

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Advent 1, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 21:25-36

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

## Background and general observations

*The Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world is one of the prominent themes of Advent each year. The first Sunday of Advent is the church's new year's day, and here at the beginning, we always pause to consider the end.*

*The passage above falls into the category of "apocalyptic" literature, and this sort of writing is found throughout the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the books of Daniel, Joel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. The probable origin of apocalyptic writing is the history of Israel's constant subjugation to foreign powers. The cry, "How long, O Lord?" was repeated regularly by the Hebrews in times of exile, destruction, or foreign domination. Apocalyptic writing is a kind of answer to such cries of desperation. The time will come, the oppressed are assured, when the present order of things—political powers, as well as the natural world—will pass away, and God's just reign will be established forever.*

*The word "apocalypse" means an "unveiling" or "revelation," and in addition to Jesus' apocalyptic discourse in the Gospels, the New Testament Book of Revelation, which was written by a man named John who had been exiled under the persecution of the Emperor Domitian, is a prime example of this genre.*

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

1. Individuals and groups throughout history have used the symbolic language of apocalyptic literature to predict the precise date of the end of the world. They have all been wrong. Jesus exhorted his followers to "stay awake" and to "be alert at all times," but he was also very clear about the futility of predicting the exact day or hour. It will happen, he said, at a time you do not expect.

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 own 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. Here are some timeless questions you may wish to consider privately or perhaps with a small group of people you trust as you enter into this season of Advent.
- 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?
  - 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?
  - 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?
  - So much of our lives can lapse into unconscious routines, 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”?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Advent 2, Year C

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

### 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, and there might be some important personal business for each of us to tend, in order to make the way straight and smooth for God's advent in our lives.*

*The Gospel according to Luke places the ministry of John the Baptist very specifically in history, and this might be an occasion for us to consider the very specific circumstances of our own history. Where has God been in our lives? Where is God now?*

*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 Luke'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.*

*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.*

**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

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## Epiphany 1, Year C

### Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

### Background and general observations

*This is the first Sunday after the Day of the Epiphany. The word "epiphany" means a revelation or manifestation of the divine in our world. The arrival of the wise men at the scene of Jesus' birth on the Day of Epiphany, January 6, signifies that the revelation of God in Jesus is for the nations (the gentiles), as well as for the Jews. Throughout the season of Epiphany, we are going to be hearing stories of various ways in which the divine is revealed or manifest among us. Every year on the Sunday following January 6, we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord.*

*Jesus came into the world at a time of heightened expectation on the part of the Hebrew people. They were looking for and expecting the imminent arrival of a Messiah who would save God's people from political destruction and lead them into a future in which God's rule would be firmly established. Given this atmosphere of expectation, it is not surprising that many of the faithful would look at John the Baptist, notice the drama and popularity of his ministry, and conclude that John was the promised Messiah. The fact that all four Gospels are intent on making it clear that John was not the Messiah indicates that there may well have been some argument and controversy about this.*

*In Luke's account of things, John the Baptist uses a popular agricultural image to describe Jesus' ministry – "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Some commentators have pointed out that the wind blows the chaff away from the grain. The winnowing fork is used to lift the grain from the threshing floor, so that the wind (the Spirit) separates the chaff from the heavier grain. The idea that Jesus lifts the grain and the Spirit does the work is important to Luke, given Luke's emphasis on prayer.*

*Unlike the other Gospel accounts, Luke does not describe the baptism of Jesus but only notes that it has happened ("when Jesus also had been baptized..."), and then notes that it was while Jesus was praying that the epiphany happens. It is not when he came up out of the water, but after he was baptized and was praying. Luke will regularly note the importance of prayer in the life of Jesus and in the life of the believer, and it is prayer that signals the presence of the Holy Spirit.*

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

1. "...the people were filled with expectation..."

Here at the beginning of a New Year, with what expectations are you filled? What are your hopes and expectations concerning God's role in your life? What are your hopes and expectations for yourself?

2. The Gospel according to Luke shows Jesus praying regularly: before he calls the disciples, before he asks them who they say he is, at the Transfiguration, before he teaches the disciples how to pray, at the time of his arrest, and at the time of his death. In addition, we frequently think of Jesus removing himself from the commotion that his ministry seemed to cause, as he sought out "a lonely place to pray."

What is your experience of prayer? Does prayer have a regular place in your life, or is prayer more episodic? What is your experience of times of epiphany?

3. Jesus got in line with crowds of sinners who came out to hear and be baptized by John. Yet, as one commentator has pointed out:

...too often we may send the message that respectable, successful folks are the ones we need to build up our [church] communities. Time and again people who encounter difficulties in life drop out of our churches, seek help from other caregivers, and return to church only after they feel they can be re-certified as respectable, churchgoing people. Jesus got in line with sinners and was baptized with them. (Robert M. Brearley, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 238)

Does this ring true for you? Have you had this experience?

Imagine a church that those who are troubled or in difficult periods of life find to be a safe and brave place to rest. What are the characteristics of such a place?

4. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is the voice Jesus hears from heaven. We all need to have a sense of belonging, a sense of being cherished. While we can understand why God would speak words of such affirmation and assurance to Jesus, many of us suspect that God feels very differently about us. If God were to speak a word to you from heaven, what do you imagine God would say?
5. Sometimes we inadvertently ignore or take for granted the very people whom God has given us to cherish and affirm with unconditional love. We fall into unconscious patterns of life that keep us from being spiritually and emotionally attentive to each other. If we are God's body in the world, how might God want to use you to convey love, belonging and assurance to someone in your life?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Epiphany 2, Year C

### The Gospel: John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

### Background and general observations

*Today we encounter John's retelling of Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, the first of Jesus' miracles. Rather than reading this story simply for what is on the page, we must remember that John's Gospel is highly symbolic; there is much metaphor and intertextual allusion here. As one commentator writes:*

*The story of the wedding at Cana is not a simple tale of a super-miracle exposing Jesus' supernatural power of turning water into wine, framed with a happy nuptial background. Deeper, more symbolic meaning awaits the attuned reader. In this story, the identity of Jesus and his ministry is introduced with important symbols: a joyous wedding, six Jewish ritual pots, thirsty wedding guests, and an abundance of wine. (Linda McKinnish Bridges in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 261)*

*We might even notice that this miracle happens "on the third day," which could signify this incident is a resurrection event. Weddings in Jesus' culture were seven-day-long celebrations at the groom's home, and running out of wine would be an embarrassment for the host. On the literal level, "the third day" is perhaps just a sign that the host has a big problem on his hands. But the post-resurrection Christian community would see something deeper and more significant here.*

*The "six stone water jars" which were used for ritual purposes in the Jewish religion (Jesus' religion) signify a religious or spiritual tradition that has become inhospitable and empty. Even when the jars are filled with water, the full import of Jesus' presence is not realized until we see that the water has become wine—Jesus' presence means a renewed vitality, abundance, and joy.*

*The exchange between Jesus and his mother is interesting. It seems that John's Gospel presents Jesus as omniscient. And for whatever reason, Jesus seems reluctant (is he put out?) to reveal his identity here.*

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

1. Notice that Jesus uses the traditional jars reserved for Jewish religious ritual. He makes use of something old and infuses it with new life. How might this be working metaphorically?

Consider what this Gospel story may be telling us about how to refresh, reinvigorate or resurrect ancient and traditional religious practices that may seem to us empty or lifeless.

2. In this wedding story, Jesus' role is to restore a party, to bring happiness and laughter. We also recall that when we speak the Nicene Creed, we affirm that the Holy Spirit is "the giver of life." John's Gospel speaks of Jesus in this way: "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." God delights and laughs along with us, just as God is grave, serious, and somber when we are somber. God holds the whole breadth of emotional experience within Godself, and meets us in it all.

Have you ever experienced God meeting you in an emotional experience? What stories do you have of a God who "gives you life," who delights in bringing joy and laughter to people? Have you ever felt playful with Jesus?

How might you cultivate a playfulness or lightness in your relationship with God? How might you cultivate such a playfulness within your community of faith?

3. How do you respond to the (ambiguous) banter between Jesus and his mother? What do you think is going on here?

Some scholars suggest that Mary is lovingly calling on Jesus to get on with it, so to speak; his hour *has* come to reveal himself and his mission because it is not simply that the wedding guests have no wine, but that the whole nation has no wine. In other words, what we witness here is a profound moment of perfect knowledge between Mother and Son, two that understand each other completely. Under this lens, how do you interpret their conversation?

4. The steward in this story recognizes the wine as "the good wine," and he acknowledges that this good wine is usually reserved for the very beginning of the feast, before the guests have become intoxicated and numb to the distinction between the good and the inferior wine.

What do you know about recognizing "the good wine," the gifts that come by grace from God? And what do you know about being in a state in which you no longer can recognize the good wine, no longer recognize that what you are seeing or experiencing is a gift from God?

What are some of the practices and habits of life that keep you sensitized to the gifts of joy and wonder in your life? What are some of the habits that harden your heart or desensitize you to the good wine that has been offered to you?



# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

## Epiphany 3, Year C

### The Gospel: Luke 4:14-21

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

### Background and general observations

*In Luke's Gospel, the Spirit has “descended” on Jesus at his baptism, then “led” Jesus into the wilderness to be tested, and now in this passage “fills and empowers” Jesus to declare who he is and the nature of his ministry to the people of his hometown. Prior to returning to Nazareth, he had been teaching in surrounding synagogues and was “praised by everyone.” The experience in the hometown synagogue was very different.*

*Jesus was apparently invited to read the lesson, and he chose a bold passage from Isaiah 61. Given that the Jewish people of his day were in a state of heightened expectation concerning the coming of the Messiah and the in-breaking of God to establish God's rule in an oppressive era, this passage would do more than simply warm the hearts of hometown family and friends.*

*Initially, it seems that the hometown people were in a state of rapt attention. Jesus had finished his reading, handed the scroll back to the attendant, left the platform, and sat back down. And all the while, it seems people were just wondering what was going to happen next. “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.”*

*This passage can also help us understand more about Jesus' understanding of himself and what he felt his life's work was all about. This, in turn, helps Christians to understand who we are as followers of Jesus. And finally, we can ponder the kind of reaction such a ministry provokes. As one scholar puts it: “This event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church.” (Craddock, Luke, John Knox Press, 1990, p. 61)*

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

1. The Peter Paul Development Center, a vital community center for youth, seniors, and their families in the Richmond's East End—an area characterized by the highest concentration of poverty in the city—has inscribed on its cornerstone Isaiah 61:1-4, the passage from which Jesus quotes in his hometown synagogue.

Why do you suppose the Peter Paul Development Center chose this inscription for its cornerstone? Would it make sense for your church to have the same thing inscribed on its cornerstone?

2. One commentator has pointed out that many Americans are keen on identifying their mission or purpose in life (Ernest Hess in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 289). This commentator also points out, however, that although Scriptural quotations are abundant in *The Purpose Driven Life*, Isaiah 61—the quotation Jesus used to identify himself, his mission, and his purpose—is not found anywhere in the book.

Now, this might not mean much in itself, but the commentator uses this tidbit to ask how Jesus' statement of purpose compares to our own sense of purpose. What do you think? If you were to write a personal mission statement or statement of purpose for your life, what would that be?

3. What do you know about feeling empowered by the Spirit in ways that might astonish or even dismay the people who have known you best? Or, what do you know about sensing a movement of the Spirit in your life, a prompting from God, that might well surprise the people around you if you acted on that prompting?

It is not unusual for people of faith to say that God or the Holy Spirit is calling or empowering them to do something. But how do you know when something is truly of the Spirit, and you are not deceiving yourself? Does the passage from Isaiah help in determining whether or not something is truly a prompting of the Spirit?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Epiphany 4, Year C

### The Gospel: Luke 4:21-30

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

### Background and general observations

*At first, the hometown crowd loved Jesus' sermon, and not just because it was brief. Everybody loves good news, and the news that blind people will now see and prisoners will now be released is great news. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But when Jesus goes on to say that God has been pleased to use widows and lepers outside of Israel to demonstrate God's power and compassion, the hometown people suddenly want to throw Jesus off a cliff. They were "filled with rage."*

*What in the world is going on?*

*Jesus has just asserted the presence of Good News and God's activity in the world. But he goes on to point out that such good news and divine activity have been present at other times, and the people who thought of themselves as having a special relationship with God (the Jews) were passed over in favor of extreme outsiders. And further, these outsiders displayed a kind of faith or trust that was not found among the Israelites.*

*The Gentile widow to whom Elijah was sent (1 Kings 17:1-16) demonstrated extraordinary faithfulness, more than those in Israel. The famine in her land and the prospect of imminent death for her son and herself did not deter her from listening to Elijah, showing Elijah hospitality, and trusting that God would provide for them. And although Naaman was originally ornery and hesitant, he ended up doing as the prophet Elisha said, trusting that God would heal him (2 Kings 5:1-14). God's power and people's faithfulness could have been demonstrated among the people around us, but God chose instead to go to these outsiders. The example of Naaman might have been especially offensive to Jesus' audience, since Naaman was not only a Gentile but also a commander in the Syrian army and thus a physical threat to the Jews.*

*Jesus' words anger those who listen to him, perhaps because they feel insulted or betrayed at his statement that God's activity might work outside of their community or through foreign, unexpected routes. In this way, Jesus signals an important aspect of his ministry: that it upends all "normative" systems of belonging and action in the world, even those with which Jesus himself grew up.*

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

1. At first, Jesus is well received in his hometown. It doesn't take long, however, for the hometown crowd to turn on him and try to throw him off a cliff. At the end of his life, Jesus experiences something similar. He enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in triumph and ends up being mocked and jeered by the crowd at week's end.

What do you think motivates the crowd to act and react to Jesus in this way? Ask yourself what the members of the crowd might have been feeling, to turn on Jesus like this. Have you ever acted in a similar way to the members of the crowd, turning away from Jesus' word in your life? Why? What do you do to turn yourself back to Jesus' message and mission?

1. "They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'"

Given what they knew of Jesus' background, the hometown people were amazed by Jesus; they just didn't expect this kind of power and authority to come from a humble carpenter's son.

What do you know about people making assumptions about you or having certain expectations about you, based on your background or family?

What is your experience of trying to live up to, or break out of, the assumptions and expectations others have for you?

2. One commentator says about this passage, "Jesus is too local to be heard."

What do you know about this dynamic in your own life?

Are there "local" people whom you know very well who might be bearers of wisdom and messages from God? Perhaps because we believe that noted authors and eminent leaders are the ones who have the words we need to hear, we do not pay good attention to the more ordinary locals in our lives.

Could it be that God is trying to reach you by means of someone very close to you – a spouse, a friend, a neighbor, a child, a parent – but these people are "too local to be heard"?

3. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The Good News is that God is present and active in our lives today, right now. Jesus would speak of "the Kingdom of God within you," and in many passages throughout the New Testament, we hear about the divine as the light and life of human beings, the living water gushing up within a person to eternal life, and so on. This is a present, living reality.

Do you tend to think of God's immediate presence right now? Or, do you tend to think of God's presence and activity being located somewhere in the past or the future?

If you believed in the immediate presence of God, how would your life and your attention to the people and situations around you change?

4. Consider the remarks in the "Background and general observations" above. Jesus seems to be saying that God has shown in the past, and is showing again now, that God is deeply concerned about his marginalized children and is more inclusive than many religious people would expect.

