, and when fully grown becomes the tree of life upon which the birds of the air find their home.”

Bigger is better—more, More, MORE!

Go viral!!

My tweets rock 1.2 million followers!!!

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.³²

Unobserved, we make a difference

one small act of love at a time.

*Our service “rocks” no one but is part of a larger plan
of the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve.³³*

Lord, take all that we are and have to offer,

little though it be,

and use it for love’s sake.

And the Lord will add thirty, sixty and one-hundred-fold³⁴

Lord, make me like the mustard seed,

though small, mighty,

though scraggly, life giving,

though like a bush, called a tree,

with growth encoded into my being,

living beyond others’ expectations,

providing a home for the birds of the air whom you cause to nest within
me.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to go viral as to live with virtue,

to believe the hype as to trust the holy,

to make the big splash as to be the pebble in the pond.

For mustard seeds do not grow quickly into that which is your design,

but, over time, become that which, by your design,

nurtures life and provides *shalom*.

Go into the world... Notice small acts of kindness today. From you, toward you, and around you. Notice their impact and influence. Notice the moments that lead to these small acts of kindness. What is your state of mind or heart that you offer them or recognize they have been offered? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:33-35

Jesus told yet another story: “The rule of God’s Sovereign love is like the yeast a woman hides in flour. Though small and hidden, the yeast is at work, leavening the entire loaf, the hidden revealed in taste and texture.”

Jesus taught the gathered about the rule of God’s Sovereign love in stories and with some form of tale or bit of anecdote Jesus seemed to say everything. He did this to complete the word spoken by the truth-teller from ages past:

I will open my mouth;
 stories I will tell.
I will proclaim hidden truth;
 revealing mysteries from the foundation of the world.

I never actually saw Ms. Virginia play the role of God.

*I saw her smile at children, laugh with friends, and hold the hands of the dying,
but play the role of God?*

No, not Ms. Virginia.

And Ms. Maria? Did she ever even once create the cosmos?

No, but she kneaded the bread of hospitality and baked marvelous loaves of community.

I can still smell the aroma of her goodness.

Do you know Ms. Virginia or Ms. Maria?

Probably not. My guess is that their lives are hidden to you,

but the yeast of their faith I cannot forget,

for I have feasted at the Lord’s Table through them.

Lord, make me like a woman baking bread,
not in a sexist way as “That’s women’s work,”
but in the way of a gifted chef as “Wow! That’s amazing!”
Not to bake Wonder Bread for mass production,
but to bake something worthy of a community feast!
Not to bring myself praise,
but to provide, to delight, to nurture those whom you love.
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

acclaim as influence,
approval as impact,
to make an impression as to make a difference.
For hidden acts of love are not hidden from your sight,
but are held in the courts of heaven
as a foreshadowing of that which is to come on earth.

Go into the world... Notice hidden things that you cannot see except for their effect in the world, except for the grace that is birthed because someone chose to live the God-life according to God-rhythms. Is there something you do that no one else sees but which is your gift to the world? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:36-43

Jesus left the gathered and went into a house. His devoted approached him concerned about his story of the weeds. Jesus replied, “I will tell you about both the wheat and the weeds. The one who throws the good seed is the Son of Humanity. The field is the world—all culture and all society, presidents and prime ministers, all families and all faiths. The good seed that grows wheat is the offspring of the God-life and God-rhythms. The bad seed that grows weeds is the offspring of the Evil One, who threw the bad seed into the world. The Harvest of Celebration at the culmination of time will be fulfilled by God’s messengers. At that time, the Son of Humanity will send his messengers to sort the weeds from the wheat, to purify God’s storehouses of the sin that destroys and those committed to evil³⁵ and to consume with fire all that is weedy. There will be sorrow and dismay on that Day. But those who seek right relationships with God and others will shine bright like the sun according to the rule of God’s Sovereign love. Let those with ears, listen!”

*At the funeral I speak hope and eulogy, the good word.³⁶
On and on I prattle, all sunny and nice. And I wonder,
“Am I telling the truth about this person—the deceased?”
Does it really matter? Perhaps at times it does:
when speaking only good obscures, confuses, adds to victimization.*

*Some weeds must be pulled publicly, or at least referenced, or not lied about.
But sometimes the speaking of good is more than spin. It is
foreshadowing
of that time when the weeds will have been pulled already
and only wheat remains—
humble grain for holy Table—
around which God's saints and angels will gather in joyous celebration
with the likes of the deceased, (usually),
and me (I pray).*

Lord, help me speak the truth of others' goodness,
seeing the wheat, not the weeds,
honoring the holy, not the broken,
rejoicing in all right relationship, thin though it may be,
even speaking goodness into being, if such a thing is possible.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to spot lies, as to notice truth in all its wondrous manifestations,
to call out wrong, as to call forth compassion,
to weed the garden as to plant seeds of justice.

