

Lent Devotional

The Open Door, 2017

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Week 1: A Practice-Oriented Faith

Optional Reading: Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, ch. 4

Day 1 – The Role of Practice in Theology

Day 2 – Childhood and Habits

Day 3 – We are What We Love

Day 4 – Story and Ritual

Day 5 – The Influence of the Body on the Mind

Week 2: Intersubjectivity & the Trinity

Optional Reading: Bahler, *Childlike Peace in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*, ch. 6

Day 1 – The Original Goodness of Human Relationships

Day 2 – Seeing God in the Face of the Other

Day 3 – Trinitarian Subjectivity: Mutuality and Service

Day 4 – Trinitarian Relationships: A Dialectical Spiral

Day 5 – Trinitarian Relationships: Self-Emptying and Surplus

Week 3: Exposure (Listening)

Optional Listening: <https://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-137-the-priesthood-of-alexander-shaia/>

Day 1 – Mirroring

Day 2 – Listening

Day 3 – Asking (Vulnerability)

Day 4 – Hospitality as Guest

Day 5 – Learning from “the Least of These”

Week 4: Justice & Forgiveness

Optional Reading: Bahler, *Childlike Peace in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*, ch. 7

Day 1 – Being: Preparation for Action

Day 2 – A Hermeneutics of Charity

Day 3 – A Positive Politics: What Can We Accomplish Together?

Day 4 – Reconciliation and Embrace

Day 5 – “I am because we are”

Week 5: Hospitality

Optional Reading: Yancy, “Introduction,” *Christology and Whiteness*

Day 1 – The Risk of Feeling Uncomfortable

Day 2 – Bearing Witness: Empathy and Its (Im)Possibility

Day 3 – Love Your (Embodied) Neighbor

Day 4 – Playing Host or Being Hosted

Day 5 – Philoxenia in a Xenophobic World

Week 6 [Passion Week]: Social Action

Optional Reading: King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Day 1 – The First Are Last; the Last First

Day 2 – Being in the World

Day 3 – Peter’s Sword

Day 4 – An African, Women, and a Thief

Day 5 (Good Friday) – “Father, forgive them”

Holy Saturday

Easter Sunday

Introduction

Lent is a time for reflecting on our sin and unproductive habits, and of considering what we need to give up in order to be more fully alive. This time of fasting is accompanied by envisioning our participation in both Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness as well as his days of preparation leading up to the Passion Week. The following meditations are centered around not only what we might give up, but *also* what new practices, habits, and postures we might *take up* in order to more fully embody the humility of Christ. This is consistent with Scripture where we are told that true fasting is always connected with social action (Isa. 58:1-9). The study is framed around viewing the humble life, teachings, and death of Christ as an act of hospitality that is central to the nature of the Triune God. In short, we will utilize Lent as a time to consider how we might participate in the life of the Trinitarian God in order to cultivate a lifestyle marked by hospitality, empathy, openness, and sacrificial love. Each day includes a list of reflection & action questions. *Please* read slowly, sit with each reading. Take time to journal and reflect on a couple questions for each day—don’t rush. Focus on what the Spirit is leading you to explore in your own heart. *Note:* unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Week 1: Practice-Oriented Faith

Day 1 – The Role of Practice in Theology

Scripture: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

Reading

“Theology” is often reduced to a bullet-point list of propositional statements that we mentally assent to, and yet religions have long been more about *action* or one’s *posture* toward life than about mental assent. Judaism existed for thousands of years with no official doctrinal statement, which finally became established in the 12th century by Moses Maimonides. One of the main values of Buddhism is to oppose dogmatism, articulated in the famous kōan, “If you meet the Buddha, kill him.” Theology is a way of life, as the Early Church Fathers saw “theology” not as process of intellectually systematizing Scripture, but rather, as mystical participation with God. With this in mind, our church commits to and prioritizes five community practices: listening to God, learning from God, eating with others, encouraging others, and giving ourselves away to the world. What would it look like to *live* our theology? The Buddhist social activist Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, “The life of Jesus is crucial to understanding His teaching. For me, the life of Jesus is His most basic teaching, more important than even faith in the resurrection or faith in eternity.”¹ A mutual dialogue persists between theory and practice—our belief statements shape how we develop our communities of faith and our lives should enact and inform our doctrinal beliefs.

Reflection & Action

1. What thoughts stir in you from this Hanh quote? Does it make you uncomfortable? Are there other scenes in the Bible where one’s actions or intentions seem to be central to what constitutes “belief”?
2. What are some of your core theological convictions? What impact do they have on your daily attitude or actions? What are the practical implications of these beliefs?
3. When are times in your life when your beliefs didn’t become clear to you until you made a decision or took up some action?

¹ Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 36.

Day 2 – Childhood and Habits

Scripture: “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray” (Prov. 22:6).

Reading

Contemporary cognitive neuroscience suggests that children solidify a basic disposition and understanding of the world that will shape the rest of their lives by about 6 or 7 years. While seemingly innocuous, children are habituated into a vast array of life patterns of their parents that are actually often value-laden—how and what to eat, what to wear and how to dress, how to greet others and talk to strangers, how to behave in various social settings, what kind of emotions are permissible, what affection looks like, how to respond to the needs or hurts in others, and so on. Before we have an autonomous, self-reflective awareness of things, we are habituated into a vast array of social institutions in which we meaningfully participate, including the family, religion, schools, and the homes of friends. In a very general sense, these are traditions, from the German verb *tradiert*, which means “to hand down.” Although they are not deterministic—we *can* change our behavior—they are sedimented into our minds and bodies and do become a kind of rut in which we live and move.² Thus, on the one hand habits and traditions are implicitly ethical in the way they call me to *recognize* those who have influenced me and made me who I am. On the other hand, this reveals that humans are intrinsically habit-forming—many of which go unnoticed—and thus, if we want to change, we must begin by recognizing our existing habits and replacing them with new, embodied behaviors.

Reflection & Action

1. Who do you have to thank for instilling in you positive habits, dispositions, and behaviors—down to your everyday actions and bodily posture? Whose habits and dispositions are you shaping?
2. What are 2–3 habits that you perform (largely unconsciously) that shape how you interact with others, influence your response to people who are different from you, or inhibit a capacity for hospitality?
3. Are there habits that you need to give up? What new habit might you take up that would cultivate openness and charity to others?

² For more, see Bahler, *Childlike Peace in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*, 19-21.

Day 3 – We Are What We Love

Scripture: “When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Matt. 19:22).

Reading

James K. A. Smith notes that growth is motivated by desire, passion, and love rather than a list of ideas or commands. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing the “formative power of practices—communal, embodied rhythms, rituals, and routines that over time quietly and unconsciously prime and shape our desires and most fundamental longings. ... We don’t think our way through to action; much of our action is not the outcome of rational deliberation and conscious choice. Much of our action is not ‘pushed’ by ideas or conclusions; rather, it grows out of our character and is in a sense ‘pulled’ out of us by our attraction to a telos.” We are motivated by desires, not abstract concepts—by interests, not commands. As most of us have well experienced, statistics and facts seem to have far less power in changing someone’s mind than a good story that appeals to the person’s heart and basic sense of self. “We are liturgical animals who are defined by what we love ... The driving center of human action and behavior is a nexus of loves, longings, and habits that hums along under the hood ... without needing to be thought about ... We are what we love precisely because we do what we love.”³ We often fail to acknowledge our basic desires and loves. After we have habituated our lives by them, we no longer have to consciously think about them. The Gospel is a message that calls us to change by appealing to our desires.

