



LENT WORKOUT

A 40-Day Workout for the Season of Lent



FNC LENT WORKOUT

A Letter from Pastor Jeff

The church year revolves around two fundamental celebrations, Christmas, and Easter. At Christmas we celebrate the initiation of God's redemptive plan through the birth of Jesus Christ and at Easter we celebrate the culmination of that plan through His crucifixion and resurrection. With each of these celebrations come seasons of preparation. For Christmas we have the season of Advent. This is a time to prepare for the arrival of Jesus; we remember his first coming and we prepare for his second coming. For Easter, we have the season of Lent.

Lent is a season of reflection and the denial of self. It is a time where we seek to identify with Jesus Christ and his sufferings. The season lasts 40 days (minus Sundays)¹ in commemoration of Jesus' wilderness experience where he fasted, prayed, and was tempted before beginning his earthly ministry. As we share in the sufferings of Christ through prayer and fasting, we draw nearer to Christ in remembering his crucifixion and the amazing joy of his resurrection on Easter Sunday. The unavoidable path to resurrection is through crucifixion.

This guide is a 40-day preparation plan to enrich your Easter experience. It is called a "workout" but it's really a collection of 40 workouts that focus on the spiritual but also consider the physical and mental. The Apostle Paul was very fond of using the metaphor of athletics to draw an analogy to the spiritual life. In his letter to the church in Corinth he compares the spiritual journey to running a race:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

-1 Corinthians 9:24-27

We admire athletes who are able to accomplish what seems like superhuman feats of athletic prowess. But what we tend to ignore is the tremendous amount of discipline, self-control and hard work that goes on behind the scenes that make it all possible. Paul makes this analogy because our spiritual life is much the same way. Spiritual growth requires discipline and selfcontrol. Great men and women of God are not simply "zapped" into holiness, and they are certainly not born that way.

As you follow this collection of workouts, there are three parts: body, mind, and soul. The "Physical" section offers tips and suggestions on diet and exercise. This is general information to help improve your physical health. The "Mental" section offers some

¹https://www.calendardate.com/lent_2023.htm, Lent for Christians starts on Ash Wednesday and ends on either the evening of Maundy Thursday or on sundown of Holy Saturday (day before Easter Sunday). However, the practices of Lent do not end until sundown on Holy Saturday for all Christian denominations. So, it is 44 days from Ash Wednesday to Maundy Thursday and another two days with Good Friday and Holy Saturday added to give a total of 46 days for Lent. But Sundays are excluded from fasting during Lent and with 6 Sundays removed from the count we get lent being a 40-day liturgical period.

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mental exercises, “brain teasers” that will challenge you to think – exercise for the brain. They are not too difficult and intended to be fun. The answers to these riddles can be found at the bottom of the page – no cheating! Lastly, the “Spiritual” section is the primary focus of these workouts. They are pretty simple, a short passage of scripture followed by a reflection. These workouts are progressive and move day by day toward the cross. I invite you to invest the time to meditate on them, pray over them and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through them. No doubt you will be challenged along the way, perhaps with a different perspective or maybe even convicted over an attitude or a habit. This is where we have the opportunity to make spiritual “gains.” When we exercise and discipline our bodies, there are a couple of phrases or mottos that often get repeated: “no pain, no gain” and “pain is weakness leaving the body.” Physical discipline requires pain, not only during the physical exertion but we often experience sore muscles the next day. This is the price an athlete pays to grow stronger and faster. It is similar with the spiritual life. The pain is not necessarily physical (though the useful spiritual discipline of fasting is certainly painful), but to change a perspective or a belief, or to be convicted of a bad attitude, a festering spirit of unforgiveness toward someone, or a bad habit, is all its own form of pain. Embrace it. Then take action and make the change that God requires. This is the path of holiness. To become more like God means that we must become less like ourselves, that is, less selfish, less sinful.

Thanks for joining me on this journey. It's always good to have company and to know that you're not alone. Actually, any journey is better when others are with us for support and encouragement.

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. -Ecclesiastes 4:9

Jeff



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DAY 1 I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU <i>Jeremiah 29:11-12</i>	DAY 2 YOU HAVE SEARCHED ME AND YOU KNOW ME <i>Psalm 139:1</i>	DAY 3 MY SOUL LONGS FOR YOU <i>Psalm 42:1</i>	DAY 4 GOD IS LOVE <i>1 John 4:7-8</i>	DAY 5 I DO WHAT I HATE <i>Romans 7:15</i>	DAY 6 DEPART FROM ME, A SINNER <i>Luke 5:8</i>
DAY 7 REPENT, AND BELIEVE IN THE GOOD NEWS <i>Mark 1:14-15</i>	DAY 8 THIS IS THE SORT OF FAST THAT PLEASES ME <i>Isaiah 58: 6-7</i>	DAY 9 ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU <i>Matthew 7:7-8</i>	DAY 10 BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY <i>Leviticus 19:1</i>	DAY 11 THE SICK NEED A DOCTOR <i>Matthew 9:10-13</i>	DAY 12 COME AND SEE <i>John 1:35-39</i>
DAY 13 GLAD TIDINGS TO THE POOR <i>Luke 4:16-18</i>	DAY 14 WASHING FEET <i>John 13:4-5</i>	DAY 15 LET THE PARTY CONTINUE <i>John 2:1-5</i>	DAY 16 BLESSED ARE YOU <i>Luke 6:20-23</i>	DAY 17 CALMING THE STORM <i>Matthew 8:23-27</i>	DAY 18 FEEDING FIVE THOUSAND <i>Luke 9:12-13</i>
DAY 19 NOT IN THIS HOUSE <i>John 2:14-16</i>	DAY 20 SEEING JESUS IN A NEW WAY <i>Matthew 17:1-2</i>	DAY 21 TRIUMPHAL ENTRY <i>Matthew 21:6-9</i>	DAY 22 FOOT WASHING <i>John 13:3-5, 12-15</i>	DAY 23 LAST SUPPER <i>1 Corinthians 11:23-26</i>	DAY 24 AGONY IN THE GARDEN <i>Luke 22:41-45</i>
DAY 25 ARREST <i>Mark 14:43-46</i>	DAY 26 TRIAL <i>Mark 15:1-5</i>	DAY 27 RESOLVE <i>Isaiah 50:5-8</i>	DAY 28 CROWNING WITH THORNS <i>Matthew 27:27-30</i>	DAY 29 WAY OF THE CROSS <i>Luke 23:27-31</i>	DAY 30 CRUCIFIXION <i>Luke 23:32, 39-43, 46</i>
DAY 31 AN EMPTY TOMB <i>Mark 16:1-8</i>	DAY 32 RECOGNIZING JESUS <i>John 20:11-16</i>	DAY 33 DO NOT BE AFRAID <i>Matthew 28:1-10</i>	DAY 34 ROAD TO EMMAUS <i>Luke 24:28-32</i>	DAY 35 VISITING THE DISCIPLES <i>John 20:19-23</i>	DAY 36 DOUBTING THOMAS <i>John 20:24-29</i>
DAY 37 COME EAT BREAKFAST <i>John 21:3-6, 9-12</i>	DAY 38 FAITH AND WORKS <i>James 2:14-17</i>	DAY 39 VINE AND BRANCHES <i>John 15:1-5</i>	DAY 40 GOD IS LOVE <i>1 John 4:16-21</i>		

I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU

PHYSICAL

Drink more water. Most of us don't drink enough water every day. Water is needed to carry out body functions, remove waste, and carry nutrients and oxygen around our body. Since we lose water daily through urine, bowel movements, perspiration, and breathing, we need to replenish our water intake. Furthermore, drinking water helps in losing weight. A Health.com study carried out among overweight or obese people showed that water drinkers lose 4.5 more pounds than a control group. Generally, we need to drink about 2.0-3.0 liters of water or about 8-10 glasses every day.

MENTAL

What is special about these words: job, polish, herb?

SPIRITUAL

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. - Jeremiah 29:11-12

The prophet Jeremiah was writing to the people of Israel during the worst time anyone could remember; they had been sent into exile after having been conquered by Babylon. "God has abandoned us!" some would have shouted. Others would have questioned even that kind of loyalty, saying, "Our God is weak, He could not protect us." Jeremiah faced the grim reality of a world filled with suffering and pain, and he cries out to God in his distress. What is important to remember, though, is that his language is still spoken today. This is not the language of unbelief or of cynicism; rather, it is the honest cry of the heart in the middle of intense pain and suffering. This is not white-washed piety of the "everything will turn out fine" variety, the empty words we sometimes throw around in the face of grief. This is heart-wrenching, honest language that recognizes the suffering we face in life.

But the language that God speaks back to his people is the language of comfort and reassurance. "I know the plans I have for you..." Hope does not ignore the reality of the world; it simply offers a change in perspective. Our faith is not blind insistence that everything is always fine. Instead, it is reliance on a God who offers us real hope for a better future. Our faith is that God knows us better than we know ourselves, and he ultimately wants what is best for us. Whatever your circumstances, remember that God knows, and He has plans to restore and redeem.

