

MARCH 18, 2018

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# 40 DAYS OF FAITH

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EXCLUSION-FREE LIFE



river

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*As a way to reflect on the week's theme, Exclusion-free Life', I have included the stories that the kids at the River are reading in this 40 Days Daily Guide.*

*The stories are part of the series, 'Upside-Down Love of Jesus', where Jesus puts the people's understanding of the world and faith upside down. Jesus' way is upside-down from the world's perspective because it is so radically generous and exclusion-free.*

*The stories are from the Bible, but I have edited and paraphrased them for children. Each story will include the link to the original text for your reference.*

*Warmly,  
Caroline*

## **Monday, March 19**

### **The Strong and The Weak** ([John 1:1-18](#), [Luke 1:35](#), [2:7](#))

In the very beginning, Jesus was there. Jesus was with God and Jesus was God.

He existed in the beginning with God.

God created everything through Jesus; the universe, the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Jesus gave Life to everything that was created; to trees, animals, birds, and people.

Jesus' Life brought Light to everyone.

Jesus made everything in the world possible and was over everything.

Jesus was with God and was ONE with God.

But to show us His Upside-Down Love, Jesus came into our world. Jesus became human and made His home among us. He was born to a young woman, Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit. When He was born, she wrapped him in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them.

He came into the very world He created as one of us and the world did not recognize Him. They did not understand the Upside-Down Love of God. He became small to show us how big His love for us is. He became weak and His love became stronger to reach us. Jesus was filled with

never-failing and never-ending love for all. He gave Life and Light to whoever turned toward Him. No one has seen God, but Jesus, who is Himself God, has revealed God to us.

## Points of Interest

- The passage from the book of John describes Jesus as being before the world began. Christ was there when God created the world. He was an essential part of the creation process. He gave life to everything created. He holds the world together. And through Him, everything in the world is connected. Everything belongs. Nothing is excluded.
- In an act of complete and radical inclusion, Jesus, who holds everything together and is one with God, chooses to become one of us. Inclusion is not just about opening the gates and letting others in. It is also about letting go of privilege and entering into others' world.
- The powerful Creator of the universe came to us as a helpless and vulnerable human baby so he can love us, so he can fully include us. What is so amazing about this (and easy to forget) is that when he became small and weak, his love became more real and stronger to us. What does this mean for us as we try to love others as ourselves? Are there ways for us to become smaller so we can love and include others radically?
- We often forget how radical Jesus was. It is easy to read of Jesus' love and kindness toward people and think that he was 'nice'. But he was way more than that. As the Franciscans say, Jesus did not come to change God's mind about people, He came to change our minds about God. Our ways of understanding the world are so deeply flawed and ingrained in us that anything short of God Himself coming as one of us can't break us out of them.

## Prayer

Everything is created through Jesus. Jesus gives life to everything and everyone. That means we all are included. We all belong. Everything in us belongs. The impulse to exclude starts within us. We categorize our own traits, personalities, strengths and weaknesses into good and bad and try to eject the bad from within us. How do you feel about all of you belonging to God? Talk to God about it.

This week, as a way of fasting from exclusion, let's embrace all of who we are. Let's pray together, 'God is in me and I am in God. All of me belongs as does all of creation.'

## Tuesday, March 20

### The Rich and the Poor (Mark 12:41-44)

Jesus often explained God's Upside-Down Love to His friends with stories, but they had hard time understanding because it was upside-down from how people thought about it.

One time He was sitting down near the collection box in the Temple. People came and dropped their money in the box. The money was used to fix anything broken in the Temple, to buy supplies, and to support those who worked at the Temple.

As Jesus watched, many rich people put a lot of money into the collection box. Then a poor woman came and dropped in two coins.

Jesus called His followers to Him and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor woman has given more than all the others who gave money." His friends were surprised because that was upside-down from what they thought. Jesus continued, "It may look like the rich people gave a lot, but they gave a tiny part of what they don't need. But this woman, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on."

God blesses those who are poor and need God. The Kingdom of Heaven is theirs (Matthew 5:3). So, the poor are rich and the rich are poor in God . . . so upside-down!

### Points of Interest

- In Jesus' time, people believed that the rich were rich because God blessed them. God blessed them so there must have been a reason, they must be better people, more godly people. This puts the poor on the other side of this spectrum: the poor are poor because of their own behaviors and sinfulness. So the poor were considered far from God, disfavored by God. This is why people were so surprised when Jesus said, in Mark 10:25, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They thought if it was that hard for the rich, how would anyone else get saved?

