



# One Heart Lent Program

This Lent, you are invited to participate in the **One Heart Lent Program**, an effort to help feed hungry people in Lawrence, MA. The **One Heart Lent Program** offers this daily guide for Lenten reflections, as well as a unique opportunity to help feed some of our neediest brothers and sisters through our Lenten almsgiving.

## LENT

Lent, the period of weeks leading up to Holy Week and Easter, is a unique gift from God. During Lent, we are invited to renew our relationships with God, turn away from sin, and experience reconciliation with God and others.

We traditionally embrace three disciplines during Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. None of these is an end in itself. Instead, each discipline helps us better focus on God and on living God's love.

## PRAYER

The goal of Lenten prayer is to dedicate more of ourselves to building our relationships with God. To make best use of this **One Heart Lent Program Guide**, you are invited to set aside some period of time each day during Lent (perhaps half an hour) to communicate with God through reflective prayer. Each day, you are invited to read in your bible the Gospel passage listed in this guide, and then to consider the reflections and questions for the day. If possible, it is very helpful to make notes after your reflections each day.

## FASTING

Through fasting, we recall that God gives us all the gifts we have in life – not just food, but also breath, health, speech, thought, love, and every material good. By choosing to deny ourselves some food and drink during Lent, we gain a better perspective on all of the material blessings God gives to us. In addition to observing the Church's Lenten regulations for fasting (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) and abstinence (from meat on Fridays), each of us chooses particular ways to fast during Lent.

## ALMSGIVING

Almsgiving is our sharing the best of our treasure with people who are in need. All that we are and all that we have are gifts from God. It is tempting to grasp those gifts for ourselves, without considering God or other people. When we sacrifice the best of our gifts for people in need, we become better focused on God and others. We grow closer to God and all of our brothers and sisters by living God's generous love.

The **One Heart Lent Program** is a fantastic focus for Lenten almsgiving. The **One Heart Lent Program** raises money to help feed hungry people in Lawrence, MA. In Lawrence today, 75% of children are at risk for hunger. The **One Heart Lent Program** raises money to provide free, nutritious meals in Lawrence through the **Cor Unum Meal Center**. ("Cor Unum" means "One Heart" in Latin.) Cor Unum serves meals to hundreds of people every day, 365 days a year. **100% of the alms you contribute to the One Heart Lent Program will help provide food through Cor Unum.**

**To participate in the One Heart Lent Program, all you need is an open heart, the desire to grow in the Lord, and a jar.**

# ASH WEDNESDAY and the FIRST DAYS OF LENT

## Wednesday, 3/5 (Ash Wednesday): Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18

Most of us are rightfully bothered by people who are fakes. Fakes are people who present themselves to the world as something they're not. Fakes exist in every time and place . . . and we seem to have an overabundance of fakes in our society today. In the Church, when we learn that a person - especially a leader - is living a life deeply contradictory to the teachings of Jesus, we are scandalized by his/her hypocrisy, dishonesty, and spiritual corruption. In just over six weeks, we will be invited to enter into the holiest days of the year - the Easter Triduum. At the Easter Vigil or on Easter Sunday, hundreds of millions of us around the world will stand up in public and profess that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, that He has risen from the dead, and that we are His disciples (His followers). When we make that public profession of faith at Easter, to what extent will we be fakes, and to what extent will we be authentic disciples of Jesus? "Authentic" means being true to the original - not being false. Lent is the period of six weeks in which many people focus day by day on growing as authentic disciples of Jesus by turning away from sin and living more faithfully as His followers. We hear the first part of the spiritual agenda for Lent when we are blessed with ashes today: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." As we begin Lent, it is important to be maximally clear with God and ourselves what are our intentions this season. Spend time in prayer today speaking directly and honestly to God about this. To what extent do you intend to intensely, sincerely turn away from sin and work to grow as a more authentic follower of Jesus every day during the next six weeks? What are your goals? Why are you pursuing them? What disciplines do you plan to pursue to keep yourself spiritually focused for the next six weeks? When you've been clear with God about your intentions for Lent, ask Him for the grace to be true to them for the next six weeks. It may be helpful to write down your intentions as a reference later in Lent.

## ALMSGIVING!

To begin Lent, put a **One Heart Lent Program** wrapper on an empty jar. Place your jar in a location that is very visible to you, and each day during Lent place in it an amount of money that will be a reasonable daily sacrifice for you. Your sacrifice will help feed some of the neediest of our brothers and sisters through the Cor Unum Meal Center.

## Thursday, 3/6: Luke 9.22-25

Yesterday, we reflected on the first part of our spiritual agenda for the next six weeks of Lent: repenting of our sin and growing as more authentic followers of Jesus. Today's Gospel passage from Luke 9 adds more specifics to that spiritual agenda. This text describes uniquely important and straightforward instructions from Jesus about what anyone in any generation who wishes to follow Him **MUST** do to authentically follow Him. That means us today . . . and especially us if we're actually going to live Lent. We are entirely free to accept or reject Jesus' instructions here, but if we do wish to follow Him, He says we **MUST** follow these three clear teachings. The teachings are: (1) Anyone who wishes to follow Jesus **MUST** deny himself/herself. That means that anyone who wishes to follow Jesus must remove himself/herself from the center of his/her life and put Jesus at the center of his/her life. If you want to grow as an authentic disciple of Jesus this Lent, do you intend daily to deny yourself as the center of your life and put Jesus at the center of your life? (2) Anyone who wishes to follow Jesus **MUST** take up his/her cross daily. That means you must accept whatever passion, challenge, and effort is involved in following Jesus. Are you willing to do that every day for the next six weeks? (3) Anyone who wishes to follow Jesus **MUST** . . . follow Him. That means you must persist (and persist and persist) in your effort to follow Jesus. Do you intend to persist in striving to follow Jesus every day for the next six weeks? Jesus' instructions here about the necessary conditions of discipleship are not a test or an obstacle course or a heavy burden. They are a gift. Without accepting these three teachings day by day, we cannot grow as authentic disciples of Jesus. If we accept the gift of these instructions, we take another very positive step into the grace of Lent. Today, reflect on and speak directly to Jesus about these teachings and your specific intentions for embracing each of them during Lent. It might again be helpful to make some notes for yourself for future reference during Lent.

### **Friday, 3/7: Matthew 9.14-15**

In today's reading from Matthew 9, Jesus makes clear the purpose of fasting: It is a physical discipline that helps bridge the gap between people and God. Jesus explains here that while He is physically present among His disciples, they do not fast. In saying this, Jesus lays out a clue about who He is. (Jesus' disciples do not need to fast when they are in His physical presence because, when He is physically with them, there is no gap between them and God. That is because Jesus is the eternal Son of God.) Describing the future - the time after His ascension to heaven - Jesus states that His disciples will fast. Authentic disciples of Jesus in every time and place embrace physical fasting. That means us during Lent. Healthy fasting assists our prayer, focuses us on things spiritual, increases our gratitude for God's gifts, deepens our solidarity with people in need, and fosters our sacrificial generosity. Leading up to Easter, the Church's official regulations for fasting and abstinence are extremely minimal - two days of moderate fasting (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) and seven Fridays of abstinence from meat. If these regulations are very challenging for you, you should make an appointment with a dietician. Today, spend time reviewing your personal plans for fasting this Lent, which hopefully extend beyond the Church's requirements. What is reasonable, healthy, sacrificial fasting from food and drink that will positively support your spiritual focus during the next six weeks? Do you consume alcohol or recreational drugs from which you should fast during Lent? Talk to God about this and confirm your plans with God and yourself. As the weeks of Lent unfold, if you do not see a direct connection between your fasting and your repentance and increasing in Christian action - or if your fasting proves to be an end in itself, not connected to real spiritual growth - you may need to adjust your fasting.

