



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, 2/14 (Ash Wednesday): Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18

Six weeks from now, God will offer the world the holiest days of the year – the Easter Triduum. At the culmination of those days (the Easter Vigil or Easter Sunday), hundreds of millions of people will profess in public that they believe Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, and that they are his disciples. Lent is the six-week period of spiritual preparation for the grace of the Easter Triduum and the Easter Season. Spend time today getting as clear as possible with God and yourself about three questions: (1) What are your goals for Lent? A principal goal should be to be living as a maximally authentic disciple of Jesus when the Easter Triduum begins on March 28. You may have other goals for Lent. What are they? (2) In pursuit of those goals, we are invited on Ash Wednesday to do two things every day for the next six weeks: repent and believe in the Gospel. Speak honestly with God and yourself about this today. 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? (3) What are your plans for using practical disciplines to focus yourself on living Lent for the next six weeks? Hopefully, you will begin with the traditional Lenten disciplines referenced in today's gospel passage: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. What other disciplines will you use? In your daily life, what are activities and behaviors from which you should withdraw – or that you should add – to positively focus you on living Lent each day for the next six weeks? Be sure to consider your involvement in entertainment and social media. For each of these three questions, be as clear and concrete as you can be. You are likely to benefit from recording some notes for yourself for 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, 2/15: Luke 9.22-25

Today's Gospel passage from Luke 9 is one with which every authentic disciple of Jesus should be familiar, as in it Jesus gives a straightforward teaching that is supposed to guide every day of every true Christian's life. Jesus states clearly here that anyone who wishes to follow Him **MUST** do three things. (1) First, anyone who wishes to follow Jesus must deny himself/herself. If you're embracing Lenten disciplines, you might immediately think, "I'm denying myself alcohol . . . or social media . . . or gossip this Lent." What Jesus is addressing here is much deeper than denial of activities. Jesus is saying that anyone who wishes to follow Him must remove himself/herself from the center of his/her life and accept Jesus as and at the center of his/her life. Jesus is, in fact, the only origin, only current source, and hopefully only eternal future of our lives. We are entirely free to accept or reject this reality. A fundamental temptation is to place ourselves (or other people, or things, or forces), instead of Jesus, at the center of our lives. 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 accept Jesus as the center of your life? (2) Second, Jesus states clearly here that anyone who wishes to follow Him **MUST** take up his/her cross daily. That means you must accept whatever passion, challenges, and effort is involved in following Jesus. Are you willing to do that every day for the next six weeks? (3) Third, Jesus states clearly here that anyone who wishes to follow Him **MUST** . . . follow Him. That means you must persist (and persist and persist) in your effort to follow Jesus. Do you intend to do that every day for the next six weeks, or are you more likely to give up or slack on actively pursuing your Lenten goals? Today, reflect on and speak directly and honestly to Jesus about these three clear teachings. It might again be helpful to make some notes for yourself for future reference during Lent.

Friday, 2/16: Matthew 9.14-15

In today's reading from Matthew 9, the disciples of John the Baptist are surprised that Jesus' disciples do not fast. Their correct understanding is that faithful people use the discipline of fasting to help bridge the gap between

themselves and God: to help focus their prayer, to mark their repentance from sin, to increase their thankfulness for God's blessings, and to increase their recognition of and active service to people in need. When Jesus responds to their question about His disciples' non-fasting, He gives an implicit revelation of who He is. Jesus says that His disciples do not need to fast at this time because the bridegroom (Jesus) is with them. In the future, when the bridegroom (Jesus) is taken away from them, Jesus' disciples will fast. Jesus' disciples have no need to fast while He is with them because He is God. While He is physically with them, the gap between Jesus' disciples and God can be measured in inches or feet. We are Jesus' disciples in 2024. He is fully with us through the power of the Holy Spirit, but our sin and our great room for growth in Him are gaps between Jesus and us. We fast as our Jewish ancestors did, and with the same goals. Today, spend time reviewing and finalizing your plans for physical fasting during Lent. Hopefully your plans extend significantly beyond the Church's very modest regulations for two days of Lenten fasting (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) and abstinence from meat on Fridays during Lent. Are your plans for fasting this Lent sacrificial, reasonable, and genuinely intended to focus you on repenting and believing in the Gospel each day? If so, the proof will be that you recognize a connection between your fasting and your growth in holiness in upcoming days and weeks. If your fasting disciplines this Lent cannot be connected with your decrease in sin and increase in living as an authentic disciple of Jesus, you may need to switch them up later in Lent.

Saturday, 2/17: Luke 4.1-13

In today's text from Luke 5, Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow Him, and then shares a banquet at Levi's house with a large crowd of tax collectors and others. In Jesus' time and place, tax collectors are commonly considered sinners because they often extract more money than is fair from innocent people. Jesus states of His fellowship with tax collectors, "I have not called the righteous to repentance but sinners." Jesus enters into the lives of Levi and the tax collectors to call them to righteousness – to turn away from their sin and begin to lead lives ordered to God's will. If they accept Jesus' call, Levi and the tax collectors will significantly change the way they handle material wealth. Jesus has the same call for us during Lent – to allow Him into our lives, to turn away from sin, and to grow in righteousness. One of the three traditional disciplines (along with prayer and fasting) that supports our Lenten spiritual development is almsgiving. Giving alms means to take a generous amount of your material wealth and sacrifice it during Lent to assist people who are in material need. Sincere, sacrificial almsgiving should increase your awareness of the material blessings God has given you, open your consciousness to your sinful uses of material wealth, assist the lives of people in material need, and thereby improve the material state of the world. What is your concrete plan for almsgiving this Lent? Is your plan truly sacrificial, and is it something that will be part of your every day during the next six weeks? (Throwing change or a couple of dollars into a jar is not at all sacrificial for most people in 2024.) Spend time today, in the presence of God, finalizing and committing to your Lenten almsgiving plan.

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 2/18: Mark 1.12-15

Mark offers a brief account of the testing of Jesus before He begins His public ministry: "The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and He remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to Him." Presumably, during those 40 days Jesus grows in His communion with God the Father and in His clarity about the mission He is about to begin. Living Lent offers you the opportunity to grow in communion with God and to gain clarity about the mission God gives you. To enter into this opportunity, you need to be maximally open each day to the Word of God and the challenges it provokes for you. Whether you have lived as a disciple of Jesus for many decades or a short period of time, every Lent is new, as is every week of Lent and every day of Lent. God wants to work in you during each day of this First Week of Lent 2024. Today, speak to God about your intentions and plans for entering into the scripture and reflection for each day of this week of Lent. If you intend to live actively this week of Lent, do not read ahead in this prayer guide. Read only one day at a time.