Reflection and Action

1. Think about how you spend your time today. What loves and desires shape your everyday actions? What longings move you?
2. How do we cultivate new desires and longings? What desires do you need to die to in order to cultivate an openness to God and others?
3. What would an education program look like that is focused less on information and memorizing facts and more on cultivating a certain passionate posture toward the world, others, and learning more?
4. Given the importance of appealing to desire, how might this shape how you interact—or debate and argue—with others?

³ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, 4, 6, 12.

Day 4 – Story and Ritual

Scripture: “Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 13:34-35). [Read some of the parables of Jesus]

Reading

Continuing yesterday’s discussion about motivations, Smith writes, “The way to the heart is through the body, and the way into the body is through story. And this is how worship works: Christian formation is a conversion of the imagination effected by the Spirit, who recruits our most fundamental desires by a kind of narrative enchantment—by inviting us narrative animals into a story that seeps into our bones and becomes the orienting background of our being-in-the-world.”⁴ Story-telling and ritual-making are intrinsic to the human experience. Stories and rituals are *fully embodied* modes of reenacting and imaginatively living into the religious reality of an incarnate God and of declaring sacred what is mundane (bread and wine). C.S. Lewis writes that story provides a third way between our subjective, emotional experiences and abstract concepts, writing, “In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction. ... It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely.”⁵

Reflection and Action

1. How does the Gospel appeal to you as a story? In what ways does it cultivate your sense of imagination and curiosity?
2. What stories, myths, or novels have you read that have “seeped into your bones”? Why? In what way did they resonate as “true” to the human experience without being factual?
3. What rituals are central to your religious life? What stories and/or rituals can we create that might cultivate a sense of participation with God, the holiness of mundane things, or hospitality to others?

⁴ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 14-15.

⁵ Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” 343.

Day 5 – The Influence of the Body on the Mind

Scripture: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom. 12:1-2).

Reading

Richard Rohr writes, “We do not think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking.”⁶ We present our bodies first, altering our habits and practices, and our minds follow—becoming virtuous comes through performing virtuous actions. Our brains are malleable, and only a couple months of repeated behaviors can result in altering brain function. The repetition of religious rituals does not merely reinforce theological beliefs; it profoundly changes the chemical make-up of the brain and one’s view of reality.⁷ Further, the *content* of religious practices expand specific parts of the brain. Contemplating an angry God alters the amygdala, the fight or flight mechanism, making you more prone to anger, fear, and stress; it may even lessen your capacity to empathize with and forgive others.⁸ In contrast, long-term contemplation of a benevolent God enhances the anterior cingulate cortex and the prefrontal cortex, leading to a heightened sense of focus, peace, security, and happiness. They express lower levels of stress, fear, guilt, and have a greater capacity to consider other viewpoints and empathize with others’ pain.⁹

Reflection & Action

1. What kind of view of God is reflected in your attitude, posture, and actions toward yourself and others? Loving? Judgmental? Punishing?
2. What are some ways you live dualistically, separating mind from body? How might you increase the body’s role in your spiritual life?
3. Perhaps spiritual growth is like becoming physically fit—you have to “fake it until you make it.” What spiritual practices or social engagement are you afraid to start because you don’t know how, are afraid of not doing it well, or don’t feel like it?

⁶ Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 19.

⁷ Newberg, D’Aquili, and Rause. *Why God Won’t Go Away*, 29, 79, 104.

⁸ Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes the Brain*, 43, 53, 110-11, 115, 138.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44, 49, 50, 56, 111.

Week 2: Intersubjectivity & the Trinity

Day 1 – The Original Goodness of Human Relationships

Scripture: “In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:27, 31).

Reading

We often live and think as if the Bible begins with the Fall. We reduce relationships to a *quid pro quo*, to competition and violence, or assume the other has some ulterior motive for what they do. Likewise, political theories often reduce humans to the basest desires of self-preservation and selfishness, concluding that the government exists for only negative purposes—to prevent harm and punish criminals. Such a politics of fear continues. But as Richard Rohr writes, “Our starting place was always *original goodness*, not original sin. This makes our ending place—and everything in between—possessing an inherent capacity for goodness, truth, and beauty.”¹⁰ Without denying violence and sin in the world, a close analysis of our first encounters with others reveals they are grounded in peace, mutuality, and trust. Our initial encounters with our caregivers, family, and teachers establish a positive orientation toward others where we expect that the other will creatively expand the self and its possibilities. The self is not originally attuned to think that the other negates the self, but in contrast, the self enters the world with a sense that it is *shared* with others, and that this inter-dependence is both deeply meaningful and enriching.

Reflection & Action

1. In the last 24 hours, list 10-15 little instances where people have exhibited beauty, love, or service to you by ordinary, mundane acts?
2. Jot down 2-3 instances where a conversation or encounter with someone has expanded your sense of self or altered your worldview.
3. Who is someone that today you can say to them: “I see this beauty, this love, this goodness in you” and affirm the image of God in them?
4. Thinking about your childhood, how did your parents shape your view of the world? Or as a parent, how has raising a kid altered your world, your sense of love and sacrifice, or your orientation to what matters? What kind of world are you creating for them?

¹⁰ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 32.

Day 2 – Seeing God in the Face of the Other

Scripture: “But Esau said, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’ Jacob said, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:9-10). “Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God” (1 Jn. 4:20).

Reading

At birth, we can already distinguish between different human faces. The face of the other is our gateway to make meaning in the world. In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean sings, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas stress that encountering God is always mediated by our service to others. “God” on this account is not a noun to be understood, but a verb that is enacted—the energy and flow of grace that is expressed and manifested in the space between you and I, when I acknowledge you as a *Thou* rather than as an *It*. The power of God is revealed in relationship. The significance of this is two-fold: (1) The Trinity is not a useless, archaic doctrine, but gives meaning to our everyday interactions with others. Our mutually unfolding, loving interaction with others is a reflection of and participation in the communion of the Trinity.¹¹ (2) God as Trinity invites us into God’s work of repairing the world, of acknowledging God’s grace and goodness in others, and of being part of God’s kingdom making. Our actions in the world matter and are significant in realizing God’s communal love in the world.¹²

Reflection & Action

1. What kind of practices can we engage in to cultivate seeing God in the other—or enacting God in our encounters with others?
2. If you find yourself in public spaces (buses, elevators, etc.), consider ways you can bridge the distance with strangers without being invasive or annoying. What if you smiled, said hello, blessed them, prayed for them, or mindfully acknowledged those around you?
3. How else is the doctrine of the Trinity relevant to our daily lives? What makes it meaningful?

