Virtues for the Journey:
A Lenten Prayer & Reflection Guide

Santa Clara University
Lent 2022
Welcome! A Guide to this Book

Dear SCU Community,

Welcome to *Virtues for the Journey*, a 6-week guide to prayer and reflection during the great season of Lent. The reflections, prayers, and spiritual autobiographies that follow are authored by members of SCU’s Religious Studies faculty.

Each reflection centers on a specific virtue. As you read, consider how the author’s reflection relates to your own life as a follower of Jesus: What is God saying to you through this reflection? To what is God calling you? How can this reflection help you make this Lent a time of authentic purification, enrichment, and recommitment that allows you to enter more fully into the joy of Easter?

Consider reading each reflection a few times in the appropriate week. Consider praying the prayer at the start of each day. If you find yourself inspired by the spiritual biographies, you might ponder how the author’s life relates to your own.

All in all, this guide aims to help us walk together a community of faith, drawing us more fully into solidarity with the poor and those in need and challenging us to live more fully into prayer, fasting, and almsgiving: the hallmarks of the Lenten Season.

Blessings on the journey,

Paul J. Schutz  
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Week 1: Humility (March 2-12)
Rev. Dr. James Bennett, Associate Professor, Religious Studies

Reflection (Guiding Scripture: Luke 14:7-14)

That humility is a virtue may not seem obvious. Achievement and self-promotion often seem to be more dominant values. Even the dictionary denigrates humility as "having a low estimate of oneself." Nor is this a modern perspective. In the cultures of the New Testament era, humility was also a negative concept. It was the way those in the highest positions described those in the lowest. Humility was something people aspired to rise out of. No wonder many consider humility less than virtuous.

But in Luke 14:7-14, Jesus lifts up the idea of humility as a characteristic of the Kingdom of God. Watching Pharisees jockey for seats of honor at dinner, Jesus tells them to take the lowest seat rather than the highest when they are invited to a banquet. That way they might experience the honor of being asked to move up, rather than the humiliation of being told to take a lower place at the table.

Jesus’ conception of humility is very different from understandings that equate humility with low self-esteem, inferiority, or submission. Rather, humility is recognizing limits of who we are and living within the reality of those limits. This does not mean that we see ourselves as failures. Rather, humility calls us to a realistic assessment of who we are and challenges us to proceed from that understanding. It means keeping ourselves in perspective. We do not exaggerate our position by thinking too much of ourselves, nor minimize it by thinking too little. Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs use this understanding of humility as the foundation of each of their steps: only when people recognize their own limits, what they can and cannot realistically accomplish, can healing begin. And only then, AA adds, can a person develop a spiritual dimension.

Reconceived in this way, humility and pride are not opposite ends of a spectrum. Instead, humility sits at the middle of the continuum, between pride and what is the real opposite of pride: self-abasement. Humility becomes the middle way. On one side, it is a balance to pride, which disrupts our relationship to God and to others as we deny our connections to and need for them. On the other side, humility counters self-denial and denigration, the tendency to forget we are created and loved by God and to diminish our value to God and our community. Humility is not humiliation. It is not allowing ourselves to be stepped on and pushed around. Nor is it enduring, or even welcoming
the worst. Suffering is not humility. Dag Hammarskjöld, a Secretary of the United Nations in the 1950s, challenged these misconceptions when he wrote "humility is just as much the opposite of self-abasement as it is of self-exaltation."

When we think of humility as a middle ground, of living within the limits of who we are, it has important ramifications for our spiritual life. We are no longer caught up in the illusion of self-sufficiency. The danger of pride is that it leaves no space for others in our lives, and it leaves no space for God. A psychologist who has spent a great deal of time studying humility suggests, "if you do not believe in God, maybe this is because you have not developed the humility it takes to look for God."

When we move away from the extreme of self-abasement, humility gives us the confidence to live in the certainty of God's forgiveness, rather than feeling unworthy to accept it. As the earliest Christian monks observed, we recognize that "humility [is] the living out of the conviction that all human beings, every man, woman, and child, are beloved creatures of God." When we acknowledge our limits—when we see ourselves as imperfect yet created in God's image—we are able to respond to the loving God who offers forgiveness and mercy, to the God who has reconciled us through Jesus Christ.