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, 2/19: Matthew 25.31-46

Today's text from Matthew 25 is Jesus' most detailed description of how we are eternally judged by Him . . . and therefore presumably how we are judged by Him every day of our lives. In judging us, Jesus does not ask us any questions, challenge us with a quiz, or invite us to say anything whatsoever. In judging us, Jesus, who has sacrificed His entire life for us because of His love for us, repeats back to us the choices we have made either to return love to Him or to not return love to Him. We chose to return love (or not return love) to Jesus when we feed "the least" who are hungry (or not feed them), give drink to "the least" who are thirsty (or not give drink to them), welcome "the least" who are strangers (or not welcome them), clothe "the least" who are naked (or not clothe them), care for "the least" who are ill (or not care for them), and visit "the least" who are in prison (or not visit them). Many godly realities that are part of a holy person's life are not mentioned in Jesus' detailed description of how He judges us (worship, piety, devotions, even prayer). Many areas of our lives that may or may not be important, but can consume much of our attention, are also not mentioned in Jesus' detailed description of how He judges us: education, employment, economic status, material possessions, earthly power, cleverness, physical appearance, likes, followers, or time spent having fun. Jesus, who offers us nothing by sacrificial love every moment of our lives, judges us based on whether we return love to Him by putting into practice sacrificial love for "the least" people around us. Whether you are very familiar with this passage or it's new to you, spend plenty of time today reading and reflecting on it. Do you grasp it? Is it understandable to you? (It should be . . . if not, call someone you trust to ask questions.) If you grasp the passage and understand it, what are your reactions to it? In your prayer, speak directly to Jesus about this.

Tuesday, 2/20: Matthew 6.7-15

Today's reading from Matthew 6 includes the uniquely important prayer commonly called the "Lord's Prayer" or the "Our Father". At the beginning of the prayer, every faithful disciple of Jesus is instructed to pray to God our Father, ". . . thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." To connect this passage to yesterday's: In heaven, no one is hungry, no one is thirsty, no one is a stranger, no one is naked, no one is ill, and no one is in prison. Since it is obviously God's will that none of these realities exists in heaven, it is clearly God's will that that none of these realities exists on the earth. Hopefully you sincerely pray the Lord's Prayer numerous times each day. In your reflection today, consider: In the world around you (your immediate community and within a short geographical distance), where do you recognize the following kinds of people? Go through each category individually and literally. In the world around you, where do you recognize people who are hungry . . . thirsty . . . strangers . . . naked . . . ill . . . and in prison? Spend time on each category. Do not go beyond that list. Be specific about the people around you whom you recognize in each category. Make a list. After you've done that, go back through the list. In each category, exactly what are you doing at this present time to respond materially to these people? Not what are you doing to respond spiritually (thoughts and prayers). In each category, exactly what are you doing at this present time to respond MATERIALLY to these people? If the answer is "nothing", be honest and don't spend time analyzing yourself. You are not the focus today.

Wednesday 2/21: Luke 11.29-32

In this passage from Luke 11, Jesus responds to people who want Him to perform some sort of miraculous or extraordinary sign for them. He recalls two stories from the Old Testament in which pagan people respond positively and profoundly when they hear God's true word spoken through God's true messengers. Jesus tells His listeners that He will not give them a sign greater than this: His word. When Solomon and Jonah spoke God's word, pagan people heard that word and changed their lives dramatically. Jesus says that ". . . there is something greater than Solomon . . . something greater than Jonah here." He means Himself, who is speaking the fullness of God's truth. At the judgment,

Jesus says, the pagans who change their lives in response to God's word through Solomon and Jonah will condemn this present, evil generation, who do not respond to the word of God through Jesus. Last Wednesday, you hopefully affirmed that during Lent you intend to work daily to repent and believe in the Gospel. This week, you have heard some of Jesus most important teachings about how He judges you. Do you feel you need something more from Jesus to show you who He is and where He's leading you?

Thursday, 2/22: Matthew 7.7-12

In today's text from Matthew 7, Jesus commands His disciples: "Do unto others whatever you would have them do to you." To continue to build on our reflections this week on Matthew 25, today do the following spiritual exercise. Some of us have suffered from serious, protracted physical hunger. In the United States, most of us have not. Some of us have suffered from serious, protracted physical thirst. Most of us have not. Today, spend some real time imagining that you were suffering serious, protracted, painful, health- or life-threatening physical hunger and physical thirst. After you've honestly (and not just briefly) imagined yourself in those situations, answer these questions: If you were deeply hungry, would you want another person to give you food? If you were deeply thirsty, would you want another person to give you drink? These are simple, straightforward questions . . . which will only be spiritually meaningful if you let the imagined realities of hunger and thirst sink in and take some real time reflecting on the questions. If you quickly read the description of this exercise and jump to snap answers to the questions, you are not doing the exercise.

Friday, 2/23: Matthew 5.20-26

In the today's passage from Matthew 5, Jesus says to His disciples (people who are actually trying to follow Him) that their righteousness (concretely living their lives according to God's will) must be deeper than certain religious leaders of their time. This may be a reference to the limitations and sometimes hypocrisy of those leaders, or it may be a straightforward reflection of the fact that Jesus' disciples have received much, much more of the revelation of God's truth through Jesus than many religious leaders of their time have received, because those leaders have not yet begun to believe in Jesus. This week, we have had beautifully re-presented to us Jesus' straightforward teaching that the first realities we concretely live to return love to Him are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the ill, and visiting the imprisoned. In your prayer and reflection today, hear Jesus speak these words directly to you: "I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven." Given the Matthew 25 context of our reflections this week, how do you react when Jesus says this to you?

