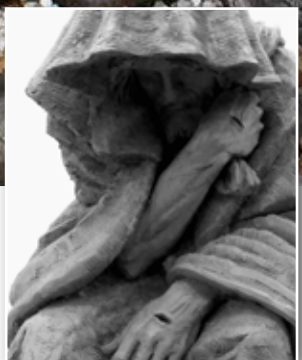




Lord

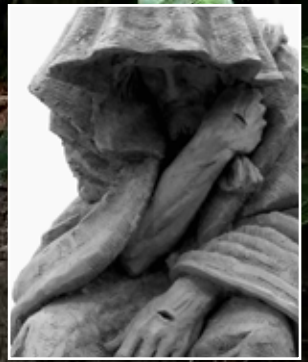
When Did We See You?



**A Matthew 25
Lenten Experience**

By Donna Frischknecht Jackson





Lord

When Did We See You?

A Matthew 25 Lenten Experience

By Donna Frischknecht Jackson

When I think of living a Matthew 25 life, the words to the hymn written in the early 20th century by Thomas O. Chisholm, "Living for Jesus," plays in my head: *Living for Jesus, a life that is true, striving to please him in all that I do.*

As I hum the tune, I begin questioning, "Am I really living for Jesus? Is all that I do pleasing to him?" Perhaps you have asked yourself the same.

In the spring of 2019, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) embarked on an exciting transformation, inviting churches to live for Jesus in a big and bold way by committing to becoming Matthew 25 congregations. By framing the work of the church based on the words Jesus spoke in Matthew 25:31–46 — "I was hungry, and you fed me," "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink," "I was sick and you cared for me," etc. — congregations not only began strengthening their connection to one another by sharing a common mission, but communities began changing as those beyond the church doors began seeing that the "love of God has skin on it," as the Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett, president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency in Louisville, says.



About the sculptures

The sculptures featured in this Lenten devotional are the creations of Timothy P. Schmalz, a Canadian artist based in Ontario. A sculptor for more than 25 years, Schmalz is best known for his Matthew 25 series. He has often likened his work to that of “visual sermons” available to the public 24-hours a day.

Schmalz’s Matthew 25 series, as well as sculptures honoring veterans and firefighters, have been installed worldwide, including almost every state within the U.S.

The artist’s public relations manager did share their hopes for a Schmalz original to be commissioned someday in Burlington, Vermont.

Discover more about the artist, by visiting: sculpturebytps.com

Living for Jesus in a Matthew 25 way is igniting a movement among many Presbyterian churches, leading to innovative missions and ministries and a renewed sense of belonging and hope. At the start of 2022, 934 congregations, 74 presbyteries and 10 synods have accepted the Matthew 25 invitation, committing to using their hands, feet and hearts in mission and ministries that focus on one or all three areas: 1) building congregational vitality, 2) dismantling structural racism, and 3) eradicating systemic poverty.

As the Matthew 25 invitation marks its third anniversary this April, Presbyterians are invited to delve more deeply into the Scripture passage that has gained so much mission momentum. This Lenten devotional is an opportunity to pause and ponder what it means to live for Jesus. It doesn’t matter if you and your church have been a Matthew 25 congregation for a while, have just accepted the invitation, or are currently discerning whether to officially become a Matthew 25 congregation, this devotional is for everyone at every stage. It is a time to listen again to Jesus’ words and open your heart and ask, “How can I live for you?”

Using this devotional

This devotional spends time each week exploring one of Jesus’ many Matthew 25 “I was” statements, beginning with Ash Wednesday.

First Days of Lent: Inherit the Kingdom

Week 1 in Lent: I was hungry; you fed me.

Week 2 in Lent: I was thirsty; you gave me something to drink.

Week 3 in Lent: I was a stranger; you welcomed me.

Week 4 in Lent: I was naked; you gave me clothing.

Week 5 in Lent: I was sick; you took care of me, I was in prison; you visited me.

Holy Week and Easter: Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.

Coupled with days of reflections will be the following opportunities to experience Lent in a new way:

Sunday Matthew 25 Spotlights

Each Sunday in Lent will feature one such congregation in the Matthew 25 Spotlight. You are invited to watch the short video and reflect on what that community is doing to be the embodied love of God to others.

Monday Spiritual Practice

Spiritual practices during Lent are a wonderful way to slow down and to make a space for listening to God. Each week, you will be introduced to a spiritual discipline and given ideas for carrying that practice out.

Wednesday Soup and Reflection

Lent has traditionally been a time for churches to open their doors and invite folks to come for a simple soup meal and a time of prayer. With pandemic precautions still prevailing in many parts of our country, this year's devotional offers you a soup recipe to have your own "soup and reflection" time. Even better is if you make an extra batch of soup and create a Lenten care package for a neighbor or friend.

I hope you find this Lenten devotional to be an eye-opening Matthew 25 experience. It is my prayer that come Easter morning, our eyes will see anew the many opportunities we have each day to live out the Matthew 25 vision — and by doing so, live for Jesus in all that we do.

Blessings,
Donna Frischknecht Jackson

About the author

The Rev. Donna Frischknecht Jackson is the editor of *Presbyterians Today*. An ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Frischknecht Jackson has spent her pastorate career serving rural churches. She has authored *Presbyterians Today's* 2020 and 2021 Advent and Christmas devotionals and is excited to bring reflections for the Lenten season. You can email her at **Donna.Jackson@pcusa.org**.



The First Days in Lent

Inheriting the Kingdom

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." — Matthew 25:34

Ponder

When you hear the word "kingdom" what comes to mind? What are some responsibilities that come with inheriting the kingdom Matthew 25 mentions?



Ash Wednesday | March 2

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. — Genesis 3:19

Repent and believe

Growing up, having foreheads smudged with burnt palm ashes was something my Catholic and Anglican friends did. We didn't do it in the Congregational church of my childhood nor in the Presbyterian church I attended as a teen. Yet I was intrigued by the practice, mostly by how my friends seemed different once they sported smudges that looked more like abstract art rather than the crisp crosses they were meant to be. The brazen was subdued. The bully was quieted. The confident turned uncharacteristically awkward. It was as if suddenly the world could see their frailty. It made me relieved that I didn't get ashes. I outgrew that relief, and now embrace Ash Wednesday's somber reminder, echoed in the words from Genesis that accompany the ash crosses: Remember, from dust you come and to dust you return. Remember. We are not our own. We belong to God, and one day we will return to God.

There's an alternate phrase that can be said when imposing ashes: Repent and believe in the Gospel. I prefer that to the mention of dust, for the "repent" spurs me to reorient my life and take seriously the Gospel's message of love. And each year, as I feel the grit of the ash against my skin, I think of another cross once placed on our foreheads. The one that made us squirm and squeal as infants: the watery baptismal cross marking us as God's beloveds. One day, our baptisms will be made complete at

the time of our death. Till then, Ash Wednesday comes, reminding us time is slipping by. Inwardly we squirm. Silently we squeal. The smudge is made. The question is asked: When life is over, have I done my best to love as Christ loved?

Pray

Redeeming God, we remember this day the fragility of our lives. We remember that through all our days, we belong to you. May we return to you and learn this Lent to truly love the world you created. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What would others say about how you have lived your life for Christ? How do you currently show the love of Christ to others? Where can you do better?

Thursday | March 3

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" — Matthew 4:8–10

Kingdom or kin-dom?

I met Krystle while freelancing for a small-town newspaper. She was young and talented — and the editor of the paper. I was impressed. So, when the need for a freelance editor arose for a project at the national church, I recommended Krystle. She was hesitant as she didn't know "insider church language." I assured her that I would answer any questions.

Krystle did have one question about a word she had never heard of before: kin-dom. "Did the writer mean 'kingdom'?" she asked. When I explained that kin-dom reflected better the mission of the Church, moving away from top-down power and control, which the word "kingdom" evokes, to a more level playing field where there is a kinship — where the silenced have a voice and the overlooked are recognized — she enthusiastically said, "That's awesome!"

Krystle isn't much for religion. She jokes that she can't believe she is friends with me — a pastor. She, like many, have been hurt by worldly kingdoms that have often been protected and perpetuated by organized religion. Yet we in the Church still find ourselves tempted by the power such kingdoms offer. We always seem to be wrestling with our desirous idols.

Lent begins with Jesus being tempted in the wilderness where the promise of earthly kingdoms is dangled in front of him. Jesus, though, is steadfast and resists. We too, need to be steadfast and resist, emerging from our wilderness temptations ready to commit to building more Matthew 25 kin-doms.

"Is 'kin-dom' the correct word?" Krystle asked. "It is," I said. And with that, a child of God, who never thought she was welcomed into the fold, began seeing the door to the kin-dom open to her.

Pray

Loving God, temptations are all around us. The world tells us that those who have the power, those who have the wealth and those who have the prestige are the ones who have it all. But that is not the way of your kingdom. Yours is a kin-dom, where all are welcomed, valued and loved. Help us to become kin-dom builders. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Jesus told his friends that when they did something to help another in need, they were serving him. As you go about your day, think about the decisions you make and the actions you take. Now ask yourself: Is my life reflecting a worldly kingdom or a Matthew 25 kin-dom?



Friday | March 4

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. — Matthew 5:5

Inheritances

I recently came across a study from 2019 that showed the average inheritance for the middle class in the U.S. was about \$110,000. I don't count on such money coming my way anytime soon — or ever. But sometimes I wonder: What if? What would I do with that money?

It doesn't take long for my daydream windfall to become a greed-ridden nightmare, as I discover my imaginary money isn't enough for all the wants lurking within. I shudder to think what a real inheritance would bring out in me.

Matthew 25 speaks about inheriting the kingdom. This kingdom, though, is not one that comes in the way of a big check. In fact, there are many congregations with small budgets in the PC(USA) who have said "yes" to becoming Matthew 25 churches. They're saying "yes" to inheriting a kingdom that will not bolster their wealth, but rather asks them to serve, care and love others selflessly.

Early in his ministry, Jesus spoke to a hungry crowd gathered on a hillside. They were eager to hear a message of hope, and Jesus didn't let them down by telling them what it really means to be blessed. But his definitions of blessed might have surprised them for there was no mention of material comforts or elevations of status. Among the blessed, Jesus tells them, are the meek. For they will inherit the earth.

Meek isn't a very flattering adjective to our ears, but in the biblical context it is a compliment. It means that we are willing to surrender all to Jesus and say "yes" to God's plans. If we are to inherit God's kingdom, we must see that this kingdom has nothing to do with what money can buy. This kingdom is about what love can build through the work of our hands.

Pray

God of great provision, forgive us for letting the amount of money we have dictate the ministries we can do in your name. The kingdom we inherit from you is in fact this world, with all its challenges and brokenness. This is the kingdom you entrust to us. Give us the wisdom and strength this day to glorify you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

When the word "meek" is used to describe you, how does that make you feel? Now think about how Jesus uses that word. How might it change the way you live this day?

Saturday | March 5

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. — John 13:34

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." — Matthew 28:19–20

A command and a commission

I worked in a church that had a stunning stained-glass window of "The Great Commission," where Jesus, before ascending into heaven, tells his disciples to go out into the world and make more disciples. Next to it was a window depicting another one of Jesus' marching orders before leaving this world: Love one another, as I have loved you.

I never thought much about how the "command" and "commission" windows were side by side. That is until the day the rural congregation I served became a Matthew 25 church. The educated and well-off session members reviewed the three ministry focuses of the Matthew 25 invitation: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. Like many congregations who have seen numbers dwindle dangerously low to the "closing-the-doors" level, they zeroed in on vitality over eradicating poverty and dismantling racism.

All too quickly, building vitality began looking like programming to get people into the pews. My heart broke. I reminded them that Matthew 25 was not a program

to save a church. Rather, it's an invitation to die to self to save others. It's about boldly living as the body of Christ, and that living begins with loving as Christ loves. "That means loving all the shoppers in the local Walmart that I have heard this congregation talk disparagingly about," I dared to say.

When Jesus said, "Love one another," he didn't want lip service. He wanted love to be shown in our actions that would transform a community — and, thus, the world. We are at the beginning of our Lenten journey. There are still more weeks to tread all the rough and undesirable places Jesus has already gone. But it's here that we take a spiritual stop to examine our hearts before venturing further. We must be honest and question our commitment to Jesus' command and commission. "Lord, when did we see you?" we ask. And he will answer, "When you began loving as I have loved, you have seen — truly seen. Now go with that love in your heart and make disciples."

Pray

All-knowing God, you see how often we speak about love and how rarely we show it. In this season of Lent, help us go beyond words. May the world see your love through our actions. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What are the ways in which love can become a verb as you go about living this day?

The First Week in Lent

*For I was hungry and
you gave me food.
— Matthew 25:35*

Ponder

*When was the last time you felt real
thirst? How sweet did that water
taste when you finally received a
drink? What other thirsts leave our
souls parched?*



Sunday | March 6

Matthew 25 Spotlight | First Presbyterian Church, Bellevue, Iowa

On this first Sunday in Lent, visit the congregation of First Presbyterian Church in Bellevue, Iowa, as they commit to living out Matthew 25 by building congregational vitality and working to eradicate systemic poverty with its Community Cupboard Project.