Are there some ways in which you consciously or unconsciously limit the scope of God's love? How comfortable are you in sharing with Jesus his concern for the outcast, the vulnerable and for those beyond the boundaries of your local congregation?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Epiphany 5, Year C

### The Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

### Background and general observations

*At a very basic level, this story is about the experience of the Divine. In this sense, it is similar to the lesson from the Hebrew Bible that is appointed for today – the story of Isaiah's experience of God's presence in the temple. In both of these stories, we see that the experience of being in the presence of Holiness or Divinity or the Sacred leads someone to a sense of astonishment and humility (Peter "fell down at Jesus' knees, saying 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" ). Moses has a similar experience with the burning bush. He must take off his shoes, for he is on holy ground, and Moses has a strong sense of unworthiness. This lesson might invite us to consider how we respond to the experience of being in God's presence.*

*This Gospel story is also a miracle story that is very similar to a story found at the end of John's Gospel (21:1-14). Luke's version of the story comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and John's shows the resurrected Jesus directing the disciples in their miraculous catch. Some might contrast the results of human effort ("We have worked all night and caught nothing") with the results of yielding to Divine direction ("they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break").*

*Finally, this story in Luke's Gospel shows how the disciples received their sense of "call" or vocation. In other accounts of Jesus calling the disciples, Jesus is very direct, "Come and follow me." In Luke's account, the disciples are amazed, moved (at least in Peter's case) to a sense of humility, and then told by Jesus, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." The result is that the disciples "left everything and followed him." The abundant catch might be a harbinger of the explosive growth of the Jesus movement after the resurrection, and the radical decision to leave everything in order to follow Jesus might encourage us to consider what we believe about the nature of our commitment to the Way of Jesus.*

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

1. The fact that Jesus meets Peter, James and John at their place of work and even gets into Peter's boat and teaches from there might prompt some people to consider how Jesus comes to us in the places we work or in our daily routines.

Do you believe God comes to you or speaks to you in your place of work or daily routine, the way Jesus came to Peter, James and John and even asked to get into Peter's boat?

Is God more present somehow on a retreat? Or, are *we* just more present to God on retreat? If a spiritual retreat opens us to the reality of God's presence that is with us all the time, what are some of the practices or disciplines that can help us to be more open and attentive to God's presence, wherever we are?

2. Allow yourself some time for real reflection. When have you had the experience of being in the presence of God? When have you sensed that you were in the presence of Holiness or Divinity? How did you respond? Gratefully? Fearfully? Joyfully?

Throughout Scripture we see often that human inadequacy is no obstacle for God. God calls imperfect and often doubtful people to do God's work all the time. What do you make of Peter's response that he was unworthy and sinful?

3. Jesus comes to Peter, James and John after they have worked all night and caught nothing. In a sense, they have failed. They are tired and exhausted, having done all they could, and they have nothing to show for their efforts. Jesus comes to them as they are calling it quits, washing the nets and getting ready to go home.

What do you make of the idea that God sometimes gets through to us most powerfully when we have failed, given up, or surrendered? Is failure or surrender sometimes necessary in order for God to reach us?

Has this ever happened to you or to someone you know?

4. Peter's response to Jesus' help is to proclaim "I am a sinful man!" At first glance, this proclamation might put us off, as uncomfortable as we often are at the idea of our own sinfulness. Perhaps, though, Peter's proclamation is less self-flagellation and more astonished gratitude. Perhaps Peter is so deeply in awe of Jesus' care and abundance that he cannot believe it is even for him. Perhaps Peter is simply humbled before the glory of God.

Have you ever felt humbled before God? What was that like? Do you ever feel undeserving of God's gifts? Why? When you feel this way, how do you talk to God about it?

5. "Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.'"

Some read this proclamation from Jesus as clear instruction for mission and discipleship. For most of us, to follow the Way of Jesus does not necessitate leaving our current professions behind; we *all* are called by virtue of our baptism to participate in God's work, to reorient our priorities, to use well our God-given gifts, and to share the good news of Christ in word and deed.

This week's lesson offers rich possibilities for considering what it means to be "caught" by the powerful word of God. It is interesting to note that the fish are caught in the nets alive, meant to feed and to nourish. What, then, can it mean for *people* to be caught alive in the deep, wide net of God?

What might it mean for you to put out into the deep waters? What is it you think you fear?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Epiphany 6, Year C

### The Gospel: Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

### Background and general observations

*Many people know and love “the Beatitudes” found in Matthew, the beginning of the “Sermon on the Mount.” Luke’s version (known as the “Sermon on the Plain” because Jesus comes down from the mountain to a level place to give it) is quite different. Here there are only four blessings, countered by four woes. Here it is not the “poor in spirit” (as in Matthew) but the actual poor, not those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” but instead the literally hungry, who have received God’s blessing and who will experience a reversal of their current state. The rich, those who have what they need, who are lighthearted and spoken well of, are not blessed. They, too, will receive a reversal and lose what they have.*

*As is often the case in Luke’s gospel, Jesus explains that in God’s kingdom, things are turned upside down. (This is foreshadowed by Mary when she sings the Magnificat: he has lifted up the lowly, and the rich will be sent away empty.) These kinds of reversals will continue to play out in the stories to come in Luke. Jesus makes it clear that one of the hallmarks of the kingdom of God is the redemption of the poor and the release of all the marginalized from degradation. Jesus, over and over again, tells us that God is not happy with the plight of the poor and the hungry, the plight of those who mourn nor of those who are hated and reviled and God’s people can be assured that God is going to change that, that God’s will will be done.*

*In contrast, those who are rich have received their consolation already; the world has rewarded them with the world's version of success and acclaim. The implication here is that the world's reward is not a blessing but a curse and that the heavenly blessing is reserved for those who suffer. In other words, God is committed to bringing to wholeness those who are broken, to fullness those who are empty. This is God's justice.*

*This little sermon is given to Jesus' disciples in the midst of a great multitude of people from all over. Before Jesus begins to speak, Luke reminds us that God's mercy (and Jesus' power) knows no bounds. A great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem (Jewish regions), and the coast (Gentile regions) come to Jesus. All in the crowd were trying to touch him and he healed all of them. All, all, all.*

*In this way Jesus continues the narrative from the Old Testament prophets who claimed that God is the protector and defender of the poor and that God will give them justice—and woe to those who treated them with disdain, prejudice, and oppressive policies, for God will allow their downfall.*

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

1. Our understanding of this passage—the Sermon on the Plain—may depend on our understanding of what it means to be “blessed.” Perhaps you have greeted someone who, when asked how she is doing, responds by saying, “I am blessed.” What do you think she means? That she is wealthy? That she lives a life of luxury? Or does she mean something else, something beyond earthly consideration?

Is “blessedness” as simple as “happiness”? Is it possible to be blessed and also unhappy? What do you think is the relationship between blessedness and suffering?

2. It has 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.

What is your response to the Sermon on the Plain—do you feel uplifted? Angered? Defensive? Assured? Warned? Comforted?

3. Jesus' Sermon on the Plain offers a glimpse into the kingdom of God where, as Jesus explains, things are opposite, upside-down, reversed. He does not explicitly ask his listeners to make a choice between the ways of blessing and woe, nor does he directly ask them to change their lives. Instead, his sermon might be received as more of an invitation (or warning) rather than direct instruction; Jesus is not telling us what to do, exactly, but perhaps encouraging us to think about ourselves and our position in the world differently.

If Jesus is offering to you a new way of living, inviting you to a different way of relating to others in the world, what about your life might need your attention? If you consider yourself a person of wealth, how might you avoid the woe Jesus foretells? If you consider yourself a person of poverty, what blessings and riches do you notice?

4. 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 independence?

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?

5. It can be very hard, when you lose your job, or you are mourning the loss of someone you love, or your children are in trouble, or your life is in crisis, 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? What can you name as “most important” and “mattering most”?

When have you felt most deeply that you were blessed? When have you been in need of a reminder of your blessedness and how did you come to feel your blessing? What does it mean to “be a blessing” and how might you “be a blessing” for others?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Epiphany 7, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 6:27-38

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

## Background and general observations

*This week's lesson is a continuation of the "Sermon on the Plain" delivered by Jesus to his inner circle of disciples as well as to those who are gathered around to overhear this teaching. Having pronounced God's blessing on the poor, having lived out God's intention of generous blessing by healing all who came to him, Jesus now instructs those who wish to follow him regarding their behavior, particularly toward their enemies.*

*The basic message is this: do not retaliate against those who wish you harm. Do not seek vengeance. This of course flies in the face of primal human instinct, which prompts us to be good to friends and antagonistic to enemies. Jesus points not to human nature but to God's nature as the model for Godly behavior. God is kind and merciful to all, no matter whether they are good or wicked. God will give more than we ask for, so we should, too. A disciple of Jesus is called to a higher standard than that of "sinners"; a disciple is called, when faced with evil, to respond with restraint and kindness.*

*People sometimes mistake this teaching as an admonition to be passive. But the behavior Jesus calls for is not passive but active: Give your shirt, too; Love (act for their welfare) your enemies; Lend and expect nothing in return; Offer your other cheek; Extend mercy.*

*And the result? Taking the high road deflects or de-escalates hostilities. Perhaps you have heard the phrase "kill them with kindness" as a response to social meanness. Responding with generosity transforms the interaction, exposes injustice, and turns accountability back on the perpetrator. Kindness is a sort of offering, a model of behavior that mirrors God's character. Be holy just as God is holy and unholy actions will be seen for what they are. Anyone can be nice to those who are nice to them, Jesus explains; it takes courage and conviction to extend generosity and mercy beyond one's circle, and especially to one's enemies. This is the task before us: to demonstrate a Christ-like character as a Christian witness in the world.*

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

1. Marcus Aurelius is reported to have said to himself every morning, “Today you will meet all kinds of unpleasant people; they will hurt you, and injure you, and insult you; but you cannot live like that; you know better, for you are a man in whom the spirit of God dwells” (Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, p.339). It seems, then, we might ask ourselves: “Do we know better?”

Do you in fact hear Jesus inviting you to live in accordance with his very specific instructions 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!) Do you think that Jesus might be wrong, impractical, even foolish?

2. Revivalists like John Wesley were convinced that Jesus was not speaking symbolically or metaphorically at all. 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)

Do Jesus' instructions feel possible or impossible to you (or somewhere in between)? Why?

3. It has been pointed out that Jesus' audience for the Sermon on the Plain were poor and oppressed people. It may be that Jesus' instructions generally 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.

What are your thoughts? What do you hear Jesus saying? If you lived the way Jesus is inviting you to live, what do you think would happen?

4. “For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?”

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?

If Jesus is indeed suggesting that we have the capacity to love each other the way God loves us, what changes are you going to start having to make?

5. If you feel your thoughts about this passage are getting you nowhere, or tied in knots, or that perhaps you are being asked to do something difficult or even impossible, one way to reflect on scripture is simply through prayer. Rather than stew over “what Jesus really meant,” instead set aside some quiet time for prayer. Ask Jesus, “What are you trying to tell me about how I am to live?” And 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 C

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## The Gospel: Luke 9:28-36

About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

## 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 Luke'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.)*

*Throughout the story of God's salvation history, 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 a fulfillment of all of the Law and the Prophets, or is in company with them as a transcendent means through which God is working salvation out in the world.*

*The often-impetuous Peter can't contain himself and speaks (blurts?) first, proposing that they build a memorial or dwelling places on the site. Then, from a cloud comes a voice, saying in effect the same thing that was said at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, my Chosen"; but with the additional command, "listen to him!" This is not a time for building or planning. It is simply a time to listen, and that can be hard for many of us.*

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

1. That even Jesus' inner circle of disciples does 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, the 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 depend on. Who

might 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? How might you be such a 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 to see Jesus clearly for who he is in all his glory. It’s not that they are seeing something brand new or that something has happened to change Jesus; rather, it is the disciples who are changed. They are glimpsing things, even if briefly, as they really are, as they have been all along. The veil has been lifted for a moment, and what used to seem quite ordinary is revealed as holiness.

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? Out of the blue, have you been filled with wonder and gratitude at the splendor and beauty of your life and of the people and places around you as though you were seeing something brand new? What do you think of the possibility that such moments of splendor that inspire our awe and gratitude are really just an unveiling of the deeper truth about our lives that, unfortunately, we miss all too often? How can we position ourselves to see the world aright, in all its glory, instead of going through our lives with a feeling that things are humdrum or ordinary?

3. The Greek word that Luke 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 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 to such divine things, so that we are transformed? Do you sense yourself being so transformed at times?
4. It has been said that God gave ten commandments on the mountaintop in the Old Testament and only one commandment in the New Testament: “Listen to him (Jesus).” Have you considered “listening” as a divine commandment? How often, in the busyness of your daily life, are you consciously and prayerfully listening to Jesus? Is your busyness an unconscious attempt to avoid this kind of holy listening? How can you (re)orient your life so that you are more available and more open to the kind of listening God is asking you to do?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Lent 1, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

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

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

## 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, "filled with the Holy Spirit," is led in the wilderness where he experiences tests for 40 days and nights.*

*Forty days in the wilderness would remind the readers of Luke's Gospel of the 40 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 sets us 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 fail and become disobedient. So in the events of Jesus' life, the earliest Christians not only saw a mirroring of the life of Israel, but also a perfecting of Israel's story. The lesson ends with the devil departing from Jesus "until an opportune time." Of course, the devil will return when he enters Judas and sets the stage for Jesus' last temptation at his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.*

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

1. When have you had the experience of being “filled with the Holy Spirit”? What is that like? What does it mean? And how can a person open himself or herself to be filled in this way?
2. The season of Lent is our 40 days. Where do you stand spiritually, here at the beginning of this Lent, your 40 days? How might God be calling you or leading you to use this Lenten season? How might it be a “wilderness” for you?

Have you had an experience of spiritual wilderness before? Have you had a sense of being ministered to when you were in that wilderness? What have you learned about being cared for and caring for others in times like that? What have you learned about love from being in the wilderness?

3. Immediately after his powerful experience of God at his baptism, Jesus is led into temptation. What do you know of this pattern in your own life—a powerful religious or spiritual experience being followed by a time of equally powerful temptation, testing, and wilderness? How might such a period of testing and temptation be just as formative as the experience of affirmation, love, and belonging? How do you explain the relationship, in your experience, of being in the wilderness with your sense of being loved?
4. We noticed above that those reading Luke’s Gospel would have understood the parallels between Jesus’ life and the life of the people of Israel. They might have read Jesus’ relationship to God as a perfecting or paradigmatic model of how relationship with God ought to go.

Like Israel and Jesus, we have made covenants with God that we promise to uphold—the first of these being our Baptismal Covenant (which you can revisit in the Book of Common Prayer beginning on page 304). Do you ever find it difficult to uphold your covenantal commitments? Can you recall a time when you disobeyed God or broke a promise you made to God? How did you reconcile with God? What did you do to renew your covenant?

5. One of the most frequently repeated suggestions of the Desert Mothers and Fathers was this: “Go into your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” They understood our desire to seek meaning 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, waiting to be revealed, if we can only be still and attentive to what *is*. How do you respond to this advice? Do you sense yourself resisting it? Why do you think that is? What is it you think you fear and what is it you might hope to find?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Lent 2, Year C

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## The Gospel: Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

## Background and general observations

*Herod, here, is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. He would be regarded as a traitor to the Jewish people and a collaborator with the oppressive Roman Empire. Herod, in other words, represents the empire's goal of Romanizing the Jews, and Jesus represents a movement that is calling people back to God. Herod and Jesus are calling people to different loyalties, different kingdoms—the kingdom of Caesar or the Kingdom of God.*

*Jesus is unfazed by the message that Herod Antipas is out to kill him. In fact, Jesus dismisses Antipas as being powerless over him. Jesus has work to do, and there's nothing Antipas can do about it. Jesus' contempt and disregard for Antipas come across loud and clear.*

*What Jesus says next is moving. He is not worried about Antipas and even seems to cast him aside with disdain. But then he mourns over Jerusalem, speaking as a parent might speak who longs for his wayward children to come to their senses. Jesus sees his children as scattered and in disarray and wants to gather them under his protective and nurturing wings, desiring to bring them home again.*

*The image of God gathering his scattered people is found throughout the Hebrew Bible, so Jesus is building on a powerful tradition and understanding of how God longs for God's people. This passage comes at the end of a collection of parables, all of which are about the need for repentance. Therefore, this passage could be seen as the crowning call for repentance —"Turn around," Jesus is saying, "and return to God who yearns for you."*

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

1. Ponder the fact that Jesus is unfazed by the message that Herod Antipas is out to kill him. What does Jesus have that allows him to move ahead with such clarity and sense of purpose, unconcerned about gathering threats? What does Jesus have that allows him to remain so calm in the midst of a life-threatening storm?

