

Lent Reflections 2024

Some people take on some reflective readings for Lent. Each week there is a reflection and some questions for thought and discussion. You can use these as journal prompts or for reflection & meditation.

Week 1: February 18 - 24

A Reading from a sermon of Peter Chrysologus, Bishop of Ravenna c.450 C.E.

There are three things by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other.

Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; they cannot be separated. If you have only one of them or not all together, you have nothing. So, if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God's ear to yourself.

When you fast, see the fasting of others. If you want God to know that you are hungry, know that another is hungry. If you hope for mercy, show mercy. If you look for kindness, show kindness. If you want to receive, give. If you ask for yourself what you deny to others, your asking is a mockery.

Let this be the pattern for all when they practice mercy: show mercy to others in the same way, with the same generosity, with the same promptness, as you want others to show mercy to you.

Therefore, let prayer, mercy and fasting be one single plea to God on our behalf, one speech in our defense, a threefold united prayer in our favor.

Let us use fasting to make up for what we have lost by despising others. Let us offer our souls in sacrifice by means of fasting. There is nothing more pleasing that we can offer to God, as the psalmist said in prophecy: “A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; God does not despise a bruised and humbled heart.”

Offer your soul to God, make him an oblation of your fasting, so that your soul may be a pure offering, a holy sacrifice, a living victim, remaining your own and at the same time made over to God. Whoever fails to give this to God will not be excused, for if you are to give him yourself you are never without the means of giving.

To make these acceptable, mercy must be added. Fasting bears no fruit unless it is watered by mercy. Fasting dries up when mercy dries up. Mercy is to fasting as rain is to the earth. However much you may cultivate your heart, clear the soil of your nature, root out vices, sow virtues. If you do not release the springs of mercy, your fasting will bear nor fruit.

When you fast, if your mercy is thin your harvest will be thin; when you fast, what you pour out in mercy overflows into your barn. Therefore, do not lose by saving, but gather in by scattering. Give to the poor, and you give to yourself. You will not be allowed to keep what you have refused to give to others.

Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church.

Edited by J. Robert Wright. Church Publishing Company. 1991. pp. 121 & 122.

1. *What do you think of when you think of prayer, fasting and mercy?*
2. *How do you see these as connected?*
3. *Which is hardest for you?*

Week 2: February 25 – March 2

Diana Buttle Bass. The Reign of God and the Art of Anticipation

“But church isn’t supposed to be about spiritual practices, about finding ourselves and getting our needs met,” protested a United Church of Christ pastor. “That’s all navel-gazing consumerist spirituality. Church supposed to be about God’s reign – the kingdom and justice.”

I have heard that objection many times. It is right to worry that spiritual practices exacerbate individualism and a church-shopping mentality. However, the divide between practices and the kingdom, between spirituality and social justice, is a false one.

Practices done in imitation of Jesus naturally extend to the kingdom that Jesus preached. From the beginning to the end of his ministry, Jesus proclaimed that God’s reign of love, peace, mercy, and justice was at hand and invited all who heard him to recognize and participate in that kingdom. When his first followers heard this, they imagined that the end of the world was near, that Jesus had initiated the longed-for-rule of Jewish messiah who would overthrow Caesar and all oppressors. Even after Jesus died, early Christians lived in the apocalyptic expectation that Jesus would return in their own lifetime to fulfill this ancient promise.

When Jesus did not return and things got politically worse, Christians redefined the kingdom as the visible reign of the church. Many centuries later, they reassigned the kingdom to the invisible church of true believers. Some believed that the kingdom would come at the time of the Protestant

Reformation. Others believed that the kingdom has begun, but that it was simply hard to see.

By the nineteenth century, however, Christians had embraced the idea that somehow God's people would bring about or build the kingdom through the good works they did on earth. Missionaries spread out across the globe with the words of the Lord's Prayer on their lips: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." They evangelized entire nations, built hospitals and schools, and sought to change economic and political structures grounded upon the principles. Probably no generation worked so hard or invested so much in order to make God's kingdom on earth than did those nineteenth-century believers. When World War I crushed their optimism, Christians retreated from the kingdom either by surrendering to failure or believing that their hope for a kingdom here on earth had been misplaced. Many abandoned a robust vision of the kingdom, trading it for theologies of escape and despair.

