

Wednesday, March 1st Ash Wednesday

Jesus has turned towards Jerusalem and we are invited to follow in his footsteps. Throughout Lent we will be accompanied by the Beatitudes found in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The Beatitudes are teachings of Jesus that speak to who we must be as well as what we must do as members of the Body of Christ. Even with these “musts”, the Beatitudes contain more promise than demand. “Blessed are you,” is the transformative mantra that Jesus returns to again and again. The blessings, though, often come in unexpected ways. As we embark on this journey together, spend a few moments considering your blessings.

Prayer

God, it is never easy to turn towards Jerusalem, for the shadow of the cross looms large. As we begin this journey, help us to hear ever more clearly your reminder, “Blest Are We,” for we are your precious children. Amen

Thursday, March 2nd

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then Jesus began to speak, and taught them, saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” The crowds prompted Jesus to ascend a mount and sit down. But, Jesus waits for his disciples before he starts teaching. The crowds may very well be listening in, but the audience of Jesus’ teaching is the disciples. In his teachings, Jesus begins to describe the new community of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Are you more like the disciples or the crowd? Are you eager to sit at the feet of Jesus or would you rather get lost in a crowd? Being a disciple of Christ is demanding, for Christ meets us where we are, but he doesn’t leave us there.

Prayer

God of transformations, give us the courage to sit at the feet of Jesus and to imagine the new community to which we are called. Do not let us get lost in the crowd. Draw us close, as we lean into this new way of being community. Amen.

Friday, March 3rd

If you were to describe God to someone who did not yet know God, how would you do it? Would you quote the psalmist, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love?” Would you talk about God’s amazing love, demonstrated so powerfully through the life and ministry of Jesus? Or would you struggle to put into words the character of the God whom you have experienced? Spend a few moments today reflecting on the character of God as you have experienced God. Write these words down. Share them with someone, for God tore open the heavens and came down according to Isaiah, so that we might know God ever more fully through Jesus Christ, the one who willingly turns towards Jerusalem and the cross.

Prayer

Holy One, we admit that we struggle to articulate who you are for us. Help us to see the breadth, depth, height and length of your love for us and for the world. We give thanks that you do not give up on us, but are with us always in the everyday places of our lives. Amen.

Saturday, March 4th

“Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman write, “Jesus calls us to a ‘beatitudinal’ way of life – a life shaped by the dynamic of seeking and finding God’s presence in our life, doing whatever is essential to put God at the very center – or rather, to put ourselves at the very center of God’s will.” When are you most often aware of God’s presence in your life? Are you more aware in the early morning hours, in the middle of a forest, in the quiet of a sanctuary, in a loving embrace, or somewhere else? What are the essentials – the spiritual practices – that help you keep God at the center of your life? We claim that God is with us. Let’s be attentive to this reality for our lives.

Prayer

Always present God, wake us up to your presence. Surprise us with your nearness. Draw our attention to you when we least expect it. Always present God, cultivate within us a deep hunger for your abiding presence. Amen.

Sunday, March 5th 1st Sunday of Lent “Blessed are the poor in spirit...”

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Mary Lou Redding offers this insight, “This Beatitude offers us a spiritual life based not on performance but on dependence.” It is a spiritual life not based on rules but on relationship. As you reflect on your own spiritual life what has more sway – rules and performance or relationship and dependence? As we begin to imagine what this particular Beatitude means for our lives, let us remember that Jesus rebuked the Scribes and the Pharisees even though they followed all the rules!

Prayer

Holy God, help us to hear these words from Apostle Paul, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Give us the courage to claim this freedom for our lives. Help us to deepen our relationship with you, rather than perfect our ability to follow rules. Amen.

Monday, March 6th

Have you ever wondered why this particular Beatitude tops the list? I believe Jesus sees this Beatitude as foundational to all the others. “Poor in spirit” is about self-emptying. As Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, “Christ Jesus... did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.” In this foundational Beatitude, Mary Lou Redding proposes, “Christ invites us into a partnership that can change us, and through us, change the world.” A “beatitudinal” way of life begins by emptying ourselves of all pretense that through our own skills, insight, and energy, we can save ourselves or the world.

Prayer

Holy One, we admit that self-emptying, as Christ did, causes fear to well up within us. We are far more comfortable with being in control, than with letting go. Give us the courage to let go and trust your lead in our lives and in the life of your church.

Tuesday, March 7th

Max Lucado writes, “Don’t miss the thrust of this Beatitude: You cannot save yourself. Not through the right rituals. Not through the right doctrine. Not through the right devotion. Not through the right goose bumps. Jesus’ point is crystal clear. It is impossible for human beings to save themselves.” Notice how many times the word “right” appears in this quote. Do you have a propensity to always want to be right? How does being right actually get in the way of deeper conversations with others and with God? Once we finally accept that we cannot earn our way to heaven, something wonderfully freeing happens. We learn to respond to God’s invitation with gratitude rather than out of performance anxiety.

Prayer

Merciful God, help us to relinquish our need to be right, for it separates us from you. Give us the courage to let go of our need to perform, which constantly taunts us with feelings of inadequacy. We are your beloved sons and daughters. Help us claim this truth for our lives. Amen.