Do you believe you have this same gift in yourself? How can you draw on this sense of Presence, of calm and strength more often, instead of being anxious and worried about the storms of life around you? Are you, or can you be, a source of calm and strength to someone in your life who is anxious or afraid?

2. Think about mistakes you have made in your life, about ways in which you have veered off course, times you have hurt others or done something that you are ashamed of now; how do you imagine God responds to your sinfulness or your propensity to wander, over and over again?



Do you imagine God is exasperated with you? Angry with you? Do you imagine God is longing for you?

What does it feel like to imagine God saying your name, God calling to you, “How long have I desired to draw you closer to myself...?”

3. When a loved one (spouse, child, close friend...) has deeply disappointed you, are you more prone to lecture and keep your distance, or are you apt to offer unconditional love and acceptance, even when the person doesn't deserve it (but definitely needs it)? Remember a time when you responded with judgment or criticism. And remember a time when you offered unquestioning and nonjudgmental love. How was each response received? You might remember also times when you were offered judgment, and times when you were offered love, and how each made you feel. Journal about those experiences, or share them in a small group.
4. Consider the following reflections by Barbara Brown Taylor:

If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them. Meanwhile, this is the most vulnerable posture in the world—wings spread, breast exposed—but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand...

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story. What he will be is a mother hen, who stands between the chicks and those who mean to do them harm. She has no fangs, no claws, no rippling muscles. All she has is her willingness to shield her babies with her own body. If the fox wants them, he will have to kill her first.

Which he does, as it turns out. He slides up on her one night in the yard while all the babies are asleep. When her cry wakens them, they scatter. She dies the next day where both foxes and chickens can see her—wings spread, breast exposed—without a single chick beneath her feathers. It breaks her heart, but it does not change a thing. If you mean what you say, then this is how you stand.

—The Christian Century, February 25, 1986, page 201  
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How do you respond to this image of Jesus? Do you see yourself anywhere in that image? Does this image encourage you to consider any changes in your life?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Lent 3, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

### Background and general observations

*The report of some to Jesus that Pilate had some Galileans killed while they were offering sacrifices in Jerusalem is in keeping with the way some historians have portrayed Pilate, but this story is found only in the Gospel of Luke. Galilee was known as a town of rebels, and some believe that the Zealot movement came from there. Zealots, among other things, advocated not paying taxes to Rome. Of course, Rome did not take kindly to that sort of rebellion, and the authorities could be ruthless in their retaliation.*

*In a similar way, the story about a tower of Siloam falling and killing eighteen people is only found in Luke. But the point of these events is simply that they serve as a catalyst for Jesus to reflect on a common theology of his day—bad things happen to bad people, and good things happen to good people. It was an idea taken from the Hebrew scripture, particularly the Book of Deuteronomy: God blesses the righteous and curses the sinner. But here we have Jesus saying that's not how God works.*

*Jesus doesn't answer the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" But he uses these tragic events to emphasize how important it is to respond to the Gospel now, before it is too late. We don't know when death will come, so we should not waste time; we need to repent now. Jesus underscores this message with the parable of the unfruitful fig tree, which also emphasizes God's patience, mercy and forbearance. Three years would have been plenty of time for the tree to bear fruit, and the sensible thing for a farmer to do would be to pull up the unfruitful tree, in order to make room for a tree that bore fruit. But God is more merciful than sensible and we have yet more time to grow.*

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

1. Many of us may still harbor the suspicion that if something really terrible happens to us, God must be angry with us. And if something extraordinarily wonderful happens, God must be pleased with us. But, if it is not so straightforward that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, how are we to make sense of a much more complex relationship? What do you think is the point of living a just, noble and godly life?
2. It is hard to miss the sense of urgency about Jesus' message. It is important to turn away from our sinful ways and return to God *now*, today. The Kingdom of God is here at hand; repent and trust in God.

How do you respond to this sense of urgency? Does it frighten you? Inspire you? Are you one who feels and believes in the closeness of God, the ever-present invitation to a new life, and the

importance of giving yourself to this kingdom? Or, are you more prone to debate with yourself, chew it over with others, and postpone such a movement of radical trust? Where does the invitation of Jesus fall on your list of priorities?

3. It may be helpful to spend some time in prayer—particularly during this season of Lent—to consider if and how your life is bearing fruit and how you might be called to tend to your spirit, to “dig around and fertilize it.”

When in your life have you felt *most* fruitful? And when have you felt that you perhaps had nothing at all to give?

If you have been feeling *unfruitful*, do you still believe you are precious to God, that God is patient with you and believes in you?

4. Consider the patience of the gardener. Think of a person or situation in your life that is exasperating you now, a relationship that simply isn't bearing fruit.

What do you know about the impulse to give up on that relationship or situation, to “cut it down”?

What do you know about a nudge from God to wait, to exercise patience and give it some more time?

What are the costs and benefits of giving up? What are the costs and benefits of giving it more time?

5. We cannot make another person bear fruit, just as the gardener cannot make the fig tree produce figs. But the gardener can work to provide the optimal conditions for the tree to thrive.

What do you know about the importance of providing optimal conditions for God to do God's work in yourself and in your relationships with others, and then leaving the rest to God?

And what do you know about trying to force people and situations?

Think of a relationship or situation in your life today that is calling for you to “dig around it and fertilize it.” What would it look like for you to provide the optimal conditions for God to bring growth out of that relationship or situation, and then for you to step back and let God take over?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Lent 4, Year C

## Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

## Background and general observations

*Sometimes, context is everything. This much-loved parable of the Prodigal Son is the third in a series of three parables that make up the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Each of the three parables is about something that is lost and then found, and each concludes with joy and celebration at the finding of that which had been lost. The other two parables that make up this chapter are the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin.*

*But notice how the fifteenth chapter begins: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable. . . .” (Luke 15:1-3)*

*The chapter begins with wayward sinners (the lost) coming to Jesus to listen to him. Good religious people, the Pharisees and the scribes, grumble about this and keep their distance, complaining that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. So it is with the Parable of the Prodigal Son: a wayward sinner (the younger brother) comes home to his father, and his father welcomes the sinner with a feast. The parable ends with the older son complaining and keeping his distance, refusing to join the celebration. The older brother thus now becomes the one who is lost, and the father “seeks” him, by begging him to join the banquet.*

*We do not know how the older brother will respond to this invitation, just as we do not know at this point how the Pharisees and scribes will respond to Jesus’ invitation.*

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

1. With which of the three main characters are you drawn to identify at this stage of your life – the father, the younger son, or the older son?

How does this parable speak to your present situation and invite you to see your situation with new eyes?

2. A sheep becomes lost by wandering off innocently, not knowing what it is doing. The younger son becomes lost by way of greed, selfishness and immature self-gratification. The older son becomes lost by way of anger, resentment, jealousy and pride.

Consider these and other ways in which a person is likely to stray and become spiritually lost, separated from God and other human beings.

Have you experienced becoming lost in these ways? What is it that usually causes you to lose your way in life? What has helped you to return to the path homeward?

What is your experience of being found? Has there been someone like the father in your life? Have you experienced the disapproval and indignation of someone like the older son? Have you exhibited the nonjudgmental welcome and joy of the father toward others? Have you exhibited the judgment of the older son?

3. All of us need to know that we are special or cherished in the eyes of someone else. Yet, this need to be valued for our uniqueness and “set apart” in some way can become destructive when one feels slighted, or when the need to be loved turns to jealousy or envy. The indignant older son could be seen as struggling with this dynamic.

What do you know of this dynamic in your own life, either standing apart from others yourself, or watching someone you love separate himself or herself from others out of a sense of hurt or indignation?

How can such a person be reached in this state of hurt or indignation? What will it take to bring such a person back into the fold?

4. A recovering alcoholic once recalled that when he was in the throes of his addiction, having lost his family and his good job, and was living on the street, he would wake up in the morning in his cardboard box and think to himself as he watched all the people going to work, “Too bad all of those people have such sorry lives.” From his cardboard box, he actually pitied those who still lived with their spouses and children, had good jobs, clean clothes, decent food, and loyal friends. It would require nearly losing his life for this man to “come to himself” and wake up to the reality of his situation.

The prodigal son seems to have thoroughly enjoyed himself until his life was threatened by famine and hunger.

What do you know of being lost and not realizing it?

What does it take for a person to “come to himself”?

5. Ponder the image of the father who allows the younger son to insult the family and squander his inheritance, who then waits eagerly for the son’s return, and who runs out to meet the boy with kisses, presents, and a banquet celebration.

The implication seems to be that this is what God is like.

Is this your image of God? Do you have a sense that God is one who eagerly seeks the lost and who rejoices when they return? Or is God one who waits passively for our return?

6. The prodigal son “comes to himself” and begins the journey home. But both the lost sheep and the lost coin are found, apart from any initiative of their own. What do you know of taking the first steps to return to God, and what do you know of being found, apart from anything you’ve done?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Lent 5, Year C

## The Gospel: John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

## Background and general observations

*This Gospel lesson is appointed for the last Sunday in Lent, just before the beginning of Holy Week on Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. This dinner party at the home of Lazarus is a kind of respite or interlude, between the dramatic and joyful raising of Lazarus (Chapter 11), and the dramatic and intensely sorrowful final days of Jesus' life in Jerusalem (beginning in chapter 12, right after this story). As a reminder, here is the setting.*

*The chapter immediately before this one tells the story of Jesus raising his friend, Lazarus, from the dead. Lazarus, Mary and Martha are all siblings, and the sisters had sent word to Jesus that their brother was ill. By the time Jesus arrived, however, Lazarus had been dead for four days, and many had come to be with Mary and Martha to console them.*

*This is the chapter in which Jesus says to Martha, "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." (John 11:25-26) These are the words with which Episcopalians begin every funeral—as the procession makes its way down the center aisle, the priest is saying, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever believeth in me, shall never die." (Book of Common Prayer, Rite One, p. 469)*

*After Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, calling to him inside the tomb, "Lazarus, come out!" and then saying to the crowd, "Unbind him, and let him go," word travels to the Pharisees and chief priests about what has happened. A discussion among the religious officials ensues, in which fears are expressed that Jesus is attracting too much attention and might bring the wrath of the Romans who would destroy the temple. Better to have one man die, Caiaphas reasons, than to have the well-being of a whole nation threatened by that one man's actions. "So from that day on they planned to put him to death." (11:53) But while some are plotting against Jesus, many are abuzz about whether or not Jesus will show up in Jerusalem for the Passover.*

*The verses here, 12:1-8, show Jesus at a dinner party in Lazarus' home. Martha is serving (we might remember from Luke 10:38-42 that this is typical of Martha), while Mary, the one with the more contemplative bent, engages in a lavish display of anointing Jesus with costly perfume and intimate, loving gestures. This selfless gift is contrasted to Judas' selfish grousing, but Judas makes a point that many of us might think is a good one. Is it really right to waste so much money in a lavish display of affection and honor for Jesus, when the money it cost could be have been used for the relief of the poor instead? Wouldn't that be a more fitting way to honor Jesus?*

*Immediately after this story about the anointing of Jesus at the dinner party, the Gospel says that the religious officials plot to put Lazarus to death, “since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.” And the very next thing we see is Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, with crowds hailing him along the way.*

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

1. Lazarus has just come back from the dead. Imagine what his life was like now. How did he see and experience life differently now? What sort of presence do you imagine he was at the dinner party?

What do you think Lazarus made of the controversy and drama going on around him after Judas criticized Mary’s expensive waste of perfume, and Jesus tells Judas to “Leave her alone”?

2. One person has reflected on this biblical scene by imagining what it was like when “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” As the scripture says, Mary used a lot of expensive perfume, when only a very little bit would surely have created a lovely scent. But the person who was reflecting on this passage imagined that forever hereafter, whenever those who had been at that dinner party experienced this fragrance again, they would not only recall Jesus but also in a sense experience his presence again.

Another person remarked, in the same vein, that after a person dies, some who are bereaved will go to the deceased person’s closet and inhale the scent of the person’s clothes, as a way of drawing closer to the one who has died.

So it is, in a sense, with the sacraments of consecrated bread and wine, as physical things can make spiritual realities more present to us. Since we are physical beings and not pure spirits or angels, it seems that physical things play an important role in drawing us to spiritual realities.

What do you know about particular sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or sensations of touch conjuring spiritual realities for you? How have you experienced present sensations like these transporting you beyond the limitations of time and space? How important are such “outward and visible signs” to you—or not—in nurturing “inward, spiritual realities”?

3. As noted in the background section above, we might question Judas’ motives when he grouses about what a waste it was for Mary to use so much costly perfume to honor and show her affection for Jesus, but many today continue to make Judas’ point. Is it really right to spend so much money on church buildings and furnishings, when the money could be used for the poor instead? Wouldn’t care for the poor be a more fitting way to show our affection and honor for Jesus?

Yet, some people seem to be drawn to faith and a life of following Jesus in part by way of the expensive displays of affection and honor that one generation after another makes for succeeding generations. Many church buildings are not merely utilitarian spaces where groups can gather for worship out of the weather. (A wooden barn would do just as well as a vaulted cathedral of stone.) Some churches, like St. Stephen’s Church, are fairly ornate buildings, with impressive architecture and expensive appointments. “Why was this money not given to the poor?” Judas might ask.



It is interesting to ponder how the church might strike some sort of balance that draws more people to the Christian faith, so that the church might do more meaningful ministry with the poor and marginalized. But how does the church best honor a savior who was poor and homeless? Some ornate buildings are private and for the use of those who can pay for them. But churches are public spaces where all are welcome. Does that make a difference somehow? Is there a ministry there, simply in providing beautiful, sacred spaces for all, rich and poor alike?

And while such questions are interesting to ponder (how should the church exercise restraint in church expenditures for the sake of the poor?), it can be a little tougher to apply these same questions to our individual Christian lives (how should I exercise restraint in personal expenditure for the sake of the poor?). And finally, how important is it to serve and care for the poor in spirit (people who are bereaved, having trouble in their marriages, struggling with addiction, lost in depression or anxiety, etc.) regardless of their financial station in life?

4. What do you imagine is going on with Jesus, emotionally and spiritually, at this dinner party? Do you imagine him cool and collected, on the eve of his entry into Jerusalem, unconcerned about the fact that officials are out to kill him and large crowds are anxiously speculating about him?

Or, was Jesus hurting inside? Was he preoccupied and worried about what might happen next? With so much going on all around him, could he really be present to the people who have lovingly invited him to be their guest for supper?

What do you know about being so preoccupied or anxious, when people around you are trying to care for you? And what do you know about trying to love and care for someone who is so deeply preoccupied or worried?

5. When Mary anoints Jesus with this costly perfume and wipes his feet with her hair, what do you think is going on in Jesus' heart and mind, before Judas interrupts this loving moment with his indignation? Was Mary's display of affection a kind of balm for Jesus' troubled spirit?
6. The Gospel lesson says that Judas' indignation is false or hypocritical. He really didn't care about the poor, but his self-righteousness probably sounded good. What do you know about such duplicitousness, not only on the part of others but in your own behavior?
7. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

One might wonder if Jesus had the need most of us have to be noticed and to be uniquely and particularly loved, even though there are many people all around us who are just as needy.

When has someone been Mary to you in this way, focusing in on you with a touching and lavish show of devotion? What did that feel like?

