



Daily Meditations

November 1-6, 2021

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 2 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Jon Campbell, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link. Current and past copies of the "Daily Meditations" may be found at: ststeve.org/daily-meditations

Proper 26:

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Monday, November 1, 2021

Matthew 13:36-43

"At the same time, ripe holy lives will mature and adorn the kingdom of their Father." 43

"Ripe holy lives ..." What an image! Layered and stuffed with meaning, this phrase deserves unpacking beginning with the image of ripening fruit. I am reminded of Jesus' words, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Drawing our life and our sustenance from Jesus, we stretch forth into our lives and, when our branches are ripe, produce fruit, the natural outpouring of goodness and love channeled from the source of all goodness, Jesus. As a child growing up in a church-and-Bible-centered family, when I heard the word *holy*, I would immediately think of the Holy of Holies, that place in, first, the Tabernacle and then the Temple in which only the purest most high priest could approach the Presence of God. Violation by lesser individuals — either not qualified by the priesthood or impure in some way, including, of course, women and children — would lead to immediately being fried to a crisp. I still find it difficult to reconcile that even I, with all my impurities, unworthiness, etc., am called to be holy.

But vocabulary.com offers this: The adjective holy comes from the Old English word *hālig* and is related to the German word *heilig*, meaning "blessed." There is a relationship between holy and whole, and the religious sense probably developed from keeping believers spiritually whole — and pure. A place, object, or person who has been blessed can be described as holy, meaning "associated with God."

Truly I am blessed, and in my quest to be spiritually whole, I associate with God daily in prayer and study, so maybe I *can* see myself as *holy*... perhaps not fully arrived yet but on the road.

What a joyous thought to hope to “adorn the kingdom of God.” I have met some people, and probably you have also, whose souls just glow from within them. Like brilliant stars, I can visualize those souls adorning and standing out from the massed forest of all of us reaching towards God. From our reading today, I take this: Jesus nourishes us who are still growing towards ripening into a maturity that will adorn his Way of love and reconciliation.

Tuesday, November 2

Matt. 13:44-52

“He said, Then you see how every student well-trained in God’s kingdom is like the owner of a general store who can put his hands on anything you need, old or new, exactly when you need it.”⁵²

Bishop Michael Curry in the opening Eucharist of the 2018 General Convention of the Episcopal Church references this very scripture as he offers a path answering the questions:

“How do we help our church go deeper as the Jesus Movement, not just in word, and not just in deed, either, but for real? How do we help folks to throw themselves into the arms of Jesus? How do you help me do that? Because I know when we do it, and abide in him, we will bear fruit we never imagined.”¹ The answer? We already have it! Our Father provides it to us through Scripture, and access to it through the spiritual practices that open us to going deeper into our knowledge and trust of Jesus and his Way of Love. They say that to become highly proficient or “expert” at any task or activity, a person must devote 10,000 hours to it. In other words, one must be immersed in whatever it is. The general store owner Jesus references devotes his life to knowing, stocking, caring for and managing that business so that at any moment her or his hand can grasp whatever item is required. I would love to think I could do that just in my pantry, but I am not willing to devote the hours!

But am I willing to devote the time and energy to study, meditation, prayer and even discussion about God?

Most of Jesus’ disciples were not learned men, but they have hearts for God. All were Jewish, so they had heard Torah, the Psalms and the Hebrew prophets read throughout their lives. Children and then adults do live what they have learned, albeit imperfectly. Jesus says himself that he did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them ... to my mind, to bring them into focus and redeem them from centuries of men’s interpretations. So Jesus says, all these sayings/teachings are no more than what God has said to you for centuries, offered in different words. Now it’s up to you to draw them out of your memory playbook and put them into effect.

When he left earth, Jesus promised us a Comforter, one who brings to mind the teachings when we need them. But you cannot access what you do not have. Therefore, study is essential, especially since we have only an imperfectly transmitted and occasionally contradictory record of Jesus. And the essential partners of study? Meditation and communion with God. One of our greatest deficits in the essential habit of Scripture study has been contemplating what we call The Old Testament. Many people I encounter know almost nothing about it and find it daunting or irrelevant. To my mind, a follower of Jesus’ Way must grasp at least the scope and sequence of the teachings that Jesus himself followed, i.e., Hebrew Scripture. Otherwise, Jesus becomes this alien being, apart from his culture, his people and ultimately, his God, and that reduces his relate-ability to me, and I cannot accept that. God calls us, and Bishop Curry reiterates it: turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest.¹

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/>

"[Jesus] made a real hit [in his hometown]. 'We had no idea he was so good' ... But in the next breath they were cutting him down ...' Who does he think he is?' They got their noses all out of joint." 53-58

Public opinion is a fickle thing, especially in small towns. The passage lumps all the townspeople together, but having grown up in a small, very narrow community, I know that opinions most likely were varied, but the loudest voices prevail, silencing others. Through the lens of history and 2000 years of Christianity, the small-minded insecurity of those villagers who rejected Jesus seems incomprehensible to us ... but they were not alone.

Jesus began his public ministry in the province of Galilee and only widened it into other areas in the short period before his death. According to what is written in the accounts we have, people either embraced what Jesus was saying or rejected it in favor of the priesthood's teaching. The Romans watched Jesus with suspicion, hearing a protest against their presence and rule. The ruling classes watched Jesus, concerned that he would siphon power over public opinion away from them.

But his friends and childhood neighbors "got their noses all out of joint!"