As you watch, hold the congregation in your prayers. See what inspires you with ideas for your community.



Watch

pcusa.info/LentWeek1

Monday | March 7

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. — Matthew 4:1–2

Weekly Spiritual Practice: Fasting

Lent, the 40-day season to turn back to God and prepare for the miracle of Easter's empty tomb, is the perfect time to explore a spiritual practice. As the first week in Lent begins, we will look at the traditional Lenten practice of fasting.

As we see in Matthew 4, fasting is a practice that helps strengthen our reliance on God. The grumbling of our stomachs reminds us of our prayer for — and provision of — daily bread. It also helps us connect to those for which hunger is not a privileged, practiced and temporary discomfort, but a harsh reality brought about by the many food injustices in this world. Fasting is not a “Christian diet” nor is it a way to be holier than others. Fasting is about creating a “hungering space” for Jesus to enter your lives.

As this week's focus is on seeing the Lord in those who hunger, commit to a time of fasting. There are many ways to fast — not just from food. Here are some ideas:

- Make time this week for a partial fast. Choose a morning to refrain from food and use the time you would have spent on making breakfast to pray. Break the fast at noon. Or perhaps, make your fast be one that foregoes dinner.
- Fasting can be refraining from a certain food or drink that you feel you can't live without. Did someone mention coffee? Chocolate?
- Fasting doesn't have to be food centric. Try a social media fast or a fast from checking emails constantly. Perhaps use one day as a “No Electronics Day.”

Whatever you choose to fast from, and decide the duration of the fast, reflect on these questions:

- What cravings/addictions have a hold on you?
- What do you find the most uncomfortable about the fast you have chosen?
- What physical discomfort have you experienced? How does this connect you with others who are suffering?
- What have been some insights or realizations that have come to you from fasting?

No matter how you decide to explore the spiritual practice of fasting this week, remember you are not striving for perfection. If you give in and eat or drink something sooner than you had wanted, or checked an email after promising to log off, that is OK. Fasting is about making us more aware of creating a space in our lives to have more room for God to enter in. Fasting opens us up to our need for more reliance on Christ in our lives.

Pray

God of daily bread, this week in Lent, help us to enter the hunger of the world around us so that we become more aware of those who are standing in need of our help. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What is God asking you to fast from this week?



Tuesday | March 8

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. — Isaiah 58:10

May I make you a plate?

“May I make you a plate?” is a question I’ve heard in my life when I’ve been too busy to eat, too tired to cook, or even too low on cash for groceries, as it was early in my career as a magazine editor. Most of my entry-level paycheck went towards the rent of my studio apartment in Manhattan’s historic Murray Hill neighborhood.

“May I make you a plate?” always made me feel cared for. More importantly, though, it made me feel seen. Someone noticed my plight. Someone thought enough to reach out with a plate of food that would fill much more than a hollow stomach. Plates of food can be plates of love. They can also be cautionary tales of how we are misusing our abundance.

There was a church I knew that prided itself on the lavish banquet that they called “Coffee Hour.” Every week after worship, they would rush to fill their plates with hot casseroles and an endless array of cheeses and sweets. After a few months of watching this Sunday feasting, I realized this congregation’s love for food could become an opening for mission beyond the fellowship hall.

I began asking: How could they share this abundance with others? Could plates be made for the family whose children couldn’t wait to get back to school on Monday because then their weekend fast would come to end? Could a plate be made for the

elderly widow who had to choose between paying a heating bill or buying groceries? Could plates be made for hospital workers working tirelessly due to a health system burdened by a pandemic?

The questions have yet to be answered. Their feasting continues. And so, I turn to you and ask, "Who can you make a plate for this day?" Who will be touched that you have seen them too tired to cook, too busy to eat or too financially strapped to fill their kitchen cupboards?

Prayer

God, we thank you for the food that graces our tables this day. We thank you for all the times you have satiated our hungers. Open our eyes now to whom we might be able to "make a plate" for. Lead us this day to the one you want us to help. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Eradicating systemic poverty is one of the Matthew 25 focuses that have led many churches to delve more deeply into how to overcome hunger in their communities. The hunger statistics are alarming as the global pandemic has put more pressure on food systems. Remember, those who are hungry might look like you and me.

How can we become more aware of those who are hungry among us? Who in your community can help you identify the hunger needs: school officials, social workers, or town officials? What systems are in place to help? What systems are in place that are hurting others?

Wednesday | March 9

When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled. — Matthew 14:14–20

Stone Soup

The little community I served as pastor had a tradition of an ecumenical Lenten lunch. Each week, a church would open its doors to others, welcoming all to a big pot of soup, accompanied with a midweek prayer and reflection.

I walked into the kitchen the day my church was hosting the lunch. The air wafted with the comforting smell of stock simmering with vegetables. I peeked into the pot, wondering what kind of soup it was. I was told it was "Stone Soup." The kitchen crew laughed as I looked to spot the stones. Stone Soup, I was told, is from a European folk story in which hungry strangers convince the people of a town to each share a small

amount of their food to make a meal that everyone enjoys. By each person sharing what they had, what individually seemed meager soon became a substantial, filling meal.

As I poured ladles of soup into bowls, I gazed at the items floating in the broth. There were potatoes from one person's farm, carrots from another's garden and onions from the family with seven children who had begun attending church. There were big chunks of chicken from the guy who lived on a lonely dirt road who would butcher the chickens of those who just didn't have the heart to do it themselves. It was then I realized that together we can all truly be fed. Together, no one would go hungry if we willingly shared what little we have with one another.

Pray

God, open our eyes to see what little we think we have is just a piece of a grand, blessed banquet — that is, if we are willing to trust you and let go and share. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday | March 10

It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops. — 2 Timothy 2:6

The hunger of those who feed us

I never thought much about where my food came from. I never thought about those toiling to break ground for seeds to be planted. I didn't pay much heed to how field workers spent hours hunched over in the searing sun and whipping winds, picking the berries that I would get to enjoy bouncing in the milk with my cereal flakes. I never thought about it until answering a call to serve a rural community. It was amid the stories of centuries-old dairy farms struggling to survive, the contentious discussions on fair milk prices, and the hushed whispers about the many more migrant workers seen in a dollar discount store that I began seeing the bowl of berries bounding in milk differently. The more I heard, the less idyllic rural living became.

Hunger in the very places where food is produced is a reality that is hard to fathom. And yet, it is a reality that has become ever more acute. According to the hunger advocacy group, Feeding America, Covid has exacerbated hunger, especially in rural areas known for producing food for the masses.

In Vermont, where I call home, it is startling to discover the food inequities. Teresa M. Mares writes in a book released last year, "Life on the Other Border: Farmworkers and Food Justice in Vermont," that the Green Mountain state is "a place where migrant workers produce dairy products bearing the wholesome Vermont brand, even as they are often sustained by foods with little nutritional value." She adds, "Where food is harvested, cooked, [and] served, there is someone working for too little and for too long."

I look at the berries in my bowl. They are more than just breakfast. They are a gift given to me by someone who has worked for too little and for too long. Now what can I do to give back to those hands that have gifted me with sustenance?



Make Stone Soup

Here's a recipe to get your Stone Soup started. Consider asking friends to contribute to the soup. Make a larger batch and pour it into Mason jars, attach a Scripture verse or prayer and then share them with others.

- 4 cans (14 ½ ounces each) chicken broth
- 4 medium red potatoes, cut into eighths
- 1 yellow summer squash, chopped
- 2 medium carrots, chopped
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 celery ribs, chopped
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 4 cups cubed cooked chicken
- 1 cup frozen cut green beans
- ½ cup quick-cooking barley
- 1 can (14 ½ ounces) diced tomatoes, undrained
- 4 cups salad croutons
- 1 cup shredded Parmesan cheese

1. In a Dutch oven, combine the first eight ingredients. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer for 10–15 minutes or until vegetables are crisp-tender.
2. Stir in the chicken, beans and barley. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer for 10–12 minutes or until the vegetables and barley are tender. Add tomatoes, heat through. Serve with croutons and cheese.

Pray

Provider God, help us to look beyond our full pantries and see the faces of those who work so hard for so little, so that we will not go hungry. May we remember that hunger in the very places where our food comes from is a growing problem. Open our hearts and show us how we can walk alongside the farmer, the migrant worker, the truck driver — all who are part of our food systems. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Think about the food you ate or will eat this day. Where did it come from? Who harvested, prepared and packaged it?

Friday | March 11

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

— Isaiah 55:8–9

The veggie van

Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that when we feed the hungry, we are indeed feeding him. Yet, how do we define “feed”? Is feeding a free church meal? Is it a food pantry in the church basement? Is feeding one of those micro pantries set up on the church property that allows 24/7 access for those who are hungry?

At the heart of all these questions is the most important one: How do we get to the point where free meals, food pantries and micro pantries are obsolete? How do we eradicate hunger? Perhaps we begin by looking at the systems in place that keep folks hungry. What if national grocery chains didn't pick locations for stores based on profitability, but real need? For example, many rural areas are labeled as food deserts — places where healthy, affordable food cannot be found. What if lobbyists didn't advocate for corporations that perpetuated food waste? What if, after cleaning up a free church dinner, the faithful sat down and asked, “Is there more that can be done?”

A young college graduate asked just that when returning to his rural community. After noticing perfectly fine vegetables and fruits left in the fields, he asked for permission from the farmers to glean the fields and take what was collected to area food pantries. When we began noticing those who really needed the fresh produce were not showing up — the elderly who could no longer drive to the pantry — he asked, “What more can be done?” He secured a generous grant to buy a van and began driving into the area food deserts. His veggie van became a healthy version of an ice cream truck. And while no ditty or catchy tune played announcing its arrival, the van nevertheless put a smile on the faces of those it would bless. One young man was eradicating hunger, and it all began by asking, “Is there more that can be done?”

Pray

Creative God, your ways are so much better than what we can ever imagine. As we seek to live the vision of Matthew 25, help us to let go of all our preconceived ideas of what serving you entails. Open us up to new ideas. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

In what creative ways is God asking us to feed the hungry? As Isaiah notes, our ways are not God's ways. This day, think beyond the ways the hungry are traditionally fed. Is there a veggie van in your future? Or is there a gleaning ministry waiting to be born?

Saturday | March 12

Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.”
— Deuteronomy 31:6

Hungering for more than just food

I sit here writing thoughts about what it means to live as a Matthew 25 Christian. This week has been about the growing hunger among us and how there are many ways to feed others. Yet I can't shake the feeling that there is more to explore than just physical hunger.

When Jesus says, "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat," I can't help but think about those who are battling eating disorders, those who are clearly starving themselves because they are starving for more than just food. They are hungering for love, not just from others, but they are hungering for self-love.

How do people come to hate themselves so much that they take it out on their own bodies? I am not a trained therapist, but I know it happens. I have had friends who have suffered from eating disorders. I, myself, struggled in my teen years and all through my 20s with a distorted fear of food that was tied to my striving for perfection and acceptance.

"I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat." Not everyone is hungering for a basket of food or a free meal. There are some who are hungering to feel whole, for acceptance — to simply be seen. Yes, we need food to survive, but without love we are nothing. Perhaps when we talk about feeding the hungry, we need to remember that behind the hunger — no matter what kind of hunger it is — there is always more to tend to than an empty stomach. There is a heart that is aching.

Pray

Loving God, behind each hunger pang is a hurt that needs healing. As we seek to feed the hungry, may we dare to go deeper and see into the hearts of all. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Think about your relationship with food. Is it used as a drug to numb pain? Is it used to comfort the hurts in your life? How can we have a healthier relationship with food? How can we help those who are struggling with eating disorders? For help, go to nationaleatingdisorders.org

The Second Week in Lent

For I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink
— Matthew 25:35

Ponder

When was the last time you felt real thirst? How sweet did that water taste when you finally received a drink? What other thirsts leave our souls parched?



Sunday | March 13

Matthew 25 Spotlight Singing the vision

In 2020, Phillip Morgan, director of music at Central Presbyterian Church in Louisville, had a question for the Rev. Dr. David Gambrell. Morgan asked the associate for worship in the Presbyterian Mission Agency's Office of Theology and Worship if he had ever considered writing a Matthew 25 hymn. The question prompted Gambrell to write the hymn, "Jesus Be With Us," and send it to Morgan for his feedback. "The following day," Gambrell said, "to my surprise and delight, Phillip sent back a beautiful recording."

The words of the refrain for the hymn are based on Matthew 1:23, "and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us,'" and Jesus' closing words in Matthew 28:20, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Gambrell said he wrote the hymn in a gospel style because he wanted Presbyterians to remember that the three areas of ministry focus set forth by the Matthew 25 invitation — building congregational vitality, eradicating systemic poverty and dismantling structural racism — are "gospel work. It's how we proclaim and respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ."



Watch and listen

pcusa.info/LentWeek2

"My prayer is that the hymn will help congregations and mid councils keep singing the Matthew 25 vision as they worship and work in the world," said Gambrell.

As we begin the second week in Lent, pondering Jesus' words about a thirsting world and how we can offer relief, take time to listen to the hymn. Use it daily as part of your devotional time, and share it with others.