¹¹ “Communion with this God is at once also communion with those others who have entrusted themselves in faith to the same God” (Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 173).

¹² Cf. Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 94, 153, 158.

Day 3 – Trinitarian Subjectivity: Mutuality and Service

Scripture: “His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you ... may become participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:3-4).

Reading

“Within the triune God,” Frank Viola writes, “we discover mutual love, mutual fellowship, mutual dependence, mutual honor, mutual submission, mutual dwelling, and authentic community. In the Godhead there exists an eternal, complementary, and reciprocal interchange of divine life, divine love, and divine fellowship.”¹³ If we pay close enough attention, we will find that our relations with others are *simultaneously* reciprocal and asymmetrical, both enriching and demanding, both a gift and a responsibility. And this dance of mutuality and service is intrinsic to being human—we don’t have to become interdependent beings; we already are. Yet we are continually fed—and often believe—a message of self-reliance, total freedom, and autonomy. We close ourselves off, whether due to fear or pride or life circumstances. Richard Rohr suggests that “sin is always a refusal of mutuality and a closing down into separateness.”¹⁴ The Incarnation is God’s way of reminding us what God is like and of who we really are—participants in eternal love. Perhaps this is what St. Athanasius meant, when reflecting on the Scripture above, boldly proclaimed: “God became man so that men might become gods.”

Reflection & Action

1. Does altruism exist or are all actions borne of self-interest? Perhaps this dualism becomes a false binary when we reflect on the mutuality and deference that is intrinsic in the Trinity.
2. Where do you experience this mutuality and service in your life? What are ways you close yourself off from others? Are there ways you can expand your circle of who receives these qualities from you?
3. Who in your life lack power, privilege, or material wealth yet are models of this mutual love and service to others?

¹³ Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*, 35.

¹⁴ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 56.

Day 4 – Trinitarian Relationships: A Dialectical Spiral

Scripture: “In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple ... in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:21-22). “And we know that the Spirit works together with those who love him to bring about what is good” (Rom. 8:28 alt. NIV trans.).

Reading

The universe is expanding. Growth and dynamism are intrinsic to the entire cosmos, to our encounters with others—perhaps even to God. Richard Rohr suggests that many of us have been raised with a view of God, “as a pyramid-shaped universe, with God at the top of the triangle and all else beneath” and yet the participatory, mutually interacting nature of the Trinity suggests “a more honest and truly helpful geometrical figure would be ... a circle or even a spiral.”¹⁵ The Early Church Fathers described this eternal circle of the Trinity as *perichoresis*—dancing (e.g., choreography) around. Rather than the God of Greek philosophy, which depicts God as a static Universal Truth, Reason, or Unmoved Mover, this imagery suggests a God in movement, changing, expanding, and who invites us into the dance. This parallels human experience: we are not first thinking things that move; we are movers who think, whose thinking is sustained by our behaviors and connections with others. The more we interact with others, the more our selves are expanded and enriched. And as we interweave our lives with the lives of others—and the life of God—we work with the Spirit to embody God’s goodness in the world.

Reflection & Action

1. When you think of God, what image(s) do you have? How do you think these images have shaped you? What else is significant about this image of the Trinitarian God in an eternal dance?
2. Reflect on God’s invitation to you. What does it mean that God invites you into the dance? How can your posture better embody this spirit of welcome at work, school, church, family, etc.?
3. Take a walk in your neighborhood. Prayerfully consider who lives nearby. Do you know then my name? What are they like? How are they different from you? Do you have space to welcome them?

¹⁵ Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 66-67.

Day 5 – Trinitarian Relationships: Self-Emptying and Surplus

Scripture: “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” (Phil. 2:5-8).

Reading

The very nature of the Triune God is to give and serve. God’s self-emptying, or *kenosis*, was made more available and tangible to us through the Incarnation of Jesus; however, *kenosis* is not merely a response necessitated by the Fall. The events leading to Easter, rather, reflect “what the life of the Trinity is, translated to the world.”¹⁶ It is not a characteristic of Jesus alone but illuminates how the the three persons of the Godhead continually serve one another. Miroslav Volf adds that Christ’s humility reflects “the internal life of the Trinity. ... The life of God is a life of self-giving and other-receiving love,” which is what the “divine perichoresis sought to express.”¹⁷ The eternal dance of the Trinity is not just a dance of mutuality, but one of eternal deference and humility to the other. The Scriptures too can be understood as an act of accommodation and hospitality—God speaks in human terms so we can attempt to understand an incomprehensible God. We who are responsible for God’s relationship to the world are called to this same vision. When we serve others, we discover our true selves. When we serve others, our lives are enriched, and we participate in the “foolishness of God” (1 Cor. 1:25).

Reflection & Action

1. What does it look like to take on a posture of humility in your conversations with friends, on social media, in encountering strangers?
2. Can one have humility yet have confidence in one’s skills? Can one defer to others and still advocate for one’s self, have a self-identity?
3. Where else in Scripture do you observe the self-emptying of God?
4. What practices might help produce a spirit of service and deference? What habits do you need to develop to live a kenotic life?

¹⁶ Williams, “Barth on the Triune God,” 177.

¹⁷ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 128. Cf. Rohr & Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 90.

Week 3: Exposure (Listening)

Day 1 - Mirroring

Scripture: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Reading

René Girard suggests that all learning is motivated by mimetic (e.g., “to mimic”) desire—our desire for things is motivated by the desire of others. We desire objects or skills because others ascribe value to them.¹⁸ Just think of a child who doesn’t take interest in an old toy until his/her younger sibling does! But while this desire to mirror others can lead to conflict or jealousy, intrinsically it is absolutely good and necessary—the same Hebrew word translated as “to covet” (Ex. 20:17) is positively used to speak of the trees God made that were “pleasant to the sight” (Gen. 2:9). We would learn little to nothing unless we observed someone else’s interest on a topic or demonstrate the value of a skill. Cognitive neuroscience has added to the value of this experience of mirroring. Mirror neurons are neurons in the brain that fire not only when you perform an act, but when you see someone else do the same thing. When someone smiles, the same neurons in your brain fire *as if* you were smiling. We can immediately translate the actions of others into the first-person perspective. The implications of this are profound: we live in a shared world with others and are not isolated subjects, we can meaningfully understand the actions of others through perception and without any advanced cognitive functioning, and the actions of others profoundly affect our mental activity and imaginative capacities for what we think we also can do.

Reflection & Action

1. Who are your mirrors and models? Whose image do you reflect? Whose behaviors and mannerisms do you modulate in your own body? Are these models having a positive or negative effect on you?
2. Who is mirroring you? Are you satisfied with what is being reflected back at you?
3. What change(s) do you desire in your life? Who could you observe and spend time with in order to mirror and assimilate those behaviors?

¹⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 9-10.