Saturday, 2/24: Matthew 5.43-48

If you have taken seriously this week's scripture and reflection, you hopefully have an enhanced consciousness of the love-in-action on which Jesus fundamentally judges us now and eternally, an increased recognition of people in need around you, a greater sense of urgency about the compelling importance of Jesus' teaching on Matthew 25, and perhaps a more immediate awareness of how you would want people to treat you if you were in deep need. If you have entered into this week's scripture, you have presumably had some thoughts about ways that you do NOT currently feed the hungry people around you, give drink to the thirsty people around you, welcome the strangers around you, clothe the naked people around you, care for the ill people around you, and visit the prisoners around you. In today's passage from Matthew 5, Jesus states that God our Father sheds grace on all kinds of people – good and bad: ". . . he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." Do not at this time enter into any extended reflection or analysis of the reasons you choose not to meet the physical needs of the people around you. Simply consider your honest response to this question: Are you open to loving God's love in action significantly more actively with the people in need around you . . . especially with those people you consider "the least" . . . because God loves them?

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 2/25: Mark 9.2-10

In this passage, Jesus invites three of His disciples – Peter, James, and John – to have a uniquely important experience. They accept the invitation. Jesus leads them up a high mountain, where they witness the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus' appearance is transformed with an indescribable light. Moses and Elijah appear, conversing with Jesus. These are Old Testament figures who represent all of God's revelation before the coming of Jesus, as well as the eternal future. What the disciples are seeing is the full glory of who Jesus truly is: the eternal Son of God, the fulfillment of all that has come before Him, and the eternal future of all. Peter expresses the desire to remain in place, to prolong the comfort of this experience. At the same time, he and his fellow disciples are terrified. The disciples' words and reactions are silenced by a further gift – the overshadowing of the presence of God and a direct message and instruction from God the Father about Jesus: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." As they go back down the mountain, Jesus adds another instruction: Do not to tell anyone about this vision until the Son of Man (the term Jesus uses exclusively to refer to Himself) has risen from the dead. While the disciples have been given a vision of who Jesus truly is, they will not fully understand who He is – and be able to explain Him to others – until they have experienced the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As you read this account of the Transfiguration, consider the amazing fact that if you are choosing to deeply live Lent, you have chosen to enter into a comparable experience. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, has invited you to enter into a unique experience this Lent. If you are choosing to deeply live Lent, one way or another . . . You will see more clearly who Jesus truly is . . . You will be called to grow beyond your current spiritual comforts and fears . . . You will hear God's instruction to listen more to Jesus . . . You will prepare to re-enter the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus at the conclusion of Lent, to understand more fully the reality of who He is. If you are choosing to deeply live this Lent, this passage should be a great encouragement for the week ahead. A note for the week ahead: If you intend to use this prayer guide for the Second Week of Lent, do not read ahead in it! If you read ahead more than one day at a time, this guide may not be helpful.

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, 2/26: Luke 6.36-38

(Before reading today's reflection: Please be sure you first read the Gospel passage for today. This reflection guide is based on your having first read the passage. If the Gospel passage is not at the center of your reflection from beginning to end, this guide may be of little use.) Consider two principal teachings from Jesus in today's text from Luke 6. (1) Jesus states: "Stop judging and you will not be judged." In this context, Jesus is referring not to observing or evaluating other people's behavior and making prudent decisions based on those realities. When Jesus warns against "judging", He is referring to doing what belongs to God alone – fundamentally deciding and pronouncing the state of a person's soul. There is far too much judging going on these days in American society. Today, spend time honestly considering, in God's presence: Who are the people you currently judge as only God should judge? Do not think in generalities or vaguely: Name these people. Exactly who are they? Record a list of those names, or the categories of people you judge. If you have no list, you are probably kidding yourself. (2) Jesus states in this passage: "Stop condemning and you will not be condemned." By "condemning", Jesus means declaring other people to be irreparably bad and to be dismissed. American culture currently thrives on condemning. In your reflection today, make and record a second list: Who are the people you currently condemn? By the end of today, you should have substantive, specific lists of the people/categories of people you currently judge and condemn. At the top of your list, write this header: "The People/Categories of People I Judge and Condemn".

Tuesday, 2/27: Matthew 23.1-12

In this passage from Matthew 23, Jesus clearly teaches His disciples: “The greatest among you must be your servant.” Recall last Monday’s passage from Matthew 25, in which Jesus reveals that true love is putting into practice sacrificial service for “the least” people around us. Jesus lives the greatest love when He sacrifices His entire life to free sinners from sin. We live great love – and grow in greatness – when we serve others, especially “the least”, by sacrificing to meet their concrete needs. Today, reflect on this fundamental truth. Then honestly consider, in God’s presence: Who are the people you currently serve as Jesus teaches us to serve? Once again, name these people. Exactly who are they? What are their names? Make and record that list: the names of the people you currently serve as Jesus teaches us to serve. If you don’t like making lists, make the list. At the top of your list, write this header: “The People I Serve as Jesus Teaches Us to Serve”. Finally, reconsider the list you made yesterday of people/categories of people you judge and condemn. Are there any additional names you should add to that list?

Wednesday, 2/28: Matthew 20.17-28

In today’s reading from Matthew 20, Jesus says of Himself, “. . . the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve . . .” That should make immediate sense: Jesus does not come to the world to have people serve Him. He comes to the world to serve people. The rest of Jesus’ statement is: “. . . and to give His life as a ransom for many.” A ransom is paid when a person is imprisoned/enslaved and does not have the ability to pay what is needed to free himself/herself. We do not have the ability to free ourselves from the original sin of fallen humanity or our individual sin. There is nothing we can do or pay to “get” God’s forgiveness for ourselves. Jesus comes to the world and sacrifices His entire life to save us from the fallen state of humanity and our own sin. He ransoms us from all that separates us from God. Jesus comes to ransom all people from sin and death. Not some people. All people. Today, pull out the list you made on Monday and Tuesday – people/categories of people you judge and condemn, and people you currently serve as Jesus teaches us to serve. Simply read through the lists, one name at a time. For each name on the list, repeat thoughtfully to yourself, “The Son of Man came to give His life as a ransom for this person.” Without analysis, do this exercise. Repeat it if you like.