YOU HAVE SEARCHED ME AND YOU KNOW ME

PHYSICAL

Get enough sleep. When you don't rest well, you compensate by eating more. Usually, it's junk food. Get enough rest and you don't need to snack to stay awake. Also, lack of sleep causes premature aging, and you don't want that!

MENTAL

I am taken from a mine, and shut up in a wooden case, from which I am never released, and yet I am used by almost everybody. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me...and are acquainted with all my ways.
- Psalm 139:1*

This Psalm is a meditation on the amazing reality of God's incredibly intimate knowledge of your life, and mine. He knows our actions and our movements, he knows our thoughts, he knows what we're going to say before we can even get the words out. It's hard to imagine a being that has such complete knowledge. In fact, knowledge of such a God can either bring us a great deal of comfort or a terrible amount of fear. There are some thoughts that are best forgotten. After all, a sign of maturity is having a "filter" between our brain and our mouth. If we said everything we thought, we'd all be in a lot of trouble! But God knows it all, even the thoughts that go unspoken. That can be really incriminating! So why is this psalm so positive? All these meditations are spoken as a form of worship. This intimate knowledge of God is viewed as a source of inspiration and praise. I believe the difference between praise and terror in our response is based on our view of God. Is God benevolent or malevolent? That is, is God good or is God bad? Another way of saying it is, "Can God be trusted with such incriminating information?" There is no "pleading the fifth" with God, everything we say or even think can and will be used against us. Or will it? Rather than viewing God as a malevolent judge who is ready to throw the book at us, Psalm 139 encourages us to view God as a loving creator. Imagine God looking at your life the way a novelist looks at a character in his novel: seeing the whole story in his imagination, enjoying the characters he has lovingly created. Or maybe we can think of God as a sculptor, lovingly chiseling away at a block of marble – and you are that block of marble! What beauty does God see in the yet unfinished stone? What is God chipping away with each strike of the hammer? Does it cause pain? What will the finished sculpture look like? Can you express to God your honest feelings about the process? Can you trust the sculptor to give life to the vision?

MY SOUL LONGS FOR YOU

PHYSICAL

Exercise. Movement is life. Research has shown that exercising daily brings tremendous benefits to our health, including an increase in lifespan, lowering of risk of diseases, higher bone density, and weight loss. Increase the activity in your life. Choose walking over transport for close distances. Climb the stairs instead of taking the lift. Join an aerobics class or a dance class. Pick a sport of your liking.

MENTAL

A man stands on one side of a river, his dog on the other. The man calls his dog, who immediately crosses the river without getting wet and without using a bridge or a boat. How did the dog do it?

SPIRITUAL

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. - Psalm 42:1

Longing. Thirst. Hunger. Desire. Passion. These are all words that describe powerful motivational forces that drive us to action. The Psalmist uses the longing of a thirsty deer for the flowing streams of water as an analogy to the longing that he has for God. Though I can imagine a thirsty deer, I must admit that I've never seen one. What I have seen is a thirsty dog. After a long summer walk our family dog, Copper would run for the water dish and lap up the water, making a mess of his face and the floor. I know there have been times in my life when I have been thirsty and parched, my mouth dry and my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth, "cotton mouth" is a pretty accurate description! When have I ever longed for God like that? Do I long for God as if my life depended on it? Because it really does! There are those moments when we are desperate for God, and they are usually those "Jesus take the wheel!" times when we are in a crisis, and we cry out to God for help.

What we truly need to develop in our spiritual life is a constant awareness of our need for God, a longing for God that reaches desperation. Like lovers forced to be separated from one another. Or like a people forced into exile, far away from the land they know and love. What if we could cultivate that same kind of longing and hunger for God, a fellowship with Him as necessary as the air I breathe or the bread and water that keeps me alive? The good news is that we can cultivate this kind of passion for God. This happens as we develop our awareness of God's character and begin to fathom the depths of His amazing love and mercy through the disciplines of prayer, meditation, and reading of His word.

DAY 4

GOD IS LOVE

PHYSICAL

Pick exercises that you enjoy. When you enjoy a sport, you naturally want to do it. Exercise isn't about suffering and pushing yourself; it's about being healthy and having fun at the same time. Adding variation in your exercises will keep them interesting. What exercises do you like and how can you include them in your routine?

MENTAL

I can't be bought, but I can be stolen with a glance. I'm worthless to one, but priceless to two. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. - 1 John 4:7-8

Our deepest longings always point us toward love, and our longings for authentic love always point us toward God. John's first letter expresses a truth we often dance around in our hopes for goodness in the world: hope for an end to violence; perfect justice between men and women across the world; enough food and water to satisfy all hungers and thirsts. We sense deeply that there must be goodness, that God must be present if the world is to have any meaning whatsoever. In John's language, love is from God.

The great paradox of the Christian mystery is that God has not put an end to violence and injustice; God instead has elected to suffer with us. How often we wish that God had chosen another way, the way of power over human choosing! For through our choices, we ruin our relationships: we manipulate one another for money, for sexual pleasure, and for power; we build our own fortunes while others go hungry. God did not come to veto our choices but rather to suffer the consequences of our choices with us. "I was hungry and you gave me food." Jesus says, for "just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:42, 45). But this paradox implies that God's love is God's justice: before one who loves us without any condition whatsoever, we stand naked with empty hands. There is nothing that we can offer but ourselves. We continue to receive God's gifts and squander them, much like the prodigal son who takes his father's inheritance and runs off for a good time (Luke 15:11-32). Yet this God who has made our hearts for love will never be satisfied until we can truly receive that love and return it with our whole hearts. The Lord says, "I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like a mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you" (Isaiah 44:22).

I DO WHAT I HATE

PHYSICAL

Work out different parts of your body. Don't just do cardio (like jogging). Give your body a proper workout. The easiest way is to engage in sports since they work out different muscle groups. Popular activities where you can get a good body workout are trekking, hiking, swimming, basketball, tennis, squash, badminton, yoga, and frisbee.

MENTAL

Turn me on my side and I am everything. Cut me in half and I am nothing. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. - Romans 7:15

Acknowledging sin is hard, but it is absolutely necessary. Imagine for a moment that we completely shut our eyes to the possibility that our actions have no impact on those around us. What if we just acted out on our impulses for self-gratification: lust, greed, hunger, power, anger, conceit. Imagine a world where no one ever admitted they were wrong or that their actions had any negative consequences for others. Picture a world where "anything goes" and there are no consequences for our actions, no matter how terrible – no laws, no police officers, no judges, no prisons. Such a world would be a nightmare beyond comprehension! It would be a pure "survival of the fittest," "wild west," "Mad Max" hell on earth where only the most ruthless and depraved could survive.

What Paul acknowledges in Romans 7 is that everyone tends to fall into habits that in many cases bring about results that we hate. More important, we may not recognize that those things are bad until someone draws the connection for us. But once they do, we face a dilemma. Do we accept the consequences of our actions and change our ways (the biblical word is "repent")? Or do we tend to "shoot the messenger" and accuse him or her of being nosy and to mind their own business.

Paul reminds us that we are not always totally in charge of our choices and that it takes prayer and reliance on God's grace to bring about the good. We can't just will it into being, because our desires often over power us. But when we acknowledge that sometimes we do what we hate and develop habits that are destructive even when we may not be aware of it, we are able to repent, and pray for God's amazing grace.

DEPART FROM ME, A SINNER

PHYSICAL

Eat fruits. Fruits have a load of vitamins and minerals. Do you know that oranges offer more health benefits than vitamin C pills? As much as possible, consume your vitamins and minerals through your diet rather than through pills. Eat a variety of fruits every morning for greater energy for your day.

MENTAL

No matter how little or how much you use me; you change me every month. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

But when Simon Peter saw it [the great catch of fish], he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'God away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' - Luke 5:8

Coming to know God is at the same time coming to know myself as “fall[ing] short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) – that is, recognizing that God’s complete love for me makes me recognize how badly I have loved God in return. Peter’s response to Jesus is understandable; he wants Jesus to go away because Jesus’ presence makes him hyper-aware of his sin.

Martin Luther King Jr. expressed a profound awareness of the coexistence of pain and healing to be found in acknowledging injustice. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” he wrote, “Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed.” So, too, with our sin: we must expose it to the light of Christ, the “light of the world” (John 8:12) who brings us healing. That process is difficult but necessary. We may continue to avoid acknowledging sin, moving from one to another and drowning out God’s gentle voice, but we will continue to hurt ourselves and others.

In the story above, Jesus comes to Peter and shows him where to find what he is seeking. Peter has been a fisherman all his life; it is likely that he considered himself perfectly competent to make his own decisions about how to do his work. Yet his willingness to trust Jesus leads to an abundance he could not have foreseen. Will my trust in Jesus similarly lead me to new fruitfulness, perhaps of a sort I cannot now see? Will my willingness to name my sin leave a space for God to heal me? And will that healing make me more disposed to do God’s work of building a kingdom of justice and mercy?

REPENT, AND BELIEVE IN THE GOOD NEWS

PHYSICAL

Eat vegetables. Vegetables are the source of many nutrients and minerals like folate, vitamin K, vitamin A, manganese, and potassium, not to mention dietary fiber which is important for good gut health. All vegetables are important and enrich our diet. Try eating raw salads for lunch every day with a variety of vegetables, then a cooked dinner with grains, potatoes/sweet potatoes, and other delicious vegetables. A variety of vegetable intake will strengthen your immune system.

