



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, 2/18 (Ash Wednesday): Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18

People sometimes wonder, "How deeply does God get involved in the details of our lives?" As Christians, we believe that God gets very much involved in the details of our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit, Who is God among us 24/7. People also sometimes say, "I wish God would really enter into my life and help me clean up my act . . . help me become the person God wants me to be." God does this. God continually offers the grace of conversion to all of us. We decide, at any given time, whether to accept this grace and cooperate with it. God owns all time. God gives us particular graces at particular times in the course of every year. These are seasons through which God offers all the world graces God wants us to experience . . . if we choose to accept those graces and cooperate with them. Lent is a season of grace that is a uniquely important and powerful gift from God. Through the grace of Lent, God offers us the opportunity to clean up our acts spiritually: to grow in honest recognition of our sin; to turn away from that sin and ideally receive God's forgiveness for it; to grow in understanding better the teaching of Jesus; and to put Jesus' teaching into more active practice day by day. How deeply does God get involved in your life? God gets so deeply involved in your life that God personally offers you the grace of Lent - the grace to have realized within you the words we hear when we are blessed with ashes today: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." Six weeks from now, when you hopefully stand in public to profess your belief in the resurrection of Jesus, God invites you to be a very different person - a liberated sinner and a more authentic disciple of Jesus Christ. Today, spend some time reflecting on this. Do you basically understand the gift that God is offering you if you choose to actively live Lent? What is your response to this offer? Since the grace of Lent is guaranteed, what are your intentions for opening yourself to that grace and cooperating it day by day for the next six weeks? What are your specific plans for living Lent, especially in terms of daily scripture reading and reflection? It is good to be maximally clear about the grace of the season and your intentions for how you will live 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, 2/19: Luke 9.22-25

If you live this Lent actively repenting and believing more in the Gospel, Lent will be a season in which God offers you concrete opportunities to change your life. Changing your life will involve rejecting sinful ways and more actively living Jesus' teachings. As these concrete opportunities become clear, you will need to make free decisions whether to take action to change. Some of the choices for change will hopefully be easy for you to make. Some choices for change likely will be more challenging. It is quite possible that during Lent God will show you changes in your life that He wants you to make, but that you do not want to make. You may find yourself realizing, "I know this change is God's call, but I'd prefer to hold on to the way I currently live my life . . . rather than entering into the challenges/difficulties involved in this change." In today's Gospel passage from Luke 9, Jesus states, ". . . whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." During Lent, if you realize that God wants you to "lose" the way you currently live . . . to "lose" specific sinful ways and limitations in your discipleship . . . and you realize that you'd prefer to "save" things the way they are . . . what will you do? Spend time today reflecting on this and speaking honestly to God about it. If it turns out you desire to make whatever changes God invites you to make this Lent, be sure you hear Jesus's clear teaching here about what you must do day by day to authentically follow Him: (1) You must deny yourself - remove yourself from the center of your life and put Jesus there. (2) You must take up your cross daily - accept whatever passion, challenge, and effort is involved in following Jesus. (3) You must follow Him - persist and persist and persist in your efforts to follow Jesus. If you are open to it, that is a clear set of instructions for what you need to do when you face decisions about challenging changes during Lent. How do you react?

Friday, 2/20: Matthew 9.14-15

Fasting is a proven discipline that helps bridge the separation between people and God. When Jesus is asked in today's passage from Matthew 9 why His disciples do not fast, He explains that His followers do not now fast because "the bridegroom is with them." Jesus is offering His immediate listeners a very powerful hint about who He is. "The bridegroom" is Jesus. If Jesus' disciples do not fast because the bridegroom is now physically with them . . . and fasting assists in bridging the separation between people and God . . . Jesus is God! For us during Lent, the key part of the passage is the rest of what Jesus states: "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." He is speaking about us. If during Lent you are pursuing renunciation of sin and growth as an authentic disciple of Jesus, that means you are trying to bridge the separation between you and God. Fasting is a gift to assist you in this spiritual pursuit. The Church's official regulations for fasting and abstinence during Lent are minimal – two days of moderate fasting (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) and seven Fridays of abstinence from meat. What other forms of fasting do you plan to embrace as helpful disciplines during Lent? Consider the food and drink you regularly consume. From what parts of that consumption might you choose to withdraw that will help you focus daily on your spiritual agenda? Fasting should never do harm to you physically. Fasting should never, ever be an end in itself. It should always be a secondary reality that helps focus you spiritually. If you find within the next weeks that the fasting you have chosen either harms you physically (that's unlikely) or becomes a major focus of your attention, you will need to shake it up. Lent is not about losing weight or achieving fasting records. It is about losing sin and achieving holiness. Spend time reflecting on this today and finalize your fasting plans for Lent 2026.

Saturday, 2/21: Luke 5.27-32

Many faithful Jewish people at Jesus' time believe that a holy person should not associate closely - even physically - with sinful people. The sinners' spiritual impurity may pollute the holy person. Jesus is known as a holy man of God. In today's text from Luke 45, when certain religious leaders witness Jesus' sharing a banquet with publicly known sinners, they are taken aback. They ask a very good question: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus offers a direct answer, which is meant to open His immediate listeners' minds to a much greater experience of the merciful love of God: "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." Spend time today honestly reflecting on this and speaking directly to God about it. At this very early point in Lent, do you consider yourself a person who is, to one extent or another, spiritually sick? Do you welcome Jesus to come directly into your life this season to help you become spiritually healthy? Are you a sinner? Most people's answer to those three questions is probably, "Yes." There's one more question. As a sinner, to what extent are you open to responding to Jesus' call to *repent* of your sin - to fully acknowledge your sin, reject your sin, and change your life to live without your sin? If Jesus enters directly into your most serious sin, and it turns out to be sin that you like - that you really do not want to change - will you repent? Are there areas of your sin from which you will not repent? If everyone were honest about this, the world and Church would be very different.

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 2/22: Matthew 4.1-11

On this First Sunday of Lent, we hear Matthew's version of Jesus' temptation in the desert. After He has been baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert, where He is tempted by the devil for 40 days. Fundamentally, Jesus is tempted to live His life apart from the will and plan of God the Father. Jesus has lived a fully human life. He has experienced the fullness of temptation to sin that you experience. He entirely, personally knows your life. If you choose to live as an authentic disciple of Jesus, He offers you over time everything you need to know in order to live a full, holy, powerful, meaningful, fulfilling, and eternal life. If you intend to actively live this week of Lent, spend some time today in prayer speaking directly with Jesus. Tell Him what you plan to do in living Lent day-

by-day this week. Tell Him whether you're willing to listen to His words through the scripture and dedicate yourself each day to allowing His teaching to affect your life. Ask Him for any graces you feel you need to deeply live this week of Lent. A note: If you want to effectively use this prayer guide for the First Week of Lent, read it only one day at a time. If you read ahead, you may blow it.