Thursday, 2/29: Luke 16.19-31

In the parable Jesus offers in today’s passage from Luke 16, He tells the story of a rich man who dresses in fine garments and dines sumptuously each day. The rich man knows by name a man named Lazarus. That is a key part of the parable. Lazarus is not a person whom the rich man doesn’t notice. The rich man not only knows who Lazarus is, he knows Lazarus by name. Lazarus lies at the door of the rich man, covered with sores and hungry, longing to eat his fill of the scraps of food that fall from the rich man’s table. Dogs are able to eat those scraps of food . . . and dogs by instinct come and lick the sores of Lazarus. Knowing Lazarus by name, the rich man chooses to do absolutely nothing for Lazarus in his need. The rich man does not feed Lazarus, give him drink, welcome him, clothe him, care for his illness, or enter into the “prison” in which Lazarus lives. The rich man does absolutely nothing for Lazarus . . . which is less than dogs by instinct do for Lazarus in his need. In the parable, Lazarus ends up eternally in heaven. The rich man ends up eternally in hell. Read and consider this parable. After you do so, make another list. Once again, do this in the presence of God. Who are the people you currently treat as the rich man treats Lazarus? Name these people. Exactly who are they? Do not spend time today thinking about why you treat these people this way. Record a list of their names. At the top of your list, write this header: “The People I Treat as the Rich Man Treats Lazarus”.

Friday, 3/1: Matthew 21.33-43, 45-46

In today’s Matthew 21 text, Jesus is speaking to certain religious leaders who assume they are part of God’s Kingdom on this earth and perhaps eternally. Jesus offers them a parable. In the parable, a landowner leases his excellent vineyard to tenants. In an arrangement like this, the tenants benefit personally and economically from working and harvesting the vineyard. In the lease, they agree with the landowner to pay him for these benefits by returning to him a certain amount of the produce grown in the vineyard. This is an entirely just arrangement. When the time of the harvest arrives, the tenants refuse to give the landowner his fair share of the produce. Instead of being faithful to the terms of the lease agreement, they want to unfairly keep all of the produce for themselves. The tenants violently

reject two groups of servants the landlord sends to collect the produce he is owed. When the landlord sends his own son to collect the produce, the tenants seize him, throw him out of the vineyard, and kill him. Jesus offers this parable to the religious leaders with whom He speaks to reveal the truth that “the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.” We have established during the first two weeks of Lent that the produce Jesus seeks from us is love in action: our real, concrete, sacrificial meeting the needs of the people we encounter. With this in mind, take out the three lists you have made this week. On each list, scratch out the previous header and write this same header at the top of each: “The Least”. After you’ve done that, slowly review each list, spending a moment or more on each person/category of people on it. After each name, repeat: “The Least”. What are you thinking?

Saturday, 3/2: Luke 15.1-3, 11-32

This passage from Luke 15 is one of Jesus’ most powerful revelations about the merciful, forgiving love of God our Father. The father in the story – who watches for the return of his sinful son, rushes out to welcome him, accepts his son’s confession of sin and desire to return to his father’s household, entirely forgives his son, is reconciled with him, and throws a great party to celebrate his son’s return – represents God our Father. Most of us believe or want to believe that God loves us this way in our sinfulness and offers us this forgiveness and reconciliation when we are repentant sinners. In the parable, the father’s older son does not accept his father’s forgiveness and reconciliation with his younger brother because of his negative personal view of his younger brother (and his father). The older brother has closed himself off from the reality of his father’s merciful, forgiving love – and obviously is not open to being an instrument of that love for or with his younger brother. At the end of the parable, it is at best sad that the older brother chooses to exclude himself from the joy that his father, his father’s household, and his younger brother are enjoying in celebration of his father’s forgiving love. Jesus Christ came to this world to offer salvation – forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God – to all people. Not just to you. Not just to a select group of people. To all people. That includes all people who are “the least” – the people on all three lists you compiled this week. If you accept this truth, bear it in mind and re-read your first and third lists. Jesus came to offer forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to each of these people. Read each name and pause with it.

THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3/3: John 2.13-25

In today’s reading, the Gospel writer notes that Jesus does not need anyone to testify to Him about human nature, because He himself well understands human nature. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who has become a fully human being. He does not observe human life from a distance, but entirely experiences what it is to live a human life. Jesus not only knows first-hand the temptations and limitations of human life; He also knows first-hand the potential of human life. He knows first-hand the breadth of ways we can choose to live our lives. This week, you will be offered scripture passages in which Jesus offers people significant opportunities for growth in their connections to and relationships with Him. Many of these people choose to reject the opportunities Jesus offers them. If you want to live deeply this week of Lent, you will be invited to witness these people’s choices and honestly consider how you may be like them. Jesus fully understands you and wants to help you understand yourself, very much including your limitations and errors. In your prayer today, speak to Jesus about your level of interest in engaging deeply in this Third Week of Lent. If you intend to engage, 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, 3/4: Luke 4.24-30

In today's passage from Luke 4, Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth, the town in which He grew up. He has just read and interpreted a passage from Isaiah for the people in the synagogue, directly suggesting to them that He is the Messiah. This is an astonishing offer to these people to grow in relationship with Jesus. At first, some people in the synagogue are positively amazed by what Jesus has said. Just as quickly, others challenge what Jesus has said, referencing the fact that they know Him as the son of Joseph, a common laborer. Jesus observes that "... no prophet is accepted in his own native place." He then cites two examples from the Old Testament in which God's prophets are accepted by foreigners but rejected by God's Chosen People. When the people in the synagogue hear this, they are filled with fury. They rise up, drive Jesus out of the town, and lead him to the brow of a hill to hurl Him down headlong. What Jesus has said (which is the truth) prompts these people to such fury that they try to murder Jesus! At the moment when Jesus offers them the revelation of a great truth – that He is the Messiah – these people allow their negative reactions to entirely block the growth Jesus offers them. Spend time today asking yourself: Why do you think the people in the synagogue react with fury to Jesus' suggestion that He is the Messiah? (There is no definitive answer to that question.) After you have come up with some possibilities for the reasons for their fury, consider: Are there situations in which you are offered a revelation of the truth by Jesus through the teaching of the church or the scripture and you have a strongly negative reaction? What has been the cause of your strong negative reaction? Does your strong negative reaction ever block your openness to the teaching?