MENTAL

David's Father Has Three Sons: Snap, Crackle, And _____?

SPIRITUAL

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good new of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.
- Mark 1:14-15

The Greek verb “metanoiete,” translated usually as “repent,” could just as easily mean “change your minds.” Some think of conversion as a kind of magic, as if God randomly chooses people to set aside their brains and believe in strange things. Here, and in the other Gospels, we see Jesus saying something to the effect of “try a new way of looking at things by placing your trust in the Good News I’m sharing with you.” In that way, Jesus is less like a magician and more like a professor or journalist who wants to shape the way we view the world.

The cornerstone of what Jesus wants to share is that God is working through him, laboring among us as a flesh and blood human being, inviting us to partake in a grand, unfolding project. Jesus’ invitation, then, is this: be part of that project, because God needs you to be love where you live. If you aren’t that love, who else will take on and accomplish that part of God’s project? Who else will agree to be love to your family, your friends, your coworkers, your circle of influence?

Are you willing to set aside your limited perception of the world and allow yourself to learn from Jesus and the followers of Jesus who have been at it longer than you? Are you willing to participate in a grand, unfolding project of being love for the world, being love for the specific men, women, boys, and girls your life touches? Are you willing to look at all things the way God does and test your understanding against the wisdom of the church? Are you willing to let your life sing to the tune that God conducts, as part of His grand symphony?

THIS IS THE SORT OF FAST THAT PLEASES ME

PHYSICAL

Cut down on processed food. Processed food is not good because (a) most of the nutritional value is lost in the creation of these foods, and (b) the added preservatives are bad for our health. Many processed foods contain a high amount of salt which leads to higher blood pressure and heart disease. In general, the more ingredients a food has on the label (ending with 'ite' or 'ate'), the more processed it is. Go for less processed food such as a baked potato over chips, fresh fruit over canned fruit, and intact grains over white bread.

MENTAL

What has cities, but no houses; forests, but no trees; and water, but no fish?

SPIRITUAL

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke...Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? - Isaiah 58: 6-7

The prophet Isaiah names here what all of us want when we confront our sin (our tendencies to hurt ourselves or others). We desire healing. We desire freedom. We recognize on some level that – in the words of Psalm 51:3 – “My sin is ever before me” and that we can’t break free through sheer willpower.

Isaiah tells us what it took centuries for theologians to fully understand. Fasting – that is, the willingness to curb a desire the way a farmer prunes a plant – is an act of will, rising from the normal patterns of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Such an act of will says “yes” to God’s grace and allows the inrushing of the Holy Spirit, so that God can transform our lives toward holy purposes. This act of openness toward God is possible when we recognize that our attempts to do good are always short of the mark and that only God can affect the healing of our intentions and turn our efforts toward the grand unfolding of a divine project.

When we allow God that space in our lives, our healing will “spring up quickly,” and God will emerge from the corners of our minds to take the lead: “your vindicator shall go before you” (Isaiah 58:8).

ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU

PHYSICAL

Avoid trigger foods. Trigger foods are the foods that make you go berserk and binge after you eat them. Everyone's trigger foods are different, but generally trigger foods are candy bars, chocolate, confectionery, chips, cookies, or anything with a high level of refined sugar, salt, or flour. These foods cause a blood sugar imbalance, hence triggering one to eat more. What are your trigger foods? Identify them and remove them from your diet.

MENTAL

A red house is made from red bricks. A blue house is made from blue bricks. A yellow house is made from yellow bricks. What is a green house made from?

SPIRITUAL

[Jesus said] "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him." - Matthew 7:7-8

The key to this often-misunderstood text lies in the examples that Jesus gives toward the end. Children are always asking for things, and a good parent will often have to say "no." But when the child asks for something that will benefit the child, a good parent will say "yes."

So, too, with God; as the one who loves us more than we can understand, God wants to give us gifts – and will often give us gifts that we don't ask for (and maybe don't even understand as worth having). Sometimes these gifts are obvious: a new friendship or a feeling of consolation that comes from loving well. Many times, though, the gifts are obscure or even unwanted: a sting of conscience after sin; difficulty in school or work that points us away from wasting our energies.

Perhaps the most basic act of faith after believing that God exists, is believing that God is good even when evidence seems to point to the contrary. The God who created us knows our good better than we ever can, and the practice of asking God for gifts is critical to our growing in knowledge of the good to which God is pointing us. We will not always get what we ask for, but we will in time get what we most truly desire.

BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY

PHYSICAL

Breathe. Deeply. Oxygen is vital for life. You may know how to breathe, but are you breathing properly? Most of us aren't breathing properly — we take shallow breaths, only breathing to 1/3 of our lung capacity. Athletes are taught proper breathing techniques to get their best performance. A full breath is one where your lungs are fully filled, your abdomen expands, and there's minimum movement in your shoulders.

MENTAL

There is a word in the English language in which the first two letters signify a male, the first three letters signify a female, the first four signify a great man, and the whole word, a great woman. What is the word?

SPIRITUAL

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. - Leviticus 19:1

The uncomfortable truth about faith is that God makes demands. We can't be the same old person we were before we said "yes" to God's offer of unconditional love. We can't make our response conditional: "I'll have faith as long as I get to..." (fill in the blank). God really makes only one demand – God demands holiness. Initially, that might sound terrifying – who can live up to that! For some, that demand may come with images of heaven and hell similar to what medieval artists and writers such as Dante conjured up. But behind that demand is a more fundamental truth: God loves us without condition, which as much generosity when we are horrible sinners as when we are reckless saints. The demand of holiness is most certainly not, then, a condition of God's love for us. It is rather a condition of our happiness.

Imagine wearing expensive clothing and jewelry. You are ready for the cover of Vogue or GQ. Now imagine entering a sauna – an analogy for the presence of God, whose love is described as a refiner's fire (see Malachi 3:2; 1 Corinthians 3:13). The experience will be torturous for the person concerned with preserving the look, but for the person ready to simply let go of the clothes and makeup, it will be very relaxing. God's demand for holiness is ultimately a demand that we let go of what prevents us from taking comfort in the presence of God. The challenge, of course, is that many things get in the way of our taking comfort. The author of Leviticus names several, but in our own day there are many more. Through our participation in the life of the church, we come to better awareness of these obstacles so that we might let go of them and experience holiness and happiness.

THE SICK NEED A DOCTOR

PHYSICAL

Eat small meals. Choose several small meals over huge meals as it evens out your energy distribution. It's also better for your stomach as it doesn't over-stretch from digesting a huge volume of food at one go. In general, eat when you feel hungry and stop when you're full. You don't need to wait until official mealtimes before you start eating. Listen to your body and what it tells you.

MENTAL

What is harder to catch the faster you run?

SPIRITUAL

As [Jesus] sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. - Matthew 9:10-13

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew writes for his fellow Jews who were surprised and sometimes scandalized by the way Jesus went about his ministry. Here, he describes one of many scenes when Jesus challenges the Pharisees' misunderstanding of what God desires.

The Pharisees held closely to the holiness code in the book of Leviticus. Their understanding of holiness stressed the idea that to be like God is to be set apart, healed of sin and therefore unlike others who keep falling into sin. But Jesus takes another approach. He uses a medical analogy, stressing that holiness is like the health a person gains after being in a hospital. But the only way they can get there is if God's servants go out to bring the sick in on stretchers. (A similar image appears in John chapter 5, where a sick man complains of wanting to reach the healing waters of Bethesda but has no one to carry him there.)

Our desire to be more like Jesus means being willing to be one of those servants. It means we will be hanging around hospitals (either literal or metaphorical). First, it means each one of us must be willing to seek Christ's healing – accepting Christ's dealing with our own sin and unwellness. Second, it means we must be willing to work at maintaining our spiritual health by avoiding sin. Third, it means constantly asking God where he would send us to bring the sick to him, the divine Physician, so that he might do His merciful healing work of transformation – making us holy as He is holy.

COME AND SEE

PHYSICAL

Stop eating when you feel full. Many of us rely on external cues to tell when we're full, such as whether everyone has finished eating or whether your plate is empty. These are irrelevant: you should look at internal cues, such as whether your stomach feels full and how you feel. Don't eat just because there's food on the plate. Listen to your gut and learn when it's time to stop!

MENTAL

You're escaping a labyrinth and there are three exits. Exit A leads to an inferno. Exit B leads to an assassin. Exit C leads to a lion that hasn't eaten in 3 years. Which exit do you pick?

SPIRITUAL

John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. - John 1:35-39

Putting aside for a moment the technical term "lamb of God" – a term that first-century Jews would have understood as crystal clear reference to the Passover celebration – let's observe that what happens in this story as a teacher directs his students to follow someone, he knows to be a greater teacher than himself. In their curiosity, his disciples go after Jesus and accept his invitation to get to know him better.