Wednesday, March 8th

Our culture has taught us to be self-reliant, independent and resourceful. Some even say that to ask for help is a sign of weakness. Advertisements seduce us to accumulate more - more possessions, more prestige, more power. The more self-reliant we are the more successful we are deemed by our culture. Yet, Jesus teaches us, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Self-emptying and letting go of control are incredibly counter to the American culture. Yet, which way of life is more appealing to you? Jesus bids us to come and walk through life on a road that is often less traveled. Will you risk traveling the way of Christ?

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we are more comfortable with accumulation, rather than releasing. We are much more familiar with grasping, then with letting go. Give us the courage to turn the world right by living with the same mind as Christ, who emptied himself to usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth. Amen.

Thursday, March 9th

How comfortable are you with discussing your weaknesses, given that we all have some? Most likely, we are all more comfortable keeping them well hidden. We don’t like to admit we don’t know. We don’t like to ask for help, until it is often too late. Why is so hard to admit that we need help from others or from God? Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” for they know that claiming their spiritual poverty is the beginning of becoming what God intends them to be. Are you willing to own your spiritual poverty, even if it disrupts business as usual?

Prayer

We admit that we like routine. We like to hide our weaknesses, too. We especially like what we like. Yet, you call us to let go of all of this and trust you with our very lives. Divine Mystery, we admit that this is difficult for us. Give us the courage to let go, so that we might become what you intend us to be. Amen.

Friday, March 10th

“Many of us do not realize our poverty of spirit because we are not living an adventurous enough life. We aren’t living courageously enough to have any other means of support than Christ,” writes Lloyd Ogilvie. This is an indictment of play it safe Christianity, where the status quo is revered and nothing much ever changes. We play it so safe, that God doesn’t have to show up. Where is God calling us to live more adventurously? Richard Rohr writes, "Authentic God experience always leads you toward service, toward the depths, the edge, the outsider, the lower, the suffering, and the simple," where your own skill, insight and energy is not enough.

Prayer

Almighty God, we confess that at times we live timid lives. We fear the edge, the outside, the suffering, and stay neatly tucked in our places of comfort. Yet, you call us to enter places that strike primal fears within us. Give us the courage to trust that you go before us and will be powerfully present with us wherever you take us.

Saturday, March 11th

What is the kingdom of heaven like? It is paradoxical, for to let go is to gain. Do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples? He said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” To grasp or to hold tight is to restrict possibilities. When have you grasped something so tightly that you actually lost it? To release or let go of something you hold dear brings freedom. Can you name an experience of letting go that caused you to gain it? As you move through the day, be more aware of what you are grasping and what you are willing to let go of.

Prayer

Merciful God, we confess that it is hard to let go. Although we know there is freedom in doing so, we prefer to be in control, or at least retain the illusion that we are in control. Help us to trust you more and more, so that we might be willing to lose our lives in order to gain them. Amen.

Sunday, March 12th 2nd Sunday of Lent “Blessed are those who mourn...”

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn.” “This statement runs contrary to common sense. Someone who mourns has suffered loss and is grieving. To be in this situation is not a blessing,” says Mary Lou Redding. This week will not be easy as we explore this Beatitude, especially if you have experienced a recent loss of a loved one. Be gentle with yourself. Let the tears fall, for remembering our loved one will touch us in a myriad of ways. The Beatitude ends with this assurance by Jesus, “for they will be comforted.” May God’s comfort enfold you.

Prayer

Comforting God, wrap us in your loving arms as we explore this Beatitude this week. We know that many memories will flood our thoughts. We know that tears may well up and cascade down our faces. Collect our tears and consider them precious, for they are shed for precious children of yours. Amen.

Monday, March 13th

Cultures and even families have different ways of mourning. In some cultures, mourning is formalized with specific practices and customs expected. In other cultures, mourning is more private and tears are shed in solitude. In the business realm, mourning is given a set time off – three to five days is the normal allotment. What has been your experience? When you suffered a loss was there time and space available to mourn, or did circumstances and the depth of pain cause you to deny the grief and get on with life? “Blessed are those who mourn,” says Jesus. Where was the blessing for you?

Prayer

Loving God, loss is never easy, especially of those whom we dearly love. The pain of loss is often overwhelming and disorienting. Give us the courage to stay with the pain though, trusting that although we are alone in our feelings of loss, you can know the depths of what we mourn. Amen.

Tuesday, March 14th

A poignant story from scripture comes to us from the Gospel of John. Jesus is at the tomb of Lazarus. Martha had just scolded Jesus and said, “If you would have been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live.” Jesus then asks Martha, “Where have you laid him?” What happens next is moving, for Jesus began to weep. Jesus grieved and shed tears, even though he was about to resurrect Lazarus. God wept. God weeps with us in our grief. Have you experienced God weeping with you?