Who in your life might benefit from the balm of your lavish display of tenderness and affection?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Palm Sunday, Year C

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## The Gospel: Luke 19:28-40

After telling a parable to the crowd at Jericho, Jesus went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

"Blessed is the king  
who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Peace in heaven,  
and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

## Background and general observations

*Palm Sunday, also known as "Passion Sunday," 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."*

*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? Where do the liturgies of Holy Week fit in your prayer and devotional practices as a Christian?*

*[An aside: It is interesting that Christians appropriated a pagan festival of the sun to be the Christian celebration of Jesus' birth. Some now note the irony that the pagan culture has now re-appropriated the celebration of Jesus' birth as a time for commercialism and bacchanalia.]*

*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. 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. Interestingly, what we are most passionate about is also what we are willing to *suffer for*. Palm Sunday and Holy Week are about focusing on Jesus’ deepest passion, his deepest suffering.

What do you believe Jesus was most passionate about? How did he demonstrate this deepest passion? What is *your* deepest passion? How much are you willing to suffer for this passion?

The Greek word “pathos” also means “to suffer” and it is where we get the words “pathetic,” “sympathy,” and “empathy.” It is interesting to realize the ways these words relate to one another and to “compassion” — which means “with suffering” or “to suffer with.”

Empathy is a closer synonym to compassion than to sympathy. The subtle difference is that *em-* derives from the Greek *en-* meaning “within, in.” So the difference in sympathy and empathy is the difference in *with* and *within*. One of the lessons in Max Lucado’s annotated Gospel of Mark, in a study of Jesus’ healing of the leper, reads like this: “Sympathy says, ‘I feel bad that you’re hungry.’ Empathy says, ‘I know something about how you feel; I was hungry once myself.’ But compassion says, ‘Friend, let’s go get something to eat’ . . .”

How might knowing about these words inform your way of being in the world? What might this knowledge teach you about your personal relationships, especially with family or friends you find it difficult to “suffer with”?

2. 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 that 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?

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? 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?

3. For some, gazing at the cross can deepen an awareness of our own propensity for ugliness and our complicity in evil. Being reminded of our own sinfulness, many believe, can be healing—we are not constantly blaming others for the wrongs in the world; instead, we realize that we are all in this together.

What do you know about such healing power from the cross? What do you know about projecting your own faults onto others, believing that sin is a much greater problem “out there” than “in here”? What might Holy Week have to teach us?

4. Martin Laird (author of *Into the Silent Land*, *A Sunlit Absence*, and *An Ocean of Light*) 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 both *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. Then, consider how Jesus evinced in his last days both deep trust and human distress. How can suffering *with* and *within* Jesus’ passion free you to live more completely into the life God has given you to live?

5. 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 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 nearby.

What do you know from your own life of this dynamic? When have you experienced a profound sense of presence while darkness or evil was 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

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Easter Day, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

## 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. 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.*

*Among the noteworthy details in Luke's account above, we might ponder the following: We notice that the women were "perplexed" when they saw the stone rolled away from the tomb and then that they were "terrified" when two men in dazzling clothes suddenly were standing beside them. After the two men address the women, they "remembered" what Jesus had told them, and then they return to the eleven and recount their experience at the tomb. There is not a moment of recognition or jubilation; instead, we are hearing about people being perplexed, puzzled, terrified.*

*We notice also that the eleven dismiss the women's testimony as "an idle tale." And when Peter decides to investigate this himself, he is simply "amazed at what had happened." In other words, this passage seems to leave us hanging. There is not rousing climax, just an air of uncertainty and wonder. Could it be that this is just the sort of state that might be most conducive to receiving a divine encounter? Could it be that one of the barriers to faith for many today is that we assume we know what is going on, or we approach the Bible with an*

*analytical mind, searching for specific answers to specific questions? Does God need to shake us up and disorient us, in order to prepare us for an experience beyond our imaginations?*

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

1. “But the words of the women seemed an idle tale to the eleven, and they did not believe them.”

What do you know about having a profound experience that is difficult to communicate or that is dismissed by others?

In your life of faith, have you had sacred experiences that you might be reluctant to share or express? Is this, perhaps, the nature of divine/human encounter? If religion is at least in part about human attempts to express the inexpressible, what does that insight mean for religious communities and the way religious people relate to one another?

2. It is one thing to be perplexed and amazed about an absence (the empty tomb), and it is another thing to be perplexed about a presence. The very next story in Luke’s Gospel, just after this passage, is the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. In it, the disciples experience the presence of the risen Jesus, as they walk and talk with him on the road. When the eyes of the disciples are suddenly opened, and they recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread together, they look back on their experience of Jesus’ presence with them along the way and remark, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us?”

As you look back on your own journey of faith, can you identify times when you felt a similar kind of warming within, or a sense of presence that was mysterious at the time?

3. In his colloquial rendering of the New Testament called *The Message*, the late Eugene Peterson translated the last couple of verses in this passage this way: “But Peter jumped to his feet and ran to the tomb. He stooped to look in and saw a few grave clothes, that’s all. He walked away puzzled, shaking his head.”

What do you know about God doing something profound or extraordinary in the world or in your life, and you are simply left puzzled, wondering what has happened or what is going on?

Many of us feel a need to understand and to control as much as possible about our lives. How might we become a bit more open to the possibility that God is at work in ways that are beyond our imagination? Ponder the difference between being puzzled and perplexed about life, as opposed to feeling a sense of awe and wonder.

4. Imagine the difference between that first Easter Day and today. The followers of Jesus are in disarray. They are mourning his death and wondering what it all means and what they will do next. There is confusion and concern, even terror among the faithful. Today we mark Easter with brass and timpani, “Hallelujahs,” bright clothes, feasting, and the greeting, “Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.” How does it feel to experience the resurrection this year?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Easter 2, Year C

## The Gospel: 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 means fifty), 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.*

*The Second Sunday of Easter 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. 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. How might the "locked room" be working as a metaphor? Is it a symbol for the human heart? Our truest self? The soul?

Against what or against whom have you locked the door? In this passage, Jesus enters the room in spite of it being locked. Have you ever felt something similar, that a door had been symbolically pried open or broken down even when you attempted to keep it shut? If so, what was that experience like?

3. "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?

4. "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? Are you withholding forgiveness? At what cost to yourself?

5. 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. ...<sup>1</sup>*

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?

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: An Introduction to the Language of Theology*

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Easter 3, Year C

## The Gospel: John 21:1-19

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

## Background and general observations

*This passage falls at the very end of the Gospel according to John. After the above, there are only six more verses to John:*

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" This is the disciple who

testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.—John 21:20-25

*That's it. The end.*

*But the verses that immediately precede the passage we are studying this week (John 20:30-31) would have made a fine ending to John's Gospel:*

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.

*So, we can see how the story of Jesus showing himself to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius serves as a kind of epilogue. The interesting thing about this epilogue is that its details might stir in us memories of things that happened during Jesus' earthly ministry with the disciples:*

- *This story of the resurrected Jesus feeding his disciples fish on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius would recall how Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish in that same place (John 6:1-14)*
- *The fact that the disciples fish all night and do not catch anything until the resurrected Jesus tells them where to cast their nets might recall the fact that in the Gospel stories the disciples never catch anything without Jesus' help or guidance.*
- *The fact that the disciples do not recognize Jesus at first would recall other similar instances, from Mary mistaking Jesus as a gardener to Thomas needing proof (and in Luke, the disciples on the road to Emmaus).*
- *Jesus inviting the disciples to breakfast and serving them might recall the meal they had had in the upper room where Jesus fed them and taught them about serving.*
- *Jesus asking Peter three times if Peter loves him would recall the three times that Peter denied Jesus before the cock crew.*
- *And Jesus' instructions to "feed my sheep" would recall Jesus' teaching about the Good Shepherd (John 10:14)*

*In addition, some have suggested that the interesting detail about Peter being naked while he was fishing and putting on clothes before he springs into the water might recall for us the story of Adam being naked in the Garden of Eden and hiding himself from God. Peter puts on his clothes because he is still ashamed, but he does spring into the water to approach Jesus. Could it be that Jesus' encounter with Peter is a kind of undoing of Adam's trespass? For a Gospel writer like John who begins his Gospel this way, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. . .," such an idea might not be so far-fetched. At the very least, this interaction between Peter and Jesus does serve as a kind of reconciliation between the disciple and his Lord following Peter's denial of Jesus. Jesus' love extends even after that.*

*Our passage for this week, in other words, is a richly symbolic epilogue that might help the faithful in our own day to consider how Jesus is still with us, still performing miracles, still guiding us in our various endeavors, still serving and feeding us, still redeeming and forgiving us. And even so, we are often still unable to recognize him.*

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

### 1. “I’m going fishing.”

It almost seems like a quirky detail. But Peter and the disciples have just been through serious and bloody trauma. Then, they had some incredible experiences of the resurrected Jesus. And Peter announces that he’s going fishing.

Of course, fishing is Peter’s livelihood and profession. And one might recognize that when we have gone through traumatic or disturbing or overly stimulating events, we all might very naturally seek refuge in the familiar, in what we know.

But if going to work or returning to his familiar, safe world was Peter’s way of avoiding another strange encounter or running away from the shame he felt about denying Jesus, his plan did not work. Jesus seeks out the disciples in their familiar environment, in their place of work.

Do you have a sense of God meeting you in the routines of your daily life and work? Or, do you tend to relegate encounters with the divine to “special” times and places—church, meditation, prayer, retreat, a hike in the mountains?

As you ponder your daily life and routines, consider how God might be calling out to you, seeking to guide you, or even seeking to serve and feed you. The disciples do not at first recognize Jesus on the beach. Can you imagine that you, too, often do not recognize him?

### 2. “It is the Lord!”

It is interesting that the first disciple to recognize Jesus is John, the “Beloved disciple.” John was the one who reclined at Jesus’ breast at the Last Supper, and some have seen John as a “contemplative” disciple.

What role might contemplation and love play in helping a person recognize the Lord?

### 3. When Peter heard it was the Lord, he put on his clothes and jumped into the sea. Although John was the first one to recognize the Lord, Peter was the first one to reach him. John might be a prototype of the contemplative Christian; Peter could serve as the prototype of the active Christian.

What is the role of contemplation in the Christian life, and what is the role of action? Do you find it a challenge to balance contemplation and action?

Do you tend to be more of a contemplative (John) type, or more of an active (Peter) type? What are the perils associated with being overly contemplative or overly active?

### 4. Consider the observations above in the “Background” section regarding the naked Peter putting on his clothes and jumping into the sea.

What role does shame play in our relationship with God?

What role does shame play in our relationships with each other?

What do you believe God wants to tell us when we feel shame?

5. 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 do you think it means to “feed my sheep” and “tend my lambs” and “follow me”? What is he saying to you about how to live your life?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 4, Year C

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## The Gospel: John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

## Background and general observations

*The Fourth Sunday in the Easter season is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday." It might be interesting to ponder why the image of Jesus as Good Shepherd has been so important to Christians through the ages. It might also be interesting to ponder the [Collect for the Day](#): "O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."*

*Since neither shepherds nor sheep are part of our everyday experience, it can be helpful to recall some of the routine practices of shepherds in Jesus' day. One was the practice of combining flocks at night, so that shepherds could take turns keeping watch for predators. In this way, shepherds who had worked all day could get some sleep without having to worry about the safety of their sheep. In the morning, each shepherd could stand in a different part of the field surrounding the pen and call to his sheep with his distinctive voice or pipe on a simple instrument. The sheep all knew the distinctive call or voice of their shepherd and would follow the one who, they knew, kept them safe.*

*It is also interesting to note the difference between cattle herding and shepherding. Whereas cattle are often herded by "driving" them from behind on horseback, with whips and loud, threatening calls, sheep need to follow their shepherd. If the shepherd were to get behind the sheep and try to drive them like cattle, the sheep would all run to get around behind the shepherd. As some have pointed out, sheep don't need to be threatened and driven by whips and yells. Instead, sheep seem to think of their shepherd as one of them, as one of the family, so to speak.*

*Thus, we can see why the collect of the day for Good Shepherd Sunday is so appropriate—we pray that we may know the one who calls us (recognize his voice or call), and we pray that we may follow where he leads (as opposed to being whipped and driven). With so many "voices" calling out to us each day, we might ask ourselves, how do we recognize the voice of God? And are we people who need to be "driven" or threatened, whipped and prodded by God to go in the right direction, or are we people who need to listen or be attentive in order to follow God?*

*It is also helpful to remember that John's Gospel has several different "I am" sayings of Jesus. For example, "I am the Bread of Life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the door or gate," "I am the vine, you are the branches," "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," . . . So, when Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd, we*

might surmise that this is just one more facet of his relationship to us. What do you hear God saying to you about your relationship to God in these “I am” sayings, and which are most meaningful to you?

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

1. In the 10th chapter of John’s Gospel which is read on Good Shepherd Sunday during Year B (we are in Year C), Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” Some have seen this portion of the lesson as indicating God’s desire to draw all people to God. Jesus says elsewhere that when he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. Jesus also speaks in Luke’s Gospel about the shepherd’s willingness to leave 99 sheep in order to go after one sheep that is lost.

How does this strike you? Do you think of God as One who actively seeks you and wants to embrace all people? Or, do you think of God as One who passively waits for people to look for him?

2. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. . . . The Father and I are one.”

Think about this intimate knowledge—Jesus is saying he knows us in the same way he knows the Father. That is, just as Jesus dwells in the Father and the Father dwells in Jesus, so we dwell in him and he dwells in us. What do you make of this idea that God is so very close to you that God even dwells in you? What difference does it make in your daily life, when you have a sense of this intimate, indwelling presence of God who loves you so much that he would rather lay down his own life before he would let any harm come to you?

Could it be that when we are feeling separate from God or uncertain of the reality of God, we are just being “forgetful” of the deepest truth about our life and who we are?

St. Augustine wrote, “You, God, were within me, and I was far away.” Augustine went through a long period of time when he was drawn to this philosophy and then that one, from one way of life to another, often living a self-indulgent life. One interpretation of the short quotation is that Augustine was following one hired hand after another, moving from this voice to that one, when all the while the Good Shepherd was calling to him and was even within him. Does that have a ring of truth about it in your life?

Another analogy might be with the story of Elijah who did not discern the voice of God in the thunder, the earthquake or the fire, but in the “still, small voice” (also translated as “sheer silence”). How might you cultivate the ability to listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, the One who gives abundant life, as opposed to the many other voices that seem to be flashier or sexier but that only let you down in the end?

3. Continuing with the theme of voices or callings, which are the voices that *give you life*, and which are the voices that *take life away from you*? Can you discern the voice of the Good Shepherd in those voices, people, activities that put life into you (give you a sense of abundant life)? And can you discern the voice of the hired hand who might call to you and promise to lead you, but in the end will let you down and forsake you?

Are you an expert in hearing and interpreting certain voices that are not of God? Have there been times in your life when you realized too late that you had been listening to and following a hired hand?

Is this a useful way of thinking about how we find and recognize the voice of God in our lives?

4. As noted in the Background section above, Jesus' use of shepherding is a compelling metaphor especially when we realize the particular behavior of these animals, their desire to walk with their shepherd. What do you think Jesus hopes to teach us? Are we people who need to be "driven" or threatened, whipped and prodded by God to go in the right direction, or are we people who need to listen and be attentive in order to follow God?

In thinking about your own spiritual journey, are you able to distinguish when you were walking with God or following God—in trust, by faith—and when you felt you were being prodded or whipped, perhaps in fear of punishment or abandonment?



# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Easter 5, Year C

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## The Gospel: John 13:31-35

At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

## Background and general observations

*The central and pivotal importance of this passage for Christians cannot be overstated. "Judas had gone out." This is how the lesson begins, and the reader is given to understand that something has now been set in motion that cannot be stopped. Judas has gone to betray Jesus, and this act will set in motion the events that lead to Jesus' arrest, trial, beating, crucifixion and death.*

*The setting, of course, is the Lord's Supper, the Passover meal of Jesus and his closest friends. And when Judas goes out to plot Jesus' betrayal, Jesus says to his friends who have remained, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." There is a profound irony that Jesus' betrayal by one of the people closest to him leads to God's glorification, and it is important to note that in the very next verses after the passage above, Jesus announces that Peter will betray him, also. "Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times." (v. 38) Thus, this pivotal passage in the Gospel of John is framed by betrayal and denial.*

*The heart of the passage, however, is Jesus' "new commandment," the "mandatum novum" from which we get the word "Maundy," as in Maundy Thursday. Liturgically minded Episcopalians might recall how the drama of Holy Week has Maundy Thursday as a poignant and distinctive highlight. As is the case in this passage we are studying, the Maundy Thursday service is a powerful mix of betrayal, tenderness, and glory. Although red is the liturgical color for all of Holy Week (denoting passion, blood and death), white has long been regarded as an optional color for Maundy Thursday, because we are celebrating Jesus' loving act in giving us the Lord's Supper. Of course, the Maundy Thursday worship service concludes with a foreboding all-night vigil of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. We might ponder again the breadth and depth of human emotion here, as well as the breadth and depth of Jesus' love.*

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

1. As noted above in the "Background" section, there is powerful irony in the fact that Jesus' betrayal by one of the people closest to him leads to his and God's glorification.

What do you know from your own life about a betrayal that led to glory? Where was God in that situation?

2. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

What does it mean for a person to love as Jesus loved? When have you felt that you loved in this way? Have you ever felt so loved by someone?

What leads a person to love as Jesus loved, and how can we better position ourselves to live and love in this way?

Are you able to recall a time when you loved someone who perhaps did not deserve your affection? Have you ever been cared for in such a way that you felt you were not worthy of such love?

What do you think Jesus would have to say about our abilities to love beyond what we feel we deserve? What kind of effect can that have on a life?

3. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer.”

Jesus speaks to the disciples with tenderness and compassion, at a time when they are surely frightened.

What is your experience of the Presence of God in times when you have been most anxious or afraid? What are the resources of your faith that seem to calm your troubled heart? What consoles you?

When you are feeling frightened, are there things you can do that better position you to receive God’s calming and strengthening influence?

4. This passage invites us to ponder what it means to be a follower of Jesus. So what does a Christian life look like? What must a Christian believe or do, in order to be considered a Christian? Could it really be as simple as a life of love? Could we really say that to be a Christian is to love, and to love is to be a Christian? Or, is it more complicated than that?

Imagine that someone who does not know anything about Christianity approaches you and wants you to explain it all. How would you explain to that person what it means to be a Christian?

Are you eager to share the Christian way of life as good news?

How would you use your own experience to testify to the good news of Jesus and the Christian Way?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Easter 6, Year C

## The Gospel: John 14:23-29

Jesus said to Judas (not Iscariot), “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.”

or

## John 5:1-9

After Jesus healed the son of the official in Capernaum, there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

## Background and general observations

*As you can see, we are sending you two Gospel readings this week. The passage from the fifth chapter of John's Gospel is the story of the man who had been ill for 38 years and who lay near the pool called Beth-zatha, It is one of the few Gospel passages that was not included in the Eucharistic lectionary for the Book of Common Prayer. Now that many churches have started using the “Revised Common Lectionary” (as we have at St. Stephen's), many Episcopalians are hearing this story read in Sunday worship for the first time. It is a powerful story, and comparatively little known, but we're including it in this study guide.*

*The Thursday after the Sixth Sunday of Easter is Ascension Day, which is a major feast of the Christian church. On Ascension Day, Christians remember the story of Jesus “going away,” ascending into heaven in the sight of the disciples. And from Ascension Day to the Day of Pentecost is a period of 10 days. Thus, there is this interesting period of time in which Jesus has bodily departed, and the Holy Spirit has not yet come. The reading from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel anticipates this very important sequence of events and has Jesus preparing the disciples for what must surely have been a confusing or even frightening time. Here, Jesus assures the disciples that although he is about to go away, the Holy Spirit will come and “will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*

*Below, you will find two things: first, a reflection by Tom Ehrich on John 14:23-29; and second, a guided meditation on John 5:1-9 that is adapted from Anthony De Mello's book, Sadhana: A Way to God. This guided meditation is a form of prayer made popular by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuits. It involves imagining oneself as a participant in a scene from the Gospels and allowing it to come to life. An effective way of engaging in this way of prayer is to have a member of your small group to lead you all through it. Such a prayerful engagement with the Gospel story can be life-changing, and it is worth setting aside a period of at least 30 minutes for this exercise, in order to leave plenty of time for silent attentiveness to the Presence of Jesus coming through to us in this unique way. Allow for time at the end of the guided meditation for people to sit quietly with Jesus in the group. Then, invite any who wish to share their experiences to do so, respecting the wishes of any who prefer simply to ponder this in their hearts.*

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

1. Tom Ehrich, who writes insightful daily meditations on God in daily life (subscribe at [morningwalkmedia.com](http://morningwalkmedia.com)), writes about the passage from John 14:

Normally, when the founder of an enterprise departs, the enterprise struggles and often collapses. This happens regularly in businesses and in start-up churches. Jesus, however, anticipated the crisis that his departure meant for the disciples. He promised them an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who would remind them of everything he had said. And he left behind his unique form of peace, which wasn't like the world's peace but rather stirred and transformed their hearts, enabling them to live without fear.

It has been two thousand years since Jesus left, but the crisis keeps happening. We struggle on our own, and often our faith or our faith community collapses. The same gifts, however, come to us: the Holy Spirit and peace.

Church history suggests that from the earliest years, Christians wanted Jesus to have left them other assets, like power, wealth, a call to rule the world, indeed the power to control access to heaven and hell and to take human life. That is human brokenness talking, however, and human pride and avarice. God gives what he promised: an Advocate to remind us what Jesus said and did, and a unique form of peace.

Some day we will realize that those gifts are more than enough.

- A. How do you respond to this reflection? In what ways do you agree or disagree with Tom Ehrich?
  - B. This is not the first time Jesus says "Do not let your hearts be troubled." 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 your life?
2. Adapted from *Sadhana*, by Anthony De Mello:

St. Ignatius of Loyola recommended a way of prayer that involves taking a scene from the life of Christ and reliving it, taking part in the scene as if it were actually occurring and you were a participant. You will want to take a few moments to calm and still yourself, taking a deep

breath, slowly exhaling, and then allowing the cares and occupations of your present situation to recede.

Having relaxed, read through the Gospel passage from John 5, just as a way of being familiar with the details of the story. Next, close your eyes (if someone else is reading the meditation for you) and consider the following as a means to allow this story to come to life. The places with three dots ... are for significant pauses, to let it all sink in:

*Now, imagine the pool called Beth-zatha ... the five porches ... the pool ... the surroundings ... Take time to see it all in your imagination.*

*What kind of place is it? Is it clean or dirty? ... Is it a large place or small? ... Notice the architecture ... the weather ... the temperature ...*

*Now, allow the entire scene to come to life ... And imagine that you are there in the scene. Look around at the people gathered around the pool ... How many are there? ... What sort of people are they? ... How are they dressed? ... What are they doing? ...*

*What kind of illnesses are people suffering from? ... What are they talking about? ...*

*You are participating in the scene. What are you doing? ... How are you feeling? ... Why are you here? ...*

*Are you speaking with anyone? ...*

*Notice the man who has been ill for thirty-eight years ... Where is he, and how is he dressed? ... What is he doing? ...*

*Walk over to him and speak with him. What do you say to him? ... How does he respond? ... Spend some time getting to know about him and the details of his life ... What are you feeling, as you hear his story? ...*

*As you and the man are talking, notice out of the corner of your eye that Jesus has entered this place ... Watch him. What is Jesus doing? And what do you think he is feeling? ...*

*Now, notice that Jesus is coming toward you and the sick man. What are you feeling? ...*

*You step aside so that Jesus can speak with the sick man. What is Jesus saying to the man? ... How does the man answer? ...*

*Spend some time pondering Jesus' question to the man, "Do you want to be made well?" ... Now, listen to Jesus tell the man to "stand up, take your mat and walk." ... Notice the man's reaction ... his first attempt to get up ... the miracle ... Take it all in, including Jesus' reaction.*

*Jesus now turns to you ... He engages you in conversation ...*

*Is there any physical, emotional, or spiritual illness that you are suffering from? ... Speak to Jesus about it ... What does Jesus say? ...*

*Listen to his words to you, "Do you want to get well?" Do you really mean what you say, when you say you want to be healed? ... Are you ready to accept all of the consequences of healing? ...*

*You are at a moment of grace ... Do you believe healing is now possible? ... Listen to Jesus pronounce your healing ... Do you believe that something is already happening within you, even if you cannot perceive it at the moment? ...*

*Spend some quiet time with Jesus ...*

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Easter 7, Year C

## The Gospel: John 17:20-26

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

## Background and general observations

*Ascension Day is the Thursday before the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the fortieth day of the Easter Season. We are now in the midst of the ten-day season of the Ascension, which culminates on the Day of Pentecost, the fiftieth day after the Resurrection (Pente = fifty).*

*This Seventh Sunday of Easter is peculiar. In the drama of the liturgical year, Christ has ascended into heaven, and the Holy Spirit has not yet come. So, Christians are perhaps drawn to a more introspective place, even a place of "unknowing"—we are not focused on the resurrected Christ, because he has ascended, and we are not focused on the Holy Spirit, because the Day of Pentecost is still a week away. In a sense, we are left with ourselves. Could it be that this time of absence and stillness is necessary to reveal the truth of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit who is as close to us as our own breath? Maybe we need a time when we are not so outwardly focused, so that we can come to recognize and claim the indwelling presence?*

*The Gospel lesson appointed for this Sunday is the conclusion of what Biblical scholars call Jesus' "Farewell Discourse," a long section which began with chapter 13 of John's Gospel. In this passage, we find Jesus praying that the community he is leaving will manifest the same unity that Jesus has with the Father. This unity will be important for followers of Jesus when they are expelled from the synagogues and must then meet in house churches. There is a tension between "the world" which represents all those forces that work against and do not know God, and "the word" which is one with God. Jesus is praying that the community will become one, as Jesus and the Father are one, and that the united community will dwell in God, as God dwells in them.*

*This mutual indwelling and the unity of the community will be evidence to "the world" of the truth of the Gospel and the power of God's love.*

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

1. Jesus is saying much more than, "Y'all be nice to each other when I'm gone." Clearly, Jesus is talking about his followers demonstrating a profound union, a true oneness. Of course, for many, his vision of unity seems to be in stark contrast to our present divisions in politics, in re-

ligion, and even in domestic life. It seems important for many of us to be “right” about important issues of the day—even in a morally ambiguous world—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?

2. When, if ever, have you experienced a true sense of oneness with others? What were the conditions which allowed for or helped to foster such oneness?

What are the forces at work in the world or in ourselves that separate us from one another or that work against the kind of Godly union Jesus envisions for his followers?

What is it about Jesus and the way of the cross that helps a community to become one in the way Jesus describes?

As you ponder your own life, what changes do you need to make in order to be more available for oneness with others? What seems to be in your way and how can you address such a barrier?

3. When many people speak of “the mission of the church,” they are likely talking about outreach ministries and missionary work overseas. But in this passage, Jesus seems to be saying that a primary “mission” of the church is to manifest a united, loving community in the midst of a broken and divided world, an “inward-reach” as much as an *outreach*.

How is a community’s oneness (its unity and love) a powerful ministry to the world?

Do you see such oneness in Christian communities today? Is oneness among Christians typically based on like-mindedness and similar opinions or political views? Or, is there a deeper unity (a unity in God) that is available to people and that transcends social and political views?

How can you promote this deeper kind of unity in your own Christian community?

4. Jesus’ extended “Farewell Discourse” ends in love. Love is made visible in relationships. We can talk about the nature of love, but people only “get it” when they see love made visible in the way people relate to each other. In other words, it is one thing to understand intellectually what love is, and quite another—and more profound—thing to know love personally, by heart.

In the prayers for a newly married couple in the Book of Common Prayer, we pray that the couple’s love for each other may be “a sign of Christ’s love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 429)

I have often told young couples that there may well come a time in their lives when they question whether or not they have lived meaningful or worthy lives. Some people at midlife, for example, question how their lives can have more of an impact on the world, and so on. But this prayer in the marriage service, and the prayer of Jesus just before his arrest and crucifixion, suggest that we do the world a tremendous service by showing the world what love looks like in our relationships with each other. Perhaps, I tell some young couples, the most important



thing they can do is to tend to their relationships in such a way that everyone can see and believe that unity *does* overcome estrangement, forgiveness *does* heal guilt, and joy *does* conquer despair.

Consider how your relationships with others might have eternal, Godly significance. What changes or adjustments might happen in your life if you believed that your highest calling was to tend to your most personal love relationships?

We have all experienced the pain of broken relationships. Many of us have had to deal with the tragedy of divorce. How is God manifest in the ways we deal with our pain and brokenness (“forgiveness healing guilt,” “joy conquering despair”)?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## The Day of Pentecost, Year C

### 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 Acts (which is a continuation of Luke's Gospel) is one of the best known passages from the Bible, we thought we'd focus 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 “all good theology is really a species of poetry,” 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: “suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house...” 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. The scene we have here in the Book of Acts is one of power, noise, multiple languages, and so on. It sounds chaotic and, 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, or a time when you felt “inspired” and filled with some divine sense. Was it a powerful and even bewildering event?

Or, have you experienced 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)

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. The event of Pentecost describes how a fearful, disorderly and mournful band of people is transformed into a courageous and inspired group who will change the world.

Have you ever experienced such an infusion of courage and life before? How did that event change you?

3. It has been said that the central insight of monotheism is that, if there is only one God, that means that all 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 “their own members”? What is it we all must still learn?

4. “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?

5. 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.

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?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Trinity Sunday, Year C

### John 16:12-15

Jesus said to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

### Background and general observations

*Is it irony, grace, or both, that the only Sunday in the church year set aside to celebrate a church doctrine, Trinity Sunday, follows the major feast of Pentecost, when we celebrate the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of timid disciples into emboldened leaders? Some might say that the day on which we celebrate disciples speaking in many different tongues and appearing to bystanders to be drunk at mid-day stands in sharp contrast to a day on which we celebrate the carefully crafted and sober doctrine of the Trinity. Of course, the Trinity is not so much the **object** of faith, as it is the **explication** of faith. The experience of God is ineffable and multifaceted. We hardly know what to say, but we feel compelled to say something. The doctrine of the Trinity is the central dogma of Christianity that, among other things, gave words and concepts to people in the second, third and fourth centuries to use in talking about something that strained the limits of language.*

*Throughout the centuries during which the Doctrine of the Trinity was being developed, numerous "Trinitarian" ideas were taught that were ultimately deemed to be heretical or unorthodox. Even after Trinitarian teaching was codified by the Council of Nicaea, many devout followers of "The Way" of Jesus held contrary ideas about the nature of God, and very often they paid for having these different ideas with their life. One cannot help but wonder, "What does it mean to obey Jesus' commandment to 'love one another' when the person we are supposed to love has an idea or belief about the nature of God that is contrary to the official position?" Throughout much of Christian history, church officials have handled such dissenting beliefs by putting the errant believer to death. For many of us today, it is hard to see such executions as the Way of Jesus.*

*This brings us to the Scripture appointed for Trinity Sunday this year. "I still have many things to say to you," Jesus tells his disciples before he leaves them, "but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. . . ." Christians came to believe that God the Son proceeds from God the Father, and that God the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father [and the Son]. In other words, the Spirit will continue to lead the disciples (will continue to lead us) in the same Way that Jesus has revealed to us. There is much more to this Way than Jesus can speak during his earthly ministry. This lesson invites us to ponder how the Holy Spirit continues to "teach" us and to "lead" us. And the appointment of this lesson on Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday set aside to celebrate an official doctrine of the church, might cause some to wonder if the role of the Holy Spirit is to lead us into more precise doctrines and dogmas, more precise words for ineffable truths; or, is the role of the Holy Spirit to lead us into a Way of Life and a way of being in community with one another that exemplifies the Way of Jesus?*

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

1. The community out of which John's Gospel arose could not possibly fathom many of the cultural, historical, and technological developments that have taken place over the last two thousand years. (Frankly, I could not have imagined so many developments over the past 25 years! Internet? iPad? Skype?...)