John's role of pointing his disciples to Jesus is the role of every Christian. We are called to introduce people to Jesus. And Jesus' invitation to John's students is the same for everyone, "Come and see for yourself what I'm about." Don't just rely on what other people tell you. All the centuries of religious tradition (rituals, doctrines, moral teachings, historical events, successes, and failures) can obscure this firsthand encounter with Jesus that is so necessary. But the exhortation remains: learn for yourself. Don't let what others have said or done get in the way. John's great wisdom is, "Don't take my word for it. Go talk to him yourself." We do this today is by asking Him to speak to us through His word.

GLAD TIDINGS TO THE POOR

PHYSICAL

Cut down on deep-fried food. Deep-fried food contains acrylamide, a potentially cancer-causing chemical. According to a BBC report, an ordinary bag of potato chips may contain up to 500 times more of the substance than the top level allowed in drinking water by the World Health Organization (WHO). Consuming oily foods can make you feel sluggish. Go for food prepared using healthier methods instead, such as grilling, steaming, stir-fry, or even raw food. Reduce your intake of fast food, fries, doughnuts, chips, wedges, and deep-fried food.

MENTAL

What can be swallowed, but can also swallow you?

SPIRITUAL

He [Jesus] stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... - Luke 4:16-18

Every true Christian vocation is a vocation to serve those who are poor, in need, marginalized. Our challenge is to discern how God calls us – that is, to understand which people most need the unique gifts with which God has endowed us for the sake of service.

The historical church names several categories of service, known as the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

The physical works of mercy are: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, burying the dead.

The spiritual works of mercy are: admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving all injuries, praying for the living and the dead.

What is clear from the Gospels is that Jesus moved with purpose in his ministry: teaching and healing; reaching out to those on the margins and challenging those with power; calling people to repent of their sins and preparing them for God's mercy and judgment. He undertook a ministry to the poor – both physically and spiritually. Most importantly, he was free from self-interest. He abandoned himself to God's grace, approached death with obedient resolve, and then showed the world that God could even overcome death itself.

WASHING FEET

PHYSICAL

Cut down on sugary food/drinks. Sugary food consists of candy bars, pastries, chocolate, cookies, cakes, and jelly donuts. These foods trigger you to eat more due to the sugar rush. Eating these things is okay occasionally, but not daily. Go for healthy snacks instead. Sugary drinks are unfortunately sold everywhere today, namely in the form of soda and sweet drinks. These drinks are unhealthy and cause weight gain. Go for plain water, green tea, or vegetable juices instead!

MENTAL

They fill me up and you empty me, almost every day; if you raise my arm, I work the opposite way. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

[Jesus] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. - John 13:4-5

There are two elements in this story that are surprising. The first is that Jesus does something as humble as washing feet. The second is that he basically tells us that we must do the same thing. His example is challenging – saying, in essence, that the normal boundaries don't apply when it comes to following him. Don't worry about your image, he seems to be saying – worry instead about being part of what I am doing.

Jesus is calling us to freedom from the hang-ups that prevent us from giving ourselves fully to love. "The kingdom of heaven is right here!" he says in so many words – right in the people around you now - and the only inhibitions to embracing it fully are our fears.

In his famous prayer known as the Suscipe, St. Ignatius begins with the line "Take, O Lord, and receive...my memory." I once found this a curious beginning to a prayer, but now I understand it to mean that we hope God will transform our self-understanding. We have created an image of ourselves that can be prideful and selfish. We need God to transform our self-image, so that we remember ourselves differently. For by giving our memory to God, we release our hold on the limited self-image or "reputation" we have built and enter freely into loving service to the world. My past no longer limits me; I am here to serve, to wash the world's feet.

LET THE PARTY CONTINUE

PHYSICAL

Don't drink alcohol. Alcohol is a diuretic, which means it drains water from your body. Not only that, but alcohol is repeatedly proven to have negative effects on our body and health — impacting the proper functioning of our brain, liver, lungs, and other major organs. If you drink alcohol regularly, it's time to cut it out, or at the very least, reduce your consumption.

MENTAL

First I am dried, then I am wet. The longer I swim, the more taste you get. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee...when the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." - John 2:1-5

In John's Gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry with the miracle of changing water into wine. Why does he choose this action, rather than something more – well – Godlike? Why not raise someone from the dead or heal some people – or for that matter, cure cancer, eliminate poverty, and end war? Why do a miracle that simply allows a party to continue?

There is something intensely paradoxical about this first miracle that should give us pause in our efforts to change the world. Jesus' actions are always personal and always surprising. He was not a social-justice crusader. At no point did Jesus challenge the oppressive Roman government, organize the poor to demand their rights, or lead a boycott against the religious authorities. He simply wanted to reveal God's glory and to show that he himself was the bearer of it. He was fabulously unconcerned with applying divine power to cure social evils. His actions were rather modest and even random, in this case, simply obeying his mom's directions to help out a bridegroom too poor to buy enough wine.

This week, as you contemplate Jesus' invitation to "come and see" who he is and what he's about, pay attention both to what he does and does not do. Why does he show his power? What are the conditions that allow him to work miracles? What seems to be his objective? This is not a man who appears to be on a massive public-relations campaign, working strategically to upset unjust power structures. He seems much more interested in personal random acts of compassion, changing the world one person at a time.

BLESSED ARE YOU

PHYSICAL

Many vegetable oils, which are used in a variety of food products and in almost all restaurants today, are toxic. This includes all refined oils such as canola oil, rapeseed oil, soybean oil, palm oil, sunflower oil, and even olive oil. Despite the whole "heart healthy" branding surrounding vegetable oils, it is an extremely processed food stripped of all the nutrients/fiber/protein/etc. of its source. Many commercial oils are high in omega-6 polyunsaturated fat which causes inflammation. Vegetable oils are used because (a) they are cheap and (b) they lengthen the shelf life of food.

MENTAL

My voice is tender; my waist is slender, and I'm often invited to play. Yet wherever I go I must take my bow or else I have nothing to say. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

[Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. - Luke 6:20-23

The Beatitudes are an insider's guide to the Christian life, turning every customary marker of success on its head. Jesus suggests what appears to be difficult may in fact be a sign of fidelity to building God's kingdom.

Imagine a coach telling the team members of the hardships they will face, the struggles they will have to overcome to achieve victory. A good coach will be honest about what the team members must face so that they will not lose heart when, inevitably, things don't always go as hoped. In the Beatitudes, Christ takes a similar approach, suggesting that the distant hope for building the kingdom will involve highs and lows - this mission will be arduous, but the reward will be heaven itself. You'll know that you're building God's kingdom, Jesus says, when people "hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you" (Luke 6:22), just as people did to the prophets. People hate those sent by God because such people always sting the consciences of the self-righteous through their Christlike character and spirit. There will be persecution and hardship, but heaven is our reward.

CALMING THE STORM

PHYSICAL

Prepare your meals. When you prepare your meals, you control what goes into them rather than choosing between sub-standard options in a restaurant. Get quality kitchen equipment — it will be your best investment ever. Having a blender makes it a breeze to make your fruit/vegetable juices! Having an instant pot and an oven makes cooking much easier too.

MENTAL

A mother has six children and five potatoes. How can she feed each an equal amount of potatoes? Do not use fractions.

SPIRITUAL

When [Jesus] got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" - Matthew 8:23-27

The story of Jesus calming the storm can be a kind of metaphor for life, saying in effect, "Don't worry about how bad things get as long as you are close to the Lord." In Matthew's Gospel, the story comes after the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is a man on a mission, and his disciples are just trying to keep up. Everything about their life with Jesus is startling – they are like children who are with their father during "come to work" day. But something happens and they don't know what to do!

Jesus is completely unconcerned about what appears to be a huge problem to the disciples. We recall the words of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man" (Luke 6:22). For many of us, the negative and at times hateful reactions of people around us can lead to depression or self-loathing. Jesus upends our concerns: "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Matthew 8:26). Of course, there are problems we must face; they are the birth pangs that usher in the coming of the kingdom (see Matthew 24:3-35). The enemy of our soul wants to discourage us from carrying on in the face of these storms. Jesus' response is to see through those lies and keep his eyes on the ministry with which the Father has entrusted him. We must do the same.

FEEDING FIVE THOUSAND

PHYSICAL

Try a vegetarian diet. Just to be clear, being vegetarian doesn't automatically mean better health. There are tons of unhealthy vegetarian food out there (mock soy patties, refined carb, fried vegetarian food, sugary desserts). Trying a vegetarian diet is about being healthier — meat has been linked to inflammation. When done right, there are many proven health benefits of a vegetarian diet. You don't have to do this forever — you can just try it out as an experiment, or just go vegetarian for two days a week.

MENTAL

Take one out and scratch my head, I am now black but once was red.

SPIRITUAL

The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." - Luke 9:12-13

I have always found Jesus' words to the disciples here the most puzzling: "You give them something to eat" (Luke 9:13). Why does he say this, knowing they have no resources, and then turn right around and perform a miracle?

I think the story is a clue to the way God works. He is not a passive gift-giver, like a rich father spoiling his children. He wants his children to act and be poised with desire to bring about the kingdom.