For you are the One who calls things that are not as if they are,³⁷
and will at the culmination of all things harvest seeds of justice and joy,
that are planted within us, waiting to be nurtured, seeking to be fruit,
ready to live according to your grace, mercy, and peace.

Go into the world... Notice opportunities to resist the temptation to judgment. Instead of lamenting the loss of chivalry, practicing the presence of kindness. Notice grace in yourself and grace through others. Name it—speak more grace into the world! Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:44-50

Jesus told a series of three quick stories about the rhythm of the God-life and God-love. “The rule of God’s Sovereign love is like treasure hiding in a field, which someone found and hid even better. In their joy they sold everything they owned to buy the field.

“Or again: the rule of God’s Sovereign love is like a treasure hunter; on finding the perfect pearl, the treasure hunter sold everything they owned to buy it.

“Or again: the rule of God’s Sovereign love is like the best fishing expedition ever! When the net was pulled up, every kind of fish imaginable was found in the net—seahorses and whales, eels and trout, sharks and lobster. When the net was finally dragged to shore, the good fish were gathered for the feast but the bad were tossed aside. So will it be at the culmination of the age: God’s messengers will separate good from bad, throwing broken relationships, deceptive words, and oppressive acts into a fire that will consume all within it, and evil will sorrow and lament.”

*Meeting your best friend forever in third grade—would you give it up?
The wiggly squeal of the heart the first time you saw your beloved—give it up?
Sex the first time (or the hundredth, when you know your beloved so well)—give it up?
Holding your child for the first time (or having that child finally sleep)—give it up?
The promotion, finally, into your dream job—give it up?
Knowing you are eternally beloved by the Creator of the Universe—give it up?
Being a part of bringing good into the world—give it up?
Rejoicing with all around you as the arc of history bends toward justice—give it up?
An answered prayer—give it up?
A word of hope at your parent’s funeral (or, God forbid, your child’s)—give it up?
What would you be willing to give up to be a part of the rule of God’s Sovereign love?
Thank you, God, I have not been asked to choose between you and these things
today,
while others of these things are a part of
the joy I know, the treasure I have found, the right relationships that express
the rule of God’s Sovereign love
forever.*

Lord, make me an instrument of gladness,
rejoicing in the hidden treasure of your grace,
delighting in the found treasure of your mercy,
elated by the pearl of your peace.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
treasure that is temporary as to live a better Way,

to have more stuff as to share a deeper Truth,
to live the American Dream as to welcome an eternal Life.
For it is in the rule of your Sovereign love that can be found
a joy for which all other things might be forfeit
for a goodness and a grace to be gained forever.

Go into the world... Notice your moods. When are you a “Little Mr./Ms. Grumpy Pants” and when are you a “Little Mr./Ms. Sunshine”? What focus helps you be open to joy? What helps you embrace thanksgiving? Notice. Pray. Act.

Matthew 13:51-58

“Do you understand?” Jesus asked the devoted.

“Yes!” they answered.

“Then you are like the rabbi trained for heaven, blending old and new, revealing treasures, becoming Master of the household for the sake of the God-life of those who live there.” And Jesus left that place and returned to his hometown.

In his hometown Jesus started teaching his neighbors, formally and officially, with great learning. His neighbors were amazed with his wisdom and the news of his power. “How can this be?” they wondered. “Don’t we know him and his family? The carpenter’s son, right? And Mary is his mother and James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers. His sisters are right here, for goodness’ sake. How can this man have gained all this wisdom growing up in this family, in one of our families?” They were offended by Jesus’ presumption.

Jesus responded, “Truth is received at a distance but rejected up close; truth-tellers welcomed by strangers but not in their own home.” And Jesus only showed them a smidge of what he could do and what he was about—a smidge of the God-life was all they could handle.

I was the brother told not to mention God at the wedding.

I was the sister invited to do Mom’s funeral so long as I didn’t express an opinion.

I was the child welcomed to pray at the family reunion so long as I wasn’t thoughtful or clever or seeking to express the mysteries of the God-life or

God forbid!

inviting others to dance to God-rhythms!

We are the seminary-trained pastors of families

whose vocation is clouded in mystery—aka in confusion—for those closest to us.

It can feel like willful ignorance on the part of our families, and certainly condescending, but perhaps it is merely an expression of Jesus' ancient wisdom.

And so we do what the Master did: we do the best we can—we share a smidge.

Lord, make me a purveyor of the smidge,
knowing I'll be dismissed yet showing up,
comfortable on the sidelines yet ready when needed,
possessing depths yet swimming in the shallows,
able to soar yet staying grounded,
trusting another will give, will share, will express
that which must, of necessity, remain hidden within me.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek
to be the next St. Francis as to express simple compassion,
to write like John Calvin as to perform magic with a brief note,
to preach like MLK as to be able to pray a prayer at Thanksgiving
that is neither trite nor demeaning but conveys the deep love I have
for those who only want a smidge.

For ministry is not about me and my feelings,
never has been, never will be,
but about meeting people where they are,
giving them what they can handle—no more, no less,
and being okay with that, even if it's only
a smidge.