Monday | March 14

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. — Matthew 6:6

Weekly Spiritual Practice: Centering prayer

“Centering Prayer” is a spiritual activity with roots in the ancient monastic practice of “Lectio Divina,” which is Latin for “divine reading.” Monks would select Scripture and read it several times, noting what words captivated, intrigued and resonated with them. The Scripture would be read again slowly. When Vatican II sought to revive the contemplative practices of early Christianity, three Trappist monks at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts — Fathers William Meninger, Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating — developed a simple method of silent prayer for today’s faithful. The prayer came to be known as “Centering Prayer,” referring to Thomas Merton’s description of contemplative prayer as “prayer that is centered entirely on the presence of God.”

Centering Prayer is a powerful spiritual practice that helps to slow our racing thoughts. It provides a space to listen to and connect with God. In this second week in Lent, make a commitment to practice Centering Prayer each day, using that day’s Scripture reading as your focus.

Steps of Centering Prayer:

Step 1: Choose a sacred word

A sacred word can be just about anything that is on your heart. Some people embrace the word “God” or “Jesus.” But it your word can be “holy,” “joy,” “help” — again, anything that is on your heart that speaks to you can be your sacred and centering word.

Step 2: Sit with that word

Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, introduce the sacred word into your thoughts, presenting it to God and praying over it.

Step 3: Remain with the word

Don’t worry if you get distracted during this prayer time. Gently return to the word or phrase you have chosen to center your prayer on. When you are done praying, remain still and silent for a few more minutes before reengaging with the world.

Pray

God who spoke through prophets and mystics, may we hear your beautiful voice speak to us this day as we turn back to you and make time to be still and listen. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Mystics have long known the importance of quiet contemplation, but in our busy and noisy lives there isn’t much opportunity for the holy silences that we need to hear God. What would we need to change in our lives to create more quiet moments?



Tuesday | March 15

The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” — John 4:11–15

Digging a deeper well

There’s an old stone well on my property here in Vermont. It’s been out of commission for many years, but its stones still speak of a time when families drew water deep from it to parch their thirst, cook with, bathe in and provide for their animals. The old well ran dry at some point, and a new, more modern one had to be drilled deeper into the ground.

I sometimes sit on the old stone well and gaze out at the back pasture where my neighbor’s cows love to graze. I sit and think of the living water Jesus once offered to a woman who came to parch her thirst. She came in the noonday sun when she knew it would be too hot for other women to congregate with their buckets and seize the opportunity to ridicule or shun her. She was not a woman of high standing in the village, having had many husbands, as Jesus acknowledged much to her surprise.

How did he know that? Still, when Jesus saw the woman at the well, he noticed her thirst was for much more than water. It was for welcome, kindness and perhaps redemption.

I sit on my old stone well many times and realize how much I, too, need living water in my life. I thirst for a world that is finally just. I thirst for the growing political divisions in my rural hamlet to cease. I thirst for our faith communities to be revived.

And as I yearn for the water Jesus offers, I remember something important a friend once pointed out to me here at my old stone well. When the thirst is too great and it seems the spiritual well has run dry, sometimes you must dig deeper to get that living water to flow once again.

Pray

God, your Son promised that through him we shall all receive water from which we will never thirst again. What a wonderful promise. What a beautiful, life-saving gift. This day, we say "yes" to that water, knowing that there will be times when we will need to dig deeper in our faith to get to where this water flows. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

In our journey to live Matthew 25 more boldly and more faithfully, how deep are our spiritual wells? Do they need deeper digging?

Wednesday | March 16

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. — Hebrews 12:1–3

African Peanut Soup

It was during a Lenten soup dinner at the church I was attending in New York City during my magazine journalism days, that I discovered Peanut Soup. It was rich with peanut butter that to my surprise mixed beautifully with the crushed tomatoes and chicken stock. And the warmth of the spices that danced in the broth was amazing: The ginger and the cumin wrapped around me like a warm blanket on the "in like a lion," sleeting March evening.

I was skeptical at first that peanut butter could be used in such a dish. I thought peanut butter's culinary greatness reached its pinnacle on a piece of Wonder bread slathered with grape jelly. But there I was enjoying this new taste experience. The chef later told me that Peanut Soup was an African dish that the enslaved brought over to America, where it soon began appearing in the cookbooks of early Colonial housewives.

Today, Peanut Soup is often served during the celebration of Kwanza, but this chef remarked he preferred having it served during Lent as it reminded him that when our journeys get hard, when God asks us to go on paths that are rough, we do not ever journey alone. "We have our ancestors that have gone before us to nourish us," he said. "Lent is a time I am nourished by the faith — and soup — of my ancestors," he said, offering me a generous second helping. What — and who — is nourishing you this Lent?

Pray

Nourishing God, we thank you for the great cloud of witnesses that accompany us always on our journeys. May we draw inspiration and strength from them as we seek to serve you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Make African Peanut Soup

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 2 large red bell peppers, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 (28 ounce) can crushed tomatoes, with liquid
- 8 cups vegetable broth or stock
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon chili powder (Optional)
- ¼ teaspoon ginger
- 2/3 cup extra crunchy peanut butter
- ½ cup uncooked brown rice

Heat oil in a large stockpot over medium high heat. Cook onions and bell peppers until lightly browned and tender, stirring in garlic when almost done to prevent burning. Stir in tomatoes, vegetable stock, pepper and chili powder. Reduce heat to low and simmer, uncovered, for 30 minutes. Stir in rice, cover and simmer another 15 minutes or until rice is tender. Stir in peanut butter until well blended and serve

Thursday | March 17

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. — Ephesians 3:18–21

Being brave

Beads of sweat were already glistening on the athletes' foreheads. They were determined, though, to compete in the day's events. No amount of humidity was going to stop them. I marveled at their commitment as I poured cups of water for them. I was with my church group volunteering at the Special Olympic Games that were being held at Riverside Park in Manhattan. I had one job to do, and that was to make sure no one went thirsty.

As the sun got higher and hotter, I noticed spirits did not wane or wither. If anything, these athletes' spirits were soaring. I was beginning to get overwhelmed by their can-do attitudes and the gracious sportsmanship they displayed. Win or lose, there were smiles and high-fives. There were hugs and praises for jobs well-done. There was a sense of victory, even amid losing.

As I passed out the water, I realized the greater thirst that was being quenched that day was the thirst among these "disabled" athletes to show the world their "ableness." They thirsted for limiting labels to be removed from their names. They were thirsting for a chance to be part of a competitive world. They didn't necessarily need my meager cup of water. They needed a refreshing cup of recognition.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver believed that people with disabilities could play sports while others didn't even want to believe it, and so she organized the first Special Olympics Games in Chicago in 1968. At the inaugural games' opening, Shriver told the athletes that in ancient Rome, gladiators would enter the arena with these words on their lips: "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." Each game since has opened with the athletes reciting just that.

The day was just about over. I handed the last cup of water to a young girl with Downs syndrome who beamed at the bronze medal hanging from her neck. She lifted it up to show me, smiling. "It's prettier than gold," she said. It was. As I rode the subway home that afternoon, thinking about ministry, servanthood and life in general, I prayed over and over, "Let me be brave."

Pray

God, open our eyes to see that often the greatest thirst in this world is that of wanting to be valued as a beloved — capable — child of yours. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What are the limitations we assume of others? How do we measure worth and value? What would happen if we began believing that every person has something to give to this world?



Friday | March 18

As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. — Genesis 9:9–10

A fountain for animals

One of the perks I had in my first career as a jewelry magazine editor was the opportunity to travel throughout Europe. In between interviewing the goldsmiths of Italy, the watch crafters of Switzerland and the gem cutters of Germany, I would stroll through the oldest sections of the cities, taking in their soaring medieval cathedrals and still standing, stone walled gates. I would also be amused by the many leashed dogs and stray cats that lapped at the water flowing from a fountain in the middle of some storied square.

When we hear Jesus' words of water being given to the thirsty, visions of drought-ridden countries often come to mind. We think of the stories we hear during the Lenten charitable appeals for money, like stories of young children having to walk for miles to get a bucket of water. We might think of ministries that involve building wells and irrigation systems.

But do we think about God's beloveds that roam the earth on four legs? Isn't it true that all of Creation is thirsting in some way?

Herman Lee Ensign thought about that and was inspired to use the fortune he made from advertising to donate fountains across the country for the sole purpose of providing animals with water. The animal advocate would eventually organize the National Humane Alliance in 1897. When he died in 1899, he left much of his wealth to continue building animal drinking fountains for any city that requested one. The fountains that stand in Barre, Bennington and Burlington, Vermont, are just three

of hundreds of granite fountains that he generously gifted to cities throughout the country. Ensign wasn't looking to leave a personal legacy. He simply wanted all animals to have something to drink.

And just a side note as to how proud and stubborn New Englanders can be: While 124 of the Ensign fountains were made from pink granite from Maine, residents of Barre, Vermont insisted that their fountain be made from local gray stone. I am sure the dogs who drank the cool water, didn't mind where the stone came from. All they knew was someone was caring for them as God had asked.

Pray

God, you invited Adam to co-create with you, enlisting his help in naming the animals of the Earth. That call to care for creatures, big and small, is still being extended to us. Help us this day to look beyond preconceived ideas of who is thirsting. Help us to see the many ways in which all Creation needs fresh water — from dogs lapping from fountains to fish dreaming of clean water to swim in. May our Matthew 25 mission reach all living things. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Explore the ecological needs in your community. Are there bodies of water that need to be cleaned? Are there animals that have been misplaced by building projects? Is the soil parched due to drastic climate changes? Where is nature thirsting?

Saturday | March 19

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. — John 19:25–29

God's thirst for us

I don't have easy access to water for my garden, which is getting bigger every year. There is no hose on the side of our house nor is the house itself close to the garden. Rather, I spend my gardening time hauling buckets of water from the house to the garden, and back again.

One day, my husband surprised me with a very long garden hose that he attached to a water source in the root cellar that I didn't know existed. He was dismayed when I explained that I wanted to do the extra work of hauling water. It was, I told him, my spiritual exercise, helping me to connect daily with the laborious task of securing water that so many this world experience. I, in my own unique way, didn't want an easier way to water the garden. I wanted a more meaningful way.

And after one particularly hot summer hauling water, I came to realize how God is in fact thirsting for me — thirsting for me to understand the world's problems better,

thirsting for me to open my eyes in seeing those in need more clearly.

"I thirst" was a guiding statement in Mother Teresa's work. A visitor once noticed in the chapel of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity a sign above a statue of Jesus that read simply, "I thirst." When he asked the future saint about it, she replied that that saying of Jesus from the cross hangs in every Missionaries of Charity chapel as a reminder that "we are to quench the thirsts for love, kindness and compassion." Mother Teresa also stressed to the sisters under her care to hear that statement, "I thirst," as being spoken directly to them by inserting their name: "Donna, I thirst." "Bob, I thirst."

As her life was ending, Mother Teresa made a passionate appeal to the sisters, writing in a letter to them, to take Jesus' "I thirst" more seriously in their daily lives. Remember, she wrote, "I thirst" is something much deeper than Jesus just saying, 'I love you.'" It is a cry from the cross for us to enter the realities of those who are parched. I want to hear that cry. And so, I continue hauling buckets of water, walking by the unused garden hose.

Pray

God, may the familiar words of Scripture become new and fresh to us this day. May we hear the words with different meaning — deeper meaning. May we be startled into action by fresh, new insights as to what you are really desiring us to do. You thirst for us to understand you better. May we hear. May we see. May we begin connecting to your world in need. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Insert your name at the beginning of Jesus' "I thirst" statement. How does that make you feel? What thoughts come to mind? How does it elevate Jesus' command to love others?

The Third Week in Lent

*I was a stranger and
you welcomed me.*
—Matthew 25:35

Ponder

What is your initial reaction when meeting a stranger? Is there hesitancy, suspicion or even disinterest? Recall a time when you were the stranger to someone. How were you received?



Sunday | March 20

Matthew 25 Spotlight - St. Mark's Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles

St. Mark's Presbyterian Church is reaching out to the staggering 60,000 people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles. St. Mark's story of compassionate care includes active participation in Pacific Presbytery's Homelessness and Housing Task Force. The presbytery also participates in the Hunger Action Advocate program of the Presbyterian Hunger Program of the PC(USA). As you watch this Matthew 25 body of Christ, lift a prayer for those who are seeing Christ in the strangers they meet.



Watch

pcusa.info/LentWeek3

Monday | March 21

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward. — Matthew 10:40–42

Weekly Spiritual Practice: Welcome and Hospitality

When we think of spiritual practices, what often comes to mind are activities that are contemplative, such as reading Scripture, praying and meditating. By its very definition, though, a spiritual practice — that is “an activity done regularly that furthers one’s spiritual experience” — can also include that of “welcoming.”

In this third week in Lent, we hear Jesus’ words from Matthew 25 about welcoming strangers. But what exactly does it mean to welcome others? And how can welcoming be a spiritual practice?