Tuesday, 3/5: Matthew 18.21-35

In this text from Matthew 18, Peter asks Jesus how often he must forgive a person who sins against him. Jesus responds directly: You must forgive without any limit. Jesus then offers a parable in which a king forgives a servant a debt that the servant can never possibly pay back. That forgiven servant then refuses to have pity on a fellow servant who owes him a modest debt that the fellow servant is entirely capable of paying back. When the king learns that the servant whose unpayable debt he has forgiven has refused to pity his fellow servant, the king is angry, condemns the unforgiving servant, and has him handed over to the torturers until he pays back the whole debt. This is sobering, because the unforgiving servant cannot in his lifetime possibly pay back the whole debt. Jesus is clear: "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." Through His passion and death, Jesus has given us the forgiveness of a debt we can never pay back on our own: our sin against God. All of us are called to strive without ceasing to forgive people who have sinned against us – which means giving them a small part of the forgiveness Jesus has given us. When Jesus offers this teaching, it is a potentially profound opening to growth in Him. In fact, when many of us hear this teaching and receive Jesus' offer of spiritual growth through it, we react negatively. For most active Christians, forgiveness is at times or for extended periods of time a significant challenge. In your life right now, who are the people who have sinned against you whom you have not yet forgiven? In light of today's passage, do you accept the fact that your choice to not forgive these people blocks the growth and flow of God's grace within and through you?

Wednesday, 3/6: Matthew 5.17-19

In these verses from Matthew 5, Jesus teaches His disciples that in what we choose to say and do, we not only obey or break God's commandments. In what we choose to say and do, we also teach other people how to obey or break God's commandments. People pay attention to one another. When we witness what other people say and do, we are given by them direct examples of how we ourselves can choose to act. This can be difficult to accept. Most of us are happy to hear that our holy behaviors set a good example for other people. Many or most of us, however, would prefer to think that our sinful behavior is somehow private, not impacting other people's lives. That is entirely untrue. Much of our sinful behavior is directly witnessed or recognized by other people. Whenever we sin, it negatively impacts who we are. We become much less the people we are meant by God to be. Even if people do not directly witness our sinful behavior, they encounter us. They witness who we are. That very much includes the unholy parts of us. In your prayer today, re-read this passage and hear Jesus speak directly to you about the fact that you teach others how to obey and break God's commandments. Do you receive this teaching positively as an opportunity for growth, or negatively? Will you do anything as a result of this teaching?

Thursday, 3/7: Luke 11.14-23

In this passage from Luke 11, Jesus drives out of a man a demon who has made the man mute. When the demon has gone out of the man, he is able to speak. The crowds who witness this miracle are amazed. Unfortunately, some of the people who witness Jesus' miraculously liberating the man held mute by the demon react by saying that Jesus drives out demons by the power of Satan. In response, Jesus does not criticize these people. He loves them. He offers them two straightforward, logical, and understandable explanations for why Satan does not drive out demons, and why His driving out demons is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God. At the end of the passage, we are left wondering what Jesus' listeners will do with the reasonable explanations of the truth He has given them. His explanations of the truth are opportunities for significant growth in these people's connections with Jesus. In your prayer today, consider whether in your past you have heard teachings of Jesus that you soundly rejected, but which have then been explained to you in understandable ways . . . and which you have subsequently come to accept and believe are the truth. With that in your consciousness, consider next whether in your recent life you have heard teachings of Jesus to which you have reacted negatively . . . and have not been open to hearing or pursuing reasonable explanations for why those teachings make sense. (If you do not quickly come up with examples of this dynamic, dig deeper. They most likely exist.) What is going on when you do not welcome reasonable explanations of the truth?

Friday, 3/8: Mark 12.28-34

In today's reading from Mark 12, Jesus reveals the double commandment of love that underlies all of God's commandments: 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). Clearly, Jesus is here referring to a process of growth in love that continues all through our earthly lives – rather than a goal to be once and for all achieved – since none of us ever perfectly loves God with all of our being or perfectly loves all other people as God would have us love them. Sometimes when we hear this teaching we react to it joyfully, recognizing that Jesus offers us the way to continual spiritual and moral growth through all our lives. Sometimes, we can react negatively to this teaching, feeling that we will never love God or other people the way God expects us to love. Can you relate at all to this second possibility? Does the fact that Jesus offers you a life of continual growth . . . which necessarily includes continual reform, continual effort, continual change, and continual expansion . . . sometimes meet a less-than-welcoming response from you? Take plenty of time in your prayer today to reflect on this. Honesty can take time.

Saturday, 3/9: Luke 18.9-14

In today's parable from Luke 18, a religious leader in the temple area considers himself to be not like the rest of humanity, which he views as greedy, dishonest, and adulterous. He cites his worthy religious practices, feels no need to confess any sin to God, and offers not a scintilla of assistance to a tax collector whom he recognizes as a sinner (no word, no assistance, no encouragement . . . not even a prayer for the tax collector). Jesus states that this religious leader goes home not justified – that is, not in a right relationship with God. (Jesus says that the tax collector, who speaks directly to God, honestly acknowledges his sin, expresses sincere repentance, and asks God for mercy, goes home justified.) Luke explains that Jesus addresses this parable to people who are incorrectly “convinced of their own righteousness” – that is, who erroneously believe they are in a proper relationship with God. Such people, like the religious leader in the parable, consider themselves “all good” with God. They are therefore convinced that they fundamentally need nothing from God in terms of forgiveness or growth. Because this parable and Luke's explanation of its purpose are so straightforward, it would seem like a perfectly clear teaching that Jesus offers to all of us to be sure we are never incorrectly convinced of our own righteousness. And yet in every generation, there are many, many, many people who identify themselves as Christians who are very much like the religious leader in this parable. Do you ever make the error of ignoring this clear teaching of Jesus and living like the religious leader in the parable? Why?

THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3/10: John 3.14-21

In this reading from John 3, Jesus identifies Himself as the Son of God who has been sent to the world to offer salvation to all people. Jesus affirms that people who encounter Him must make a choice: to accept His light by believing in Him and living His love, or to reject His light by choosing to live the darkness of evil and wickedness. Our spiritual exercises during Lent are meant to strengthen our choices to believe in Jesus and live His love in the world. During the upcoming week, the scriptural readings will invite us to reflect on key moments of choice in our everyday lives that are offered to us by Jesus as important openings to our spiritual growth as His authentic disciples. They may be challenging and quite difficult moments, but they are critically valuable gifts from Jesus. In your prayer today, speak to God about your level of enthusiasm for pursuing the upcoming week as week of real spiritual growth. If you intend to engage deeply in Lent this week, 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, 3/11: John 4.43-54