Some have sensed that the Holy Spirit has led Christians deeper into truth by abolishing biblically-sanctioned institutions such as slavery and the subjugation of women. Girls are now able to serve as acolytes in the Episcopal Church, and women can now serve on vestries. Women in the United States can now be ordained, and we have female bishops.

However, other Christians find the above contrary to God the Holy Spirit. Many other issues face Christians: stem cell research, artificial prolonging of life, homosexuality, religious pluralism... How do you discern what is of the Holy Spirit and what is not? Is there a "litmus test" for good theology?

How can a community tell when it is being guided by the Holy Spirit vs. when it is being caught up in very human "group think"?

2. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

Most parents can identify with Jesus' dilemma: they wish they could tell their children more, but they know that their children will not understand certain things yet. Teachers know the same about their students.

Look back over the course of your life. What are some of the things the Holy Spirit has had to teach you over time, things that you simply were not able to bear when you were younger?

As you ponder how you've changed (or been led into deeper truth), how does that affect how you view your future?

3. How do you believe the Holy Spirit continues to lead people into truth? When have you sensed yourself being drawn more deeply into the mystery of God and your relationship with God?

Does the Holy Spirit use worship, music, sermons, Christian fellowship?

Does the Holy Spirit work through our relationships with the poor and marginalized, through our marriages and relationships with our children?

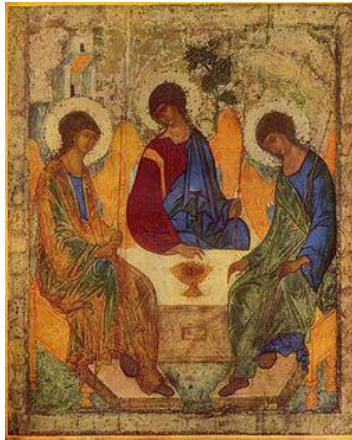
Does the Holy Spirit speak through art, poetry, novels and other fine arts?

How do you experience the Holy Spirit coming through to you most powerfully in your daily life?

4. What are some of the signs of a community that has been drawn or led by the Holy Spirit more deeply into all the truth?

What are some of the signs that the Holy Spirit has led a friendship or a marriage or a relationship with a child into all truth?

5. Not long ago, when I was going through a particularly stressful time, a couple of friends of mine who are contemplative missionaries overseas, and who knew something of my stress, called me to tell me that they were praying for me. Specifically, they said that they were placing me in the midst of the Rublev Trinity, one of the most famous of all Christian icons. The Rublev Trinity depicts the story of the three strangers who visited Abraham and Sarah. The three strangers are sometimes referred to as angels (“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” Hebrews 13:2), and Rublev depicts them as the three persons of the Trinity.



Andrei Rublev, Public domain,  
Wikimedia Commons

My missionary friends pointed out that there was a space at the table with the three angelic visitors (or the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and when my friends were praying, they were placing me in their midst. I was enveloped in the loving embrace of God, they told me. Rest there.

Consider spending some time with this ancient icon. Ponder how there is a place for you at the table. Place yourself in the midst of this self-giving community of persons, this communion. And consider placing someone you love in this circle of love.

This way of praying is sometimes called “holy gazing.” You do not have to think of anything to say; you can simply be still and rest in the moment, as you feel yourself drawn into this holy space, through this icon or window into eternity.

What is your experience of this way of praying?



# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Proper 22, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'

## Background and general observations

*Immediately preceding these verses from the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus has warned his disciples that "occasions for stumbling are bound to come," and he tells them that it would be better for them if a great millstone were hung around their necks and they were thrown into the sea than for any of them to cause another to stumble. Specifically, Jesus is teaching them about the importance of forgiveness, about how they must forgive anyone who repents, even if that person sins repeatedly, over and over, "seven times a day." In other words, the context for this lesson is Jesus' teaching his disciples the imperative of forgiveness and the deathly danger inherent in not forgiving. (Luke 17:1-4)*

*The apostles seem to respond to this teaching of Jesus with a kind of urgency and even desperation: "Lord, increase our faith!" One interpretation is that the disciples find this teaching about the imperative of forgiveness to be overwhelming and too hard for them. If they are expected to forgive like this, they are going to need more faith than they have. At least, that's what they seem to believe and fear.*

*Next comes the parable of the unworthy or "worthless" slave. The Greek word for "slave" is the same word for "servant," but however you translate this parable, it will sound foreign and difficult for many modern people who are rightly repulsed by the institution of slavery. However, Jesus is simply using a well-known convention of his day to awaken a new perspective in his hearers.*

*We live in a time when the issue of self-worth is of great importance. "I am somebody," and "I am a man" are familiar rallying cries and correctives from the days of the Civil Rights movement for people who had been treated as "worthless servants." So, for Jesus to invite his disciples to consider themselves as slaves might be jarring. We can remember, however, that Jesus says of himself that he is among them "as one who serves" and that this is where true greatness is found. (Luke 22:27) It might also be good to remember the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (or, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector) which is found in Luke 18:9-14.*

*When taken in the larger context of the Gospel according to Luke, the metaphor of the "worthless slave" perhaps simply illuminates a deeper truth about where our true life is to be found. That is, it is our delight and true life to live in accordance with the ways of God. We are not to trust in our own merits or our personal worthiness, but simply to discover the abundant life that is found in doing as the Lord requires, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)*

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

1. Consider how important it is to know the tone of voice someone uses. This is one of the handicaps of email and other written correspondence: if we don't know the tone of voice of the writer, we can inadvertently get a very wrong – and incomplete – impression about what is being said.

When Jesus tells the disciples, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you,” we might imagine that Jesus is speaking with the disciples in exasperation: “Your utter lack of faith is irritating and infuriating. How long am I going to have to suffer being with such faithless people?”

Or, we might imagine Jesus teaching his disciples about faith in a loving and encouraging way: “You don't need more faith; you have all the faith you need already. You just need to tap into the gift of faith that God has already given you.”

Or, we might imagine Jesus teaching his disciples with a sense of tenderness and pity: “Don't worry about ‘increasing’ your faith. I understand that you are feeling anxious and insecure, but do not worry about your life. You might feel as if your faith is very small, but tap into this and you'll be amazed at what happens.”

How do you imagine Jesus' tone of voice when he teaches his disciples about faith?

What does your *assumption* about Jesus' tone of voice say about what you have been taught or about what you believe concerning the nature of God and the way God relates to you?

2. To take this a bit further, one tool available to humans is the ability to determine subtlety and nuance. There is evidence that children, even in infancy, react differently to varied tones of voice and that as we age, our ability to determine tone affects everything from language acquisition to memory recall to our own sense of self. But, even fluent speakers and the most attentive listeners can sometimes misunderstand.

The word “nuance” has its roots in Latin: *nubes*, meaning “cloud.” Over time, the word “nue” and “nuer” evolved to mean “shade of color” and we now use the word “nuance” to designate subtle shifts in expression. Often, nuance is easier communicated face-to-face and aloud – we take cues from facial expressions, volume, and gestures – than it is in written form. But we only have the written story of Jesus speaking and we must put our imaginations to work if we really want to hear Jesus the way he intended to be heard. What is it you think is most important about this particular teaching of faith? Why does it matter that we explore nuance in tone and how does that help us to know Jesus?

3. Just a few verses later in this chapter, some Pharisees ask Jesus when the Kingdom of God is going to come. Jesus responds by saying, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21)

One interpretation of these teachings is that Jesus is pointing out that faith and the Kingdom of God are not remote possibilities or elusive entities, but that faith and the Kingdom of God are

very present, very near you, very accessible to you, and even within you. Yet, concerning faith and the Kingdom of God, the disciples and many of us often agonize about these things being far away or unattainable, even impossible.

For some of us, it could be that our intellect, our reason, and our rational brains keep us from believing fully that the abundant life and peace we seek are available, near, and within us already. Are you able to name or recall the moments in your life when you have felt the Presence of God within you and felt it without doubt? What were the circumstances that you feel allowed for your certainty? How is it that Presence can move nearer or further away from us?

4. “Lord, increase our faith!”

Most of us can identify with the disciples in their plea and, likely, we have all sought to “increase” our faith. For many, spiritual disciplines provide this increase: fasting, daily prayer, meditation, use of the rosary, Sabbath observance, alms giving, reading of Scripture, etc. Sometimes, the more disciplined we are, the stronger our faith becomes and the more closely aligned we become with the faith that is already within us. It could be that the more we engage, the more we become the people God created us to be.

But what about other spiritual disciplines that might not look so “religious”? Taking a walk, swimming laps, going for a run, working in the garden, doing a jigsaw puzzle, listening to music, looking for shells on the beach – anything that has us feeling alive or attentive or comforted or awakened – may very well be as important to spiritual health as anything else. It may not look like prayer, or sound like prayer, but sometimes the value is in the *feel* of prayer.

Are there disciplines you have in your daily life that you can (re)consider as prayerful even if they do not seem particularly religious?

5. One of the oldest and best known passages from the New Testament is found in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, Chapter 2, verses 5-11. This passage is thought to have been an ancient Christian hymn that Paul is simply quoting in his letter to the Philippians. If so, it gives us valuable insight into one of the most cherished and deeply held beliefs of the earliest Christians:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

There is a lot to think about in this remarkable Scripture about God “emptying” himself and “taking the form of a slave” and “humbling himself” and becoming “obedient to the point of

death – even death on a cross.” Many theologians see this pattern as the Way of Jesus, the Way of all Christians. It is a self-emptying way or even a “descending” way that leads to new life.

Make time for meditating on this emptying, this descending, this humbling way of being. Can you recount an experience of your life that you felt was an emptying out of yourself? Do you believe it is true that something can be at once emptying and also filling? Perhaps love is like this: we can “empty out” our love to someone and still be full with the very love we gave away.

6. This lesson contains an invitation to adopt an interesting mix of perspectives. First, Jesus invites us to imagine what it would be like to command a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea. This invitation feels like an invitation to imagine what it would be like to have power and mastery over the natural world. Second, Jesus invites us to adopt the perspective of a master who owns slaves. “Who among you would say to your slave....” And finally, Jesus invites us to imagine ourselves as “worthless slaves,” insignificant people who only do as they are told.

It has been said that we live into the fullness of our humanity when we have married within ourselves a sense of our greatness and our insignificance, our exalted status and our lowliness, pride and humility.

The 19th century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, described in a journal entry from July 1835 a seacoast that was one of his favorite places:

...as I stood there alone and forsaken, and the power of the sea and the battle of the elements reminded me of my own nothingness, and on the other hand the sure flight of the birds recalled the words spoken by Christ: Not a sparrow shall fall on the ground without your Father: then all at once I felt how great and how small I was; then did those two mighty forces, pride and humility, happily unite in friendship.

Lucky is the man to whom that is possible at every moment of his life; in whose breast those two factors have not only come to an agreement but have joined hands and been wedded – a marriage which is neither a marriage de convenance nor a mesalliance but a tranquil marriage of love held in the most secret chamber of man’s heart.... He has found...that Archimedean point from which he could lift the whole world.—Excerpted in *Acedia & me*, Kathleen Norris, Penguin Books, New York: 2008, pp. 167-168

One might say that this business of being human is truly extraordinary – both beautiful and very difficult. What do you make of this idea that one is fully human to the extent that this sense of greatness and humility are so perfectly wedded in one’s soul? With what do you struggle more – a sense of power and greatness, or a sense of humility and smallness? How are these seemingly opposite states united or balanced in you, or are they not?

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# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Proper 23, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

## Background and general observations

*One of the things that makes Luke's Gospel distinctive is its special concern for women, the poor, and outcasts, anyone who has been marginalized by society. The story of Jesus and the healing of the ten lepers is an example of this special concern, and it appears only in the Gospel of Luke.*

*The 10 people we meet in the Gospel lesson are required, by law, to have no contact with other human beings. They have a disfiguring skin disease that requires them, according to Levitical law, to keep their distance from others and to call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever someone passes by, so that everyone will be duly warned: here is an outcast, here is a person who is unclean, here is an untouchable.*

*The term "leprosy" in Jesus' day referred to a wide range of skin diseases, not simply the disease known today as "Hansen's disease." People with such diseases had to be quarantined until a priest certified that they had been cured and the required sacrifices had been offered. It is interesting to note that all ten were "made clean" and "healed," but Jesus says of the one who returned, "Your faith has made you well." Jesus' declaration about the one who returned could also be translated, "Your faith has saved you" or, "your faith has made you whole."*

*Some biblical commentators speculate that ten people were cured of a skin disease, but only one was healed, saved, or "made well" in a deeper and more holistic sense. The difference between the one and the other nine, of course, is that the one "returned," "praised God," and "gave thanks." We are given to ponder the role of praise and gratitude in human health. Additionally, of course, the one was a Samaritan, which demonstrates God's reach beyond orthodox and institutional religion.*

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

1. From ancient times, the central act of worship for Christians has been the Lord's Supper, also known as the Eucharist. The word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving, and it is often pointed out that Christians are "Eucharistic people" or "people of thanksgiving." When we are living in a state of gratitude and praise, we are living the deepest truth about who we are. But even gratitude can be complicated... For example, is there a difference in practicing gratitude and living gratefully? Perhaps living gratefully is more of an art, a cultivated way of being in the world that requires more than action, more than simply saying "thank you." How can we better distinguish between "living" and "practicing"? How much does it matter that we distinguish one from the other? Does gratitude feel more like a responsibility or is it a joy?

2. The notion of “community service requirements” is a controversial topic in schools. On the one hand, teaching young people the values of good citizenship and generosity is an excellent way to cultivate gratitude and to heighten their awareness about the world around them, especially about the circumstances of other people’s lives. On the other hand, many people believe that to require service undermines the very notion of giving. That is, if you are required to be generous, what does that say about the true nature of your generosity? What do you make of this? How much does it matter that an act of service be from the heart rather than by the rules?
3. If this story continued and the other 9 came back to apologize to Jesus and to give thanks, what do you think Jesus would say? Were they too late? Would their praise be less worthy?
4. “And he was a Samaritan.”

Related to the sentence above, consider how the person’s religion (a Samaritan was a heretic) seems to play no role whatsoever in his healing or salvation. One might say that it is possible to be an intellectually committed Christian—a person who believes the traditional and accepted articles of the Christian faith and who participates in the Holy Eucharist—and still be an ungrateful and spiritually unhealthy person. And, it is possible for a person to be an agnostic who has no interest in Christianity or the church and who may never have received Communion, and still that person might be an exceptionally grateful, generous, and spiritually healthy person.

Are the practices and beliefs of the Christian religion, the Way of Jesus, designed to shape us into grateful people who are full of praise? Or do these practices have another responsibility?

It is often pointed out that some of the most thankful and generous people in the world are people who live in dire poverty. Why is that?

5. As is pointed out in the background section above, lepers in Jesus’ day were not allowed to have any human contact. Ponder the sense of isolation and alienation they must have felt. From our infancy to our death, all human beings need to be touched— we need to be held, and we need to hold others. Babies in the neonatal intensive care unit in hospitals who are held or rocked are much more likely to thrive than babies who are not held or rocked. And an elderly person who is lonely or dying knows deeply how important it is to be touched or held by someone who cares. Apparently, this is one of the most important truths about who we are, and it is one of our deepest needs. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” and some might say that Christians are people who believe that our highest purpose is to embody Love. In other words, Christianity is an “incarnational” religion – it is all about Love with skin on it, God’s Love becoming flesh in us.