### **Saturday, 3/8: Luke 5.27-32**

In Jesus' time and place, many people believe that a holy person should avoid contact with sinful people, lest that holy person be defiled by the sinfulness of sinful people. In today's text from Luke 5, certain religious leaders are scandalized when Jesus invites a presumably sinful man (Levi) to follow him, and then shares a great banquet with a large group of presumably sinful people. If Jesus is a holy man, why does He associate so intimately with sinners? Will this contact not defile Him? These religious leaders ask Jesus: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus responds directly to their question: "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners." Jesus is the eternal Son of God who comes to this world to enter directly into the lives of sinful people in order to call them to repentance, forgive their sins, and lead them to the path of holiness. Jesus cannot be defiled by our sins. He enters into our sinfulness in order to purify us of our sin, and to offer us the way of salvation. "Purifying us" of our sins means His reaching into our lives and removing our sins. For Him to do that, we have to say "Yes" to His doing so. As you reflect on this passage, consider the extent to which you genuinely welcome Jesus, the Son of God, to reach into your current sinfulness during Lent, to share with you His mercy, and lead you to a new path of holiness. Jesus will not be defiled by your sin. However, He does want to remove your sin. All of it. To what extent at this point do you really want that to happen? Are you aware of areas of your sinfulness that you don't want Jesus to touch and remove?

## **THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT**

### **Sunday, 3/9: Luke 4.1-13**

Before He begins His public ministry, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days, where He experiences strong temptations by the devil to choose to live His life according to the terms of the devil, rather than according to the terms of God, His Father. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, lives a fully human life, truly experiences the temptations of the devil, and chooses to live according the will of His Father. During the upcoming First Week of Lent, you will be invited to reflect on Jesus' fundamental teaching about the most important choices you make every day of your life that determine how He judges you at the end of your life and today. You will also be invited to focus your private prayer on the uniquely important prayer Jesus instructs His disciples to pray. Our spiritual exercise this week will be to focus on these two fundamental teachings every day during the week. In your prayer time today, speak directly

with God about your desire and commitment to enter into this spiritual exercise during this First Week of Lent. No one is forcing you to do this. You must choose. If you intend to enter into the exercise, do not read ahead in this prayer guide. Read only one day at a time. If you read ahead, you risk botching the week.

### **ALMSGIVING!**

During the past few days, you hopefully have figured out how you will fast during Lent. This week, calculate the cost of the food from which you are fasting during Lent, and add that to your **One Heart Lent Program** jar. By doing this, you are both offering your fast to God and directly offering the equivalent of what you would have eaten to help feed the hungry.

### **Monday, 3/10: Matthew 25.31-46**

Today's text from Matthew 25 is a unique gift. In it, Jesus describes in detail how He judges us at the end of our lives. The content of Jesus' judgement reveals what fundamentally matters for our being alive in Him eternally and now. When He judges us, Jesus does not ask us any questions. He does not invite us to explain or defend ourselves. He does not request any input from us. When Jesus judges us, He repeats back to us how we have chosen to live our lives. The choices on which He focuses are very specific. Jesus tells us that He was present in "the least" people we encountered in our lives. When we encountered these "least" people, we recognized their needs. After we recognized these people's needs, we made one of two choices: either to enter into those needs and meet them, or to not enter into those needs and not meet them. Jesus is entirely clear: In "the least" people we encounter, He is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, ill, and imprisoned. When we recognize those people's needs, we choose to respond either by feeding Jesus, giving drink to Jesus, welcoming Jesus, clothing Jesus, caring for Jesus, and visiting Jesus . . . OR by not feeding Jesus, not giving drink to Jesus, not welcoming Jesus, not clothing Jesus, not caring for Jesus, and not visiting Jesus. When Jesus repeats back our choices to us, He presumably makes references to where we lived, the particulars of our work and studies, and what we possessed materially. However, the substance of His judgement is one reality: our choices to live selfless, merciful, serving, sacrificial love for people in need, AND our choices not to live selfless, merciful, serving, sacrificial love for people in need: particularly people who are considered "the least." Beginning today, make it your central agenda each day this week to focus on recognizing the needs of people you encounter (particularly "the least") and taking concrete action to address those needs. Within the regular busyness of your life, make this the focus. We will add reflections each day. If you don't feel like doing this, good luck at that judgment.

### **Tuesday, 3/11: Matthew 6.7-15**

Our spiritual exercise each day this week is to focus on recognizing the needs of people we encounter (particularly "the least") and taking concrete action to address those needs. Keep that as your central goal as you live this Tuesday. As you do that, add this reflection: Today's reading from Matthew 6 includes the prayer commonly called the "Lord's Prayer" or the "Our Father". Of the many ways Jesus prays publicly and privately, when He teaches His disciples (which means us today) how to pray prayer, He gives very specific instructions: Pray the Our Father. Jesus seems to suggest that whenever and however we pray, the Our Father should be part of our prayer. Today, and each day for the rest of this week, do as much as you can to simplify your private prayer by focusing on the Our Father. You are not being asked to abandon the other ways you pray privately. However, focus as much as you can on praying these sentences: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." This is not at all about repeating the Our Father over and over again. Quite the opposite. Each time you pray the Our Father today and the rest of this week, first be conscious that you are speaking directly to God your Father. Take it slowly . . . perhaps just one phrase at a time. Reflect on what you mean on this day of your life when you speak a phrase of the Our Father to God your Father. You may end up focusing for an extended period on just one phrase. Don't spend time analyzing or evaluating this experience. Simply do it.

### **Wednesday 3/12: Luke 11.29-32**

In this passage from Luke 11, Jesus addresses certain people who want Him to perform an extraordinary sign for them, presumably to give them the sort of evidence they demand in order to accept Him. Jesus states that He will give these people no sign, "except the sign of Jonah". In the Old Testament, Jonah is sent by God to preach repentance to the pagan people of Nineveh, who are considered terribly evil. When the people of Nineveh hear God's word spoken to them by God's true messenger, they respond positively. They repent of their sin and open themselves to God. Jonah's preaching God's call to repentance is the only sign the people of Nineveh need. Perhaps you sometimes wish Jesus would do something in your life to increase your faith in Him. Today is one week since Ash Wednesday. The great news is that if you have been actively living Lent, it turns out that you have needed no greater sign from Jesus to increase your faith in Him than hearing these words: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." If you have been doing this, you have received His sign and accepted it. Consider that today. Additionally, consider this: The world around you is consciously and unconsciously looking for signs to help even consider the possibility that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. The realities of secularization and the scandalous sinfulness of Christians harm the credibility of Jesus in our society and the world. The fact is that the people around you who seek a sign to consider the truth of who Jesus is need no greater sign than this: YOUR turning away from your sin and YOUR growing as an authentic disciple of Jesus. Reflect on that today. Through the day, continue (1) focusing on recognizing the needs of people you encounter and taking concrete action to address those needs - which is Matthew 25.31-46 - and (2) focusing your private prayer on the Our Father. What you are doing is important for you and the world.

### **Thursday, 3/13: Matthew 7.7-12**

In today's text from Matthew, Jesus teaches: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." He goes on to state: "For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Jesus explains that if we, with our sinfulness, know how to give good gifts to our children, "how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him." Jesus here opens up some insights into the mystery of how God responds to our petitions. The end of the teaching is clear: God our Father will give good things to those who ask Him. As children, we typically think whatever we want from our parents is a good thing. As it turns out, many things we want are not at all good. The same goes with God: Many of the things we at a given moment may be sure would be good for us turn out not to be so. As children, we often think that whatever we want from our parents should be given to us NOW. As it turns out, the timing of our parents' giving us good things may be quite different from our desires. The same goes with God: God's timing in giving us good things may be quite different from our desires. Add to that the reality of human interference: Hundreds of millions of hungry people around the world today are asking God to give them food. There is more than enough surplus food in the world for them to be fed. There's no question God wants to give them that food. For that to happen, other people need to freely cooperate with God and give them that food. They often don't. Knowing that many of those hungry people will die today, it must be that God will answer their prayer in eternal life. With the mystery and the insights all this brings, reflect on this today: God will give you all good things. What those good things are and when you will receive them will unfold over time, including eternal time. What you can definitely know today is that you are doing God's will and growing in relationship with Him. Consider that as a motivation to continue to actively focus today on living Matthew 25.31-46 and praying the Our Father.