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, 2/23: Matthew 25.31-46

Today's text from Matthew 25 is considered by many people to be Jesus' most detailed description of how He judges us eternally and each day of our earthly lives. Jesus judges us on very specific criteria: He knows and judges each and every way we choose to put His love into practice or not put His love into practice. His teaching is straightforward: ". . . whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me . . . what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me." Jesus has sacrificed His entire life in order to save you from your sin. He has given everything . . . His entire self . . . to save you from everything that separates you from God. When you were the most sinful, you were "the least." Jesus gave His entire self to save you when you were the least. This is the fullness of His love. This is true love. True love, by nature, requires a response: True love is either returned or not returned. How do we return to Jesus the love He gives us in dying for us? We recognize the needs of "the least" people around us and make the choice to sacrifice to meet their needs. How do we NOT return love to Jesus? We recognize the needs of the "least" people around us and make the choice NOT to sacrifice to meet their needs. It is typically much easier to love people whom we like. Jesus' emphasis is on our returning love to Him by loving "the least" - the least likable, the least attractive, the least impressive, the least valuable, the least lovable. Today, spend some time honestly identifying the people who are "the least" in your life these days. Start with your closest relationships and move out from there: your spouse, your immediate family, your extended family, your coworkers, your classmates, your neighbors, members of your community, people to whom you give attention in society. Make a physical list. This list should include the people you treat the worst . . . in thought, in word, and in deed . . . directly and indirectly. If your list gets long, that's evidence of your honesty.

Tuesday, 2/24: Matthew 6.7-15

Our reading from Matthew 6 includes the Lord's Prayer and then verses 14-15: "If you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions." Today's spiritual exercise is entirely simple: Who are the people you do not forgive? Accept the challenge of engaging in this exercise without self-analysis, mental trips into the past, or allowing yourself to go down emotional rabbit holes. Be sober and straightforward. Make a physical list of all the people you do not forgive. Do not dwell on your thoughts or feelings about these people. Do not spend time reflecting on your lack of forgiveness. Stay focused: make a list of all the people you do not forgive. When you are sure your list is complete, go back to the list you made yesterday of the people who are "the least" in your life. Is there anyone on that list who should be on today's list of the people you do not forgive?

Wednesday 2/25: Luke 11.29-32

In Jesus' public ministry, His implicit or explicit claim is that everything He says and does is entirely the truth . . . entirely revealing the truth of God the Father and Creator of the universe. Ultimately, Jesus directly claims to be one with God the Father . . . to be God. The supernatural power of Jesus' words and actions, including His miraculous works, are signs to people that Jesus' claims about Himself are true. In today's passage from Luke 11, Jesus is speaking to people who seek an additional sign to prove that what He says is true. These people are probably looking for an additional miracle or another kind of wondrous work that will convince them of the truth of what Jesus says. Jesus tells these people that no sign will be given to them, "except the sign of Jonah". In the Old Testament, Jonah is a

reluctant prophet who is sent by God to the people of Nineveh, who are considered to be profoundly sinful and entirely unlikely to change their ways. God send Jonah with the message to the people of Nineveh that if they do not repent of their sin, they will be destroyed by God. The people of Nineveh do not believe in the true God. Shockingly, the word of God that comes through Jonah strikes their souls. They accept the message from the true God and repent of their sin. The “sign of Jonah” is God’s call to turn away from sin and turn to God: repentance and conversion. We are one week into Lent. If, today, you are pursuing last Wednesday’s call to “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” during this season, you are on track spiritually. To stay on track, return today to the lists you made on Monday and Tuesday. Take time to review them. Who should be on those lists who is not already there? Add them.

Thursday, 2/26: Matthew 7.7-12

Today’s text is Matthew 7.7-12. If we could do a brain scan of all the people who hear or read this passage today, it would be interesting to see where people’s thoughts go. It’s likely that many of our minds would focus on the first five verses. In those verses, Jesus offers some teachings that touch on the mystery of intercessory prayer. He makes affirmations that can enlighten us about God’s love and generosity. He offers insights into the importance of persistence in our prayer. He opens up reflections on the timeline of God’s responses to our petitions for the good . . . a timeline that extends beyond our earthly lives. Anyone who spends time with those first five verses might come away with some insights, as well as some questions that will only be fully answered, hopefully, in heaven. Back to the brain scan. How many people’s minds would be shown by the scan to be focused on the final verse of the passage: “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets.”? Interestingly, that verse contains very little mystery, is entirely graspable, and leaves no questions that need to be answered in heaven. It’s Jesus’ straightforward teaching about how we are to live every day of our lives: Do unto other people what you would have them do to you. Unless you have a serious pathology, you would have all other people to you only what is good. “Good” is ultimately what God would have people do to you. In your prayer time today, consider and answer these two questions in God’s presence: (1) Is it acceptable to you that anyone do to you what is not good? (2) Is it acceptable to you that anyone not forgive you? A flip or dismissive “Yes” in answer to those questions is meaningless. Spend time considering and answering them in God’s presence.

Friday, 2/27: Matthew 5.20-26

In today’s passage from Matthew 5, Jesus teaches that if you are engaged in a worthy religious practice (bringing your gift to the altar) and there realize that someone has anything against you, “go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” A thoughtful repeating-back of this teaching might be: “If I am doing something good to honor God . . . and realize there’s some wrong I’ve done to another person that I have not resolved . . . I should take a pause from the good honoring of God . . . go and be reconciled with that person . . . and then go back to honor God.” That would be correct. A further reflection might be: “If I have done wrong to another person, I should go and apologize to that person, which offers the possibility of reconciliation.” That would be correct. An additional reflection might be: “If a person has done wrong to me that person should come and apologize to me, so we may be reconciled . . . and then the person can return to properly worship God.” That would be correct. Here’s the kicker: When you do not forgive another person, you do wrong to that person. Spend some time today prayerfully considering that. What are your reactions?