To truly be welcoming and show hospitality to strangers, we must look within ourselves and ask what the preconceived ideas are we have of others — what are our biases and prejudices that exclude and hurt. The spiritual practice of welcome and hospitality begins by recognizing how small we sometimes make our circle of belonging and by seeking ways to widen it.

In his book “Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life,” Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote, “Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”

Here are some ideas to begin exploring welcome as a spiritual practice this week:

- Identify someone in your workplace, community organizations or congregation whom you have never taken the time to get to know. Begin a conversation with them.
- Broaden not only your social circle, but think about the books you read, the TV shows you watch, etc. Challenge yourself to add diverse voices to your reading list. Watch documentaries about people or subjects you are not familiar with. Welcoming strangers is about listening to their stories.

Pray

Welcoming God, you call us each by name and embrace us with open arms — no matter how far we might have strayed from you. Help us in this Lenten season to become more welcoming of all your children. Just as you love us, may we love others. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Take time today to think about your circle of belonging. Who is missing from it?



Tuesday | March 22

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. — Hebrews 13:2

Checkout chats

The pandemic has been hard on many people for many reasons. For me, I have discovered that mask wearing has taken away those “smiles-on-the-street-from-strangers” moments that I didn’t realize till now had the ability to turn my day around. Pandemic precautions have also tempered my chatting with strangers. I can’t help it. I like striking up conversations with the cashier at the grocery store or the woman sitting next to me in the quick-change oil place while our cars get serviced.

With each encounter, I walk away feeling more connected to humanity, having shared a laugh, voiced a concern or simply found someone to commiserate with. My husband, the quiet one, always asks me why I talk to everyone I meet. I shrug that maybe it’s the reporter or pastor in me. Whatever it is, I do know this: Many times in my life these strangers have been angels in disguise, coming to me when I needed them the most.

I’m not the only one who knows the blessing of chatting with strangers. There’s a grocery store chain in Norway that understands. Noting how loneliness has become more acute due to the pandemic, especially among the elderly, the store has created “chat checkouts” — checkout counters (done with virus precautions in place) where folks are invited to linger and talk with cashiers. I doubt that chat checkouts would ever succeed here in the U.S. where any delay in our running around is greeted with impatience and short tempers. You mean we should take time to slow down and connect with someone? What a concept!

But I wonder what would happen if we ceased this frantic rush through life and took time to notice, stop and talk with others. During a pandemic, I know we don’t want to linger, but think about how we want to live when the virus eases. Do we want to miss the many angels among us that appear disguised as strangers? Who knows? There might be a heavenly conversation waiting for you at the grocery store.

Pray

God, forgive us for being so busy that we often don't see the angels disguised as strangers in our lives. Slow us down this day. May we become more aware of your holy presence as we become more present to others. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Do you know someone who might be experiencing acute loneliness today? What can you do for that person?

Wednesday | March 23

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. — Philippians 2:1–4

Chicken Noodle Soup

I remember the first “Chicken Soup for the Soul” book I received. I had just moved into Manhattan and was living alone. I had stayed home from work with a horrific cold. I didn't want to call my mother in New Jersey, for I knew she would probably send my father into the city with a care package. As much as I would have welcomed that, I didn't want to impose on my parents — or anyone. So, imagine my surprise later that day when the doorman buzzed to let me know I had a package waiting for me.

I shuffled downstairs and saw the package was a “get better soon” gift from a group of women at church that I hardly knew. I had just started attending worship and wasn't very active in Bible studies. Inside were all the cold standbys: orange juice, tea bags, honey, cold medicine and, of course, cans of Chicken Noodle Soup — the ones I remember enjoying when I was little. There was also a coloring book, crayons (You are never too old to color!) and the “Chicken Soup” book. I curled up on the couch with my soup and juice and read it from cover to cover. I laughed. I cried. I felt myself feeling better both physically and emotionally.

They say chicken soup is healing. But I think it's the care and love that goes into the making and sharing of the soup that is the real medicine. We all need homemade chicken soup — for our bodies and our souls. This third week in Lent, make a huge batch of it. And then share it with a stranger in need of a friend.

Pray

God, we pray this day for those who are “under the weather” be it physically or emotionally. Open us to the many ways that we can help heal others by our loving words and actions. Lead us to the many ways we can live Matthew 25 this day. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Make Chicken Noodle Soup

- 1 tablespoon butter
- ½ cup chopped onion
- ½ cup chopped celery
- 4 (14.5 oz) cans chicken broth
- 1 (14.5 oz) can vegetable broth
- ½ pound chopped cooked chicken breast
- 1½ cups egg noodles
- 1 cup sliced carrots
- ½ teaspoon dried basil
- ½ 2 teaspoon dried oregano
- salt and pepper to taste

In a large pot over medium heat, melt butter. Cook onion and celery in butter until just tender, 5 minutes. Pour in chicken and vegetable broths and stir in chicken, noodles, carrots, basil, oregano, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer 20 minutes before serving.

Thursday | March 24

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. — Ephesians 2:19–22

The role of the stranger

Before seminary, I was working at a church in a wealthy New Jersey suburb. I was alone late one afternoon when the doorbell rang. We didn't have a security camera, and I didn't think anything about answering the door. I wish I had. There before me was a disheveled man. He requested money for a bus fare. I felt uneasy and quickly gave him what little I had, hurrying then to shut and lock the door.

I was rattled not so much about the man appearing at the church, but because I found myself wondering about that fine line of helping and being safe. I still wonder, but I have come to realize that sometimes I do need to trust my instincts and forego helping someone. But that is not to say we ignore strangers altogether. If anything, that encounter prompted me to consider how to serve God's children safely and smartly.

Be aware of your surroundings. Trust your instincts. But also explore what the uneasiness with strangers might be revealing within your heart. What I realized that day was how quickly I began labeling this stranger: homeless, drug user and scammer. I didn't believe he needed money for a bus fare. Yet, the following day, when I boarded the bus that would take me back to my Manhattan apartment, the man was seated in the front seat. As I walked by, he thanked me for helping him.

Parker Palmer once wrote that the role of the stranger in our lives is vital in the context of the Christian faith, for through strangers, God is persistently challenging our worldview. "It is no accident that God is so often represented by the stranger. God uses the stranger to remove the scales of worldly assumptions from our eyes," said Parker. Yes, welcome strangers. They can teach us a lot about who we say we are. Welcome them, but always be smart and safe as you do.

Pray

God, as we seek to show your love by welcoming the strangers that we encounter, we pause and ask for you to protect us. Shield us from harm. Do not make us fearful of others, but more aware of situations and our surroundings. Help us to trust when we feel something is not quite right. Help us to know that nothing can thwart your work from being accomplished. And so, if we feel we have failed in serving you, help us to know that you will present us with more opportunities. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Matthew 25 talks about welcoming the stranger. This can be looking to see who in your community is not represented in your church family. Who do we often exclude? The stranger can also be that person who reaches out to us for help. As we seek to live Matthew 25, how does the issue of safety while serving God make you feel? How can we be more proactive in welcoming the stranger while being mindful of our safety?



Friday | March 25

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. — Leviticus 19:33–34

A stranger in your land

I have a love/hate relationship with Facebook. I love that I can keep in touch with friends, especially those from high school with whom I would have long lost contact if it wasn't for social media. But I also hate discovering how those I thought I knew harbor hate toward others. I have especially seen this in the comments that friends have made about immigrants: "They don't deserve to be in our country." "What about the rights of my children?" "They should speak English." "Why do I have to fund their handouts?"

My heart breaks when I read such comments. My heart shatters when such comments come from those who are part of houses of worship. No matter how many times I remind the faithful that Jesus and his family were immigrants, fleeing to a foreign land to escape the dangerous King Herod, it just doesn't seem to click that those who flee today are seeking safety for their own children.

And even long before Joseph and Mary's escape with the Babe of Bethlehem, God made sure that the laws given to the children of Israel included laws on how to be welcoming to all. In Leviticus we are reminded that when an alien, a stranger, an immigrant, a foreigner — whatever label you use — enters your land, you do not oppress them.

Rather, love them as you would love yourself. Yet, it seems this love doesn't come as easily as hate does. In 2020, a Psychology Today article explored what is behind this hatred of immigrants. In one of the studies cited in the article, conducted with men and women in their 30s, researchers found several perceived threats behind the hate. Among them was the threat to one's way of life, be it religious or cultural. Another perceived threat was to job availability. The article concluded that those threats lead to fear, which then lead to hate.

Immigration issues are not easy to navigate. They can be overwhelming and become contentious. They can challenge the love of even the most faithful followers of Jesus. But we don't have to be fearful that God will forget us when we welcome a stranger. God's love is vast, endless and all-encompassing. Simply put, there's room for all in God's Matthew 25 kin-dom.

Pray

God, forgive us for becoming protective of what we have. Your love is for all. Your care is for all. Help us to remember that as we move forward, reaching out to strangers who are seeking safety and shelter in our communities. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Imagine if you had to flee your home for the safety of your family. How would it make you feel to know you weren't welcomed somewhere? What would you risk to secure a better way of life? How can living out Matthew 25's welcoming of strangers be accomplished in your community?

Saturday | March 26

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. — Romans 15:7

Those under the bridge

I was early for my interview with a local police chief for my newspaper story on general safety tips. So, I sat in the present and took out my reporter's notebook to jot down some "to do's." As I made my list, I heard, "Are you a reporter?" A man nodded toward my notebook. When I confirmed I was, he let out a sigh of relief. He told me he had come to the police station several times looking for help. Finally, he found someone he could talk to. Before I could reply, he began telling me about the homeless people that were living under a bridge.

Every so often, I glanced up from taking notes to look at the stranger speaking. He hadn't shaved, and he was on the thin side. His jeans were torn, and his jacket was threadbare. I realized he was one of those living under the bridge. After he was done, he thanked me for listening and reached out his hand in a sort of "I-dare-you-to-take-it" way, sizing me up for my reaction. His hand was crusted with callouses and dirt. His tense shoulders softened as I took it. His guarded eyes watered as I shook it warmly. How many times, I wondered, had that outstretched hand been rejected?

There's a bronze sculpture by artist Timothy P. Schmalz of a homeless Jesus that is housed in an Italian basilica. Every time I see it, I think of my encounter with the homeless man from under the bridge. Just recently, Schmalz installed a replica of this sculpture in front of a church in Canada. This time, though, Schmalz placed the homeless Jesus in a circle of seats, making the art installation interactive. The artist, inspired by Matthew 25, said that when he thought of a stranger being welcomed, he didn't think of a door opening to let the stranger in. Rather, he envisioned a circle to include the stranger in. "It reminds us that we are to welcome, not alienate others from our social circles," Schmalz shared on his website.

I wrote the story about the homeless people under the bridge. Like many stories I write, I wonder who might have been inspired by my words? But most of all, I wonder, how many times I have missed touching the divine, because my clean, soft hand hesitated to touch that which was calloused and dirty?

Pray

God, you come to us in many different disguises, all of which we so often look down upon or quickly ignore. From the homeless to the outcast, to the one whose skin is a different color or whose accent is foreign, to those whose physical abilities are questioned or whose intelligence is put down, we miss divine encounters with you because we are looking for our own ideal of who you are. We want a God who is powerful, who is able, who looks like us and thinks like us. But that is not you, O God. You reveal your holy self to us in those we most often ignore. Open our eyes to see you. Open our hearts to receive you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What stories have you read or heard in the news that made you want to act? Did you take action? What held you back? Where perhaps has God been stretching out a hand to you in the form of a stranger that you have yet to grasp?

The Fourth Week in Lent

I was naked and you gave me clothing. — Matthew 25:36

Ponder

In the Bible, nakedness is about spiritual and physical vulnerability. As we enter the fourth week in Lent, think about what “garments” we can clothe the most vulnerable with. Now think about how vulnerable we allow ourselves to be with one another. How easily do we reveal our weaknesses and fears? How often do we admit that we need a mantle of help to be placed over our drooping shoulders?



Sunday | March 27

**Matthew 25 Spotlight—Bethel Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia
Doylestown Presbyterian Church, Doylestown, Pa.**

This week in Lent, discover how two churches in the Philadelphia Presbytery have answered the PC(USA)'s Matthew 25 invitation to focus on racism and poverty, which in turn has increased their congregational vitality. As a result, the two congregations — one predominately Black, the other predominately white — have come together to be open and vulnerable with one another, seeking to learn more about one another and to serve God in the community, together.



Watch

pcusa.info/LentWeek4

Monday | March 28

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
— Proverbs 3:5,6

Weekly Spiritual Practice: Prayer Walks

Henry David Thoreau once wrote that “an early morning walk is a blessing for the whole day.”

A walk can indeed be a blessing. It can even be a powerful spiritual practice, especially in the season of Lent when walking can be a metaphor for “walking with Christ to the cross.”

Prayer walks do not have to be long. Even a 15-minute walk can be spiritually refreshing. The walks can be anywhere: in a city park, around a suburban block or out on a rural unbeaten path. Wherever the prayer walk takes place, leave your earbuds at home so no music will distract you. But do take with you a piece of Scripture to pray over and over as you walk.