Go into the world... Notice who around you is able to receive and who is not. Notice your own bruised ego or acceptance, your own hurt feelings or humility, when you encounter those who only want a smidge. Notice. Pray. Act.

¹ c.f. 2 Samuel 13:7-15, in which one of David's sons, Amnon, rapes his sister, Tamar.

² *ibid.*

³ The last couplet is a paraphrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's seminal work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he reflects upon the differences between cheap grace and costly grace.

⁴ c.f. 2 Kings 4:32-37.

⁵ This verse is usually translated "compassion" and "...guts spilled out upon the ground" is, literally, the definition of compassion in the first-century Greek context, a visceral image, to be sure.

⁶ It is said that some disciples even followed their rabbi into the lavatory in case the rabbi said something while relieving themselves.

⁷ The Greek word is *apostoleos* is the noun form of the verb "to send," and from *apostoleos* we get "apostle," which literally means "sent one."

⁸ This stanza paraphrases lines from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's seminal work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which Bonhoeffer distinguishes between cheap grace and costly grace, saying that only costly grace, which asks much and indeed everything from those who would follow Jesus, is worthy of the name discipleship.

⁹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, (1987).

¹⁰ This is a paraphrase of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quote that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

¹¹ c.f. Isaiah 11:6-9.

¹² Jesus quotes Micah 7:6, which in its larger context discusses the perversion of Israel,

The faithful have disappeared from the land,
and there is no one left who is upright;
they all lie in wait for blood,
and they hunt each other with nets.

³Their hands are skilled to do evil;
the official and the judge ask for a bribe,
and the powerful dictate what they desire;
thus they pervert justice. (7:1-3)

The turmoil in Israel forces one to choose whom to trust. Even neighbor and family are untrustworthy when justice is perverted. Only the Lord can be trusted,

Put no trust in a friend,
 have no confidence in a loved one;
guard the doors of your mouth
 from her who lies in your embrace;
for the son treats the father with contempt,
 the daughter rises up against her mother,
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
 your enemies are members of your own household.
But as for me, I will look to the LORD,
 I will wait for the God of my salvation;
 my God will hear me. (7:5-7)

¹³ This line and the next two lines are taken from the inscription on the Statue of Liberty.

¹⁴ c.f. Isaiah 35:5-6, 61:1-2.

¹⁵ This common phenomenon is called “the Fundamental Attribution Error.”

¹⁶ In the first century, a rabbi’s teaching was known as the rabbi’s yoke.

¹⁷ c.f. 1 Samuel 21:6.

¹⁸ The Hebrew word *shekinah* refers to the fullness of God’s presence and is often associated with the light and life associated with God’s presence. The word “glory” is often coupled with it, *shekinah glory*, to convey full weight and measure of awe of God’s presence. The Jerusalem Temple was said to be the one place on earth where God’s *shekinah glory* was found in its fullness.

¹⁹ c.f. Hosea 6:6.

²⁰ c.f. Colossians 2:14.

²¹ This parenthetical is not in the original text but is inserted as a cautionary word to the reader. It is too easy to assume that “destroy” means “kill” because we know the end of the story: arrest, trial, cross, etc. However, at this juncture in the Gospel, it remains unclear what the Pharisees, (who I have paraphrased as “the Scrupulous”) intend.

²² c.f. Isaiah 42:1-7. What I paraphrase as “outsiders” is literally “Gentiles” (Hebrew: *goyyim*) and what Matthew speaks of as “hope” is generalized from Isaiah, which is far more specific. The hope in Isaiah 42:7 is “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

²³ Quoted in *Reading for Preaching*, Cornelius Plantinga. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 2013, p. 63.

²⁴ c.f. Matthew 3:17.

²⁵ c.f. Revelation 3:20.

²⁶ c.f. Revelation 2:7.

²⁷ C.f. James 3:1-12.

²⁸ *Kairos* is one of the Greek words for “time” and connotes the key moment when something important is to occur. “Honey, it’s time,” said by nine-month pregnant women to her partner is *kairos*.

²⁹ c.f. Galatians 5:22-23 for the list of the fruit of the Spirit.

³⁰ c.f. Isaiah 6:9-10.

³¹ c.f. Matthew 7:3.

³² c.f. Ecclesiastes 1:2.

³³ c.f. Mark 10:43.

³⁴ c.f. Matthew 13:8

³⁵ Commentators interpret the parable of the wheat and weeds in two directions: both as referring to two sets of people and as referring to two ethical and spiritual natures within one individual. The first interpretive lens leads to divisions between “just” and “unjust” or “good” and “bad.” The second interpretive lens recognizes the internal struggle within each soul. Although the interpretation found here focuses on the second interpretation, the author recognizes that this phrase suggests both interpretations.

³⁶ Eulogy comes from the Greek *logos*, meaning word, and prefix *eu*, meaning good.

³⁷ c.f. Romans 4:17.