Saturday, 2/28: Matthew 5.43-48

In this text from Matthew 5, Jesus instructs 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.” Jesus makes clear that His disciples have enemies. (If you do not have any enemies, you could not be living an authentically Christian life, because there are always people who hate authentic Christians.) Jesus never teaches His disciples to like their enemies, hang out with their enemies, live with their enemies, or pretend that the wrong their enemies do is right. Jesus teaches His disciples to love their enemies. What does it mean to love another person, including an enemy? It means to imitate Jesus in relation to that person. Jesus mentions a single example of love-in-action for enemies in this passage: pray for them. This week, you

have been invited to identify people whom you do not forgive. You have not been asked through this prayer guide to take any action in relation to these people. Today, based on the scripture passage, you are. Take the list of people you do not forgive that you began on Tuesday and hopefully refined during the week. In your prayer time today, slowly (but not painstakingly) go through the people on the list, one by one. If . . . and only if . . . you can do this with sincerity, state their name and say to God this single prayer: “God bless <the person’s name>.” If you can sincerely do this, you are loving your enemies, and you can leave it at that for today. This topic will return later in Lent. If you cannot sincerely say this prayer for the people you do not forgive, don’t pretend to do so! Don’t condemn yourself. But think about this.

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3/1: Matthew 17.1-9

Every year on the Second Sunday of Lent, we hear one or another gospel account (this year, from Matthew) of the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus leads his close disciples Peter, James, and John up a high mountain by themselves. There, the disciples are given a vision of the full glory of Jesus. They witness Jesus’ speaking with Moses and Elijah – the great figures of the law and the prophets in the Hebrew scripture. The disciples experience a manifestation of the presence of God the Father, whose voice tells them: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.” In the scene of the transfiguration, we are not given a fanciful portrait of disciples who are perfect or who nearly fully understand Jesus. We are given a realistic portrait of disciples who have a relationship with Jesus, who are given a powerful new experience of grace from God, who are limited and afraid, and who have a long way to grow in fully understanding Jesus. Hopefully, you can relate to this. If you have a relationship with Jesus, have been actively living the grace of Lent, are limited, and recognize you have a long way to grow in fully understanding Jesus . . . you are on the right track spiritually! Today, speak directly to God about your desire to grow as a disciple by entering actively into this Second Week of Lent. You have heard this before: If you intend to use this prayer guide for the Second Week of Lent, read it only one day at a time. Reading ahead is detrimental to allowing this week of Lent to unfold.

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, 3/2: Luke 6.36-38

Mercy is the reality of God’s love that extends beyond strict justice. Our sin distances us from God. Our serious sin can significantly distance us from God. In justice, God responds to our sin with the consequences that are proper to God. God also loves us beyond what we deserve in strict justice. Mercy is God’s love-beyond-strict-justice. At the beginning of today’s text from Luke 6, Jesus states: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Since we know that no human being is as merciful as God our Father, Jesus must be teaching us that we are called to continually grow in being merciful. There is always room for growth in understanding mercy and living mercy with other people. At the end of the passage, Jesus teaches: “For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” Do not water down this teaching . . . and apply it to mercy: The measure with which we measure out mercy to other people will in return be the measure with which God measures out mercy to us. Yikes! Most of us would prefer that God be much more merciful with us than we are with other people. If you take seriously Jesus’ teaching here and are honest about your own limitations/failures in living mercy, you hopefully want to increase the measure with which you measure out mercy to other people. For today’s spiritual exercise, make a list of the most significant ways you currently (not in the past) live merciful love with other people. Be as specific as possible in compiling this list. Write

down individual's names and simple notes of the merciful actions you extend to them. As was the case last week, start with your closest relationships and move out from there: your spouse, your immediate family, your extended family, your coworkers, your classmates, your neighbors, members of your community, people to whom you give attention in society. Do not do any analysis of yourself or the people on the list. Just make as complete a list as you are able to make today.

Tuesday, 3/3: Matthew 23.1-12

At the end of this passage from Matthew 23, Jesus tells His disciples: "The greatest among you must be your servant." A servant is someone who recognizes another person's need and provides what is necessary to address that need. A good servant is attentive, selfless, and giving. Picking up on the final line of today's biblical text, a good servant humbles himself/herself to meet another's need, rather than exalting himself/herself over the other person. An authentic Christian puts Jesus' love into action by serving the needs of other people as Jesus would have us serve those needs. Today, make another list: Make a list of the ways you choose these days (not in the past) to serve other people in and for Jesus. This is not merely a list of ways you give to others. It is a list of specific ways in which you make the choice to recognize others' needs, consider how those needs might be addressed, and sacrifice to provide what is needed to address those needs. If it helps, you might consider your service in terms of the traditional pillars of biblical stewardship: How do you currently sacrifice your time, talent, and treasure to live as a servant to others in and for Jesus? Once again, it might be good to construct the list by considering your closest current relationships and moving out from there. Compile as complete a list as you can today.

Wednesday, 3/4: Matthew 20.17-28

In today's reading from Matthew 20, we hear words from Jesus that might remind us of yesterday's reading: "... whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave." Jesus adds a statement about Himself: "... the Son of Man [the title Jesus uses uniquely for Himself] did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many." Jesus lives His life serving all of humanity. Jesus' ultimate service of humanity - of every single human person of every time and place, including you - is His sacrificing His life to free us from sin and death. This is the fulness of God's love. It is the fulness of God's mercy. None of us, including the most genuine disciple of Jesus, has lived this fulness of love. We have not given our entire lives for the ransom of humanity from sin and death. Jesus invites us to enter into the fulness of love through Him. He calls us to grow in living more and more of His *merciful, serving* love, until we hopefully enter into the fulness of that love in eternal life. In your prayer time today, reflect on what are significant, concrete examples of Christian service going on around you ... in which you are *not* currently personally involved ... that you recognize as genuinely of and for Jesus? What are the needs being addressed, and how are other people clearly choosing to live as servants in and for Jesus by addressing those needs? It might be helpful to take some notes on your observations.

Thursday, 3/5: Luke 16.19-31

In today's parable from Luke 16, Jesus introduces the character of a rich man who dresses in fine garment, dines sumptuously each day, and has a home of his own. Lying at the rich man's door is a man named Lazarus who is economically poor, covered with sores, perhaps homeless, and so hungry that he longs to eat the scraps of food that fall from the rich man's table. A key detail of the parable is that the rich man knows Lazarus (proven by the fact that he knows Lazarus' name.) It's not that the rich man has never noticed Lazarus. He knows him. This makes the parable memorable. The rich man does absolutely nothing for Lazarus. He does not invite him into his home, share his clothing with him, feed him even a scrap of food, address his sores, greet him, or even pray for him. The rich man does less for Lazarus than dogs, who lick Lazarus' sores, do for Lazarus. Imagine the most extreme reasons why the rich man may behave this way. Lazarus killed the rich man's child. Lazarus is a child abuser. Lazarus has committed violent crimes. Lazarus is a hopeless addict. Lazarus did the worst thing to the rich man that anyone has ever done to the rich man in his entire life. Given the most extreme reasons why the rich man may do absolutely nothing for Lazarus, consider the spiritual and moral reality here: The rich man chooses to entirely deny mercy to Lazarus. In your reflection today, honestly answer this question: Who is Lazarus in your life today?

