

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Advent 1, Year A

Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus said to the disciples, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Background and general observations

The First Sunday of Advent is the beginning of a new church year. The Sunday lectionary for the Episcopal Church is divided into three years: Year A, Year B, and Year C. In Year A, we will focus on readings from the Gospel According to Matthew; Year B is devoted to Mark; and the emphasis of Year C is Luke, with the Gospel According to John read at special times in each of the three years. The effect of this lectionary cycle is to read all of the Gospels over a three-year period, and with this Sunday, we leave Year C, with its emphasis on Luke, and enter Year A, with its emphasis on Matthew.

The Gospel According to Matthew was much loved by the early church, and it is believed to have been written for a Jewish audience. Matthew begins with a genealogy that traces Jesus' lineage to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through David, to firmly establish Jesus with the credentials of the promised Messiah, the Son of David. Other clues about the Jewish origins of Matthew's Gospel include the depiction of Jesus as the new Moses – both Jesus and Moses narrowly escape death as infants, at the hand of a political tyrant; both sojourn in Egypt; both give divine teaching from a mountain; and both struggle with a rebellious people.

Also, it has been noted that Matthew can be divided into five distinct sections or discourses, and some have suggested that these five sections are parallel to the five books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. And, unlike the other Gospels, Matthew consistently refers to the "Kingdom of Heaven," as opposed to the "Kingdom of God," in order to honor the Jewish prohibition about writing or speaking the divine name.

The passage appointed for the first Sunday of Advent (above) is from the fifth discourse, the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus, and its emphasis is on the end times. One of the traditional themes of the season of Advent is the end of the world, and one might ponder some of the reasons the Christian Church has chosen to begin the church year with a focus on the end of all things. One suggestion is that there is nothing like pondering the end to bring you more fully aware and awake in the present. In fact, Christians through the centuries have seen prayerful reflection on our own mortality and death as one of the best ways of reordering our priorities in the present. It is also noteworthy that Jesus emphasizes in this lesson that "no one knows" when the end will come, neither angels nor even himself, so we should not speculate about the precise day or time of the end. And it is our not knowing that is our inducement to "stay awake."

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. From the “Background” section above: “there is nothing like pondering the end to bring you more fully aware and awake in the present.”

Here at the beginning of the new church year, Christians are being invited to ponder the end of all things. How does this focus on the end affect you in the present?

How would you live your life differently if you knew the end was coming very soon, but it was impossible to know exactly when?

Although we know on some level that all human life is brief, it sometimes seems that we forget our mortality. How would your life change if you were more mindful of your mortality?

2. Although we usually think of the “apocalypse” as a future event, another way to ponder the whole idea of apocalypse is to understand that it is referring to a present reality. That is, apocalyptic visions are “unveilings” or “revelations” of the deepest reality that dwells eternally beneath surface appearances. Below the surface of things, even permeating all things, there is an eternal Life that occasionally breaks through and gives rise in this world to beauty, art, poetry, and sacrificial love.

This deeper Life is where our true life is hidden with Christ in God, as St. Paul said. And when we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying that this deeper, eternal Life might become a more present, tangible reality in this temporal world.

How might such an understanding affect the way you pray and the way you live?

3. In previous years on the first Sunday of Advent, Emmaus Groups have considered some of the following timeless questions as a way of becoming more spiritually alert and attentive. These might be worth considering again:
 - a. When in your life have you felt most “alive,” most engaged, most “present”? Some say in answer to this question that it is when they are with someone they love very much, perhaps someone they have missed for a period of time and have eagerly anticipated their reunion. But even the most passionate and joyful relationships can become dull. When Jesus says we should “keep awake,” perhaps he is suggesting that we stay present and alive, especially in our relationships with each other. What might you do in order to become more present in your own life in this way?
 - b. One way of understanding this lesson is to see it as an invitation to deeper faith and relationship with God. The point is not the end of the world and when that might happen. The point is to examine how we are living now, before the end (our end) comes. What do you know about living a life of such deep trust in God that you no longer need to worry about the end?

- c. An ancient way of praying is to lie down on the floor, close your eyes, and imagine yourself in your own grave. From this perspective, what is now most important to you? After a time of prayer such as this, what changes might you make in your daily life?
 - d. So much of our lives can lapse into unconscious routines. One way of dealing with busyness and information overload is to compartmentalize our lives and develop routines that allow us to meet our obligations without having to think or reflect on what we are doing. In this sense, we can go through some days as if we are sleepwalking. What changes would we have to make, if we were to heed Jesus' urgent plea to "stay awake"?
4. The Gospel lesson depicts people going about the usual routines of life, "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in fields, grinding meal..." when one person is "taken" and another is "left."

You know how one person can be "taken" by a sunset or a piece of music or an act of kindness, while another person seeing or hearing the very same thing can be "left" unmoved.

What makes the difference? Why is one person moved to tears or "taken" by revelations of God in everyday life, while another person who experiences the very same thing is "left" only with a sense of life as mundane, ordinary, or even dull?

When have you been "taken"? When have you been "left"?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Advent 2, Year A

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Background and general observations

John the Baptist figures prominently in the season of Advent, for obvious reasons. This is a season of preparation and reflection, and John the Baptist is a reminder, among other things, that an unexamined life can be a disaster. The appearance of John the Baptist on the Second Sunday of Advent is an invitation to step back from business as usual and to ponder in a piercingly honest way, "What changes need to be made in my life, if I am going to 'prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight' into my life?"

John perceived that "the kingdom of heaven has come near." There is an urgency about his message and a sense of immediacy about the presence of God. No doubt there are many urgent concerns in our own day. Is the importance of repentance one of them? And surely God is very near to us, even when we are drawn away from God. Where is God in your life now? What is God doing in the world around you? What changes need to happen in your life if you are going to be more present to God and better aligned with God's activity in the world?

In John the Baptist's day, the Hebrew people were in a state of anticipation. It was time for a change. Surely God had heard the cries of God's oppressed people. The prophets had foretold a time when God would act decisively, and Matthew's use of the prophecy from Isaiah was a clear message: God was speaking again. John the Baptist was announcing something extraordinary, something for which the people hoped and longed. How is God speaking again today?

The fact that John's baptism is a "baptism of repentance" indicates that the preparation for God's return would not be dependent upon ritual or ancestry. This preparation was all about changing one's life to make it more open and receptive to the One who was coming. This lesson is our opportunity to ponder the necessary changes that will make the way for God straight into our lives.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Repentance and forgiveness are the heart of John the Baptist's message and ministry. What do repentance and forgiveness of sins have to do with preparation for a fuller experience of God in our lives?

When have you experienced forgiveness, or the lack of it, as an important factor in your spiritual life or relationship with God?

Who has been a John the Baptist figure to you, someone who helped you most in welcoming God into your life more fully?

Have you been John the Baptist for someone else in your life?

2. One might say that ordinary people seem to be chosen vessels for God's revelation, and wilderness seems to be a chosen place for God to be revealed. Ponder God's choosing John the Baptist to announce God's coming, instead of choosing a more prominent or powerful person. And ponder the wilderness as a chosen place for God's revelation. Why John? Why the wilderness?

What do you know about wilderness in your own life? What makes the wilderness especially conducive to divine revelation?

If God has a special ministry to manifest in you, what might that be?

3. If John the Baptist were ministering today, how might he call our society to repentance? What needs to change?

In what ways might John speak very personally to you? In what ways do you need to repent or change your life, in order to be more open or available to God's revelation?

4. John the Baptist came onto the world stage in a time of great anticipation. Most of us know what it feels like to be eagerly waiting for something, hoping for something. It might be waiting for a college acceptance letter, a house closing, a new job, the results of an MRI. For what are you waiting and hoping in the spiritual life? In what ways do you look expectantly to God in your daily life?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 2, Year A

John 1:29-42

John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Background and general observations:

As we make our way through the season of Epiphany, we are hearing various stories about the Divine being revealed or manifest in the world. And after last week's Gospel lesson from Matthew that recounted the baptism of Jesus, we now turn our attention to John's Gospel, which is so very different in language, tone, and emphasis.

The Gospel according to John seems intent on establishing the divinity of Jesus as "pre-existent." That is, any confusion that some might have had about Jesus being "adopted" by God at his baptism (some might infer this from Mark, since Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus' baptism), or any confusion that some might have had about Jesus being "created" at his miraculous birth (some might infer this from Matthew and Luke), would be cleared up with this Gospel's prologue, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...."

In other words, if the other Gospels at times seem to emphasize Jesus' humanity, John's Gospel clearly emphasizes Jesus' divinity. And in this particular passage, John the Baptist is portrayed very clearly as being inferior to Jesus, perhaps indicating some confusion in the early church about John's status or identity. Here, John is a herald, pointing out Jesus to others ("Look, here he is!") and telling the story of Jesus' baptism in place of a third person narrative such as we get in the other Gospels.

The next section of this passage from the Gospel according to John shows the story shifting away from John the Baptist. The Baptist has pointed out Jesus to others, and these others now start to investigate on their own. The passage then concludes with Jesus calling Peter by a new name, perhaps indicating the kind of personal transformation the disciples are already starting to experience as a result of their encounters and investigations of Jesus.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. “When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’”

Imagine a routine Sunday morning or evening at church. After you enter your pew in silence and you are perhaps kneeling in prayer before the service begins, Jesus appears next to you and says to you, “What are you looking for?” Or, imagine Jesus sitting next to you right now and asking this question. Or, imagine that a voice has been speaking this question in your heart all along, “What are you looking for?”

How would you answer?

2. John the Baptist is one who refuses to draw attention to himself. Clearly, he was very popular, with crowds of people coming from all over the region to hear him and to be baptized by him. But John does not let this go to his head, it seems. John sees his role as one who points out the divinity in another.

Is there a John the Baptist sort of person in your life, someone who is very intentional about deflecting attention from himself or herself, in favor of pointing out the importance of others?

How might you be a herald of the Divine, one who points out how you perceive God’s Presence in the world beyond yourself?

3. In this passage, John the Baptist seems so certain about Jesus. Later, after John is arrested, we know that John the Baptist expresses some uncertainty, as he sends word to Jesus, “Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?”

What do you know from your own life about feeling so very certain about God’s Presence and activity in your life at one stage, only to find yourself questioning yourself later? How do you deal with serious doubts?

4. “Jesus said to them, ‘Come and see.’”

Some have suggested that our most effective witness or testimony about our faith is not what we say but how we live day by day. Imagine your life as your testimony. If perfect strangers were to “come and see” where and how you live day by day as evidence of your faith and what is most important to you, what would they take away with them?

5. “They remained with him that day.”

Imagine “remaining with” someone for a day, with none of the distractions of our modern world. No electricity, television, computer, telephone.... In an age of constant connectivity, some have suggested that we are losing our capacity simply to “remain” or to “be” with each other, without having to be doing something all the time. Often when people are trying to be

with each other, they are drinking alcohol or nervously planning activities. For some, it is even hard to look another person in the eye.

Are we losing our capacity to “remain with each other”? Are our attention spans for relationships shortening, so that we have a hard time resting with one another? What are the spiritual issues here?

What does it mean to “remain” for a day or any significant period of time with God?

What difference might it make in our lives if we were more intentional about “remaining” with God and with one another?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 3, Year A

Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Background and general observations

The relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus continues and takes a new turn in the lesson this week. After John baptizes Jesus (Epiphany 1), John then announces and calls attention to Jesus' identity (Epiphany 2), and in this passage, the news of John's arrest is the occasion for Jesus to leave his home in Nazareth and begin his public ministry. The mission begins where Jesus will ultimately give the Great Commission, at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel (28:16-20).

The theme of call and discernment is prominent in this passage, as Jesus apparently discerns that the time has come for him to leave home and begin a new phase of his life and ministry. Likewise, Jesus calls disciples to leave their homes and livelihoods for a new life. Discerning the call of God or the voice of truth, over and against the many other voices we all hear day in and day out, is something that many of us find at the heart of a good and fruitful life.

This passage follows immediately after the story of Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he fasts for 40 days and experiences several temptations. One might surmise that the force and clarity of his call might well be linked to the focused work of prayer, fasting and discernment in which he has been engaged in the wilderness. In our busy and noisy world, with our many cares and occupations, we might ponder the place of clarifying “wilderness” experiences in our own lives. The passage that will follow just after this one in Matthew's Gospel moves us straight into the Sermon on the Mount, which is often seen as the heart of Jesus' message.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The theme of leaving home and all that is familiar in order to embark on a new life and vocation figures prominently in this passage. Jesus leaves his home in Nazareth when he hears that John the Baptist has been arrested. Peter and Andrew leave their livelihoods to become “fishers of people,” as do James and John.

What do you know about “leaving home”?

When have you stepped away from all that was familiar to you, all that had defined you and sustained you, in order to answer a new calling?

2. Following up on the theme of leaving home and answering a new calling, read the following poem aloud, slowly, and then sit quietly. What does this poem open up or reveal to you about your life?

“The Journey” Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

3. Peter and Andrew, as well as James and John, leave their homes, families and livelihoods “immediately” for an uncertain life and future.

What do you know about making such a great and wholehearted commitment so immediately? Many of our larger decisions in life might require more careful analysis and prolonged consideration. What could cause you to act with such boldness and commitment?

Another way of approaching this dynamic in the Gospel lesson is to notice that these disciples surrender everything for a new life. In a later parable, the merchant in search of fine pearls surrenders everything in order to purchase the pearl of great price.

For what would you be willing to surrender everything? Are there some things you would refuse to surrender? Are your “boats and nets” too valuable to leave behind?

4. James and John were with their father in the boat, “mending their nets.”

What do you know about working, day after day, to “mend your nets” so that you can continue going after the same catch, only to hear a voice one day calling you to change course and fish for something very different?

5. “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

Where do you see people sitting in darkness today? Where in your world today do you see a region and shadow of death?

When have you experienced sitting in darkness?

Where in the world around you do you see light dawning?

When have you experienced light dawning within yourself?

6. Imagine Jesus saying to you, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

What does this mean to you? If you were to respond, how would your life be different tomorrow?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 4, Year A

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Background and general observations

This passage begins what is called Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and this section of the sermon is, of course, known as the Beatitudes, one of the best known of all Jesus' teachings. The circumstances of the Sermon on the Mount run parallel to the story of the Exodus, the dramatic events which shaped and defined the people of Israel.

In both the Exodus story and the story of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, the situation is a time of oppression, there is a slaughter of innocent children, there is a passage through water, and there is a time of temptation (40 years in the wilderness in the Exodus story and 40 days in the wilderness in the Jesus story). Finally, in both stories, the hero ascends a mountain, which becomes a meeting place with God, and delivers a defining declaration from God. In this reading of parallel stories, Matthew seems to be pointing out for his Jewish audience that Jesus is a kind of “new Moses” whose coming represents liberation from oppression and good news for the poor, those who mourn, and so on.

There are also striking, word-for-word parallels with the declarations of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, in which the prophet says, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent

me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; . . .to comfort all who mourn.” (Isaiah 61:1-2)

These parallels with Moses, the lawgiver, and Isaiah, the prophet, perhaps foreshadow the event of the Transfiguration in which Jesus appears transfigured with Moses and Elijah, and he is seen as the one who fulfills in himself the sum of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. What are some of the ways in which you seek happiness and fulfillment in life?

What does it mean to be “blessed”?

Imagine greeting a poor, homeless person at a local shelter or kitchen. You ask how he is doing, and he simply responds, “I am blessed.” What does he mean? What might he have that you do not have?

2. It is frequently noted that the poorest and most vulnerable in society are most likely to understand the importance of depending on God and one another. They don’t have the money to hire babysitters, so they care for each other’s children. The poor might rely on neighbors to care for them after being discharged from the hospital, or getting a ride to the doctor or to the grocery store. For people of means, on the other hand, independence, privacy, and self-reliance are highly prized, and there is perhaps less inclination to rely on God or one another in the business of daily life.

What do you know from your own life of the “blessedness” of interdependence and the “curse” of wealth and independence?

3. It has also been noted that in Jesus’ day, the poor, the mourning, the rejected, the marginalized, and sinners of every kind flocked to Jesus. They loved Jesus and couldn’t get enough of him. On the other hand, those who had some stature in the religious community of Jesus’ day and who had some standing in society generally tended to be suspicious of Jesus and criticized him. Today, that dynamic sometimes seems reversed: the poor, the marginalized and sinners stay away from the church (“the body of Christ”), while the upstanding prominent in society flock to the church.

What has happened?

4. It can be very hard, when you lose your job, or you are mourning the loss of someone you loved, or your children are in trouble, to feel “blessed.”

Yet, from time to time, a person going through extreme hardship will tell you that he or she is getting in touch with what really matters most in life. He or she is discovering what is most important and what makes life worth living.