The power of touch is life-giving and life-affirming, but of course human touch also has dangerous potential. People abuse other people and often we are taught to keep our distance from others in order to protect ourselves. To touch someone is a privilege and to withhold touch is a punishment, as in the story of the ten lepers who must live without human contact. There is a

lot to think about here. Consider writing a private reflection about your relationship to touch— being touched, touching others, withholding touch.

The intimacy we share with one another through touch is often a sacred experience. How do you protect this kind of relationship? Were you always protective or did something or someone change you? Or, perhaps you don't protect the sacred in that way; if not, why do you think you don't? Was it always this way?

6. Read aloud the following lines by the poet Mary Oliver:

Of course I have always known you  
are present in the clouds, and the  
black oak I especially adore, and the  
wings of birds. But you are present  
too in the body, listening to the body,  
teaching it to live, instead of all  
that touching, with disembodied joy.  
We do not do this easily. We have  
lived so long in the heaven of touch,

and we maintain our mutability, our  
physicality, even as we begin to  
apprehend the other world. Slowly we  
make our appreciative response.  
Slowly appreciation swells to  
astonishment. And we enter the dialogue  
of our lives that is beyond all under-  
standing or conclusion. It is mystery.  
It is love of God. It is obedience.

by Mary Oliver, from "Six Recognitions of the Lord" in *Thirst*

The poems in her book, *Thirst*, were written shortly after the death of her beloved life partner. How do these lines speak to you? If you are in a group, consider an exercise of *lectio divina* or "holy reading." You might begin this exercise with a time of silence, in which everyone turns his or her attention to the Presence of the One who is always with us. Ideally, you might ask ahead of time for three volunteers to read the poem.

Then, after the centering silence, the first person assigned to read in the group reads the poem aloud slowly, while others listen for a word or phrase that "lights up" for them, a word or phrase that somehow captures their attention. It is not important that you know why this word or phrase stands out for you. You simply want to be open for something to stand out a bit. After some silence, allow people simply to speak the word or phrase that captured their attention, without comment from the person or from others in the group. Just speak the word or phrase. Then allow for some silence.

Next, ask the second person to read the poem aloud slowly. Observe another period of silence, during which people are pondering how God might be speaking to them through this poem. Again, invite those who wish to share how they believe God might be speaking to them while the others in the group listen attentively and appreciatively, and without comment.

Finally, the third person reads the poem, after which the group simply sits in prayerful, sacred silence. Concluding this exercise with silence allows for each person's truth to emerge within

him or her, without fear of judgment. When this final time of silence is concluded, you might ponder how such an experience of shared openness to God and to one another is truly an intimate and holy experience.

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# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Proper 24, Year C

### Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

### Background and general observations

*This parable of the widow and the unjust judge is another parable that is found only in Luke's Gospel. We have noted before how Luke seems to have a special interest in marginalized, helpless and poor people, and a widow in Jesus' society would be a prominent example of these characteristics. One commentator suggests that Jesus' hearers would have found this parable uproariously funny. The image of a helpless widow hounding a powerful judge to the point of exasperation and surrender is a striking one.*

*The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible notes an alternative translation for the verse, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming!" The NRSV translation for the ending to that verse is, "so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face." The Harper Study Bible version of the NRSV notes that "wear me out" is translated literally, "hit under the eye," an image from boxing found also in I Corinthians 9:27. In other words, this is no withering widow!*

*An important thing to keep in mind when reading parables is that it is misguided to read them with the goal of finding the hidden meaning or lesson. Parables are stories that might have multiple meanings and that regularly vex the hearer. God and the nature of our relationship with God are topics that are beyond explication. These are mysteries, and parables invite us deeper into these mysteries. Parables stick with us, and the stories they tell shape us and reorient us in ways that simple teaching or lectures cannot. In the case of parables, our response to them is not one toward an "answer" but toward fruitful questions. It is in our questions that we are able to more fully examine our own lives and our own relationship with God.*

*It is interesting to note Jesus' supposed motivation for telling this parable. It is about "their need to pray always and not to lose heart." One might surmise that Jesus' audience would be familiar with the temptation to give up on God and throw in the towel. Surely, it must seem at times that God is uninterested in our concerns — though the concerns are big to us, it might seem that these concerns must be petty to God. Otherwise, why does it seem that we pray and pray and pray, but our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears? This parable might help engender courage and determination.*

*Lest we interpret this parable as saying that God is like an unjust and uninterested judge who has to be pestered or badgered constantly in order to help us, we should know that this parable employs a literary device that was common in Jesus' day. The point is this, "If a crummy, no-count judge would eventually break down and help*

*this widow, how much more will a loving and just God speedily care for you.” We find the same device used earlier in Luke’s Gospel, in a parable about perseverance in prayer. Jesus invites people to imagine a friend coming at midnight and requesting three loaves of bread. Although you don’t want to get up out of bed, you’ll do it anyway because of the friend’s persistence. Jesus concludes that story with these words, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” That section of Luke’s Gospel (11:5-13) immediately follows Jesus’ teaching his disciples The Lord’s Prayer.*

*This is all to say that perhaps Jesus’ injunction to “pray always” is more in the spirit of The Lord’s Prayer than in the spirit of merely asking God to give us what we want. But this is hard. If we were not prone to lose heart, Jesus would never have felt a need to tell this parable. And Jesus wonders openly at the end, “. . .when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Here, then, we recognize the difficulty of our situation, and we are given an example in the widow of boldness and determination in the face of situations that are sometimes daunting. The hope is that we will be found with faith, with a belief that God is trustworthy.*

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

1. We have probably all had the experience of losing heart and feeling as if prayer is futile. If it is helpful for you to remember such an occasion when this was true for you, consider not only how you arrived at a place of discouragement, but also how you emerged *from* that place. Or, perhaps you have not yet emerged. . . in that case, how do you (or do you?) imagine your faith being strengthened in this time of difficulty?

Often when we are attempting to comfort one another, we have a hard time being good listeners and quickly move to self-reflection and self-referencing. That is, if we are hearing someone’s story about their despair, we might all too quickly react by saying, “When *I* was despairing. . .” and we therefore redirect the conversation to ourselves. Sometimes this kind of redirection could be encouraging, a gesture of empathy. But other times, it might be selfish, at worst, or at best simply unhelpful. What are your thoughts about how we can be more mindful of one another’s needs and become more generous listeners, strengthening one another in faith and in prayer?

2. In the ancient devotional classic, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the main character discovers that reciting the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me”) during his travels has the effect of inducing continual prayer in his heart. He finds himself “praying always,” as Jesus and St. Paul advised, even though he no longer has to will that he pray. It is just *happening*.

Have you had the experience of “the Spirit praying within you” apart from your will or initiative?

An NYU professor, Catherine Robson, has studied the benefits of memorization in her book titled *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*. In it, she explores not only the delight in knowing something by heart, but also the physiologically effects from “tak[ing] the poem inside you, into your brain chemistry if not your blood. . .” She says, “If we do not learn by heart, the heart does not feel the rhythms of poetry as echoes or variations of its own insistent beat.”

What do you make of this kind of study as it relates to an innate way of “praying always”?

3. Consider the point in the background material above that Jesus’ first parable and teaching about perseverance in prayer follows immediately his teaching The Lord’s Prayer. If The Lord’s Prayer is Jesus’ model of prayer, how does that compare to your own model? How is your attitude in prayer similar to or different from Jesus’s disposition?
4. Interestingly, each culture’s concept of and understanding about justice differ. Because different cultures have their own set of values, their own moral/social/political contracts, their own shared history and/or religion, justice is more a *theory* than a true definition since what is considered “fair” by one person may not align with someone else’s ideas about judgement or principle or consequences—both in punishment and reward. Knowing that justice is a subjective concept, what do you think Jesus had in mind when he said, “Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them?”

What was the “justice” that Jesus had in mind, and how are Christians meant to be God’s agents in helping to bring about that justice? Remember that there is no hidden meaning or correct answer, but that parables—like poems—are meant to illuminate our lives with exploratory and evocative questions that lead us deeper into truth. And this is the kind of truth that is distinct from fact. *Correctness* of thought is not nearly as expansive or enriching as *thoroughness* of thought.

5. Read aloud the following lines by the poet Mary Oliver from her book *Thirst*:

### **Praying**

It doesn’t have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch  
a few words together and don’t try  
to make them elaborate, this isn’t  
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.

How do these lines speak to you? This might seem like a long way from an obstinate and determined widow who could end up slapping an unjust judge. But what might this poem be saying about the nature of prayer?

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# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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## Proper 25, Year C

### Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told this parable to some who believed that they were righteous while they regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

### Background and general observations

*This parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector follows the parable of the unjust judge and the widow, in which Jesus expresses "their need to pray always and not to lose heart." (Luke 18:1) It might be interesting to consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in this light – the Pharisee in this story really has no need of Jesus' teaching about "not losing heart," since he seems quite satisfied. The tax collector, on the other hand, might be just the sort of person who stands to benefit most from what Jesus has to offer – anyone who has failed or who is in trouble or deeply discouraged is precisely the person who will welcome and benefit from Jesus.*

*This parable is then followed by the story about people bringing infants to Jesus, that he might touch them (18:15-17), and then by the story of the rich ruler who prides himself on having been a good man but who is saddened by Jesus' encouragement to give away his wealth: "...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:18-25)*

*It seems that those who are sorrowful, vulnerable, and dependent are invited into a kingdom in which they are embraced and encouraged by God, while stronger and more independent people, people who are highly regarded by society, must remain outside.*

*The themes of "justification" and humility are central to this parable. The tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee, we are told, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." It seems that fasting and tithing are good things, but they do not in themselves put a person in a right relationship with God. Much of protestant theology has concerned itself with what it takes for a person to be "justified" or put in right relationship with God, and this parable invites us to consider the role God plays, as well as any role we might play, in being made right with God.*

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

1. Of the two characters in this parable, the Pharisee and the tax collector, with whom do you more easily identify at this stage in your life?

2. Ponder the following story from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers (3rd-4th century Egypt and Sinai):

*There was a brother at Scetis who had committed a fault. So they called a meeting and invited Abba Moses. He refused to go. The priest sent someone to say to him, "They're all waiting for you." So Moses got up and set off; he took a leaky jug and filled it with water and took it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, "What is this, father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me and I cannot see them, yet here I am coming to sit in judgment on the mistakes of somebody else." When they heard this, they called off the meeting.*

Often we condemn in others what we fail to see in ourselves. Our blindness is complicated: are we blind because we are *unable* to see? Or because we *do not wish* to see? The wisdom in this story is very much about judgment of others; we are quick to point out the faults of others, and slow to recognize our own. But it's also very much about compassion: as soon as the others hear what Abba Moses says, as soon as they realize their *own* brokenness and shortcomings, they call off the meeting and essentially pardon the sinner.

One practice to consider is called "Compassion Meditation." You can do an internet search or [try this link](#). One guided meditation from the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley is called Compassion for an Enemy and it asks us to visualize someone with whom we have difficulty. We are invited to imagine this person's suffering and then to notice how it feels to extend warmth, light, and a desire for this person to be free from suffering. Ideally, over time and with practice, we might *cultivate* compassion not only for our loved ones—for whom compassion likely comes more easily—but for our enemies, too.

3. Our culture often seems to encourage us to be independent, self-made, and self-confident. Consider how the messages we receive from our culture can interfere with our relationship with God and our growth in the spiritual life.

What are the forces—relationships, activities, cultural messages—that you believe draw you away from your life in God? And what are the forces that are drawing you nearer, that are life-giving? What can you do, or what changes might you need to make, in order to embolden that which draws you near?

4. Jesus inextricably linked love of God with love of neighbor in his summary of the Law. One way of thinking about this parable is to suggest that the Pharisee was a very good man in many ways. His practices, such as fasting and tithing, are good things and marks of a good life. But the Pharisee makes one serious mistake – he makes assumptions about and looks down upon another human being. In other words, the "fatal flaw" in the Pharisee's approach to the spiritual life is neglect or disdain for another person, for his neighbor. The tax collector, on the other hand, keeps his head down and does not compare himself to others.

We are all guilty of looking down on another. But rather than dwell on our failings, the questions we might ask ourselves are: what are some of the ways in which I might repair what has been injured? How can I strengthen the relationships in my life that might be compromised?

5. In the religious life, there are things we do to live more godly and acceptable lives, and there are things God does to shape us. Religion, for some, could be about things we do or accomplish so that we are better people. For others, religion might be more about surrendering oneself to the transforming and shaping life of God. With which model do you more readily identify? Was this always the case?
6. Consider the connections: “human,” “humility,” and “humus” (dirt).

It has been said that the one who is most authentically *human* is the one closest to God. How do these words in relationship to one another help you imagine a journey toward becoming more “completely human”?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Proper 26, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

## Background and general observations

*Following last week's Gospel story about a tax collector on his knees, here we have a tax collector in a tree. The story of the tax collector and the Pharisee (18:9-14) has some interesting parallels to this story of Zacchaeus, and one might wonder if the kneeling, penitent tax collector from last week's story ultimately has a joyful change of life similar to Zacchaeus.*

*Tax collectors in Jesus' day are by definition wealthy, and the notation that Zacchaeus was "rich" might indicate that he was especially so. Jericho, after all, was a considerable city, and Zacchaeus has profited handsomely at the expense of his neighbors. But although his life is large in terms of his wealth, he is small of stature. In worldly goods and material wealth, Zacchaeus is great; in the spiritual life, he is impoverished. Something is missing; he cannot see Jesus.*

*However, Zacchaeus puts himself in a position where he can both see and also be seen by Jesus. Jesus, in a significant breach of etiquette, not only welcomes Zacchaeus but invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. According to the customs and traditions of Pharisees, sharing table fellowship with another person indicates favor and approval of that person, and Jesus' approval of Zacchaeus understandably causes a scandal. But it also changes Zacchaeus' life.*

*This story begins with Zacchaeus unable to see Jesus; but, when he does see, he comes to understand at least two important things about himself. For one, he realizes that he has much more than he needs. Secondly, he realizes he is not in a right relationship with his neighbors. Seeing these two things, seeing his own life and his neighbors more clearly and truthfully, Zacchaeus vows to live in accordance with this truth. "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Given the Biblical requirement that "the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep" (Exodus 22:1), it appears that Zacchaeus sees himself as having lived the life of a thief.*

*The story begins with Zacchaeus as a rich man, and it concludes with a vow of restitution that will ensure Zacchaeus is not so rich any longer. But, Jesus says, "Today, salvation has come to this house." Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Zacchaeus, by the end of the story, is rich in a different way, the only way that ultimately matters.*



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

1. “He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.”

The metaphor here seems to be about obstruction and hindrance, something in the way of whatever it is we wish to see. Zacchaeus has to contend with obstructions in his environment (the crowd) and with limitations in his person (he is short in stature). Interestingly, his height is beyond his control, but not without a solution.

Can you name the hindrances in your environment (busyness, commotion, noise, competition, contentiousness, etc.) that get in the way of your seeing or understanding God? And what limitations do you perceive in yourself (desire for the security of wealth, the need for approval, lack of discipline, tendency to be distracted, etc.) that might further hinder your ability to be closer to God?

Zacchaeus dealt with his obstacles by running ahead of the crowd and climbing a sycamore tree. How might you deal with yours? Are there solutions available to you?