Friday, 3/6: Matthew 21.33-43, 45-46

In today's Matthew 21 text, Jesus speaks to certain religious leaders who have had the opportunity to listen to Him and witness His love, and who firmly reject Jesus. These people are meant to be leaders of God's Kingdom on earth, producing for God the fruits of God's love in action. However, when God Himself comes to them in Jesus, they oppose and persecute Him. Jesus offers a parable that reminds His listeners of the ways that past leaders of God's people have violently rejected the emissaries God has sent to them. In the parable, Jesus makes clear He knows well how these religious leaders will ultimately treat Him: They will kill Him. At the end of the parable, Jesus explains the results of all this: "... the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit." When Jesus speaks of the people who will produce fruit for God in the Kingdom of God, he is hopefully speaking of you. You have been given the blessing of receiving the revelation of Who Jesus is and have hopefully responded by saying "Yes" to living in Him. If you take seriously today's passage, your appropriate response should have something to do with desiring to increase the ways you produce fruit in and for the Kingdom of God. At the beginning of this week, you had the opportunity to consider how you live merciful love with other people and how you serve other people in Jesus. These are some of your strengths as a disciple of Jesus. Yesterday, you were given the gift of honestly acknowledging ways in which you choose to deny merciful love to specific people and/or categories of people. These are some of your weaknesses as a disciple of Jesus. Putting together those two realities, return to your reflections from Wednesday. If you desire to increase the ways you produce fruit in and for the Kingdom of God, what is a specific Christian service going on around you that you should embrace to put into action your desire to increase the ways you produce fruit in and for the Kingdom of God?

Saturday, 3/7: Luke 15.1-3, 11-32

Today's passage from Luke 15 is considered by many people to be the parable that most deeply and broadly reveals the truth of God the Father's merciful, forgiving love for us. The father in the parable represents God our Father. Throughout the parable, the father is full of life and love, generous with his inheritance, respectful of his children's freedom, on the lookout for the return of both sons, eager for reconciliation, full of compassion, effusive in affection, ceaselessly patient with both sons, and eager to celebrate the good. The father is generous, merciful, and forgiving. Everything about the father is about joy - the joy he experiences by living true love, and the joy he wants to share with everyone else around him. Spend some time today reflecting on the truth that God your Father only wants you to experience joy. He wants to share the fullness of joy with you. The way that leads to that joy is the way of Christian discipleship. In light of the spiritual exercises you've pursued this week, especially anything that has been challenging for you in the past two days, consider the fact that all of this is meant to lead you to more joy during your earthly life and, ultimately, to eternal joy. Lent is about growth.

THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3/8: John 4.5-42

In today's account from John 4, Jesus has an extended encounter with a Samaritan woman. The story might reflect various dimensions of our own personal encounters with Jesus today. There is mystery and revelation, a back-and-forth of questions and answers, increasing openness and trust, and eventually a significant spiritual movement on the part of the Samaritan woman. At any point in the encounter, the Samaritan woman is free to ignore Jesus, to not listen to His words, to dismiss Him, or to turn away from Him. She makes the free choice to remain engaged with Jesus, with all of the challenges this involves for her. At this point in Lent, if you are honestly trying to remain actively engaged with Jesus, you are on the right track spiritually! In your prayer today, speak directly with God about your intentions and spiritual goals for living each day of the week ahead. A repeat reminder: 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, 3/9: Luke 4.24-30

In today's passage from Luke 4, Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth, where he grew up. He has just offered a commentary, based on a passage from the prophet Isaiah, in which He identifies Himself with the long-awaited Messiah. At first, Jesus' neighbors who listen to Him are amazed by His words and speak highly of Him. At the same time, because what Jesus has said calls into question their presumptions about Jesus and the Messiah, the crowd begins to react negatively to what He has said. Jesus directly challenges His listeners' unwillingness to accept the truth He has offered them. He compares them to people in the Old Testament who have claimed to be of God, but have rejected the truths spoken by God's messengers, at the same time that foreigners have accepted the truths spoken by those messengers. When the people in the synagogue are challenged in this way by Jesus, they are filled with fury, rise up, drive Jesus out of Nazareth, and lead Him to the brow of the hill on which the town is built, to hurl Him down headlong. The crowd in the synagogue is fine with Jesus until He challenges their thinking about Him and about how God works. They are fine with Jesus until He challenges their errors. In your prayer and reflection today, dedicate time to considering when this dynamic occurs in your life these days. Within recent memory, what teachings of Jesus have you heard through the scripture and the teaching of the Church that you have ignored or rejected when they challenge your thinking, your presumptions, your comforts, or your way of life? Take notes on this - make a list. If you are not open and honest about this topic, this week's reflections will not go very far.

Tuesday, 3/10: Matthew 18.21-35

In this text from Matthew 18, the disciple Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?" This direct question is shared by every sincere Christian. Jesus responds directly: You must forgive without any limitation. Jesus then offers a parable in which a master forgives a servant a huge debt that the servant could never pay back in the course of his lifetime. The forgiven servant subsequently, violently demands immediate repayment of a relatively modest debt (entirely repayable over time) that another servant owes him. The master of the forgiven servant who refuses mercy to his fellow servant has him handed over to the torturers until he should pay back his whole debt . . . which he will never be able to do in his lifetime. At the conclusion of this sobering parable, Jesus is clear: "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." There is no legitimate way you can erase from reality the clear teaching of Jesus here: You must forgive people who have sinned against you without limitation. There is no legitimate way you can erase Jesus' clear teaching here about the consequences of your refusal to forgive. Perhaps returning to the reflections on unforgiveness you pursued in the First Week of Lent: Whom do you not forgive in your life? Allow yourself to absorb these statements today: If you want to be an authentic disciple of Jesus, you *must* forgive these people. You *must* address this issue now. How do you respond to this? If your response is negative or dismissive, does yesterday's reading resonate more with you?