There is a balance between our action and God's action. We don't earn salvation by our actions, but neither do we sit passively while God does all the work. Jesus' words here are critical; he wants the disciples to do something. The disciples will, in fact, feed the multitude but first they must rely on Jesus to provide the meal. Jesus multiplies the loaves and fish, but it is the disciples who bring the food to the people. We must do the same in our own lives, acknowledge our inability to accomplish the task he sets before us and allow him to provide what we need. What our action in prayer does is express the desire that God act — opening, as it were, the door to God's desire to work abundantly in our lives. So, if Jesus gives you a task that is far beyond your ability, don't worry, just confess your inability and stand by and wait on Him. He will provide what you need. Then jump to action and do the work.

NOT IN THIS HOUSE

PHYSICAL

Try a vegan diet. A vegetarian diet excludes animal products. A vegan diet excludes animal and animal-derived products. This means no eggs, dairy, honey, cheese, or milk. So, in that sense, being vegan seems like a very strict diet in our meat-heavy food culture, but it is said to have even more positive benefits than a vegetarian diet! As with a vegetarian diet, trying out a vegan diet doesn't mean doing it permanently if you're not ready for it — simply experiment, try it for a few weeks, or just go vegan for two days a week. Do note that if you're 100% vegan, there are certain vitamins and minerals that you should watch out on, specifically vitamin B12 and omega 3 (DHA/EPA). These can be easily added by eating the right foods and/or supplements

MENTAL

He has married many women but has never been married. Who is he?

SPIRITUAL

In the temple [Jesus] found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace! - John 2:14-16

Imagine, if you can, what our use of money might look like if there were no sin. We would use money for the sake of trade and to encourage creative work that serves the common good. We would not see harmful risk-taking of the sort that we find in, say, casinos, Ponzi schemes or other fraudulent or criminal behavior.

Many read Jesus' action in the temple as a criticism of the way the money changers were profaning a sacred space. But there is another way to understand this account. Really, the entire world is God's house, and the abuse and misuse of money is a sin. In this respect, money is no different from any other of the tools people use. Jesus' criticism points to the ways that people tend to act differently in the sacred space (the temple), which ought to mirror life in God's kingdom. Many are tempted to use money not for the sake of building the kingdom, but to become (in the words of Saint Augustine) "turned inward onto themselves." Our sinful attitude toward money prevents us from seeing the great good that Christ is trying to work in us.

SEEING JESUS IN A NEW WAY

PHYSICAL

Supplement your diet as needed. Even when we eat healthily, there will be times when we lack certain vitamins/minerals because many man-made processes have permanently altered our food. Common nutrient deficiencies are iron, vitamin B12, vitamin D, calcium, and magnesium.

MENTAL

What do you throw out when you want to use it but take in when you don't want to use it?

SPIRITUAL

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. - Matthew 17:1-2

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus taking Peter and some other disciples aside to share with them more intimate moments, teaching them things he does not share with the many others who are curious to see what he is about. Jesus is like all of us: we don't usually broadcast the details of our lives to everyone, and even when we do – as on social media or reality TV shows – the sheer volume of information makes it unlikely that most people will really care.

In the story of the Transfiguration, we see Jesus with his closest friends, his inner circle – the men whom he relied on most. This is not the public Jesus: the charismatic rabbi, the healer, the wonder worker. Jesus' public face is real, but Jesus the intimate friend is more than the sum of his public words and actions. What Peter, James, and John see is Jesus up close, real, and personal, and they are awestruck.

Peter is stunned to have this kind of intimate knowledge of Jesus. By knowing Jesus, he begins to know God face-to-face, and he is forever changed. We are tempted to believe sometimes that religion or spirituality is about ideas, abstractions, words, texts, principles, moral teachings, beliefs, doctrines, or philosophical systems. But here the Gospel tells a basic truth: our faith is about coming to know a person. Faith involves being invited into intimacy with Jesus. We need ideas, belief systems, and the rest, but in the end, we must simply allow Jesus to reveal himself to us, allow his heart to speak to our heart, so that we, too, might behold his glory and be transformed.

TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

PHYSICAL

Get out more often. If you have a 9-5 job, chances are you spend much of your time holed up in the office and not a lot of time going out and having fun. During weekends, you're probably busy with work or running errands. Make a point to go out with your friends at least once a week. Get some sun. Go out and have a change of environment. It'll be great for your body and soul.

MENTAL

I can be short and sometimes hot. When displayed, I rarely impress. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" - Matthew 21:6-9

One day, crowds gather and welcome a celebrity into their midst. Another day, they watch him get tortured and killed. What is going on here?

Jesus is completely unconcerned with the adulation of the crowds, in this situation and others. Like any modern story of the celebrity who is lionized one day and vilified the next, this one points to the unreliability of public opinion as a barometer of divine favor. The "voice of the people" may sometimes be the voice of God, but usually it is not.

We who have fragile egos so often act according to what we perceive to be the voice of the people. It is very difficult to hold truths that are frowned upon by those around us, especially difficult moral or political issues that are constantly in the news. Jesus' example here shows us that the right action is never based on looking around us at what others think; it is always about obeying God's commands. And following God's commands – as Jesus did – may lead us into conflict.

We practice discernment of God's commands by remaining close to Christ and Christ's Body, the church. In doing so, we place ourselves with the poor, the suffering, the forgotten, the abused, and the hated: God's beloved creatures whom others have forgotten. Seeing Jesus in those people, we ask three simple questions: what have I done for Jesus? What am I doing for Jesus? What will I do for Jesus?

FOOT WASHING

PHYSICAL

Practice good dental hygiene. Good dental hygiene will make you feel better, and it is linked to better health. Brush your teeth twice a day, rinse your mouth after each meal, and floss after each meal if possible.

MENTAL

What can be driven although it doesn't have wheels, sliced but stays whole?

SPIRITUAL

[Jesus] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him....After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." - John 13:3-5, 12-15

John's account of the foot washing – unique among the Gospels – is one of the clearest directions about how to be a follower of Jesus. It is hard to miss the symbolism here: washing others' feet means being in a humble position of service.

Even though Jesus commanded that his disciples follow His example and wash one another's feet, it is an experience that most modern disciples rarely experience, if ever. Historically, the church would perform foot washing on Holy Thursday when the Pope and royalty would humble themselves and wash the feet of the poor. If done sincerely, from the heart, this can be a powerful reminder of Jesus' teaching that in the Kingdom of God the "last will be first and the first will be last." (Matthew 19:30)

Jesus' action was performed among the twelve he had chosen to be his closest associates – those who would carry his mission to the rest of the world. Yet it took place on the eve of his most public humiliation, his arrest and crucifixion. There is a "missionary" dimension to Jesus' foot washing, a kind of alter-baptism. He washes the feet of those he is sending out into the world to continue the work he has begun, preaching the good news of God's love, manifest in Jesus' own willingness to suffer death for the sake of the world's salvation. Will you join in that mission? Will you let Jesus wash your feet? And will you wash the feet of others?

LAST SUPPER

PHYSICAL

Hang out with healthy people. You're the average of the 5 people you spend the most time with, so the more time you spend around healthy people, the better. Dine with people who are health conscious and get workout buddies. It makes healthy living more fun!

MENTAL

What is unusual about the following words: revive, banana, grammar, voodoo, assess, potato, dresser, uneven?

SPIRITUAL

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. - 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

There is a note of urgency in Paul's account of the Last Supper, echoing so much of his other writings: we must tell this story. We must gather together to share the bread and the cup so that others may know of Christ's death and what it means.

Yet at the beginning, the disciples were unsure of what Jesus meant when he first introduced this practice. Imagine their incredulity at Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Surely the disciples would have recognized his reference to the old covenant, each doorframe of Israel sealed by the blood of the lambs that were sacrificed on that first Passover in Egypt. But what exactly did he mean? Imagine the disciples, filled with fear, huddling in the upper room after Jesus' death. The earliest Christians were confused men and women trying to figure out what exactly Jesus meant. Only later, after his resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, did the full meaning of Jesus' teaching become clear.

It is good to remember this pattern in our own lives. Living in faith is not living always in certainty; more often it is living in trust that whatever suffering we undertake out of love for following Jesus will become clear to us eventually.

AGONY IN THE GARDEN

PHYSICAL

If you'd like to get into better shape, it's important to begin by developing the right attitude. The mind may not be a muscle, but it will make the difference between succeeding and failing at your goal. Being fit is a marathon, not a sprint, and it requires making changes to your entire lifestyle. Don't give up when you don't attain your goals right away. Don't approach this with the mindset that you can abandon the changes you've made as soon as you reach your fitness goal, or you will slip into your bad habits again. Being fit means incorporating things into your life that you can eventually do by habit.

MENTAL

I have a large money box, 10 inches wide and 5 inches tall. Roughly how many coins can I place in my money box until it is no longer empty?

SPIRITUAL

[Jesus] withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief. – Luke 22:41-45

For each of us, there comes a time when the certainties that have guided us in the past are unable to sustain us during crisis. What is remarkable about the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is their inclusion of such a time in the life of Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is fully aware of the mission the Father has entrusted to him: he heals the blind and the lame; he preaches the coming of the kingdom; he raises the dead to life; he predicts his own death. Yet in the garden, Jesus finds himself plunged into grief – a swelling, overwhelming fear that floods his rational decision to obey his Father's will. He knows that there is resurrection from the dead; he knows that he is held in the loving embrace of the Father, even unto death; and yet he feels terrified.

