

First Fifteen: March 21-25 (4th Sunday in Lent)
Focus Scripture: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Monday: Matthew 5:17-20

Going Deeper: This week we will be spending our time in what is known as Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." We begin with what I believe is the foundation of his sermon or these teachings from Jesus, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but fulfill."* (Matthew 5:17 – NRSV) Jesus tells us his intent was to complete our understanding, by fulfilling the meaning of the Torah. The word Torah often understood as "law" is better understood from the original Hebrew as teaching, and as Jesus' statement tells us his intent was to help us see these teachings of Moses as more than rules or rigid punitive guidelines for our lives. What comes to mind as you think about the "Law of Moses" which we also know as the 10 Commandments? Does your impression change if we use the word "Teaching of Moses?" Jesus' ministry was focused on restoration, and connection between people and God's love and grace. His intent was to knock down the walls that separate and divide us from one another by restoring our sense of unity through our trust in God's mercy. The "sermon on the mount" is his road map that reveals not merely the intent of what we call "the Law," but also how we can better understand the blessings of this teaching as we seek to align our lives with their guidance. When we fail to see the intent and blessing of this teaching, we are left with what has become the punitive aspect which was and continues to be used to divide and evaluate, and this is precisely how Jesus wanted his followers to differentiate themselves from others in their understanding and practice.

Prayer: Lord of Light shine brightly around and within me, helping me become more aware of your guiding presence today. Your desire is not to scold or correct, but to lift and connect my life with the lives of others around me. Help me use these foundational teachings not as lessons focused on do not. Help me see them as a call to lean toward doing what brings your message of hope, connection, and restoration in all that I do today. Amen.

Tuesday: Matthew 6:1-6

Going Deeper: What do you hear Jesus saying in this teaching? What appears to be the focus or point he is trying to make? He specifically targets two aspects of the practice of our faith... charity, specifically giving to the needs of others and what we might call public prayers. I hear him asking us to go beneath the surface and consider our motives and desired outcome. He is challenging us to consider what we expect from the practice of our faith, while helping us realize how it is easy to shift the focus from serving others and God to something else. This teaching from Jesus reminds me of the words of the Hebrew Prophet Micah. Specifically, those from Micah 6:8, *"He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD (Yahweh) requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God."* (CEB) The point of the practice of our faith is not to gain the attention, or accolades of those around us, these practices are an outflow from what we have received from God. We must also understand Jesus' intent is not for us to be secretive, as much as it is to help practice our faith without

fanfare, but as response of our gratitude. John Wesley taught the true focus of our charity is based upon our understanding of solidarity or connection with those in need. This understanding then helps us see our connectedness and relationship with them. It is the basis of his teaching on charity... "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." (From his sermon – "The Use of Money" – 1789)

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the blessings of my life... family, friends, peace that trusts your love and mercy. Help me see those in need and then allow your spirit to lead me in my response. Lord, I ask that all I do this day would be grounded in my gratitude and my responses and reactions would be from the outflow of all you have given me. Amen.

Wednesday: Matthew 6:19-24

Going Deeper: At first glance these two teachings from Jesus may appear to be unrelated, but that is not the case. In 1st century Judaism having a "good eye" meant you were generous, whereas, having a "bad eye" meant you were stingy and tight fisted! (Jewish New Testament Commentary by David H. Stern) Although I suspect Jesus chose these images not only for their familiarity to his audience, but also to illustrate his call to a clear and focused practice of our faith. In essence he was comparing a clear eye, one filled with light to a heart filled with desire and directed by a singular focus. His message takes on the aspects of the parables he used throughout his ministry, calling us to consider our desires, and question our focused attention. These questions: where do we spend our energy, and how do we use our spare time... challenge us to honestly consider where our faith connects with these questions of focus and priority and whether our faith shape and direct these decisions... or not. I do not hear this teaching as a critique as much as I hear Jesus' invitation to go deeper into our self-awareness and discovery of our growing edges as his followers and in our love for God and others, asking how does our faith weigh against and balance with our desire.

Prayer: My God of infinite mercy, your well of blessings overflows with abundance. Your presence and purpose are the waters that refresh my soul, and yet I feel the push and pull of distraction through out my day. Guide my steps and bolster my faith and focus this day allowing my life and choices to become vessels of your love and presence for others. Amen.

Thursday: Matthew 7:1-5

Going Deeper: As I read these verses with Jesus' direct instruction to not judge or condemn others, I remember my first Confirmation Class with a group of pre-teens who summarized this teaching as Jesus' take on Karma. When I asked them what "karma" meant to them, most agreed... "what goes around comes around." Then just as we were about to move on, I heard a rather reluctant and soft voiced interpretation... "It means I'm rubber, your glue what you say bounces off me and gets all stuck up on you!" What Jesus meant is clear, our focus is to be on how we live our life, not managing the lives of others. He is telling us to pay attention to how well what we say about our faith aligns with how we conduct ourselves beyond Sunday morning. It is always easier to point out what others are doing wrong, or how they could do it better, but what Jesus asks of us is

to focus on how we can become our best selves through self-awareness by using of a practice of discernment. One way to do this is by using a Daily Examen which is attributed to Saint Ignatius. It is a daily prayer of self-reflection seeking discernment as we review our day. It is typically done at the end of the day, often the last thing we do before we go to sleep, and it involves five steps: Still your thoughts and reach out for God's presence. As you feel a growing sense of peace review your day with gratitude, letting go of any regrets. Pay attention to your emotions as they rise and fall as you review your day. Choose one aspect or reaction from your day and ask for God's grace as you commit to work on this area as a practice of your faith. End your examen with a word of hope for the new day and with gratitude for the opportunities it will bring.

Prayer: Everlasting Love, the truth within your words sometimes sting, not because they are cruel, they simply hit the mark you were aiming for... help me stay focused on my reactions and what I can control today. Help me accept and encourage those around me through my responses and compassion. In all things help me seek to live into my best self as your follower and beloved son or daughter. Amen.

Friday: Matthew 7:24-29

Going Deeper: There is a Jewish maxim that encourages those who will listen... "Let your home be a meeting place for the wise." Jesus' ending of his sermon on the mount calls for us, the hearers of his teaching to now become the practitioners of his teachings. Or as Glenn encourages us to become doers of the word, not merely hearers of it. Jesus' ending also sounds like the prescription from the Hebrew book of Proverbs with its distinctive description of what is wise and what is foolish behavior. But what draws my attention most clearly in these last words is the reaction of the crowds... *the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, not as their scribes.*" (Matt. 7:28b-29 – NRSV) The people heard something different in Jesus' teaching, his words were not merely repeated from some other source or appealing to a precedent set by another. Jesus spoke from an experience and a trust in the source of what he was teaching. Often, we as preachers are referred to as those who authority is not our own, it is borrowed from another... but nonetheless it too must be grounded in our experience, as well as our trust and humility before the One who is our source... Is this not true for all of us? The crowds heard something in Jesus' teaching they had not heard before... how about you? What have you heard this week? Where have these words and teachings of Jesus lead you and what have they asked of you in your moments of discovery?

Prayer: Another week in Lent has past and we are a few steps closer in our journey with you to the Cross. Help me my Lord to listen more clearly and focus more intently to who you have challenged me to become. You call you disciples to discover their own cross, or crosses in life and you do so asking us to trust your leading for our lives, family, and community. Lord, I do believe, and yet I ask you help me in those places of unbelief. Amen. ("Lord I believe, help my unbelief" is taken from Mark 9:23-24 – NRSV)