Day 2 – Listening

Scripture: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). “Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, ‘Here I am!’ ... Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’” (1 Sam. 3:4, 10). [Read all of 1 Sam 3 for more]

Reading

Listening requires slowing down and quieting one’s soul. The ancient Greeks often privileged vision as the primary sense. Plato, Philo, and Augustine often depicted vision as a parallel to reason and the light of the divine. But vision makes the self the center of knowledge, the privileged viewpoint from which to stand. Perhaps, this is why they believed knowledge was self-sufficiently attained by simply re-remembering what had been forgotten. In truth though, when we are born we can see very little—about 12 inches (the distance between the mother’s face and her breast)—and it takes 6-8 months before an infant’s vision fully develops. In sharp contrast, infants already use their ears in the womb—already differentiating rhythms and voices—and have fully functioning hearing at one month. Hearing precedes vision, and learning requires listening to the other. Hearing, in contrast to vision, exposes us to others and makes us dependent on them to learn. Hearing initiates an ethical consciousness, an originary sense of responsibility to the other. Hearing decenters us and makes the other the giver of knowledge, placing them in a position of height. Hearing demands a posture of humility, submission, passivity, & vulnerability.

Reflection & Action

1. When in conversation with someone, consciously cultivate active listening. Keep asking questions. When they speak, really listen rather than thinking about how you might respond or offer a rebuttal.
2. Look over your library and music collection. What kind of people do they represent? Take some time to read a book or listen to music from a different perspective or marginalized or oppressed viewpoint.
3. Who are the silenced voices God is calling you to listen to?
4. Have a meal with someone who is different from you that you want to get to know. Be honest about your intentions and explain how you’ve come to realize how you tend to associate with people like you. Tell the person you want to learn about him or her (bring questions!).

Day 3 – Asking (Vulnerability)

Scripture: “When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (John 4:7 NIV). “Ask, and it will be given you. ... Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?” (Matt. 7:7, 9).

Reading

Before the Samaritan woman, Jesus breaks the social norms of his day by asking a question. Samaritans were viewed to be religiously and ethnically inferior by the Jews. And women—as in most cultures—had inferior social status. Jesus asks this woman for help to meet his most basic material need. It is this openness—this willingness to play guest rather than host and receive her hospitality—that sets the stage for their entire interaction. Asking for help requires courage in the face of the possibility of being in need and of being vulnerable to another. We don’t like to admit that we are dependent on others, that we don’t have the knowledge, skills, or capacity to accomplish what we would like to do. Asking requires an openness to be shaped by others, a willingness to be changed. It creates a space that in and of itself affirms the presence and humanity of the other person. It amounts to a verbal handshake or embrace with the other, as Emmanuel Levinas writes, “The essence of language is friendship and hospitality.”¹⁹ Asking questions creates the possibility for others to evaluate something about themselves or the world that they might never have considered.

Reflection & Action

1. The next time you need something, ask your neighbor if you can borrow it—whether it’s a ladder, a cup of sugar, or his/her time.
2. How often do you ask your children questions that affirm that their opinions and desires matter? Tell them how you learn from them.
3. Who are the people who lack power and privilege in your sphere, the silenced voices, whose opinions are rarely sought? What questions might you ask them? What can you do that might allow them the chance to play host?
4. Who do you—or our community—desire to serve and minister to? What questions do you/we need to ask *them* in order to give them ownership in that ministry and discover what their needs really are?

¹⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 305.

Day 4 – Hospitality as Guest

Scripture: “After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them. ... He said to them, “Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide ... Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:1-2, 7-8). “But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So [Jesus] went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:29-32).

Reading

At the initial sending out of the 70 followers, Jesus tells them to go out without any basic supplies or money and depend on the charity of others. We should not conclude from this that poverty is a spiritual value or that one should always depend on others—Jesus later reverses these instructions (Luke 22:35-36). And yet, the story does call us to consider how we can intentionally place ourselves in a position of dependence on others and, thus, increase our trust in them. It calls us to eliminate our pre-planned expectations of how we will interact with others and allow for the spontaneous to occur... In the second passage, Jesus again allows others to play host, allows himself to be moved and influenced by the beckoning and desires of others. He participates in the goodness and gifting of the most mundane and ordinary activities of eating and fellowshiping with others. He walks alongside these (seeming) strangers, and slows down to be with them.

Reflection & Action

1. What are the moments in your day in which you move too fast to even notice the needs and desires of others? How can you slow down to make more room for life, to notice what’s happening around you?
2. Think of a person or two you know who have different tastes and interests than you. Ask them how to make their favorite meal, why they like a particular music genre, or explain their hobbies and loves.
3. Take a walk in your neighborhood—slowly. Pray for each house. If you run into someone, talk to them and find out the person’s name.
4. Visit a museum or attend an event or presentation that exposes you to the viewpoints and experiences of people different from your own. What did you learn about others—and yourself—from this experience?

Day 5 – Learning from “the Least of These”

Scripture: “And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Matt. 25:39-40).

Reading

Over and over, the steady refrain in the Bible is that God is the God of the outcasts—the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor, the prostitute, and the sick. To this list we might add the refugee, the Muslim, the mentally ill, those ostracized for their sexual orientation, the undocumented, and the forgotten. As Paul Simon put it in his song “Blessed”: “Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on.” Jesus regularly offered hospitality to those who were socially stigmatized or socially awkward. His critics called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34). In the context of Luke 7, Jesus makes it clear that his style of ministry is not to be seen in competition with that of others, such as the penitential asceticism of John, but one simply cannot overlook the extensive time and energy Jesus offers to nobodies. To those who give parties as a means to demonstrate their status, position themselves above others, or dine with people who can offer a *quid pro quo*, Jesus says to “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”—those who cannot pay you back (Luke 14:13). To those who care about social hierarchy, Jesus invites himself to the home of Zacchaeus, a short man with no friends who had effectively committed treason against his own people by working as a tax collector for the Romans. Over and over, Jesus both serves outcasts and allows himself to be served by them as well.

Reflection & Action

1. Your life calling may not be the same as Jesus’, but how can you cultivate the same kind of posture of availability to others and concern for the oppressed? How do you interact with the homeless, with those who interrupt your plans, with those who ask you for something?
2. What ministry, program, or activity could help you rub shoulders with and reach out to the “least of these”? What will you have to give up in order to add this to your lifestyle and schedule?
3. What does it look like to treat everyone with grace and generosity?

Week 4: Justice & Forgiveness

Day 1 – Being: Preparation for Action

Scripture: “Mary sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:38-41).

Reading

Honestly, I tend to identify more with Martha than with Mary. I want people to notice all my hard work. I want recognition for my dedication. I compare myself with others and reduce service to a zero-sum game. When people ask, “How are you?” my first response is often, “Busy.” I like to think I’m too busy to be still. No doubt, there is a place for hard work—and for acknowledging those people who tirelessly work behind the scenes without any recognition. But that’s a far cry from the way we compete to wear our frenetic lives as a badge of honor. In contrast, the leaders of the Civil Rights movement maintain that social action that is productive and sustainable must be grounded in a contemplative life. John Lewis recounts that participants spent months not only planning campaigns but also reading philosophers on civil disobedience, preparing and purifying their hearts so they could respond with love, and even dramatizing what it would be like to face hostility. It is only out of a deep inner reservoir of peace and vitality that we can offer anything of substance to others and have the resilience to stand up against oppression and injustice.