### **Friday, 3/14: Matthew 5.20-26**

In today's passage from Matthew 5, Jesus says to His disciples (people who are actually trying to follow Him) that He's not looking for the minimal practice of God's love. Some Christians think they are entirely good with God if they haven't committed monstrous sins: "Well, I haven't killed anyone." Congratulations, you haven't killed anyone. Jesus makes clear here that He cares entirely about our deeper violations against other people: anger, writing-off, abusive and cruel treatment. Similarly, Jesus makes clear here that He cares about more than even good religious practices. If you are engaged in the very positive religious act of bringing your gift to the altar . . . but recall someone has something against you . . . you should leave your gift at the altar, go first and be reconciled with that person, and then return to offer your gift. Consider in your prayer today that Jesus is not just looking for you to not murder people or

perform good religious deeds. He is looking for you to love as He loves. If that is what you are trying to do in focusing today on living more actively Matthew 25.31-46 and growing more profoundly in your relationship with God through the Our Father, you are on the right track.

### **Saturday, 3/15: Matthew 5.43-48**

In this text from Matthew 5, Jesus tells His disciples: “But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” When we are new to Christian discipleship . . . or following Jesus only on a surface level . . . this teaching can be difficult. We may have little willingness to love our enemies or pray for people who persecute us. The wonderful news is that as we grow in living authentic Christian discipleship, Jesus puts everyone and everything into a very different light, including our worst enemies and persecutors. To focus on the content of this week’s spiritual exercise, if we accept as the long-term daily agenda of our lives (1) living the love revealed in Matthew 25.31-46 and (2) growing in our relationships with God through the most simple, sincere personal prayer, Jesus puts into their proper place our enemies and persecutors. If you live as Jesus’ authentic disciple, you will usually be too busy building His Kingdom to spend much time paying attention to your enemies and persecutors. The abundant love God makes real through your actions in the lives of people in need will turn out to be much more interesting and fulfilling than the distractions caused by many enemies and persecutors. In situations of seriously harmful enemies and persecutors, if you live in God and do God’s work, God will assure you that you are on the path to eternal life, and that your enemies and persecutors will be held entirely accountable by God for their choices. In your prayer today, speak directly with God about how this week of Lent has gone for you. Are there any long-term spiritual and practical takeaways?

## **THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT**

### **Sunday, 3/16: Luke 9.28-36**

Consider two main realities about Jesus’ disciples Peter, James, and John when they witness His transfiguration in this passage. First, the disciples receive a clear revelation from God of who Jesus really is – the one who possesses the full glory of God, who fulfills the Old Testament law and prophets, who is the Son of God the Father, to whom they should listen. Second, these three disciples are very limited. They do not know what they are saying, are frightened, and do not nearly understand God’s revelation. That is the status of Peter, James, and John at this point in their journey with Jesus – God has revealed to them who Jesus really is . . . and they are also very limited. If you have been spiritually engaged in the beginning of Lent, hopefully you can recognize yourself as similar to Peter, James, and John. You have received enough revelation from God to know who Jesus really is. At the same time, you are limited. If that’s how you understand yourself at this point in Lent, you are on the right track! Last week, we focused on various dimensions of what Jesus reveals is selfless, serving, sacrificial love for people in need. This is MERCY. This week, we will be offered scriptural passages that highlight attitudes and perspectives we may embrace that significantly work against mercy. In your prayer today, speak directly to God about your desire to grow as a disciple by entering actively into this Second Week of Lent, with whatever spiritual challenges it may bring. If you intend to use this prayer guide for the Second Week of Lent, do not read ahead in it. Read it only one day at a time.

### **ALMSGIVING!**

Most of the people who are helping feed the hungry through the **One Heart Lent Program** have heard about the project by word-of-mouth. This week, consider ways you might help expand the number of people sacrificing to help feed the hungry by telling other people about the project and encouraging them to get involved. For inspiration and images, you might visit the website of the Cor Unum Meal Center, **CorUnumMealCenter.org**. You might also join Cor Unum on social media and begin to share its posts with your friends and followers.

### **Monday, 3/17: Luke 6.36-38**

In today's text from Luke 6, Jesus states: "Stop judging and you will not be judged." As we considered last week, Jesus makes clear that at the end of our lives - and every day of our lives - He alone is our judge. As judge, He alone has the final evaluation of where we stand with God, what is our holiness and our sinfulness, and what is the meaning of the choices we make. Human beings appropriately make judgements about what is good and bad in ourselves, other people, and the world in which we live. However, we are in no way THE ultimate judge. Only Jesus is. In the next line of the passage, Jesus states: "Stop condemning and you will not be condemned." Similarly to the reality of judging, it is only Jesus who eternally or now condemns anyone - that is, actually declares that a person is unreservedly wrong or evil in the eyes of God. Human beings appropriately observe and reject what is wrong and evil, but the only ultimate condemnation of any person is by Jesus. In every time and place, it is easy for us to go beyond appropriate human judgments and rejections of evil and begin to live inappropriate, unrealistic, and ungodly lives judging and condemning people - as if we were Jesus. These kinds of judging and condemning are enemies of mercy. Is it any surprise that in our society today, in which there may be more inappropriate judging and condemning than ever before, mercy can at times almost seem absent? Today, hear Jesus' words in the passage spoken directly to you: "Stop judging" and "Stop condemning". How do these declarations apply to your current attitudes and behaviors? What do you need to stop? Speak directly to Jesus about this. If you are not maximally open and honest, this exercise will be wasted.

### **Tuesday, 3/18: Matthew 23.1-12**

At the end of this passage from Matthew 23, Jesus tells His disciples: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Humility is the acceptance of the reality that God is the infinite source of all good, that each of us exists in relation to the infinite greatness of God, and that every human being is equally a child of God. Humility has nothing to do with being quiet or unassuming or hiding in a corner. It is the straightforward acceptance of the factual status of humanity before the infinite greatness of God and the factual equality of all people as children of God. A person who "humbles himself/herself" lives the reality of humility. Again, this has nothing to do with being silent, shy, withdrawn, or weak. It is about having the strength and integrity to accept the reality of who we are in relation to God and other people, and then to make our daily choices grounded in this realistic perspective. In contrast, a person who "exalts himself/herself" holds the false delusion of being greater or more important than he/she actually is in relation to God or other people . . . and then makes daily choices grounded in this unrealistic, distorted, and self-centered perspective. Humility is fertile ground for mercy. Self-exaltation is an enemy of mercy. In your reflection today, hear Jesus speak these words directly to you: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." In your prayer, be maximally honest with yourself and Jesus as you consider how you live humility, and how you exalt yourself.

### **Wednesday, 3/19: Matthew 20.17-28**

In today's reading from Matthew 20, Jesus says ". . . whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave." He adds a reference to Himself: ". . . the Son of Man [the title Jesus uses uniquely for Himself] did not come to be served but to serve . . ." Human beings are created to be great. We are not created to be mediocre, dull, unachieving, insignificant, or forgettable. We are created to be great. Greatness results from living love of God and love of other people. Any follower of Jesus recognizes that He is the ultimate revelation of how human beings are meant to live. Everything He says and does reveals the fulness of how to put into practice love of God and love of other people. Everything He says and does is also about serving other people - recognizing their needs, entering into those needs, and sacrificially acting to help meet those needs. Jesus is Mercy Himself . . . and therefore Greatness Himself. In a fallen, sinful world, there are many ideas about human greatness that have little or nothing to do with God. The further those conceptions are from God, the more they can be real threats to mercy. In your reflection today, spend some time thinking about the extent to which you currently seek to be great. (If greatness is not your goal, why is that?) If you seek to be great, what are the standards of greatness you value and pursue? How is each of those standards related . . . or not related . . . to serving others? Once again, honesty is key to this exercise.