The virtue of humility also restores balance to our relationship with others. When we stand in that middle ground, acknowledging and living within our limits, we become sympathetic to the limits of those around us. We realize we are called to stand in community and solidarity, rather than competition, with each other. With the humility that characterizes the Kingdom of God, we join Jesus in recognizing the image of God in each other, finding strength in our shared experiences of God’s love and grace.

As we move through this Lenten season, let us practice the virtue of humility and its middle way of standing in right relationship to God and each other.

**Prayer**

God of Grace, you sent Jesus to live among us, to minister to us, and to guide us away from the illusion of self-sufficiency and the despair of loneliness. As we journey through this season of Lent, remind us that you have created us in your own image, strengthen us to accept and renew our dependence on you, and empower us to reflect to others the love and grace that you have given to us. Amen.
“In life and in death we belong to God.” These words give me great comfort. They are the opening line of the “Brief Statement of Faith,” one of the official confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to which I have belonged my entire life. In fact, I am a third-generation Presbyterian and am named after my grandfather who was, like me, an ordained Presbyterian minister.

These are the anchors of my faith: the tradition to which I belong and the family that nurtured my faith. That is not a claim to exclusive truth nor to suggest that neither my faith or tradition has been unchanging. As a historian, I am aware of contingent, contextual, and changing nature of both institutions and individual faith. Perhaps this is why I have often found the confessions, which stretch over the centuries of Christian history, to be a meaningful ways to help articulate my changing faith.

At times it was the sense of rules and expectations that gave me comfort, though now that seems misguided. As I have become more aware of my own imperfections and those of the world, I have leaned into the assurances of God’s grace at the heart of the gospel. I find comfort not in seeking perfection—that’s impossible and not the source of our salvation anyway—but in trying to live out the love and grace I experience in my own life and to see the image of God in each and every person. This is what I understand to be the Christian calling.
Week 2: Openness (March 13-19)
Dr. Haruka Umetsu Cho, Assistant Professor, Religious Studies

Reflection

For me, the Lenten season starts with recalling the memory of the serious injury that I suffered in winter 2014.

On a snowy day, we were driving from Connecticut to up north. When we entered Vermont, the mild snow changed into a storm. At an exit, our car slipped and turned over. At the hospital, they found my neck was broken. I could have been dead if the fractured part were a few inches higher.

Two weeks after the surgery, I came back to school wearing a plastic neck brace. (I was an M.Div. student at that time, and as an international student I needed to continue enrolling at the school to maintain my student visa).

This experience became the beginning of my journey toward the unknown. I woke up every night with a pain I had never experienced, and the psychological shock of the accident unexpectedly visited me a few weeks after the surgery. Ultimately, I lost the idea of God that I’d previously had. What hurt me the most were, strangely, the words of kindness, like “God had a plan. God saved you.” I thought, “On that day, there took place seven other accidents in the same area almost simultaneously. What about other people—the others whom I even haven’t met but might have seriously injured as well or died in those accidents?” This idea was extended to numerous others who would be suffering in the world. With my depressed mind and injured body, I could not be thankful or think about what I could do for the better.

During that semester, I was taking a course on spirituality and meditation, and the liturgical calendar entered into Lent. The course introduced various ways of meditation, which invited me to simply sit with the unknown—the unknown physical pain, the unknown feelings in the aftermath of the accident, and God as the Unknown. After three months of meditation and journaling, what I found was still, the unknown—but I became slightly more patient, slightly better at being present with uncertainties. I just realized a simple fact: we cannot control our lives, and we cannot control (our ideas about) God. What I could do was just to sit with myself, open to the presence of the Unknown. And I felt it was enough. It was just enough.
And of course, I was able to go through this journey with the warm presence of my loved ones, friends, teachers, and supportive communities. I was probably not fully functioning enough to process events or conversations at that time, but my body still remembers the presence of those people who cared for me. I learned that the presence could remain in our heart, body, and spirit. And the presence could change into warm feelings of healing and gratitude.