Rather than being a theology of retreat, spiritual practices actually pick up an ancient thread in our understanding of the reign of God. The dominant narrative of God's reign has been the one mentioned above: the first Christians believed that Jesus would restore the kingdom; medieval Christians believed that the church was the kingdom; Reformed Christians believed that true Christians embodied the kingdom in word and sacrament; and modern Christians believed that they could create the kingdom through their work. But there has also been another story about the reign of God – the notion that God's people anticipate and participate in the kingdom through spiritual practices. Prayer, for example. Although a deeply personal practice, and in many ways the ultimate in "navel-gazing" spirituality, prayer connects an individual to God. Through it, we enter a conversation with God. But it also function in a more universal and eschatological way. To pray to God

anticipates some future time when the supplicant will speak with God face-to-face. In God's kingdom, there will be no barrier of space or time between us and God's presence. Intimacy with God, as in the intimacy of prayer, will be the very nature of God's kingdom. In the here and now, prayer creates connection and relationship with God, even as it embodies the sure hope that God is our eternal friend.

All Christian practices work in this way. The practice of hospitality opens our hearts to those who are strangers; it anticipates that, in God's kingdom, there will one day be no strangers. The practice of forgiveness cleanses our souls from guilt and shame; it anticipates that, in God's kingdom, all will be forgiven. The practice of charity shares what we have with those who suffer want; it anticipates that, in God's kingdom, there will be no more hunger, pain sorrow, or fear. The practice of stewardship creates a generous spirit; it anticipates that, in God's kingdom, money and possessions will cease to exist and that all is God's. Practices shape us to be better, wiser, more gracious people now, even as these very practices anticipate in our lives and communities the reality of God's kingdom that has entered into the world and will one day be experienced in its fullness.

Some may choose to participate in a certain spiritual practice because it is interesting, feels good, or gives their life new meaning, but every serious Christian practitioner soon discovers one of the deepest mysteries of these practices. Christian practices all contain within them the dimension of ethics – they all anticipate God's reign, in which the world will be made right according to God's love and justice. Practices are not merely spiritual activities we do to entertain ourselves. Practices enliven and awaken us to the work of God in the world. We anticipate each day, knowing that God is in the here and now, and anticipate, most assuredly, the human future in the Spirit's reign of peace. No matter which particular road we travel, if we

practice our faith in imitation of Jesus, the outcome will be justice. Our actions witness to this hope. Practices are the connective tissue between what is, what can be, and what will be. Spiritual practices are living pictures of God's intentions for a world of love and justice.

Diana Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion, 2012, HarperCollins, pp. 157 – 160.

1. *What spiritual practices are most important to you?*
2. *How do they show you the world of love and justice that is God's kingdom?*
3. *How do your spiritual practices help you build the kingdom of God? How could your spiritual practices help you be a part of building the kingdom of God?*

Week 3: March 3 - 9

Rachel Held Evans: Open Hands

I resist it every time.

All the way down the aisle and up the steps to the altar I fidget, folding and unfolding my arms, clasping and unclasping my hands, forcing my mouth into a pleasant, inconspicuous smile as my eyes greet the faces of the congregants who have gone before me.

There is organ and choir and stifled coughs and babies' cries.

There is incense and hair spray and old church and cheap perfume.

My knees hit the pillow beneath the altar rail and light from the stained glass dapples my skin. It's as vulnerable a posture as a body can assume: kneeling, hands cupped together and turned out – expectant, empty, exposed –

waiting to receive. I resist it every time, this childlike surrender, this public reification of *need*.

Prayer, at least, offers some protection with its clasped hands, bowed heads, closed eyes. But here at the table I am open, unsheltered. The lines on my palms are dry creek beds in a basin awaiting water. I am a little girl crouched beneath the spigot.