### **Thursday, 3/20: Luke 16.19-31**

In today's parable from Luke 16, Jesus tells the story of a rich man who has a home, fine garments, and abundant food. At the rich man's door lies a poor man, covered with sores and desperately hungry. The rich man has much time, talent, and treasure available to share with the poor man. With all that opportunity, the rich man freely chooses to do absolutely nothing to assist the poor man. He does not take him in, offer him food or drink, treat his physical needs, greet him, or even pray for him. A key detail in the parable is that the rich man knows the poor man's name: Lazarus. It is not the case that the rich man doesn't notice Lazarus or disregard Lazarus. He knows Lazarus by name. He chooses to do absolutely nothing for Lazarus. Because this is a parable, we are free to speculate about what might be going on inside the rich man. Whatever is going on, he makes the free choice to absolutely refuse any form of assistance to Lazarus. He denies mercy to Lazarus. Today, spend time considering whether there are people - specific individuals and various types of people - whose existence you fully recognize and perhaps whose names you know, to whom you absolutely refuse to offer any assistance. Don't get lost in self-defense. Perhaps there are people who have offended, hurt, or damaged you or people close to you. Who are these people in your life, and exactly WHY do you choose to offer them any assistance. Review the list of "whys" for your behavior toward these people. These whys, while perhaps entirely understandable, are enemies of mercy.

### **Friday, 3/21: Matthew 21.33-43, 45-46**

In today's Matthew 21 text, Jesus is addressing certain religious leaders who have rejected His invitation to become part of the Kingdom of God by following Him and are plotting to kill Him. Jesus tells a parable about a landowner (representing God) whose tenants in justice owe him as payment for using his land the fair part of the produce they have grown in his vineyard. Instead of handing over to the landowner's servants the portion of the produce they justly owe him, they beat, kill, and stone the servants (representing the rejection of God's prophets He has sent to His people). When the landowner sends his son, whom he thinks the tenants will respect, the tenants seize, expel, and kill the son, hoping they will acquire his inheritance (the vineyard). With this parable, Jesus shows He knows full well how these religious leaders are plotting to treat Him. Focusing just on the terms of the parable, the tenants want everything for themselves. They want the produce they have fairly grown in agreement with their lease, the produce that they entirely owe to the landlord, the vineyard itself, and the destruction of anyone who stands in their way. They want everything. While few of us would admit that we want everything in the world for ourselves, many of us do, in fact, effectively live as if we do. This dynamic's direct opposition to mercy should be obvious: If we effectively want everything for ourselves, why would we offer anything to anyone else, especially other people who are in need and cannot repay us? In your reflection and prayer today, try to be honest about this: Do you see any part of yourself in the tenants in the parable?

### **Saturday, 3/22: Luke 15.1-3, 11-32**

This passage from Luke 15 contains a uniquely detailed revelation from Jesus about the mercy of God our Father. In the parable, the father represents God our Father. Although his son rejects him and wastes his inheritance, the father watches for his son's return, runs out to greet him, immediately restores him to a place of honor, and throws a lavish party to celebrate his return. Jesus makes clear through this story the overwhelming, complete, merciful love of God our Father. If you have engaged actively in our reflections during this Second Week of Lent, you have presumably reflected seriously on some parts of you that are opposed to mercy, and therefore block your growth as an authentic disciple of Jesus. If parts of this week have been challenging for you, they are hopefully challenges that are leading you into the freedom from sin and new life in faith that God wants for you. Today, simply read this passage from Luke 15 and consider that this is how completely, mercifully God loves you. God only wants you to grow in receiving and sharing this merciful love. That is the purpose of Lent.



# THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

## **Sunday, 3/23: Luke 13.1-9**

If you have been actively engaged in the first weeks of Lent, this Sunday's reading from Luke 13 should be encouraging to you. In it, Jesus repeats twice His call for people to repent – to turn away from their sins. If during Lent you have been sincerely repenting of your sins, you are on the right track spiritually! In this text, Jesus also offers a parable that expresses God's merciful patience with people who do not produce the spiritual fruits they should. If at this point of Lent you are sincerely thankful to God for His merciful patience with the ways you have not been productive in living His love, you are on the right track spiritually! In the parable, Jesus makes clear that we have a limited time remaining in our lives to produce good fruit by living authentic Christian lives. If you are honestly trying each day of Lent to live more actively and productively as a disciple of Jesus, you are on the right track spiritually! In your prayer today, speak directly with God about where you are with Him at this point in Lent. Be honest with Him and yourself about your intentions and spiritual goals for living each day of the week ahead. If you intend to engage deeply in Lent this week, read this prayer guide only one day at a time.

## **ALMSGIVING!**

In many cases, the economically poor and hungry must beg in order to live. Your almsgiving through the **One Heart Lent Program** makes it possible for more people to be given the food they need – not to have to beg for it. This week, would you be willing to stand in for your hungry brothers and sisters by asking some of your family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to make contributions to your **One Heart Lent Program** jar? Your outreach this week could free many more people from the reality of hunger.

## **Monday, 3/24: Luke 4.24-30**

In today's passage from Luke 4, Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth, where he grew up. In the verses that precede this passage, Jesus has read aloud a messianic passage from Isaiah and has stated that the passage has been fulfilled today in the presence of the people in the synagogue. People in the synagogue are amazed by Jesus' words. They also begin to question how Jesus could read this passage about the Messiah in reference to Himself. Jesus understands the thoughts and attitudes of the people in the synagogue, stating that “. . . no prophet is accepted in his own native place.” Jesus then cites two examples from the Old Testament in which God sends His prophets to the Jewish people. In each case, the prophets are not accepted by their own people, but they are accepted by foreigners. When the people in the synagogue hear this, they are filled with fury at Jesus. They rise up, drive Him out of Nazareth, and lead Him to the brow of the hill on which the town is built in order to “hurl Him down headlong.” The people's reaction to Jesus' clear statement of the truth is that they want to kill Him! Through the grace of God, Jesus passes through the midst of this homicidal crowd and goes away. If you are an authentic disciple of Jesus, you are called in many situations to state the truth clearly in love to other people. There can be people who react very negatively, even with hatred and the desire to harm, when Christians speak the truth in love. Can you think of recent experiences in which you have spoken the truth of Christ and experienced strong rejection? How did you respond? In your reflection today, consider this and speak directly to God about it. (If you are not maximally honest with yourself and God, this exercise will be wasted.) Most of us complain that American society is drifting away from God's truth. Many of us back down from stating God's truth because we fear other people's negative reactions. The fact is that God gives us the grace to pass through the midst of people who reject us. How do you react to that fact?