Seven years have passed since the accident. I no longer suffer from intense physical and emotional pain, but this Lenten experience became a pivotal moment for my theology. Each individual may not be able to do tremendous things to change the world. But as religious people have said again and again for centuries, we can do simple things. Be present—be patiently present with ourselves, the other, and the Unknown Other. As God is unfathomable, so too is each individual and the world. We may open ourselves up to uncertain moments of life, to be present with others—however discomforting it may be.

Perhaps we may call this simple act of opening ourselves up a beginning of solidarity.

**Prayer**

God, Unknown Other,
   open my senses to your presence;
   open my heart to your love.
In opening myself to you,
   may I open myself to others.
   May I find you in them
   as I see them in you.
Guided by your grace, may I act simply,
   in whatever small ways I can
   to know you and to do your will. Amen.
spiritual autobiography

I was introduced to Christianity and came to my faith while attending an ecumenical Christian high school and college in Tokyo, Japan, where Christianity is a minority religion. While I’m now a member of the United Church of Christ, my mentors and teachers, who profoundly impacted my life, come from various religious traditions, including Catholicism. Currently, I am interested in doing theology in unexpected places—specifically, having questions about cultural exchanges, literary imaginations, and sex, gender, and sexuality.

In these realms, I search for and desire to listen to forgotten or marginalized voices of God and humans, which are often spoken in unexpected manners. I extend this theological aim to my teaching. For me, teaching is also an act of seeking ways to be open to ourselves and each other: I want to make a classroom a space where we find our diverse voices together. In my postcolonial and feminist/queer research, part of my job is to point to tremendous injustices done by religious traditions; but at the same time, I do not give up Christianity/religion because it enables me to imagine something radically different, which makes me strive for it, however imperfectly.
A testimonio de fe or faith testimony relates to a conversion experience and how believers experience God along their faith journey. In my testimonio, I encountered faith when I was fifteen at a migrant congregation in California's Central Valley. The pastor introduced Jesus as El Cristo migrante, a liberator who stood with the poor and needy migrants because he was once a migrant in Egypt and sought to eradicate oppressive structures. Uprooted from friends and family in Mexico and dealing with the vicissitudes of migrant life and its ongoing changes, El Cristo migrante offered a foundation, albeit a mobile one, and a sense of purpose. This faith became real when I accepted the call to be a scholar/pastor while harvesting grapes in Arvin, California. Discerning a need to equip the Latinx Church and write resources that use our context as loci of theological reflection, I felt a fire had been lit up in my heart as if a pathway had been opened, and I understood what I needed to do. During difficult times through college and graduate school, El Cristo migrante sustained me, and I encountered him repeatedly through my work with diverse migrant communities in Boston. Fourteen years later, that flame is still burning. As a professor of biblical studies, I interpret scripture through a migrant lens, stand in solidarity with marginalized communities in California, and continue to walk alongside El Cristo migrante.

Reflection

One of the virtues that El Cristo Migrante fosters and which I wholeheartedly embrace is simplicity. The Gospel and letters of John encourage Christians to not love the world (τον κόσμον) or the things (τα) of this world because “…all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of life—comes not from the God but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever” (1 John 2:15-17). For the Elder, the world is characterized by self-serving pursuits that enslave believers and drive them away from God.
Simplicity is a seed of trust in God planted in our soul that yields a harvest of freedom. If we must, then I would define simplicity as the freedom to do the will of God by renouncing the bondage of possessions, status, and self-centeredness. As Jesus pointed out in Luke 16:13, greed enslaves people to “Mammon,” divides our loyalty to God, and disrupts our relationships with other human beings. Hence, Jesus invites the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-22 to get rid of his possessions and give them to the poor and follow him, which was a rare and precious invitation if you ask me.