- This might sound like arcane belief, but our society still maintains this mentality in practice all the time. We respect those who have money and influence. We listen intently to those who are successful and consciously or subconsciously believe that they have valuable wisdom to offer. We trust those with means and distrust those without.
- Jesus puts that upside down. The looks can be deceptive. You would think more donation means more devotion, but no, look deeper and completely opposite dynamic is going on. Two coins from the poor widow is a much bigger sacrifice of love than more money from the rich. Poverty doesn't necessarily mean righteousness, but neither does wealth. In fact, we can be so easily deceived by wealth.
- The poor have the unique access to God's heart. Being in the position of lack seems to have a way of opening up our souls to see more of others' struggles. They are at a place where they can understand God's heart of grace and love. They are more ready to receive what is offered by Jesus. Hence the verse from the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Those who understand what it means to be poor and needy (financially, emotionally, spiritually, or otherwise), they are rich in heaven.
- My teenage daughter was quick to point out to me that this story could be used to get people to give more, but that's not what Jesus is about. She went on to say that the story must be about something else. I agree. I don't fully understand what Jesus is trying to say here, but one thing seems clear: He stands outside of this system that rewards the rich and punishes the poor. The Kingdom economy works differently. We are not valued more because of our success, wealth or capability.

## Prayer

Appearances can be deceptive. We often give too much credit to those who are successful and rich and too little credit to those who have less power and resource than us. Take time to reflect on the relationships in your life: at home, work, school, or church. As a way to fast from exclusion and exercise inclusion, make extra effort to listen to those you are tempted to ignore.

## Wednesday, March 21

### The Greatest and the Least (Mark 10:13-15, Luke 9:46-48, Matthew 23:11)

It was often hard for Jesus' followers to understand the Upside-Down Love of God.

One time, some parents brought their children to Jesus so He could touch and bless them. But Jesus' followers stopped the parents and scolded them for bothering Jesus. They didn't think the children were important enough for Jesus to spend time with. When Jesus saw what was happening, He said to them, "Let the children come to Me. Don't stop them! God's Kingdom belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive God's Kingdom like a child will never enter it." Then He took the children in His arms and placed His hands on their heads and blessed them.

Another time, Jesus' followers argued about which of them was the greatest and the best. They still didn't understand Jesus' Upside-Down Love. Jesus knew what they were thinking and brought a child to His side. Then He said to them, "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this is welcoming Me. And whoever welcomes Me also welcomes God. So whoever is the least important among you is the most important. Whoever is the smallest among you, love them with the greatest care."

Jesus also said, "The greatest among you must be a servant."

### Points of Interest

- Today's story comes from two different passages where Jesus interacts with children.
- In the first story, Jesus tells the people that to enter the Kingdom of God, we need to receive it like a child. How does a child receive anything? They receive as a gift. They don't receive it as something that they have earned or deserved because of their own merit. The gift is given because they are loved. Jesus seems to be saying that when we try to earn our way into the Kingdom, we cannot enter it. We need to humbly receive it as free gift. This is the opposite of how we often think about faith, heaven or salvation. The Kingdom of God doesn't have admission ticket that we earn with good deeds, successes, beauty or even niceness. No one is excluded. Everyone is invited. We simply need to receive it, trusting that we all belong. That is very different from how the world operates. How do you feel about that?

- In the second part of the story, Jesus' disciples argue about greatness. Jesus responds by saying "whoever is the least important is the most important." It is in human nature to pay more attention to those who are important and influential, those who have the power to help us. And we tend to overlook or mistreat the weak. But Jesus is calling his followers to do the opposite. And not because that's the right thing to do, but because we truly believe that no one is excluded and that there is enough for everyone in God. It requires trust and faith in God's limitless love and goodness to live out this vision of love. Our hearts need to see God's image and the intrinsic value in each human being. Jesus calls us to care for the least among us, because we choose to trust in God who is love.

## Prayer

Living in New York, we often encounter people asking for money on the street. It is easy to not see them, or to give out of guilt. We feel helpless because we know what we do will not change things for them. As a way of fasting from exclusion, consider preparing a gift to give to a homeless person (a pair of socks? A gift card? A cup of coffee?). As you give the gift, remember that we all belong together.

## Thursday, March 22

### The Righteous and the Humble (Mark 2:13-17, Luke 18:9-14)

It is easy for us to think that doing the right things and keeping all the rules will please God and make Him love us more. Many people in Jesus' time thought so, too. So they were often confused about Jesus' upside-down love.

One time, Jesus was having a party with some unpopular people. These were the people who didn't always do the right things and did not keep all of God's rules. Many people despised them, but Jesus was friends with a lot of people like this. So some religious leaders asked Jesus, "Why do you eat with such bad people?" Jesus told them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor. Sick people do. I am like a doctor. I have come for those who know need help, not for those who think they are already righteous.

Then he told this story: "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, known to be a great rule-keeper. The other was a hated tax collector.\* The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'I thank you, God, that I am not like those bad people. I am definitely not like that tax collector over there! I fast twice a week and I give you a tenth of the money I make. I keep all of your rules.' But the tax collector stood at a distance and couldn't even lift his eyes to heaven. He prayed with sorrow, 'O God, be kind to me, for I am not good and I break your rules.' I tell you, this tax collector received so much more from God than the Pharisee. Those who lift themselves up are brought down and those who understand they need help are lifted up."