## **Tuesday, 3/25: Matthew 18.21-35**

In this text from Matthew 18, Jesus is asked how often we must forgive people who sin against us. Jesus answers directly: We must forgive people who sin against us without any limitation. He then offers a parable about a servant who owes to a king a debt so large that he will never in his lifetime be able to pay it off. Moved with compassion, the king forgives the servant's enormous debt. The servant whose debt has just been forgiven then encounters a fellow servant who owes him a relatively small debt that the other servant can pay off in a reasonable amount of time. The just-forgiven servant refuses to be patient with his fellow servant or have pity with him. He has his fellow servant put

into prison until he pays off the debt. When the king finds out about this, he is angry at the first servant's behavior, tells him that he is wicked, and has him handed over to the torturers "until he should pay back the whole debt." Because his original debt is so huge, he will remain with the torturers for the rest of his life! Jesus is clear what all of this means, saying: "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." Most thoughtful people would probably agree that our society has never been as unforgiving, merciless, and impatient as it is today. Any authentic disciple of Jesus can grasp that He has forgiven the debt that we can never pay off on our own - the debt we would owe to God to "pay back" for our sin. Our society needs more than ever the witness of authentic Christians who strive to forgive without any limitation. No greater motivation is needed for you to pursue limitless forgiveness than the fact that Jesus has forgiven the sin you could never resolve on your own. How are you doing these days on pursuing forgiveness without limitation? How do you react to this very clear parable and Jesus' entirely straightforward teaching about the consequences of our unwillingness to forgive?

### **Wednesday, 3/26: Matthew 5.17-19**

In these verses from Matthew 5, Jesus makes clear that in everything we say and do, we teach other people about how to live life. People by nature pay attention to one another's words and behavior. Today, people in our society are more engaged than ever in watching one another. Jesus teaches here that when we obey God's commandments - when we live the truth - we teach other people how to obey the commandments. God rewards this: "... whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the Kingdom of heaven." Jesus also states here that "... whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven." So many of us can speak endlessly about what's wrong with our society. We can point our fingers negatively at a limitless number of people - both in our immediate circles and in the public eye - who set bad examples for others. Americans have arguably mastered the art of criticizing other people and condemning the bad examples other people offer, especially to young people. In your reflection today, take Jesus' words as spoken directly to you personally. Do not think about anyone else's behavior. Jesus knows in 100 percent detail all the ways you obey God's commandments and teach others to do so, as well as all the ways you break God's commandments and teach others to do so. Speak to Jesus directly about how His words here currently apply to you.

### **Thursday, 3/27: Luke 11.14-23**

In this passage from Luke 11, Jesus miraculously drives a demon out of a man. Some people in the crowd are amazed. Others say that Jesus has driven out the demon by the power of the devil. This suggestion - that Jesus has driven out the demon by the power of the devil - is entirely false and could seem ridiculous to anyone today who knows that Jesus is God. From wherever the people in the passage are coming - genuine ignorance, willful ignorance, or straightforward hatred of Jesus - Jesus responds to them with love. Jesus offers these people three entirely reasonable, logical, and easy-to-grasp explanations of why it does not make sense that He (or anyone) would drive out a demon by the power of the devil. He does not question these peoples' motives. He does not get tied up in their emotions. He offers them the understandable reasons why what they say about Him here does not make sense. He attempts to engage their intellects. In the end, these people will freely decide what to do with the logical explanations of the truth Jesus offers them. We live in a society in which people often have very strong positions and opinions that are measurably false. For too many years, a climate has grown in which negative emotions run super high - and often out of control - in public and private discourse. It can seem, at times, that there is no room for civilized discussion about matters that are actually important. In the midst of this, authentic Christians are called as strongly as ever to share the truth with others in love. Every human being is given an intellect by God, no matter what he/she chooses to do with it. Part of being an imitator of Jesus involves offering other people - no matter their attitudes, including their hostility - clear, logical, understandable explanations of what we know from God is the truth. Spend some time reflecting on this today. In your recent life, in what situations have you been that remind you of Jesus' situation in this passage? What have you chosen to do? Once again, you need to be entirely honest in this reflection. Speak to Jesus about it in your prayer today.

### **Friday, 3/28: Mark 12.28-34**

In today's reading from Mark 12, a Jewish scribe asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment in the Old Testament law. Jesus responds by declaring the double commandment of love: to love God with all our beings, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (which means to love all other people as God would have us love them). When the scribe tells Jesus that he agrees with what He has said (and repeats it back to Him), Jesus says, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." This is a wonderful affirmation and encouragement for the scribe from Jesus! If you spend even a little time considering this double love commandment, you should realize that it is not fully achievable during our earthly lives. No one currently on the planet loves God with ALL of his/her heart, soul, mind, and strength. No one on this planet ENTIRELY loves all his/her neighbors as God would have us love them. Rather than being realities that are able to be perfectly achieved during our earthly lives, the two parts of the double love commandment are realities in which we are meant to grow . . . and grow . . . and grow, until they hopefully become complete realities if we are fully united with God in heaven. In every time and place, it can be tempting for Christians to feel they should perfectly fulfill every one of God's commandments by a certain point in their lives. That is certainly true for murder, but it is clearly not true for this all-important greatest commandment. Spend time reflecting on this today: How comfortable are you with the fact that if you live as an authentic disciple of Jesus, you will always be a work-in-progress, constantly called to increased love of God and neighbor . . . therefore constantly challenged . . . and invited to constantly experience growth in life, love, and fulfillment?

### **Saturday, 3/29: Luke 18.9-14**

In today's text from Luke 18, the word "justified" refers to a person's being in a proper relationship with God. At the beginning of today's parable, the tax collector is not in a proper relationship with God because of his sinfulness. The tax collector chooses to be honest with God about his sinfulness, to acknowledge his sinfulness in his words and actions, and to humbly ask God for the gift of God's mercy. As a result of these choices, Jesus explains, the tax collector goes home justified . . . in a proper relationship with God. In contrast, the Pharisee in the parable confidently takes up his position of prayer, speaks his prayer to himself (not God), praises himself for some of his religious actions, and assures himself that he is not sinful like the rest of humanity, including the tax collector. While pointing out the sinfulness of the tax collector, the Pharisee does absolutely nothing in word, prayer, or action to assist him. Jesus states that the Pharisee goes home not justified – that is, not in a right relationship with God. In our society, we more than ever can prize presenting ourselves to the world as happy, attractive, filled with laughter, and successful. Social media has taken this to a new extreme. Our spiritual goals during Lent have been to be like the tax collector in this parable – to be maximally honest about who we really are . . . to turn away from sin and to be faithful to the Gospel . . . and to be justified with God. In your prayer today, consider the extent to which the story of the tax collector encourages you about your spiritual progress during Lent.

## **THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT**

### **Sunday, 3/30: Luke 15.1-3, 11-32**

In this Sunday's Gospel reading we hear again the parable of the merciful father from Luke 15, which we read on the Second Saturday of Lent. In the parable, the younger son grows in becoming more realistic about himself, his bad state, his sins, and his desire for change. He grows in honesty, self-awareness, repentance, conversion, and constructive action. The younger son is an inspiration for anyone who is deeply living Lent – anyone who is striving to repent and believe in the Gospel during this season of grace. In your prayer today, speak directly to God about your willingness to accept the invitation to grow as an authentic disciple of Jesus during the upcoming week. To what extent do you intend this week to repent and believe in the Gospel by dedicating time to entering into the scripture, reflecting on it, and allowing yourself to be challenged by it? If you intend to actively participate in this week's spiritual exercises, it is once again important that you read this prayer guide only one day at a time.

## **ALMSGIVING!**

If you have been pursuing the almsgiving possibilities offered during recent weeks, you are doing much to grow in union with God and to be more connected daily with your brothers and sisters in need. This week, consider whether there are other material areas of your life that you might like to redirect toward doing God's work for the economically poor. If those areas are near at hand, consider redirecting the treasure involved to your **One Heart Lent Program** jar.