Simplicity as freedom from the pursuit of status also confronts us daily in a cultural environment where building a reputation is part of the game, yet toxic and detrimental to our well-being and relationships. In our ruthless desire to be known and thrive in this world, we have sacrificed precious moments with family and friends to impress people that do not really care about us. Thus, Jesus issues a stark warning for those obsessed with the pursuit of status: “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matthew 16:26). For example, while finishing my doctorate at Harvard, I picked up a family album only to notice I missed most of the family pictures. Such an experience challenged me to rearrange my priorities and be present for those I love. Finally, simplicity also liberates us from self-centered and self-serving biases that make us prideful and treat others as steppingstones to our success. In a world of ruthless completion, St. Paul challenges us to "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3). In this manner, a spirit of simplicity reminds us to consider the well-being of others even before our own, a tough call in a world inhospitable world. In doing so, simplicity enables us to honor the Imago Dei in others and to treat the poor, migrants, and foreigners as children of God.

**Prayer**

Giver of life, my soul feels the weight of the stress and anxiety that attachment to the things of this world generates. If I have been blinded by the mindless pursuit of material possessions, give me simplicity to be free and make my resources available to others. If I have been tempted by the pursuit of worldly fame and vain reputation, help me surrender my life for your kingdom's sake and desire to be known by you and you alone. If I have allowed arrogance and self-conferenced to grow unchecked in my heart, please help me trust and entirely depend on you. If all the worldly desires have led me to mistreat your children, please forgive me and help me stand in solidarity with them. Grant that I may live a life of freedom through simplicity.
Week 4: Indifference (March 27–April 2)
Rev. Dr. Robert Scholla, SJ, Lecturer, Religious Studies

Reflection

In recent years I have come to think of Lent as God’s springtime! The purple vestments coupled with modest fasting and abstaining from meat on certain days lend a somberness to Lent. However, with the lengthening of days and the Mission Gardens about to return to full bloom, I imagine the forty days of Lent, and the subsequent fifty days of Easter, as a privileged time for a personal and communal pilgrimage into the springtime that God so deeply desires to give. During these days, questions tumble around inside of me: How can I listen more attentively to the urgings of God in my daily life? How might God be inviting me into newness of life—challenging me to grow and to change? Can my heart become more sensitive to and understanding of those with whom I live and work, and more deeply aware of crises in the world beyond Santa Clara? How does God desire to liberate me, so that I might live with greater integrity and docility? Over the years I have found that acknowledging my lack of indifference can actually foster new inroads to engaging the needs of everyday, and contribute to my living a life that is more genuine—more free.

“Indifference” is easily misunderstood, and we need to contrast the “virtue of indifference” from patterns of “unholy indifference.” Unholy indifference reveals itself as a lack of concern for and involvement with others, and manifests itself as an apathy and blindness before situations where persons are categorized or worse, exploited. Ultimately patterns of unholy indifference leave us numb, isolated in self-centeredness, and detached from reality. God’s springtime challenges us to address those aspects of unholy indifference which have invaded our lives and to awaken to the virtue of indifference to live our lives in greater freedom.

One of the most ancient and powerful religious celebrations of God’s springtime is Passover. In the Seder meal and days that follow, Jews do not merely recall the liberating action of God as a past event, but they celebrate the dynamic and compassionate love of God who lifts people out of their captivity and enslavement now! This powerful sacred celebration of liberation and renewed identity takes place in the Jewish home about the family table. One participates in the Seder ritual within a context of hospitality, holy remembrance, lively conversation, questioning, mutual listening, and great love. Some years ago, I was blessed to be a guest at a Seder celebration in the
home of Jewish friends. During the meal, as we recalled the events surrounding the exodus experience, a question was posed by a first-year college student, the daughter of my host. For me, her question remains as vibrant today as when I first heard it: “What inner pharaohs hold us back from the liberating love of our God?” Practicing the virtue of indifference challenges us to acknowledge those “inner pharaohs” who wish to enslave and inhibit us from realizing our deepest identity as children of a compassionate and liberating God.

Like the Seder, Ignatian Exercises take place within a context of spiritual conversation, questioning, and mutual listening. At the outset of Exercises, Ignatius challenges the retreatant using the following words: “we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life” [23]. As a Jesuit novice, when I was confronted by these words and invited to embrace Ignatian indifference, I failed the test! Why should I not prefer health and well-being, over fragility and sickness? What’s so wrong with desiring economic security and a modicum of comfort, over financial vulnerability, or impoverishment? Why should I not aspire to be respected by friends and colleagues, rather than being dishonored and reviled? Why should I not hope for a long and blessed life, rather than one tragically cut-short?