Prayer

Weeping God, your heart breaks and tears cascade when death enters into life. Could this be the blessing that Jesus speaks of? That you weep with us? We are thankful that you wept, for you know the depth of our pain. Amen

Wednesday, March 15th

Apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth, saying, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Most of us find it easy to rejoice with those who rejoice, but to weep with those who weep is much more difficult. We often don’t know what to say or we blurt out platitudes that have more to do with our discomfort than the one who is grieving. Coming along side one who is weeping is sacred space. It is sacred space where presence is more meaningful than words. It is sacred space where touch communicates more than a litany of scriptures. Are you willing to come along side those who are grieving? Take off your shoes for you are walking on holy ground.

Prayer

Companionship God, you walk with us when we enter the sacred space of another's grief. Help us to let go of our needs and discomfort, so that we might be fully present to the other. We give thanks for you alone are our provision, which frees us to be fully present to the other. Amen.

Thursday, March 16th

"Sorrows come to stretch out spaces in the heart for joy," according to poet Edwin Markham. The depth of our pain allows us to be stretched to a reciprocal height of joy. As Mary Lou Redding writes, "Often those who seem to most enjoy life, have endured great loss or pain," as their loss or pain awakened their appreciation for the sacredness of life. When we invite God into our pain and loss, as the psalmist confessed God can transform us, "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy."

Prayer

God of transformations, we offer to you our sorrows, our grief, our pain and all that disquiets us. Awaken us ever more fully to the sacredness of life. Renew our joy in living the preciousness of every moment. We are grateful for transformations in our lives, where you have turned our mourning into dancing.

Friday, March 17th

Brian McLaren, a leading voice in contemporary spirituality and religion, offers a provocative understanding of this Beatitude. He suggests the context of this Beatitude is the violence of the Roman Empire where killing is a form of power. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn," simply because they are not the perpetrators of the violence. They suffer violence and death at the hands of another. Yet, better to suffer loss than to be the one who perpetrates violence and death. The way of the Beatitudes is non-violence he suggests. Reflect on individuals and even communities of people who have not returned violence for violence, but rather offer love.

Prayer

God of life, you call forth life and desire life abundant for all, yet humanity has chosen another way. Give us the courage to choose life in the face of death, love in the face of hate, and hope in the face of despair. Give us the wisdom to choose the path of nonviolence, which is so desperately needed in our world.

Saturday, March 18th

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." As we come to our last day to reflect on this particular Beatitude, how have you been comforted by your faith in the midst of suffering and death. How have others comforted you? How have you comforted others? Teresa of Avila wrote over 400 years ago, "Christ has...no hands but yours. Christ has no eyes but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ is to look out on a hurting world. May we find a way to be the compassion of Christ for our hurting world.

Prayer

Holy One, we are thankful for Christ, who willingly entered into the mess of the world to show us another way to be in relationship with one another. Christ's compassion brought comfort to those suffering and mourning. Give us the strength to be the compassion of Christ for each other and for the community you have called us to serve. We give thanks for the assurance of your comfort, O God, which is able to turn mourning into dancing. Amen

Sunday, March 19th 3rd Sunday of Lent "Blessed are the meek..."

This is one of the most misunderstood Beatitudes, simply because the Greek word, which is often translated "meek," is most untranslatable in the English language. If we turn to a dictionary we understand why this Beatitude is misunderstood, for meek is defined as "easily imposed on; submissive." In other words, the meek get trampled in life. So, who wants to be meek? Yet, Jesus says, "the meek will inherit the earth!" Although our 21st century understanding assigns a negative connotation to this word, begin to imagine how this word might be understood in a powerful way. As the week progresses, anticipate a new understanding!

Prayer

Holy Mystery, do not let the cultural understanding of the word "meek" close our minds from the teaching offered by Jesus through this Beatitude. Open our hearts to what we will learn about the misunderstood power of meekness, which changed the world many times over. Amen

Monday, March 20th

Do you recall these words from Apostle Paul to the church at Philippi? "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." Jesus had access to all glory, honor, and power, yet he set it aside. He chose to submit. "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." This is power reframed. This reframing begins to give us some new insights as to what it truly means to be meek. The meek use their power differently. They surrender their power, so that it may be used to usher in the reign of God, as Christ did.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we admit that we struggle to surrender our power for causes other than our own. We know that we often pray, "on earth as it is in heaven," but this is not easy. It is hard to give up what we want. It is hard to surrender control. Give us the courage to explore how we might use our power differently to usher in ever more fully your reign, O God. Amen.

Tuesday, March 21st

Mary Lou Redding writes, "When Jesus said, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,' he was quoting directly from Psalm 37. The context of these words in the psalm is waiting for God to act. Five times in this psalm God's people are reminded that those who wait for God to vindicate them (rather than taking matters into their own hands) will see God's salvation... Our deciding not to act is often the way of wisdom and of obedience to God." When

have you refrained from using your power by waiting on God? How was this a way of wisdom for you and for others?