The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.

Jesus descends into my open hands.

The Blood of Christ, the Cup of Salvation.

Jesus slips in, through my parted lips.

“If we did nothing else,” writes Nora Gallagher, “if nothing was placed in our hands, we would have done two-thirds of what needed to be done. Which is to admit that we simply do not have all the answers; we simply do not have all the power. It is, as the saying goes, ‘out of our hands.’”

“Faith,” she says, “is a catch-and-release sport. And standing at the altar receiving the bread and wine is the release part.”

But I’m no good at the releasing and receiving, at least not without practice. Ours is a culture of achievement, of sufficiency, of bootstrap pulling and ladder climbing. We celebrate the winners, the leaders, the do-it-yourselfers. Like any good American, I like to wait until I think I’ve *earned*. I like to wait until I think I’ve *deserved*. With giving, I can maintain some sense of power, some illusion of control. But receiving means the gig is up. Receiving means I’m not the boss of what comes into life – be it trial or trouble or unmerited good.

A writer friend of mine recently sent me a bouquet of orchids that sat on our dining room table for weeks in a perpetual explosion of magenta. She sent them because she

knew I was in one of those seasons when I wanted little to do with God and nothing to do with the church. Christians had been cruel to one another and cruel to me, and it had all happened in a public forum. I was in no mood to accept any acts of mercy, particularly from the very sort of Christians against whom I was revolting. Embarrassed by her generosity, I sent a quick thank-you in response and resolved to return the favor sometime. If I owed her, maybe I wouldn't have to let her in.

I was in possession of my friend's gift long before I received it, on a gray day when its stubborn, irresponsible beauty could no longer be ignored. Until then, I didn't want to admit how badly I needed her kindness, how helpless I was at sorting all this out on my own. I didn't want to see myself in those fragile, thirsty orchids, fighting against the gloom to trestle toward the light.

But this friend knows better than most the nature of *eucharisteo* – thanksgiving – how it enters through our soft spots and seeps in through our cracks. She knew God would unclench my fists and unfurl my fingers and that grace would eventually get through.

And so it did, when I finally opened my hands, when I received grace the way I receive communion, with nothing to offer back but thanks.

“Grace cannot prevail,” writes Robert Farrar Capon, “until our lifelong certainty that someone is keeping score has run out of steam and collapsed.”

This is why I need the Eucharist.

I need the Eucharist because I need to begin each week with open hands.

I need the Eucharist because I need to practice letting go and letting in.

I need the Eucharist because I need to quit keeping score.

“No one has been ‘worthy’ to receive communion,” writes Alexander Schmemmann, “no one has been prepared for it. At this point all merits, all righteousness, all devotions disappear and dissolve. Life comes again to us as Gift, a free and divine gift. ... Everything is free, nothing is due and yet all is given. And, therefore, the greatest humility and obedience is to accept the gift, to say yes – in joy and gratitude.”

It's a scary thing to open your hands. It's a scary thing to receive, to say yes. I resist it every time. But somehow, whether it sneaks in through a piece of bread, a sip of wine, or a hatching bud, grace always, eventually gets through. And finally, at long last, I exhale my thanksgiving.

Rachel Held Evans, Searching For Sunday, Nelson Books, 2015, pp. 142-145.

1. *What do you feel or think as you come to altar for Eucharist?*
2. *What makes it difficult? What do you look forward to?*
3. *What makes you thankful?*

Week 4: March 10 - 16

Diana Butler Bass; The Great Reversal

For the last few centuries, Western Christianity ordered faith in a particular way. Catholics and Protestants taught that belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belonging resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions. Churches turned this pattern into rituals of catechism, character formation, and Confirmation. At

birth, Christian children were either baptized or dedicated, with sponsors and parents answering belief questions on their behalf, promising to teach them the faith. As children grew, Sunday schools and catechism classes taught Christian doctrine and the Bible, ensuring that each generation knew the intellectual content of the tradition. Eventually, children moved from Sunday school classrooms to “big church,” where they participated in grown-up church practices and learned how to pray, worship, sing, give alms, and act kindly. When a Christian child reach an age of intellectual and moral accountability – somewhere between seven and fifteen – the church would offer a rite of full membership in the form of Communion, Confirmation, or (in the case of Baptists) adult-believers baptism. Believe, behave, belong. It is almost second nature for Western people to read the religious script this way.