Wednesday, 3/11: Matthew 5.17-19

In these verses from Matthew 5, Jesus explains that when we obey God's commandments, we teach other people to obey God's commandments. When we break God's commandments, we teach other people to break God's commandments. In whatever ways we live our lives, other people encounter us. Our holiness and sinfulness are entirely part of who we are and whom other people encounter. When we live holy lives, we offer people examples of living holy lives. We teach them about holiness. When we live sinful lives, we offer people examples of living sinful lives. We teach them about sin. People do not need to directly witness our holy or sinful acts to witness their results in us. People do not need to analyze us in order to understand us. In every way we choose to live, we show people

that our way of living is a way they can also live. We teach them. In your reflection today, think about the areas of Jesus' teaching that you choose to ignore or reject and tell yourself that these choices are not that important. What are the areas of Jesus' teaching that you choose to ignore or reject and tell yourself these choices do not affect other people? What are the areas of Jesus' teaching that you choose to ignore or reject and tell yourself these choices are "private" because other people do not directly witness your making them? Make a list of these choices. Today is three weeks from Ash Wednesday - the halfway point of Lent. If you find this spiritual exercise difficult and want to avoid it, you might help yourself by reviewing why you wanted to actively enter into Lent.

Thursday, 3/12: Luke 11.14-23

In this passage from Luke 11, Jesus has miraculously driven a demon out of a man. Some people in the crowd make the preposterous affirmation that Jesus drives out demons through the power of the devil. Jesus responds to this falsehood by offering several straightforward, logical, graspable explanations of why it is not true. If people in the passage who feel Jesus drives out demons through the power of the devil listen to the explanations He offers and enter into them, they should be led to understand the truth that Jesus is only driving out demons through the power of God. Jesus does not criticize these people's initial thinking or emotional reactions. Jesus appeals to these people's reason - the intellects God has given them - to move beyond their limited thinking and feelings and grow in understanding the truth. Our thoughts are limited and may be wrong. Feelings have no IQ. God gives us the power of reason to sift through our various thoughts and feelings to grow in knowing and understanding the truth. Recalling your reflections from the past three days, for each teaching of Jesus you have identified that you choose to ignore or reject (including His teaching about forgiveness), to what extent do you know and understand our faith tradition's explanations of the teaching? The easy way to clarify this is to state to yourself the teaching you ignore or reject and then summarize for yourself our faith tradition's explanation of why the teaching is supposedly true (even though you ignore or reject it.) If you don't have a full and logical explanation of the teaching, what is it you do not understand? Be specific. There is nothing to fear in this exercise.

Friday, 3/13: Mark 12.28-34

In today's reading from Mark 12, Jesus reveals the two-part "First" or "Greatest" of all the commandments of the Old Testament: (1) You shall love God with your entire being, and (2) You shall love your neighbor as yourself (meaning you shall love every other person as God would have you love yourself). If you ask a diverse group of Christians whether they fully live this two-part Greatest Commandment, some will say "Yes, I do." Upon further reflection, most people will acknowledge that no one currently on this planet fully lives the Greatest Commandment. Many people deeply love God, but no one nearly completely loves God with every fiber of his/her being. Many people very much love their neighbors as themselves, but no one nearly completely loves every single other person as God would have us love one another. We are all works in progress, from the beginning of our lives until the end. Do you grasp this? If you do . . . and if you recognize that you are a work in progress in terms of loving God and other people . . . go back once again to your reflections this week on the teachings of Jesus that you choose to ignore or reject. Recognizing that you are a work in progress in terms of these teachings, with obvious room for growth, honestly consider this question: On March 13, 2026, to what extent do you want to grow in understanding and living these teachings? To what extent do you feel fine remaining where you are in relation to them? Your honesty here is critical.

Saturday, 3/14: Luke 18.9-14

In the parable Jesus offers today in Luke 18, the Pharisee is an extreme. According to Jesus, he is convinced of his own righteousness and despises everyone else. The Pharisee is incorrectly confident that he is in a proper relationship with God. He is not. He is a sinner. The Pharisee prays to himself, not to God. He recites his list of good religious practices and is thankful (to himself) that he is not sinful like the rest of humanity, including the tax collector. When the Pharisee sees the tax collector, who publicly acknowledges himself to be a serious sinner, the Pharisee does absolutely nothing for the tax collector that a godly person should do - assist the tax collector with his struggle, encourage the tax collector in his pursuit of God, or even pray for the tax collector. Do not spend a lot of time on this question, simply answer it: Do you ever, with the legitimacy of your life as a Christian, look down on

individuals or types of people whom you recognize as sinful? If that is even occasionally true, does this week's self-examination have an impact on how you might be softened to make you more an instrument of God's mercy? That could be a significant blessing for the world that emerges from this week of Lent.

THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3/15: John 9.1-41

This Sunday's reading from John 9 recounts the story of a man born blind from birth. Jesus enters into this man's situation and initiates a series of great gifts. The man first receives the miraculous gift of sight. This is just the beginning. Tossed about by a succession of questions, challenges, and particularly the misguided opinions of certain religious leaders, the man eventually receives the ultimate gift – belief in Jesus. The man's journey to belief is complicated and not easy. During it, he makes a series of simple but important choices that help him grow in receiving the gifts that Jesus offers him. In the week ahead, we will be presented with daily scripture passages from the Gospel of John that highlight straightforward choices we can make to grow as authentic disciples of Jesus. In your prayer today, speak honestly with God about your level of interest in entering into this spiritual exercise during the week ahead. If you want to focus spiritually during this Fourth Week of Lent, are you willing to take action to follow through on insights that emerge from your reflection? Please accept this weekly instruction: 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, 3/16: John 4.43-54

In today's reading from John 4, Jesus is in the Galilean town of Cana. He is approached by a royal official whose son is ill in Capernaum, which is some distance away. The man asks Jesus to come with him to Capernaum to heal his son, who is near death. Jesus responds with a strong statement: "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." The royal official again asks Jesus to come with him before his child dies. Jesus instructs him: "You may go; your son will live." Jesus is inviting the royal official to grow beyond his questions, feelings, fears, limitations, and expectations about how he thinks Jesus should work (Jesus should come with him Capernaum) . . . and to simply do what Jesus instructs him to do - to believe Jesus without first seeing a sign or wonder. The royal official chooses to say "Yes" to what Jesus instructs him to do: He believes what Jesus says to him and leaves. The next day, while the royal official is still journeying back to Capernaum, his slaves meet him and give him the remarkable news that his son will live. They report that his son began to recover the previous day, just at the time Jesus told him that his son would live. The scripture writer states that, as a result of all this, the royal official and his whole household come to believe in Jesus. A straightforward takeaway from this scene is that part of believing in Jesus is simply doing what He instructs us to do when we are blessed to hear His instructions to do something. Our questions, feelings, fears, limitations, and expectations about how we think Jesus should work are real, but they are not of central importance. Much more important is our listening to the instructions Jesus gives us through the scripture and the teaching of the Church . . . and simply choosing to do what He instructs us to do. Is there room in your life to grow in doing this? In your reflection today, consider specific situations in which this may apply to you. This may be a powerful entry point to growth in authentic discipleship.