While you’re walking, notice how your body falls into a rhythm. Feel the surface beneath your feet — how it grounds and centers you. Look at the sky above you. Notice the colors and the shapes of the clouds. Listen for the sounds around you. What do you hear?

Now look for the glimpses of the Divine. See the tree buds waking up from their slumber. Can you find a crocus peeking out from the ground?

Finally, pray. If you’re walking in your neighborhood, pray for your neighbors. If your walk takes you into a downtown business section, pray for the local businesses. If you are out in nature, pray for God’s Creation to be healed and humans to become better stewards of the gifts found in nature. When you return from your walk, don’t quickly resume your regular schedule. Take a moment to reflect on how the walk made you feel.

Pray

God of our many journeys, may we become more aware of how you are with us each step we take in this life. Make those steps secure. Bless the path before us. Help us to walk the valleys with hope and trust in you. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

There are many paths we can walk in this life. As you embark on the spiritual practice of prayer walking, think about the direction God is asking you to go while you seek to live out serving others as if you are serving Jesus himself.



Tuesday | March 29

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. — James 1:17

The beggar's blanket

Verbascum thapsus — or in English “common mullein” — was the name of the flower that lined a part of the trail I ran on. A friend once told me that the tall plant, with large fuzzy leaves and spikey yellow flowers, was an obnoxious weed. But for some reason, I questioned if it really was. For to my eyes, the plant looked too regal to be a weed.

After having had a bad encounter with what I thought was goldenrod, but was wild parsnip — the sap of which, once it touches the skin and is exposed to sunlight, acts like acid — I whipped out my phone to open my plant identifier app. I wasn't going to tangle with any plant I didn't know much about again!

I discovered common mullein was far from a weed. It was popular in 18th-century America, having been brought to Virginia from Europe for medicinal purposes, as the petals could be dried and made into a tea to help with bronchial infections. What really struck my fancy, though, was the plant's nickname: beggar's blanket.

Folklore states that many times early settlers would plant common mullein along paths and roads for wandering beggars who needed the warmth of a blanket. They would take the large fuzzy leaves and line the inside of their threadbare clothing for an extra layer of protection. The leaves were also wonderful for lining the inside of holed shoes. Hummingbirds were especially fond of using the leaves to line their nests.

I stood there staring at these beggar's blankets lining each side of the trail and mused at the many ways people have clothed the naked over the years. I imagined a settler planting the common mullein. I imagined a grateful beggar who sighed with relief at the soft cushion cradling his aching feet. But now, to our modern eyes, these plants have become just a weed.

That's when a question began gnawing at me: What other "God provisions" do I not see right before me that can be used to help others? It's funny to think that even in our blindness, even when we label that which is good as "weeds," that nature still seeks to care for us. God still seeks to blanket our nakedness.

Pray

God, open our eyes to see the value in the "weeds" we are so quick to disregard as worthless. Help us to realize that your provision, your help and your love are all around us; and as we realize that, may we then take those resources you have blessed us with and share them with others in need. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What are the often overlooked and underappreciated gifts right before you that can be put to use to help others?

Wednesday | March 30

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. — Isaiah 58:6–8

Hot Dog Soup

The deacons and I were in the kitchen washing the final dishes from the supper that just served more than one hundred people. This supper wasn't at the church, but at a local nonprofit that was doing an amazing job feeding the hungry in the area. At first, we weren't familiar with the feeding program. We had originally sought to forge a clothing partnership with the nonprofit, which advertised the need for gently used clothing. When we heard about the dinner the organization served weekly, we offered our help.

So, here we were in the kitchen cleaning up and admittedly feeling overwhelmed by how many were fed. We had no idea such need was right under our noses. As we cleaned, a young woman, who had enjoyed the dinner, came to help. She took a towel to dry the dishes I had washed. We stood side-by-side at the sink making small talk.

I remarked how nice the dinner was. She replied that she didn't know how tasty beans could be. "It sure beats Hot Dog Soup," she said. The quizzical look on my face made her chuckle as she began rattling off the recipe. "Sliced hot dogs, macaroni, canned tomatoes, or in my family's case, ketchup. Oh, and if you're lucky to have canned corn, throw that into the pot as well," she said.

An older woman, who had walked in and overheard our conversation, spoke. "I remember that soup. We called it 'Depression Soup.' I practically grew up on it," she said, before lowering her voice as if offering a hushed confession. "I still make it from time to time."



Make Hot Dog Soup

- 1 (16 oz) box of elbow macaroni
- 2 (16 oz) cans of stewed tomatoes or whole tomatoes
- 1 (16 oz) package of hot dogs
- 1 (16 oz) can of corn (a can of beans may also be added for protein)

Cook macaroni according to the instructions on the box. While it cooks, slice the hot dogs thinly. Open cans of tomatoes, beans (if using) and corn, but do not drain corn or tomatoes. Beans may be rinsed. Combine the contents of the cans and the hot dog slices in a large pot and bring to a simmer. Break up the tomatoes into small chunks as the mixture heats. Drain the macaroni when it is almost done. Reserve the cooking water to add to the pot, if needed. Add the macaroni to the tomato mixture and continue simmering until all the ingredients are thoroughly heated.

As the two women shared a knowing look, I suddenly felt like an outsider, not able to fully understand the love/hate relationship with Hot Dog Soup, Depression Soup, or even as it was called during the Great Depression, “Hoover Stew,” named after President Herbert Hoover, whose term was marked by the stock market crash of 1929.

But that night, something inside of me awakened. I went home and looked at my well-stocked cupboards with new eyes. What could I give away? But more importantly, how could I enter the suffering of hungry people in my community? Perhaps a good start would be to taste this Hot Dog Soup. The next day, my husband and I each sat down to a bowl of it. And as the sliced hot dogs floated in the crushed tomato broth, we began to understand the needs of this world a little bit better.

Pray

Provider God, many of us cannot understand what living on Hot Dog Soup was like. For many of us, our cupboards are full; and even in our “lean” times, we always seem to have more than enough. In this season of Lent, help us to “taste” what life is like for the vulnerable we are called to feed and clothe. Help us to enter the places where stomachs growl with hunger and bodies shake from the cold. Move us to not only care more, but also move us to act. Show us the way. Guide our feet. Open our hearts. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday | March 31

In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” — Luke 3:11

Giving my cloak

I will never forget the day a colleague and I walked up Fifth Avenue to attend the opening of a new gallery featuring an up-and-coming jewelry designer. We were editors for a trade publication, so attending such events were just a typical day for us.

As we walked, I noticed a dog sitting on a blanket with a homeless man whose hand was stretched out holding a cup, waiting for whatever “manna from heaven” would fall into it. I, though, didn’t offer relief nor did I even notice the man. Instead, what came from my mouth was, “Oh, that poor dog.” I am not proud of this moment in my life. And I will never forget how I was called out for my ignorance as the man on the blanket feebly cried out, “What about me?”

In the fourth century, a young soldier, Martin of Tours, came across an old beggar at a city gate who was nearly naked and shivering from the cold. The beggar cried out for money, but Martin had none. Wondering what he could do, Martin took out his sword and cut his ragged cloak in two, wrapping one piece around the old man. He continued on his way, not thinking much about what he had just done. That night, though, Martin had a dream. He saw Jesus wrapped in the same cloak he had given to the beggar. An angel asked Jesus, “Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak?” Jesus replied, “My friend Martin gave it to me.”

Martin woke up the next morning, committing himself to help those in need. His prayer was simple, as all our prayers should be: “Lord, if your people still have need of

my services, I will not avoid the toil. Your will be done.” Martin would later be sainted as St. Martin of Tours.

That day on Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue dashed any hopes of me ever becoming a saint—not that I was even in the running for such a lofty title. But that day did change my life, for it was a day that I heard the voice of Jesus feebly admonish me, asking, “What about me?”

It’s a question that continues to haunt me. It’s a question that has made me realize just how easy it is for our hearts to become desensitized to the hurting people in our midst.

Pray

God, the news of growing poverty, hunger and homelessness grows more dire each day, with numbers rising and needs increasing. The endless news can numb us and make us indifferent. Keep us alert, O God. Awaken us to the needs in our own community. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Where have you heard Jesus crying out to you? When have you been called out for not helping? How did that make you feel?



Friday | April 1

The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. — John 11:31–35

The heart on my sleeve

I've been told that I "wear my heart on sleeve." (Thanks, mom, for that insight.) I do show my emotions easily. People know when I am sad and when I am mad. They know when I am out of sorts. They know when I am happy. Over the years, my mother has gently tried to get me to be not so revealing. But I can't. And while it is scary and even risky at times to put your innermost being on display, I wouldn't live any other way.

You see, being vulnerable with others paves the way for healing and understanding. Vulnerability can strengthen communities. When we reveal our innermost struggles, the bravados we hide behind fall away. Bravado gives way to authenticity, and authenticity gives way to deeper relationships. Perhaps our churches could use a bit more authenticity — a bit more vulnerability with one another?

Being vulnerable should not be confused with being weak. If anything, it takes strength to show others the real you. Jesus himself modeled vulnerability. He came to us in the most vulnerable way: a baby born in squalor conditions. As he grew, he continued to show us that it's OK to be vulnerable. He cried openly at the death of his friend, Lazarus. The last act of Jesus' vulnerability was his death on the cross for us.

I am not one to hide my emotions, and by doing so I have been graced with companions to share my sorrows, doubts and questions with. I never would have found these companions if I had kept a brave face and hid my real self from the world. Speaking of wearing hearts on sleeves, the saying has its origins in jousting. Knights would wear on their armored sleeves the colors or some type of emblem to signify the ladies for whom they were participating in the jousting tournament — the ladies whom their hearts belonged to.

Yes, there is a heart I am wearing on my sleeve. It's the heart that beats for Jesus, the one who taught me it's OK to show my tears to the world, for they are tears that fall for this world.

Pray

God, may we recognize how many times we show the world a side of ourselves that isn't truly who we are. May we risk being vulnerable with one another. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Matthew 25 talks about clothing the naked, but as we have mentioned earlier this week, nakedness in the Bible is often a metaphor for those who are vulnerable. As we begin to think of others who are vulnerable, let us stop and ask ourselves about how vulnerable we are willing to be with others. What about being real with others makes us uncomfortable?

Saturday | April 2

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. — Matthew 6:25–33

Consider the lilies

In his book, “Walden,” Henry David Thoreau — who set out to discover what he could learn about himself by going into the woods to live simply — observed how the wealthy defined themselves by the clothes they wore. “It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothing,” Thoreau mused.

Since biblical times, clothing has been a way of classifying people. We are told in Acts, that Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, which only the rich could afford because the dye was rare and expensive.

I spent my early career reporting on the world of fashion. I was intrigued by the psychology of creating consumer demand and awed by the bright lights of designer runway shows. But it didn’t take long for those lights to dim as I began seeing the less glamorous side of the industry: the competitiveness of designers, the unhealthy body images of models, and the unfair wages of factory workers sewing the garments. When Jesus asks us to clothe the naked, he is asking for the vulnerable to be taken care of, and the vulnerable be found nowhere more readily than in the very industry that clothes people.

In the “2021 Presbyterians Today Advent Devotional,” I mentioned how there were times in my fashion career that I wished for the simple dress of the Amish. A pastor soon wrote to me asking if I was familiar with the “Wool & Prince 100-Day Challenge.” With my curiosity piqued, I went to the retailer’s website. The challenge began in 2012 when the founder of Wool & Prince, Mac Bishop, set out to wear a wool shirt for 100 days without washing it. According to the site, Bishop noticed merino wool was gaining popularity with outdoor enthusiasts, and he wanted to find out firsthand how great merino wool really is. The results were impressive: The shirt made it through the 100 days.

Today, though, Bishop challenges customers to the 100-day shirt wearing challenge not to sell them on the benefits of merino wool, but to awaken them to what I will call “just dressing” — wearing clothes that seek to promote justice in the world. By wearing the same shirt for 100 days, Bishop says customers will recognize what they really need in their wardrobes, save money on dry cleaning and reduce their impact on the planet.

The 100-day challenge will also make you realize that your clothing isn't what defines you. (Thoreau would agree with that!) And for those who complete the 100-day challenge, the retailer sends a free shirt to them.

We don't have to go off into the woods to discover if we really want to live like Thoreau did. We can begin changing our lives and helping others by venturing into the depths of our closets and listening to what our wardrobes say about us.

Pray

God who dresses the lilies in the field so splendidly, you know what we need to cover our backs. May we see our wardrobes this day as an extension of our faith, purchasing clothes from designers who pay fair wages to factory workers and paring down what we own to reduce clothing waste in landfills. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Lent is a perfect time for spring cleaning, starting with our closets. Take an afternoon to reorganize your clothes and see what you can give to others.

The Fifth Week in Lent

I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

— Matthew 25:36

Ponder

What are the social ills that have kept many of God's children from health and wholeness? How has a global pandemic redefined what it means to care for the sick?

And for those who are imprisoned either physically or emotionally, what ministries might God be asking you this Lent to reach out to them?