When has this been your experience? What is going on in such a situation?

5. In his book *Social Animal*, the New York Times columnist David Brooks notes, “Research over the last thirty years makes it clear that what the inner mind really wants is connection. ... Joining a group that meets just once a month produces the same increases in happiness as doubling your income.”

How do you respond?

6. When have you felt most deeply that you were blessed?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 5, Year A

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Background and general observations

This lesson provides a kind of transition from the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes) to the ethical teachings of Jesus in the sermon. The first two sections of this passage (verses 13-16) provide two important metaphors, salt and light, for thinking about the nature of the Christian life. What does it mean to be salt, and what does it mean to be light?

The third section of this passage (verses 17-20) establishes, here at the beginning of the sermon, that Jesus' teaching is very much in keeping with the Law of Moses. The religious establishment will criticize him for violating or watering down sacred tradition and holy laws, but Jesus insists that he has come to fulfill, not to abolish, and that his followers must exceed the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness. What does it mean to exceed scrupulously vigilant, Biblical literalists in righteousness?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "You are the salt of the earth."

Salt is used to enhance flavor and to preserve food. Salt also induces thirst. Consider the difference between a person who "blends in" with the culture around him or her, so that this person does not stand out in any way, as opposed to a person who brings out the best in others, enhances life, and induces others to do the same.

Where in the world around you do you see people who are the salt of the earth?

Where do you see people whose saltiness has lost its taste? What happened to them? How did they get that way?

Imagine Jesus telling you that you are the salt of the earth. What does he mean by this? What difference would it make in the way you lived, if you believed him?

2. “You are the light of the world.”

Light allows us to see things as they are. Light brings out diversity from the sameness of darkness. Light causes things to grow, and light is an important ingredient in combating depression.

Who are such “lights” in the world around you?

Who has been a light in your life?

Imagine Jesus telling you that you are the light of the world. What does he mean by this? What difference would it make in the way you live, if you believed him?

3. Imagine Jesus’ original audience for the Sermon on the Mount. We know he has called uneducated fishermen and other common folk. The Beatitudes indicate that he is talking with people who are poor, hungry, marginalized, and oppressed.

What does it mean to say to ordinary, common folks that they are the salt and light of the world?

What are some of the ways in which the poorest and lowliest among us are sometimes more expressive of the values of the Kingdom of God than those who are much more highly esteemed?

What are some of the simple, but profound, salty or enlightening gestures in daily life? How can you, in small ways, express your saltiness and shine your light a little more in your daily life and encounters?

4. “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

What does it mean to exceed in righteousness people who are very careful about observing religious traditions and the letter of Scripture, which are supposed to lead one to righteousness?

What do you know of the difference between a life that is open and available to God, as opposed to a life that is striving for God?

5. Rabbi Hillel was a much loved and highly regarded contemporary of Jesus. The story is told about a group of pagans who came to Rabbi Hillel one day and said that they would convert to

Judaism if the rabbi could recite the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Rabbi Hillel stood on one foot and said, “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you. That is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary.”

Given that Jesus expressed something very similar in what has come to be called “The Golden Rule,” and that Jesus gave a summary of the Law by urging love of God and love of neighbor, one might imagine that these two religious teachers largely agreed with each other.

But how do you square the sentiment of Rabbi Hillel, as expressed in the story above, with Jesus’ warning that “whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven”?

Consider that Jesus himself seems to have broken rules about the Sabbath, saying that the Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. When in your life have you sensed a difference between a righteousness that flows from a right relationship with God and human beings, and a righteousness that flows from obedience to holy laws?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 6, Year A

Matthew 5:21-37

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Background and general observations

Although this passage of the Sermon on the Mount is usually understood as Jesus' teaching about how we are to conduct ourselves with one another, some have suggested that the teaching in the first paragraph might have been particularly important for Jews coming to terms with their Roman oppressors. Instead of fighting with the Romans and bringing on bloody, military reprisals (the hell of fire), overwhelm your oppressors with kindness, generosity, and overtures of reconciliation.

Some Christians who are accustomed to contrasting the "God of wrath and judgment from the Old Testament" with the "God of love from the New Testament" might find some of this passage especially challenging. Instead of easing up on the requirements of the Hebrew Scripture, Jesus seems to some to be making the requirements tougher. However, many Christians see Jesus' teaching here as an effort to shift the focus from external requirements of the Law to internal dispositions that give rise to a life of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. One suggestion about this portion of the Sermon on the Mount is that it is Jesus' invitation to understand religion as something much greater than a code of moral conduct.

How are you accustomed to thinking about the religious or spiritual life? Is Christianity, for you, primarily about learning to live a morally pure life that is acceptable to God? Or, if you sense that Jesus is showing a Way of life that about more than right behavior or moral conduct, how would you describe this Way?

2. Some have commented that Jesus' teaching here does not sound like "good news." In fact, many will perhaps despair upon reading this passage, figuring that there is no way they will ever be able to live up to the standards Jesus is setting here.

In what sense, if any, do you hear Jesus' words here as "good news"? How is this passage helpful to you in deepening your spiritual life and your relationship with God?

3. One way of reading this passage is to see that Jesus is pointing out how our way of relating to each other directly affects our relationship with God. When we are out of sorts with each other, we are out of sorts with God.

What do you know about your spiritual life and your relationship with God being disrupted when you have been wronged by someone or when you have said or done something harmful to others?

Most of us can give numerous examples of feeling spiritually dis-eased when we are at enmity with family members, friends, colleagues, or neighbors. It's hard to feel good about our relationship with God when our relationships with loved ones are suffering.

Can you apply this principle to relationships with people far away? What effect does suffering or enmity in Africa, Egypt, or the Middle East, for example, have on your spiritual life?

4. "...it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

What do you know about allowing one aspect of your life to throw your whole life into hell?

When have you experienced a hell brought on by something you could have and should have excised from your life?

5. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

What do you know about doing your best to be reconciled with someone but not being able to achieve reconciliation? Or, what do you know about not being able to muster the willpower even to try to be reconciled? In situations like that, where there is stubbornness or just too much hurt for reconciliation to occur, do you hear God telling you to keep on trying and don't come back until you've succeeded? Or, do you hear God saying to you, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest"? (see Matt. 11:28-30)

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Epiphany 7, Year A

Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Background and general observations

As one commentator has said about this passage, "The history of interpretation reveals something we would rather not say out loud: we are suspicious that Jesus is wrong. So we explain away his words in various ways."(Greg Carey in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, p. 381)

"Turn the other cheek," "give your cloak," "go the extra mile," "give to everyone who begs," "love your enemies," "pray for those who persecute you," "...we've heard it all many times, and many of us find these words beautiful and quintessentially Jesus. And perhaps the most arresting of all of these demands is "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Among the questions that have plagued Christians for 2,000 years are these: Did he really mean this all literally? Was Jesus just speaking about a Godly state of perfection that he knew full well was unattainable, but he wanted us to keep this perfection before us as our ideal? If Jesus meant that we really should live this way, was he simply wrong, impractical, or foolish? If I lived this way, what would happen to me?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Let's just start with the obvious – do you hear Jesus inviting you to live in accordance with his very specific commands in this passage? Or, are you convinced that Jesus did not mean all of this literally? (at least, he didn't mean it all literally for you, that is!)
2. Matthew's Gospel ends with the Resurrected Jesus giving the disciples very specific instructions: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

What do you hear Jesus saying to you here?

3. It has been pointed out that revivalists like John Wesley were convinced that Jesus was not speaking symbolically or metaphorically in this passage. They were and are convinced that Jesus would not tell us to do something that was impossible for us to do:

“God well knew how ready our unbelief would be to cry out, This is impossible! And therefore stakes upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of God, to whom all things are possible.”
(John Wesley)

This point of view has inspired some of the largest and most vibrant Christian movements the world over, and we might point to certain saints throughout history who seem to have attained the kind of life Jesus espoused (Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa...).

Do you find this point of view inspiring, dispiriting ...?

4. When a woman who grew up as the daughter of Christian missionaries was asked how she and her family could live among the poorest of the poor without fear of being robbed, she replied, “Simple. You can’t own anything anyone would want to steal.” (Jason Byassee, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, p. 384)

What do you know about “the blessing of possessing nothing” and “the curse of possessing too much”?

5. It has been pointed out that Jesus’ audience were poor and oppressed people. It has also been suggested that Jesus’ commandments make more sense to the poor and disenfranchised than to the rich and powerful. To the poor, Jesus comes across as a hero; to the rich, he comes across as an impractical idealist.

Your thoughts?

6. “God makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?”

This passage is sometimes explained as Jesus’ way of describing how we, as children of God and as people who are made in the image and likeness of God, can live our lives so that we “love as God loves.”

Do you really believe that God loves all people, even evildoers and persecutors, so indiscriminately?

How does God love?

If you hear Jesus commanding you to love as God loves, what changes are you going to start having to make?

7. Nobody is perfect, right?

But is Jesus suggesting that we have the capacity to love each other the way God loves us?

One possibility – don’t just stew over these things in your mind and swap opinions about “what Jesus really meant.” Instead, set aside some quiet time for prayer, and ask Jesus, “What are you trying to tell me in this passage about how I am to live?” Be open to whatever happens in that prayer time. Whether or not you seem to get a clear answer, maybe just the work of sincerely asking the question and dwelling with Jesus’ words will initiate something life-changing. Just be open.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Background and general observations

The season after the Epiphany concludes with one of the most powerful epiphanies of all – the Transfiguration. This story comes at the center of Matthew's story, between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection. Jesus takes his "inner circle" of disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain. (These are the same disciples whom Jesus will take with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus will be deeply troubled.)

As we know, a mountaintop is understood to be a place for divine encounter – Moses received the Ten Commandments and covenant there; Elijah experienced God in "a still small voice" there; and Jesus of course delivered the "Sermon on the Mount" there.

It is here, on a mountain, where Jesus is "transfigured" before the disciples. There is an otherworldly quality to this event, as we read that the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. The appearance of Moses and Elijah perhaps symbolizes the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Their appearance with Jesus clearly places him in a position of prominence, and some have suggested that this event symbolizes the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment or summary or goal of all of the Law and the Prophets. In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

The often-impetuous Peter can't contain himself and speaks (blurts?) first, proposing that they build a memorial or dwelling places on the site. Is this the all-too-human attempt to institutionalize that which cannot be institutionalized? Does Peter simply not want this moment to end? Or is he looking for something to do in a situation in which he should be still and attentive, and not doing anything at all?

Then, from a cloud comes a voice, saying in effect the same thing that was said at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved"—but this time the voice adds a command, "listen to him!" This is not a time for talking or planning. It is simply a time to listen, and that can be hard for many of us. Yet, perhaps this is just the command we should take with us into the season of Lent which begins with Ash Wednesday (March 5).

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The fact that even Jesus' inner circle of disciples do not seem to understand divine occurrences, sometimes say very inappropriate things, and even let Jesus down when the going gets tough (falling asleep in Gethsemane), might give us some relief – when we blow it with regard to God, we might remember that even the inner circle or cream of the crop failed miserably at times.

But the fact that Jesus had an inner circle at all might remind us of just how important it can be to have an “inner circle” ourselves – special people we love, trust and rely upon.

Who would be in your “inner circle”?

What makes a person the right one to be in such a trusted and important position in one's life?

What do you think is required of you, if you are going to be such a trusted and important person to someone in your life?

2. Some have said about the Transfiguration that this event is an “unveiling,” that the disciples are simply able, for a moment, to see Jesus clearly for who he is in all his glory. It's not that something has happened to change Jesus, it's just that the disciples are seeing things, for a brief moment, as they really are. The veil has been lifted briefly, and what used to seem quite ordinary is now seen as it really is.

When have you experienced such an unveiling? Have you gone through much of your life thinking of the people and places around you as being “ordinary” and unremarkable but then saw things differently?

Has it ever happened that, out of the blue, you have been filled with wonder and gratitude at the splendor and beauty of your life and of the people and places around you?

What do you think of the possibility that such moments of splendor that inspire our awe and gratitude are really just unveilings of the deeper truth about our lives that we unfortunately miss all too often?

How can we more often position ourselves to see the world as it really is, in all its glory, instead of going through our lives with a feeling that things are just humdrum or ordinary or even burdensome?

3. The Greek word that Matthew uses for the transfiguration is the same word that Paul uses to describe the change that is to take place within ourselves: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* (transfigured) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

What do you think this intended transformation or transfiguration of yourself is all about? Is this the point of being a Christian – that we pattern our lives in such a way and turn our attention and open our lives to divine things, so that we are transformed or transfigured into their likeness? Do you sense yourself being so transformed at times?

4. An Episcopal monk once wrote: “Almost everyone I know in the church complains about being too busy. We know being busy probably isn’t very good for us. Most of us have been so busy for so long and accomplished so little that we are quick to admit to the futility of all of this activity. But I wonder how often we see all of the busyness as sin. I wonder how often we see it as a kind of avoidance of being drawn into the real worship of God. I wonder if we realize how much our prayer suffers because of the lack of space in our lives. Not that we don’t make time for prayer. We may be quite faithful about carving out the time for prayer. But how often are we willing to surround the prayer with the solitude and leisure which is so important for listening to God? ... There are probably too many workshops in the Church and not enough places of silence and quiet.” (from an old SSJE newsletter, written by Thomas Shaw, who was the superior then and who is now the bishop of Massachusetts)

It has been said that God gave ten commandments on the mountain top in the Old Testament and only one commandment in the New Testament: “Listen to him (Jesus).”

Do these reflections help you understand the importance of listening? Is your busyness an unconscious attempt to avoid listening to God and listening to the deepest truth about your life and who you are? What keeps you from devoting more time to such quiet and listening?

5. “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Some things are so precious that they need to be treasured or pondered in our hearts before we speak about them.

Some things are so great and mysterious that our attempts to explain or talk about them would not make sense, except as they inform or help to make sense of our subsequent experiences.

Some things cannot be spoken about, but simply need to be experienced for ourselves.

What do you know of needing to remain quiet about something important that has happened in your life? Concerning your relationship with God and your experience of the Divine, what do you know of things that, at least for a time, must not be spoken?

6. “Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’”

Jesus came and touched them.

It is sometimes noted that Christianity is an “incarnational” religion.

What do you make of the importance of touch in the spiritual life? Touch seems to play an important role throughout the Gospels, with people seeking to touch Jesus or Jesus reaching out to touch others. What would have been the difference in this story, if Jesus simply spoke to them without touching?

7. St. Stephen's staff member Betsy Lee points out that Peter's desire to build three dwellings on the mountain might, in some sense, relieve the disciples of their role to reveal the Divine in our own lives. If Peter can just build three dwellings on the mountain, people could come to this special place or revelation on a mountain, instead of finding the revelation of God in ourselves.

What do you know of seeking to locate the revelation of holiness and divinity somewhere outside yourself and thereby avoiding the calling to manifest the divine in your own life?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 1, Year A

Matthew 4:1-11

After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Background and general observations

Here at the beginning of the season of Lent, we return to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. At Jesus' baptism, Jesus experiences the powerful affirmation that he belongs to God and that he is loved by God. John the Baptist was administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness, or release, of sins. Jesus submits to John's baptism, and when he comes up out of the water, he hears the Divine Voice, "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased." And it is just after this extraordinary affirmation that Jesus is "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness," where he fasts for forty days and nights and experiences tests from "the tempter" or "the devil."

Forty days in the wilderness would remind the readers or hearers of the Gospel of the forty years of wandering and testing that the Hebrew people endured after they were released from their bondage in Egypt and came up out of the water of the Red Sea. The earliest Christians, in other words, saw the events of Jesus' life as mirroring the events of Israel's release from bondage and their passing through the waters of baptism that swallowed up their pursuers. These were the events that set the people of Israel free and set the stage for their entering into a deeper relationship with God (just as baptism reminds us that we are set free and sets the stage for our entering into a deeper relationship with God). In the wilderness, the people of Israel would receive the covenant, and they would promise their obedience. Of course, the Israelites would become disobedient and fail miserably. So, in the events of Jesus' life, the earliest Christians not only saw a mirroring of the life of Israel, but also a kind of undoing of Israel's disobedience.

Another more general angle on the juxtaposition of the baptism and the testing in the wilderness would be to consider how, in our own lives, times of affirmation, spiritual highs, consolations, and so on are often followed by times of testing, spiritual lows, desolations. While affirmation is good, we might consider the role that testing, temptations, wilderness, and even failure can play in our spiritual growth and maturation.