The meaning then, as it is today, is about reacting with hurt feelings and upset to an offense such as when someone gets something we want. The visual of a 'nose out of joint' makes for a vivid metaphor. The image, for instance, is one of imbalance and something broken (literally and figuratively). Looking at a person with a 'nose out of joint' is in and of itself a painful vision and one which I imagine reflects emotions of deep hurt, anger, disappointment, betrayal, injustice, or sadness ²

Somehow Jesus *offended* his hometown folks by his teaching or by his knowledge or by his manner, or by the fact that he seemed to be declaring himself superior to them or just by being Jesus the homeboy. Whatever the reason, that little village really lost out.

² <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/167259/origin-of-nose-out-of-joint>

"Herod had arrested John, put him in chains, and sent him to prison to placate Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. John had provoked Herod by naming his relationship with Herodias 'adultery.'" Herod wanted to kill him, but he was afraid because so many people revered John as a prophet of God." 3-5

The entire passage for today provides so many different thoughts. First is the similarity between this story and the story from I & II Kings about the prophet Elijah calling out King Ahab and his evil queen Jezebel. Ahab tried to kill Elijah but was not successful; in fact, both Ahab and Jezebel perished instead.

With that said, comparisons between John and Elijah are significant in that Elijah is one of the most powerful prophets in Jewish history, not dying but being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. John makes a similarly powerful impression on the people of the Jordan area: a strong call for repentance with baptism to show a cleansing turn from old ways. He wears a belted skin with the rough side in, sandals, and eats only honey and bugs (locusts). Some say he is a Jew of the anti-Temple and anti-priesthood Essene group. He is definitely preaching a nonviolent rebellion against the status quo.

As seen above, John is killed by Herod but possibly not as the result of his step-daughter's dance (see Mark) and most likely not killed at Herod Antipas's Palace but at the Machaeron Prison in a less emotionally-charged decision. Secondly, Herod Antipas is a lesser ruler than the original Herod, his

grandfather. He is a Jew but probably a weak practitioner. Part of his job as one of the four puppets of Rome (tetrarchs) is to placate the subjugated Jews, his own countrymen. However, he is torn about what to do about John: the historian Josephus, a contemporary of the writer of The Gospel of Matthew, writes that Herod likes listening to John, even though John harangues him about his unScriptural divorce and remarriage to Herodias, to whom Herod is also related in the complicated family. His new wife Herodias definitely wants John silenced, but even more, Herod Antipas does not want a Jewish rebellion of any sort on his hands ... he would lose his job! John is extremely popular in the countryside, and he does stir up a nationalistic feeling among his Jewish countrymen who naturally want to oust the hated Romans. Therefore, it is just a matter of time before timid Herod A. finds a reason to remove John's influence permanently. Little does he know what's coming next.

Friday, November 5

Matt. 14:13-21

"But Jesus said, 'There is no need to dismiss them. You give them bread.'" 16

I have often said that I wished children came with an instruction manual, or that life's problems could be consistently solved with a 3-step process. How easy that would be. Or even that following the Jesus' Way just told me precisely what to do.

Actually it does. But the answer is bigger and more multifaceted than most of us can deal with:

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus has just spent 24-7 with his disciples for close to two years, teaching and modeling for them in varied ways what this looks like. It is not a pure logic syllogism: if this, do that. Instead, smush your desire to love your neighbor right into the everyday interchanges in which you find yourself and stay true to your purpose/love.

I used to think parables are direct correlation stories: the lost coin stands for a person's valuables and the frantic woman for almost anyone who has ever seen financial ruin or loss approaching. I now believe that Jesus is challenging the hearer/reader to place that situation in her/his own life and gauge what the heart prompts a person to do. Not so straightforward.

The disciples and Jesus see the hunger of the crowd, and the disciples' first impetus is to send the people away. Jesus says, no, you take care of them, you give them what they need

... you **love** them.

And I am sure after a few "who me's" and "that's not possible," the disciples step up. I do not think this miraculous feeding is for the crowd; it is for Jesus' disciples. Jesus' time with them is growing short. No longer can they be just hearers, but must be doers.

"Jesus said, 'Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's law and the Prophets hangs from them." Matthew 22:36-40

Saturday, November 6

Matt. 14:22-36

"Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, 'Master, save me!'" 29b-30

Well, I got my hand on the gospel plow,

and I wouldn't take nothin for my journey now.
Keep your hand on that plow and hold on.
When I get to heaven gonna sing and shout,
there'll be no critics that will put me out.
keep your hand on that plow and hold on.

Hold on (hold on) hold on (hold on).
Keep your hand on that plow and hold on.
Hold on (hold on) hold on (hold on).
Keep your hand on that plow and hold on.³

I recently read Bishop Michael Curry's short but powerful book, *The Power of Love*. In it he refers to this great old gospel spiritual and talks about Peter jumping out of that boat with his eyes fixed on Jesus amidst a storm out in the dark in the middle of a deep lake that had terrified these lifelong fishermen.

I love Bishop Curry's observations here:

I want you to notice that the storm doesn't stop. This is not a story about Jesus calming the sea. The storm rages on. But if you want to know how to walk through a storm? Keep your eyes on the prize. Keep your eyes focused on this Jesus, on his teachings, and his spirit. Abide with him, dwell with him, live in him. And when you live in him, guess what? He will start living in you. p. 24⁴ I cannot think of a better last word.

Well, I'm headed to a city so bright and fair,
not gonna stop until I make it there.
Keep your hand on that plow and hold on.
I won't look to the left I won't look to the right,
my heavenly home is just in sight,
keep your hand on that plow and hold on³

³ <https://www.8notes.com/scores/4797.asp>

⁴ Curry, Bishop Michael. *The Power of Love*. New York: Avery/ Penguin Random House, 2018.

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