Over the years, and after a good deal of wrestling with the spiritual proposals and teachings of Ignatius, I have come to appreciate why he begins spiritual exercises by challenging us to consider our unacknowledged and hidden biases which all too often influence our choices and sense of self-worth. How often do we hear those inner-voices which say: “You’ll only be happy if …,” or “You will only have a sense of accomplishment when …” In companioning persons into spiritual exercises—into a pilgrimage of purposeful change—Ignatius challenges us to acknowledge our unfreedoms and invites us to seek a place of equilibrium—a place of greater freedom—a place where we might not desire health over sickness, riches over poverty, honor over dishonor, a long life over a short life, but where we might embrace the liberating and life-giving love of God in whatever situation is before us.

Universities are places of great desires and aspirations, and it is necessary for university communities to examine, design, and undertake great projects for the betterment of our human condition and world. At a Jesuit university, such an endeavor might even be called “holy.” To which, I would say, “Maybe.” As a university community which represents persons from various religious traditions or with no explicit religious tradition at all, what may be our common hope as we enter this springtime pilgrimage? Well, it may be good for us—personally and possibly even collectively—to foster habits which examine our desires and those all too often unacknowledged preferences that can
determine our choices and shape significant life decisions. Such examination might enable us to see those desires and presuppositions which hinder our personal and collective growth, and ultimately encumber our freedom. Once acknowledged, springtime may give us the courage to trust in a liberating power and agency of change that is greater than our own.

For those who are Christians, we might consider the challenge in exercising a freedom that is illuminated by the intense light of God who has been revealed as One who embraces human contingency, fragility, and vulnerability, who is born in poverty, ministers amid religious and political conflict, and experiences rejection, dishonor and disrepute, and whose life is cut short by a scandalous death.

**Prayer**

As a university community entering this pilgrimage into springtime, we might ask for God’s grace and pray:

God of love and liberation,
help me to grow in indifference
and to embrace whatever is offered to me in this present moment.
Free my thoughts and desires in such a way
as to give greater attention to the truth of my experience
and the world that is before me
— as a privileged place to encounter You who desires to draw close to me.

**Spiritual Autobiography**

Rob Scholla, SJ, is a lecturer in the Religious Studies Department and serves as the Faculty Director of Loyola RLC and the Director of Catholic Studies. He entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1976 and has studied and exercised ministry in the United States and internationally. The interior life challenges one to have a “beginner’s mind,” to be open to the wonder of each new encounter—of each new moment. Living with undergraduates continually invites him to be a good example of geriatric joy!
Week 5: Compassion (April 3-9)
Dr. Elyse Raby, Assistant Professor, Religious Studies

Reflection

Jesus was a feelings guy. He displays a range of emotions throughout the gospels. He shares his joy with his disciples (Jn 15), he weeps at the death of a beloved friend and at the future destruction of Jerusalem (Jn 11, Lk 19), he expresses anger in at the moneychangers in the temple and at the hypocrisy and greed of the scribes and pharisees (Mt 21, 23), he seems frustrated with his slow-witted disciples and the barren fig tree (Mk 4, Mt 21), he experiences fatigue from the endless crowds (Mk 6), and is in anguish before his arrest (Lk 22). Perhaps more than any other feeling, the gospels tell us that Jesus felt compassion. He felt compassion for the widow who lost her only son (Lk 7), for the sick, hungry, and harassed crowds that followed him in his ministry (Mt 9, Mt 15, Mt 14), for the blind men on the road from Jericho (Mt 20), and for all those he encountered who mourned, who were ill, who were condemned.

The term compassion in its Latin roots literally means “to suffer, undergo, or endure with.” In the original Greek of the gospels, the word translated as “compassion” means “to be moved in one’s bowels” or in one’s inward parts, in those inner organs thought to be the seat of the affections (such as love and pity). Jesus’ compassion is no mere rational or verbal acknowledgment of others’ suffering. It is a profoundly visceral, bodily response. Witnessing pain, suffering, grief, and injustice was gut-wrenching for Jesus. He shared in their grief, their thirst for justice, their hunger for basic well-being, their desire to rejoice and be filled. Jesus not only suffered on the cross but suffered with and felt with others in their daily lives.

