

**First Fifteen: May 9-13**  
**Focus Scripture: John 13:31-35**

**Monday: John 3:1-8**

**Going Deeper:** The story of Nicodemus is often seen through the lens of Jesus' comment on being "born again." The Greek work used by John can mean not only "again," can also mean "from above" and it may actually have been meant to be understood as both to create a deeper understanding through its play on these two possible meanings. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, which John may be inferring he came as one who was still undecided regarding Jesus' divine connection with God. His response to Jesus' statement is literal, as he wondered how is what you are saying even possible! I suspect Jesus' comments on about being born of the flesh or being born of water and the Spirit didn't help Nicodemus much. Not that we are any better at understanding Jesus' more opaque teaching! I have come to see this interaction as a call to open our minds, I see it as a call to repentance which can mean to enlarge our understanding as well as turn around. If we can see Jesus' invitation to be born from above as allowing our understanding to be enlarged, freeing us from our limited ideas about what is possible and what is not this then helps us understand his comments about being born of the flesh as compared to being born of water and the Spirit. I hear Jesus giving us an invitation to be open to all possibilities of grace rather limiting God, and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We as human beings are rather fond of control, knowing the result and what steps will get us to where we think we are going. We like to nail down the details, whereas open ended situations tend to create stress. Maybe you are different, and this is not as important for you... nonetheless this week's readings will be focused on preparing us for John 13:31-35. If we are going to ever fully embrace the transforming message of Jesus' commandment to love as the foundation of the kingdom of God, then we must be willing to allow the Spirit to lead! So... What are your thoughts regarding the "kingdom of God," and where and what does it mean for our lives? (Take a look at Luke 17:20-21)

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, help me hear your invitation to be born from above. Help me be open to allowing the Holy Spirit to lead me to those places where I have held on to tightly and I need to be open to all the possibilities God's love and mercy create for me and others today. Amen.

**Tuesday: Luke 10:25-37**

**Going Deeper:** The parable of the Good Samaritan is most likely familiar for us, although this may also allow us to be become close minded to any further learning from this story within our faith. What is your understanding of the message of this parable? (There are no wrong answers, I am simply asking what your perception has been, and what do you hear as your read it now.) What do you hear in Jesus' question to the "lawyer" and what might he also want us to hear and understand as well? As you read this parable what details do you notice, what phrases or responses surprise you, or cause you to pause and ponder? The most familiar and often taught message of this parable is focused on the perceived callousness of the priest and Levite who pass the stranger in

need. I have heard it taught that their indifference, or avoidance was based upon a need to maintain ritual purity, unstained by the messiness of this situation. But is there more for us to hear and respond to in this parable? Jesus shares the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the Lawyers question for definition of “who is my neighbor.” The parable seems to me to be focused not on religious ritual purity as it is on understanding our obligation to create community. This becomes shocking clear to this Hebrew questioner when the one who responds to the needs of the stranger, opening the door for community is not like him, but from one he understood as other, less than, even as enemy. Jesus provokes us through this parable to consider not merely the question of moral obligation of being a neighbor and /or its limits of engagement, he also challenges us to remove and question our limits and preconceived requirements for loving, kind and merciful engagement with friend, stranger, and foe.

**Prayer:** Lord of mercy, who is my neighbor? Who are you calling me, even challenging me to reach out to... providing compassion and kindness to someone in need? Open my heart, clear my mind, and help me see who and where you are leading me today. Amen.