Reflection & Action

1. Consider developing space for quiet and contemplation. Practice breath prayers while riding on the bus or driving the car. Spend 10 minutes a day in concentrated silence, focusing on love, peace, etc. Take a walk out in nature. Read poetry. Practice Ignatian spirituality
2. Some quick resources for slowing down and contemplation include: the Divine Hours (<http://annarborvineyard.org/tdh/tdh.cfm>), Pray as You Go (<http://www.pray-as-you-go.org/home/>), or Richard Rohr’s homilies (<https://cac.org/category/homilies/>).

Day 2 – A Hermeneutics of Charity

Scripture: “Let love be genuine ... love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:9-10).

Reading

Reading is an opportunity to show hospitality. Sacred texts are living, breathing documents that call for mutual engagement between the text and its interpreters. Encountering a text is an interactive conversation with the author, providing a space for understanding, unexpected epiphanies, creativity, and disagreement. Such disagreement should be preserved and appreciated. The Talmudic tradition in Judaism—the ancient rabbinical interpretations of the Torah—preserves the many minority opinions and disagreements between various schools. Such an exegesis must be a work of love and generosity, with the conviction that even those we disagree with can speak the truth. In a culture shaped by the masters of suspicion—Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx (who we can also learn from!)—I propose a hermeneutics of charity. In this vein, Augustine suggests any interpretation of Scripture is permissible so long as its goal is charity.²⁰ Ignatius begins his spiritual exercises admonishing: “every good Christian ought to be more willing to give a good interpretation to the statement of another than to condemn it.”²¹ And Jewish scholar Maimonides beckons his readers that if they don’t understand his text that they not “treat such passages with suspicion” but “give me the benefit of the doubt.”²² In a climate where people are so easily offended, and where even the tiniest remark by a politician is interpreted in the worst possible light, what would it look like to give others the benefit of the doubt, to read them with charity?

Reflection & Action

1. What is your posture when reading the news, social media, and the views of those you disagree with? How could you respond with charity? How can you approach texts without looking to be offended?
2. List 3-4 recent instances where you have found truth and agreement with people from very different backgrounds or worldviews.
3. How can you cultivate a spirit of generosity as you read?

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, XII.18.27, 25.35, 30.41.

²¹ St. Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, 47.

²² Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 46, 47.

Day 3 – A Positive Politics: What Can We Accomplish Together?

Scripture: “A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them. ... But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves’” (Luke 22:24-26).

Reading

Jesus’ “kingdom is not from this world” (John 18:36), and yet it is inherently, subversively political. When the apostles proclaimed “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9) and “There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), they were parroting the pledge of allegiance to Caesar. When Luke’s angels sang: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10), they were parroting an official proclamation announced at the birth of Caesar Augustus.²³ Jesus’ kingdom was a direct assault of the imperial cult of Rome. For sure, the Gospel does not provide unambiguous directions on how to participate in politics as usual—it is a peculiar politics that doesn’t play by the usual rules. Rather than ruling through hierarchies, competition, power, prestige, law & order, and brute force—a view of politics that continues to be perpetuated in the thinking of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hegel, and today’s politicians—Jesus calls for a politics that is considered upside down: one grounded in love, service, and weakness. The politics of force assumes a negative human nature: people must be governed by fear and the threat of punitive punishments to inhibit their basest desires. The politics of love—of which “there is no law” (Gal 5:23)—assumes a positive human nature: people are motivated to commit to something greater than themselves when we recognize their human dignity and redemptive capacity to contribute to the community.

Reflection & Action

1. Where is Jesus’ politics of love at work in your sphere and life?
2. How do you perpetuate a politics of fear, power, and comparison?
3. Is your “Gospel” known for what it is against or what it is for?
4. Whose human dignity and capacity for good can you affirm today?

²³ “Gospel” [εὐαγγελίων] originally referred to the peace that was to come from a king’s birth or military victory. See Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 43-44, 57.

Day 4 – Reconciliation and Embrace

Scripture: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43-44).

Reading

It is easy to love those who you know will love you back. It is much harder to trust those who have lost your trust, to love the unlovable, and to help those who have hurt you. To seek reconciliation, to extend forgiveness, is an act of courage. Miroslav Volf points out that the embrace of the other is a risk. It begins with the vulnerable act of opening oneself up to the other. This hopeful expectation of an embrace—which is only successful if both parties participate—entails the possibility of rejection.²⁴ This risky invitation is premised on a responsibility for the other, on a belief in human goodness, and on a conviction that reconciliation is better than hate. We must have hope in our enemies, in our opposition. To this, in his eulogy for the girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. No, we must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality.”²⁵

Reflection & Action

1. Who have you lost hope in? Who is your “enemy”? Who needs your open embrace? What are times when an embrace has backfired?
2. How does one not lose faith in someone who has repeatedly shown themselves to be untrustworthy? And how does one live the tension of risking an embrace with such a person and sensibly protecting oneself?
3. We have all experienced the positive experience of an embrace with those who love us. How can we build on those experiences of peace to cultivate a posture of peace toward those who seem misguided, who need a second chance, with whom you disagree?
4. How does one defend the human dignity of both the oppressed and the oppressor? How do justice and forgiveness coincide?

²⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 141, 143, 249.

²⁵ King, “Eulogy for the Martyred Children,” Sept. 18, 1963.

Day 5 – “I am because we are”

Scripture: “We, who are many, are one body in Christ” (Rom. 12:5). “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor. 12:22, 25).

Reading

In South Africa, one of the most prominent terms to speak of subjectivity is *ubuntu*, popularized by Bishop Desmond Tutu. Most simply, the term means “humanness,” although such a translation fails to communicate the richness of the term, which figured prominently in the foundational principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Ubuntu* stresses that a sense of self arises only within the context of community. In stark contrast to Descartes’ famous “I think; therefore, I am,” *ubuntu* states that “I am human because I belong, I participate, I share,” that my personhood is defined by my engagement with others, or, “I am because we are.” In terms of *ubuntu*, human subjectivity and maturity is not measured by the capacity for abstract thinking but is best exemplified in service to the other—in acts of hospitality, patient listening, and generosity. Indeed, a self-sufficient human living in isolation would be considered “subhuman.” As a result of this interdependence, the viewpoints and successes of others do not come across as a threat to my subjectivity or provoke competition; rather, they help to enhance my understanding of myself within society and are the ingredients for a more cooperative and fruitful community. On this account, I cannot reach my full potential as a human unless I make space to encourage the potential in you.²⁶

Reflection & Action

1. Look at your lifestyle, the way you spend your time, and your engagement with others. Do you live as if others are a central component to your sense of self, or if they’re detrimental to it?
2. What are ways you create a hierarchy or make comparisons of different spiritual gifts, skills, etc.? Who can you affirm today that has different abilities than you and tell them you appreciate what they do?
3. Who else needs to be invited into your circle of interdependence?