The lesson ends with the devil departing from Jesus and angels coming and ministering to him. What a relief. We've all experienced something like this, as the dark clouds eventually disperse, or a time of painful testing comes to an end, and we finally have a sense of angels caring for us. Of course, Christians who have made the Gospel story their own will remember that the devil will return when he enters Judas and sets the stage for Jesus' last temptation at his arrest, trial and crucifixion. So, it seems, we are invited to ponder the importance of soaking up and interiorizing those times of consolation when we feel very close to God, because in this life, such times are eventually followed by times of desolation, when we need to remember the former times, just to get us through our trials.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The season of Lent is our forty days. Where do you stand spiritually, here at the beginning of this Lent, your forty days? How might God be calling you or leading you to use this Lenten season?

2. When have you had the experience of being "led by the Holy Spirit"?

What is that like? And how can a person open himself or herself to be led in this way?

3. Immediately after his powerful experience of God at his baptism, Jesus is led in the wilderness where he experiences temptations.

In the traditional form of the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God will not "lead us into temptation"; yet, this seems to be precisely what happens to Jesus. Some scholars argue that the more accurate translation of the Lord's Prayer is "save us from the time of trial."

What experience do you have of this pattern in your life – a powerful religious or spiritual experience being followed by a time of testing, temptation, and wilderness? How might such a period of testing, temptation, and wilderness be just as formative as the experience of powerful affirmation, love, and belonging?

Have you ever had a sense of the Spirit leading you into a time of testing, temptation, or difficulty, which resulted in your growing and developing in ways you could not have otherwise?

What do you know about seeing tests and difficulties in your life as gifts from God that ultimately can draw you closer to God?

4. What is your experience of spiritual wilderness?

Have you had a sense of being ministered to when you were in the wilderness?

What is it like trying to minister to others who are in their own wilderness?

How can we love people through their times of wilderness?

Is it possible that angels seek to minister to us in times of wilderness, but we are sometimes spiritually unavailable and unable to perceive or receive their caring ministry?

5. Forty days is a long time. Imagine the extended periods of silence, the extra time to think. Barbara Brown Taylor asks, “Can you handle the silence, in which thoughts and feelings you have outrun will have time to catch up with you?”

Is this why some people take a bottle of Scotch with them when they go on retreat?

What do you know about uncomfortable periods of silence and stillness?

One of the most frequently repeated suggestions of the Desert Mothers and Fathers was, “Go into your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” They knew how we often seek meaning and answers outside ourselves – in spiritual gurus, in books, in the church, in the Bible – but they seem to suggest that what we need is already with us and within us, just waiting to be revealed, if we can only be still and attentive to what is. If this is hard for you, why do you think that is?

6. We might notice that Jesus does not engage the devil in arguments. Jesus simply quotes verses of Scripture in order to confirm his resolution to be attentive to God.

What is your experience of people quoting Scripture to you in order to prove their point? Do you tend to get defensive or ensnared in argument? Or, is it enough to remember that “even the devil can quote Scripture”?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 2, Year A

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Background and general observations

This seemingly simple scenario has been the locus of much analysis and interpretation over the centuries. Why is Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night? Is Nicodemus speaking for himself alone, or is he an emissary from the Sanhedrin? If Nicodemus is such a learned man, why does he fail to understand what Jesus is saying, taking everything Jesus says so literally? Does Jesus' speech prefigure the Last Supper, or are we reading back into it our own awareness of the Eucharist? And as always, what does this story mean for us and our faith journey? There is much more here than a first reading might sense.

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, is drawn to Jesus, but many have conjectured that he comes to Jesus "by night" because he is afraid of others knowing that he is drawn to this rabbi. Nicodemus seems to indicate that religious officials have found some merit in Jesus' teaching. "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," Nicodemus says, "for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Yet, in the two verses that immediately precede this story, we read that many believed in Jesus "because they saw the signs that he was doing." (John 2:24) But Jesus "would not entrust himself to them." So, when Nicodemus asserts confidently that they "know" Jesus has come from God because of the signs, perhaps we are seeing up front that Nicodemus' approach and understanding are suspect.

Jesus makes it clear that his focus is not on signs or teachings but on a complete transformation that can be described as a rebirth "from above." "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above," he says. The magnitude of this idea is difficult to understand (kind of like the Trinity), and Nicodemus presses

Jesus to say more, by asking how this could be. But whereas Jesus had spoken about being born “from above,” Nicodemus asks how one can be born again in the earthly sense, by “entering a second time into the mother’s womb.”

This precipitates Jesus’ discussion about being born “of the flesh” and being born “of the Spirit.” Of course, where you are born is where you are “from” and where you “belong.” And Jesus speaks of his own origins when he says that the Son of Man is the one who “descended from heaven.”

Throughout this dialogue, we have an interweaving of the divine persons of the Trinity: God, who gave God’s only Son; Jesus, the Son of Man who descended from heaven; and the Spirit, who is the giver of life. And by saying that we must be “born from above,” Jesus is inviting us into this divine, eternal life.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. John Calvin suggested that Nicodemus was a secret disciple of Jesus. This is the reason he comes at night. Calvin used this story to coin a word, “Nicodemites.” Nicodemites were the people in France who were evangelicals at heart but Roman Catholics in practice. They were people who could not bring themselves to show forth in their lives what they believed in their hearts.

In what ways might you be a Nicodemus-like character?

In the words of Parker Palmer, how is your “soul,” your truest self, sometimes at odds with your “role” in life? Is your nighttime truth sometimes at odds with your daytime practice?

2. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

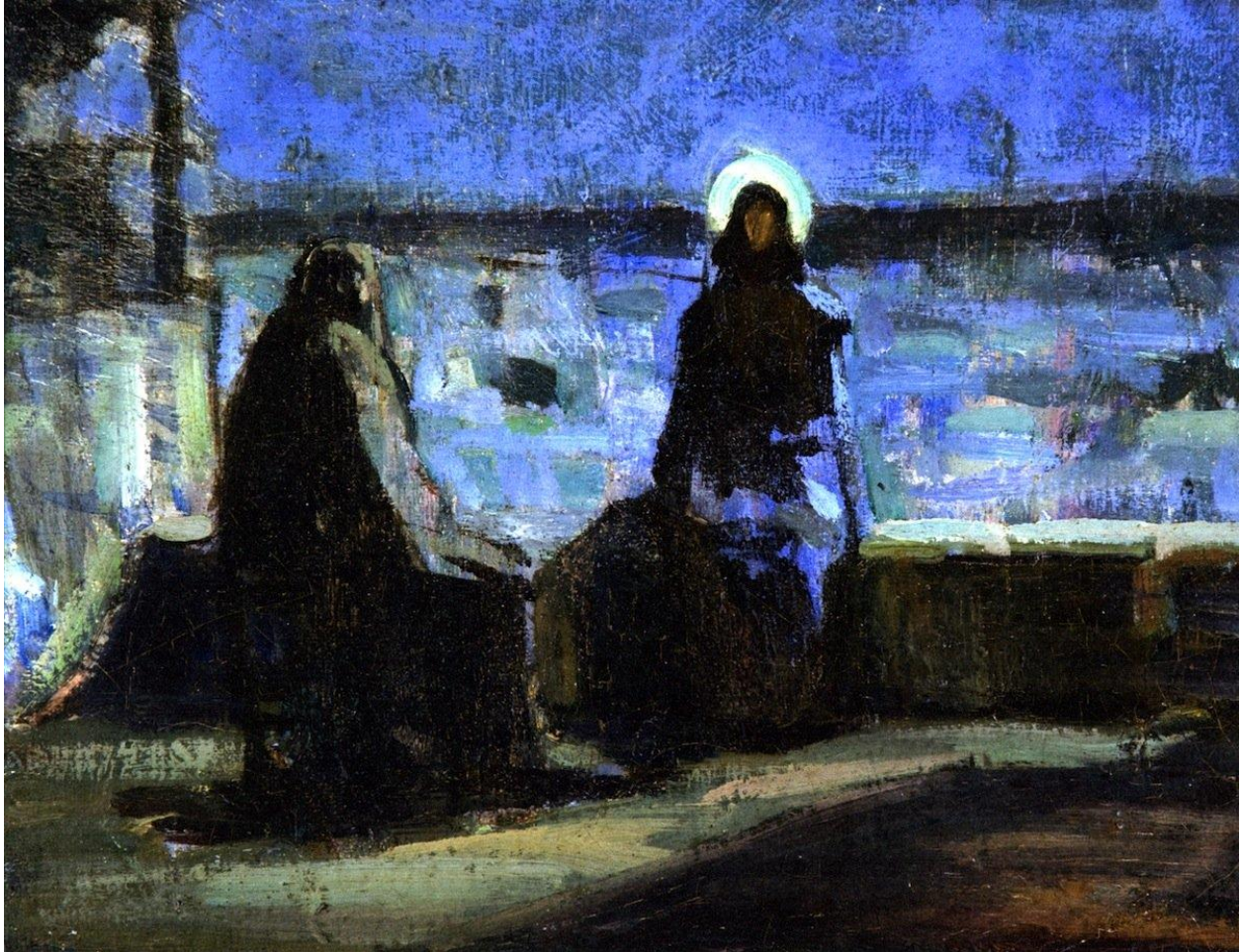
This is the John 3:16 that you’re supposed to hold up on poster board, if you’re seated in the end zone section at a football game. Martin Luther called this, “the Gospel in miniature.”

Some have heard this verse quoted by people who interpret it to mean that one must believe what they believe in order to have eternal life. Sometimes, that doesn’t sound like good news at all. How do you hear this verse? What does it mean to you?

3. What would you say might be signs that a person has been “born from above”? How does that person live or conduct herself in such a way that you know she has been “born from above”? How is that person different from other people?
4. Have you ever had an experience that you would call being “born from above”?

In the staff’s weekly Bible study, Sarah Bartenstein commented, “I’d really like to know what tone of voice Jesus used when he was talking with Nicodemus.” Janet Allen followed up by noting that Henry Ossawa Tanner [painted a powerful image](#) called “Nicodemus and Jesus on a Rooftop.”

Ponder the image below—a study for Tanner’s painting—and wonder about how the scene unfolds. Where are they in the conversation? What is Nicodemus hearing? Does this image help you to live into the account that the Gospel is offering?



5. If you could come to Jesus “by night” and ask him something, what would you ask?
Take some time to imagine such a meeting. Imagine yourself coming to Jesus. How do you feel as you approach him? ...
What do you ask him? ...
How does Jesus respond? What does Jesus say to you? ...
6. Here in the early part of Lent, how are you approaching God?
How do you hear God speaking to you?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 3, Year A

The Gospel: John 4:5-42

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Background and general observations

The familiar story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is rich in symbolism and ties together several emerging themes. In order to appreciate this passage, it is important to put it in context. For example, this story about a Samaritan woman in chapter 4 of John's gospel follows immediately the story of Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, in the preceding chapter. It seems we are meant to contrast these two characters: one a man, the other a woman; one a Jew, the other a Pharisee; one with a name and prominent position in the Jewish establishment, the other nameless and despised by the religious establishment; one who comes to Jesus "by night," and the other who comes to Jesus at noon, in the full light of day.

Notice not only the contrasts but the similarities between Nicodemus and the anonymous (though somehow thoroughly known to Jesus) Samaritan woman. With Nicodemus, Jesus insists that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he or she is "born again" or "born from above." Nicodemus seems stuck on a literal level with Jesus and so does not understand. "How can anyone be born, after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb, and be born?" Jesus responds that one must be "born of water and the Spirit," in order to enter the kingdom of God, thus setting up the controversy that concludes chapter 3, the controversy about Jesus' disciples baptizing more disciples than John, and introducing the theme of water that plays out here in chapter 4.

Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at first seems to take Jesus literally and misunderstands what he means when he says (paraphrasing), "If you knew who I am, you would have asked me, and I would have given you living water." The Samaritan woman is incredulous, maybe mocking, when she points out that this is a deep well, and Jesus doesn't even have a bucket. How, exactly, does he think he would give her a drink? Jesus responds that whoever drinks this water will be thirsty again, but not so with the water he will give: "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." And the Samaritan woman, again understanding all of this literally, says, "Great, give me that water, so that I won't have to keep coming back to this well over and over again."

Interestingly, our passage in chapter 4 is followed by a story in chapter 5 about a healing pool of water in Jerusalem, beside which there are many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. And there is a man lying there whom Jesus approaches (unlike Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, who approach Jesus). This man had been ill for 38 years, and he explains to Jesus that there is no one to put him into the healing pool when the water is stirred up. Jesus responds simply, "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." Others might need to immerse themselves in the healing pool of water, but the encounter with Jesus is an encounter with healing water for this man. And one more interesting parallel: in chapter 6, Jesus gets into a discussion with the disciples about food—"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." (6:27) As the discussion goes on, the disciples sound like the Samaritan woman who asks for the living water. "Sir," the disciples say about the bread Jesus is describing, "give us this bread always." And Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (6:34-35) Time and again, people ask Jesus about physical things that sustain life like water and bread, or about the biological process of birth, and Jesus responds that a relationship with him transcends all things temporal; encountering him is encountering the source of eternal life.

That the encounter in this passage takes place in Samaria is also full of meaning. In the verses immediately preceding this passage, Jesus makes the decision to leave Judea to get back to Galilee—“But he had to go through Samaria.” (4:4) The necessity of going through Samaria seems more theological than geographical—what God is doing in Jesus is for ALL people, including people who are despised. The parenthetical remark, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,” is an understatement—Jews detested Samaritans, who had no role in the rebuilding of the Jewish nation. The understanding among Jews was that Samaritans had corrupted their traditions and misinterpreted their scripture. And the shock the disciples experience upon seeing Jesus talking with a woman further highlights how unlikely and unexpected this encounter is. It seems that the Spirit is indeed blowing where it wills, without regard for human expectations.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Who are “Samaritans” for you? Whom do you avoid? And do you sense that God might be especially interested in “going through Samaria” and engaging with these people in your life and loving them where they are?
2. For what are people thirsting today? What is your greatest thirst, and how do you seek to satisfy your thirst? How does the world promise to satisfy you? Why are some advertising messages so persuasive? Which promises do you readily believe? And by contrast, how does Christ promise to satisfy you and why might you have difficulty believing?
3. “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”
As noted in the background section, this verse is inscribed next to our memorial garden fountain at St. Stephen’s. See if you can find a nice day to sit in our memorial garden among the burial places of so many people, while the fountain gushes up nearby. What is the effect of encountering and pondering your mortality and the brevity of life, along with the eternal life that Christ says he has put within you?
4. “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”
Jesus seems to say that the time will come when it will not matter where one worships, that we sometimes focus too much on human traditions when it comes to God, and that God is trying to free us to experience the beauty, wonder, and truth of our eternal life with God at any time and in any place.
What do you know about the importance of worshipping at set times and in a set place? Some believe that setting aside or sanctifying certain times and places for worship is a way to prepare one to encounter God at all times and all places. What is your experience?
5. A prominent British monk, theologian, and former dean at Cambridge University, H.A. Williams, once said that the only churches that will still be in existence one hundred years from now will be centers of contemplation, where people will learn meditation and ancient, contemplative traditions. What do you know about the role of churches in disposing us to encounter God in daily life?

A sandwich board outside St. Stephen's Church invites passersby to "Come in. Be still. Light a candle. Say a prayer. Go in peace." Many people from a variety of church traditions, or none, take us up on this invitation. How might something as simple as this help people to "worship in spirit and in truth"?

6. "Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see...'" (4:28-29)

"So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them.... They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'" (4:32)

The Samaritan woman has an experience that changes her, and she says what Jesus says in the first chapter of this gospel to the first people who would become his disciples, "Come and see." The woman leaves her water jar at the well, perhaps because she herself has become the vessel of living water that Jesus gave her. The people of the city believe her and come to Jesus. They ask him to "stay" with them, a word that means to "abide" with them, and Jesus does so. The result of Jesus abiding with them is that they know from their own experience, not just from the woman's testimony.

What do you know about a person "embodying" the good news—embodying the Spirit—so that his or her testimony is compelling? What are the signs of such an embodying? And what does it mean for us to "abide" with Jesus? When have you had the experience of Jesus/God/the Spirit "abiding" in you, and you abiding in God? Is there a way for us to encourage others to such an abiding?

7. "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Sometimes we can be impatient to see the results of our labor. But can you believe that God is often using you to plant seeds that will sprout and grow into fruitful plants one day, but that you might never see? How are you planting seeds each day, with family members, friends, and even with perfect strangers? Can you be satisfied with this work of planting, believing that others will later enjoy the fruits of your labor?