What the perfectly human Jesus shows us is that such an experience of being overwhelmed is not antithetical to the life of faith; it can happen even in the climactic unfolding of it. This is good news, even though it is difficult good news – for we, too, who live by faith, will face times of terror and uncertainty. The temptation that Jesus faces is very real: will he love to the very end? We know how his story ends, what about yours?

ARREST

PHYSICAL

Keep track of your progress and be proud of minor improvements. It is a good idea to start a 'fit journal' so that you can keep track of when you work out, what you do, and for how long. You can also log what you eat each day. You may find that when you have to write down whether you snacked or not you may be less inclined to snack. Don't think that just because you have one setback, you may as well scrap it all and give up for the day. Don't be discouraged if you stop losing weight or stop gaining muscle; remember that plateaus are normal but overall, you've put yourself on an upward trajectory and that's definitely something to be proud of.

MENTAL

A man builds a house rectangular in shape. All the sides have southern exposure. A big bear walks by. What color is the bear?

SPIRITUAL

"Immediately, while [Jesus] was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him." - Mark 14:43-46

The follower of Christ will, if he or she remains faithful, face suffering. The reason is simple: people are prone to sin. Jesus preached the kingdom; he showed merciful, compassionate love to those on the margins of society; he challenged the religious and political leaders of the time, and they wanted to kill him. The sad story of Judas offers us a window into the effect of sin.

Here is a man who knew Jesus intimately, and who – whether out of ignorance or malice, it is impossible to say – chose to act against him. Perhaps he was simply an impatient pawn who hoped to move Jesus into political activism. Perhaps he wanted a stronger demonstration of Jesus' power by forcing him to face off against Rome. Perhaps he believed Jesus was a fake. In any case, Judas' sin leads directly to Jesus' arrest. The Son of God is thrown into prison.

What is astounding is that Jesus offers almost no defense. Why does he not call Herod or Pontius Pilate on their injustices? Why does he not use the opportunity to stand before the Sanhedrin to denounce their perversion of justice? Why does he go quietly? What is he trying to avoid? And where is God the Father in all this?

TRIAL

PHYSICAL

Create a reward system with yourself. Set a goal and then decide upon a reward. Pick an item that you really want or something that you really want to do. For instance, make a contract with yourself that states that if you go on a run for 30 minutes every day you can buy a new shirt or the golf clubs you have had your eye on for weeks now.

MENTAL

What runs all around a backyard, yet never moves?

SPIRITUAL

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. – (Mark 15:1-5)

The scene of Jesus' trial is in stark contrast to the earlier scene of his agony in the garden. Here, Jesus appears resigned, even indifferent: there is none of the terror he showed earlier. Paradoxically, we see no reference to the Father, whose apparent absence from the scene is striking. Why does it seem to us that in our times of great need God can be deafeningly silent?

In his meditation on suffering, St. John of the Cross described the necessity of the “dark night of the soul,” the feeling of God’s absence:

It is fitting that, if the understanding is to be united with that light and become Divine in the state of perfection, it should first of all be purged and annihilated as to its natural light, and, by means of this dark contemplation, be brought actually into darkness. This darkness should continue for as long as is needful in order to expel and annihilate the habit which the soul has long since formed in its manner of understanding, and the Divine light and illumination will then take its place. (Dark Night of the Soul, IX.3)

What Jesus shows in his experience of trial is readiness to do what he knows the Father has asked of him, even to go to a painful death. Jesus' act of faith, completely trusting the Father even when he seems absent, is our model and consolation as we follow Him.

RESOLVE

PHYSICAL

Get someone else to get fit with you. It is much easier to reach your goals when you have someone to share the pain and the gain. Create a schedule that you can both commit to, and keep each other on track. You could even get a group of people in on the 'get fit' schedule. Have a friendly competition and congratulate the winner each week.

MENTAL

What goes through cities and fields, but never moves?

SPIRITUAL

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced; therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. – Isaiah 50:5-8

Viktor Frankl, the famous psychiatrist, and concentration-camp survivor, observed in his important book *Man's Search for Meaning* that only those who had a reason to persevere in the horrific experience of the camps survived; those who lost hope quickly died. Quoting Nietzsche, he believed that "those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how.'" For Frankl, sacrifice is tolerable when it is meaningful.

The Evangelists portray Jesus as facing his suffering with resolve, not ignoring its reality, but choosing to enter it with his "face like flint." All four use the language of Psalm 22, described as "a poem of the person abandoned by God" or "a prayer of an innocent person." Jesus is faithful to his death.

Recalling the way Jesus approached his death, Paul would later write of how he himself thought nothing of the sufferings he faced.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 8:38-39

Following the examples of Jesus and Paul, may we live in fidelity to our God who loves us, with perfect readiness to go where he calls us, unafraid of the consequences.

CROWNING WITH THORNS

PHYSICAL

Incorporate more physical exercise into your daily routine. Consistent daily exercise is very important and forgoing a few conveniences can increase your activity level. Try parking several blocks away from your office building to force yourself into two 15-minute walks every day. When you go shopping, park at the end of the lot instead of wrangling for a spot near the front door. Walk the dog more often—both your body and your pup will thank you. Exercise at the office. Believe it or not, it's completely possible to make sitting at your computer into a calorie-burning activity. You can stretch and workout your muscles by doing leg lifts, oblique reaches, and lower back reaches, among others. Take a short break and stand or walk for 5 minutes and then get back to work.

MENTAL

What is made of water but if you put it into water it will die?

SPIRITUAL

The soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. – Matthew 27:27-30

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Atop many crucifixes is the acronym INRI, which stands for Isus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum, or "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." The soldiers put this sign above Jesus' head on the cross in a mocking description of his crime. The crowning with thorns is yet one more painful reminder that the Romans considered Jesus a funny little backwater preacher. They ridiculed Jesus and the entire community – peasant Jews – that he came from.

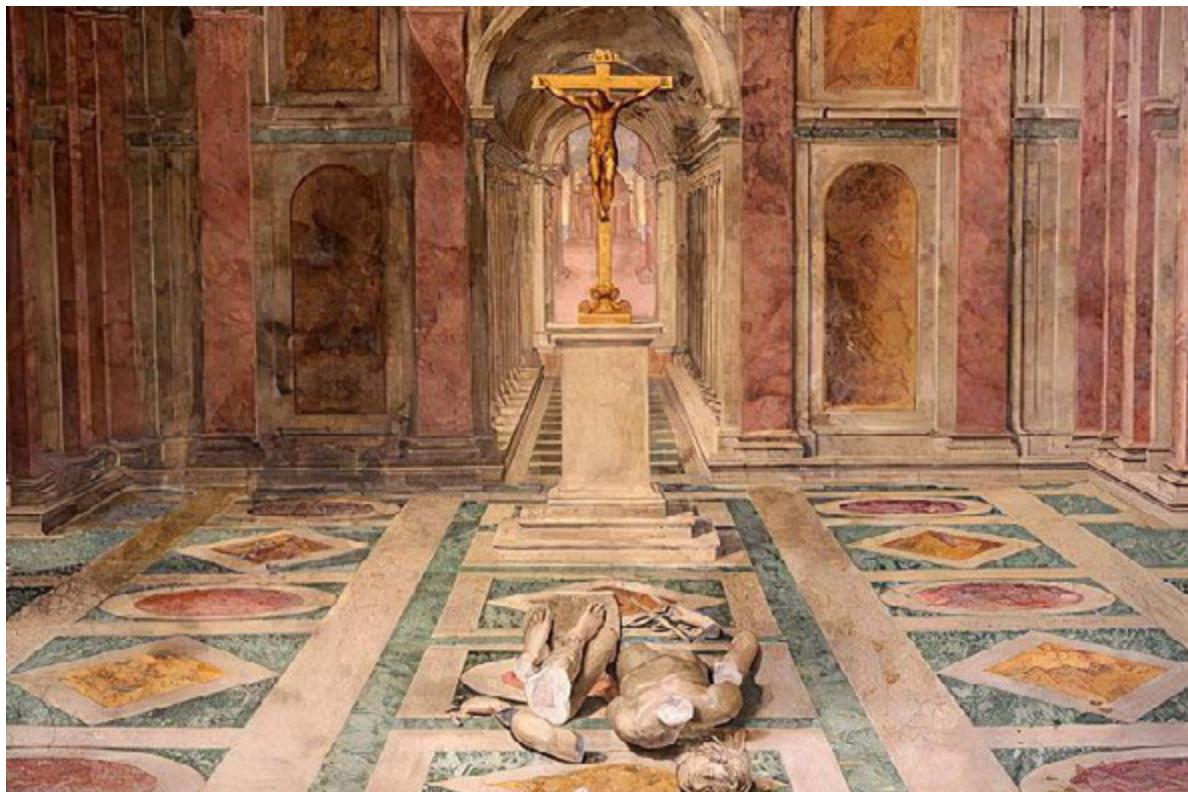
It is no surprise that, centuries later, Christian iconography exalted the image of Christus victor, Christ triumphant. Perhaps the most striking portrayal of this image is that by Tommaso Laureti, a painting completed in 1585 and called Il Trionfo della Christianity (The Triumph of Christianity), which portrays Christ's cross in a room where the statue of a Roman god lies broken on the ground. The conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine signaled a sea change in the public perception of the church, from persecuted sect to official religion of the Empire. "Take that, Roman imperialists!" one can almost hear Christians say as they come out of hiding.