### **Monday, 3/31: John 4.43-54**

In today's reading from John 4, Jesus is in the town of Galilee. A royal official whose son is ill in the town of Capernaum, which is a distance away, asks Jesus to come to Capernaum to heal his son, who is near death. Jesus makes a statement that might remind you of the passage we heard from Luke 11 during the First Week of Lent: "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." Jesus then gives the royal official His direct word, in the form of instructions: "You may go; your son will live." Please note the obvious: Jesus does not offer the man a sign or a wonder. He simply offers him His word. In response, the man accepts the word of Jesus, without any sign or wonder, and acts on it. He believes what Jesus says to him and leaves. The next day, as the royal official is still on his way back to Capernaum, his slaves meet him and tell him his son will live. When he asks them when his son began to recover, they tell him it was the previous day, at the time that Jesus had told him his son would live and he should go. Consider what all this from Jesus must mean to the royal official and, according to the scripture writer, his whole household: The word of Jesus, without any accompanying sign or wonder, is the truth itself. Whatever Jesus states is entirely the truth, can be entrusted as entirely the truth, and can be followed as entirely the truth. Spend time today reflecting on this. How does this revelation apply to your life? How might it simplify your relationship with Jesus? How might it move you to more mature discipleship?

### **Tuesday, 4/1: John 5.1-16**

In this passage from John 5, Jesus enters into the life of a man who has been ill for 38 years. The man is crippled or lame, and has been spending time at a pool called Bethesda in Jerusalem, which is hoped to offer miraculous healing powers. Jesus tells the man, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." As was the case with the royal official in yesterday's passage from John 4, Jesus does not offer the man a sign or wonder (which is what the man has been seeking at the pool). Jesus offers the man only His word: "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." The man immediately becomes well, takes up his mat, and walks! There should be no question that if the man reflects on what has happened, he will recognize that the word of Jesus in itself is the truth and has the power to make real the will of God. A while later, Jesus seeks out the man and gives the man an immeasurably greater gift. Jesus' first words to the man offered him a wonderful physical miracle. That miracle was by nature temporary and transitory. This time, Jesus gives the man His word about how to enter into the reality of salvation, which is meant to be neither temporary nor transitory: "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." If the man chooses to accept Jesus' word here as the truth and follow it as the truth - if he turns away from his sin (and presumably pursues Jesus to learn the breadth of what this means) - nothing worse will happen to him. Whatever happens to him physically, including when earthly death inevitably comes, if the man accepts Jesus' word, he will be spiritually saved. In your reflection today, consider and respond to these questions: Do you believe that the miraculous healing in this passage, accomplished through the word of Jesus because His word is God's truth, actually happened? Do you believe that Jesus' words in his second approach to the man - "... do not sin any more" - are the truth? If your answer to those questions is "Yes", hear Jesus' words to the man spoke personally to you today: "Do not sin any more." How do you respond? Are these words enough for you to respond positively, or do you seek something more from Jesus to do so? In your prayer, speak directly to Jesus about this.

### **Wednesday, 4/2: John 5.17-30**

This text from John 5 picks up where yesterday's passage left off. After Jesus heals the man at Bethesda, some people begin to persecute Him because He healed the man on a sabbath (which these people think violates God's law). Jesus responds to their opposition by offering these people more of the truth of who He is. He tells them, "My Father is at

work until now, so I am at work.” John explains the reaction of Jesus’ persecutors: “For this reason they tried all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the sabbath, but also called God His own Father, making Himself equal to God.” Showing how much He loves them, Jesus answers these people’s now-homicidal hatred by offering them even more of the truth of who He is. He tells them He does only what He sees God the Father doing. He states that what God the Father does, He, Jesus, will also do. Jesus tells these people that just as God the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also Jesus gives life to whomever He wishes. Jesus declares that God the Father has handed over eternal judgment to Jesus personally, and that He, Jesus, will personally judge all people’s goodness and wickedness either to the resurrection of life or the resurrection of condemnation. Jesus states that He, Jesus, will give eternal life to anyone who hears His word and believes in God the Father through Him. Today is one month since Ash Wednesday. Especially if you have been actively living Lent for the past four weeks, spend time today reading through the entirety of this passage. Take it slowly, read it as many times as you like, and hear what Jesus says in it spoken to you personally. At this moment in Lent - just today - if you accept Jesus’ words here spoken directly to you, how do they impact you?

### **Thursday, 4/3: John 5.31-47**

This section of John 5 continues from the end of yesterday’s passage. Jesus is speaking to people who so reject Him that they are trying to kill Him. Knowing well that these people reject His words, Jesus cites for them in love four testimonies that should confirm for them the truth of what He says and does: the words and ministry of John the Baptist; the works that He, Jesus, does (which could only come from God the Father); the Jewish scriptures; and the teaching of Moses. If these people accepted what these sources really say, they would realize that they testify to the truth of who Jesus is: the Son of God, and the long-awaited Messiah of the Jewish people and the world. Jesus is clear: His listeners have these sources, they are able to understand these sources’ testimonies to Him, but they choose not to do so. There are surely many reasons for this, one of which Jesus states that is particularly sobering: “I know that you do not have the love of God in you.” Jesus declares: “I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me; yet if another comes in his own name, you will accept him.” Today, many of us who are baptized hear the words of Jesus, are able to understand His words, and for a variety of reasons struggle to accept His words as the truth. Whatever the reasons for our struggles to accept Jesus’ teachings as the truth, the fact is that other people come along and claim to say and teach the truth purely on the basis of their personal authority . . . and we accept what they say and teach as the truth. We accept that what they say and teach is the truth explicitly because they claim to be the source of the truth, including when their words entirely contradict the words of Jesus. In your reflection today, be honest about this: Who are the people whose proclamations of the truth you accept on their personal authority, specifically when their proclamations explicitly contradict the teaching of Jesus? Be honest with God and yourself.

### **Friday, 4/4: John 7.1-2, 10, 25-30**

In this passage from John 7, Jesus encounters people who are wrestling with the question of who He is. At first, these people entertain the possibility that Jesus could be the Messiah. They then use limited, flawed logic to dismiss that possibility. They are not only wrong, but they seem comfortably confident that they are correct. Jesus is very much affected by these people. He cries out against them in public. These peoples’ rejection deeply upsets Jesus. He responds to them with forceful, entirely controlled anger. Jesus is a fully human being, with all the negative temptations that every other human being experiences. In His anger (here and in many other places in the scripture), Jesus’ words in absolutely no way contradict love. In His angry words to these people, Jesus in no way harms them, threatens them, or denies their fundamental dignity as children of God. Jesus’ words, even in situations that justly provoke deep anger in Him, in no way contradict or violate His merciful love for His opponents and enemies. In our society, many people have anger problems, including many disciples of Jesus. When we experience other people’s words and actions that do, in fact, go against or assault God’s truth, we can make the error of expressing our justifiable anger in seriously ungodly ways. We reject our opponents, attack our opponents, condemn our opponents, and do ungodly things in word and action to harm our opponents (in person, with others, and so often online). In your reflection today, consider how this reality applies to you. Insofar as it does, are you open to the possibility that in your anger, your words (spoken and typed) do not have to contradict Jesus’ love?

### **Saturday, 4/5: John 7.40-53**

In this section of John 7, certain religious leaders are fiercely opposed to Jesus. When some of the guards employed by these leaders, as well as one of their fellow leaders, seem to entertain the possibility that Jesus could be the Messiah, these leaders respond with rejection, insulting disparagement, and intimidation. History has proven that this is a common reaction among many human leaders who are threatened by the truth of who Jesus is. In our society, we have leaders in government, politics, education, the entertainment industry, and various dimensions of popular culture who not only oppose, but even hate Jesus. When these leaders encounter people who follow Jesus as Lord or entertain the possibility that He may be the Son of God, they may react the same as the leaders in today's text - rejecting, disparaging, and trying to intimidate those people. Followers of Jesus who experience this kind of opposition may react with hurt, pain, fear, and the temptation to back down, shut up, or abandon Jesus. This is natural and understandable. The key question for us when we have such experiences is the same as for the people in today's passage: What are we going to do now? This is a decision point. In the passage, we know that the religious leader who faces fierce opposition from his peers when he suggests the possibility of listening to Jesus, does not allow himself to be shut down by the leaders who hate Jesus. This man, whose name is Nicodemus, has previously visited with Jesus at night and has had a powerful conversation with Him. It seems fair to think that the words of Jesus in that earlier encounter have remained alive in Nicodemus and empower him to not back away from Jesus despite these religious leaders' threats. (We know Nicodemus is not shut down by Jesus' opponents here because Nicodemus is the person who brings the spices to anoint Jesus' body after His crucifixion.) In your reflection today, think about recent experiences in which you have felt leaders in our society threatening you because you believe in Jesus. How have you responded? Have you enjoyed the strength that Nicodemus does, allowing the words of Jesus to remain in and empower you?