And what do you know about being a beneficiary of the labors of others who have gone before you, perhaps even people who planted seeds in you? Do you periodically stop to thank God for those people?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 4, Year A

John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You

were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Background and general observations

On one level, this passage could be read as an example of a miraculous healing that leads to religious controversy – rather than simply receiving the miraculous healing with joy and gratitude, neighbors of the man who was born blind, along with religious officials, fuss and argue about the correct interpretation of the miracle or what it all means. This approach to the story might strike a chord with some people. The miracle itself is very simple and takes only a couple of verses to articulate. What follows, however, is a lengthy interrogation and debate about what it all means. We might see ourselves in this sequence, how we human beings sometimes have a difficult time simply accepting a beautiful and life-giving thing for what it is in itself; instead, we can get lost in contentious debate about what it means, how it should be understood, and who has the correct interpretation.

But John’s Gospel is rich and highly symbolic, and one can read this passage in other ways. “I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.” The hymn “Amazing Grace” uses the metaphor of blindness and seeing in the way the Gospel of John seems to be using it here. This is more than a story about a miraculous healing; it is also a “sign” that is pointing to important spiritual truths. This passage encourages us to ponder what it means to “see” in a spiritual sense, to recognize who Jesus is and to see how and where God is at work in the world and in our lives.

Read this way, this passage is about those who recognize Jesus and those who do not – those who see and those who are blind. It is also about “knowing.” (Underlining each instance of the verb “to know” in the story is revealing.) And it appears that “knowing” Jesus or God has very much to do with being in relationship with Jesus or God. We might remember how the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night begins with Nicodemus saying, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher from God...” This theme of knowing is important in that story, as well. Who really knows what? Jesus tells Nicodemus that he (Jesus) speaks of what he knows. That is, Jesus speaks from his experience. But others, including the religious people in this passage, seem to be stuck arguing about what they know of the Scripture, and they cannot see the One to whom the Scripture has been pointing.

It is interesting to see this passage as connected to the verses which follow in John 10:1-21, where Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd, with sheep who know his voice. That passage continues the theme of knowing and recognizing – the sheep know and recognize the shepherd from hearing his voice. Again, this sense of knowing and recognizing God is something that happens over time, through experience, and it leads the one who repeatedly attends to what he is seeing or hearing to a sense of trust and safety with God.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The man who was born blind comes to know who Jesus is gradually, it seems. Although his eyes were opened, and “he came back able to see,” the man’s recognition of Jesus grows throughout the story. He begins by referring to him as “the man called Jesus.” As he is questioned further, he says Jesus is “a prophet.” And when he is pressed even more, he says, “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing,” and for this he is kicked out of the synagogue. Finally, when Jesus finds the man again, he refers to Jesus as Lord: “Lord, I believe.”

What do you know from your own experience about coming to recognition or knowledge of God only gradually, over time?

What do you know about evolving or growing in your relationship with God and your recognition of God? How have your faith and your understanding of God changed over time?

What does this say about the role of patience with ourselves and with one another in the spiritual life?

2. In the spirit of the last question, read the following quotation slowly. If you are in a group, consider having one person read it, followed by a little silence. Then, allow anyone who wishes to say how this speaks to his or her life or experience:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke, “Letters to a Young Poet”

3. It is interesting to note that the man who was born blind comes to know Jesus after repeatedly telling his story.

What do you know about the importance of repeating your own story and attending, over and over, to your own experience, as a way to gaining deeper knowledge of God?

What is it about attending to our own experience that can lead to revelation?

And what is it about attending to opinions and interpretations that leads to division and contentious debate?

4. One commentator has pointed out that the only two trustworthy characters in this story are the man who was born blind and Jesus. The neighbors don’t even recognize the formerly blind man at first, and his story leads to argument and division among them. Even the man’s parents seem to be afraid to stick up for their son, because they feared getting kicked out of the synagogue themselves. And, of course, the religious community turns on the formerly blind man.

So, the neighbors, family, and the religious community all fail the formerly blind man. By sticking to his story with integrity, he finds himself cast out and alone with Jesus.

What do you know about experiencing the trustworthy Presence of God, even though others have abandoned or failed you?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 5, Year A

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already

there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Background and general observations

The raising of Lazarus is the last of a series of seven “signs” in John’s Gospel, and this story is found only in this Gospel. We see that the raising of Lazarus provokes two strong reactions – some people end up “believing” in Jesus, and others end up seeking a way to kill Jesus. It seems that no one is left feeling lukewarm or merely curious. This event sharpens divisions.

Throughout the story, there is an emphasis on “believing,” and this is always a verb in John’s Gospel, never a noun (never “belief”). The emphasis, in other words, is on believing in or trusting in Jesus as the One who has the power to bring life out of death. And while many will focus exclusively on this as a physical or biological idea, Christians of course have long believed in the power of Jesus to bring life in other senses (resurrecting a dead marriage or relationship, resurrecting one who has been in the darkness and death of addiction, etc.). Further, the raising of Lazarus invites us to ponder our role in bringing life to each other (“Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine...” “As the Father has sent me, so I send you...”). And although Jesus is the agent of resurrection in this story, he does give others an important role – “Unbind him, and let him go.”

It is often said that the shortest sentence in the Bible is also one of the most powerful, “Jesus wept.” In this translation of the NRSV, we see that this verse 35 is translated, “Jesus began to weep,” indicating the imperfect tense (an ongoing action in the past), as opposed to the perfect tense (more simply, an action in the past). In the midst of a Gospel that sometimes seems to depict Jesus as philosophical and detached, this story of the raising of Lazarus conveys Jesus’ deep humanity. While Jesus is reassuring to his friends who are grieving the death of Lazarus, he himself ends up being so deeply moved and grieved that those who are standing around take notice (“See how he loved him!”).

Jesus asks Mary, “Where have you laid him?” Later, a different Mary will ask the same thing, “Tell me where you have laid him” (20:15). In this story of the raising of Lazarus, the one who is raised from the dead still has the grave clothes wrapped around him. In the story of Jesus’ resurrection, the grave clothes are cast off to the side. Lazarus’ resurrection is, in this sense, qualitatively different and temporary. Jesus’ resurrection is the end of death forever.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives:

1. Jesus is depicted in this story with deeply human emotions. He is “greatly disturbed in spirit” and “deeply moved,” and he weeps.

How do you relate to Jesus?

Is Jesus, for you, one who is more aloof, all-powerful, and superior in every way? Or, is Jesus one who is more personal and vulnerable and prone to expressions of emotion?

How does your conception of Jesus affect the way you pray?

2. What do you know about resurrection from your own life?

Have you experienced the death and resurrection of a relationship, for example? Or, have you experienced the death of something in yourself, only to experience the miracle of resurrection later?

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, it is the encounter with Jesus that brings about resurrection. Have you had such an encounter in your life or witnessed such a life-giving encounter in someone else?

3. For you, what does it mean to “believe in Jesus”?

4. Sarah Bartenstein notes that Mary and Martha both say to Jesus, “If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died,” and that while they have a sense of the power of Jesus, their sense of Jesus’ power is too small or too limited. They do not seem to imagine that Jesus can bring life out of death; they only seem to imagine that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus’ death.

What do you know about having expectations of God that are too small? Have there been times when you have tended to expect too little of God?

In his famous book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis says that many Christians tend to think of God as one who comes into our lives to do a little rearranging, when what God is actually trying to do is give us a whole new life. We expect God to rearrange the furniture of our lives, but God is busy building a whole new mansion for himself.

What do you know about having limited expectations about what God might be up to in your life, leading you to “live small” and not venture a greater life that God is preparing for you?

5. “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Lazarus cannot unbind himself; he needs the help of those around him.

What is still binding you?

What is keeping you from living the resurrected life?

How do we keep one another bound?

What is our role in unbinding each other?

When have you experienced someone or a community unbinding you and setting you free?

When have you participated in unbinding someone else?

Where do you see people still living bound in tombs? What will it take to get them out?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Palm Sunday, Year A

Matthew 21:1-11

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Background and general observations

Palm Sunday is also known as "Passion Sunday" and is the first day of Holy Week. This week has long been the most important of all to Christians, from the earliest days of the Christian movement. Hundreds of years later, Christians would begin to celebrate Jesus' birth, appropriating a pagan celebration of the sun as their date to celebrate the birth of the Son of God. But Holy Week was by then deeply entrenched as the most important week of the Christian year.

If at all possible, Christians would travel from far away to Jerusalem, where they would retrace the steps of Jesus during the final days of his earthly ministry. It was in these last days, in this Holy Week, that the message of God in Christ found its most powerful and poignant expression, and prayerful reenactments of Jesus' last days had a transforming effect on those who devoted themselves in this way to "walking in the way of the cross." One way of thinking about Holy Week is that it is a time for us not only to remember in our minds Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, it was more importantly a time to re-member Jesus' last days – his actions, thoughts and feelings – in our bodies, to re-enact the dramatic events of Jesus' last days and find ourselves changed as a result.

Thus, one question we might ask ourselves is this. Has Holy Week lost some of its power for modern day Christians? If so, why do you think that is? Have we become more cerebral about our faith, or more "spiritual"? Where do the dramatic liturgies of Holy Week fit in your prayer and devotional practices as a Christian?

On Palm Sunday, our worship runs the gamut from joy and triumphal acclamation to hostility and condemnation, with deepest emotions of pleading, grief and confusion in between. We begin worship remembering Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with an adoring crowd, and we conclude by recalling his fatal clash with religious authorities and a hostile crowd. How quickly human sentiment and human allegiances can change.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey would specifically recall for Jews in his day a prophecy from Zechariah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zech. 9:9)

The victorious one riding on a donkey indicates that this one is coming in peace, with peaceful intentions. A warrior would come riding on a stallion. Although a warrior would seem to be more threatening to earthly powers, the prophecy from Zechariah confuses things – is this lowly one "our king"? It is important to remember that this was a time of emotional tumult in Jerusalem, and Jesus comes into this cauldron of emotions in this lowly, but symbolic, fashion.

An important theme of St. Paul's would become "power in weakness." That is, Christians are people who are strongest when they are weak, because God is most powerfully manifest in the weak. Consider your own life. When have you come on strong and asserted your authority or power in a situation that was contentious or emotional? How did it feel for you to assert yourself that way? How did it feel inside?

Now, consider a time when you conducted yourself with humility and quiet, unassuming presence in the midst of a contentious or emotional situation. How did it feel to hold your tongue and sit quietly through a situation that was raising passionate feelings in others?

Where is God in such situations? Where is the true power and strength in such situations?

2. What might Holy Week have to teach you about your relationships with family and friends?
3. The term "Passion" Sunday comes from a Latin word that means "to suffer." On Palm Sunday and throughout Holy Week, we are reliving Jesus' last week, with special attention to his suffering. However, many prefer to point out that we are willing to suffer only for those things that matter most to us. That is, Palm Sunday and Holy Week are about focusing on Jesus' deepest passion.

What do you believe Jesus was most passionate about? How did he demonstrate this deepest passion?

What is your deepest passion? How do you show your passion in the way you live your life?

4. Martin Laird (author of *Into the Silent Land* and *A Sunlit Absence*) has said that silent prayer is the most natural thing a person can do. Our egos can keep us anxious and striving, busy and contentious; but at the deepest level of our being, our true life is already at peace with God. Being prayerfully quiet, opening oneself to God in contemplation, is about letting go of the ego in order to be still with God in that deepest place of peace, to return to our true life. Contemplative prayer is about gradually dispelling the illusion that we are separate from God. God is with us and within us always, and remembering that reality can lead to a life of deepest faith and trust – even death cannot separate you from your true life in God.

Consider how walking in the steps of Jesus during Holy Week might deepen your “knowledge” or experience of God, and how this might lead to a deeper sense of trust and free you to live more completely into the life God has given you to live. Consider how Jesus evinced in his last days both deep trust and human distress. Does reliving these last days through Holy Week draw you closer to God?

5. The way in which Jesus chooses to enter Jerusalem makes a significant statement about how God might choose to enter our lives, particularly in situations of conflict, turmoil, and uncertainty.

How do you experience God entering into your life? Is it with power and triumph, or is it with humility and seeming weakness? How do you recognize when God seems to be drawing closer to you or making his presence felt more poignantly?

6. It is often said that where humans experience profound holiness and goodness, evil and darkness lie close at hand. That certainly seems to have been the case during Jesus’ last days, as he showed the beauty of holiness in serving his disciples, washing their feet, and in sharing a meal that would care for them and reassure them long after he was killed. All the while, of course, a dark conspiracy that would lead to Jesus’ death was playing out.

What do you know from your own life of this dynamic? When have you experienced a profound sense of Presence, while darkness or evil is lurking nearby? How do you maintain your focus on the Presence of God in such times and not allow yourself to be governed by fear?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter Day, Year A

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Background and general observations

It's probably a good idea for us to take stock of the fact that the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection vary significantly in their details. For example, how many women were there? How many angels? What was the message to those who encounter the empty tomb? Was Jesus himself there, or not?

Such variations in the telling of the Easter story are disturbing to some. If you are counting on the Gospel accounts serving as reliable, historical accounts about precisely what happened when, then you might find the variations unsettling. But if you think of the Gospel accounts being different ways of communicating the same, extraordinary truth, that Jesus was raised from the dead, then you might find the variations interesting and even helpful in sorting out what all this might mean for you and your life.

Some of the differences in detail might reveal different understandings of the same truth and experience. Each of us brings different needs, insights, and ways of perceiving to our experiences, so our way of describing the same experiences will understandably differ. And much has been made over the centuries of different literary allusions in the Gospel accounts. For example, in John's account, Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Is this an allusion to that original garden, the Garden of Eden, and the effect the resurrection has of restoring

humanity to our intended relationship with God? Is it an allusion to a parable Jesus told about the patient gardener who forestalls judgment? You can see how various interpretations like this might reveal as much about the interpreter as they do about the Gospel account itself.

It is also interesting to note about John's account that those who look inside the tomb seem to see different things. Peter and "the other disciple" both see grave clothes, and Peter, at least, sees the cloth that had covered Jesus' head "rolled up in a place by itself." (The reference to the head cloth could be an allusion to the veil which Moses would remove when he entered into the presence of God — perhaps we are being shown a clue that Jesus has entered into God's presence?) After the men see these things, they returned to their homes. Mary, on the other hand, sees two angels and speaks with them. Then, Mary turns around and sees a person she believes to be the gardener but whom she recognizes as Jesus when he speaks her name. Did the angels suddenly appear after the disciples left? Or, had the angels been there, and the disciples simply were not able to see them? What keeps us from seeing Divine activity in our lives, and what allows us to see Divine activity?

We might also wonder about Mary mistaking Jesus for a gardener. Do we similarly mistake or overlook the presence of Jesus, the presence of God, in our lives today? What is it that allows us to see the deepest truths of our lives more clearly, and what blinds us to such truths?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The first witnesses at the tomb on Easter Day see and experience different things. Although the men seem to see only grave clothes, Mary sees angels. Then, when she turns around, she sees one whom she supposes is a gardener. When he speaks her name, however, the gardener turns out to be Jesus himself. It is a strange scene — you might think that Mary would recognize instantly the one whom she knew and loved.

One interpretation of these varying perceptions and misperceptions is that we are dealing here with human beings encountering Divine reality, and this requires the "eyes of our faith" to adjust. Some might see gradually, and others might not see at all.

What do you know from your own experience about the difficulty of perceiving the presence and activity of God in your life?

What allows you to see clearly?

What keeps you from seeing clearly?

2. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'"

Have you ever experienced God "calling you by name"?

Have you ever had an experience of being "known," in the most intimate way, by God?

Imagine how Jesus spoke Mary's name...the tone of voice...the volume of his voice...the sharpness or softness of his voice...as he said simply, "Mary." If you are inclined, sit quietly, close your eyes, and imagine Jesus speaking your name.

3. "Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold onto me...'"

What do you know about trying to "hold onto" God, as opposed to "being held" by God?

What does the message of Easter mean to you?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Second Sunday of Easter, Year A

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Background and general observations

Easter is not one day but a season that is fifty days long. The Easter season culminates on the Day of Pentecost (Pente = 50), when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many regard Christmas Day, Easter Day, and the Day of Pentecost as the three greatest feasts of the church year.

Interestingly, the Second Sunday of Easter is often called "Low Sunday," because the attendance in church on this day is often so much lower than the attendance on Easter Day. That's understandable, but it's also unfortunate, since this is the day on which we traditionally read the account of "Doubting Thomas." Many people think that it's unfair to label Thomas as "doubting." After all, he not only ended up believing, he ended up believing profoundly – "My Lord and my God!" That is a response that is very different from, "Well, it is you, Jesus."

Some like to point out, as well, that Thomas in fact confesses his belief without having to test the evidence, as Jesus invites him to do ("Put your finger here..."). We might also wonder if the other disciples would have needed some sort of visual or even tactile confirmation of Jesus' presence after his death, if they (like Thomas) had not been present when Jesus appeared to the others in that locked room a week earlier.