Sunday | April 3

Matthew 25 Spotlight, Knox Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati

Structural racism is a generational sickness that has kept God's children from the health and wholeness they deserve. See how a monetary bequest left to Knox Presbyterian Church many years ago revealed the sin of structural racism to the congregation and what they did about it to begin the healing of God's beloveds.



Watch

pcusa.info/LentWeek5

Monday | April 4

Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. — Proverbs 24:16

Weekly Spiritual Practice: Speaking words of kindness

We're coming to the end of the Lenten season, and there are still many spiritual practices to explore. As I was thinking about which one to introduce you to this fifth week in Lent, I kept hearing the words to the African American spiritual, "There Is a Balm in Gilead," in which we are told there is a balm to heal the "sin-sick soul." A healing balm in Gilead is restorative; but the words of love and hope, redemption and reparations, that we speak, are just as healing.

There is too much hateful rhetoric these days. Words have become weapons. Personally, it has led me to the spiritual practice of limiting the time I spend online and trying to model healthy social media consumption. Now more than ever, we need to be mindful of what we read, what we hear and, most of all, what we speak. We need to practice speaking words of kindness, and that, in fact, can change our lives — and the world.

There was a mother of two young boys in a church I served early in my ministry. One lazy summer day, while we were in the church parking lot watching her boys and some other children whiz by on their skateboards, we overheard a scuffle, complete with some harsh words being said. The mother stepped in and reprimanded her boys. She then gathered the children and asked them to challenge themselves to speak only kind words to one another. They didn't look like they were sold on that idea, but she pushed further by asking them also to only speak words that were positive and hopeful.

I'm not sure what impact she had on the children, but I know she changed my life that day. I became more aware of how quick I was to sigh or grumble about something. I asked myself, "How would my outlook on a situation change if I refrained from negativity and reframed my responses more positively? What if I sought to spread words of kindness to all I met daily?" I haven't always succeeded, but I have noticed the spiritual practice of speaking words of kindness does have the power to heal a sin-sick world. A kind word spoken — and received — eases tensions, calms rattled spirits and turns scowls into smiles.

Won't you join me during this fifth week in Lent as we care for the sick and visit those in prison, sharing with them kind words filled with love and hope? Begin each day seeking to intentionally speak kind words to at least three people. It's even better if your kind words are to those whom you don't easily get along with. Post the words from Proverbs 16:24 — "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body" — some place prominently in your home where you will be reminded of their wisdom throughout your day.

Pray

God, you sent your Son, Jesus, into this world as the Word made flesh. His ministry was filled with many words: words of love, words of warning, words of reprimand and words

of welcome. May we this day be mindful of what we say to one another, speaking words that heal and truths that are grounded in Christ's love. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

This week, notice how the spiritual practice of speaking kind words affects your outlook on life. Do you feel more hopeful, less overwhelmed, more energized, less depressed?



Tuesday | April 5

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. — James 5:14

Healing prayer

There have been occasions in my ministry when I offered a time of healing prayer. I can't say it is just the Presbyterians who have found this time in the service a bit uncomfortable, with many choosing to remain in their pews rather than coming forward to be anointed with oil. I worked briefly in both an American Baptist congregation as well as for the Episcopalians, and in both denominations, folks remained seated, too, rather than coming forward for a time of healing prayer. Why are we often reticent to receive healing prayer?

My answer came one night during a Bible study I was leading when a newcomer noticed I was struggling with a sinus infection. He stopped the study and asked to pray for me. No one ever offered that before. I was stunned and hesitant, but I said, "Yes." He put his hands on my head and began praying. Admittedly, I felt awkward. The longtime Presbyterians gathered were feeling that way too as I noticed them fidgeting in the chairs around me.

But as the time of healing prayer continued, I found myself surrendering to being cared for. I began praying, too. The fidgeting from others ceased, and a holiness fell



Make Thai Coconut Soup

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger
- 1 stalk lemon grass, minced
- 2 teaspoons red curry paste
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 3 tablespoons fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon light brown sugar
- 3 (13.5 ounce) cans coconut milk
- 1/2 pound fresh shiitake mushrooms, sliced
- 1 pound medium shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- salt to taste
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro

Heat the oil in a large pot over medium heat. Cook and stir the ginger, lemon grass and curry paste in the heated oil for 1 minute. Slowly pour the chicken broth over the mixture, stirring continually. Stir in the fish sauce and brown sugar; simmer for 15 minutes. Stir in the coconut milk and mushrooms; cook and stir until the mushrooms are soft, about 5 minutes. Add the shrimp; cook until no longer translucent, about 5 minutes. Stir in the lime juice; season with salt; garnish with cilantro.

upon us. We began opening ourselves to the Spirit and to one another. I learned that night that care requires both the healthy and the sick to be present and vulnerable to one another: We must allow ourselves to see and be seen, to touch and be touched, to pray and be prayed for. James reminds us today that when there are any sick among us, we are to call upon the community that God has called together.

Pray

Healing God, you are our great physician, and we turn to you for all that ails us. Grant us wholeness. Grant our family and friends the power of your healing touch. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

How comfortable are you to have someone anoint you with oil? When it comes to healing prayer and asking others to pray for you, how does that make you feel? Loved? Vulnerable?

Wednesday | April 6

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. — Psalm 23

Thai Coconut Soup

The slumbering market was waking as vendors set out a colorful array of exotic orchids and equally exotic fruits. Well, they were exotic to my New York City eyes. I suspect that the dazzling colors and smells of the local floral and produce was just another day to the locals. I was in Bangkok on business for the jewelry magazine, and instead of having breakfast at the American hotel I was staying in, I decided to find a meal with a more local flair.

As I contemplated trying the strange, prickly fruit in my hand — which later I learned to be durian, noted for its horrible smell, yet fleshy somewhat sweet, somewhat bitter pulp — I noticed several Buddhist monks walking with empty bowls in their hands. Each vendor they passed would place something in the monks' bowls. When I shared my morning excursion with the liaison from the Thai jewelry association, she explained that the bowls were "begging bowls." It was customary, she said, for monks to rely on the generosity of others and beg for their first meal of the day.

Since that bright Bangkok morning, I pause whenever I take a soup bowl from my shelf, remembering the monks' reliance on others. I hold my empty bowl prayerfully thinking about who it is that I rely on for my sustenance, and how grateful I am that there's always a full bowl of something for me and my family to enjoy. But not everyone has their bowls filled so easily. There are many whose bowls remain empty.

This week in Lent, as your soup simmers on the stove, take your bowl and hold it. Think about how we are called to be Christ to one another and how we really do rely

on one another for our needs to be met. If my bowl is empty, I pray you will fill it. And when my bowl is filled to the brim, I pray that my heart will be generous, and I will fill yours.

Pray

Generous God, we prayerfully hold our empty bowls out to you, asking for you to fill them with a love that will lead us to truly serve your children in this world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday | April 7

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. — Galatians 6:9

Sick and tired

I never thought I would be overwhelmed by Jesus' words in Matthew 25 about caring for the sick, but two years of a pandemic that has brought so much heartache and hardship has me overwhelmed — and tired. Where does our caring begin when there are so many needs?

I pause on my Lenten journey to think about how the global pandemic and its mutating variants have stressed an already stretched-thin health care system. I lift a prayer for all the bone-tired and emotionally weary doctors, nurses and chaplains.

I think about so many of my friends who are caregivers to elderly parents, special-needs children and physically challenged adult children. The statistics of how overburdened families are as they take care of loved ones are staggering, and pandemic precautions and concerns have added to the burden. I hear about the growing mental health crisis among children and teens as typical routines have been disrupted by remote learning and mask mandates, and my heart breaks, and I whisper, "Lord, what can I do?"

"Pray fervently," I hear coming back to me. But as I pray, I realize that I am sick, too: sick of the sickness in the world. I'm not just talking about a virus ravaging the bodies of those I love. I am talking about a virus that has brought to light the sickness of racial injustices and economic inequalities. Covid has hit our Black and Indigenous siblings hard, with rates of infections and death alarmingly high. Covid has shone a light on the lack of medical care available to those in impoverished rural areas. Covid has also revealed how riddled with potholes the digital superhighway really is. How do children stay competitive if they cannot receive online learning? How can a breadwinner continue providing for the family if reliable internet is nonexistent?

I am sick — and tired — of the world we are living in. But even as my heart aches and breaks, even when I want to crawl back underneath the warmth of my covers, I hear the words of Jesus spoken in so many different voices and in so many different situations. They're saying, "I was sick," and I pray for the strength to help so that the next words will be, "And you cared for me."

Pray

God, grant us the energy we need to serve you in this world so filled with sickness. When

we feel overwhelmed by it all, may we remember it is then we need to step back, breathe and turn our eyes upon you. For it is from you that our help will come. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What has you overwhelmed the most this day? Identify your stress, your fear or worry. Now take inventory of how your body feels physically. Note any aches, pains or tension. What can you do to take care of your physical and mental health so that you can care for others?



Friday | April 8

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. — Isaiah 61:1

Prison systems

It was an eerie sound hearing the door to the jail cell clank shut. I stood there frozen, feeling as if I couldn't breathe. I quickly grabbed hold of the metal bars and swung the door back open. Never in my life did I ever think I would experience being in an actual jail cell, but there I was.

A local man in the village I was serving as pastor had invited me to explore the historic courthouse. It hadn't been operational in years, but I still heard the infamous story told in many variations about the time an inmate broke loose and hid in the neighboring cornfield that was right across from the school where children played during recess. It was shortly after that event that the courthouse was moved out of the village.

No, I never thought I would experience being in an actual cell, but there I was, and I was not prepared for the suffocating helplessness and sense of isolation I felt. While I was there for all of 20 seconds, in that short time, I felt my humanity slipping

from me. If I felt that so quickly, how then did the prisoners sentenced for more a 20-second stint feel?

I never felt a call to prison ministry, but I have had friends who have, and I am always awed by their stories of great spiritual awakenings they have witnessed within a locked cell.

While our prison system, like many of our systems, is broken and needs fixing, we must not forget to pray for those incarcerated, they tell me. But how? For when I hear I should pray for someone who has harmed another, I find it difficult. And yet, we are called to do what is difficult. We are called to forgive and to love, for those are the very things that set all prisoners free — those behind actual bars and those in their own cells of victimization.

While I was struggling to write this reflection, as I have never visited anyone in prison, I came across an article published by Baylor University. It caught my eye because it started with the sentence, "Prison ministry teaches us deep spiritual lessons." Intrigued, I read on. Those lessons, it said, included how to forgive and how to restore. It also cited lessons on listening, patience and cross-cultural communication.

It seems to me if we mastered the skills of listening, patience and communication with all our siblings in Christ — no matter their color, gender or economic standing — perhaps there would be less need for prisons in the country where more people are incarcerated than any other country in the world.

Pray

God, you gave us free will to choose between right and wrong, but there are times your children choose to act in a way that harms others and your commands to not kill and not covet are broken. Let us not forget that there are times where we are all found guilty of not loving one another. Send us your forgiveness. Redeem our troubled hearts. Use our hands and feet to work for restorative justice in this world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

According to the Vera Institute of Justice, a national organization founded in 1961 that partners with local communities and government leaders to work for prison reform, there were 537 people behind bars per 100,000 residents in early 2021. Think about those who are incarcerated and how God might be asking you to "visit" those in prison.

Saturday | April 9

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! — 2 Corinthians 5:17

The prison of yourself

There was a large prison I would drive by on my way to the rural church I was serving in upstate New York. It always gave me a chill when I saw it. It's cold, fortress-like walls and harsh barbed wire, wrapping and curling on top of the tall fence outside, gave me the feeling of a cold and harsh environment on the inside of the prison as well. I don't know if that was true because I never went inside, but I met a woman who did.

She was an older pastor, now retired. Her slight frame and gentle demeanor made me size her up again when she told me of how she would spend many weekends at that prison. She noticed my quizzical look and explained that most of her prison ministry took place outside in the parking lot. Not that many people, she explained, ever thought about the needs in a prison parking lot, where family members would line up to wait to visit their loved ones inside.

"I had some of the best conversations and moments of ministry there in that lot," she said. There were moments of sadness, guilt, regret, hurt, betrayal and even confession. But the greatest moments she remembers were the ones in which those who were nonordained reached out to her, the pastor, and noticed something amiss within her own heart. "There were times I found myself being ministered to," she said.

It is said that often when we are feeling imprisoned by our own worries, thought distortions, guilt or sadness, we need to step out of ourselves and serve others — and to serve others selflessly, looking for nothing in return. It was in those prison parking lot moments, the pastor got to connect with people who were carrying so much on their shoulders, but she also allowed them to connect with her. She discovered the greatest gift was not in seeking to repair the broken, but simply being among the many pieces of shattered lives and to admit that she had a few shards in the mix as well.

Barbara Brown Taylor, author and Episcopal priest, once wrote that "the hardest spiritual work in the world is to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, help, save or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you allow it."

As we seek to live into Matthew 25, let us not make Jesus' "I was" statements a ministry checklist for "doing good." Let us not see the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned as mission projects, but let us see them as beloveds on the journey with us — beloveds that can, in fact, minister to us and set us free from whatever prisons we have kept ourselves locked in.