## **THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT**

### **Sunday, 4/6: John 8.1-11**

In this account from John 8, Jesus encounters a woman who has committed adultery. Jesus recognizes her sin, tells her that He does not condemn her, then tells her to go and to sin no more. If you have been deeply living Lent, you have had many opportunities to reflect on Jesus' merciful love. You have been able to more intensely, sincerely turn away from sin and work to grow as a more authentic disciple of Jesus every day. All of this has been to spiritually prepare for the graces of the Easter Triduum and the Easter season. Those graces somehow have to do with God's renewal of salvation within you. Today, dedicate some prayer time to considering the extent to which you desire the profound spiritual renewal God offers through the graces of the Easter Triduum and the Easter season. Do you desire these graces? Are you willing to live each day of this Fifth Week of Lent preparing to cooperate with these graces? If so, and if you intend to actively use this prayer guide during the upcoming week, read it only one day at a time.

### **ALMSGIVING!**

This week, as you continue your pattern of Lenten almsgiving, assess what you've been doing. Take a look at your **One Heart Lent Program** jar. All the money you've collected in there will help feed the hungry. How do you feel about that? What are your thoughts about the material sacrifices you've been making? Are you better off having made them? When Lent comes to an end, will you want to continue any of these sacrifices? How do you view your experience of telling others about this effort, and of asking others to sacrifice for economically poor people? Are those experiences you would like to be permanent parts of your life?

### **Monday, 4/7: John 8.1-11**

In this passage, which we read yesterday, certain religious leaders propose to stone to death the woman who has committed adultery (a very grave sin), punishing her according to the law of Moses. To test Jesus, they ask whether he approves of this plan. Jesus pauses, and then says, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." With these words, Jesus reveals that God's mercy extends beyond this woman's grave sin, and whatever punishment might justly be due for it. On some level, these leaders are clearly struck by the truth of God's

mercy revealed through Jesus' words! In response to this reality, the religious leaders choose to walk away one by one, beginning with the elders. It is wonderful that the leaders stop themselves from killing the woman. Very unfortunately, they walk away from Jesus . . . rather than remaining with Him to learn more about the mercy of God that He has just expressed, and that has touched them. These leaders of course do not understand God's mercy as revealed by Jesus. However, unless they remain with Jesus, how will they begin to understand . . . and know . . . the mercy of God that Jesus wants to further reveal to them, in which He wants them to live? The reality of God's mercy, which extends far beyond strict justice, is a truth that is only revealed to us over time, through one situation after another, if we choose to live in communion with Jesus. To grow as authentic disciples of Jesus, we need to constantly listen to His voice, learn about His merciful love, and extend His mercy to others. There is always immeasurably more to learn about the mercy of God that is revealed to us through Jesus. Lent presses a question: If you desire through the grace of the Easter Triduum and the Easter season to grow as an authentic disciple of Jesus, are you willing to remain with Him when His revelations about God's infinite mercy extend beyond your understanding, preferences, and limitations? In your reflection today, consider how this question directly applies to your life, and dedicate some time to answering it.

### **Tuesday, 4/8: John 8.21-30**

In this section of John 8, Jesus tells people who do not yet understand who He is, "You belong to what is below, I belong to what is above. You belong to this world, but I do not belong to this world." When Jesus refers to "what is below" and "this world", He means realities of human life that are sinful and not of God. When He refers to "what is above", Jesus means realities of human life that are holy and of God. Jesus then states that He says and does only what God the Father has taught Him . . . only what pleases God the Father. Every day of our lives, we live on a planet in which there is a mixture of "what is below" and "what is above." Jesus has come to this planet to teach us "what is below" and "what is above," so that we can more and more enjoy living in "what is above." Jesus does not do this by handing us a list of every situation we will encounter in our lives, explaining to us in advance "what is below" and "what is above" in each situation. Rather, He reveals these truths to us over time through our living in communion with Him as His active, authentic disciples. Through the Holy Spirit, most powerfully in the teaching of the Church and the scripture, Jesus today says and does what God the Father has taught Him . . . only what pleases God the Father . . . in the midst of the realities of our daily lives. If you want to grow in this, you need to make a decision: Will you live your life by placing the truth of what Jesus says and does at the center of your daily life, or not? Your answer to this question should give you a clue about your openness to the grace of the Easter Triduum and the Easter season.

### **Wednesday, 4/9: John 8.31-42**

In these verses from John 8, Jesus tells the crowd that, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Jesus is here offering a profound teaching about true freedom. "Freedom" can refer to our ability to choose whatever we want to do. On a deeper level, "true freedom" refers to our ability to choose what God wants us to do. When choose to do what God wants us to do . . . whether that choice is easy or difficult . . . we grow on the path of salvation, now and eternally. "True freedom" is, therefore, the reality for which we should constantly strive. To restate what Jesus reveals in this passage: If we remain in active communion with Him, listening to Him and living as He teaches us to live . . . we will be His true disciples . . . and we will know the truth through Him . . . and that truth will set us free from all that separates us from God and is not of God. Recognizing our freedom to do whatever we want with our lives, we every day can use our freedom to choose to do what God wants us to do, as continually revealed to us by Jesus. You presumably entered into Lent because you recognized ways that you use your freedom to choose what God does not want you to do. In your prayer today, consider whether, as we approach Holy Week, you understand what Jesus teaches here about "true freedom." Looking toward the graces offered through the Easter Triduum and the Easter season, are you willing to commit your life to pursuing "true freedom"? If so, you should have great hope for growing as an authentic disciple of Jesus.

### **Thursday, 4/10: John 8.51-59**

In this text, Jesus clearly identifies Himself as, "I AM", which is the name reserved exclusively for God in the Hebrew scripture. The people who hear Jesus identify Himself as God respond by picking up stones to throw at Him. Their reaction entirely makes sense. For anyone who believes in God, if a person identifies himself/herself as God, that is utter blasphemy. In Jesus' time and place, the people who reject His claim to be God believe He deserves death for this blasphemy . . . so they pick up stones to kill Him. It is important to remember that 2000 years ago, this is fundamentally the reason why people kill Jesus: because He claims to be God. Jesus is not tortured and executed because of vague misunderstanding or confusion or reasons that are lost in the mist of history. Jesus is killed because He tells people He is God, people understand His words, and they completely reject His claim to be God. The people who killed Jesus 2000 years ago came and went from this world 2000 years ago. What matters now is what happens now. In 2025, Jesus continues to be fully alive in this world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus in 2025 tells the world - which means you - that He is God. When the world in 2025 - which means you - is given the opportunity to hear and understand Jesus' claim to be God, the world freely chooses how to respond to His claim. Which means you. If you plan to fully enter into the Easter Triduum, you will be confronted with this fact: Once you know who Jesus is, when you choose to sin, you reject Him. When you reject Jesus, you are actively part of killing Him. If your living Lent has been spiritual preparation for entering into the Easter Triduum . . . especially if your goal has been to be a maximally authentic disciple of Jesus . . . spend time today reflecting on this truth: When you sin, you choose to be part of killing Jesus. How do you react to that, one week away from Holy Thursday?