DAY 28

CONT.

It is a temptation to substitute the triumph of the church for the triumph of Christ. The crowning with thorns is a difficult reminder that what Christ himself experienced was a triumph over his own fear of death at Gethsemane and a complete willingness to be killed as a result of preaching the gospel. Jesus showed no interest in politically motivated "community organizing," no taste for overthrowing the resident oppressors, no tolerance for those even in his inner circle who wanted to establish a new political order in Jerusalem or beyond. His triumph was then and is now a paradoxical one, signaled not by anything resembling victory in the usual senses. His crown was not the laurel leaf but the thorn.

What are the ways in which my willingness to follow Christ leads me to crowns of thorns, instead of political victories? Will I witness to my faith even when I know it will be unpopular?



Il Trionfo della Christianità (The Triumph of Christianity) by Tommaso Laureti

WAY OF THE CROSS

PHYSICAL

Start an exercise regimen and stick to it. A proper fitness program has five components: a warm-up, an aerobic workout, strength-building exercises, stretching (flexibility), and a cool-down.

MENTAL

A family has two parents and six sons. Each of the sons has one sister. How many people are in the family?

SPIRITUAL

A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" - Luke 23:27-31

The women in this moving scene are able to see what is happening with a clarity that eludes both Jesus' disciples and the soldiers. The disciples have vanished; fearing that they may suffer the same fate. And the soldiers are just doing their jobs, hardened and jaded by their grisly work.

The women see, as it were, the emperor's new clothes. They see an innocent man made to suffer and die, and they are horrified. They see that he has been abandoned by his friends because they are afraid. And they wail because they know that there is something profoundly wrong in the order of things. Where is God in all this?

Jesus responds by saying that things are going to get worse, and that those who put their trust in the things of the world – symbolized by the hopefulness of childbirth – will face trouble. This points to a foundation of Jesus' teaching: the world and everything in it belongs to God. It hangs by a thread from the hand of God, and it is thus the greatest arrogance on our part to imagine that it exists to serve us.

We have, then, a paradox: the world is a place where evil resides, but it is also the place where God accomplishes salvation. Out of this coexistence of evil and grace is born the gospel, the good news of God's power to redeem and transform.

CRUCIFIXION

PHYSICAL

A good warm-up is a steady walk outside or on the treadmill, a slow pedal on a stationary bike, or a few rounds on the stair master. You want to exercise just enough to get your blood flowing and put your joints through their full range of motion so that your muscles warm up. Exercising without a warm-up could lead to pulling or straining a muscle.

MENTAL

What can't talk but will reply when spoken to?

SPIRITUAL

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him...One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." ...Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. – Luke 23:32, 39-43, 46

The gospel writers offer three different accounts of Jesus' last words. In the accounts from Matthew and Mark, Jesus cries out the words of Psalm 22:1 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" John has Jesus saying simply, "It is finished," referring to the ministry the Father had entrusted to him.

Luke's version here paints a slightly different portrait. Jesus expresses anguish similar to that described in Mark and Matthew, but also a trust in the loving hands of the Father. His suffering is real; perhaps, too, is his doubt about whether he has accomplished what the Father asked of him. "Into your hands I commend my spirit," he says. Take who I am; take what I have done; accept me into your loving arms, for I have nothing left to give.

Like a small child reaching up to a parent and saying, "hold me" so Jesus reaches out to his Father and turns himself over. What's more, he speaks this on behalf of the repentant criminal, promising him that in death he will know paradise.

Can I face the reality of my own death – however near or far – with this same hope and trust? Can I face my sufferings and those around me with the honesty that Jesus showed?

AN EMPTY TOMB

PHYSICAL

Cardio workouts improve circulation and endurance. This could include going on a run, biking at a high resistance, or doing an increased speed on a stair machine. You want to work up a sweat and get your blood pumping. Good cardiovascular health is not only good for heart health and blood pressure, it's even been linked to a decreased risk of Alzheimer's Disease. Doing interval training (i.e. alternating between low-intensity and high-intensity activity) has been shown to be an especially fast and effective way to improve heart health and endurance, and an efficient way to burn fat.

MENTAL

What can you keep after giving to someone?

SPIRITUAL

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. – Mark 16:1-8

Marks' Gospel ends on a perplexing note. The two Marys and Salome are bewildered; they don't know what has happened or what will happen. They receive this strange message from a mysterious man, presumably an angel, and they run away in fear.

Sometimes the in-breaking of hope is similar for us. It may come upon us in the least expected way. It may already be alive in us now in ways that will become clear to us only later. Often God's work in our midst is alarming and we may want to run away in fear. Perhaps our own experiences of death are part of the way in which God is working to bring about his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

RECOGNIZING JESUS

PHYSICAL

Building muscle through strength-training will not only increase your strength and tone, but will also increase your metabolism, as muscular people have been shown to burn more calories even when they're at rest. You could work with weights, do squats, push-ups, or crunches, among many other exercises. If going to the gym isn't for you, try strength-training at home.

MENTAL

The more of this there is, the less you see. What is it?

SPIRITUAL

"Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (Which means Teacher). – John 20:11-16

In this scene from John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene has just returned to Jesus' tomb after telling Peter and John that it was empty. The two men sprint to the tomb and make a fuss before deciding that SOMETHING MUST BE DONE. By contrast, all Mary can do is sit, wait, and weep.

Jesus cannot reveal himself to the busy men, they won't stay put long enough. It seems that he can only reveal himself to the one who sits still and remains present in grief. She herself is too saddened to see what has happened. Only Jesus can open her eyes and turn her sorrows into rejoicing. Not long before his death, Jesus had promised his disciples: "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy...So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." (John 16:20, 22)

Now, Mary's heart is lifted. She cannot know what it will mean, but for this moment it is enough to be with her beloved teacher once again. And her fear is gone.

DO NOT BE AFRAID

PHYSICAL

Stretching during or after a workout increases your flexibility. It can also relieve muscle and joint stiffness. Stretch your legs, arms, back - any muscles that you used while working out (which should generally be all of them.)

MENTAL

What is black when it's clean and white when it's dirty?

SPIRITUAL

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." - Matthew 28:1-10

Twice in this short text we see the words Do not be afraid – once from the angel and once from the mouth of Jesus. We also see two different reactions: the soldiers are petrified, while the women receive the words of the angel, who gives them the mission to comfort the brothers of Jesus.

Fear is the proper reaction to that which we cannot understand. We cope with this fear by carving up our world into small parcels that our minds can grasp. Whatever cannot fit into our conceptualization of the world is frightening to us.

Jesus' greeting to the two Marys, though, evokes a different kind of fear – a fear that coexists with "great joy." It is the fear of the person who has fallen deeply in love, afraid only that his or her joy cannot possibly last. This fear-in-joy overtakes them in the midst of grief, and surprises them with its spontaneous power. The one whom they love, and thought was dead, is alive. But if Christ lives, of what then should they be afraid?

ROAD TO EMMAUS

PHYSICAL

A cool-down is very similar to a warm-up. You should perform some sort of cardio exercise at a very low level. Cooling down allows your muscles to relax while the blood is still flowing through them at a slightly increased rate.

MENTAL

What has many keys but can't open a single lock?

SPIRITUAL

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" - Luke 24:28-32

Two disciples are on the road to Emmaus when the resurrected Jesus approached them and began a discussion with them. We are told that they were “prevented” from recognizing him, but as they walked and talked there was something very familiar about him. They felt like they should know him, but they just couldn’t put their finger on it. They convinced him to join them for dinner, and as Jesus prayed a blessing over the bread, broke it and gave it to them – then their eyes were opened. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus instituted the sacrament. And it was the power of the sacrament, those familiar words of Jesus, finally jolted their brains into recognition. The disciples’ rhetorical question at the end of this story, “Were not our hearts burning within us?” is a commentary on the whole of the spiritual life. During most of their encounter with Jesus, the disciples did not know it was him until that blinding moment of epiphany when their eyes were finally opened and they were able to recognize him. Our lives are like that: we go from one experience to the other unaware of Jesus’ presence with us, until we finally experience a moment of crystal clarity when we are able to recognize his presence, and everything make sense. The key to this experience is first an ongoing familiarization and relationship with Jesus, then an awareness of how our own hearts are burning within us, the recognition of a certain familiarity about his presence. And finally, as we approach the sacrament and hear those familiar words of Jesus, our eyes are opened.

VISITING THE DISCIPLES

PHYSICAL

Switch things up. Any physical activity that takes a bit of effort will help you get fit, but it's important to remember that variety is the spice of life—and of physical fitness! More importantly, as your body gets comfortable performing a certain activity, it learns to do it more efficiently, making it easy for you to plateau in your workouts. Keep both your body and your mind guessing by enjoying a diversity of activities and having fun.