Tuesday, 3/17: John 5.1-16

In this passage from John 5, there is a man in Jerusalem who has been seriously ill for 38 years. The man is crippled or lame. Jesus finds him at a pool called Bethesda, where large numbers of people congregate to seek miraculous

healings from God through the movements of the water in the pool. Jesus approaches the man and asks him if he wants to be well. Jesus instructs him to do something other than what he expects to do to receive God's healing: Jesus instructs him to rise, take up his mat, and walk. The man chooses to simply do what Jesus instructs him to do: He immediately becomes well, takes up his mat, and walks. This is an astonishing miracle! If you straightaway connect this man's choice to yesterday's reflections about simply choosing to do what Jesus instructs us to do, you are on target. There is more to the passage. A while later, Jesus finds the miraculously healed man and gives him a further, much more important instruction: "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." The man's past physical illness was significant, but its consequences were physical and ultimately temporary. Much more serious is the man's sin - his spiritual illness. The consequences of his sin are much deeper - they reach the level of his soul - and can ultimately be eternal. Jesus' second instruction to the man is His critical gift to him: "Do not sin any more." Does the man move beyond his questions, feelings, fears, limitations, and expectations about how he thinks Jesus should work regarding sin . . . and simply choose to do what Jesus instructs him to do? We cannot know: The scripture writer does not give us any more information about the man. What you can know is how you respond to that instruction, which Jesus give to every single person who is blessed to encounter Him: "Repent." Turn away from your sin. Now. Hopefully benefitting from your having lived Lent during the past four weeks: What does this mean for you today? What must you do?

Wednesday, 3/18: John 5.17-30

In this text from John 5, Jesus is speaking to crowds of people. He makes direct claims about who He is. All of these claims are either 100 percent true or 100 percent false. There is no grey area. Jesus claims to be equal to God. Jesus claims that God, the Creator of the Universe, is His personal Father. Jesus claims to be the Son of God with a capital "S" - not merely another child of God (which all people are). Jesus claims that the Father loves Him and shows Him everything that the Father Himself does. Jesus claims that just as the Father has life in Himself, He has given Jesus the possession of life in Himself. Jesus claims that just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so Jesus gives life to whomever He pleases. Jesus claims that the Father, who alone has the authority to exercise judgment on humanity, has given Jesus this power to exercise judgment. Ultimately, Jesus claims: ". . . whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me [God the Father] has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life." In all of this, Jesus thereby claims to be the Savior of the world. To repeat: there is no grey area in these claims. They are either entirely true or entirely false. An authentic Christian accepts these claims from Jesus and professes them to be true. In the passage, Jesus is explicit about the behavior of people who accept His claims: they honor Jesus just as they honor the Father. In your prayer today, answer this question in detail: How do you honor Jesus? This is not a vague or fringe question. Answer it in as much detail as you can - make a list of all the ways you honor Jesus at this time. After you have completed the list - when you have nothing else to add - answer this question: Is there room in your life for the expansion of this list? Do you have insights into what that might involve?

Thursday, 3/19: John 5.31-47

Today's reflection does not apply to everyone. For some of us, it could be uniquely important. In this section of John 5, Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people who have had the opportunity to encounter Him, listen to Him, and observe His actions . . . but choose to reject Him. Jesus cites for these people numerous, entirely reliable witnesses who testify to the truth of who Jesus is and what He teaches: God the Father; the works of God the Father that Jesus does; the preaching of John the Baptist; the word of Moses; the Scriptures. All these witnesses are available to Jesus' listeners, but they choose not to believe in Him. Jesus is laser direct in stating to these people why they reject Him. He is laying out in the open what is fundamentally spiritually wrong with these people. Some of us, including some people who in various ways follow teachings of Jesus . . . and may be living Lent . . . know that beneath whatever real Christian virtue we have, something is fundamentally spiritually wrong with us. The people we know or sense we should basically be as followers of Jesus . . . we are not. This goes much deeper than being sinners in need of growth as disciples. At the depth of who we are, we do not believe in Jesus or accept Jesus as we know or sense we should. If this resonates with you, allow yourself to hear spoken personally to you by Jesus what He states is at the depth of the people who reject Him in today's passage. Jesus makes several direct statements here. Focus on two: You do not have

the love of God in you. You do not want to come to Jesus to have life. If these words hit your soul as true, today could be the most important day of the rest of your life.

Friday, 3/20: John 7.1-2, 10, 25-30

In this passage from John 7, Jesus speaks to certain people who are entertaining the possibility that Jesus is the Christ - God's Anointed one - the long-awaited Messiah. These people say they know that when the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from. They also say they know where Jesus is from (presumably, Nazareth). Since no one will know where the Christ is from . . . and they know where Jesus is from . . . they know that Jesus is not the Christ. Jesus cries out against these people: They do not know Him and they do not know where he is from. These people are entirely wrong about Jesus and who He is. What happens to these people in the long run? The scripture does not tell us. Perhaps they subsequently witness the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus . . . and become people who understand who Jesus truly is - the Christ. Perhaps they subsequently encounter post-resurrection Christians whose witness to Jesus helps them to become people who understand who Jesus actually is - the Christ. The basic hope is that the people in this passage subsequently become people who are able to say: "I was wrong. I was wrong about Jesus. I did not know Him, and I did not know the truth of what He claimed. But now I do. I now know Jesus and I know who He is - the Christ." One of the marks of an authentic disciple of Jesus is his/her being able to state with happiness the ways he/she has been wrong about Jesus in the past . . . and how he/she today knows the truth about Jesus. This is meant to be a reality all through Christian life, which is meant to be an experience of constant growth in knowing Jesus and who He is. In your reflection today, consider and list the concrete ways you have been wrong about Jesus and His teaching in the recent past (not the distant past), and what you now realize, in contrast, is the truth. How extensive is your list? If your list is short or non-existent, be careful!