2. Although our children’s songs about Zacchaeus might prejudice us to think of him as a harmless, wee, man whose cute curiosity has him climbing a tree like a child, the truth about Zacchaeus was probably much grittier. Zacchaeus was likely thought of as a despised thief and traitor. So, to have Jesus single out such a person as worthy of Jesus’ favor and embrace would have caused scandal and seriously damaged Jesus’ reputation. In fact, just a few verses after this story, Jesus enters Jerusalem where the crowd will turn on him, and it could well be that Jesus’ embrace of people like Zacchaeus contributed significantly to his suffering at the hands of the crowd and authorities. How would Jesus scandalize “the crowd” (us) today? In other words, is there someone you despise whom God embraces that causes you to feel disapproval or dismay?
3. It never feels good to identify with the antagonist of a story; we would much rather see ourselves as the “good guy” or even the hero. But sometimes it is helpful in better understanding ourselves if we allow this exercise in discomfort. Take some time to consider yourself as a character like Zacchaeus, someone other people dislike. How does it feel to know that God approves of you even if upsets the crowd? Similarly, how does it feel to be a member of the crowd who might self-righteously think another person is unworthy of God’s love?
4. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, and what he ends up seeing most clearly is his neighbor and himself. “To see” also means “to understand” or “to know” and that equation is especially visible in this story. Though we may or may not see God—visibly, tangibly—it does not necessarily mean we cannot know God. What do you make of this kind of distinction between the visible and the felt? When have you had a sense that you were in the presence of and embraced by

God, the Divine, the Holy, Jesus...? Can you think about your experience in terms of *feeling* God and/or of *seeing* God?

5. At the heart of this story is Zacchaeus' conversion and repentance. Zacchaeus does not simply come to a new system of beliefs; more importantly, he decides to live a new life and to make amends for his former life. But surely there is something in-between that might be left unsaid. What do you imagine Zacchaeus is thinking about in the time between his climbing up and his climbing back down? How might God be inviting you to live a new life? And what repentance might be called for? Are there amends you want to make?
6. There is some safety in keeping one's distance from God. From his vantage point in a sycamore tree, Zacchaeus can observe and philosophize without fear of judgement. But Jesus calls Zacchaeus to come down from the tree, because Jesus wants to go with Zacchaeus to his home and stay with him. What role does fear play in Zacchaeus' decision to come down? We read that Zacchaeus "was happy to welcome him," but what else might Zacchaeus have been feeling?

What is your experience of keeping some distance from other people? What about distance from God? Have you had a feeling at times that God might be asking you to get down out of your tree, so that God can stay with you? What is your response?

There are costs for Zacchaeus no matter what he does. If he comes down to embrace a more intimate life with God, what must he give up? Had he chosen to stay in the tree, safely at a distance, what would the cost have been?

7. There are numerous trees mentioned in the Bible: almond trees, palm trees, cypress trees, fir trees, olive trees, balsam trees, to name just a few. I read an interesting reflection about this story in which the writer wonders about the significance of Zacchaeus climbing, specifically, a sycamore tree. Scholars deduce that the tree in Jericho had to have been a *Ficus sycamorus*, also called the sycamore fig, and in the same family as the fig tree in the Garden of Eden. You could make an argument for symbolism here, and the academic part of my brain loves this kind of close attention to detail. If the sycamore tree is a symbol for regeneration, how does that affect your understanding of Zacchaeus's rebirth or revival? What has been restored in him? And what role does the tree have in his renewal? Without his climbing higher, without his purposeful decision to move upward in order to see more clearly, this particular interaction with Jesus, this renewal of Zacchaeus' faith, may not have happened.

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# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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All Saints' Sunday, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 6:20-31

Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”

“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to 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 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 and woes from the Gospel According to Luke. All Saints' Day is one of the major feasts of the church year and while we are accustomed to thinking of “saints” as people of extraordinary virtue and Christ-like lives, people who end up in stained glass windows and on church calendars, the more ancient understanding of a saint is different. In the earliest days of the church, all baptized Christians were referred to as “saints.” The word means “sanctified” or “set apart.” Christians are people who have been consecrated or sanctified in baptism and called out to live lives devoted to the Way of Jesus.*

*St. Paul, for example, begins his letter to the Colossians this way: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae. . .” And he*

*begins his first letter to the Corinthians, introducing himself and then saying, "...to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..."*

*In other words, if you are a Christian, you are a saint. You might not be an especially good or obedient saint, but you are set apart, sanctified, in the world but not of the world...you belong to Christ. And after Paul greets all the saints in Corinth or wherever, he will at times go on to chastise them for their bad behavior. We might put it this way: Paul is reminding all Christians that they are saints, and he is calling them to become who they already are.*

*On this special feast of All Saints', we are invited to remember not only the famous women and men who have been extraordinary examples of Christian virtue through the ages, but all the saints—your grandmother or uncle or cousin, or your brother or sister, the person next door, people who will never be famous. All Saints' provides an opportunity for rich discussion and deep personal reflection about those in your life, living or dead, who come to mind on All Saints' Day. Whom would you identify as an important saint in your life and how does that person inspire you to live? How might you be a saint to others?*

*The better-known version of the beatitudes is from the Gospel According to Matthew in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Luke has Jesus delivering a Sermon on the Plain, and some of its content is stark and unsettling, especially when compared to the version in Matthew. For example, Matthew's version has nine blessings, and Luke's has four blessings and four contrasting woes. 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, all right."*

*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. All Saint's Sunday provides us with a rich opportunity to consider our blessedness and to reflect on God's invitation, God's desire to awaken in us a new understanding about what it means to live a life in Christ.*

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

1. If you are in an Emmaus Group, you might invite all members of your group to close their eyes and sit in silence for a few moments as each of you calls to mind particular people who have

embodied love and grace for you. After a few minutes, invite anyone who wishes to share with the group the person or people who come to mind.

What made or makes that person so special? We might keep in mind that Holy Scripture 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?

2. William Wordsworth said, “The best part of a good person’s life are his little, unremembered acts of kindness and love.” Surely we can all agree that God is at work in the world in ways that we often do not see, notice, or remember. But even these unnoticed and unremembered acts of kindness and love have an important effect on the world. Jesus used a mustard seed to show how something small can bring about something enormous, and he spoke of the importance of becoming like children in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Mother Teresa spoke of not worrying about doing great things, but doing small things with great love.

How do you think God wants to use *you*, perhaps even in “little, unremembered” or mustard-seed sized ways, to embody God’s grace and love in the world?

3. It has been said that in Jesus’ day, proper people, do-gooders, and religiously observant people dominated the religious establishment, which was hostile to Jesus, while notorious sinners, outcasts, and marginalized people were the ones who flocked to Jesus. Notoriously sinful people and outcasts loved Jesus, while the religious establishment kept their distance or even reviled him.

The church is called the Body of Christ, but does the church more resemble the religious establishment of Jesus’ day, or Jesus himself? Who are the outcasts, sinners, and marginalized of our day? Are they drawn to the Body of Christ, the church?

Do you know some people who are drawn to Jesus but not to the church? If so, what do you think is going on, and what might be your role in addressing this situation?

4. C.S. Lewis said that we 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.

How do you respond to what Lewis describes? When have you realized, perhaps later than you would have liked, that you were in the company of the Holy? What changes might you need to make in your life in order to live fully into the delight and wonder God has prepared for you? What might be the “mud puddle” in your life that is distracting you from the sea?

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# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

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Proper 28, Year C

## The Gospel: Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

## Background and general observations

*The magnificence of the temple in Jerusalem was well known and highly celebrated, and the admiring comments of bystanders only emphasize how grand it all was. The rebuilding of the temple was begun by Herod in the year 19 BC and continued until 62-64 AD. Thus, this extraordinary building project would have been a notorious and much discussed event throughout Jesus' lifetime.*

*The Jewish historian of the first century, Josephus, wrote admiringly of the temple: "The outward face of the Temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise either men's minds or their eyes, for it was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays. But the Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow, for, as to those parts of it that were not gilt, they were exceeding white." (The Jewish Wars)*

*But in the year 70 AD, the unthinkable happened. The Roman army seized Jerusalem and destroyed this magnificent temple, reducing it to dust. Only the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, remains today. Josephus tells us that over a million people died in this siege and destruction, and close to 100,000 were taken into captivity. One can imagine how this must have seemed like the end of the world to many faithful people. In the following year, 71 AD, spoils from the destruction of the temple and large paintings of the event were paraded around Rome in victorious celebration.*



*It is a human trait that we are sometimes captivated by worldly magnificence and have a hard time imagining that such a grand and glorious edifice would ever be destroyed. Perhaps it is worth thinking about the ways in which Jesus seems to have seen beyond the greatest examples of human splendor to a deeper and more abiding reality, how he seems to have been aware of the important distinction between that which is transient and that which is permanent. A fundamental question for people of faith has to do with whether we are being drawn to center our lives on things that are passing away or to center our lives on the things that endure.*

*Another important piece of background information about this passage is the common understanding of people in Jesus' day that world history could be divided into two different eras. There was "the present age" which was considered wicked and evil, and there was "the age to come" which was the age of God in which God's reign would be firmly established. In between these two ages, there was "the day of the Lord" which was a time of terrible tribulation, distress, warfare, and destruction. This terrible "day of the Lord" would then be understood as a time of necessary transition or even birth pangs, and people living in such times would have had a sense that although they were in the midst of agonizing events, they were nevertheless on the cusp of something extraordinary. The important thing was simply to endure with faith in that which was coming. Surely this idea is a relevant one for faithful people today.*

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

1. A fundamental theme of this Gospel passage, and of the life of faith in general, is the tension between our human fascination with worldly splendor and our commitment to divine permanence. There are probably times when each of us is overly fascinated with, drawn to, or even especially desirous of things that are passing away, while we are less concerned about "those things that shall endure." We might think of these times as occasions when we have "lost" ourselves or at least lost our perspective about what truly matters.

When you become so captivated or overly attached to transient things, what is it that restores your perspective and allows you to return to a life of faith? Sometimes it is a tragic or devastating event that awakens us, or reminds us of what really matters; is there another way to keep this reminder that does not involve trauma or tragedy?

How do you feel about the permanence (or lack of it) of church buildings and other sacred spaces which depend on human effort and money? What is the relationship between this kind of human fascination and a closeness to God?

2. Jesus warns his hearers about false leaders who will rise during times of upheaval and attempt to lead us astray.

How do you discern false spiritual leaders from true ones in such turbulent times, or in any time? Is there a way to be sure of the differences?

3. Jesus seems to be saying that this terrible time of destruction will be a sign of something much greater and wonderful that is to come. It sounds a bit like the idea of a "silver lining."

When, in your life, has a terrible event turned out to be a sign or a prelude to something important that God was about to do? More simply, when have you experienced an apparent curse being turned into an obvious blessing?

Thinking more globally, is there expanded Christian love in our world today compared to previous ages since the time of Jesus? Have we progressed? Is it possible to measure the ways the human spirit can change?

4. Jesus promises that throughout the dreadful and fearful times that will surely come, he will be with us. In fact, he says, “not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

People throughout history have reported having a powerful and comforting awareness of God’s presence in their lives during their most difficult times, whether it was during a terrible illness, a divorce, a crisis with a child, or even on their death beds.

What has been your experience of divine presence in times of such extremity? When have you had an especially powerful sense of God’s strengthening, comforting or even guiding presence with you?

5. The French novelist Leon Bloy famously wrote, “Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence.” In other words, suffering changes us, as does mercy.

How has suffering changed you? And when have you experienced mercy? What has been your “testimony” during suffering, or on the other side of suffering? Were you able to see signs of God? How did it feel to have your patience and endurance tested? If you could know then what you know now, what would be different?

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Christ the King Sunday, Year C

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## The Gospel: Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called the Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

## Background and general observations

*The last Sunday of the Church year is known as Christ the King Sunday, and the lesson appointed describes Jesus being crucified as a criminal. Among other things, we are drawn to consider the nature of Christ's kingship. That is, in what sense is Christ "king" for us? In what sense is Christ a ruler, and what sort of rule has Christ established on earth? And recognizing that the people who crucified Jesus saw him not as a king but as a criminal, we might also consider how we see (or do not see) God's presence and activity in our own lives. What causes us to judge wrongly, and how might we see the truth more clearly?*

*The idea that something terrible is being done in ignorance is an idea found throughout the New Testament. The Gospel according to Luke is really a two-part work, with the Book of Acts continuing what Luke started in the Gospel. And as William Barclay points out, Peter says in the Book of Acts, "I know that you acted in ignorance" (Acts 3:17). And Paul said that "they crucified Jesus because they did not know him" (Acts 13:27). Here, of course, we have a theme that recurs often in our own daily lives—how often people hurt us, or how often we hurt others, without realizing what we are doing. What did Jesus have that allowed him to pray, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"? And how can we find that same inner peace and power?*

*Marcus Aurelius is reported to have said to himself every morning, "Today you will meet all kinds of unpleasant people; they will hurt you, and injure you, and insult you; but you cannot live like that; you know better, for you are a man in whom the spirit of God dwells" (Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, p.339). It seems, then, we might ask ourselves: "Do we know better?"*

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

1. All of the characters in this story could represent parts of ourselves; inside us might be the crowd, the two criminals, and Jesus. Do you recognize them? Which character feels most like you? With which one do you identify comfortably? Which one do you find yourself resisting?

2. As a culture, we are shifting quickly into the holiday-shopping season; Christmas carols are already on the radio. Do you feel a tension between the solemnity of church and the frenzy of the world? How do you reconcile what feels like two ends of an emotional spectrum? More specifically, what does it feel like to read this particular lesson in the context of holiday mania?
3. When we talk about Christ as king, we are 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). 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.” How would this world be run differently if God were in charge? That is, if Christ were king? What do you think “success” means in the Kingdom of God? (Is there even such a thing as “success” or “failure”?)
4. An important article appeared in *The New Yorker* over a decade ago, “Letting Go” (August 2, 2010), about how frantic some people become when they realize they are nearing death. The writer, a physician, pointed out that often when people realize they are dying, their fear leads them to grasp (perhaps unreasonably) at any medical intervention available, even if it means destroying their quality of life in the process and rendering themselves unavailable to people who love them.

In response to this article, a local physician, Hunter McGuire, wrote an appreciative letter to the editor that appeared a few weeks later. In it, Dr. McGuire noted that his great-grandfather had been Stonewall Jackson’s physician and had had to deliver the news to Jackson when it was clear the general was about to die. Jackson calmly replied that he hoped it would be on “the Lord’s Day,” and his last words were, “Let us cross over the river and rest under the trees.” Dr. McGuire remarked, “Such a peaceful and heroic death requires a lifetime of preparation.”

One commentator has said about the Gospel lesson above, “Jesus’ speech in Luke while he is hanging on the cross exhibits a deep, personal relationship to God, continually nurtured through a life of prayer” (Vernon Robbins, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, p. 333). Consider what it takes for a person to approach death with inner peace, calm, and a deep-seated conviction that “all shall be well.” In what ways are you engaged in “a lifetime of preparation” of this sort? What changes might you make to your daily routine of life that might serve you well in this regard?

5. When Jesus is crucified, “the leaders” scoff at him; soldiers mock him; the people stand by watching; one criminal derides him. Then, the other criminal rebukes the first one and asks Jesus to remember him.

Many people are witnessing the same event and are reacting similarly to it. But one of them, the second criminal, understands the situation differently. For most witnesses, Jesus’ crucifixion is just another example of a troublemaker being put to death. It happened all the time. What is it about this man, the criminal who pleads with Jesus, that opens up this story for deeper

reflection? And what is it about the other characters that leads them to misinterpret God's activity? What might it suggest about our own tendencies to overlook, misunderstand, or disregard?

6. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

In one sense, these people know very well what they are doing—they are killing Jesus. And the derision is malicious.

You can probably recall a time when either you acted maliciously or when someone else did towards you. What does it take for a victim of such hurt to be able to pray as Jesus prayed, "Forgive them; they don't know what they are doing"? What might you need to be able to learn to love in this most radical way, forgiving those who have hurt you?

A more difficult question to ask of ourselves might be: Why is it that we sometimes act with such ugliness toward one another? How can we behave better? What in your life might need to change in order to recover, remember, or renew a more peaceful and more loving life?