### **Friday, 4/11: John 10.31-42**

In this passage from John 10, which is two chapters ahead of yesterday's reading, we hear about another crowd of people in Jerusalem who pick up rocks to stone Jesus. The people in the crowd are straightforward about why they are doing this: "We are not stoning you for a good work but for blasphemy. You, a man, are making yourself God." This is precisely the same reality as in yesterday's reading. Jesus moves away from this crowd, leaves Jerusalem, and crosses the Jordan River to the place where John the Baptist first baptized. In this place, many people come to Jesus, recognize the signs Jesus has performed, affirm that what John the Baptist said about Jesus was true, and begin to believe in Jesus. We see in this brief passage two crowds: a crowd of people in Jerusalem who choose to try to kill Jesus and, at the same time, a crowd of people geographically not far away who choose to believe in Jesus. Each individual in both crowds is entirely responsible for how he/she responds to Jesus. At the same time, it surely there is a dynamic here that involves crowds. If some of the people in the murderous crowd in Jerusalem were instead in the believing crowd across the Jordan, would those people choose to believe in Jesus? Crowd dynamics 2000 years ago and today suggest they would. This matters. On Palm Sunday, we will recall the crowd of people in Jerusalem who shout out about Jesus as Messiah. On Good Friday, we will recall the crowd of people in Jerusalem who a few days later shout out about Jesus: "Crucify him, Crucify him." Are some of the same people in both of those crowds, swinging from one extreme to another in a matter of day in the midst of the crowd dynamic? Probably so. Hopefully having pursued more authentic Christian discipleship during Lent, where do you stand about the crowd dynamic vis-à-vis Jesus in the world around you on April 11, 2025?

### **Saturday, 4/12: John 11.45-56**

In these verses from John 11, the final Passover of Jesus' earthly life is approaching. Jesus has been increasingly opposed by a variety of enemies, some of whom want to kill Him. Some people who gather in Jerusalem for Passover, knowing that certain religious leaders want to arrest Jesus, look around for Him and ask one another, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?" This is a good question. Completely innocent of any wrongdoing, living fully only the love of God, Jesus knows well that His enemies hate Him and want to kill Him. Jesus has done nothing wrong. If He goes to Jerusalem, Jesus faces the most excruciating passion. "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?" In your reflection today, imagine that the people in the passage ask you, today, those questions about Jesus. You already know the answers (He goes to the feast). Then, explain to them your understanding of why Jesus decides to go to Jerusalem, where His enemies await. Why does Jesus decide to do this? Bring your thoughts with you as we hear the reading of Jesus' passion at tomorrow's Palm Sunday liturgy.



# HOLY WEEK

## **Sunday, 4/13: Luke 22.14 - 23.56**

As we begin Holy Week, we are invited to listen to the account of Jesus' passion and death in the Gospel of Luke. Take some time today – and in the days leading up to the Triduum, if you like – to slowly read through this text. For each of the people or closely-associated groups of people about whom you read in this passion account, ask yourself two questions: (1) How does this person/these people respond to Jesus in this text? (2) How are you like this person/these people? Do not dive into deep or extended self-analysis. Simply read through the text and ask yourself those two questions.

## **Monday, 4/14: John 12.1-11**

The Gospel readings on this week's final three days of Lent are focused on Judas Iscariot. Judas is called by Jesus to be one of His twelve closest disciples. Judas has maximum exposure to Jesus, travelling with Him, directly hearing His preaching, witnessing His miracles, and being sent by Jesus on missionary expeditions as a minister of Jesus' own divine power. Judas witnesses the profound conversion of very serious sinners who recognize the overwhelming presence of God in Jesus, are profoundly moved by the love He reveals, and reform their lives to follow Him (sinners who repent and believe in the Gospel). With all this direct, personal experience of Jesus and His love, Judas makes the free choice to turn away from Jesus. Judas betrays Jesus and hands Him over to His enemies for death. In today's passage from John 12, when Jesus' friend Mary, whose brother Lazarus has been raised from the dead by Jesus, anoints Jesus' feet with a costly perfumed oil, Judas objects that the expensive oil could have been sold and given to the poor. The Gospel writer informs us that Judas does not really care about the poor. In truth, Judas' anger comes from the fact that he is a thief who steals from the money bag with which he has been entrusted by Jesus. In this episode, Judas shows himself not just to be a sinful man, but a hypocrite. He is not just a money-centered thief, but he pretends to be something he is not - a follower of Jesus who is concerned about people who are economically poor. Our spiritual goals during Lent have included being maximally honest with God and ourselves about our sin and our holiness. Approaching the Easter Triduum and looking at Judas in this passage, speak directly to Jesus today about where you stand in terms of your sinfulness, holiness, hypocrisy, and honesty.

## **Tuesday, 4/15: John 13.21-33, 36-38**

In this text from John 13, Jesus and His disciples are at the Last Supper. Jesus knows that Judas intends to betray Him to His enemies. Jesus says to Judas: "What you are going to do, do quickly." Judas leaves at once and goes off to betray Jesus. When Jesus tells Judas to do what he is going to do, Jesus is not telling Judas to go do evil. Jesus would never tell anyone to do something that is sinful. In fact, Jesus does not specify what "what you are going to do" means. Judas is still an entirely free human being. He is free to betray Jesus, which he has planned to do. He is also free to turn away from his plan to betray Jesus. Judas is one hundred percent free to turn away from his intended sin and return to Jesus. Jesus' statement, "What you are going to do, do quickly," is Jesus' direct, personal affirmation to Judas that He entirely knows Judas and entirely recognizes Judas' freedom to do whatever Judas wants to do with his life, including betraying Jesus. Hopefully during Lent you have spent extensive time speaking directly with Jesus about your life and your choices. Especially if you have been blessed with an increased closeness to Jesus during Lent, spend time today reflecting on the truth that Jesus entirely knows you and entirely recognizes your freedom to do whatever you want to do with your life. As we approach the Easter Triduum, in which the fulness of how Jesus loves you will be revealed, how does His entirely knowing you and entirely recognizing your freedom impact where you are spiritually in your life on April 15, 2025?

## **Wednesday, 4/16: Matthew 26.14-25**

Today's passage from Matthew 26 is slightly different from John's account of the Last Supper. In Matthew's version, Jesus announces to his twelve closest disciples at table that one of them will betray Him. Judas joins the other eleven in explicitly denying to Jesus that he is the one will betray Him, saying "Surely it is not I, Rabbi? As in John's version,

Jesus replies by affirming Judas' freedom to act as he chooses, simply stating, "You have said so." At this moment, Judas is a maximally inauthentic disciple of Jesus. While claiming to be a follower of Jesus - even to Jesus' face - he is, in fact, a person who has turned away from Jesus and is following the way of the devil. On Ash Wednesday, you probably had the goal of growing as an authentic disciple of Jesus by living Lent. Without getting lost in any detailed self-evaluation, as we are about to enter the Easter Triduum, speak directly to Jesus today about your current status as His authentic disciple. Focus on the growth in discipleship you have experienced during Lent, and tell Him what this means to you.

## YOUR JAR!

After this Wednesday, we begin the observance of the holiest days of the year, the Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter.

Your helping to feed the hungry through the **One Heart Lent Program** is a wonderful gift for God and the neediest of our brothers and sister. Please remove the money you've collected in your **One Heart Lent Program** jar. Count it, then put it in the form of a check or money order and mail it to **One Heart Lent Program, 118 South Broadway, Lawrence, MA 01843**. One hundred percent of the money you have collected will be used to feed hungry people through the Cor Unum Meal Center!

For all of the hungry people whose lives you have changed through your sacrifice for the **One Heart Lent Program**, many thanks! We hope that you will stay in touch with the **Cor Unum Meal Center** in the months and years ahead. Link to Cor Unum's social media accounts via **CorUnumMealCenter.org!** **God bless you!**