This leads to a very general question for all of us. What kind of experience must we have, in order to believe that Jesus has truly risen from the dead? What kind of experience must we have, if we are going to believe that God is a real, living and active presence in our lives?

This passage contains the second and third appearances of the risen Jesus. The first appearance, of course, was to Mary Magdalene in the garden. The fourth appearance occurs in the next chapter of this Gospel, when Jesus appears to the disciples on the beach, directs them in their fishing, and then has breakfast with them.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus enters a locked room where his disciples are gathered in fear. These disciples are the people who had the benefit of Jesus' companionship, hearing Jesus' teachings, and witnessing Jesus' miracles. Yet, they are also the people who scattered and ran away in Jesus' hour of greatest need.

We might expect Jesus to give the disciples a hard time, "What happened to you guys?!" Instead, he simply says, "Peace be with you."

If this is the way Jesus treats these disciples who failed and abandoned him so miserably, even though they had been privileged to be with him intimately, why do you suppose many believe that God is inclined to punish us so severely when we fail or abandon him? What can we learn about God from this passage? And what can we learn about ourselves?

2. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This is a powerful statement. We are to be like Christ to one another, sent by God to each other.

Who in your life has been such a "God-send"?

In what ways might you be a "God-send" to someone else?

3. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This is another powerful statement. It seems that Jesus is saying we have enormous power over one another.

What sins of others are you retaining? At what cost to yourself?

4. The Episcopal priest and New Testament scholar, Robert Capon, says the following about the primary calling of the church and of Christians:

The church is not in the morals business. The world is in the morals business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of it, all things considered. The history of the world's moral codes is a monument to the labors of many philosophers, and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty. As C.S. Lewis said, anyone who thinks the moral codes of mankind are all different should be locked up in a library and be made to read three days' worth of them. He would be bored silly by the sheer sameness.

What the world cannot get right, however, is the forgiveness business — and that, of course, is the church's real job. She is in the world to deal with the Sin which the world can't turn off or escape from. She is not in the business of telling the world what's right and wrong so that it can do good and avoid evil. She is in the business of offering, to a world which knows all about that tiresome subject, forgiveness for its chronic unwillingness to take its own advice. But the minute she even hints that morals, and not forgiveness, is the name of her game, she instantly corrupts the Gospel and runs headlong into blatant nonsense.

*The church becomes, not Ms. Forgiven Sinner, but Ms. Right. Christianity becomes the good guys in here versus the bad guys out there. Which, of course, is pure tripe. The church is nothing but the world under the sign of baptism. ... (Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: An Introduction to the Language of Theology*)*

How do you respond to this idea that we are, first and foremost, people who have been sent to forgive sins?

How are you doing in that vocation? What do you need in order to do your job better?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Third Sunday of Easter, Year A

Luke 24:13-35

That very day, the first day of the week, two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Background and general observations

The story of Jesus appearing to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus occurs only in the Gospel according to Luke. It follows Luke's story about the discovery of the empty tomb, in which several women have gone to the tomb with spices. They find the stone rolled away from the tomb, but they do not find the body of Jesus. And while they are perplexed, two men in dazzling clothes appear to them and ask why they are seeking the living among the dead. The women report all of this to the other disciples, who dismiss their story as an idle tale, but Peter goes to the tomb to check things out himself. When he finds things as the women had reported, he simply walks away amazed. (Luke 24:1-12)

In the Gospel according to Luke, therefore, the encounter on the road to Emmaus is the first recorded encounter with the risen Jesus. At the conclusion of this story about the Emmaus encounter, we see Cleopas and the other disciple reporting what they have seen and experienced to the eleven apostles. (vv. 33-35) The very next verse reads, "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. “While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

What do you know about the experience of not recognizing the Divine Presence in your midst?

What are some of the things that keep you from recognizing the Presence of God in your life?

2. What important truths has God taught you that you failed to understand at first?

3. Many people note that when we are confused, depressed, or anxious, we are not likely to sense God’s presence and activity in our lives. This might be especially true when we have been severely disappointed, when things have not turned out as we had hoped or expected. However, in hindsight, we can often look back on such difficult times in our lives and see how God in fact was present and at work, even though we were kept from seeing so at the time.

What do you know about this from your own life?

An interesting exercise might be to think about a particularly difficult time in your life, a time that you have perhaps tried to forget. Close your eyes and call that scene or situation back to mind, allowing that troubling time to come to life again in your imagination. As you observe the scene unfolding in your mind, imagine where Jesus was at the time. What was Jesus doing? What was he feeling?

4. Weezie Blanchard has said that this story of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus reminds her that Jesus promised he would be with us always. Sometimes, she admits, it is easy to lose sight of how and where Christ is present in certain situations. But when she stops and intentionally asks herself, “Where is Christ now?” it almost always makes a difference.

You might try this for yourself at various times in your day, and particularly when you are feeling perplexed or anxious. What is the effect, for you, of pausing and wondering in this way?

5. As they came near the village, the disciples urged Jesus to stay with them, and it was in sharing a meal together that they finally recognized him.

One interpretation of this might be that we are most likely to recognize, discover, or encounter God in tangible acts of love and hospitality. When has love been a catalyst for encountering God in your life?

6. What do you know about experiencing the presence of God in the sacrament of Holy Communion?

7. The story of the Road to Emmaus is the story of a journey that is filled with discussion of Scripture and life experiences. It is a journey that concludes with kindness, hospitality, a meal, and a sudden revelation. As the disciples look back on the journey, they comment that their hearts were burning within them.

How is this journey similar to your spiritual journey? What is the role of telling your life's story, discussing the Bible, having a sense of gradual but growing understanding, acts of kindness, sudden revelation....

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A

John 10:1-10

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Background and general observations

The chapter that immediately precedes these verses tells the story of Jesus healing the man who had been born blind. This miracle precipitated a controversy, and the result was that the religious leaders drove the man out of the synagogue. Here, Jesus seems to be making a distinction between himself (the Good Shepherd) and the religious leaders (thieves and bandits).

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is further developed in chapter 10, through verse 18. But in these first verses alone, we have other images that can be applied to Jesus, the image of the gate and the image of the gatekeeper. In verse 7, Jesus says, "I am the gate," and in verse 11 (immediately following this passage), Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." These "I am" statements of Jesus will undoubtedly remind people of other such sayings in the Gospel of John, such as, "I am the vine," "I am the bread of life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and "I am the light of the world."

John is proclaiming Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal God, so it is not surprising that multiple symbols and metaphors are needed to tell us more completely who Jesus is. Some people find it helpful to ponder which images or metaphors are most meaningful or strike a chord. And it is also useful to spend some time with those metaphors that do not seem helpful at first. Are the images that seem strange to us our "growing edges" in the faith? Could it be that these images communicate something about the nature of God and God's relationship to us that might expand our understanding of God and deepen our faith?

Whereas chapter 9 of this Gospel dealt with spiritual blindness, this passage moves from the metaphor of seeing to the metaphor of hearing, as we are invited to consider how sheep know or recognize the voice of the shepherd who takes care of them. This is another way of helping us ponder how human beings perceive or recognize the presence and activity of the Divine. In this passage, the metaphor conveys a special sense of intimacy, tenderness, and mutual recognition, as the shepherd calls each "by name," and the sheep know the shepherd's distinctive voice. Finally, this passage conveys the role of the shepherd to feed (lead to pasture), protect (from thieves and bandits), and to heal (the Greek word meaning "to save" also means "to heal" or "to make whole.") This perhaps invites us to perceive how we perceive the role of God in our lives.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. How do you perceive God's role in your life? Would you say that God feeds you? Protects you? Saves you? Heals you? Guides you?

What other metaphors would you use to describe God's role in your life?

2. Some of the images Jesus uses in this passage to describe his relationship to his followers convey intimacy, belonging, recognition, safety, life and health. What words would you use to describe your relationship with Jesus?
3. Who are the "thieves and bandits" in our world today?

Who are the "thieves and bandits" in your life?

Who or what seems tries to steal your affection, loyalty, allegiance, and trust away from God? How successful have such "thieves and bandits" been in your life? What defense do you have against the forces that draw you away from God?

4. Jesus' metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep teaches us that the One to whom we belong enters our life by "the gate." This gate seems to be a protected or guarded entrance (there is a "gatekeeper"). Thieves and bandits enter our lives by other ways.

How do you perceive God entering your life?

How do you perceive destructive forces entering your life?

Elsewhere, Jesus exhorts his followers to remain watchful and alert. What are some of the ways in which you remain watchful and vigilant in the spiritual life?

5. "They follow him because they know his voice."

Our lives can be noisy. There are many "voices" calling us and trying to get our attention. What is distinctive about God's "voice"?

How can you tell the difference between a divine tug or prompting and any other tug or prompting in your life?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A

John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

Background and general observations

You've undoubtedly heard the first part of this Gospel lesson at funerals, and it is not hard to see why so many people have found John 14:1-6 to be helpful when they are struggling to commend someone they have loved to God's eternal care. This portion of John's Gospel is sometimes referred to as a part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" in which he tells his disciples that he is leaving, attempts to console them, and gives them instruction and promises for the future.

In the verses that immediately precede this passage, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be with them only a little longer, and he gives them a new commandment that they should love each other as he has loved them. Peter asks Jesus where he is going (13:36) and Jesus responds, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now." Peter protests and says that he will lay down his life for Jesus, to which Jesus responds that Peter is going to deny Jesus three times before the cock crows. The next sentence is the first line of our passage, "Do not let your hearts be troubled..."

One of the ways in which Jesus seems to be trying to console the disciples is by assuring them that he and God are one. Anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. In other words, they might be troubled, frightened, and uncomprehending now; but Jesus wants the disciples to know that they can trust him. Where Jesus is going there are many dwelling places for them, and Jesus will prepare a place for them and will ultimately take the disciples to himself. In the meantime, Jesus' leaving is necessary, so that the Spirit can come, and the disciples "will do greater works than these."

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

The disciples are anxious and afraid. Jesus has said he is leaving, and they have responded that they want to go with him. Jesus says they cannot go where he is going yet, and the disciples respond by asking several questions that convey their anxiety.

This is the atmosphere in which Jesus exhorts the disciples not to let their hearts be troubled. Jesus intended these words to be consoling for the disciples, and we often read this Gospel lesson at funerals, as a reminder and consolation for the bereaved.

However, this Gospel lesson could apply to any number of situations in our lives when our hearts are troubled.

Think about times in your life, even very recent times, when your heart has been troubled. What are some of the events, people or circumstances that cause your heart to be troubled?

What are the resources of your faith that seem to calm your troubled heart?

Have you experienced being calmed, strengthened, or encouraged by God when you were in a particularly difficult situation? When your heart is troubled, are there things you can do that better position you to receive God’s calming and strengthening influence?

2. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

Although the traditional interpretation of this passage is that Jesus is referring to our place with God after death, all along our life’s multifaceted journey, God seems to prepare and provide for us “many dwelling places.” Our constantly changing life’s circumstances call for new dwelling places with God.

The “dwelling place” with God that we need when we are children changes when we become teenagers, when we are in our 20’s and 30’s, when we are in mid-life, and when we are elderly. Also, certain life events can call for different “dwelling places” with God.

How has God provided various dwelling places for you at different stages and in different situations of your life’s journey?

3. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

These sentences are often cited as proof that non-Christians cannot be saved or do not know God.

Consider C.S. Lewis' remarks in his famous book, *Mere Christianity*:

“Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”¹

The famous Jesuit priest and poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, has written, “Christ plays in ten thousand places/Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his...”²

How have you understood or interpreted this saying of Jesus, “No one comes to the Father except through me”? Do you believe Christ saves or brings people to the Father through means other than belief in Jesus? How do other Christians receive your belief about these things?

4. “Philip said to Jesus, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’”

Jesus seems to respond to Philip in exasperation, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?”

Reflect on how incarnational our Easter Gospel lessons seem to be. How often do we wish we could see or know God better, when God is right in front of us, or even right within us?

Jesus makes God known in the flesh, and many Christians believe that we are called and empowered to do the same. Have you ever longed for some sense of divine reassurance or divine presence, and then realized later that God had been right there with you all along, perhaps reaching out to you through a family member, friend, or stranger?

5. “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

Christians believe that we have within us the power of the Holy Spirit, the very Presence of God. What does this mean concerning how we have been empowered? You might remember how Paul says in Ephesians, “Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine...” (3:20). Paul also says in Philippians, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (4:13).

Ponder what this means for you. The context for Paul in Philippians was his explaining, “In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need” (4:12). In other words, Paul is not saying, “Now that the Spirit dwells in me,

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, New York, 1960, p. 65

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”

I can perform works of magic.” Rather, he is talking about a different kind of empowerment that sustains him in any and all situations.

What do you know of this kind of spiritual power in your own life?

6. If you read this passage with special attention to the ways in which Jesus is giving his disciples instructions on how they should live their lives once he is gone, what do you hear him saying? What is he saying to you about how you should live?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A

John 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Background and general observations

With this passage, we continue with Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" (John 13-17), picking up where we left off last week. This Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, is the last Sunday of the Easter Resurrection appearances. These appearances last 40 days, from Easter Day until the Day of the Ascension, which is the Thursday after the Sixth Sunday of Easter. "Ascensiontide" lasts ten days, culminating on the fiftieth day after Easter Day, which is Pentecost (Pente = 50). Thus, the church has structured its Gospel readings in such a way that this passage gives us the last words we'll hear from Jesus before the day he ascends into heaven and leaves the disciples in a ten-day period of uncertainty and waiting. On Pentecost, the waiting ends dramatically with the powerful experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In this passage, Jesus is telling the disciples about this coming Spirit, the One Jesus calls the "Advocate." This "Advocate" is also called the "Comforter," and it is interesting to ponder the different ways these words might affect our understanding of who the Holy Spirit is and how the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives.

It is also interesting to notice that Jesus says the disciples are going to see and recognize things that the world will not see or recognize. The disciples will know the Advocate, because He will be "with" them and "in" them. Also, although the world will no longer see Jesus, the disciples will see him. We might ponder what it is that separates the follower of Jesus from "the world." What allows us to see what "the world" cannot see; or, what keeps "the world" from seeing what is revealed to us?

Finally, this passage begins and ends with declaration that our love for Jesus is evinced by our keeping his commandments. "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." One way of thinking about this is that Jesus has invited us into a thorough identification with him — he is in us and we are in him. We are invited into a mystical union in which Jesus' life is our life, and when we are so united with him, he lives in us and through us, as we quite naturally keep his commandments to love each other and serve each other the way he loved and served us. We might ponder, what are those forces that keep us from this union with Christ, this identification of our life with the life of Christ?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. I have a friend named Larry who is in prison, serving a non-commutable, 15-year sentence for white-collar crime – he stole a good bit of money from some of his clients. When he went to prison, his wife divorced him, and his children disowned him. They will not communicate with him or have anything to do with him. He has lost everything, and when he gets out of prison, he will be penniless and homeless. He wonders what it will be like to start all over at age 70 with nothing.

We talk in person from time to time, when I can get out to the prison, but we also exchange letters. In a recent exchange, I asked him if he'd like to reflect on this Gospel passage, so that people who receive this Weekly Bible Study could benefit from his point of view. He was happy to do it, and here's some of what he wrote back:

I think the Holy Spirit is one of the most difficult concepts for us to intellectually embrace, but I can tell you, in those very lonely days when I find myself saying, "God, I can't do this," I know it is the Holy Spirit that suddenly causes me to turn to Psalm 27 or Isaiah 40, or I will be overwhelmed by a presence that tells me "I care." I know it sounds weird, and perhaps it is psychologically explainable as a coping mechanism, but to me, it is the Spirit of God.

And the directive: "love me, follow my commandments." I've written blogs a couple of times that focus on commandments¹, and I always conclude the same thing. Namely, the Beatles were right: "All you need is love." It's from love that mercy, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, righteousness all flow. And that was Jesus' commandments: love God, and love others.

*I think about love a good deal, Gary. The world, people, are way too angry, way too unmerciful and unforgiving.**

How do Larry's reflections speak to you and your own life situation?

2. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

What do you know from your own life about loving someone and NOT doing what they want you to do?

If you love Jesus or love God, is the expectation that you will ALWAYS keep Jesus' commandments? Or, perhaps, is the expectation that we will regularly fail to keep the commandments, in which case we are to return to Jesus' first commandment, "Repent and believe"?

Is the Christian life, in your experience, about regularly failing and returning, failing and returning?

In your experience, is the Christian life about taking one step forward and two back, or taking two steps forward and one back? Do you sense yourself drawing ever closer to union with God, constantly deepening your relationship with God?

How would you describe your evolving relationship with God?

3. “I will not leave you orphaned.”