In every instance where the gospels tell us that Jesus felt compassion, Jesus acts to relieve that suffering. When he saw that the crows were hungry and hurting, he commanded his disciples to feed them (Mt 15, Mk 8), he cured their sick (Jn 14), and he began to teach them (Mk 6). He had compassion on the widow whose only son had died and so he raised him from the dead (Lk 7). When Jesus is ‘moved in his bowels’ by others’ suffering, he is moved to action—to heal, to feed, to teach.

Our culture often speaks about feelings as if they were neutral responses to the world, captured in the phrase “you can’t help how you feel!” (Even Sven the reindeer sings in Frozen 2, “you feel what you feel, and those feelings are real!”) While this is true to
some extent—it is important to attend to, acknowledge, and name our feelings—it is also true that we can and should cultivate right feeling. Jesus can be our model for holy feeling with others. Anger at injustice, grief in the face of loss and illness, delight in others’ joy, hope for a better future, is Christ-like feeling. The loss of feeling (numbness, apathy) or detrimental feeling (envy, despair, misplaced anger)—can be a red flag in our spiritual lives. But acknowledging the suffering of others is not an end in itself. It should always move us to action to do what we can to relieve the burdens of others and transform the causes of suffering.

It may be the case, though, that we find ourselves emotionally overloaded and facing compassion fatigue. We know that anxiety, fear, and hopelessness have surged during the pandemic. Grief seems endless as we face loss on so many scales—of family members, of a sense of direction for our lives, of hopes for a racially just society, of a stable and livable climate. How much more compassion—feeling with and suffering with others—can we really handle? We can take heart in knowing that Jesus—fully human as he is—seems to have felt overwhelmed at times too. He often slipped out to the quiet wilderness to rest and pray alone, or with a few good friends, without the demands and expectations of the needy and suffering crowd (Mk 1 & 6, Lk 5 & 6, Mt 14). Caring for oneself, as we care for others, is Christ-like too.

As we journey through Lent this week, we might ask ourselves? What feelings are dominant in your own life lately? How might they move you to connect with others and work for justice? Who around you might need you to feel with them? As we look around at our world, our neighborhoods, and our families, what would Jesus feel?

**Prayer**

God of compassion,
  Give us hearts wide enough to feel with others,
  Hearts of flesh, not stone.
Give us minds that can identify causes of suffering,
  Minds that can envision creative solutions.
Give us bodies that are moved to action,
  Bodies that alert us to our need for rest.
Help us to feel as Jesus felt,
  To act as Jesus acted,
  To pray as Jesus prayed,
  To rest as Jesus rested. Amen.
I grew up in a more or less typical Catholic family—grandmothers with their rosaries, parents dragging us to church every Sunday, Catholic schools complete with uncomfortable uniforms. Faith & church became more than just family tradition when I started taking Religious Studies courses at Fairfield University, a fellow Jesuit school. The more I learned about Catholicism/Christianity (seeming contradictions in the Bible, the church’s checkered history, the possibilities of feminist theology), the more I was hooked. A few years working in Catholic nonprofits and higher ed, and eight years of graduate school later, here I am.

I love the church, even when I don’t really love the church (there is, unfortunately, much to not love), because of what it proclaims about God, humanity, and creation. I am regularly stunned by the mystery of the Incarnation—God’s overabundant love for creation and desire to join in our fleshly, embodied existence. Regardless of our failures, humanity will always be good enough for God.

I connect with God the most in the mountains, where I am mesmerized by the vastness and diversity of creation. The abundance of life in the mountains moves me to meditate on the excessive love of God for created things. Bears, frogs, grey jays, moss, ancient rocks—all creatures are good in themselves, entirely apart from humanity. We are so small…and yet God became one of us.
Week 6: Justice (April 10–April 13)
Rev. Dr. Diana C. Gibson, Lecturer, Religious Studies

Reflection

Welcome to a short “biblical justice tour!” While justice has many meanings, there are some persistent pointers toward a biblical understanding of justice.

Departure: In this 6th week, it seems appropriate to begin, and end, with the cross.