In today's reading, Jesus is in a town called Cana in Galilee. A royal official comes to Jesus from the town of Capernaum, which is around 20 miles from Cana. The royal official is in a terrible situation: His son is gravely ill and near death. Can you imagine what is going on inside this man? To begin your prayer time today . . . try to do that. Imagine yourself being in the royal official's situation. Imagine that your beloved son is near death. What is going on inside of you? Could any human more desperately seek something from Jesus than a parent whose son is dying? Then go back to the passage. The royal official asks Jesus to come to Capernaum and heal his son "before my child dies." Jesus offers the royal official a startling response: "You may go; your son will live." It is safe to say this is not the answer he wants from Jesus! He wants Jesus to come to his house in Capernaum to heal his son, as He has healed other people . . . in person, touching the child, or doing whatever Jesus wants to do in the physical presence of the child. Instead, Jesus asks the royal official to travel 20 long miles back to Capernaum. Try to imagine, again, what goes on inside of the royal official when Jesus gives him this response and direction. What might he be thinking? What might he be feeling? What might be involved interiorly in his saying "Yes" to what Jesus tells him to do . . . and choosing to go back to Capernaum, which will take him until the next day? As it turns out, the royal official learns the next day that his son was miraculously healed at the time Jesus told him "Your son will live." When Jesus is asked by the royal official for the healing of his son, Jesus responds by healing the boy. For the royal official, the opening Jesus offers to the reality of the healing is Jesus' instruction to do something the man does not expect to be asked or presumably want to do: to travel back to Capernaum. Go back to what you imagine is going on inside the man when Jesus initially offers him this opening. What is going on inside him and what does he choose to do?

Tuesday, 3/12: John 5.1-16

In this passage, Jesus enters into the life of a man who has been ill for 38 years. Jesus miraculously heals the man of his illness and allows him to once again walk! The man is subsequently given a difficult time by certain religious leaders who oppose Jesus. Jesus then find the miraculously healed man in the temple area and says to him: "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." In your prayer time today, imagine yourself first in the position of the man at the beginning of the passage. For 38 years, he has suffered a crippling illness. This an overwhelming miracle! Thirty-eight years of suffering have been transformed by Jesus! What is he thinking and feeling after the miracle? Do you imagine he is distracted by many other people or things, even the nastiness he experiences with Jesus' opponents? When Jesus re-enters the man's life and tells the man to not sin any

more, so that nothing worse may happen to him, how do you imagine the man reacts? Do Jesus' words make any sense to him? After you have spent time imagining what goes on inside the miraculously healed man, pull back in your prayer and ask yourself: What do you think Jesus means when he tells the man to not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to him? What is Jesus talking about? Why does Jesus warn him about his sin? What "worse" could happen to him? Why is this second exchange with the man a much more important opening to growth in Jesus than the miraculous healing?

Wednesday, 3/13: John 5.17-30

In this text from John 5, Jesus makes declarations about Himself that are either true or false: there is no in-between. Jesus claims that He is equal to God the Father, the creator of the universe. Jesus claims that He does only what God the Father does. Jesus claims that God the Father has given Him judgement over all humanity. Jesus claims that whoever hears His word and believes in Him – whoever chooses to authentically live as His disciple – He will judge for eternal life. Jesus claims that those who hear His voice and do wicked deeds He will judge for eternal condemnation. Jesus states that all of this is the will of God the Father. Today is one month since Ash Wednesday. At the beginning of Lent, you hopefully had the spiritual goal of living this season sincerely turning away from sin and working to grow as a more authentic disciple of Jesus. In your prayer time today, read and re-read slowly and reflectively today's passage from John 5. Hear Jesus speaking His claims in this passage to you personally. On this one-month mark in Lent – on March 13, 2024 – Jesus offers these claims as very specific, concrete openings to you personally for growth in Him. Right now, today – not in the past and not in some imaginary future – how to you respond to Jesus' offering you these specific openings?

Thursday, 3/14: John 5.31-47

In this section of John 5, Jesus speaks about the many people who reject who He claims to be and what He teaches. They say His testimony about Himself is not true. Jesus explains that there are many understandable witnesses who/that testify to the truth of who He is and what He teaches: God the Father; the Holy Spirit; John the Baptist; the works He does; the Scriptures; and the teaching of Moses. Jesus affirms that although people say they accept the authority of these people and realities, they do not want to go to Jesus to have life through Him. At the heart of passage, Jesus states directly to such people why they do not accept Him: "You do not have the love of God in you." This is an astonishing statement. Jesus tells these people . . . who claim to believe in God and to embrace God's revealed Word and God's messengers . . . that the real reason they do not accept Him is that they do not have the love of God in them. Put aside the people to whom Jesus speaks 2000 years ago. Focus in your prayer today on yourself. During Lent, you have hopefully become more honest about your sin. You have hopefully recognized in more detail a variety of ways that people Jesus offers you opportunities for growth in Him but may fail to accept those realities. In your prayer today, do the following exercise: Hear Jesus state directly to you that the reason you do not accept who He is and what He teaches is because you do not have the love of God in you. What is He saying to you? What is it about you that He is saying? For some of us, today's scripture and reflection could be the biggest opening to growth in Him that Jesus offers us this Lent.

Friday, 3/15: John 7.1-2, 10, 25-30

In this passage from John 7, Jesus encounters people who are entirely wrong about who He is but are confident that they are right. These people affirm that when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from. They are entirely sure they know where Jesus is from (geographically), so they are confident Jesus is not the Messiah. Jesus cries out against these people. He challenges their confidence that they know where He is from. Jesus then refers to the one who has actually sent Him . . . whom we know is God the Father . . . and declares that these people do not know the one who has sent Him. Jesus is stating flatly to these people that they do not know God the Father. Jesus is not saying to these people that the reason they do not know Him is their limited knowledge, their lack of exposure to Him, their misguidedness, their laziness, or their many other limitations. Jesus is saying to these people that they do not know Him is because they do not know God the Father. You may have found yesterday's spiritual exercise challenging or difficult. It's back again today. In your prayer today, hear Jesus speaking directly to you and telling you

personally that the reason you do not know Him is you do not know God the Father. What is He talking about? A reminder: No one is forcing you to do this exercise.