²⁶ See Bahler, *Childlike Peace in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*, 182.

Week 5: Hospitality

Day 1 – The Risk of Feeling Uncomfortable

Scripture: “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

Reading

One aspect of “foolishness” is the risk that comes in placing ourselves in spaces where we feel uncomfortable, where we are exposed to different ways of existing, and we become more aware of our own privilege. Those of us who are male and white rarely find ourselves in spaces where we feel what it’s like to be a minority. We’re often blind to oppression because it doesn’t directly effect us. We move at ease and feel at home in a largely white American culture, where to be white (or male) is the norm and everything else is a deviation. White history is considered *the* history, white philosophy *the* philosophy. When we sing music in church from white traditions, we just call it music. When we read Church history, we forget that Jesus was from the Middle East and that Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, and Cyril were Africans. When we turn on the TV, we can expect to see people like ourselves. When we are stopped by the police, we don’t fear for our lives. What is like to play host to these realities that make us uncomfortable? How might the spirit of hospitality call us to question our history, our beliefs, our privileges, our presumptions?

Reflection & Action

1. List of 8-10 ways in which your status, religion, race, or gender affords you certain social benefits and advantages on a daily basis. How does that make you feel? What can be done about that? Are there any practical ways you can give up this power and privilege?
2. What are some spaces or environments you could spend time in that might help you appreciate—although certainly not truly understand—the feeling of alienation that comes with being marginalized?
3. How can you become more aware—and more prayerful—about systemic injustice—not just the individual actions and attitudes that we have toward those who are different from us, but the many ways in which that unjust system benefits you and shapes your suspicions of others? How do you contribute to these unjust systemic structures?

Day 2 – Bearing Witness: Empathy and Its (Im)Possibility

Scripture: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15).

Reading

Elie Wiesel writes, “Sometimes I am asked if I know ‘the response to Auschwitz’; I answer that not only do I not know it, but that I don’t even know if a tragedy of this magnitude has a response. What I do know is that there is a ‘response’ in responsibility.”²⁷ We have a tendency to provide rational, metaphysical explanations for events that simply cannot be explained. In the midst of trauma, suffering, and evil—especially when it is something we ourselves have never experienced—we lack compassion when we claim to know the reason behind another’s suffering or say “I know what you’re going through.” To suffer with those who suffer doesn’t require that we understand or can explain their suffering; rather it means to affirm and acknowledge their pain even when it is incomprehensible. This directly relates to the notion empathy. Empathy has often been defined as putting oneself in others’ shoes, of imaginatively reconstructing others’ experiences as our own, or of understanding their emotional states. But this definition amounts to a projection of *myself* onto others; it assumes that how others feel and experience the world is identical to my own experience and that all suffering is analogous. Certainly, those who *have* suffered in similar ways can provide advice and solace in difficult times—support groups of various kinds are critical. But oftentimes, empathy requires recognizing how others are different and cannot be absorbed into the self. It demands believing and trusting their stories, bearing witness to them, and making space for their stories to be told.

Reflection & Action

1. What life experiences, mental illnesses, or personal struggles do you look down on or are quick to minimize or explain away?
2. Who in your sphere has had trauma or suffering that you simply cannot understand? What can you do to reach out to them?
3. Make space for a person or two who have endured tough times that you have not experienced. Ask them to tell their story (*make sure in advance they are comfortable doing so!*). What did you learn?

²⁷ Wiesel, *Night*, xv.

Day 3 – Love Your (Embodied) Neighbor

Scripture: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt. 25:35-36). “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26).

Reading

In *Heretics*, G.K. Chesterton writes, “The old religions and the old scriptural language showed so sharp a wisdom when they spoke, not of one’s duty towards humanity, but one’s duty towards one’s neighbour. The duty towards humanity may often take the form of some choice which is personal or even pleasurable. . . . But we have to love our neighbour because he is there. . . . Precisely because he may be anybody he is everybody. He is a symbol because he is an accident.” Christian living demands living in the tension of both recognizing the unity and common bonds of our humanity and appreciating our differences. Unity does not imply sameness or uniformity. For example, justice is both blind (universal) and pays close attention to detail. Justice does not show favoritism but it also cares about the particularities of the situation. To say “All lives matter,” is certainly true, but it is an abstract ideal. No one encounters “All lives” or “humanity.” We only practice that aspiration by meeting the needs of specific, embodied individuals. We can only achieve the ideal if we are cognizant of those particular lives that have historically *not* mattered and if we are attentive to what it will take to meet their specific needs and honor their unique lives. To be one implies that we recognize the many.

Reflection & Action

1. Who are the random sampling of souls God has placed in your sphere—your neighbors, coworkers, classmates, etc.? How do they compare to the groups you choose to hang out with and associate with?
2. How can you affirm and honor the differences of the specific people you meet today? What does a commitment to social justice look like if it is motivated by meeting the tangible needs of embodied humans?
3. What power and privilege might you have to give up in order to offer equality and justice to those who have historically not mattered?

Day 4 – Playing Host or Being Hosted

Scripture: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb. 13:1-3).

Reading

We have all heard the adage, attributed to Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). We gain something and become enriched, encouraged, and enlivened when we give ourselves away, when we serve, when we practice sacrificial love. Some suggest that this eliminates the possibility of altruism, or the possibility of having pure motives. But there is a difference between selfishness—which is opposed to altruism—and self-interest. Selfishness seeks advancement at others’ expense or with no thought of others. Self-interest is natural and avoidable simply to exist. We sleep and eat, go to school, and take care of our bodies—but not only for our own benefit but so we may care for others. In a similar vein, a selfish life of faith is so consumed with moral purity that it is afraid to get its hands dirty in helping others (Luke 10:25-37). We can become so self-consumed rushing to church that we are willing to be impatient with everyone (A spouse? A child? Another driver?) that’s in the way. Selfish belief is so consumed with right doctrine that it makes right action peripheral. Holiness, worship, and beliefs matter and enrich our own lives, but care for ourselves and love for God ought to be intricately interwoven with relationships with others. So how can we discern the difference between selfish pursuits versus personal interests that can also extend love to others?

Reflection & Action

1. Who are the people you view as a distraction or hindrance to getting your “real” work or ministry done? How can we cultivate mindfulness for and be present to the opportunities that fall into our laps—while also discerning when to say “No” and not overcommit ourselves?
2. Write down one or two stories where you have been enriched by serving or giving to others, particularly when it occurred spontaneously? When was the last time that happened?
3. What are your children or friends learning from you with regard to service, hospitality, and giving? What kind of example do you set?

Day 5 – Philoxenia in a Xenophobic World

Scripture: “Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt” (Exod. 24:9). “An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt” (Matt. 2:13-14).