“If anyone wishes to come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

First Stop: Psalm 82. God is sitting at the head of a divine council, a boardroom meeting of the gods. God, chair of the board, bellows to the lesser gods, “How long will you judge unjustly, and favor the cause of the wicked?” Imagine those lesser gods whining, “Okay boss, but define justice for us!” And so God does:

“Defend the lowly and orphans; render justice to the afflicted and needy, Rescue the lowly and poor; Deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

What does this tell us about God’s justice? Well, it is NOT neutral, that’s for sure! It is biased on behalf of the poor, orphans, afflicted. “Widows and orphans” are biblical code words for the most forgotten, maligned and oppressed in our world. God’s justice makes a preferential option for them. To strengthen our justice virtue, we need to learn to look at the world from the perspective of those whom society deems unimportant, marginal, disposable. Who are “widows and orphans” in today’s world?

Second Stop: Deuteronomy 10:18. God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow,” our biblical code words again, “and loves the stranger, …. So you too should love the stranger…” What is new? First, “the stranger,” sometimes translated, “resident alien” (no matter their paper work, please note). They are added to the preferential option of God’s justice. But something else is called for; not just justice, but “love.” The Hebrew word is hesed. It is a strong, active love, and regularly paired with justice in the Bible. Hesed is often translated “steadfast love.” If that sounds too, well, biblical for you,
think **stubborn love, or tenacious solidarity.** The biblical virtue of justice is never cold or detached; it involves an active commitment of passionate solidarity and love. **How might justice and love intertwine in your life?**

**Third Stop:** Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus says, “I was hungry, and you fed me, a stranger, and you welcomed me, in prison, and you visited me. ... As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” When we feed, welcome, visit, and care for the least among us, we do it to Jesus! There is another critically important aspect to Matthew 25 that is often missed. “When the Son of Man comes... and sits upon his throne, **all the nations will be assembled before him**” (31-32). This scene is not just about me, an individual, but about us, as societies, nations. Throughout this passage, “you” must be understood in its plural form! Justice can never be only an individual virtue. It is always ultimately a **communal virtue**, one that works actively **to create communities and societies grounded in justice**. **How does our nation do in caring for Jesus among us?**

**Returning Home:**

“If anyone wishes to come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

In Jesus’ time the cross was an instrument of execution, thus taking up one’s cross, i.e. being crucified, could only be done once! How are we to do it “daily”? I suggest this means living lives that are daily indictable by the dominating powers of injustice and death. We don’t have to get crucified (hopefully!) but we are called to a **daily commitment** to challenge unjust systems, to actively **deconstruct injustice**, in a way that will indeed upset those happy with the way things are. Following Jesus involves risks. It is counter-cultural. The virtue of justice requires the courage to take up this challenge, this cross, that does not accept a status quo that perpetuates injustice. **How are you called by God to deconstruct injustice?**

Our biblical justice tour taught us that God’s justice is biased in favor of “widows, orphans and strangers,” is grounded in strong love, is a communal virtue, and calls us to a **daily commitment** to actively challenge unjust powers as we follow Jesus. During this sixth week of Lent, reflect on how you can strengthen the virtue of justice in yourself and in your communities. Start with small steps, but keep your vision big. **You** have unique and valuable gifts to contribute to justice in our world.
Prayer

Holy God, teach us to see the world from the perspective of those society forgets. Fill our hearts with tenacious love. Prod us to actively seek justice in our communities and world. Give us courage to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, to challenge injustice even when it is risky. While the cross calls us to confront the suffering caused by injustice, remind us, O God, that your promise of life and love will always have the final word. In the name of Christ, crucified and risen, we pray. Amen.

Spiritual Autobiography

Raised in suburbia with a traditional family, we chose our church because it was closest to our house. White, comfortable, able-bodied, my life and faith journey started pretty unremarkably. When this first church preached against Catholicism, we moved to the next closest church. I learned something about not judging, which stuck with me. Now a spouse with a partner of 40 years, a mother for 35 years, their love nourishes my heart every day. I became a Presbyterian minister in 1978, and was often the first or only female parish pastor around. I developed inner strength as I went up against the male clergy norm.