Saturday, 3/21: John 7.40-53

In this section of John 7, certain religious leaders are increasingly enraged that some people are beginning to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They are even upset that people who work for them are positively impressed by Jesus' words. These leaders express insulting anger about people who believe in Jesus, declaring them "accursed." In the face of this violent, threatening hatred, one of the religious leaders, Nicodemus, raises a simple, challenging question: "Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" In response, the other leaders throw a sarcastic comment at Nicodemus and dismiss his question. Nicodemus will be honored until the end of time as a person who stands up to fierce enemies of Jesus, does not allow them to intimidate himself, and speaks aloud words that challenge Jesus' opponents. In our time and place, there is no shortage of people who adamantly, often hatefully, reject Jesus and act to intimidate or threaten people who believe in Jesus. These aggressive rejectors of Jesus may occupy positions of leadership in our society or sit across the table from you at family gatherings. As was the case for Nicodemus, their opposition to Jesus is a straightforward opportunity for you to grow as an authentic disciple of Jesus. In your reflection today, consider how today's gospel scene is paralleled in your life. In your life today, when have you recently encountered people who are like the religious leaders in today's passage? Have you responded in any ways like Nicodemus? Is there room for growth for you in this area? What would that be?

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3/22: John 11.1-45

This section of John 11 describes Jesus' miraculously raising from the dead his friend Lazarus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead is the final reality that moves certain enemies of Jesus to plan to kill Him. As we enter the Fifth Week of Lent, our spiritual focus is meant to become more intense. We are drawing closer to the reality of Holy Week - the reality that when God becomes a human being, people freely choose to reject and kill Him. This week, we will read passages from John that focus on people 2000 years ago into whose lives Jesus enters . . . and who freely choose to reject Him. We will be invited to reflect on what is going on with these people and to honestly consider how the dynamics of their rejection of Jesus are similar in our lives. If your goal for Lent is to turn away sin

and to grow as an authentic disciple of Jesus, this week is a graced opportunity. Today, speak directly with God about the extent to which you plan to actively live the upcoming week of Lent. If you intend to actively participate in these spiritual exercises during the upcoming week, read this prayer guide 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, 3/23: John 8.1-11

In this passage from John 8, everyone other than Jesus is a serious sinner. The religious leaders have had a chance to hear Jesus' word and witness His actions. They freely choose to reject Jesus and wish to do Him harm. This is serious sin. In His interaction with these leaders, Jesus offers them the time, words, and opportunity to once again listen to Him and accept Him. How do the leaders respond? The leaders freely choose to continue to reject Jesus and the reconciliation He offers. They walk away from Jesus. There is no indication they have accepted Jesus' offer to be freed from their sin and reconciled with God through Him. These leaders reject Jesus, the Messiah. The woman who has been caught in the act of adultery has committed a very grave sin. Her serious sin may have cut off her current relation with God - real spiritual death. Unforgiven, her mortal sin may threaten her eternal life. Jesus enters this woman's life and offers the possibility of reconciling her to God and removing the threat of eternal death. How does the woman respond? She never denies her sinfulness and remains with Jesus. It is clear that she repents of her sin, because Jesus tells her He does not condemn her and commissions her to move ahead with her life, not sinning any more. This woman accepts Jesus, the Messiah. A Catholic or Orthodox Christian has been blessed to understand that the fullness of Jesus' forgiveness is uniquely available through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Every one of us is a sinner. If you have recognized your sin during Lent . . . have you sought and received the full reconciliation Jesus offers uniquely through sacramental Confession? If you have not, to which of the sinners in this passage are you most fundamentally similar?

Tuesday, 3/24: John 8.21-30

In this section of John 8, Jesus tells people, "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." In this context, "what is below" and "this world" refer to realities that are explicitly not of God, or anti-God. That makes Jesus' statement very powerful. He is judging some people as *belonging* to realities that are explicitly not of God, or anti-God. To "belong" to another is to be owned by another. If someone/something owns you, it has the final word in your life . . . Jesus does not have the final word. If you have been engaged in Lent, it is a blessing if you have more clearly recognized realities in your life that are not of God or anti-God that have owned you (or something like that). For a variety of reasons, it would not be unusual if you anticipate returning to those sinful realities after Easter. Your engagement in Lent might be shallow. You may allow your past sinfulness to challenge you in imagining a consistently holy future. You may quite cherish your sin and honestly look forward to returning to it after Easter. In your prayer time today, consider all of this before God. To what extent do you realistically anticipate returning to the serious sin, or patterns of sin, that you have rejected during Lent? If you honestly acknowledge areas in which this is true for you, do you recognize that your acceptance of your future sin is your rejection of Jesus as Messiah?

Wednesday, 3/25: 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." On a basic level, "freedom" refers to our ability to do what we choose in life. "True freedom" means freely choosing to do what is of Christ - to learn the truth from Him and

freely choose to put that truth into practice. In your reflection today, consider these questions: At this point in Lent, do you understand the meaning of “true freedom”? If you basically understand the meaning of “true freedom,” to what extent do you accept that this is reality? To what extent do you intend to pursue true freedom in your day-to-day and major life choices as you move past Lent? Do not take for granted your answers to these questions, especially in automatically affirming a holy future for yourself. At the same time, do not allow your answers be determined by your past sin or spiritual/moral mediocrity. To what extent do you intend to actively pursue true freedom by growing in knowing the truth through Jesus and choosing to put that truth into action? Be as concrete as possible in reflecting on concrete choices you anticipate making in your life . . . and the options you will have available from which to choose. Many people in crowds 2000 years ago encounter Jesus, for some time accept His word, but do not remain in His word. Once understood, this is rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

Thursday, 3/26: John 8.51-59

If God came to you face to face on this planet . . . and you fully knew this was actually God standing in front of you . . . and God told you the truth about how you should live, would you follow what God told you to do? Knowing that God is the only source, sustainer, and possibly good eternal future you have . . . if God visited you face-to-face and told you what God wanted you to do, would you do it? In this text from John 8, Jesus speaks to people face-to-face. Jesus identifies Himself to them as “I AM”, which is the name reserved exclusively for God in the Hebrew scripture. Be sure you understand this: Jesus is directly, openly, absolutely telling these people that He is God. When Jesus tells these people face to face that He is God, they pick up stones to kill Him. This is entirely understandable. These people do not believe Jesus. They think He is falsely claiming to be God. To them, that is the ultimate blasphemy, and they believe that a person who commits such blasphemy should be killed. You hopefully know Jesus entirely more than these people know Him. You hopefully know He is, in fact, God who has become a human being. Jesus is God. In all the ways Jesus enters into your life through the power of the Holy Spirit, He is God standing in front of you, telling you the truth about how you should live. When you freely choose to say “No” to doing what Jesus tells you to do, it is you who pick up stones to throw at Jesus. Your culpability in throwing stones at Jesus is immeasurably greater than the people in the passage, who do not know who Jesus is. You do. In your prayer today, reflect on and honestly answer this question: Do you accept all of this?