Pray

Gracious and redeeming God, may we see the stranger on our path this day, not as a charity case or a mission project, but as a sibling in Christ who perhaps can teach us something about ourselves, who can perhaps free us from that which imprisons us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What are our motives for serving God's children? Is it coming from a selfless love born out of the love that God has showered upon us? Is it a sense of Christian duty? Holy Week begins tomorrow with Palm/Passion Sunday. Now is a good time to assess your readiness and willingness to live Matthew 25 in all you say and do.

The Sixth Week in Lent | Holy Week

*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."
— Matthew 25:40*

Ponder

The "least of these" that Jesus mentions are those who find themselves in need. Who do you see in your community in need? Who among you is struggling? Who needs prayer? Who is a person on your path to whom you can show the love of Christ?



Palm/Passion Sunday | April 10

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
— Matthew 21:1–9*

What the Lord needs

Before Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he asked his disciples to go get a donkey and a colt. The disciples questioned Jesus if the owner of the animals would give them freely. Jesus replied, "Just say the Lord needs them." Sure enough, the disciples didn't run into any hesitation and were able to secure the animals Jesus wanted.

I love lingering on this little detail in the story of Jesus' passion, for it so often gets pushed aside for the palm-waving fanfare and promising shouts of "Hosanna!" And every year that I was a pastor in a rural church, I would look at the palms waving from those in the pews and listen to the organist do her best to play "All Glory Laud and Honor" on the out-of-tune organ, and I'd wonder: "Are we really willing to give what the Lord needs?" Sometimes it's just easier to show up and wave a palm every so often.

Just say, "The Lord needs them." Can I really give the one who thirsts water? Just say, "The Lord needs them." Can I give my bread to one standing before me hungry? Just say, "The Lord needs them." Do I see Jesus in the least of these that are in the world?

The hosannas fade. The palms that were held high with enthusiasm lower. Reality sets in. Grace is not cheap. It's costly. And by the end of this week, it will cost our Savior his life.

But for now, don't drop your palm too quickly. Hold tightly to it and ask, "Can I give what the Lord needs today: a trusting heart when it's hard to trust, hope for new life when the old way is dying, bright joy even in the shadow of the cross, courage to go the distance with Jesus, or the patience to wait for the promise of resurrection that is to come?"

Pray

Redeeming and grace-filled God, you know how fickle our hearts are. We are so quick to sing our praises to you when things seem to go our way, but we are reminded in this week we call "holy" just how hard it is to live for you. It is hard to hold on to your promise that all will be well when the world exchanges its "Hosannas!" for "Crucify!" God, we are in the Palm Sunday crowd. You see us. You know us. We cry out to your Son, Jesus, "Save us!" We are trying our best to hold on tightly to our palms. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Take time today to think back on your Lenten journey thus far. What do you hear God asking of you? What does the Lord need in making Matthew 25 a living reality in your community? Can you give without hesitation what is needed?

Monday | April 11

As the time approached, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.
— Luke 9:51

Remaining steadfast

It's Monday of Holy Week and rather than introduce a new spiritual discipline to explore, let us reflect on the ones we've already tried throughout Lent: fasting, centering prayer, welcome and hospitality, prayer walking and speaking words of kindness. Which one did you find fulfilling? Which one was more challenging? Revisit either the fulfilling or the challenging one and commit to practicing it this week. And consider making it a goal to continue exploring spiritual practices during Eastertide, the 50 days that lead to Pentecost.

Now, let us delve into our Scripture as it is one of my favorites that I have often found myself mulling over as Holy Week begins. Luke tells us that Jesus "set his face" to go to Jerusalem, knowing all too well that there would be nothing but trouble and death awaiting him. I've always wanted more information, for I know when I've had to face something difficult "down the road," anxiety, worry and fear would fill me. I would even try to change the direction of the path I was on. Jesus, as the Son of God, was fully human and fully divine, and so I wonder if Jesus, for just one second, wanted to turn back.

Moving forward isn't always easy. We often want to run back at some point to what is familiar. When presented with our own "God futures" — that is, a future full of unknowns — we wistfully wish for things to go back to what feels safe and comfortable. But think about this: When we don't take a step forward, we risk missing all the precious opportunities to serve Jesus in the least of these.

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem because he knew God wanted something new for all humankind. What would have happened if Jesus had turned back? Where would we be today?

The Good Friday cross looms. How steadfast are you in following Jesus? Are your eyes looking forward to new possibilities or do they keep sneaking a peek to a past which is just that: past. Our hopeful futures are found on those scary, dangerous, unknown paths forward.

Pray

Loving God, help us this day to be steadfast on our journeys, keeping our eyes on Jesus and trusting our unknown futures to you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Where are you on the path of life right now? Are you stuck and afraid of taking the next step? Have you been romanticizing about a past that you wish you could return to? What "step" — literally and figuratively — can you take today to enter the future God has for you?



Tuesday | April 12

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. — Mark 11:15–18

Where the hoof prints lead

A few years ago, on a Tuesday of Holy Week, shortly after Sofie, my sweet Bernese Mountain dog died, I went for a lonely walk on the trail she loved. The night seemed quiet without her. It's funny how you get used to another's presence with you are on a well-worn path. Since I didn't have a bumbling dog occupying my attention, I could notice little details on the path — like the hoof prints in the dirt. The impressions were deep and distinct. I took note of how far down the path they went and decided to follow them, being very careful not to step on them as I didn't want to erase their presence from the path.

As I walked alongside them and thought of the hoof prints the donkey left on the path as it carried Jesus into Jerusalem, I thought about the events that would happen in that holy city. There would be an altercation in the temple. Some tables would be overthrown. A meal would be shared in an upper room. Feet would be washed. A mandate would be given to love one another. Then a betrayal followed by an anguished prayer in a garden would be capped off with an arrest, a trial, a guilty verdict for being the King of Jews, and then a crucifixion.

I thought of the tears shed by the faithful few, emphasis on few, who stayed with Jesus at Golgotha, which brought to mind that painful first day after someone dies. You might know what I am talking about: the first day without your beloved when you don't even feel your tears because you are just so numb with grief. And then, there would be an empty tomb. Death never has the last word.

I stooped down and gently traced the hoof print in the dirt. The birds ceased their singing. The peepers hushed their peeping. I traced it over and over and thought

about this week: a week I walk more slowly and feel more deeply. I felt a heavenly nudge of a dog's wet nose against my skin. I felt a divine warmth embrace me. We don't get to the glory of Easter until we trod the lonely path with our Savior.

Many probably didn't notice the hoof prints left behind so long ago by a humble animal carrying Salvation on its back. But those who did, did they keep following to where they led?

Pray

Dear God, the world around us is acting anything but holy. Life goes on as usual with no one really stopping to notice divine hoof prints all around. This is a week to slow our steps, to feel the weight of Friday's gathering gloom, to stand still and feel the awe of a love so great that you sacrificed your Son for us. We pause. We feel the heaviness of the holy. And we whisper, "Thank you." In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What can you do today that will set apart the ordinariness of this Tuesday in Holy Week as holy?

Wednesday | April 13

Among the many memories I have of visiting my grandparents in Switzerland were the meals we ate together in the old farmhouse nestled among the Alps of Appenzell. At each meal, you could count on the same staples being on the table: rustic bread, cheese and soup.

Seven Greens Soup

The Swiss love their soups, and I didn't realize how deep that love was until I discovered an old Swiss cookbook in an antique store. There were so many soup recipes — and fabled stories. I found "Peace Soup" — a milk and bread concoction — that legend has it prevented a battle between Catholics and Protestants as both armies gathered on the field and, instead of whipping out their swords, took out their spoons and ate together. And there was a soup that is served on Maundy Thursday: "Sieben Grün Suppe" or "Seven Greens Soup." When I asked my father if he remembered his mother making this soup, he recalled fondly how she would say a prayer for someone in need with each of the seven greens she added to the pot.

Traditionally, the soup was offered to break the Lenten fasting on Thursday of Holy Week, which is called "Gründonnerstag" or "Green Thursday." There are many different explanations for where the "green" entered Maundy Thursday. Some theorize the green was a nod to liturgical vestments. Before the 13th century, priests would wear green vestments on Maundy Thursday. It was also common to refer to those fasting as "green ones" as they would wear green herbs on Maundy Thursday to point towards the Easter joy that would come. Others, though, say that the "green" is an old word, "greinen," which means "mourning."

No matter its origins, I like the idea of a simple soup served during Holy Week. I like the idea of lots of greens, which symbolize the rebirth of spring. But most of all, I like how my Swiss grandmother would use the mundane task of making soup and turn it into a prayerful act — taking seven greens and thinking of seven people to pray



Make Seven Greens Soup

(Feel free to use whatever greens you have available.)

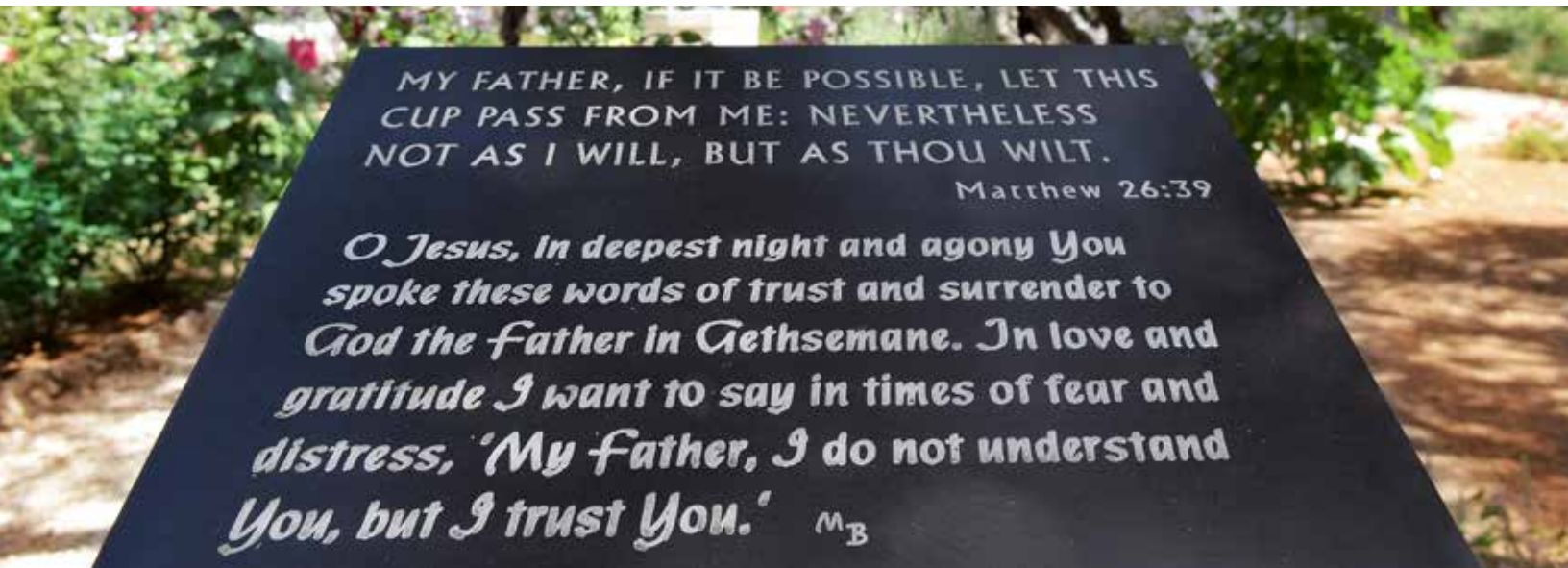
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 2 shallots, minced
- 1 medium leek, chopped
- 4 cups water
- 2 russet potatoes, peeled and chopped
- 2 cups fresh spinach, chopped
- 1 cup fresh parsley, chopped
- 1 cup chives, chopped
- ½ cup fresh dill, chopped
- ½ cup celery leaves, chopped
- ½ cup sorrel, watercress or arugula leaves, chopped
- ½ cup milk
- 1 and ½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper

Melt butter in a 3-quart soup pot. Add shallots and chopped leek and sauté over medium heat until the onions are soft, 5–7 min. Add the water and chopped potatoes. Bring the mixture to a boil and reduce the heat to a simmer. Simmer the potatoes until tender, about 20 min. Add the greens and herbs, and simmer for 10 min. Puree the soup using an immersion blender (or transfer the soup to a traditional blender and blend until smooth). Add the milk, salt and pepper. Mix well. Serve the soup as is, or topped with sour cream, croutons, or extra herbs.

for. And so, I offer you this traditional Maundy Thursday soup to make either today or tomorrow, or any time, really. But whenever you make it, take the seven greens and pray for the needs of the least of these that Jesus asks us to see in our siblings.

Pray

Abundant God, we thank you for full pantries and for the access to seven greens in which to make a nourishing soup. As this soup feeds us physically, increase our hunger for wanting to reach out to those whose stomachs are empty. Open our eyes to the “others” and grant us wisdom in how to truly love in a way that isn’t just about checking off a “good deed done” box. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.