Saturday, 3/16: John 7.40-53

In this section of John 7, people in Jerusalem are debating whether Jesus could be the Messiah. Some of the guards who work for certain religious leaders go to those leaders and report, "Never before has anyone spoken like this man." The religious leaders ask the guards whether they have been deceived into openness to Jesus, as have some of the people in what they consider the ignorant, accursed crowd. One of the religious leaders, Nicodemus, who has had personal contact with Jesus, reacts to this by asking the others, "Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" The other religious leaders respond negatively to Nicodemus. In the United States of America in 2024, if you are looking for lots of leaders – political, social, cultural, educational, journalistic – who are open to Jesus and encourage exploration of who Jesus really is, you have come to the wrong country. Many of the leaders in our society seem to think that people who believe Jesus is the Messiah have somehow been deceived and are part of an ignorant, accursed crowd. When the guards and Nicodemus find themselves among such leaders, even when those leaders threaten them, they are entirely free to react by more actively pursuing who Jesus is and what He teaches. The leaders cannot stop them from doing so. If you perceive yourself as living among similar leaders in our country today, how much time do you spend criticizing those leaders and complaining about them . . . or to what extent do you react to their behavior by more actively pursuing Jesus?

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Sunday, 3/17: John 12.20-33

In this account from John 12, Jesus teaches that ". . . unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." There are many levels of meaning to this teaching. One of them is that a person who wants to grow as an authentic disciple of Jesus cannot hold on to the status quo of his/her life. An authentic disciple of Jesus needs to constantly be willing to have the current limitations of his/her life broken open . . . and to die to them . . . so that new life, new growth, and new fruits can emerge. Our spiritual goals during Lent have been to turn away from sin and grow in faithfulness to the Gospel, which in various ways means falling to the ground and dying, in order that much new spiritual fruit may be produced. During this Fifth Week of Lent, we will be offered passages from John 8, 10, and 11 through which Jesus will offer fundamental challenges that will touch on spiritual issues that have previously come up this Lent, but which should have an added intensity as we approach the reality of His passion and death during Holy Week. If you take seriously these challenges, they may not be comfortable or easy. Today, speak directly to God about your intentions for the upcoming week. How deeply do you intend to live Lent this week? If you intend to be spiritually active during the upcoming week, do not read ahead in this prayer guide. Read 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, 3/18: John 8.1-11

In this passage, a woman has been caught in adultery (which is grave sin) and is threatened with death by stoning by certain religious leaders. Through an extended encounter in which He challenges these leaders, Jesus saves the woman from this threat of death as the consequence of her sin. When the religious leaders go away without having thrown a stone, Jesus is left alone with the woman. He asks her, "Has no one condemned you?" She replies, "No one,

sir.” Jesus then says to her, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.” We are like this woman in that our choices to sin seriously separate us from God. God is the only source of life, now and eternally. When we sin seriously, we distance and even separate ourselves from the only source of life: God. The consequence is death. There is nothing we can do on our own to remove the consequence of our sin. Jesus has brought the salvation that removes the death that is the consequence of our sin. During Lent, you have hopefully made progress on repenting of your sin and growing as an authentic disciple of Jesus. With that experience, take this passage today and hear Jesus speaking to you directly: “I do not condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.” The first part of what Jesus says should be easy to understand: He does not at this time condemn you. You are still alive. The second part is the challenge: “Go, and from now on do not sin any more.” That is a very powerful statement: “do not sin *any more*.” You know very well you are not going to become a perfectly holy person, yet Jesus says, “do not sin *any more*.” Do not water down what Jesus says to you here: “do not sin *any more*.” How do you respond to this? Speak directly to Jesus about this in your prayer.

Tuesday, 3/19: John 8.21-30

In this section of John 8, Jesus says to people who do not accept Him, “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 He says “what is below” and “this world,” Jesus is referring to everything and everyone who is not of God: people and things that are irrelevant in terms of a connection with God and, more importantly, people and things that are opposed to God. Jesus does not state here that the people with whom He is speaking are involved with “what is below” and “this world.” He says they *belong* to “what is below” and “this world.” For a person to belong to someone or something else means the person is the property of someone or something else. The Son of God’s saying this to a person – and He only speaks the truth! – is sobering. Recognizing the realities of conversion and spiritual progress that you have experienced thus far this Lent, in your prayer today hear Jesus say these words directly to you personally: “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.” Take His words seriously. What is He saying about and to you? Speak directly to Jesus about this in your prayer.

Wednesday, 3/20: John 8.31-42

In today’s passage from John 8, Jesus is speaking with people who believe in Him. He explains that “everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin.” While these people do believe in Jesus, they also sin. They are somehow slaves of sin. Sin somehow owns them. Jesus tells these believers that “. . . if the Son frees you, then you will truly be free.” Jesus (the Son) will free them from their slavery to sin! Jesus makes clear how this will happen: “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.” Reverse the order of what Jesus says: The truth will set you free from slavery to sin . . . because you will know the truth . . . because you will truly be Jesus’ disciple . . . because you will choose to remain in His word. To receive Jesus’ offer of freedom from sin, the key choice you will make is to *remain in His word*. Once again, in your prayer time today re-read this passage and hear Jesus speak these words directly to you personally. Five weeks ago on Ash Wednesday, you hopefully made a sincere commitment to living this Lent as a period of renunciation of sin and growth in holiness. These realities have hopefully unfolded in your life the past five weeks. Today – March 20, 2024 – when you hear Jesus speak these words to you, what does He mean when he says, “If you remain in my word . . .” What is Jesus saying about and to you?

Thursday, 3/21: John 8.51-59

In this text, Jesus is engaged in a heated conversation with a group of people. At the culmination of the back-and-forth with these people, Jesus identifies Himself as, “I AM”, which is the name reserved exclusively for God in the Hebrew scripture. Jesus states directly who He is: He is God. When His listeners in the passage hear Jesus claim to be God, they pick up stones to throw at Him. This is entirely understandable. For a person of sincere faith, another person’s falsely identifying himself/herself as God is utter blasphemy. When the people in this passage hear Jesus claim to be God, they reject His claim and pick up stones to throw at Him. After you have read the passage, shift your attention away from the people in it with whom Jesus speaks. Focus on yourself. If you really know that Jesus is God (which you hopefully do) . . . and you hear Jesus teach you how to live . . . and you understand that with this teaching

God is offering you the gift of the truth (which will set you free) . . . and you freely choose to reject that truth . . . you are picking up stones and throwing them at Jesus. You are rejecting Jesus as God. In your prayer today, place yourself in the presence of Jesus and slowly review this. Speak to Jesus honestly, recognizing the spiritual progress you have made during Lent. If you believe Jesus is God, when you choose to sin . . . why do you choose to throw stones at Him? Why do you continue to do this? Do not back away from this question.