During a staff discussion of this passage, several people reflected that the word “orphaned” is particularly powerful, and Jesus’ promise not to leave us orphaned is especially comforting.

What do you know about feeling utterly alone and orphaned?

What has been your experience of God breaking through to you (or not) in those times when you have felt so isolated and abandoned?

4. Several staff members found the word “Advocate” especially powerful and important. One reflected that an “Advocate” seems so much stronger and more active than “Comforter.”

What do you know about feeling a need for an advocate and not just a comforter?

What has been your experience of the Holy Spirit – is the Spirit more of an Advocate or a Comforter in your life?

If the Advocate abides “with” us and “in” us, perhaps we are intended to be advocates for each other. When have you experienced someone being a kind of Holy Advocate for you? When have you been such an Advocate for someone else?

5. “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.”

Although Jesus will no longer be with the disciples physically, still he insists that they will see him.

Where do you see Jesus in your life and in the world today?

Why do you think some are able to see Jesus, while others do not see him?

What is it that “opens the eyes of our faith” and allows us to see what “the world” cannot see?

* Since Larry does not have access to a computer, a friend of his takes his handwritten reflections and enters them for him. Larry’s blogs are deep, insightful, and real. Leave him a message, if you like. The address: www.barsstripes.blogspot.com

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A

John 17:1-11

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Background and general observations

Chapter 17 of John's Gospel is the conclusion of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse," and in the opening verses of this chapter, we see Jesus' focus moves from addressing the disciples to his addressing God. This portion of the "Farewell Discourse" is sometimes called the "High Priestly Prayer," with Jesus acting as priest and intercessor, still caring for his disciples in these remaining hours before the crucifixion, but now doing so by praying for them. It is an intimate time, and we are allowed to listen in on Jesus' prayer.

Jesus is also praying for himself. He notes that he has completed his work of "glorifying" the Father on earth, and now Jesus asks to be glorified in the Father's presence. Jesus is ready to return to the place he occupied before the creation of the world. And since he is leaving his disciples "in the world," Jesus asks the Father to keep them and protect them. Of course, he has already prayed for the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort them, so this petition is a continuation of Jesus' concern for his beloved disciples.

When Jesus says he has "glorified" the Father, he is saying that he has manifested the Father's presence, made the Father "known" in the world, and served as an "icon" or window to the Father — those who saw Jesus saw the Father.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "Father, the hour has come..."

In our staff Bible study, one staff member commented that, in a sense, the hour is always here. As a young mother, she noted how her daughter can say the most spiritually poignant things, as when she told her and her grandmother that she loved them, "And I will love you even when you are

dead.” It seemed to this young mother that her daughter had an awareness of love being always present.

Although Jesus had clearly come to the culmination of his earthly ministry, and this “hour” had special significance, Jesus is also clear in John’s Gospel that eternal life is always available to us.

What do you make of the idea of “the eternal now,” as opposed to the eternal as something in the future?

What keeps you from living in the eternal now, and what allows you to slip into the eternal now?

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus spoke about the foolishness of building barns and storing up treasure for the future. How would your life change, if lived more intentionally as if “the hour has come,” rather than expecting that “the hour” is coming later in your life?

2. “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Ponder the idea that “knowing” God is eternal life.

Although our idea of “knowing” something is generally understood to be an intellectual or rational idea, we still have an awareness of different ways of “knowing.” There is an intuitive way of knowing, and we sometimes speak of “knowing” something in our bones.

In the Hebrew language, the idea of knowing can be much more intimate, and “to know” someone is not simply to know facts about that person; rather, “to know” another can even have very intimate sexual connotations.

We are straining against the limits of our language and our usual way of thinking about these things, but how do you reflect on this idea that knowing God is eternal life? When have you had a sense of knowing God and being known by God in a way that was much deeper than mere thought or rationality?

How would you describe this way of knowing and being known?

Some have suggested that the world honors and values intellectual and empirical knowledge much more than this other way of knowing. If that is true, then where do you find support for this spiritual or religious way of knowing?

3. “I glorified you on earth. . . .”

A famous second century Christian theologian named Irenaeus famously remarked, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

Ponder what Irenaeus' statement might say about Jesus, and about you.

Jesus made God known on earth. Jesus' life was a sign, a testimony, or a window through which people were able to see the glory of God.

Now, as the Father sent him, he has sent you. One way of understanding this is that the world will know God through us. If the glory of God is a human being fully alive, when do you feel most alive? What is going on when you feel most fully alive? What is going on when you feel drained of life?

How would your life need to change if you are going to "glorify" God more fully?

4. What struck another staff member most about this passage was Jesus' vision of unity and how that vision of unity stands in such stark contrast to our present divisions in politics, religion, and even in family life. It seems important for many of us to be right about important issues of the day, and this sometimes leads us to feel it is important to point out how others are wrong.

How does Jesus' vision of unity address our present divisions, our need to be right, and our occasional demonization of those who differ from us? How would your life change if you lived more completely into Jesus' vision of unity?

5. "Holy Father, protect them in your name..."

It is touching to see how Jesus prays for the protection of the disciples after he is gone. Any parent will surely recognize his or her own prayer for the protection of their children.

However, all but one of the apostles died a violent, martyr's death. Does this mean that God did not answer Jesus' prayer? Or, is Jesus praying for a different kind of protection, a protection that keeps the disciples regardless of the way in which they die?

Although many of us are accustomed to praying for our children's physical safety, is there a deeper and even more important kind of protection for which we should be praying?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Pentecost, Year A

The Lesson: Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
 and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
 and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
 in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
 and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
 and the moon to blood,
 before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

Background and general observations

The Day of Pentecost, along with Christmas and Easter, is one of the three great festivals of the church year for Christians. And since the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (a continuation of the Gospel of Luke) is one of the best known passages from the Bible, we're focusing this week's Bible study on the second chapter of Acts. Of course, the giving of the Holy Spirit is told very differently in John's Gospel: the resurrected Jesus breathes on the disciples and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit..." Could it be that the earliest Christians struggled to convey the power of something that overwhelmed them, changed them, and enlivened them? Could these very different stories about the coming of the Holy Spirit be another example of the writer Karen Armstrong's claim that good theology is "a species of poetry," that is, attempts to express the inexpressible?

The Day of Pentecost is sometimes called "The Birthday of the Church," because it marks the transformation of timid and fearful disciples into empowered and enlivened apostles who end up being the catalysts for the transformation of the world. The Gospel according to Luke begins with the birth of Jesus, and the Book of Acts begins with the birth of the Body of Christ, the Church. We might also note that "In the beginning... a wind from God swept over the waters" (Genesis 1:1-2), and this same wind now descends on the disciples: "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." And just as God brings order out of chaos in the beginning of creation, so it seems that a kind of order and harmony come from what otherwise appears to be a fairly chaotic and disconcerting scene here in the Book of Acts.

The Spirit which was present at the creation of the universe now animates the disciples, and the result is a powerful sense of order emerging from chaos.

Finally, many like to point out that this scene in which many people from different tribes and languages all hear and understand the disciples in their own languages amounts to a kind of reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel, in which various peoples no longer can understand one another and thus are unable to work together. (Genesis 11:1-9) It is interesting in the story of the Tower of Babel that the Lord says about the great achievements of humankind that "this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." This is the reason the Lord confuses their languages. Now, however, in the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit, we see the inauguration of a new age in which peoples are again united in their hearing and understanding, and we might recall how Jesus said that all things are possible for God, who is now working in them. According to Jesus, they will do greater things than he did, and this seems to be the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. This scene in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is one of power, noise, multiple languages, and so on. It sounds chaotic. In fact, the story says that the crowd was at first "bewildered," and then they were "amazed and astonished."

Consider your own experience of the Holy Spirit. Do you experience the Holy Spirit as powerful and even bewildering, perhaps frightening? Or, do you experience the Holy Spirit as a gentler but no less animating force, as in the story from John's Gospel in which Jesus breathes

on the disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”? (John 20:21-23)

How would you describe a time in your life when you felt “inspired” or filled by the Holy Spirit?

Does the Holy Spirit come upon us completely unexpectedly, or are there ways to position ourselves so that we are more receptive to the Holy Spirit, just as sails on a boat can be better positioned to receive the wind?

2. It has been said that the central insight of monotheism is that, if there is only one God, then people everywhere are children of this same God. On the deepest level of our being, in other words, we belong to the same God, and we belong to one another.

Pentecost tells of various tribes and languages experiencing an astounding sense of unity, as if this central insight of monotheism is being revealed.

Consider how people become members of different religious movements or what people must do to “belong” to different churches. It is as if a person does not “belong” to a church until certain “requirements” are fulfilled: Baptism, Confirmation, pledging. But what if a church were to say, “All people, no matter what they believe or do, belong equally to this church, because all people belong equally to God. As God’s body on earth, we consider all people, without distinction, to be equal members of this church. Some might wish to ‘claim’ this sense of belonging by being baptized. And still others might want to support this church with their financial gifts, because they want a community like this to thrive—a community in which all belong equally, without distinction.”

How different from your current thinking about your church does that feel to you? Is it your experience that churches spend a lot of time concerned about tending to “membership” and particularly their *own* members? How might a shift in tone, or in priority, affect your own feeling of belonging?

3. “Pentecostal” churches are considerably more “freewheeling” in their worship than churches like the Episcopal Church with its typically well-ordered liturgies. It might remind some of the use of form in poetry or song: a strict form like the sonnet, or the ballad, is often the vessel by which we contain difficult or unwieldy subjects (like love or grief) that cannot be otherwise contained, a way to find order in what would otherwise overwhelm us. Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is more “alive” or active in gatherings that are more emotive and spontaneous? Or can the Holy Spirit be just as alive in liturgical traditions and well-ordered monasteries?

Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind. You can’t see it, but you can see its effects or signs of its presence (as in the movement of leaves in a tree). What are some of the signs that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in a person or in a group of people?

4. The great reform theologian Martin Luther explained the third article of the creed (about the Holy Spirit) this way:

I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church day after day he fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Commenting on Luther's explanation, a modern pastor has said:

I have frequently described the content of faith as "tentative absolutes." This is what I am absolutely sure about now; but I am open for the Spirit to give new revelations, new insights, new information which might change me and my beliefs tomorrow.ⁱ

How do you respond? Do you need to have the content of faith and the spiritual life a bit firmer and less paradoxical? Or, does this make some sense to you?

ⁱ Brian P. Stoffregen, CrossMarks.com

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 22, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Background and general observations

The context for this lesson is important. Jesus has entered Jerusalem in triumph, riding on a donkey, as great crowds of people hail him as the messianic Son of David. They spread cloaks and branches on the road as they shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David..." Then, of course, Jesus enters the temple, the ultimate symbol of the religious leaders, and overturns the tables of the money changers. It's important to know that the money changers were not bad people; they performed a simple but important function of changing unclean money for acceptable coinage—this was a familiar requirement, something that made one's offering acceptable. (Kind of like the manager of the fancy restaurant who keeps a supply of blazers in a back closet for gentlemen who are not properly dressed but who wish to dine there?) What Jesus is doing is removing barriers to God and to participation in the religious institutions of the day.

Jesus then cures the blind and the lame who are brought to him, and it becomes clear that Jesus' conflict is not with the Jewish people generally but with the religious leaders. We see that the crowds welcome and cheer him on, and Jesus continues to care for the sick and the suffering among the people. But the religious leaders are the ones who confront Jesus and challenge his authority. Jesus is breaking down barriers in the religious institutions of his day, and the present guardians of the institution are offended. Jesus is undaunted, as he tells the leaders in the verses which precede this lesson that the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of them.

After Jesus' initial outburst in the temple, he spends the night outside the temple precincts and returns the next day. On his way back to the temple, he curses the fruitless fig tree, which symbolizes the present religious leaders who have not produced the fruit expected of them. And when Jesus returns to the temple, he tells three parables, this one being the second.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. To help think about this passage, it may be interesting to consider how parents raise their children: parents recognize that they can set everything up for their children; they can plant the vineyard, put up a fence, dig a wine press, build a watchtower... It's what attentive and loving parents do in providing good nutrition and healthcare for their children, teaching them appropriate boundaries, promoting education and independence, and helping them learn how to be safe and secure and in healthy relationship to others. But there comes a time, of course, sooner or later, when parents have to accept their limitations, even their inadequacies, and then "go away to another country." That is, parents at some point have to pull back, whether they want to or not; after they have done whatever they can do and given whatever they can give, they must now let their children learn to grow and develop on their own, make their decisions, cultivate their own vineyard. It is a kind of surrendering.

You might think about this particularly if you yourself are a parent, but certainly as you remember your own childhood: what do you know about the tension between setting it all up for a child—or having it set up for you—and then leaving, or being left, so that an independent life might be cultivated? What was painful about that experience? What was necessary to learn?

What do you know about desiring an independence you do not seem to have in cultivating your vineyard? What do you know of interference, rescue, or hindrance?

On the other hand, perhaps sometimes we are in need of rescue, or our children need us to rescue them, and this might propagate another complicated set of decisions and questions. How have you learned to balance human strength and independence with human frailty and a need for help?

2. The parable in this passage could raise questions about how involved God is in our day-to-day lives. How much do you sense that God has "left you" to cultivate your life on your own? Do you wish God were more involved? What about the balance between our having free will and our having a God who is ready to step in and take over?

Ponder the tension between being responsible for your life and regularly submitting your life to God.

3. Consider this parable from the point of view of the landowner. What do you know about the experience of being kind and generous to someone over a long period of time, only to have your kindness and generosity scorned or ignored?

When have you experienced this sort of thing in a relationship that was important to you? How did you respond? What have you learned?

As the background information above makes clear, Jesus' conflict was not with the Jewish people generally but with the religious leaders. Where have you seen religious leaders being overly protective of the status quo, overly ego-driven, or defensive about their own sense of authority and power?

4. If a group of people in your church were focused more intently on welcoming all sorts and conditions of people into your church's life, and if they believed the church's mission is to draw all people into a deeper and closer relationship with God, and if the fruit of such a mission was the growth of a more open, embracing, and compassionate community, with crowds of people drawing closer in gratitude, why might such people encounter resistance in your church? What is in the way?

Have you ever had a sense that certain religious traditions or customs have become too precious—too affected or contrived—instead of being a means to an end or symbolic representations of the human-divine relationship? What do you believe can be done to protect ancient traditions while also ensuring they never become rote, insincere or artificial?

5. The great Reformation theologian Martin Luther said that the first thing Christians should do upon waking in the morning is make the sign of the cross, as a way of reminding ourselves that we belong to God.

The experience of many is that, if I want to go deeper in my life, I have to remember who I am and whose I am. That is, I have to remember who the owner is, who has given me this life to cultivate and work to avoid the temptation to think of myself as the owner. Many of us have high control needs. But the example of Jesus was that he regularly set aside time to go to a lonely place and remember who he was and to whom he ultimately belonged. We might say that in prayer, he was reconnecting with his source, consulting with the landowner.

Consider again the tension between a responsibility and accountability for your own life and regularly submitting your life and surrendering yourself to God. Are you tempted to forget God and simply take charge yourself? Or, are you regularly setting aside time to remember who you are and whose you are? What changes might you make in your daily life in order to sense the deeper truth of your life and "ownership"? And if you grew in your sense of ultimate belonging to God, how would that change your relationships with others and your outlook on your life?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 23, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to the people in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

Background and general observations

The parable in this passage continues the theme of judgment that we see in the parable that immediately precedes it, the parable of the landowner and the wicked tenants. Once again, we see a persistent protagonist, sending one messenger after another, but those to whom the messengers are sent respond inappropriately. The result is terrible judgment.

This story of the king who gave a wedding banquet is disturbing to many. It is disturbing that the king's invitation to the wedding banquet was refused or ignored by everyone who initially received the invitation; they were too busy with other matters and so made light of the king's invitation. But the story is especially disturbing at the end, when the king notices a man who was invited off the street who was not wearing the right clothes. The king's treatment of this man might seem extreme, to say the least.

The idea that "many are called, but few are chosen" could indicate to some that Jesus is describing a capricious and even unfair God. At the very least, this parable makes it clear that it is not just the unresponsive Jews who are liable to God's judgment; those who were invited late and who joined the banquet (Gentiles and Jews in the church) are also subject to judgment. But as some of the ideas below suggest, the lesson here may be more complex; not wearing a proper wedding robe could be symbolic of something much deeper than mere clothing.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. When have you either ignored or made light of an invitation from God?

Sometimes a mailed invitation gets lost in a magazine or catalogue and accidentally gets tossed out, so that we never see it. Or maybe you receive an email but for some reason never open it. Or hear the phone ringing, but don't answer. As you ponder your life, how might God be issuing invitations to you that you accidentally (or in your haste or your busyness or your preoccupation with other things) push aside and never notice?