Prayer

Acting God, we admit that at times it is difficult to restrain ourselves, especially when others have caused us problems or harm. We would prefer to take matters into our own hands. Yet, we are thankful that you teach us a way to reframe our power, by waiting for your wisdom and guidance. Guide us this day, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 22nd

A refrain in Sunday's sermon started with Moses's understanding of his relationship with God, "God is God and I am not!" Even though Moses was highly commended for being a companion with God face to face, Moses knew that without a doubt that this was a privilege not to be exploited. This perspective helps us to better understand the biblical meaning of meekness. Someone who is meek understands that she is to reframe the use of her power and be guided by God. Someone who is meek knows that God's love is the undergirding guidance system of the way he is to respond to life. Are you willing to yield your life to God's love as you move through life?

Prayer

God of all gods, you alone are worthy to be praised. Give me the courage to yield my life, so that the power which you have given me may be guided by your love. Help me to see with your eyes and respond with your heart, for you deeply care for this world you lovingly created. Give me the courage to deeply care for this world, guided by your love. Amen.

Thursday, March 23rd

"Meekness is subversive," said Brian McLaren. It counters the Western ideal of productivity and upward mobility, which has even infected the way people of faith serve God. Bigger ministry is often perceived as better, yet does God call all churches to be big? Or does God call each church to simply use their powers to do good or to take action to restrain evil? Meekness doesn't have much to do with size, but it does have to do with the orientation of our hearts. Are our hearts rooted in the abiding presence of our loving God? Then and only then will love within us bring heaven on earth, if only for a moment at a time.

Prayer

Loving God, we marvel at the wonder of your wisdom, as it is so counter to the ways of the world. You say love wins. The world says power wins. Give us the courage to love even in the face of abusive power and hate. Give us the courage to care even in the face of apathy. Give us the courage to walk through life with your loving wisdom, always poised and ready to encourage others through your love. Amen.

Friday, March 24th

One of the translations of this particular Beatitude, broke open a new insight for me. "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are –no more, no less. That's the moment you

find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought," translates Eugene Peterson in *The Message*. Are you content in your own skin? Are you content or do you find yourself still clamoring for what you do not have? "Inheriting the earth," or "finding yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought," is a way to walk through life. It is not about possessions or even land, it's about receptiveness to God's goodness in all of creation. Thomas Merton discovered this at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville on an ordinary day. He profoundly experienced that everyone was walking around shining like the sun. In a moment, he perceived the loveliness of every human being. This is when we become the "proud owners of everything that can't be bought". This is the way of meekness.

Prayer

O God, we still marvel that you chose to become like us to show us the way to most fully be human. Yet, we confess that we forget that we shine like the sun. We forget our own loveliness and in turn forget the loveliness in others, too. Help us to perceive who we truly are as your beloved daughters and sons. Help us reclaim this truth for those we encounter as we walk through life. Give us eyes to see the Christ in each other. Amen.

Saturday, March 25th

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." As we conclude our week on this beatitude what have you learned about meekness? How is God calling you to reframe the power God has given you? Is there a way for your meekness to change the course of history or even a moment within a given day in the life of another? Meekness gives us the courage to reframe our response to hurt, anger, hate and even violence. How might you be God's loving and courageous presence in the face of all that is not right with our world? May God, give all of us the courage to stand up or to speak out as we work together to usher in the reign of our loving and just God.

Prayer

Calling God, your still small voice challenges us to reframe our power to bring heaven here on earth for all, not just for some. We admit that this is not easy for us. We know how hard it is to restrain our reflex reactions to things that hurt us or anger us. Take our oft times hardened hearts and soften them with your love. Grant us the wisdom to walk through life anticipating your light and love in each other. Amen.

Sunday, March 26th 4th Sunday of Lent "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst..."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled," taught Jesus. This fourth Beatitude uses the metaphors of hunger and thirst. Recall a time when you were really hungry or when you were really thirsty. When we are physically hungry or thirsty, we often grab what's easiest. A candy bar at a convenience store. A soda at a fast food restaurant. But, have you ever thought about why these types of satisfactions are called "junk food"? We can satiate our physical hunger and thirst with junk or with nourishing and healthy food and drink. The same holds true for our spiritual hungers and thirsts. The words of Isaiah caution us as we begin our week with this Beatitude, "Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and you labor for that which does not satisfy?"

Prayer

Holy One, we live in a quick fix culture that offers us a smorgasbord of options to satisfy our physical as well as spiritual hungers and thirsts. Give us the wisdom to discern that which will truly satisfy our deepest longings for a right relationship with you, for you alone are sufficient. Amen.

Monday, March 27th

When you hear the word righteousness what first comes to mind? Unfortunately, what might come to mind is self-righteousness. You know “those people” who irritate you because they always have to be right! Or you may envision a righteous Pharisee from scripture, who prided himself on following all the commandments and rituals of faith better than anyone else. Righteousness has more to do with “right relationship” than being a barometer of “right behavior,” for when we are in a “right relationship,” then “right behavior” is a byproduct of our relationship. What relationships are not right at this point in your life? Where may God be calling you to hunger and thirst for reconciliation and restoration of a right relationship?

Prayer

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” teaches Jesus. We confess this is not always our first priority, for we like the kingdom of self. We even like to define what right relationships we want or desire. Soften our hearts by your love. Encourage us to first seek a right relationship with you, which will in turn help us to develop right relationships with others. Thank you for never giving up on us God! Amen.

Tuesday, March 28th

Oft times we miss the meaning of a biblical passage, because a particular translation is not able to break open its meaning for us. Having heard a particular passage over and over again, we can become immune to its message or believe we have mined its meaning for all its worth. I encourage all of us to read multiple translations of biblical passages and so I offer another twist on this Beatitude by Eugene Peterson, “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.” Do you have an appetite for your relationship with God? Is there a hunger or a thirst within you for time to just be with God? Spend a few moments today getting in touch with your hunger and thirst without judgment. God awaits whenever we are ready to come and sit for a spell.

Prayer

We marvel at your patience with us. You are always ready, even when we are not. Thank you for your willingness, O God, to wait and to wait patiently for our hunger and thirst to finally lead us towards your ever present love. May we taste and see that you are indeed good! May we be satisfied by your loving presence, as if we had dined at an exquisite feast! Amen.

Wednesday, March 29th

Mary Lou Redding entitled her chapter on this particular Beatitude this way, “Satisfied with Being Unsatisfied.” How often do you settle for what is, rather than exert energy to create what

could be? Although you may not be satisfied with the status quo, you don't have any enthusiasm for making a change. You just settle into the routine of life, being satisfied with being unsatisfied. This Beatitude calls us to pay attention to the gnawing dissatisfaction we have in our lives, as it just may signal what is not right with our lives. That gnawing may be God's way of getting our attention. That thirst may be God's way of saying, "Don't settle for being unsatisfied." What are you unsatisfied with in your own life? How might this be the Spirit at work troubling the water and waking you up to something more that God has in store for you?

Prayer

Loving God, forgive us when we settle for being dissatisfied with ourselves. We so often settle for what is, rather than press on for something more. It is so much easy to just keep on keeping on. Yet, this is not the life to which we are called. We are to perceive the new things that you are calling forth in us. Give us the courage to pay attention to our hungers and thirsts so that we don't settle for being satisfied with being dissatisfied. Amen.

Thursday, March 30th

What about the world around us? Have you settled for being satisfied with being dissatisfied? There is one parent who has never stopped being dissatisfied with the way things are. Mark Barden writes, "It's a nightmare I'll never wake up from, no matter how desperately I want to: My sweet little Daniel is gone forever. I will never understand why the shooter walked into Sandy Hook Elementary that day and chose to murder my kindhearted little boy, 19 of his classmates and six educators." This parent grieves and in his grief, he has decided he can't be satisfied within being dissatisfied. He has to work towards the world he wants for all children. Yet, does tragedy have to strike us personally before we stop being satisfied with being dissatisfied? What are you dissatisfied with in the world around you? How might this gnawing hunger or unquenchable thirst of dissatisfaction be the Spirit at work troubling the water and waking you up to the way God desires our world to be? How might God be calling you to respond?

Prayer

Holy One, you see the beauty that can be when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, for right relationships with you and with all others. Yet, we confess we settle for being satisfied with our dissatisfaction with the way the world is around us. Forgive us and equip us to work towards a more just world where children do not have to live in fear. Use even us to bring a bit of heaven on earth this day. Amen.

Friday, March 31st

Blaise Pascal, a fifteenth-century philosopher, said that there is a God shaped void within each of us. St. Augustine said something very similar centuries earlier, for he said, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God." When we pay attention to our hungers and thirsts, those gnawing questions about life's meaning and direction, we realize that we are created to be in relationship with our Creator. Reflect on your own spiritual journey through life and see if you can recall how a particular dissatisfaction – a gnawing hunger or unquenchable thirst – led you

to explore a deeper relationship with the Divine Lover of your soul. Is there a void or a restlessness right now in your life that is beckoning you to step deeper in the living waters of faith? Quiet yourself today and see if you can discern a void or restlessness within you that signals your satisfaction with being dissatisfied with something in your own life or in the world around you. Jesus promises that as we act we will be filled.

Prayer

Waiting God, you long for us to discern your willingness to fill the void in our lives. You long to collect us in your loving arms and subdue our restlessness. Yet, you wait for us to notice our dissatisfaction with the way things are. You do not force yourself or coerce us to accept your presence in our lives. Help us to claim our hungers and thirsts for you and your ways, O God, for you alone are the real joy giver of our lives. Amen.

Saturday, April 1st

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” As we conclude our week on this Beatitude, what have you learned about your hunger and thirst for God? Mary Lou Redding reminds those of us who are well-fed and well-watered that we may be unable to grasp the enormity of the promise of this Beatitude. Those who first heard this lived in an agrarian society where their lives depended on the bounty of their crops. Theirs was a precarious existence living at the edge of a desert, as there was constant risk of thirst and famine. We live precariously, too, when we settle for being satisfied with being dissatisfied, for our world becomes very small and we miss the grandeur of the world God envisions for us and for all of creation. May we never settle for being satisfied with being dissatisfied, for then we will be filled!

Prayer,

God of the extravagant feast of life, may our hungers and thirsts give us the courage to come and dine with you daily. May we be nourished by your love and equipped by your Spirit to work towards the grandeur of the world you envision for us, for others and for all creation. We give thanks that you beckon us to come and dine, knowing when we do we will be filled. Amen.

Sunday, April 2nd

5th Sunday of Lent “Blessed are the merciful...”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” taught Jesus. Yet, what does mercy mean? Merriam-Webster’s primary definition is this: “compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power; *also*: lenient or compassionate treatment.” Being merciful moves us beyond ourselves. Being merciful involves taking positive action to help another. Being merciful is showing kindness in excess of what is deserved. Yet, mercy is more than showing kindness. God’s mercy wipes the slate clean. God’s mercy has the ability to transform us and re-create us new every morning. Charles Spurgeon wrote, “What we are to others, God will be to us.” As we begin to explore this Beatitude, here Spurgeon’s words are a point of caution. Are we merciful towards ourselves and towards others?

Prayer

Holy One, we do not want to receive what we deserve, for we know that we have sinned and fallen short of your glory. Yet, we confess being merciful towards ourselves and others is not always so easy. As we explore this Beatitude, open our hearts wide to your compassion and forbearance with us, so that we might learn to walk in your ways. Amen.

Monday, April 3rd

One familiar story of mercy found in scripture is the story of the woman caught in adultery. Her accusers want to use the letter of the law and stone her death, for she was caught in the very act. As an aside, I always wondered where her male counterpart was in this text, for only the woman is being convicted of a crime that takes two to commit! Yet, as Jesus listens to the woman's accusers, he bends down and begins writing something in the sand. We don't know what Jesus wrote; only that he did. I imagine the woman huddled in fear, with Jesus being close at hand as he scribbles in the sand. Maybe she dares to look up at Jesus and they lock eyes before he says to her accusers, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:7). One by one the accusers drop their stones and walk away, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. With no accusers, Jesus doesn't condemn her either. He simply says, "Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Prayer

Merciful God, we are often in the shoes of the accusers. We are quick to point out the sins of others, while neglecting to be honest about our own sin. Yet, you call us to account, "Let anyone who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." Slowly, we realize that we are not without sin. Forgive us and restore within us a compassionate heart that calls others to account mercifully. Amen.

Tuesday, April 4th

"The prophet Micah wrote that God has shown us what is good: 'To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with...God' (Micah 6:8 NIV). This is key – acting justly while loving mercy, holding the two in tension," writes Mary Lou Redding. Mercy acknowledges the sin, the behavior that is not as it should be. Remember that Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, "Go and sin no more." Mercy doesn't ignore the crime. Mercy doesn't negate the pain and suffering if someone has been wronged. Yet, acting justly while loving mercy, is made possible when we walk humbly with God. God is the one who can direct our steps and lead us in the way of mercy. Can you recall a time when God directed your steps? Can you remember when you were merciful to another?

Prayer,

God of all mercies, we confess that it is often hard to be merciful, especially if we have been wronged. We would much rather avenge the wrong done to us, than grant mercy. Yet, we see the possibilities of acting justly while loving mercy. Direct our steps as we walk humbly with you, O God. Amen.

Wednesday, April 5th

Mercy is extended by one who has the power to condemn or punish but chooses not to. Can you recall a time when you received mercy? I remember one clearly. I was on my way home from a church choir practice that had gone late. I was tired and needed to be up early the next morning to drive into Los Angeles for work. And so, at a stop light, as the light turned green I took the first chance I had to make a quick lane change and roar down the road at top speed. It wasn't long before lights flashed in my review mirror! I so deserved that ticket for what the officer called an illegal lane change as well as for speeding. But, the officer granted me mercy. He sent me on my way with just a warning. To this day, I thank that officer for reminding me that safety comes first, especially when I am tired and I just want to get home.

Prayer

Loving God, we give thanks for opportunities to experience mercy from those who have authority to call to account. These moments of mercy can be teachable moments. Grant us the wisdom to learn from these experiences of mercy that we have received, so that we in turn might be merciful to others. Amen.

Thursday, April 6th

You might remember this parable about a man who received mercy. A king called to account a man who owed him ten thousand talents. This was a large amount of money. The man could not pay and so the king ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions. The man fell to his knees and begged for mercy. The king, having pity on him, forgave his entire debt. But then this freed man went to a fellow slave and demanded that he pay up. The fellow slave owed him a pittance compared to his forgiven debt. This fellow slave fell down and begged for mercy. But, the man would not forgive the debt and threw his fellow slave into the debtors' prison. How could one who was granted mercy in turn not be merciful? Mary Lou Redding concludes, "We have to learn mercy and not everyone does." I wonder, have you learned mercy?

Prayer

Merciful God, we pray that we might learn mercy, by being recipients of your abundant mercy. The writer of Lamentations reminds us that your mercies are new every morning. We start with a clean slate each and every day. Help us to remember the mercy we have received from you, so that we might in turn be merciful towards others. Amen.

Friday, April 7th

Mercy can be a matter of small acts: waving someone to go first even though he had been driving on the shoulder to get around the backup, taking a lunch to your child even though you had reminded her that morning not to forget or else she would go hungry, or giving a chronically late employee one more chance. "Mercy can be small acts, but it can also be a matter of great acts, of deciding to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply and changed our life forever," writes Mary Lou Redding. Do you remember the story of Mary Johnson whose son was murdered by Oshea Israel, which was shared one Sunday? She faced her son's killer and she decided to forgive him. Great acts of mercy only become possible, as we practice small acts of mercy, for only then do we cultivate our capacity for greater acts of mercy. Mercy, grace that

acts, implies that we desire to continue rather than break relationship with God and with each other. Mercy chooses connection. What will you choose?

Prayer

Calling God, your mercy beckons us to stay in a relationship with you. Yet, we confess this is not always easy with others. We are quick to criticize, condemn and cut off others by our words and actions. Help us to remember your deep desire for a relationship with us, so that we can cultivate relationships with others. Amen.

Saturday, April 8th

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” As we conclude our week on this Beatitude what have you learned about being a recipient of mercy and a giver of mercy? Is it easier for you to receive mercy than it is for you to give mercy? Have you been able to learn from the mercy you have received? Spend a moment reflecting on what is true for your own life. We probably all have opportunities to practice mercy everyday of our lives as we interact with others. We can choose to use our power to extend grace that acts or we can snap back and exact what is rightfully due to the other. Do you remember Micah’s counsel about what is good? It is good for us “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with...God.” There will also be a tension between justice and mercy, yet God leans towards mercy to sustain relationships. Will we?

Prayer

We are so thankful that you desire a deep and abiding relationship with us, O God. Through your mercies, we are restored each and every morning to a right relationship with you. Cultivate within us a desire for deep and abiding relationships with others, by growing our capacity for extending mercy one small act of grace at a time. Amen.

Sunday, April 9th

Palm Sunday

“Blessed are the peacemakers...”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” taught Jesus, to a people who lived in an occupied country with an uneasy peace. We, too, live in a world occupied by an uneasy peace, where rhetoric easily insights conflict and violence. Wars rage in families as well as between borders. Yes, first century Palestine as well as the world today is in desperate need of peacemakers. And so, this Palm, Sunday we should note the one we claim to follow, for Jesus didn’t chose a war horse to ride into Jerusalem, he chose a donkey. Could it be that the Prince of Peace was showing us another way, even by the animal on which he chose to ride? As we move through this week, Jesus will choose to reframe his power by God’s extravagant love and usher in peace in the midst of chaos. What about us? Can we be people of peace in the midst of the chaos all around us?

Prayer

Prince of Peace, we long for your peace which surpasses understanding. A deep centered peace from which we can respond with grace to the chaos all around us. May the cadence of our lives be in step with your love that calls us to be peacemakers. Amen.

Monday, April 10th

The Greek word for *peace* is *eirene*; the Greek word for *peacemakers* is *eirenopoios*. These words convey an active not static state. Those who actively seek peace or work to reconcile differences are the peacemakers who are blessed. In our daily lives, we have plenty of opportunities to be peacemakers by deescalating situations and working towards reconciliation with others. Yet, this is not always easy. It is difficult to respond thoughtfully to those who stoke the fires of division. Yet, this is our calling as followers of Christ. When stones, whether verbally or physically, are being picked up and thrown our way, can we listen to understand the pain or frustration that led to this behavior? Can we stop our knee jerk responses and try to walk a step or two in the shoes of the other? Peacemaking is difficult work and requires a willingness to listen deeply to the other.

Prayer

Holy One, it is hard to get along with others, especially those whom we distrust, disagree with, or even fear. We struggle at times to be at peace with ourselves, let alone with others. Help us to listen twice as much as we speak. Give us the courage to actively seek peace in all encounters, as we walk through this day. Amen.

Tuesday, April 11th

The Hebrew word for *peace*, *shalom*, never describes only an inactive state. It is also not just the absence of trouble. Shalom means wholeness where everything works toward the highest good for all. Peacemakers continually express active goodwill, not evading issues but recognizes them and deals with them so that reconciliation and peace may reign. Apostle Paul reiterates Jesus' demand for our lives, saying: "Do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is all possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Can you remember a time when you didn't repay evil for evil? "So far as it depends on you," calls us to account for our behavior in the face of evil, opposition or fear. Will we stoke the fires of division or will we work towards reconciling ourselves one with another?

Prayer

God of shalom, we know that without the power of your Spirit at work within us, we will fail as peacemakers. We, too, easily resort to responding to evil with evil. Forgive our short sightedness and instill within us a passion for working towards reconciliation in all the places you call us to move and have our being. Amen.

Wednesday, April 12th

There is a song that begins like this, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." Peace is a spiritual matter and it begins from within us, for the source of our peace is the Prince of Peace. To be peacemakers, we must first ask ourselves if we are at peace with ourselves? If we are not, it is likely that peace will not flow from our lives into the world. Jesus said to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." What is troubling your heart these days? How might you receive afresh this peace that Jesus is speaking about? In the face

of the chaos of our world, hear Jesus' words anew. Repeat them over and over again, trusting that in Christ and through Christ peace is possible.

Prayer

Prince of Peace, we admit that our hearts are troubled given the ways of the world around us and maybe even within us. Break open our hardened hearts to your peace, which surpasses understanding. Give us the courage to stay grounded in your peace, so that we might actively seek peace wherever you may lead us. Amen.

Thursday, April 13th Maundy Thursday "Blessed are those who are persecuted..."

This Maundy Thursday we turn to another Beatitude, for Jesus was persecuted for righteousness sake: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake... blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely." Certainly, this is what Jesus experienced as he faced the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman political leaders after being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet, being persecuted doesn't sound like a blessing! When I ponder this Beatitude, I hear the echo of my week with Brian McLaren, for the blessing comes from not being the one who persecutes or utters all kinds of evil against another. It is better to suffer or be persecuted or mourn, then to be the one who causes suffering, persecution and mourning. We are blessed when we actively seek peace and work towards reconciliation with others, even those who revile us.

Prayer

Loving God, we would rather not suffer for the gospel. We admit our fears cause us to be timid in living out our faith publically. Even though we are not to be ashamed of the gospel, we admit that sometimes we are. We choose to keep quiet, rather than to do the difficult work of reconciliation. Give us the courage to keep our hearts focused on you alone. Amen.

Friday, April 14th Good Friday

The brutality of this day reminds us that Christ suffered persecution. Yet, in the face of brutality, Jesus was not brutal. Jesus was present to those who were suffering even as he suffered. What about us? In the face of all that is wrong with this world – two Christian churches in Egypt bombed on Palm Sunday, a man walking into a school in San Bernardino who kills his estranged wife and a student before taking his own life - are we willing to be present to suffering? Are we willing to speak up against injustice? Are we willing not to return evil for evil? Theologian Miroslav Volf writes, "I was determined not to lose what I believed was the best in the human spirit – love of one's neighbors, even if they prove to be enemies." Did not Jesus say from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing?" "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven is at hand for those who choose the way of peace.

Prayer

Merciful God, we receive mercy upon mercies from you. Yet, on this day we struggle to stay at the foot of the cross. We struggle to be present to suffering. Whether at the foot of the cross,

or with those we love, or with the pain so prevalent in our world, give us the courage to walk the way of peace by being present to those who suffer in the midst of the chaos of life.

Saturday, April 15th

This is a day of waiting for us. Sometimes for me the silence of Saturday is deafening, as it was the Saturday before Easter morn after my dad had died. Both of my parents were now gone and grief welled up within me that Saturday. Could I really preach with any integrity that death had not won? And so, I went to their graves and wrestled with God. Tears flowed as I poured out my doubts, until having no more tears and nothing more to say to God I sat in silence. It was in the midst of that long deafening silence that God infused my heart with a peace that surpassed understanding and a hope that blazed with the glory of Easter morn. Death does not win, for we post-Easter people know that Christ conquered. Not just for eternity, but for now! In the silence of this Saturday, spend some time reflecting on what needs resurrecting in your own life. Where is darkness or deadness consuming or limiting the possibility of new life within you and through you? Easter is “already,” for Christ is risen, not tomorrow, but already!

Prayer

Holy One, silence is often your preferred language, yet like the disciples on Saturday before Easter morn, we lock ourselves behind the door of busyness. We clutter our lives with constant input and often fear the silence. Help us to heed the psalmist’s advice, “Be still and know that I am God.” In the silence of this Saturday meet us in our grief, in our doubts, in our fears and in the chaos of this world. Holy One, infuse us with your hope, for your hope does not disappoint. Amen.

Sunday, April 16th

Easter

“Blessed are the pure in heart...”

With exuberance, we will close our worship on Sunday singing, “Christ is alive... Christ’s Spirit burns through this and every future age, till all creation lives and learns, his joy, his justice, love and praise.” Easter is not an ending; it is a beginning. Christ’s Spirit burns through us as we choose the way of the Beatitudes, as we nurture undivided hearts. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” As we place our trust, our lives, our undivided hearts in the hand of the Christ who conquered death, we will see God! We will see God active and present in our lives and in the world around us! Yes, Easter is only a beginning, for all of creation has yet to live and learn Christ’s joy, justice, love and praise! As God’s children, we have work to do! Let’s be ambassadors into this world of Christ’s joy, justice, love and praise!

What a privilege it has been to walk with you from Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday through the wisdom of the Beatitudes and these daily devotions. As we move into what is known as Eastertide, I will share with you a weekly devotion, which will be delivered on Wednesdays. Remember that Easter signals a beginning, for there is much within our own lives and certainly in this world that needs the power of resurrection! May all of us renew our commitment to walk the way of the Beatitudes more fully each and every day.

Prayer

Living and loving God, with abundant gratitude, we give thanks for the miracle of Easter. Death has been conquered by Christ, for Christ is alive. Death could not hold your extravagant love hostage, for love conquers all. Give us the courage to live the miracle of your love in the everyday places of our lives. We give thanks that you invite us to bear your joy, justice, love and praise into the world with our very lives. Thank you for loving us! Amen.