

Lenten Reflections

Introduction

The Sermon on the Mount is shocking: Everything we've been told before is called into question; everything reversed. It is the marginalized and oppressed who are fortunate. We should love those who torment us. We should give to anyone who asks, and refuse to stand in judgment... This is the opposite of how the world works! More shocking yet, these upside down messages are dramatically enacted in the story of Easter, where love triumphs over violence, hope is born through surrender, and death is swallowed up in life.

Some of us are at a place where these revolutionary messages and this incredible story inspire excitement and joy at an alternative way of living. For others of us, right now they make no sense at all. Some of us doubt what we read is true or feasible, or even desirable in our day and age. And yet others of us have heard these words so many times, they no longer elicit any reaction other than, "This again?"

At Cedar Ridge we treasure everyone's journey. The reflections acknowledge the rich variety of viewpoints within our community, and challenge each of us to explore new ways of thinking. We encourage you to read the reflections slowly and meditatively, opening yourself to God's presence, and daring—if only for a moment—to dream of heaven on earth.

Reflection #1: Indifference

Love your enemy. Turn the other cheek. Do to others what you want them to do to you. You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world... Many of us have read these words, or heard them spoken, numerous times, year after year. And—if we are honest—they perhaps have yet to make much impact on our lives.

Sometimes we give it a go: we hold our tongue when we want to strike back at someone criticizing us. Or we perform a small act of kindness because we know we really ought to. But most of the time, we get swept up in the busyness of life, with all its competing demands on our time and attention. We do what we can to get through the day, and sometimes that means being less salty, less light-filled, much less like Jesus.

We get by – and maybe it's enough. Maybe it's all we can manage right now. After all, change is slow and hard. Or perhaps there is a part of us that wonders if we are missing out on the fruit-filled life, the rock-sure life, the worry-free life that Jesus describes.

Take a moment to consider: How would you describe yourself?

... Are you rich or poor in spirit?

... Are you confident, or do you often feel unsure?

... Do you feel you have much to offer?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus declared, “for the kingdom of heaven belongs to you.”

Jesus also said: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

We can’t will ourselves into being something we are not, and God does not force us to change. But in quiet and stillness, we can open ourselves up to the possibility that Love will find a way. Love is an invitation into a life that we once dreamt might be possible. Love is an embrace that holds us even when we’ve given up on dreaming. We can choose to rest in God’s presence, and learn from Jesus the way of love.

Take a moment to be still and meditate on Jesus’ invitation. Sit comfortably, with your back straight and your legs planted on the ground. Allow yourself to notice your breathing as you breathe normally. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Listen again to the Jesus’ words from Matthew chapter 11, and reflect on what God might be saying to you today through them.

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me.

Get away with me and you’ll recover your life.

I’ll show you how to take a real rest.

Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.

Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.

Continue in stillness for a few more minutes, offering up your thoughts to God.

Reflection #2: Joy

The Sermon on the Mount is sometimes referred to as the “Manifesto of the Kingdom of Heaven”—Jesus’ public declaration of what it means to live in harmony with God’s way. But this is no dry and dusty list of principles to be memorized, or regulations to be kept. It is an exuberant mix of story and hyperbole, challenging our thinking and stretching our imaginations. The Sermon on the Mount is less akin to an accountant’s ledger than to an artist’s canvas.

Imagine yourself sitting on the grassy hillside, listening to Jesus that day.

Hear the wonder in Jesus’ voice as he declares: “See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.”

Listen to the hope-filled confidence of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

How do these words make you feel? What emotions are stirred in you?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not promise an easy life. Quite the opposite! He challenges us to build not on level, pliant sandy ground, but on hard, unyielding rock; to forgo the wide, well-worn path to success and popularity that our culture promotes, and to choose instead the harder, less understood path of selfless love that leads to a richer, more fulfilling life. But these words, while challenging, are filled with hope and joy.

“Happiness,” wrote author Frederick Buechner, “turns up more or less where you’d expect it to—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.”

Elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

Spend a few moments thinking about this simple parable. In what ways can you relate to the man in the story? In what ways do you not?

Listen again: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."