Reading

“Hospitality” in the Greek is *philoxenia*—“love of strangers.” In the Latin *hospes* can mean “hospitable” but also “strange, foreign.” *Hospes* is derived from *hostis* and *potis* (power). *Hostis*, from which we derive the word “host,” typically describes one that entertains guests, originally meant “stranger.” It then came to mean “enemy”—hence, our words “hostile” and “hostility.” From meaning “enemy,” *hostis* went on to mean “army” (e.g., the “Lord of hosts” in the KJV). Finally, *hostis* took on the meaning of “guest” or “host.” Hospitality, then, reflects this risk, this vacillation, this wavering: Do I use my power to welcome the stranger as a friend or to defend myself against a potential enemy? Over and over, Israel is commanded to care for the stranger. God reminds his people to never forget where they’ve come from, to never forget their status as slaves, as nobodies in a foreign land. Given that the Pentateuch was not fully codified until the time of Ezra during the exile in Babylon (post-586BCE), the feelings associated with being a foreigner was especially palpable when these words were put into their final form. They *had* forgotten their humble origins, and thus, had forgotten their obligation to the stranger, the poor, the widow, and the orphan. It is no surprise then, that Jesus, in whom Matthew views as the culmination and embodiment of the entire history of Israel, becomes a refugee and also learns what it feels like to be a foreigner in Egypt. The country that enslaved Jesus’ ancestors becomes his haven of safety until Herod dies.

Reflection & Action

1. Have you ever had the feeling of being a foreigner? What is/was it like? How does it feel to be welcomed by someone as a stranger?
2. Who are the strangers that need to be welcomed today? How can we cultivate a spirit of welcome rather than a spirit of fear and suspicion toward the stranger, the foreigner?

Week 6 [Passion Week]: Social Action

Day 1 – The First Are Last; the Last First

The Last Supper: “The greatest among you must become one who serves” (Luke 22:26). “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mark. 10:31; Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Luke. 13:30). “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4).

Reading

At the Last Supper the disciples are still arguing about who is the greatest. Jesus flips the script and turns the world’s hierarchy of values upside down. *No other* theme is more recorded in the Gospels than that, no saying by Jesus is repeated more. Without it, Jesus’ “good news” is the same message of every empire—power, privilege, status, wealth, and success makes you a somebody, a changemaker, and loved by God. In contrast, God has a preferential option for the oppressed. But this “preference” does *not* mean that God simply reverses the hierarchy. A reversed hierarchy is still a hierarchy, a game of leveraging who is in and out, of determining who is the greatest, which leads to resentment toward the other. No, Jesus called into question the necessity of there being a hierarchy altogether. He rendered the idea of hierarchy absurd. The Gospel reminds us that life need not be reduced to a zero-sum game. Life does not have to be a competition with winners and losers. It need not be a dog-eat-dog world. One’s success is not diminished by praising the successes of others. Indeed, my joy, my successes, are wrapped up in yours: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”²⁸

Reflection & Action

1. What’s the difference between being childlike and childish? What characteristics is Jesus calling us to when he tells us to become a child? How does God reveal God’s self through children?
2. Who are the people in your midst that quietly work behind the scenes with little recognition? How can you affirm them today?
3. Who do you compete with and compare yourself with?

²⁸ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 79.

Day 2 – Being In the World

The Garden of Gethsemane: “The world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world” (John 17:14-15). “We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20).

Reading

Jesus asks the Father not to place his followers into safe and isolated communities, but directly in the world, as agitators, gadflies, and messengers. We are called to participate in bringing God’s kingdom on earth. Martin Luther King Jr. writes, “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God.”²⁹ However, we often replace this difficult, hard work with two alternatives. On the one hand, we think that the gospel is only about the afterlife and conclude that this world really doesn’t matter. We are like the white pastors who say to King, “Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern,” and who, thus, “commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.” On the other hand, we use our Christian faith to protect ourselves, achieve a higher social status, or seek political gain. In so doing, we become “an archdefender of the status quo,” and as King concludes, a “white moderate” who “is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice” is a greater hindrance to racial equality than the KKK.³⁰ In both cases, our neutrality and indifference reveals our opposition to love and justice.

Reflection & Action

1. Where do you see indifference in your own life? What is its cause? Exhaustion? Hopelessness? Fear? Selfishness? A love of comfort?
2. Where is God calling you to be in the world? How can we not become indifferent while also recognizing our limits and need to rest?
3. Where in your life do you operate on a dualism that prioritizes the afterlife or the mind at the expense of the body, others, and the world?
4. Talib Kweli states, “When you’re accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.” Are there ways you’re accustomed to privilege?

²⁹ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 89.

³⁰ Ibid. 94-95, 96, 87, respectively.

Day 3 – Peter’s Sword

The Betrayal: “Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52).

Reading

Throughout his ministry, Jesus advocates nonviolence. A nonviolent response does not come naturally. It is natural to preserve our lives. It is a law of the cosmos that every punch calls for an equal and opposite reactionary punch. An eye for an eye. To respond with nonviolence takes work and preparation. King recounts this extensive “process of self-purification. ... We repeatedly asked ourselves: ‘Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?’ ‘Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?’” At the same time, nonviolence does *not* entail permitting injustice, meekness, or pure passivity. It is a form of subversive *resistance*, a form of violence that calls into question the necessity of violence. As King adds, it “seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. ... I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.”³¹ King was arrested 29 times and never had an approval rating higher than 45% as a result of his civil disobedience against unjust laws. But such disobedience, if it is to be effective, cannot flow from hate or the desire for chaos. John Lewis—himself arrested over 40 times for civil disobedience—describes nonviolent resistance as a move “toward reconciliation. ... It has the ability to bring peace out of conflict. It has the capacity to stir up things in order to make things right. When we were sitting in, it was love in action.”³²

Reflection & Action

1. What are you doing to cultivate a spirit of peace and love toward yourself and others? What practices and training are effective?
2. What are the unjust laws in our world today? How are you being an advocate or ally on behalf of those who are discriminated by them?
3. Reread and meditate on the Garden of Gethsemane scene where Jesus is betrayed. Imagine yourself there. Which character is most like you? What would Jesus have said to you?

³¹ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 80, 81, respectively.

³² Tippet, “Love in Action,” podcast, January 26, 2017.

Day 4 – An African, Women, and a Thief

The Via Dolorosa: “As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ... Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed” (Lk. 23:26-27, 32).

Reading

As was common throughout his life, Jesus is again surrounded by people of inferior social status. Perhaps Simon was a God-fearing Gentile or a Jewish insurrectionist who had fled to Libya. Perhaps he was curious about Jesus, or he was coincidentally watching the drama like drivers rubbernecking at an accident. Either way, his inclusion, along with Ebed-Melech (Jer. 38:1-13; 39:15-18), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39), and others from Libya and Egypt (Acts 2:10), represents a long line of black religious life in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We also know the names of some of the women who traveled with Jesus—Martha & Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Joanna and Susanna who financed Jesus’ work (Luke 8:1-3). The presence of women in Jesus’ ministry was progressive for the time. In particular, that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women is significant, given that a woman’s testimony was viewed as unreliable for court in the 1st century. Then, there are the thieves, traitors. King comments, “In that dramatic scene on Calvary’s hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality. ... The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness. ... The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.”³³

Reflection & Action

1. Take time today to meditate on the final hours of Jesus. Visit the Stations of the Cross somewhere. What strikes you about these scenes?
2. Reread and meditate on the steps Jesus takes to Golgotha. Imagine yourself there. Which character is most like you? What would Jesus have said to you?
3. What does it look like to be a “creative extremist” today?