Maundy Thursday | April 14

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” — Matthew 26:36–39

A garden prayer

It was a powerful night for those gathered at the little rural church I was serving — powerful, not just because it was Maundy Thursday. That itself makes for a moving worship experience. No, this was powerful because the staunch New England traditionalists were open to trying something different.

They gathered in the fellowship hall, better known as Mackenzie Chapel, named after the man whose grim-looking picture, hanging on one wall, had caused many a child to ask, “Pastor Donna, are his eyes following me?” Of course, they were teasing me, claiming that the famous friendly ghost that was legendary for haunting their school occasionally came down the street to visit the church. There was plenty of hallowed ground in the little village, with a Revolutionary War cemetery greeting visitors upon arrival as well as stories of which old house was an underground railroad stop.

But on this holy night, an intimate group gathered in the chapel for a quiet candlelight supper to recall the Passover meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. We ate and discussed the importance of that night from the foot washing to the breaking of the bread to the hearing of a new mandate to love one another. As was recorded in Scripture, we then sang a hymn after supper was over and made our way outdoors.

The sweet smell of a spring night was strong. The daffodils and hyacinths from Easter's past, planted by the white picket fence of the church's parking lot, were in full bloom. A bird fluttered by, and, in the silence of the circle, we realized we weren't just standing on hallowed ground. We were standing on holy ground, and there were angels all around. Just then a little girl, who couldn't contain her excitement any longer, let out, "Mommy, listen to the peepers!"

It was surreal. We were there to recall the agony of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane yet mingling with his cries was the beauty of God's creation. Everyone smiled at the girl's joy, and I continued with reading the Scripture passage. With the chorus of peepers singing an anthem, I read the words I knew those in the circle had whispered, pleaded or cried out many times. I read the words that were all too familiar in my life: "Father, please let this cup of suffering pass. But not according to my will, but your will be done."

The words wafted into the air. The stars appeared. We closed with our voices joining together in a simple prayer that marked the anguish with hope: "Thy will be done, God. Thy will be done." That night, the faithful tried something new for worship. And as they got into their cars to go home, there wasn't a dry eye to be found.

Pray

God, on this night of foot washings, last meals and anguished garden prayers, help us to hold on tightly to your love, knowing that no matter what life brings, you are with us through it all. May your will be done in our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What "cup" have you prayed fervently to God to be removed? What happened when it wasn't? Can you recall how God held you and strengthened you through trials and tribulations? Who were the "others" sent to you as angels to be by your side?

Good Friday, April 15

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. — John 19:25–27

You are my family

Out of all of Jesus' words from the cross, this exchange between his mother and his beloved disciple was always a sidebar to me. There goes Jesus' human side,

expressing concern for who will take care of his mom when he's gone. I've always thought his words on forgiveness and the painful lament, "I thirst," and finally, "It is finished," carried more importance than "here is your son." But as I have been thinking for these past 40 days about seeing Jesus — truly seeing him in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger and the imprisoned — I now hear his words differently — and powerfully.

"Here is your son" and "here is your mother" are not compassionate gestures. They are words of direction for us all to see one another as family members, not bound by blood but by grace. We are meant to be the love of God to one another, to be there to console and comfort, to tend and care for, to advocate and support.

In his book, "Seven Last Words," Timothy Radcliffe shares a story about Brazilian Archbishop Hélder Pessoa Câmara, who had a deep sense that the poorest people in the world were his family. One day, Câmara heard a man was unjustly arrested. He called the police telling them that they had, in fact, arrested his brother. The police were apologetic, horrified that they had arrested someone in the archbishop's family. When Câmara came to the station, the chief, though, inquired why the man didn't have the same family name as the archbishop. Câmara simply said that every poor person shared the name of Christ with him.

Jesus is asking us, who are gathered this day at the foot of his cross, to not be hung up on our family names, on our shared interests, on our denominations or on our need to protect "our own." Jesus is asking, "Who will you share the name of Christ with today?"

Pray

God, broaden our definition of family so that we will emerge from our Lenten journey truly seeing all as our siblings in Christ. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

What does the word "family" mean to you? How do Jesus' words from the cross challenge your definition of family?

Holy Saturday | April 16

For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. — Psalm 30:5

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. — Mark 16:1–2

All of a sudden

The other night, as my husband and I were driving home, I remarked that I always find it amazing how "all of a sudden" the grass turns from brown to green. My husband didn't seem to be quite as amazed, simply replying, "All it takes is a bit of rain and a few warm nights."

He's right. That's all it takes. Still, I went back to staring at the green fields that we were passing by, silently enjoying my sense of awe as to just how quickly the earth came back to life when it seemed it would never return, especially after a long winter.

The windshield wipers whisked away the spring rain, which was also drizzling down upon the ever-greening grass. Back and forth they swished, and I found myself thinking about life's other "all of a sudden" moments: the moments when "all of a sudden" our mourning turns to dancing, the moments, when in the painful silences, "all of a sudden" God speaks so beautifully to us.

All of a sudden — God reveals something beyond what we could have ever imagined or asked for. All of a sudden — God wipes away tears of sadness with gives us tears of great thanks and praise. All of sudden — God colors our lives with the greenest of grass where once it seemed nothing would ever grow.

I have always treasured the story of the women going to the Jesus' tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week to prepare his body for a proper burial because I have made similar walks in my life. I know the dark coldness that grips the world before the sun rises. I know how hard it is to muster enough faith, courage, energy and willpower to take even one step because the pain in your heart, the dashed dreams in your life, are just too heavy to bear. And yet, you must walk forward. So, you walk knowing you must say good-bye to the past. You walk forgetting that "all of a sudden" — or so it will seem — God will act.

I looked out at the ever-greening grass being fed by the warm spring rains and realized God is never done surprising us. But there are times we must wait in the sacred silences when it seems nothing is happening at all. Holy Saturday is that time of sacred waiting, and we must slow down and enter the grief, the emptiness and the stillness. We need that space where our tears can flow freely. And like drops of warm spring rain, those tears will help something beautiful to bloom again.

Pray

God, you know how hard it is for us to wait. Our "on demand" society doesn't help our impatience. We want everything good, and we want it right now. But you, O God, have a different schedule, and your timing is always the best. On this Holy Saturday, help us not to rush ahead to the tomb. Help us to sit with the holy silences. Catch the tears that fall. Chase away the loneliness with your embrace. We are here, fully present in this dazzling darkness. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ponder

Holy Saturday has often been a day filled with last-minute preparations for tomorrow's Easter celebration. Take a look at your schedule and your list of errands. How can you change today's agenda to have more quiet time to pray and embrace the stillness?



Easter Sunday, April 17

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he 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. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” — Mark 16:2–7

Rolling the stones away

The Easter sunrise service was held in the historic cemetery of the church I served in Maryland. We began our worship inside the sanctuary, then quietly walked in the dark through the cemetery. When we arrived at a small clearing, the sun had just begun to reveal the beginnings of what looked to be a glorious day.

I was overcome with such emotion that I couldn't continue leading worship. I began to cry — freely. That had never happened before, but in that moment of Easter Day breaking upon us, I felt tremendous gratitude. I tried to pull myself together, but I just couldn't. Those gathered were gracious and gave me the space I needed. When I finally was able to talk, I looked around the cemetery — the place where the world sees “endings” but where I saw only new beginnings — and I said, “Isn't it beautiful? Look around. We have all been given the chance to LIVE.”

All throughout Lent, I have shared thoughts and reflections on each of Jesus' “I was” sayings in Matthew 25. I have invited you to live Matthew 25. Yet as I wrote, I kept thinking about all the times I have failed to see Jesus. I remembered the times I didn't stop to help someone, to feed someone, to reach out and help those in need.

Yet, Easter has dawned upon us. We have been given a chance to embrace a new life where, instead of running by the one who is asking for help, we find ourselves stopping.

We will not live out Matthew 25 perfectly. There will be times when we fail to see the Christ in one another. There will be times where we hold on to what we have rather than give freely, but we are being asked to find our lives by losing them and not to fear that loss.

While writing this devotional, I came across a song by the Irish contemporary Christian musician, Robin Mark. I was familiar with some of his songs, but this one, "Central Station," I had never heard before. It was a gift that spoke to me, its words capturing the spirit of what living Matthew 25 looks like. The song is about a friend seeing an old acquaintance at the train station who had clearly fallen onto bad times. The friend, though, didn't stop to reach out to this person who clearly needed someone to talk to. The song alludes that Jesus, though, would have stopped and talked to them.

I thought about all those times I didn't stop for someone. That I, too, like the song says, "was a little scared . . . I did not do anything, I just stood and stared." We will have those days in which we do nothing but stare, but by the grace of God, as the song says, we will be given a new day to do better. Easter is that new day. We need to stop wondering how the stones in this life will be removed and start trusting that God can use our hands to remove such barriers.

It is Easter. The tomb is empty. Do you see Jesus? He is out in the world, in many different guises. Will you have the grace to serve him?

Pray

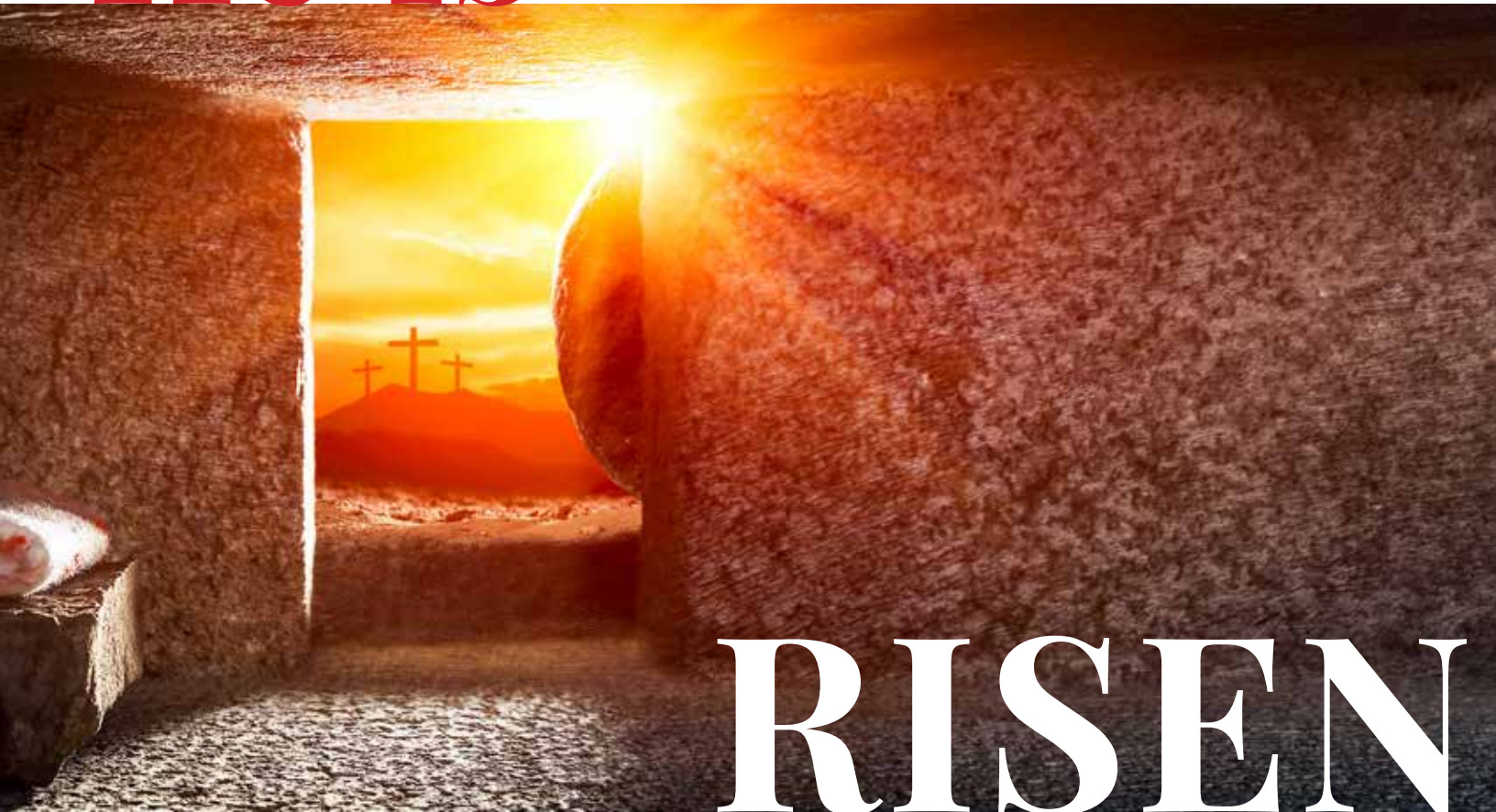
God grant that someday we'll meet again and give me the grace to talk to you — a soft word on the love that turns a life around and a kind hand that will lift you to higher ground. God grant that someday we'll meet again. Amen. (This prayer is the last line to Robin Mark's song, "Central Station." You can listen to the entire song at

pcusa.info/CentralStation

Ponder

What Easter moments are you feeling great gratitude for? What are the endings you need to leave behind in the cemetery? How will you challenge yourself each day to live Matthew 25?

He is



RISEN



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission