



**Lenten Challenge Series 2020
Discipleship Group Materials**

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Introduction

Before Jesus ever chose a disciple or began to teach, he was baptized in the River Jordan. As he came up out of the water, a voice from heaven declared, "This is my Son, whom I love." Immediately following this, Jesus went into the desert region alone and stayed there for 40 days. Freed from the noise of society, the demands of other people, and the distractions of food and drink, work and entertainment, Jesus reflected on his identity, his relationship with God, and the life he would lead and call others to. Following this time alone, Jesus began to teach—and this teaching is summarized in Matthew 5-7, which we now call the "Sermon on the Mount."

Each year, we commemorate and seek to follow Jesus' example of self-reflection for the 40-day period of Lent. In a culture addicted to noise and action, stillness can seem unnecessary and even uncomfortable. But we know that it is in quiet and rest that we hear the "still, small voice" of God in our inner selves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges the stillness of complete trust, saying, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." By laying aside our past regrets and future anxieties, and living in the present moment, we become more aware of our connection to the source of all life. As our sense of connectedness grows, we understand that the Kingdom of Heaven is "at hand;" the "divine life" we might imagine only to exist in a place called heaven, is actually possible here and now in our everyday lives.

The focus practice for this series is **stillness**. As we grow in our understanding of God's presence as complete love and acceptance, we will feel more able to be honest about our brokenness. By spending time in stillness, we can compassionately reflect on our lives, and allow God to empower us to let go of fear, anxiety, and the need to perform.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus dares to dream of heaven on earth, where love, justice, mercy and forgiveness prevail over hatred, fear and violence. This way of living requires us to think differently, to open our hearts and minds to new possibilities, and to take on a higher consciousness. Jesus offers a pathway into this life by simply becoming his apprentices and following him. As we learn and grow, we experience more of this heavenly life and are able to let it flow out of us to transform the world around us. As the writer Pico Iyer expressed it, "The point of gathering stillness is not to enrich the sanctuary or the mountaintop, but to bring that calm into the motion, the commotion of the world."

This Lent, we will set out on a Lenten journey to practice stillness and quietness as a means to engage deeply with Jesus' teaching, open our hearts honestly to its compassionate challenge, and seek the enlightenment and empowerment of God's love in our everyday lives. We will explore the teaching through themed worship services and messages, and will dig deeper in a variety of "challenge groups" that will run for three consecutive weeks.

Overview

The six weeks of the series will cover the following themes:

- *March 1: Manifesto Of The Kingdom Of Heaven*
Understanding the upside down, inside out nature of the way of Jesus that leads to a fruit-bearing life; and the practice of stillness to look at ourselves honestly in Love.
- *March 8: An Upside Down Poem*
Letting go of a “performance approach” to following Jesus, and embracing a life of being wholly loved—simply because God is Love.
- *March 15: Getting To The Roots Of Our Problems*
Examining our inner motivations and tendencies to dehumanize others, and being empowered to change from the inside out through Love, not fear.
- *March 22: How Do You Pray?*
Praying to bring us into harmony with God’s loving will and way; and more conscious of our communion with all humanity.
- *March 29: Don’t Worry; Don’t Judge*
Practicing stillness to consciously remind ourselves we are “blessed,” God is good, and we can let go of the things we don’t control.
- *April 5: Palm Sunday*
Embracing Love expressed through humility and servanthood as the way of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Challenge Groups

After the Sunday service on March 8, 15 and 22, challenge groups for adults and youth will meet for approximately an hour to discuss and pray, related to the following themes:

- *Racial justice and parenting*: Exploring ways to understand and address racism in the process of raising children. (Led by Deanna French, Mike MacDonald and Sarah Clark in room 203.)
- *Contemplative prayer*: Learning and practicing a variety of contemplative practices with an emphasis on stillness. (Led by Jonathan Freeman-Coppadge and Kate Thomas in room 202.)
- *Nature*: Developing a connection to nature that nurtures stillness, awareness, mindfulness and celebration. (Led by Melanie Griffin and Charles and Hannah Guedenet in room 104.)
- *Help when we’re feeling stuck*: Help and support for dealing with painful issues and behaviors in our lives that are overwhelming. (Led by Roger Sandberg and Amy Rich in room 103.)

The intention is for people to attend one group for three consecutive weeks (or for as many weeks as is feasible) in order to explore the topic in some depth, rather than switching groups each week. The challenge groups will include large group discussions, times of sharing in smaller groups, opportunities for stillness, exercises and prayer. Childcare will be provided.

Discipleship groups may wish to attend challenge groups and/or continue to meet as usual during the week. One suggestion is for discipleship group members to attend different challenge groups and then meet during the week of March 29 for a meal and an opportunity to share learning from the various groups.

Practicalities

In this packet you will find for the first 5 weeks a few discussion questions followed by practices focused on stillness. There are no discussion questions for week 6, Palm Sunday, which will be a Community Sunday (see below).

The materials assume you have heard the message for the week, so if you were not able to be at Cedar Ridge that Sunday, please listen or watch the message online (www.crc.org/listen-to-messages/) or via the Cedar Ridge app (text Cedarridge App to 77977 for a link to download the app).

Additional Activities and Resources

Lenten Reflections

Cedar Ridge has produced 3 Lenten reflections, available as audio recordings via our website (www.crc.org/what-were-doing-this-month/) or the Cedar Ridge app. The text is also included in this package of materials in Annex 1. You can stream the recorded reflections while driving or walking; or you may wish to find a quiet time at home to light a candle, listen (or read), and reflect on the upside down messages of the Sermon on the Mount, and their dramatic enactment in the story of Easter.

Lenten Coloring

Coloring can be a relaxing way to bring stillness and focus into our day. Annex 2 provides a coloring sheet related to the first 5 weeks of this Lenten series. Color one of the interlocking Celtic-style knots each week as you consider the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Lenten Quiet Day—Saturday, March 28, 10 AM – 3:30 PM

Join us for a time of refreshment and reflection on Saturday, March 28 in our historic Barn. We'll start the day with a light breakfast and then practice some gentle, relaxing yoga and group prayer until noon. In the afternoon, we will engage in a few simple contemplative practices and then spend several hours on our own in silence, enjoying God's presence and our

beautiful property. Come to the morning or afternoon sessions or the whole day. For information and to RSVP, email melanieLgriffin@gmail.com.

Community Sunday on Palm Sunday—*Sunday, April 5, 10 – 11:30 AM*

In addition to wrapping up the series through a telling of the Palm Sunday story, we will welcome new members, and celebrate baptisms and child dedications. If you would like to participate in any of these opportunities, please inform one of the pastors on staff. After the service, we will celebrate community together with a potluck lunch.

Good Friday—*Friday, April 10, 7 – 8 PM*

On this, the darkest of nights, we will remember the surrender, suffering, and death of Jesus. Through video clips, sacred reading and music, prayerful reflection and communion, we will journey through the darkness to the cross, while keeping the hope of resurrection in our hearts. This service is appropriate for older children and adults. Childcare will be provided for young children.

Easter Sunday—*Sunday, April 12, 10 – 11:30 AM*

Don't miss our Easter Sunday service! We will tell the Easter story through songs, readings and hands-on activities. This fun, interactive service is suitable for all ages. Stay after the service for photos with the Easter Bunny and an outdoor egg hunt on our beautiful 63-acre property. This is a great occasion to invite friends and family.

Day of Service—*Sunday, April 19, 9 AM – 12 noon*

Join us as we put love to work, serving our community together. We'll begin with a potluck breakfast at 9 AM before starting on-site and neighborhood service projects at 10 AM. There will be projects for all ages and abilities, and SSL hours available for students. If you have service project ideas, please email ruthc@crcc.org.

Lenten Challenge Series 2020
Inside Out and Upside Down—Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

Week 1: Manifesto Of The Kingdom Of Heaven

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives five main discourses of teaching. The first and most famous of these, found in chapters 5 -7, has become known as “The Sermon on the Mount.” It has also been called “The Manifesto of the Kingdom of Heaven” because here Jesus lays out much of his core teaching about personal and community ethics, morality and spirituality. He used a powerful metaphor in his time to describe what life lived in harmony with God could look like—the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus dreams of and invites us into a future where the divine way (the way of heaven) is possible on earth.

This “sermon” is given early on in the writer of Matthew’s account, and not long after Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. We are currently marking the forty days of Lent, and this week we root Jesus’ teaching in the Lenten season of personal transformation. We’ll explore the meaning and significance of Lent, and through this lens, we’ll consider how the Kingdom of Heaven is both upside down and inside out. It is upside down because people normally viewed as at the bottom of the pile are raised to the top; and also because it turns out that divine power is not domineering but expressed as empowering, life-giving love. It’s inside out because the way we behave is determined by the health of our inner motivations (which is where Jesus points); and also because how we live and behave really matters. So we’ll begin with the end in mind by considering what kind of life Jesus is calling us to, and practicing stillness to be able to look at ourselves more honestly in God’s presence.

This week’s discussion questions

Before coming to this discussion, read through all three chapters of “The Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5-7 to get a general feel for it. Read in one go, and try to imagine being there and listening.

1. We’ve just entered the season of Lent. Share your own thoughts and feelings about Lent with one another. Is this a familiar season, or does it feel new to you? What experiences (positive and negative) have you had with Lent? What hopes and goals do you have for Lent this year? How might the group be a source of support to one another in pursuing these goals?
2. How does the term “The Kingdom of Heaven” make you feel? Does it inspire you, or does it seem overly idealistic? The speaker on Sunday suggested that “Kingdom” as a metaphor might have connotations of dominating power (ruling monarchs). If Jesus’

teaching is an invitation into loving harmony with God, how might change occur? Is it realistic to expect the world (or anyone) to be transformed if not forced to do so?

3. Read Ezekiel 36:26-28 and Jeremiah 31:33-34. In what way are these scriptures an invitation? What personal response do they elicit in you? How willing are you to partner with God on the “inside” of your life?
4. Read the four metaphors for the kind of life and way of living Jesus is calling us to:
 - Salt and light (Matthew 5: 13-16)
 - Good and bad fruit (Matthew 7:16-18)
 - Wide and narrow gates (Matthew 7:13-14)
 - Rock and sand (Matthew 7:24-27)

For each one: what do you think the metaphors mean? Jesus seems to be saying that a wholesome, loving life is possible but it’s not easy—what makes it so challenging? How do these metaphors apply to you personally? Can you share any examples in your own life where these have played out?

Stillness Practice

Take some time in complete silence as a group. Sit with your eyes closed in a physically neutral and comfortable posture so your body is not a distraction. Center yourself by focusing on your breathing. Consciously be aware of God’s complete love for you. Imagine the room filled with God’s love, and you are immersed in it and breathing it in. Any time you have a negative or unloving thought or feeling about yourself, don’t panic—just let it go and breathe it out. Return to a focus on God’s love.

Once you have centered yourself this way, “look” at yourself. Do this in an atmosphere of love—just be honest but don’t condemn. What are some of the behaviors, habits and actions you feel need to change in your life? How would you like to be different? Take your time with this; relax and don’t force it. Be honest, and for now don’t worry about *how* you will change, but just *what* needs to change. Keep breathing in God’s love, and consciously see yourself as completely immersed (completely loved) no matter what needs to change.

When you have finished, write about your experience in your journal. Note down any thoughts or feelings you had about God’s love and acceptance. Was this easy to feel or difficult? Then write down what you feel emerged with regards to what needs to change in your life. Be as honest in your journal as you were in the stillness, and keep your journal safe and private!

Practice for the week

This week, take some time each day to repeat this stillness meditation. Practice immersing yourself in God's unconditional love and acceptance. Practice personal honesty. As you repeat this exercise, make notes in your journal each time, and see how you evolve with practice. As you sink deeper into love, you may find you sink deeper into honesty and you begin to see in a new way. Make note of this. Again, relax and don't worry too much about how you are going to change at this point, just what needs to change. We'll come back to these notes later in the series.

Lenten Challenge Series 2020
Inside Out and Upside Down—Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

Week 2: An Upside Down Poem

“The Sermon on the Mount” is the most famous summary of Jesus’ teaching in the Christian Scriptures. But this teaching begins, not with instructions or prohibitions, but with a poem. And this poem declares that the poor, downtrodden, ridiculed, and seemingly “weak” are actually approved and favored by God. Setting the upside-down tone for the sermon as a whole, Jesus’ memorable pronouncement of “congratulations to the losers” must have caused quite a commotion in the crowd gathered on that mountainside. Within first century Jewish society, it was generally accepted that following the Torah led to divine approval—which was in turn demonstrated in tangible rewards: material wealth, health and good fortune, respect and honor in the community. Thus, it was the rich and powerful who must be “blessed.” The poor, grieving, down-on-their luck must have offended, failed or disappointed God in some way.

After 2000 years of reading this shocking, revolutionary declaration, we have found ways to tone down the impact and make Jesus’ words correspond to what seems “fair” or “feels true.” We romanticize the poor, oppressed and grieving as possessing the secret of confident dependency on God. Or we spiritualize these attributes so that it is the humble (but not humiliated), the empathetic (but not depressed), and the otherwise virtuous who are favored by God and will be rewarded—if not here on Earth, then at least in life beyond the grave. We don’t want to be shocked. We want to know the rules and so be able to judge our own performance and that of others. We want to earn approval; rules and rewards make sense and feel safe; they grant us a measure of control. Grace (unearned blessedness) is scary. This week we will consider what it means to let go of a “performance approach” to following Jesus, and instead embrace a life of being wholly loved—not because or in spite of who we are and what we do, but simply because God is Love.

This week’s discussion questions

Before coming to this discussion read through Matthew 5:1-12. Read it in one go and try to imagine being there listening to Jesus. Then spend some time reflecting on it and review the questions below before coming to the discussion.

1. Take some time to share how the practice of stillness went for each of you this past week. How did it impact your daily life? Did you notice any changes over the course of the week? How might this practice help you on a regular basis in the future?

2. Read Matthew 5:1-12 together. The Greek word *makarios* (usually translated “blessed”) is hard to explain in common English terms. Sometimes “blessed” is translated as “happy” or “fortunate.” How does an understanding of this word as “favored, considered honorable, or accepted by God” change the meaning of this passage for you?

3. The speaker on Sunday suggested that in some ways, these attributes can be viewed as bringing their own rewards. Consider the list of attributes below. How might they lead to a deeper, more satisfying life?
 - Poor in spirit
 - Mourning
 - Meek
 - Hungry and thirsty for righteous
 - Merciful
 - Pure in heart
 - Peacemakers
 - Persecuted because of righteousness

4. There must have been many people in the crowd that day who were poor, grieving, oppressed, and abused. Probably there were others present who were relatively “successful” and considered themselves morally upstanding. How do you think each group would feel upon hearing Jesus’ “blessings”? In what way are the Beatitudes “fair”? In what way are they “unfair”? What do they teach us about God?

5. Read the paraphrase below. Which of the Beatitudes resonates most with you, and why?

Blessed are you who are poor in spirit: unsure, scared, doubting, broken; you who feel you have nothing to offer.

For you belong in God’s kingdom.

Blessed are you who grieve, who are overwhelmed with a sense of loss, who feel empty inside, who have to hold it all together when you want to fall apart.

God sees and cares, and will comfort you.

Blessed are you who are marginalized, who feel slow and awkward; you quiet ones who get passed over; go unnoticed and under-represented.

All that is good will be yours.

Blessed are you who long for justice; you who are oppressed, and all who stand beside you; you who desperately need more of God in your life.

You will receive the desire of your heart.

Blessed are you who forgive even when it hurts, you who choose to love in the face of hostility, who overlook slights and believe the best of others.

God will do the same for you.

Blessed are you who would rather lose than cheat, who rejoice in the success of others, you who have no hidden agenda, who work without expectation of reward.

God will be very present to you.

Blessed are you who defend the weak and oppose aggression; you mediators and trusted friends; you who don't need to be right.

Others will see God in you.

Blessed are you who suffer for doing the right thing, who stay true when the going is hard, who are faithful to the end.

The Kingdom of heaven is yours.

Stillness Practice

Take some time in complete silence as a group. Sit with your eyes closed in a physically neutral and comfortable posture so your body is not a distraction. Center yourself by focusing on your breathing. Consciously be aware of God's complete love for you. Imagine the room filled with God's love and you are immersed in it and breathing it in. Any time you have a negative or unloving thought or feeling about yourself, don't panic—just let it go and breathe it out. Return to a focus on God's love.

Once you have centered yourself this way, "look" at yourself. Do this in an atmosphere of love—be honest but don't condemn. What are some of the areas in your life that seem weak, disappointing or shameful? Take your time with this; relax and don't force it. Hear Jesus' words: *Blessed. Loved. Favored. Accepted.* Repeat these words in your mind.

After you have done this for a few minutes, "look" again at yourself. What are some of the areas in your life that seem strong, successful or satisfying? Take your time with this; relax and don't force it. Hear Jesus' words: *Blessed. Loved. Favored. Accepted.* Repeat these words in your mind.

When you have finished, write about your experience in your journal. Note down any thoughts or feelings you had about God's love and acceptance. Was this easy to feel or difficult in the

first part of the exercise? In the second part? Be as honest in your journal as you were in the stillness and keep your journal safe and private!

Practice for the week

This week, take some time each day to repeat this stillness meditation. Practice immersing yourself in God's unconditional love and acceptance. As you repeat this exercise, make notes in your journal each time and see how you evolve with practice. Invite God to empower you to see yourself and others as blessed, loved, favored, and accepted. As you have thoughts about yourself, and as you interact with others throughout the day, consciously return to the view that you and they are blessed, loved, favored and accepted—no matter what the circumstances. Notice times when you sense God's presence and empowerment. Journal about these.

Lenten Challenge Series 2020
Inside Out and Upside Down—Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

Week 3: Getting To The Roots Of Our Problems

Jesus was a spiritual leader and teacher rooted in his Hebrew tradition. He was Jewish through and through, and the Gospel of Matthew portrays him as a rabbi—but a different kind of rabbi. To that end, Jesus is a strong advocate of “Torah” (the ancient Hebrew Law) as the means to a meaningful, ethical and fulfilling life. But unlike most other religious authorities, Jesus realizes Torah was not meant to be a set of rules, based on fear, that police our outward behaviors. Rather Torah is best understood as a “Way,” based on love, which helps transform us from the inside out so we can live such a life. Jesus is conscious that the religious way (often symbolized by the Pharisees) is simply not working. Just trying harder to follow rules does not bring the life and health it was supposed to. So Jesus goes to the heart of the matter, reinterprets Torah from the inside out, and addresses the motivations within us. The goal is not another set of religious rules, but harmony with the will and way of God, based on reciprocal love—what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven.

This week we look at Jesus’ teaching in the latter part of Matthew chapter 5, where he addresses various outward behaviors that represent the broken nature of the human condition. He talks about murder, adultery, relational abuse, deceitfulness, revenge and hatred. It’s quite an extreme and scary list, such that Jesus says many will indeed declare themselves not guilty. But that’s not the point for Jesus. This is not an exhaustive list of “dos and don’ts” but there is a common thread: the way in which all of us have a tendency to dehumanize another person to justify our own actions. So he turns the list upside down and flips it inside out by tracing this motivation and attitude of dehumanization into the inner world of every one of us. We all have these tendencies. We may not murder but we all harbor hateful, angry, revengeful thoughts and feelings. We may not commit adultery but that does not mean we don’t objectify people sexually. This is painful to hear, but Jesus is setting a different tone and getting to the real root of our problems for the purpose of healing and wholeness. The tone is love: we are completely loved and accepted, so fear (which focuses on policing our outward behaviors) is no longer the motivation. In an atmosphere of love, we can honestly look at our inner motivations and are empowered to change from the inside out. This is life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This week’s discussion questions

Before coming to this discussion read Matthew 5:17-48. Read it in one go, and try to imagine being there listening to Jesus. Then spend some time reflecting on it, and review the questions on the next page before coming to the discussion.

1. Take some time to share how the practice of stillness went for each of you this past week. How did it impact your daily life? Did you notice any changes over the course of the week? How might this practice help you on a regular basis in the future?
2. This challenging passage is bookended by some especially challenging statements from Jesus in Matthew 5:17-20 and Matthew 5:48. What do you think Jesus means by these statements? Why do you think Jesus seems to be setting such a high standard? How does this make you feel?
3. Jesus addresses six areas of human brokenness in this passage. These are:
 - Murder (Matthew 5:21-26)
 - Adultery (Matthew 5:27-30)
 - Divorce (Matthew 5:31-32)
 - Oaths (Matthew 5:33-37)
 - Revenge (Matthew 5:38-42)
 - Hatred (Matthew 5:43-47)

Choose a couple of the ones that seem most pertinent, and discuss them with the following as a guide:

- What is the external behavior Jesus is addressing, and what is the internal motivation to which he connects it?
- Take note of where Jesus uses metaphor, imagery, hyperbole and poetry. How does this impact his meaning?
- The speaker on Sunday suggested that focusing only on our outward behaviors can cause us to live life in a way that tries to keep God happy but at a safe distance. Do you agree with this? In what way could this be a tendency in each of these issues? In what way is this a challenge to you personally?
- If God is Love, and more intimately present to us even than our breath, how might this affect the way we read these passages and embrace these challenges?
- The speaker on Sunday suggested that all these inner issues have in common the dehumanization of the other. Do you agree with this? How do we dehumanize others and why?
- If God is Love and we are already completely accepted, how might this impact how we see and treat others? In what way could this be a source of empowerment to let go of the need to dehumanize, compete with, withdraw from, and defeat others?

Stillness Practice

This practice is similar to the previous ones, and is loosely based on an ancient Ignatian spiritual exercise called “the Examen.”

First take a moment to review your journal and some of the areas of change you identified in week 1. Don’t stress about them. Just relax. This exercise is intended to help us get to the roots of these challenges, and we do so by remaining in an atmosphere of complete love and acceptance.

As before, take some time in complete silence as a group. Sit with eyes closed in a physically neutral and comfortable posture so your body is not a distraction. Center yourself by focusing on your breathing. Consciously be aware of God’s complete love for you. Imagine the room filled with God’s love, and you are immersed in it and breathing it in. Any time you have a negative or unloving thought or feeling about yourself, don’t panic—just let it go and breath it out. Return to a focus on God’s love.

Once you have centered yourself this way, imagine the following:

- Look back on the day today (or if it’s more helpful the past few days). Trace the steps of your life from the time you awoke until now.
- As you do so, look for moments when an outward behavior you’ve identified seemed to come out. Some of these moments might be quite obvious, but others might not be immediately apparent. Look for times when you felt guilty or ashamed, times of relational conflict or withdrawal, moments where you had negative feelings that might be connected to the behavior.
- As before, don’t judge or evaluate yourself. Each time you sense yourself doing that, return to your breathing and center yourself in God’s love. Have compassion on yourself, and see yourself as a fellow struggler along with everyone you encounter.
- In an atmosphere of love, hold these behaviors in front of you and open your heart to God without fear. Where do they come from? What inner root motivates them? Again, don’t judge, just allow yourself to be honest. Invite God’s presence and seek help and clarity. Don’t rush, spend some time letting yourself open and letting Light illumine your inner life. Don’t try to force anything or jump to conclusions. Just be.
- Now invite God to fill this inner space. Surrender to God’s unfailing love. Let go of fear, shame, the need to compete, the need to be right, the need to be liked, or whatever inner motivations you identified. This is not easy, so don’t be anxious; just lean into God’s empowering presence. Let God take the strain and just be a willing partner.

When you have finished, write about your experience in your journal. Note down any thoughts or feelings you had about inner motivations and the connection to your behaviors. Be as honest in your journal as you were in the stillness, and keep your journal safe and private!

If appropriate, have a time of sharing as a group to process this exercise. You don't have to disclose anything specific (unless you feel that would be safe and helpful) but discuss how the exercise went for you in general.

Practice for the week

This week, take some time each day to repeat this stillness meditation. Each evening practice immersing yourself in God's unconditional love and acceptance, and review your day. As you repeat this exercise, make notes in your journal each time, and see how you evolve with practice. Notice whether this practice makes a difference to the days that follow. As you reflect each evening, invite God to empower you the next day, and commit to being more aware of motivations. Each time you are aware of a negative motivation during your day, consciously surrender to God's love. In your evening Examen, notice times when you sensed God's presence and empowerment. Journal about these.

Lenten Challenge Series 2020
Inside Out and Upside Down—Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

Week 4: How Do You Pray?

Throughout his teaching, Jesus emphasizes the importance of living an integral life: a life where we do what we say, where our outward actions are consistent with our inner convictions, and where we don’t try to project a “holier than thou” image. This week we will explore a passage where Jesus addresses important traditional religious practices in his Jewish context—almsgiving, prayer, fasting and forgiveness. For Jesus, these are outward expressions of inner convictions, and so should never be ostentatious. Almsgiving (generosity to those in need) is not about impressing others or placating God—it’s a recognition of and participation in our common humanity with everyone, no matter what their situation. Prayer and fasting are not ways to convince others of our piety, nor means to twist God’s arm into action, but rather ways to be more conscious of God’s love. They bring us into more intimate union with God, and empower us to partner more closely with God’s love in the world. All these things are about our inner lives, and are therefore best done in private, secretly and simply.

We can imagine God’s presence in our lives as the flow of a river. God’s love flows to us, around us, and in us, and we can be in that flow by letting love flow to others. This is perhaps especially clear when it comes to forgiveness. According to Jesus, you can’t experience forgiveness without having an attitude of forgiveness to others. We either live life in the flow of God’s love and forgiveness, or we live it in the river of resentment. We can’t straddle both realities.

This week we especially focus on Jesus’ teaching about prayer, and explore “the Lord’s Prayer.” This has become so familiar over the centuries we can miss how radical Jesus’ approach is, seeing the divine presence as open, welcoming, and immediately accessible—so we can pray simply, at any time, in our own language. God’s love is constantly flowing to us, and prayer is a surrender to that flow. Prayer brings us into harmony with God’s loving will and way, which is the Kingdom of Heaven. It also makes us more conscious of our communion with all humanity: We pray to “our” Father, reciprocate forgiveness, and ask for “our” daily bread. Prayer makes us responsible for one another, as we let love flow through us to others. Prayer in Jesus’ way seems much more about changing our own consciousness than getting God to do things for us.

This week’s discussion questions

Before coming to this discussion, read Matthew 6:1-18. Read it in one go, and try to imagine being there listening to Jesus. Then spend some time reflecting on it, and review the questions below before coming to the group discussion.