What changes in your life might help you to notice and respond appropriately to an invitation from God? How can you be sure you are not missing God's call to you?

2. "For many are called, but few are chosen."

It has been said that Grace (God's unmerited gift) is free but not cheap. What do you know from your life about a gift (one you gave or one you received) that was free but not cheap?

If God's call is itself a gift, how can you faithfully "choose" it? How can you best position yourself not only to receive God's invitation but also to open and answer it? What might be the cost of living this way?

3. In thinking through this passage, it might be helpful to remember that, in the Bible—and in much of literature—clothing is often used as symbolism, used to make a point metaphorically. Paul writes (Col 3:12 ff) that we should clothe ourselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." He goes on to say that, above all, we should clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything in perfect harmony. Paul also says that we put on Christ's righteousness like a garment when we are baptized. So, in the Bible, clothing can symbolize conversion and the attitudes and behavior that are found in the heart of the believer. With this in mind, ask yourself a few questions about how you come clothed to the feast of your life:

How are you "clothed" for your various relationships and activities? For example, how are you clothed when you come home from work and greet your family? How are you clothed when you go to church? How are you clothed when you go to the grocery store, expecting to see no one you know? How are you clothed when you sit down to eat with your family or friends? How are you clothed when you are alone, or silent in prayer?

Are we sometimes clothed with preoccupation and over-active minds? Do we sometimes show up for our lives and relationships wearing garments of frustration or resentment or irritation or envy?

What might it mean, and how would your life change, if you were more thoughtful and intentional about being clothed in love, kindness, humility, openness, patience, and compassion?

4. Keeping in mind the last set of questions, consider the following as an interpretive lens through which we might view this parable: When we show up for our relationships and the feast of our lives in inappropriate clothing, we don't need to fear a geographical or spatial outer darkness

with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Instead, we should fear the outer darkness of brokenness, isolation from people we love, loss of faith and hope...these are hell; these are what bring on the deepest darkness, with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

How do you respond to the king's severity when you place this lens over the parable? Is it helpful for you to imagine yourself as the exiled guest? Are you aware of a time in your life when you have shown up wearing, metaphorically speaking, the wrong clothing?

5. Consider this idea: there is a party going on. It's called the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is at hand right now, all the time. But you are not going to be able to participate in this feast or party unless you are properly clothed. So, put on compassion; clothe yourself with kindness; take off the shoes of anger or frustration, and put on humility instead. Above all, clothe yourself in love.

Sounds good, maybe. But what is getting in the way of being so properly clothed? What keeps you from showing up without a wedding robe?

6. From the Bible Workbench:

...the invited guests are too busy with some type of work to take part in the feast. How often this has been a story in my life. The adage "work before play" is a prerogative and a mantra for me and I realize that, in many ways, I've become a human doing instead of a human being.

It's true! There is always important work to be accomplished. Someone has to do it and, seeing as how I generally know the "best" way, I may as well be the one. I've missed plenty of parties, either because of tasks (real and imagined) or because I was pooped from the completion of those tasks. I've also sometimes missed the big banquet, the banquet of life—the opportunity to connect with other humans in their simple "beingness."

And now I wonder: How often during a phone conversation have I missed the subtle sadness in a friend's voice, as I simultaneously unloaded the dishwasher and checked my email? How often have I dismissed my child's need for a hug as, head down, I marched to the laundry room with a basket overflowing with resentments? How often have I yelled at the dog to "for God's sake shut up," instead of joining the festival taking place in the yard?

7. "Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad."

It sounds as if Jesus expects unbelievers to be in our midst because, at this feast, all are gathered, no questions asked. Does this say anything to you about whom we are to welcome to the wedding feast? Does this suggest to you something about the way we are to treat one another?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 24, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Background and general observations

This is one of several encounters between Jesus and Jewish leaders who are trying to entrap him. Each encounter ends with Jesus silencing his adversaries.

In this case, the leaders seem to be trying to flatter Jesus, perhaps seeking to put him at ease or to catch him off guard with a tough question that would be sure to get him into hot water with somebody, no matter how he answered. The question of whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor was a loaded one. The tax in question was an annual tax, administered by Jewish authorities, but levied by Rome. This tax put such a burden on impoverished Jews in Palestine that, at least on one occasion, it provoked rebellion against Rome that ended the way Rome tended to end things—decisively and with much bloodshed.

So, if Jesus answers his opponents simply by saying yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then he risks alienating the poor and the oppressed who bore the greatest burden. And if he says, no, it is not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he risks facing charges of sedition. Jesus' answer, therefore, is brilliant, as he allows for the possibility of paying these taxes but makes it clear to any person of faith that he or she must consider what belongs to God.

It is interesting that Jesus asks to see one of their coins. Here they are in the temple, and Jesus gets them to hold out a coin that has the emperor's likeness and an inscription ascribing divinity to the emperor. (Are they carrying around such profane coins because Jesus drove out the money changers—the people who changed unclean money for acceptable coinage in order to make one's offering acceptable?)

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Ironically, those who seek to entrap Jesus are speaking the truth about him, while they are trying to entrap him: Jesus really *is* sincere and teaches the way of God in accordance with truth, and shows deference to no one...."

However, these people are merely *pretending* to praise him. They do not believe what they are saying and are only seeking to get him in trouble. And Jesus was "aware of their malice."

How often do we ask an insincere question, one intended to elicit a certain answer, or to embarrass, or to pursue some other, more selfish, agenda?

When have you been aware of such a question— either because you were asking it, or because it was being asked of you? What was really going on in such a situation and if you could relive the encounter, what would you change?

What do you know from your own experience of people—or even you yourself— using flattery to promote a selfish agenda? Do you ever have a tendency to ask Jesus insincere questions? How often are you content simply to rest with Jesus, to be in quiet or trusting relationship?

What changes might you make in your life that would allow you to live with greater “awareness” of your own motivations in your relationships and in your question-asking?

2. In answering those who sought to entrap him about whether or not they should pay taxes to the emperor, Jesus asked them to show him a coin. Then he asked them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They responded, “The emperor’s.”

One way of approaching this is to change the wording slightly, by asking, “Whose image is on your coin?” This could be a way of inviting us to consider, “Whose image is stamped on the emperor?”

We believe that all human beings are bearers of the image of God. The emperor’s image is stamped on the coin, but God’s image is stamped on the emperor. So, Jesus’ answer that they should “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” might sound straightforward but is actually an invitation to consider our allegiances and loyalties on the deepest level.

What reflections does Jesus’ answer raise for you about your allegiances, your loyalties, and your treatment of other people? If we are each made in the image of God, how can you reconcile your discontent with people you find difficult?

3. It seems that many people are feeling “taxed,” stretched, or burdened these days, financially, emotionally, and otherwise.

What do you know of being so taxed and stretched? What “emperors” are there in your life that seem to demand more and more of you? What keeps you from giving to God the things that are God’s?

How can you keep your composure and stay centered on God, when you find yourself “taxed” or in uncomfortable, difficult, even hostile situations? What sort of response is best when you sense malicious or insincere motivations from other people in your life? What causes you to lose your sense of being centered in God’s presence and how have you managed to regain it?

4. Allegiance and devotion to both God and country are two paramount loyalties and, for many Americans, they offer the greatest sense of belonging.

Are these loyalties ever in conflict for you? Which are you first, a Christian or an American? Does a question like that feel answerable to you?

5. Consider how this story takes on new meaning if the real question is not so much about what you should do with your money but what you should do with your life. What does it feel like for Jesus to say to you not, “show me a coin,” but “show me your life”?

What does the Lord see, when you show him your life?

Ask yourself about the Divine image imprinted on your soul. What does a person look like, or how does a person act, when he or she is living fully into his or her identity as one who is created in the image of God?

Does your public persona suggest an identity that is contrary to your truest self? How do you wrestle with conflicting allegiances and expectations? Does it feel like God’s expectations of you and your community’s expectations of you are sometimes at odds?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 25, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."

He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

'The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet"?"

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Background and general observations

This passage represents the third of three attempts to entrap Jesus, after he has entered Jerusalem in triumph, riding on a donkey, with a large crowd spreading cloaks and branches on the road as they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Although the crowds hailed him enthusiastically, Jesus was then faced with responding to religious officials who questioned his authority. This passage follows the story of the Pharisees and the Herodians questioning Jesus on paying taxes to Caesar and the story of the Sadducees, who do not believe in resurrection, questioning Jesus on the Resurrection, as they use a hypothetical in which a widow marries seven times—to whom will she be married in the resurrection, they ask?

Now, Jesus is questioned by "a lawyer," who would be an authority on Mosaic law. In the Hebrew Bible, there are 613 such commands (248 positive injunctions and 365 prohibitions), and rabbis regularly discussed which commands were the "greater" and which commands might be considered "lesser." However, with so many important laws or commands, one can imagine Jesus' answer providing fodder for controversy.

Jesus does a remarkable thing with his answer. Just as he answered the devil by quoting Scripture, so he answers his interrogator here by quoting Scripture. And in this case, he quotes first of all a part of the well-known "shema," which pious Jews were expected to recite daily ("Hear, O Israel..." from Deuteronomy 6:5). The remarkable part of Jesus' answer is that Jesus links this love of God with another verse that would become very popular with early Christians, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

This combining of love of God with love of neighbor is distinctive and might conjure images from Jesus' teaching elsewhere, such as his identification with "the least of these" in Matthew 25 ("as you have done these things to the least of these, you have done them to me").

It is also interesting that Jesus is willing to “summarize” all the Law and the Prophets by quoting these two commands. “The Law” and “the Prophets” make up two of the three sections of the entire Hebrew Bible. The third section, “the Writings,” contains books such as the Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Thus, the idea that so much of the entire Bible “hangs on” these two verses—love of God and love of neighbor—is a powerful idea. A contemporary rabbi of Jesus’, Rabbi Hillel, is quoted as summarizing the Torah (the Law) in a similar way: When someone challenged Hillel to recite the Torah while standing on one foot, Hillel indeed stood on one foot and replied, “That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow; this is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary.”¹

Finally, Jesus silences his opponents by posing a conundrum of his own regarding the Messiah as Lord and Son of David. He uses Psalm 110:1 as his text and leaves his would-be entrappers unable to answer. We, on the other hand, might recall the shouts of the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem, “Hosanna to the Son of David” or the voice from heaven which was heard to say, “This is my son...listen to him.” (Matthew 17:5)

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. What does this mean to you: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”? What do you make of it as a “commandment”?

When have you felt yourself closest to honoring it? When have you felt furthest away from it?

Ask yourself the same questions about the second commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

2. Most of us love many things and in distinct and prismatic ways; love can look very different depending on the circumstances, very different depending on our state of mind. What “loves” in your life are most important to you? Are you ever aware of yourself loving things inappropriately, or loving what you know you should not? What “loves” keep you from your deepest, primary love?

Drawing on examples from your own life, how do you see loving God and loving other people as being connected?

3. If you were to ask a Muslim what it means to be a Muslim, he or she might respond by telling you about the “five pillars of Islam”—the belief that there is no god except God, and Muhammad is his messenger; the importance of praying five times a day; the importance of ritual fasting; the importance of giving alms; and, the importance of Hajj or the holy pilgrimage to Mecca.

If a sincere non-Christian were seeking to understand what it means to be a Christian, how would you answer him or her? If this person were to ask about Jesus, who would you say he is for you? How would you explain what Jesus has to do with your daily life? What are the Christian pillars with which you identify and by which your life of faith is upheld?

¹ *Shabbat 31a in the Babylonian Talmud*

4. Many people place great importance on understanding passages of the Bible. The lawyer in this passage seems to be motivated in part by a desire to entrap Jesus; Jesus responds with the love-commandment—suggesting that it’s more about relationships than about intellectual understanding. Then, Jesus poses a question that the religious leaders cannot answer.

There is much concern by some today about the importance of being “orthodox” in one’s Christianity (believing the “right” things, understanding the Bible, knowing Scripture by heart). Do you know someone who is orthodox but not very loving? That is, someone who seems to know an awful lot about Christianity, but whose life does not seem especially Christ-like?

Do you know someone who is *unorthodox* but deeply loving? Someone who has unconventional ideas and questions about the Bible, the church, or Christianity, but whose life is loving and Christ-like?

How and where do you see yourself reflected in those questions?

5. Jesus poses a question that no one seems able to answer. How would you have responded had you heard him asking it? How comfortable or uncomfortable are you with matters that are beyond your understanding?

What might this say to you about the mystery of God and the ways God might be at work in the world?

6. If in taking stock of your relationships with other people and in seeking to live in love and charity with your neighbors you are tending to a relationship with God, how is your relationship at the moment? How could it be richer, deeper, or more intimate? What changes might be called for in your relationships with some of the people God has put in your life?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 27, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Background and general observations

Although early church tradition has it that the author of this Gospel was Matthew, the tax collector, who was a disciple of Jesus, most scholars today believe that this Gospel was written by an Israelite man between 80 and 90 AD. It might be noted that the Gospel According to Matthew seems to have been written for a Jewish audience. Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of Moses and the promised messianic king of Israel. For some scholars, this parable serves as an important point of study in the relations between Matthew's community and the Jewish community surrounding it; the conflict is focused on the acceptance of the apocalyptic nature of Christ's return by Matthew's community and the rejection of it by the surrounding Jewish community.

In this week which follows All Saints' Sunday (where we contemplate and celebrate all the company of heaven), it makes sense that we turn our attention to a return, a breaking in of the Kingdom of Heaven. In chapter 25, we have three major parables about this coming of the Son of Man, the "second coming." The first (the parable of the ten bridesmaids) and the third (the parable of the sheep and goats—"as you did to the least of these...") are found only in Matthew's Gospel. The second of the three, the parable of the talents (vv. 14-30), is also found in Luke's Gospel. The setting in the parable of the ten bridesmaids is the return—or coming—of the groom (with his new bride) to his father's house. The task of the bridesmaids is to welcome the bride and groom when they arrive.

This passage heralds Advent's message, reminding us of Jesus' regular admonition to be prepared, wakeful, spiritually attentive, and available for the revelation of God or the breaking in of the Kingdom. We are being prompted to get ready to get ready; that is, we are to "keep awake" if we are to participate fully in the Kingdom of God. Since so many today are overly busy, preoccupied, multi-tasking and worn out, there might be a number of ways in which this Gospel lesson connects with people's everyday lives. The parable may have us considering, for example, the symbolic implications concerning having plenty of oil versus not having enough, in storing up what we know we need versus pleading in desperation for what we should have cared more about, in being "spiritually prepared" and equipped in faith versus being haphazard or even dismissive in tending to a relationship with God. Or, this parable may prod us to reflect on the importance and value of a spiritual life: how might we be more intentional about, and attentive to, matters of the soul? The theme of spiritual attention will continue throughout the season of Advent, and as the liturgical year draws to a close.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. This parable raises several questions concerning themes of preparation, maturation, and attentiveness. To start, you might consider how the wise bridesmaids respond to the request of the ones who were not prepared, and how the bridegroom in turn responds to the bridesmaids who show up too late. What might their responses say about dismissal, last-minute appeals and desperation versus ongoing relationship in hope and faith? If Jesus's teaching in this case is a warning of some kind, how might you articulate what's at the heart of this lesson?
2. It might be helpful to step into the shoes of the tardy bridesmaids. Recall a time when you were late for something very important. Why were you delayed, and how did you feel? How did other people respond to your lateness? With compassion? With anger?

As ours is a world of haste and anxiety, our responses are often (over)reactions to frustration and exhaustion. How might our "keeping awake" serve us in tending not only to ourselves but to those around us, particularly those against whom the door has been shut?

3. What do you know from your own life of being spiritually inattentive and then, in a crisis, making a desperate plea for help? Often, we rely on those who are more "spiritually mature" to help us in our times of need; how can you tell if someone is spiritually mature? Concerning this parable, do you find the inability (or unwillingness) to help the unprepared an act of selfishness on the part of the more mature? Or, are we to recognize the reality that everyone must do his or her own work of spiritual preparation? After all, faith and spiritual maturity are not commodities we can instantly acquire much less give away. When have you experienced this dynamic or this frustration?
4. Do you tend to your spiritual life regularly, or do you tend to let it slide until you are in a real pinch? What can we do to help us remain vigilant about our relationship with God, instead of allowing it to take a back seat to other concerns?

More specifically, what do you know about "dozing off," letting an important relationship lapse in your life? When the relationship reached a crisis point, did you have what you needed to restore it? Consider the consequences of putting off attention to our relationships with each other and with God.

How might we acquire a sense that we are storing up oil for those times when we will lapse, doze, or become spiritually inattentive? How might we rest assured that we do, finally, have what we need?