Three singular events significantly shaped my faith. In a Salvadoran refugee camp, I witnessed people steeped in the gospel—people who had suffered unimaginable violence, yet who shared resources generously, joy abundantly, and loved even those who caused their pain. I saw Christ there, and that presence has never left me. The honor of being asked to officiate at a wedding for two men, long before it was allowed by church or state, taught me courage to say “YES!” to celebrating God’s gift of love no matter where it is found. Kneeling in front of the White House with hundreds of others as part of a Christian Peace Witness, praying for an end to war and torture, grounded me in the power of nonviolent action in community to challenge the powers of destruction and death.

Today, my students remind me that I am a work in progress!
Reflection

Today, we arrive at the end of our Lenten journey. Today, with the disciples, we sit at table with Jesus, joining in the meal that inaugurates our celebration of the three great days of the Christian liturgical year (that’s where we get the word “Triduum,” from “three days”). From this table, we’ll pass through the Gethsemane and witness our friend and teacher condemned, mocked, and put to death—an innocent victim of state-sponsored capital punishment. From unspeakable violence, we find ourselves in the cold quiet of a rough-hewn tomb, normally a place where the dead pass away into the silence of memory.

At first glance, this might seem like a fitting end to a season that begins with a signing with ashes—an ancient sign of penitence and humility; a reminder of our mortality. We are dust, and to dust we return. But we know that the story doesn’t end here. Just like hearts attuned to God’s grace at work among us, the tomb opens to the promise of new life: to the unthinkable reality of resurrection from the dead. And so we emerge from the tomb with our Brother Jesus; we stand in the garden with Mary Magdalene, the first to recognize the Risen Christ; we run to the Upper Room where we shared the meal to proclaim, “Christ is indeed risen from the dead!”

But what does this proclamation of resurrection and new life mean as we end 40 days of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving and begin to celebrate 50 days of Easter joy, which culminate in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Often, we talk about Christ’s resurrection as if it’s the final act in a divine magic trick—a “David Copperfield-ing” of our mortality. Usually, this interpretation of the resurrection is accompanied by the idea that Jesus died because it was “God’s plan” or some such thing (sorry, Drake).

Without denying the longstanding influence of these interpretations, and taking for granted the good they offer us, I’d like to propose something different: that God’s act of raising Jesus from the dead is a final proclamation of life, a “yes” to life and also a “no” to the unjust death that Jesus suffered. In this way, the resurrection is a “yes” to the idea that life will always triumph over death and a “no,” a divine “no,” to violence and oppression in all their forms. In raising Jesus from the dead, God says no to racism and...
sexism, to homophobia and transphobia, to poverty and disease, to all forms of systematic oppression that kill, degrade, and deny the immeasurable dignity of life. And we are called to do the same.

For like Jesus during these three holy days, we are daily caught up in the mystery of dying and rising. Our lives reflect what we call the “Paschal Mystery,” the mystery of our faith: that God brings life out of death and calls us to do the same. The call to openness and simplicity, the equanimity and freedom of indifference, the work of compassion and mercy—these virtues that we have pondered this Lent summarize what it means to be an Easter people, a people of life, a people who like our God refuse to let injustice, pain, and death have the final word.

As in these three days we move from Lent to Easter, from dying to rising, from despair to hope, what will we do to activate our calling as people of humility, openness, simplicity, indifference, compassion, and mercy? How will Easter become not just a special Sunday for egg hunts and chocolates but a way of life: a rhythm of existence that—when heard and danced to—gives life to the world?

**Prayer**

God, Creator and Lord, you are with us in life and in death. You call us from death into the marvelous light of your presence, just as you call the world out of death and into the joy of the resurrection. Guide us to be people of light and life, who proclaim in word and action the promise of new life that Easter celebrates. Teach us humility so that we may show true hospitality, welcoming others to our tables, feeding the poor and those in need, and drawing the marginalized into a communion of love. Open our eyes to the wonders of creation—that we may discern your presence and action in tulips and kittens, who in their own ways reflect our Easter joy. Bless us and be with us, send your Spirit upon us, as we journey toward ever-fuller union with you, O Lord our God. Amen.