It was not always that way. About five hundred years ago, Western Christianity divided from a single church into five different major church families: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Reformed Christianity, Anglicanism, and Anabaptist faith. Each group felt the need to defend itself against all the others, making clear its interpretation of the Bible and theology. Although religious diversity is common enough today, even the limited pluralism of the sixteenth century caused intense religious turmoil – including outright warfare. Competing religious claims turned into competing claims for political and economic power. Each religious group embarked on a process of ordering and systematizing its view of the faith. New theologies shifted away from emphasizing Christian practice toward articulating Christian teachings, as everyone attempted to prove that their group’s interpretation was true or most biblical. Religion moved increasingly in the direction of defending philosophical truth claims. Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes that Christianity became intellectualized and impersonalized, as

“decade after decade the notion was driven home that a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or not true.” He further states, “A legacy of it is the tendency still today to ask, in explanation of ‘the religion’ of a people, What do they believe? – as though this were a basic, even *the* basic question?”

Thus for several centuries, Western people have generally assumed that religious commitment begins when one assents to a body of organized doctrines. This holds true if you are considering changing churches or are having a faith crisis. If you are no longer comfortable being a Catholic, you look about to find a church that teaches divorce is acceptable. If you no longer want to be a fundamentalist, you find a church that teaches that the Bible is not literally true. You find out what a group teaches, and you wrestle with its ideas. Joining depends on whether or not you agree with its creed or statement of faith or doctrine. If you find its ideas about God sensible or truthful, then you reshape your life accordingly by learning new prayers, serving the poor, giving up smoking or drinking, and trying to be a better person. Finally, you become a member and join the church.

There is, however, something odd about this pattern. Other than joining a political party, it is hard to think of any other sort of community that people join by agreeing to a set of principles. Imagine joining a knitting group. Does anyone go to a knitting group and ask if the knitters believe in knitting or what they hold to be true about knitting? Do people ask for a knitting doctrinal statement? Indeed, if you start knitting by reading a book about knitting or a history of knitting or a theory of knitting, you will very likely never knit.

If you want to knit, you find someone who knits to teach you. Go to the local yarn shop and find out when there is a knitting class. Sit in a circle where others will talk to you,

show you how to hold the needles, guide your hands, and share their patterns with you. The first step in becoming a knitter is forming a relationship with knitters. The next step is to learn by doing and practice. After you knit for a while, after you have made scarves and hats and mittens, then you start forming ideas about knitting. You might come to think that the experience of knitting makes you a better person, more spiritual, or able to concentrate, gives you a sense of service to others, allows you to demonstrate love and care. You think about what you are doing, how you might do it better. You develop your own way of knitting, your own theory of the craft. You might invent a dazzling new pattern, a new way to make a stitch; you might write a knitting book or become a knitting teacher. In knitting, the process is exactly the reverse of that in church: belonging to a knitting group leads to behaving as a knitter, which leads to believing things about knitting.

Relationships lead to craft, which leads to experiential belief. That is the path to becoming and being someone different. The path of transformation.

It is also the path found in the New Testament; the Way of Jesus that leads to God. Long ago, before the last half millennium, Christians understood that faith was a matter of community first, practices second, and belief as a result of the first two. Our immediate ancestors reversed the order. Now, it is up to us to restore the original order.

Diana Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion, 2012, HarperCollins, pp. 201-204.

1. *How do you see the pattern of believe-behave-belong in the church?*
2. *What would the church look like if we followed a belong-behave-believe pattern?*
3. *What do you think is the most important part of that pattern?*

Week 5: March 17 - 23

A Reading from a sermon of Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople c. 389 CE.