5. Consider this proposition. People who expect to find joy and wonder and beauty in their daily lives seem to find these things much more regularly than those who do not expect to find them. Those who prepare for joy, experience it; and, those who believe in a heavenly realm that can break in on us at any moment are much more likely to experience this realm than those who are not so expectant and hopeful.

What is it you are expecting of your daily life? What are some of the wondrous and beautiful and godly things you might have missed (or may be missing now?) had you not been prepared to witness or receive them?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Proper 28, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Background and general observations

This parable is disturbing to many people. Yet it promises a rich discussion.

In chapter 25, we have three major parables about the coming of the Son of Man. The first (the parable of the ten bridesmaids) and the third (the parable of the sheep and goats, "as you did to the least of these...") are found only in Matthew's Gospel. The second of the three parables, this parable of the talents (vv. 14-30), is also found in Luke's Gospel. These parables seem to invite us to imagine a peculiarly attentive and vigilant life of anticipation.

A "talent," in this context, is defined as a monetary unit worth about twenty years' wages for a laborer. And the word from which "trustworthy" has been translated—pistos—has a more nuanced meaning that is closer to "faith." In other words, the virtue in this parable could be about more than trustworthiness; Jesus' lesson seems to underscore an element of risk that might, for some, be central to the call of God and a life of faith. After all, God asks us over and over to act out of faith, not fear. It might be said that the difference between the two slaves who invested their talents and the slave who buried his, is a willingness to live into faith rather than succumb to a fear of failure, or fears, more essentially, of the unknown and of risk.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Many have interpreted this parable to be about wasting, or burying, the gifts that have been given to us. What do you know about “covering up” or “burying” certain gifts, or certain parts of your life? What causes you at times to bury your true life, and what might it take for you to uncover it and bring it out into the open where it can grow?
2. Compare the dynamic of taking risks for the Kingdom of God (as found in Matthew 13:44-45, the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value, examples of selling everything for these) with the safer route of simply holding onto what one has and being content with that. Which best describes you?
3. What are the primary gifts God has given you that might yield a magnificent return, should you invest yourself in them more completely?

Has God given you a marital relationship? A child or children? Good health? Friends and neighbors? A life of prayer? An ability to forgive? An ability to smile, encourage, strengthen and serve others?

What sort of dividends or capital gains result from calling or writing to someone who is lonely, telling a family member that you love them, volunteering to help with a worthy cause?

What sort of return would you expect from investing yourself more completely in those things God has given you?

On the contrary, what sort of dividends or capital gains might you expect from investing yourself more fully in gossip, revenge, anxiety, fear? Can you imagine burying these things, so to speak, and investing more of yourself in a life of grace and loving relationship?

4. Consider the following quotation attributed to Ralph Marston:

The value of what you do will depend on the value you put into it. Success is determined not so much by what it is you do as by the passion and meaning you put into it.

In any field of endeavor that you can imagine, there are those people who enjoy astounding success as well as those who are downright miserable. And if you look closely you'll see that the difference very often is determined by what they each put into what they do.

Whatever is to be done, whether it is a phone conversation, a career, a day at the beach, or a routine task, it is an opportunity for you to contribute something of yourself. And by doing so in a positive, creative and enthusiastic way, you can bring about real, lasting value.

To get something out of it, to make something valuable of it, whatever it may be, put the best of yourself into it. Rather than worrying that life has dealt you a lousy hand, set about to play that hand exquisitely and in your own special way.

Every moment of every day, whatever the situation, is an opportunity for you to add value to your world. Put something good and useful into it, something uniquely you. Put yourself into it and you'll find delight, enjoyment, and fulfillment in what becomes of it.

Who or what has God entrusted to you, hoping you'll put yourself into them? Spouse, children, neighbors, friends, church, colleagues at work? And what about your own body, mind, spirit?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

All Saints' Sunday, Year A

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Background and general observations

All Saints' Day is November 1, and many churches, including St. Stephen's Church, use the lessons appointed for All Saints' Day on the Sunday following. Thus, we step out of the usual progression of Gospel lessons and have appointed for this Sunday the well-known beatitudes from the Gospel According to Matthew. This is the better known version of the beatitudes. Luke has Jesus delivering a Sermon on the Plain (as opposed to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount), and some of its content is stark and unsettling, compared to the version in Matthew.

For example, Matthew's version has nine blessings, and Luke's has four blessings and four contrasting woes. And where the two are similar, Luke's version tends to be starker and more direct. In Matthew, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” but in Luke, Jesus says simply, “Blessed are the poor.” There's no spiritualizing of the beatitude in Luke and so no loophole to blessedness for the rest of us who can all legitimately say, “Oh, I'm poor in spirit, alright.” And to make matters worse (or at least, to make matters more somber and ominous), Luke's version has Jesus adding some pretty stark woes: “Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing, and who have people who speak well of you.” If you are poor and outcast, with no one out there who cares about you, you are blessed. But if you're getting along swimmingly, you're in trouble.

One interpretation might be that Jesus is leading us to an awareness of a blessedness that everyone has by virtue of his or her creation in the image and likeness of God. This is a blessedness and even happiness that is not caused by any external circumstance; it is simply within you. It is your true life. And Jesus was inviting us to awaken to that deepest truth. When we are poor, hungry, weeping, or even reviled, we might (ironically) be in a better position to recognize the source of true blessedness, because our outward circumstances certainly are not bringing us blessing and consolation. But when we are rich, full, laughing, and spoken well of, we might be more prone to being distracted by these worldly pleasures and distanced from God and the source of true life and blessing. One reason for this is that we are often all too happy to settle for worldly comforts, so we become forgetful of heavenly ones.

The blessing God wants you to know does not come from anything you do. It is yours already. The question is whether you will awaken to this reality and live it, or live a life that is content only when your external circumstances (wealth, relationships, standing in society, etc.) are to your liking.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus challenges conventional notions about what it means to be blessed or happy.

What do you know about a time in your life when you felt deeply blessed, while people around you might assess your situation very differently?

What was the source of your blessing?

Why might other people have looked at you and thought of you as being far from blessed?

2. Reread the last two paragraphs of the “Background and general observations” above, and ponder their relevance to your own life.

C.S. Lewis once said that human beings are often like children who have been offered a wonderful holiday at the sea, but we content ourselves with and will not be distracted from our enjoyment of the mud puddle.

Lewis also said that our lives are like a shop window into which some mischievous character has gotten overnight. This mischievous one has switched around all of the price tags, so that the really expensive and precious things all have very inexpensive price tags, and all of the cheap and worthless things have very high price tags. We’ve been tricked, Lewis says. We behave as if all the cheap and worthless stuff is really priceless, and we spend our best energy going after these things, while we ignore heaven.

3. Which of Jesus’ promises mean most to you today, and why?
4. On the feast of All Saints, we are remembering not just the extraordinary examples of sainthood who are known to everyone (St. Francis, St. Teresa, etc.), but *all* saints, including those who will never be famous.

Who in your life, living or dead, comes to mind on All Saints’ Day as one who has been an important saint in your life? Name this person, and talk about why this person is a saint to you. How has God spoken to you through this person? And how does this person inspire you to live?

If you are in an Emmaus Group, the group might take a moment to sit in silence, as each person in the group thinks back over his or her life and calls to mind particular people who have embodied God’s love and grace for them. These people have been important communication from God, and it is appropriate to remember them in a moment of sacred and attentive silence. After a few minutes, invite anyone who wishes to share with the group the person or people who have come to mind. What makes these people so special?

We might keep in mind that the Bible suggests that the primary way in which God communicates with us is through other people. What is God saying to you through the saints you have known in your life?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 29, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Background and general observations

The last Sunday of the church year has at times been called Christ the King Sunday. Today, we crown the entire year with a special focus on the peculiar and profound nature of Christ's kingship. When we talk about Christ as King, we are obviously talking about a different kind of kingdom, the Kingdom of God. The two primary images of Christ as King are found at his birth (poor and in a manger, born a child and yet a king) and at his death (a crown of thorns, mocked, scourged and crucified between two criminals).

In the cycle of the church lectionary, we sometimes have appointed for the last Sunday after Pentecost a Gospel lesson depicting Christ being mocked, stripped, beaten, and crucified, while scoffers call out sarcastically, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Clearly, the kingship of Jesus is not something we recognize on the surface of things. And this kingly power is not evident to the whole world, but only to the eyes of the faithful. In a way, we are putting our trust—our whole lives—in something many people cannot trust, see, or sense at all.

For this Christ the King Sunday, we have appointed the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats, and there are many powerful ways in which this parable can work on us and deepen our faith. One very helpful way of approaching this lesson is to listen to it as if Jesus were telling the parable for the very first time. Do not try to "figure out what it really means," and do not leap to an interpretation. Simply listen to the story, let the characters come to life, listen to the surprise in their voices...again, don't worry about getting the "real" meaning, but let the parable work inside you, beyond your reasoning intellect and beyond your rational desires to get to the bottom of things. Trust that, on some level beyond your mind and deeper than you may realize, the parable is changing you and that a new kind of knowing will be rising in you. We do this all the time when we see or hear something extraordinary. We do not try to figure out what a beautiful sunset or a transcendent piece

of music means; rather, we experience those things, are moved by them, and are, quite often, transformed by something deep and ineffable working on us, dwelling within.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. During his ministry, Jesus taught things like this: “Love your enemies;” “Do good to those who persecute you;” “Forgive not seven times but seventy times seven;” “As you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

How would this world be run differently if the Lord’s passions were passions we, too, were pursuing? How would this world be different if God were in charge? (That is, if Christ was King?) How would your church or community be run differently, if God were in charge?

Most importantly, how would your own life be run differently, if God were in charge?

2. Success is measured differently in the Kingdom of God than it is in the kingdom of this world. How so?

Where do you hope you—and your family, your children—will be more successful, in God’s kingdom or in the kingdom of this world? How will it be measured? How will we know if we have achieved “success”?

If one of our primary hopes is that our children will be “successful” or at home in God’s kingdom, how is that made evident? What messages are we sending? How can we ensure “success”? How can we encourage and celebrate the “success” that is a rich life of faithfulness?

3. Marcus Borg has written, “In the United States, the central values of our culture are the ‘three A’s’: attractiveness, achievement, and affluence.” (*Heart of Christianity*, p. 190)

Do you agree?

Based on what you know of Jesus, what are the central values of his kingdom?

4. Surely, most of us know someone who has no interest in church or religion and yet is a good and charitable person—what is this person’s fate in the life of the world to come?

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, those who cared for the hungry, sick, imprisoned, naked, etc. are surprised to hear Jesus thanking them (“When did we see you and do all of these things for you?). Jesus tells them that they cared for him whenever they cared for the least, and he calls them blessed and invites them to inherit the kingdom prepared for them.

The reading today invites us to consider that the essence of being a Christian is not about *believing* the right things but about *living* God’s love. The sacraments of the Christian community, Bible study, prayer, worship, etc. are intended to help us live more fully and consistently in God’s love. But these ministrations of the church are means to an end (living in God’s love), and some might arrive at that end by other means (that is, not through church attendance, Bible study, prayer, etc.).

Consider for yourself how your life in the church—prayer, Bible study, worship, and the sacraments—contributes to your staying focused on your true life, your true King, and your calling to live faithfully in a kingdom that so much of the world does not recognize. Share with one another some of the ways you stay focused and centered in an invisible but powerful source of strength and purpose whom many in the world do not see.

5. At least some of the time, we all do the best we can to be kind, generous and caring people. We volunteer for causes that help us interact with and care for Jesus in “the least of these.” But few of us achieve the status of a St. Francis, who gave away everything he had and voluntarily identified completely with the poor. We all have been selfish or ignored the needs of others, at times because we did not know what to do, or felt uncomfortable, or thought we had nothing to give...or maybe we were simply too tired.

Some have said that there are both sheep and goats in each of us. That is, there are parts of us that are going straight to hell. And the Good News is that we will be glad to see those parts of ourselves go and be destroyed. The Good News is that the goats in us will be separated from the sheep in us, and all that has caused us shame and guilt will be done away with forever. *Good riddance*, we’ll say.

It is the end of one church year and the beginning of another. How might we start to experience something of a separation of the sheep and the goats in us now, so that we can begin the process of saying, “Good riddance” today?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Christ the King, Year A

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Background and general observations

The last Sunday of the Church year is called, "Christ the King" Sunday. We are crowning the entire year on this Sunday with a special focus on the peculiar nature of Christ's kingship. We call him "Lord" Jesus Christ. What do we mean by that? What sort of "Lord" or "King" is he? What are our Lord's passions, and how is he hoping you will join him in pursuing these passions?

In the cycle of the Church lectionary, we sometimes have appointed for Christ the King Sunday a Gospel lesson depicting Christ being mocked, stripped, beaten, and crucified, while scoffers call out sarcastically, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Clearly, the kingship of Jesus is not something we recognize on the surface of things. This kingly power is not evident to the world, but only to the eyes of faith. In a sense, we are putting our trust and allegiance in something many people cannot see or believe in. It's all too far-fetched.

For this Christ the King Sunday, we have appointed the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats, and there are so many powerful ways in which this parable can work on us and deepen our faith. One very helpful way of approaching this parable is to listen to it as if Jesus were telling the parable for the very first time. Do not try to "figure out what it means," and do not leap to an interpretation. Just listen to the story, let the characters come to life, listen to the surprise in their voices...again, don't worry about getting the meaning, just let the parable work inside you, beyond your reasoning intellect. Trust that, on some level beyond your mind, the parable is changing you and that a new kind of knowing will be rising in you. (We do this all the

time, when we see or hear something extraordinary. We do not try to figure out what a beautiful sunset means; we just experience it and let it work its magic on us.)

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. When we talk about Christ as King, we are obviously talking about a different kind of kingdom, the Kingdom of God. The two primary images of Christ as king are found at his birth (poor and in a manger, born a child and yet a king) and at his death (a crown of thorns, mocked, scourged and crucified between two criminals).
2. During his ministry, Jesus taught things like this: “Love your enemies;” “Do good to those who persecute you;” “Forgive not seven times but seventy times seven;” “As you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

How would this world be run differently, if God were in charge? (That is, if Christ was King?)

How would your church or community be run differently, if God were in charge?

Most importantly, how would your own life be run differently, if God were in charge?

3. How is success measured differently in the Kingdom of God from the kingdom of this world?

Where do we hope our children and we will be more successful, in God’s kingdom or in the kingdom of this world?

If our primary hope is that our children will be “successful” or at home in God’s kingdom, how is that evident?

If our primary hope is that our children will be “successful” or at home in the kingdom of this world, how is that evident?

4. Marcus Borg has written, “In the United States, the central values of our culture are the ‘three A’s’: attractiveness, achievement, and affluence.” (*Heart of Christianity*, p. 190)

Do you agree?

Based on what you know of Jesus, what are the central values of his kingdom?

5. How many times have we thought about someone who has no interest in church or religion and yet who is a good and charitable person – what is this person’s fate in the life of the world to come?

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, those who cared for the hungry, sick, imprisoned, naked, etc. are surprised to hear Jesus thanking them (“When did we see you and do all of these things for you?). Jesus tells them that they cared for him whenever they cared for the least, and he calls them blessed and invites them to inherit the kingdom prepared for them.

What do you make of this proposition: The essence of being a Christian is not about believing the right things but about living God’s love. The sacraments of the Christian community, Bible study, prayer, worship, etc. are intended to help us live more fully and consistently in God’s love. But these ministrations of the church are means to an end (living in God’s love), and

some might arrive at that end by other means (that is, not through church attendance, Bible study, prayer, etc.).

Consider for yourself how prayer, Bible study, worship, and the sacraments all contribute to your staying focused on your true life, your true king, and your calling to live faithfully in a kingdom that so much of the world does not recognize. Share with one another some of the ways you stay focused and centered in an invisible but powerful source of strength and purpose (God, Jesus) whom the world does not see.

6. We all do the best we can to be kind, generous and caring people. We volunteer for causes that help us interact with and care for Jesus in “the least of these.” But few of us achieve the status of a St. Francis, who gave away everything he had and voluntarily identified completely with the poor. We all have been selfish or ignored the needs of others, at times simply because we did not know what to do or felt uncomfortable...or maybe we were just too tired.

Some have said that there are sheep and goats in all of us. That is, there are parts of us that are going straight to hell. And the Good News is that we will be glad to see those parts of ourselves go and get burned up. The Good News is that the goats in us will be separated from the sheep in us, and all that has caused us shame and guilt will be done away with forever.

Good riddance, we'll say.

How might we start to experience something of a separation of the sheep and the goats in us now, so that we can begin the process of saying, “Good riddance” today?