That, too, is upside-down!

\*People thought of tax collectors the worst kind of people because they took money from the Israelites for the Roman empire. They made profit by taking more money from people than they owed. <https://svotssynaxis.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/icon-publican-and-the-pharisee-3.jpeg>

### Points of Interest

- Jesus is consistently hard on the self-righteous and religious people in the bible. Why is that? After all, they are the people who are good at obeying God's law. Doesn't that count for something? What Jesus objects to is not doing the right thing or obeying the law in and of itself, but playing a system that categorize people into the group that deserve God's love and the group that doesn't. When you are part of a system that considers you



good, respectable and favored by God, you are in danger of forgetting your need for God and others. In this system, you look to be rewarded and feel entitled to be treated well. That makes it harder to give and receive freely.

This is happening today as well, although the rules might be different. The conservatives might have some codes of purity that they abide by and the liberals might have some code of ethics that they judge others with.

- Whenever a system categorizes and discriminates people, it creates deeper disconnection and alienation, which is the opposite of God's Kingdom. God's reality is about relationship. It is about staying connected to God and others, so we continue to receive Life and Light into us.
- With this in mind, Jesus' parable makes more sense. It is not that doing the things that hurt others don't matter as long as we pray to God for forgiveness, but that when we understand our need for God and others and approach with open hands to receive, only then do we have hope to become blessings to others. If the goodness of our own heart is the only source we receive from, very soon, we will dry out.
- Again, only when we embrace that we all belong, and that we belong to God who belongs to all, will we be able to drink deeply from His Life.

## Prayer

Being self-sufficient is a good skill to have in life. But when it becomes our identity, it stops us from receiving from God and others. It blinds us from the reality that we are part of the whole. We end up excluding ourselves from the whole and exclude others when they don't meet our standard. As a way of fasting from exclusion, spend time reflecting on the ways that you need others in your life.

## Friday, March 23

### Rules and Love (Luke 6:1-11, Luke 13:10-17, Mark 12:29-31)

In Jesus' time, it was extremely important to keep the Sabbath. Every seventh day was the Sabbath, the day of rest. The people were not allowed to do any kind of work on the Sabbath day. One Sabbath day, Jesus and His friends were walking along the fields. Jesus' friends were hungry so they broke off heads of grain, rubbed off the husks in their hands, and ate the grain. Others who were watching them were not happy because gathering grain was considered work. They said, "Why are you breaking the Sabbath?" Jesus replied, "The Sabbath is made for people, not people for the Sabbath."

On another Sabbath day, a woman with a bent back was listening to Jesus with a crowd of people. People were watching Jesus closely to see if He would break the Sabbath rule by healing this woman, because healing was considered work. Jesus knew what they were thinking so He asked, "Does the Bible allow you to do good on the Sabbath day? Is this a day to save life or destroy it?" He looked around them and then put his hand on the woman and said, "Be freed from this sickness." The woman immediately stood up straight!

Jesus showed that people are more important than the rules in the Bible, and that loving people comes before keeping the rules. Jesus said, "The most important rules in all the Bible are these: 'Love your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' And, 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' No other rule is more important than these."

### Points of Interest

- The history of Christianity is spotted with discrimination and violence against people groups: Jews, Muslims, women, slaves, LGBTQ persons...the list goes on and on. In all these cases, the Bible was the justification. But here in this story, Jesus so clearly instructs us that there is no rule greater than love, that the rules in the Bible are made for people, not the other way around.
- What Jesus means by 'the bible (or 'the law' in most translations)' is the Old Testament. So some might argue that this does not apply to the New Testament. But the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, is the story of God's movement in the

world. And it tells the story of God moving us forward. This is why the mode of relating to God in the Old Testament is different from the New Testament mode. God moved people forward by revealing Himself in Jesus. And Jesus' radical love transformed the people's understanding about God.

- The Bible does not include the stories of God's movement in our time, but that does not mean that God has stopped moving! We learn from the Bible is that God is always at work, and therefore God is still moving us forward. And the trajectory in which God has moved in the Bible is also the trajectory in which He is moving in our world today. That trajectory is toward radical inclusion, always bringing down the 'walls of hostility.'
- 'Love God and love others as yourself' is the spirit of all the law. It is the essence of God's vision for us. Loving God, connecting with and receiving from Him, is supposed to transform us into people with greater capacity to love others and ourselves.

## Prayer

What does it mean for you to love God? Is this way of loving God making you more loving toward yourself and others? Are you becoming more gracious and compassionate toward yours and others' failings and limitations? If not, how can you rethink what it means to love God? Talk to God about it.

## Looking Back on the Week

How has it been reflecting on 'Exclusion-free' life this week?

Which of the fasting exercises have you tried? How did they impact you?