We are soon going to share in the Passover, and although we still do so only in a symbolic way, the symbolism already has more clarity than it possessed in former times because, under the law, the Passover was, if I may dare to say so, only a symbol of a symbol. Before long, however, when the Word drinks the new wine with us in the kingdom of his Father, we shall be keeping the Passover in a yet more perfect way, and with deeper understanding. He will then reveal to us and make clear what he has so far only partially disclosed. For this wine, so familiar to us now; is eternally new.

It is for us to learn what this drinking is, and for him to teach us. He has to communicate this knowledge to his disciples, because teaching is food, even for the teacher.

So let us take our part in the Passover prescribed by the law, not in a literal way, but according to the teaching of the Gospel; not in an imperfect way, but perfectly; not only for a time, but eternally. Let us regard as our home the heavenly Jerusalem, not the earthly one; the city glorified by angels, not the one laid waste by armies. We are not required to sacrifice young bulls or rams, beasts with horns and hoofs that are more dead than alive and devoid of feeling; but instead, let us join the choirs of angels in offering God upon his heavenly altar a sacrifice of praise. We must now pass through the first veil and approach the second, turning our eyes toward the Holy of Holies. I will say more: we must sacrifice ourselves to God, each day and in everything we do, accepting all that happens to us for the sake of the Word, imitating his passion by our sufferings, and honoring his blood by shedding our own. We must be ready to be crucified.

If you are a Simon of Cyrene, take up your cross and follow Christ. If you are crucified beside him like one of the thieves, now, like the good thief, acknowledge your God. For your sake, and because of your sin, Christ himself was regarded as a sinner; for his sake, therefore, you must cease to sin. Worship him who was hung on the cross because of you, even if you are hanging there yourself. Derive some benefit from the very shame; purchase salvation with your death. Enter paradise with Jesus, and discover how far you have fallen. Contemplate the glories there, and leave the other scoffing thief to die outside in blasphemy.

If you are Joseph of Arimathea, go to the one who ordered his crucifixion, and ask for Christ's body. Make your own the expiation for the sins of the whole world. If you are a Nicodemus, like the one who worshiped God by night, bring spices and prepare Christ's body for burial. If you are one of the Marys, or Salome, or Joanna, weep in the early morning. Be the first to see the stone rolled back, and even the angels perhaps, and Jesus himself.

Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church.

Edited by J. Robert Wright. Church Publishing Company. 1991. pp. 164 & 165.

1. *How do you see yourself entering into the story of the death of Jesus?*
2. *What teaching of Jesus do you come back to most often?*
3. *What do you think of when you reflect on the Passover story?*

Holy Week: March 24 - 30

From the Stable to the Cross. Two pieces by two different writers: J. Heinrich Arnold & Edith Stein

J. Heinrich Arnold

Jesus' life began in a stable and ended on the cross between two criminals. The Apostle Paul said he wanted to proclaim nothing but this crucified Christ. We too, have nothing to hold on to except this Christ. We must ask ourselves again and again: Are we willing to go his way, from the stable to the cross? As disciples we are not promised comfortable and good times. Jesus says we must deny ourselves and suffer with him and for him. That is the only way to follow him, but behind it lies the glory of life – the glowing love of God, which is so much greater than our hearts and our lives.

Edith Stein

The Christian mysteries are an indivisible whole. If we become immersed in one, we are led to all the others. Thus the way from Bethlehem leads inevitably to Golgotha, from the crib to the cross. When the blessed virgin brought the child to the temple, Simeon prophesied that her soul would be pierced by a sword, that this child was set for the fall and the resurrection of many, for a sign that would be contradicted. His prophecy announced the passion, the fight between light and darkness that already showed itself before the crib.

Watch For The Light, 2001 by Plough Publishing House
pages 107 & 108

- 1. What do you think it means to travel from the stable to the cross? What did it mean for Jesus and what might it mean for us?*

2. *Have you ever made a decision that you knew was the right thing to do, but you also knew would lead to difficulties for you?*
3. *Jesus says that we must deny ourselves and suffer with him and for him – what does that mean in your life?*