#### **Wednesday: Matthew 25:14-30**

**Going Deeper:** This may be yet another familiar parable of Jesus, then again maybe not. Its message sounds critical and harsh, potentially invoking fear of reprisal. The word Jesus uses, “talent” referred to the equivalent to a years’ wage, and this parable is often taught as an example of stewardship and the use of our material resources and wealth. The lesson when the parable is viewed this way is about the faithful use of what we have been given over against the failure to act in good faith or “righteously” which simply means in faithful response to God’s gifts. What has always troubled me about the parable is the characterization of God as being “harsh, reaping where God did not sow, and gathering where God did not scatter seed.” (Matthew 25:24) From this characterization the servant or slave is filled with fear, seemingly paralyzed by that fear, and this is not the God I know, nor is this master of fear, manipulation, and scandal anything we should seek to model. If anything, Jesus is the exact opposite of this representation and I find his use of this character quite curious! I wonder if the lesson is less on the talents and the investments made and not made and instead if we need to hear and understand we have no need to fear God. Through the gift of grace, we are challenged to live from an understanding of abundance in all areas of our lives... trusting God’s love and sharing from the wealth of God’s gifts of mercy, kindness and blessings of all types and values.

**Prayer:** Our God of Abundance... abundant grace, mercy, love, and provision! Help me trust your love for me and your provision of shelter and blessing. Help me use my talents, all your gifts of your mercy and grace to share with others today. Amen.

#### **Thursday: 1 John 2:1-11**

**Going Deeper:** These verses in 1<sup>st</sup> John shares with us images from our reading as we began the week... darkness and light, as they continue to point us toward Jesus’

command, that our lives be marked, as well as guided by love for others. John's words may sound harsh yet again like the parable of the talents, but notice his beginning comment... *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin."* (1 John 2:1a – NRSV) As I have mentioned before, I believe we limit ourselves when we understand this reference to sin by John as focused on personal morality, rather than the root of all sin, disconnection within ourselves, and between God and others. Sin is the breakdown of relationships, and it continues through our resistance, or our lack of effort and desire in seeking restoration and God's transformative love within our disconnections with others. John's underlying message is clear, if we say we are followers of Jesus, seeking light and yet do not reach out to God for creative and transformative guidance, as well as seek to create community for one another then we walk in darkness, meaning we are still unseeing and quite possible just like Nicodemus... on the fence, questioning and unsure. Although even in this place of indecision and questioning John reassures us... *"But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one."* (1 Jn 2:1b – CEB) John's encouragement, as I hear it, calls us to recognize where we are and how we are doing, openly honest with ourselves not in fear, but in seeking the abundance that God desires to share with us revealed in Jesus' parable of the talents.

**Prayer:** Your call and command is not merely to love you, but also to ground our love by accepting your gifts of grace to open our hearts to love and care for others in the same way we seek to create love and shelter for ourselves. Help me look beyond myself today, Lord. Help me to see your gifts and presence with me throughout this day so I may be your vessel of love and light. Amen.

**Friday: John 3:9-21**

**Going Deeper:** We end the week where we began, John 3 and Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus. It may be important to consider this is not the only place Nicodemus appears in John's gospel. In John 7:45-52 Nicodemus appears to attempt to create pause for understanding among his fellow members of the priesthood regarding Jesus. Then again in John 19:38-42 Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea as they remove Jesus' body from the cross and prepare it for a rushed burial before the Passover. What do these other occurrences tell us about Nicodemus? The message of John 3 and Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus give us one of the most widely recognizable verses in the Bible John 3:16. I have often wondered why we do not include what John tells us is the continuation of Jesus's statement about himself and his ministry... *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."* (John 3:17-NIV) For me this verse is as important as John 3:16. When they are held together, they help us understand the meaning of Jesus' comments about *"earthly things and heavenly things"* in John 3:12. They help us understand our human and disconnected focus on blame, accusation, and self-justification are not the ways of the kingdom but may indeed be a continuation of sin. Jesus and God call us into the light, where our eyes will be opened regarding our need and the places where we still struggle and may even hide within the darkness of self-

deception... *But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done through God.*" (John 3:21-NIV)

**Prayer:** Lord of light, truth, and love... *"open my eyes to the moments of resurrection that surround me every day. There is always something rising, opening to new life, budding and blossoming, forgiving and transforming. Teach me to live awake that I may recognize the renaissance being celebrated in my midst at every moment..."* Amen. (This prayer is from Macrina Wiederkehr 1939-2020)