MENTAL

If you drop me, I'm sure to crack, but give me a smile and I'll always smile back. What am I?

SPIRITUAL

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." - John 20:19-23

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It is telling that with Jesus' first words to the remaining eleven of his brothers he gives them a mission: "Just as the Father sent me into the world, so I am sending you into the world." And in a move reminiscent of Jesus' own baptism in the Jordan River, when the Father sent the Holy Spirit to descend from heaven upon Jesus, Jesus sends them the Holy Spirit to help them do what God alone can do: forgive sins.

Today we have all but lost what forgiveness of sins really means, and why it is only when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit upon the disciples that they can do it. We usually assume it means making up with someone, similar to the way we teach children to behave when they are learning to play with other children.

But there is something much more radical going on here. Recall that Jesus' forgiveness of sins gets him into trouble with the religious leaders of the day, who accuse him of blasphemy. Consider, too, his words to the adulterous woman: instead of accusing her, he simply says, "Don't sin again." Implicitly he is saying "You have sinned." Today, such words would be completely unacceptable to many people. Our latter-day thought leaders are effectively saying that this kind of accusation is blasphemous: "Who are you to criticize

DAY 35

CONT.

someone else's choices?" Our contemporary fascination with the "victim complex" masks a very subtle desire to have power over others. If we show they have wronged us, we can then claim a moral high ground and condemn their sins. It is a demonic reversal of righteousness.

The difference between Jesus and those who want to stone the woman is polar opposite. Jesus gives the disciples the mission to do what the Father sent him to do; to name sins and to forgive them. There is a danger here: forgiveness requires a kind of moral high ground, and our human tendency is to want to use it to bludgeon others into seeing things our way – to condemn others, just like the religious leaders of Jesus' day. It is absolutely necessary that they receive the Holy Spirit, because as ordinary men they simply could have no moral authority to forgive.

Jesus' command is radically different. He is calling his disciples to be agents of the kingdom, to forgive sins in God's name. They are not to occupy a moral high ground for the sake of condemnation. Instead, they are to go where Jesus went – the cross – and utter his words; "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." The disciple's aim is not to be politically correct, but to continue Jesus' work by releasing sinners from the prison and condemnation of sin.

DOUBTING THOMAS

PHYSICAL

A Regular Fast -Traditionally, a regular fast means refraining from eating all food. Most people still drink water or juice during a regular fast. When Jesus fasted in the desert, the Bible says, "After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." This verse does not mention Jesus being thirsty.

MENTAL

A boy is walking down the road with a doctor. While the boy is the doctor's son, the doctor isn't the boy's father. Then who is the doctor?

SPIRITUAL

Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." - John 20:24-29

Thomas is wary of an abstract idea about the Jesus whom he loved; he is cautious even about trusting the words of his fellow disciples - men with whom he had traveled for many months as followers of Jesus. He wants to personally encounter the living Jesus.

For many of us – especially in the digital age, when so much information passes through our consciousness on a daily basis – religion can become an abstraction. We can be wary of those who profess it, even our own family and friends. We can be like Thomas, not wanting to put our trust in an abstraction but still wanting to know God firsthand. We want the comfort of knowing that life means something and that there is hope beyond suffering.

Thomas is blessed: Jesus meets him, and he is able to physically reach out and touch his wounds. The promise of the resurrection is different for us. We do not have the luxury of a physical encounter with Jesus, we must accept the witness of others and receive him by faith. But we do not have to settle for abstraction, Jesus can be as real as the touch of another human being to whom we reach out in love.

COME EAT BREAKFAST

PHYSICAL

A Partial Fast -This type of fast generally refers to omitting a specific meal from your diet or refraining from certain types of foods. Daniel 10:2-3 says, "At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over." In Daniel 1:12, they restricted their diet to vegetables and water: "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink."

MENTAL

What can you hold without ever touching, or using your hands?

SPIRITUAL

Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So, they cast it, and now they were able to haul it in because there were so many fish...When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So, Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." - John 21:3-6, 9-12

This story of Jesus' appearance is something of a parable. The disciples work hard yet they yield nothing – similar to our own efforts to make the world better. It is only when they receive the words of Jesus that their efforts bear fruit. To their credit, at least they were doing something, but it was pointless without the guidance of Jesus.

Life after the resurrection consists of a balance between action and fellowship. This beautiful story of fellowship between the disciples and Jesus would not have been possible had Peter not decided to get out and do something. But just like before Jesus called them to follow him, their efforts came up empty, yet when they followed his instructions there was abundance. Jesus reinforces this lesson one last time, and then he invites them to fellowship. Like the disciples, we should be active but always prepared to receive his direction, because our actions will never bear fruit unless the Lord directs us.

FAITH AND WORKS

PHYSICAL

A Full Fast -These fasts are complete - no food and no drink. Acts 9:9 describes when Paul went on a full fast for three days following his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus: "For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything." Esther also called for this type of fast in Esther 4:15-16: "Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 'Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.'" It is recommended that this type of fast be done with extreme caution and not for extended periods of time.

MENTAL

When you have me you immediately want to share me. But if you do share me, you no longer have me.

SPIRITUAL

What good it is, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and none of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. – James 2:14-17

Inflamed by apostolic zeal after his experience of the risen Christ, James exhorts his followers in Jerusalem to spread the light of faith. He names the mechanism or method by which this faith is to be spread - works.

The gift of faith is oriented toward a deepening relationship with God through the imitation of Christ. It means drawing close to God's dream of what the world should be like, rooted in relationships of love and compassion and organized for the benefit of all.

There is a basic logic here. When you fall in love with someone, you can't just quietly enjoy the new relationship privately. You necessarily want to enter that person's life, to go where the other goes and know the people he or she knows. You want to help that person and work with him or her. So, too, with God: falling in love with Christ means wanting to go where he is, in the faces of the poor and hungry, the tired and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned. You want to help him build a world in which God's perfect love for each person is matched and manifested in people's love for one another. To use James's language, you not only want the interior knowledge of faith; you also want to use that knowledge as a blueprint for building a better world through good works.

VINE AND BRANCHES

PHYSICAL

A Sexual Fast -1 Corinthians 7:3-6 says, "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."

MENTAL

What has a mouth but cannot eat, what moves but has no legs, and what has a bank but cannot put money in?

SPIRITUAL

[Jesus said,] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. - John 15:1-5

It may well be that one person can change the world, but only if that person draws many others to the same cause. Ultimately, only communities can change the world, and Jesus tells his disciples that the church – the community of faith in Jesus Christ, giving witness to the Father's love – will bear great fruit in the world.

Our cultural exaltation of the individual often seems without limit, evincing a deep suspicion that good sought by communities crush individual liberty and enterprise. To be sure, participation in a community is always fraught with such danger; to the extend that I pursue that collective good, I necessarily sacrifice some of my autonomy.

Jesus' teaching, then, is risky, but it is clear: the Father will prune dead branches in the church. Moreover, he will prune even healthy branches so that they will bear more fruit.

Dante's Divine Comedy illustrates a landscape of the afterlife in which people live out the consequences of their desires. Those whose desires are, in Augustine's words, "curved in on themselves" lose the vision of heaven, which should be their compass point. Alternately, those who let go of self-centered desires in order to pursue greater goods- those who still, in Jesus' words, "abide in the vine" – are filled with the delights of beholding the great good that God has wrought in their lives and the life of the church as a whole.

GOD IS LOVE

PHYSICAL

The Daniel Fast is a method of spiritual fasting based on the prophet Daniel's experience fasting according to the book of Daniel in the Bible. There are two passages in specific that the Daniel Fast is based on: "Please test your servants for ten days and let them give us vegetables [pulses] to eat and water to drink." Daniel 1:12 "In those days I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled." (Daniel 10: 2-3) From this experience Daniel was said to gain knowledge, wisdom, spiritual understanding, favor, and even better appearance (Daniel 1:15-20) in addition to answered prayer and spiritual insight (Daniel 10: 11-12). So the idea behind the fast is that you would set aside other foods and focus on eating plant-based meals as an act of worship and sacrifice.

MENTAL

What has one eye but cannot see?

SPIRITUAL

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear: for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars: for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.
– 1 John 4:16-21

"Perfect love casts out fear" – John is right. Those on a mission accept that there will be highs and lows, what is important when one is on a mission is to keep going until it is completed, mindful that God's grace sustains us along the way. Choosing to follow Jesus does not guarantee happiness the way people often imagine it. Rather, it guarantees love – both God's love for us and our love for others. Happiness will often be a by-product of love; the way good feelings are the by-product of exercise. But we do not exercise only for good feelings, and we do not follow Jesus only for happiness. We set our eyes on the goal and pursue it with great resolve; for in the end, love is the only good worth seeking in this life or the next.

Sources

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Mental Exercises:

<https://parade.com/1025639/marynliles/brain-teasers/>

Spiritual Exercises:

Adapted from “The Ignatian Workout for Lent” by Tim Muldoon

Notes