³³ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 92.

Day 5 (Good Friday) – “Father, forgive them.” (Luke 23:34)

The Cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Reading

King also writes, “There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”³⁴ In this first saying from the cross, Jesus *practices* what he preached. Jesus modeled the radical call to love enemies and pray for his persecutors. By this prayer, Jesus *embodies* Isaiah 53:12—“He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” In this scene, Jesus provides the ultimate *picture of peacemaking*. To those unlovable in Jewish society—thieves and Roman soldiers—Christ offered his communion. And here, Jesus *embodies* the Law. The Scriptures distinguish two types of sin. For “sins done in ignorance” or unintentionally, a sacrifice provided forgiveness. But those who sinned deliberately and defiantly were to be cut off and “no sacrifice for sins was left.”³⁵ By this word, then, Jesus offered many prayers: He prayed for his disciples, that they would learn to lay down their lives for one another; for the Jews, that they would see him as the Messiah; for the soldiers, that they, though steeped in racial hostilities between Jew and Gentile, might experience true reconciliation; for God, that he would keep his covenant and grant sinners a second chance: “Abba, the priests are trying to correct blasphemy; the soldiers, just doing their jobs. Daddy, they don’t realize they’re killing the Son of God. Papa, take my sacrifice as the ultimate Day of Atoning! Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.”

Reflection & Action

1. Take time today to meditate on the final hours of Jesus. Visit the Stations of the Cross somewhere. What strikes you about these scenes?
2. Reread and meditate on the final sayings of Jesus while on the cross. Imagine yourself there. Which character is most like you? What would Jesus have said to you?
3. How have you recently experienced the power of forgiveness? Who do you need to forgive? From whom do you need to seek forgiveness?

³⁴ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 95.

³⁵ See Num.15; Heb. 9:7ff; 10:26ff; Acts 3:17; 7:59-60.

Holy Saturday

Scripture: “So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone” (Matt. 27:66).

Reading

“Today a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. A great stillness because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh.”³⁶

Today, we feel the silence of God. We need to sit with this long silence, this painful ellipses. Holy Saturday, as Cornel West writes, is “when God is as dead for Christians as God was for Nietzsche.” This silence, this sense of loss, is essential, or else we can jump too quickly to a triumphalistic portrayal of Easter that can make us insensitive to the suffering of others. As West writes, we must live in the tension between the thief that is given a future hope and the thief that is condemned. For “within this paradox hang we suffering, shuddering and struggling creatures.”³⁷ Not all is right with the world. Easter is an already—but not yet—reality, and Holy Saturday is just as much a perpetual reality that we live each day. The disciples have fled and are in hiding. Feel their chaos, their sense that three years of their lives have been wasted. The Roman soldiers are standing guard at the tomb. The feeling that evil has won is palpable. The pang of injustice fills the air. Death has a terrible sting. Holy Saturday grants us permission to explore, express, and even embrace the emotions associated with sorrow, loss, uncertainty, angst, brokenness, suffering, and life’s fragility. As God embraces the tomb, grant space for these feelings.

Reflection & Action

1. Where do you feel death and sorrow today? Where in your life or in the world does it feel like injustice perpetually reigns?
2. Perhaps you were raised not to think or talk about “negative” emotions. Spend some time meditating on a lingering sorrow or pain that is in your heart. Give words to it. How can the Man of all Sorrows shares in our sufferings speak to you right now?
3. Spend 10 minutes in silence. What is stirred in you as a result?

³⁶ Liturgy of the Hours, Holy Saturday (Web).

³⁷ West, “A Philosophical View of Easter,” 415.

Easter Sunday

Scripture: “But [the angel] said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. ... He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:6-8).

Reading

According to the earliest manuscripts, this is how the first Gospel ends—with bewilderment, wonder, and terror. It recalls the disciples’ response after Jesus calms the storm: Who is this man who commands the wind and waves? (Luke 8:25). Even more terrifying, who is this man—that we spent so much time with—that can even come back to life? The women didn’t expect to see the stone rolled away, didn’t expect to encounter an angel, didn’t expect a risen Lord. The resurrection, rather, was a moment of disorienting shock. Who would possibly believe such an incredible story? The story seems shrouded in myth—the story of a dying God who comes back to life is a common motif—Osiris, Balder, and Dionysius are all said to have done the same. C. S. Lewis suggests that we should *expect* such common themes, as it is built into the very fabric of the cosmos, into our very longing for God: “The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact.” It is both myth and fact, calling us to “the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. ... We must not be ashamed of the mythical radiance resting on our theology. We must not be nervous about ‘parallels’ and ‘Pagan Christs’: they *ought* to be there. ... We must not, in false spirituality, withhold our imaginative welcome.”³⁸ When every seed planted in the spring dies in order to bring forth a flower, we say *yes* to new life. When Aslan offers himself on the stone table and it rends in half, we say *yes* to Christ’s redemptive suffering. When the nobodies of Middle Earth, Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, travel to Mordor and back again, we re-discover the beauty of the Christ who “descended into hell.” When Harry Potter lays down his life for his friends we say *yes* to this great love. When Harry walks through the dark forest (Gethsemane?), and allows the Resurrection Stone to slip from his fingers in order for a truer resurrection to come,

³⁸ Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” 343, 344.

we say *yes* to the *more* that is already but not yet. When Harry, “the Chosen One,” becomes sin for everyone else—he is part of Voldemort after all (2 Cor. 5:21)—we say *yes* to the disorienting shock that is the Cross. As he lays down his life, we embrace the words inscribed on the tombstone of his parents, James & Lily Potter: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). In his death, he finds himself at King’s Cross Station—an apt name for someone who has just died a sacrificial death—and say *yes* to the silence and sorrow. There, Harry asks Dumbledore if he’s dead: “On the whole, dear boy, I think not,” replied Dumbledore. Harry exclaims: “But I should have died—I didn’t defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!” “And that,” says Dumbledore, “will, I think, have made all the difference.” When we read these words, we say *yes* to a love that triumphs over hate. When Harry defeats death itself through love and comes back to life, we say *yes yes yes!* When Neville Longbottom cuts off the head of Voldemort’s snake, Nagini, we experience the beginning of the Story. We imaginatively re-live Genesis 3:15, a prediction of the battle between the Messiah and the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” When Voldemort’s power is gone and he is ultimately defeated, we live into the End. “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; ... he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4). Love wins. He is risen; he is risen, indeed.

Reflection & Action

1. Where do you see resurrection life around you today? Where do you feel the empty tomb reverberating through the world?
2. What situations and circumstances can you offer the truth of resurrection—sacrificial love, hope, and joy—to today?
3. What sufferings and joys, what ordinary and extraordinary experiences, what friends and strangers can you say *yes* to today? What do you need to affirm and embrace?

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