In the very last chapter of Matthew's gospel, the writer describes how women close to Jesus went early in the morning to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. Instead of a lifeless body, they were met with an empty grave and messengers declaring, "Jesus is risen." The text continues: "The women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy." Life can be scary. There is so much we don't understand; so much we can't control. Yet through it all, we can be filled with joy in the unstoppable, life-giving, death-defeating power of Love.

Spend a few minutes more sitting in stillness. Open your heart to God's loving presence. Welcome the joy of the Kingdom of Heaven into the circumstances of your life.

Reflection#3: Doubt

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the writer of Matthew's gospel notes the people were amazed at Jesus' teaching. It's not hard to see why: Jesus does not provide instructions to the respectable on how to be more religious. He invites the poor and marginalized, the neglected and the disappointed, to live lives of radical, counter-cultural, and counter-intuitive love. And he explains that although they will inherit the earth and see God, they will also be persecuted, ridiculed, and misunderstood. These are hard words: words that invite questions; that stir up doubt.

Jesus welcomes our doubts and questions, our searching for truth. He also says in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples, believed that Jesus' way of living would end with defeat. He saw the mounting opposition to Jesus' teachings that challenged the status quo, and when Jesus proposed to travel to Jerusalem—the seat of power—he said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

After Jesus' death and burial, he doubted his friends' claims to have seen Jesus alive again—living, speaking, eating with them. Thomas declared to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

"Doubting Thomas" (as he became known) followed in a long line of people in Scripture who questioned the way of love, who couldn't accept miracles, who thought the "good news" of

Jesus too good to be true. So don't worry if you have doubts: you are in good company. Doubts are not to be feared or denied, but to be explored.

The Medieval philosopher and theologian Pierre Abelard wrote, "The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth."

Read this poem, "Saturday" by Rachel Held Evans.

It will bother you off and on, like a rock in your shoe,

Or it will startle you, like the first crash of thunder in a summer storm,

Or it will lodge itself beneath your skin like a splinter,

Or it will show up again—the uninvited guest whose heavy footsteps you'd recognize anywhere, appearing at your front door with a suitcase in hand at the worst. possible. time.

Or it will pull you farther out to sea like rip tide,

Or hold your head under as you drown—

Triggered by an image, a question, something the pastor said, something that doesn't add up, the unlikelihood of it all, the too-good-to-be-trueness of it, the way the lady in the thick perfume behind you sings "Up from the grave he arose!" with more confidence in the single line of a song than you've managed to muster in the past two years.

And you'll be sitting there in the dress you pulled out from the back of your closet, swallowing down the bread and wine, not believing a word of it.

Not. A. Word.

So you'll fumble through those back pocket prayers—"help me in my unbelief!"—while everyone around you moves on to verse two, verse three, verse four without you.

You will feel their eyes on you, and you will recognize the concern behind their cheery greetings: "We haven't seen you here in a while! So good to have you back."

And you will know they are thinking exactly what you used to think about Easter Sunday Christians:

Nominal.

Lukewarm.

Indifferent.

But you won't know how to explain that there is nothing nominal or lukewarm or indifferent about standing in this hurricane of questions every day and staring each one down until you've mustered all the bravery and fortitude and trust it takes to whisper just one of them out loud on the car ride home:

"What if we made this up because we're afraid of death?"

And you won't know how to explain why, in that moment when the whisper rose out of your mouth like Jesus from the grave, you felt more alive and awake and resurrected than you have in ages because at least it was out, at least it was said, at least it wasn't buried in your chest anymore, clawing for freedom.

And, if you're lucky, someone in the car will recognize the bravery of the act. If you're lucky, there will be a moment of holy silence before someone wonders out loud if such a question might put a damper on Easter brunch.

But if you're not—if the question gets answered too quickly or if the silence goes on too long—please know you are not alone.

There are other people signing words to hymns they're not sure they believe today, other people digging out dresses from the backs of their closets today, other people ruining Easter brunch today, other people just showing up today.

And sometimes, just showing up—burial spices in hand—is all it takes to witness a miracle.

Spend some time in stillness, offering up your thoughts to God.