Friday, 3/22: John 10.31-42

In this passage from John 10, Jesus is speaking to people who are picking up rocks to stone Him because they believe He is committing blasphemy by claiming to be equal to God. They say, "You, a man, are making yourself God." Jesus tells these people that if they do not accept His scriptural references to His identity or His personal claims of who He is, they should look at the works He does. Jesus performs miracles that are more numerous and on a much greater scale than any other holy person in salvation history. His miraculous works can only possibly be the works of God the Father working through Jesus. If these people accept this obvious truth, they may realize and understand that God our Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. The people in the passage hear this, reject it, and try to arrest Jesus. As you did yesterday, after you have read this passage, shift your attention away from the people in the passage and focus on yourself. In the world around you, many/most people do not yet know or believe that Jesus is God. It may be unlikely that they care about scripture or have any interest in hearing who Jesus Himself claims to be. However, it is entirely likely that they pay attention to how you live your life and the things you choose to do. What are the concrete works you are currently doing in the world that other people do or could identify as clearly the works of God our Father and Jesus working through you? Dedicate some significant time to this today in the presence of Jesus. Construct a real list – perhaps write it down – of the works you are visibly doing today in the world that are or could be clearly understood by other people as being the works of God working through you.

Saturday, 3/23: John 11.45-56

In this section of John, many enemies of Jesus in Jerusalem feel increasingly threatened by what He says and does. They are so opposed to Jesus that they firmly plan to kill Him – to once and for all eliminate Jesus from the face of the earth. It is no secret to the public that certain religious leaders hate Jesus and want Him dead. The feast of Passover is drawing near. Many people who have gone up to Jerusalem for the feast look for Jesus and wonder, given His enemies' opposition and desire to kill him, whether Jesus will come to Jerusalem for the feast. He will. Beginning tomorrow on Palm Sunday and most intensely through next week's Easter Triduum, we will be invited to re-enter the reality of what happens when Jesus chooses to go to Jerusalem and enter into the passion and death through which He will bring salvation to this fallen, sinful world. If you have actively lived this Fifth Week of Lent by honestly entering into the daily scripture passages and facing the questions and challenges they prompted, it may not have been an easy week. This week's spiritual exercises should have prompted at least some discomfort, perhaps uneasiness, and (ideally) questions to which you do not have full answers. Today, go back over the prayer and reflection you experienced this past week. Consciously review the concerns and questions that emerged for you. Bring these concerns and questions directly with you as you enter Holy Week.

HOLY WEEK

Sunday, 3/24: Mark 14.1-15.47

As we begin Holy Week, we are invited to listen to the account of Jesus' passion and death in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who comes to the world to save humanity from sin and death – from all that separates our fallen human race from God's life and love. Ultimately, the way that Jesus brings salvation to the world is through His passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus' passion and death reveal the fullness of His love. They reveal to us both how deeply God loves us and how deeply we are called to love others. As you reflect on the passion account in Mark, what most powerfully strikes you about the love that Jesus ultimately has for this fallen, sinful world?

Monday, 3/25: John 12.1-11

The Gospel readings for the next three days focus on Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples who directly betrays Jesus to His enemies. In today's passage from John 12, Judas professes to be scandalized by Lazarus' sister Mary's having anointed Jesus' feet with a liter of costly perfumed oil. Judas declares that the oil could have been sold for 300 days' wages, with the money then given to the poor. The scripture writer explains that Judas says this not because he cares about the poor, but because he is a thief who regularly steals from the money bag that holds contributions given to support Jesus and His disciples. Judas is a thief who chooses to identify himself as a disciple of Jesus without turning away from his sinful thievery. Judas is a liar who chooses to identify himself as a close disciple of Jesus without turning away from his sinful dishonesty. Judas is a hypocrite who chooses to identify himself as a close disciple of Jesus without turning away from his sinful hypocrisy. Most of us have at various times chosen to live as liars, thieves, and hypocrites and continued to identify ourselves as disciples of Jesus. When you look at Judas in this passage . . . and probably acknowledge that you have at times lived like him . . . what about your experience of living this Lent gives you confidence that you are not on March 25, 2024 like Judas in this passage?

Tuesday, 3/26: John 13.21-33, 36-38

In this text from John 13, Jesus knows that Judas Iscariot will betray Him. He says to Judas, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Jesus completely loves Judas. He called Judas to become one of His closest twelve disciples. He has spent several years sharing His life with Judas in order to invite Judas to live with and in Him. Jesus will soon sacrifice His entire life by entering into a horrendous passion in order to bring salvation into this world for the most sinful people of all human history . . . entirely including Judas. When Jesus speaks here to Judas, He is certainly not saying it is right for Judas to do the work of Satan. It seems Jesus is affirming Judas' freedom to do what he chooses to do, including Judas' betraying Jesus to those who will torture and kill Him. This is a sobering passage. Jesus entirely knows you. He knows your capacity to sin, including sinning gravely. Jesus will never deny your freedom to do what you choose to do, including betraying Him. As we approach the end of Lent and enter into the holiest days of year, to what extent do you grasp the depth of love it takes for Jesus to accept your freedom to betray Him? In your prayer today, speak directly to Jesus. Tell Him directly how you understand that love.

Wednesday, 3/27: Matthew 26.14-25

Our final Lenten passage is from Matthew 26. Matthew's account of the Last Supper is not precisely the same as John's. In Matthew's version, Jesus states to His disciples that one of them who is eating at table with Him will betray Him. The disciples say to Jesus one after another, "Surely it is not I, Lord?" Jesus states that it would be better for His betrayer if he had never been born. In reply, Judas says to Jesus, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answers Judas: "You have said so." Jesus here affirms the truth: Judas has said that he is surely not the one who will betray Jesus. He is. What Judas says is a lie. Judas is a person who lives directly in the presence of Jesus and lies to Him. He lies to Jesus about who he is! As we enter into the holiest days of the year, speak directly to Jesus. Tell Him honestly who you are today in terms of being His disciple. Tell Him honestly what you seek from Him through the grace of the upcoming days. And thank Him for Lent.

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!**