Friday, 3/27: John 10.31-42

In this passage from John 10, a crowd of people who have had the opportunity to encounter Jesus and listen to Him pick up stones to throw at Jesus. They tell Jesus why they are doing this: “You, a man, are making yourself God.” After offering these people some more explanation of the truth of who He is, Jesus leaves. Jesus goes across the Jordan River, which is not far away. There, He encounters a crowd of people who accept Him and begin to believe in Him. These two crowds - one who rejects Jesus and one who accepts Him - are not geographically far away from one another, but their responses to Jesus are radically different. Crowds do not determine the choices of individuals, including in terms of individuals’ rejecting or accepting Jesus. Everyone who encounters Jesus makes his/her personal free decisions how to respond to Him. However, crowds certainly influence individuals. As we will see when we enter Holy Week, crowd dynamics are very much involved in the passion and death of Jesus. In our time and place, there are crowds of people who reject Jesus. Christians are not called to avoid such crowds. In fact, Christians are commissioned to enter into such crowds to share with them the truth of Christ. However, the crowds of people with whom we share our lives actively influence our discipleship - discouraging or encouraging our growth in Jesus as Lord. Does your living of Lent give you increased insight about the ways that the crowds of people with whom you spend your time positively and negatively affect your authentic discipleship? Are there long-term changes in your crowd interactions that will . . . or should . . . emerge from your experience of Lent?

Saturday, 3/28: John 11.45-56

In these verses from John 11, the Passover feast during which Jesus will enter His torture and death is approaching. Jesus knows fully well that His enemies want to have Him arrested and killed. This is a terrible reality, which is referred to as the “passion” of Jesus. Jesus is entirely free to enter into this passion with the power of His love . . . or to avoid this passion. Some people in today’s passage ask, “What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?”

You know the answer to their question: Jesus freely chooses to enter Jerusalem and enter into the passion that awaits Him. It is through this passion that Jesus ultimately brings salvation to the world. The reason most of us do not move forward with Jesus in the realities of our lives is very often because of the passion involved in remaining with Him. We are not threatened with torture or death, but we face challenges, difficulties, sacrifices, and a range of rejections that we anticipate will be involved in staying true to Jesus. All of this is our passion. As we enter into Holy Week, and you face the rest of your life, consider this question in your prayer today: In comparison with where you were spiritually on Ash Wednesday, are you more willing to live the rest of your life as an authentic disciple of Jesus, knowing it will inevitably involve a real passion? What do you think? Will you go to the feast with Him?

HOLY WEEK

Sunday, 3/29: Matthew 26.14-27.66

As we begin Holy Week, we are invited to listen to the account of Jesus' passion and death in the Gospel of Matthew. Through His passion and death, Jesus brings salvation to this fallen, sinful world. Through His passion and death, Jesus also reveals to us how we must choose to live if we are to be His authentic disciples. Spend time today reading through Matthew's passion account. As you do so, ask the following questions, and continue to ask these questions when you enter into the Triduum later this week: What is happening? What is Jesus doing? How do the people in Matthew's account respond - positively and negatively?

Monday, 3/30: John 12.1-11

The Gospel readings this week include a focus on Judas Iscariot. Judas is called by Jesus to be one of His twelve closest disciples. Like the other eleven, Judas is invited by Jesus to accompany Him on His travels and witness first-hand much of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus brings Judas into the inner circle of His followers, with whom He spends extensive private time and to whom He offers more detailed and direct explanations of the meaning of what He teaches to larger crowds. Jesus sends Judas out on missionary journeys with the other eleven to preach and act on His behalf. Jesus blesses Judas with more personal exposure to His life and love than Jesus offers to most other people during His public ministry. Having spent several years in very close contact with Jesus, Judas freely chooses to betray Him. Judas' example is relevant today for Christians who have had the blessing of exposure to Jesus and make their own free choices whether to authentically live as His disciples. Having lived almost six weeks of Lent, where do you stand in relation to the same kinds of choices Judas made? In today's passage from John 12, Judas complains when Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, anoints Jesus' feet with costly oil. Judas suggests the oil could have been sold, with the income given to the poor. The gospel writer explains that Judas actually says this because he holds the money bag for Jesus and His companions and regularly steals from it. Judas in this passage speaks to Jesus and his fellow disciples as if he were true to God. His words are false, revealing his internal dishonesty with God and others. At this point in Lent, how are you less dishonest with God and others in terms of who you are internally, both in your words and actions?

Tuesday, 3/31: John 13.21-33, 36-38

In this text from John 13, Jesus knows that Judas Iscariot intends to betray Him. Jesus says to Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly." While the scripture writer notes Judas' plans and states that Satan has entered him, Judas is still a free person. He has full freedom to change his plans, reject Satan, and not betray Jesus. What will Judas decide to do? The scripture writer tells us: "Judas took the morsel and left at once. And it was night." Today, pursue these questions: During Lent, you have had the opportunity to reflect on the reality of your freedom to do whatever you choose with your life. It is Jesus who has invited you and given you the grace to become His disciple. Your actually living as an authentic disciple depends entirely on your free choices of how to respond to Jesus' invitation and grace. At this point in Lent, do you have increased consciousness of the reality of your complete freedom in responding to Jesus' invitation to discipleship? Do you have increased understanding of the choices you make for . . . and against . . . growing as an authentic disciple of Jesus? Based on Jesus' interaction with Judas in today's passage,

call to mind some of the choices you were making before Lent to embrace sin and reject holiness in your life. Recognize your freedom to make those same choices today, and however tempting it is to do so. Hear Jesus say to you directly: "What you are going to do, do quickly." How do you respond?

Wednesday, 4/1: Matthew 26.14-25

In today's passage from Matthew 26, Judas Iscariot goes to certain religious leaders and asks about Jesus: "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" The leaders pay Judas thirty pieces of silver. The gospel writer tells us that from that time on, Judas looks for an opportunity to hand over Jesus for arrest, which leads to Jesus' passion and death. This account makes clear one of the realities that is more valuable to Judas than his faithfulness to Jesus: thirty pieces of silver. Six weeks ago on Ash Wednesday, you presumably entered into Lent with a sincere intention to grow as a liberated sinner and a more authentic disciple of Jesus. If you have actively lived Lent, you surely have a more acute understanding of how you choose to sin and to reject holiness of life. When you make choices against authentic discipleship, you make choices *for* other realities. Without pursuing any detailed examination of conscience, what are the realities of which you are most aware that you choose to "get" instead of choosing for authentic discipleship? What are you willing to *get* if you hand over Jesus? Having a clear answer to this question would be an enormous blessing as you head into the holiest days of the year.

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!**