1. Take some time to share how the practice of stillness went for each of you this past week. How did it impact your daily life? Did you notice any changes over the course of the week? How might this practice help you on a regular basis in the future?
2. How would you describe your story with prayer? Share your own experience. Has it been an easy habit or a struggle? How and when do you normally pray? What is the purpose of prayer for you? Was there anything in the message this week that altered your view of prayer?
3. The speaker on Sunday suggested that Jesus taught us to pray in our own language, any time, in simple ways, and to address God in very familiar, intimate terms (“Abba” in his context). What does this say about Jesus’ understanding of God? How might this affect how you pray?
4. Read the first part of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-10. What does each element show us about our connection to God, and the flow of God’s love to us and the world? How might this change how we pray?
5. Read the second part of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:11-13. What does each element show us about our connection to one another and the flow of God’s love through us into the world? How might this change how we pray?

Stillness Practice

This week we’ll practice the stillness of “being.” We will just “be” in the flow of God’s love, not questioning it, not resisting it, but simply letting it flow to us, all around us, and into us. We will also let this love flow from us back to God and out to others by “being” love.

Take some time in complete silence as a group. Sit with your eyes closed in a physically neutral and comfortable posture so your body is not a distraction. Center yourself by focusing on your breathing. Consciously be aware of God’s complete love for you. Let it flow to you, all around you and into you. It might help to imagine you are in a river of God’s love, or imagine God’s love as light or warmth flowing to you. Just remain in this conscious flow of complete love and acceptance. Don’t evaluate or worry about who, what or how you are, but just that you are. Just be! Each time you are distracted from this, return to your breathing and begin again.

Then imagine this love flowing from you to others. Again don’t evaluate the quality or effectiveness of your love in real time. Just let love flow; just be love to those other people. Imagine the people dear to you—friends, family and loved ones. Imagine also people you find difficult, or who you feel don’t love you. Don’t evaluate whether they love you or not, don’t evaluate whether they deserve to be loved or not—just “be” love to them, and let love flow.

When you have finished, write about your experience in your journal. How did you find this moment of stillness? If appropriate have a time of sharing as a group to process this exercise. You don't have to disclose anything specific (unless you feel that would be safe and helpful) but discuss how the exercise went for you in general.

Practice for the week

This week, take some time each day to repeat this stillness meditation. Practice immersing yourself in the flow of God's unconditional love and acceptance and just "be." Consciously practice "being" love and letting love flow to others as well. As you repeat this exercise each day, make notes in your journal and see how you evolve with practice. Notice whether this practice makes a difference to the days that follow. Make note of times when you were more aware of being in God's love and less fearful. Note when you were able to embody love more and be love to others when normally you might find that difficult.

Lenten Challenge Series 2020
Inside Out and Upside Down—Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

Week 5: Don’t Worry, Don’t Judge

The whole tone of the Sermon on the Mount is positive: Jesus presents the way of love as a challenging but ultimately liberating path to a healthy, fruit-bearing life. The “blessed” life that Jesus describes is one marked by joy. Love sets us free from anxiety, as we place our trust in the goodness of God. We can stop worrying about past mistakes and about what the future holds, and instead focus on enjoying life in the moment. Love lifts from our shoulders the need to judge ourselves and others as we recognize the value of every person—loved, favored and accepted by God. Without needing to perform to earn love, we can relax and be our true selves, living authentically and with integrity. Refraining from judging others opens the way to empathy and compassion. Standing in the flow of God’s love, we can celebrate the wonder and beauty of creation; we can enjoy healthy, nurturing relationships with others; and we can find the strength and hope for difficult times. Who wouldn’t want that?!

But when we are outside that flow of love—when we feel far from God, uneasy in ourselves, and at odds with others, or when the circumstances of life seem overwhelming—instructions like “Don’t worry” or “Don’t judge” seem like impossible demands. They can easily become additional burdens to bear, as we feel guilty or disappointed that we are unable to stop worrying and judging. And under such conditions, joy can soon drain out of life.

This week we look at how to practice stillness to slow down our thinking and quiet the many voices in our heads, as we consciously remind ourselves we are “blessed,” God is good, and we can let go of the things we don’t control. We explore the feasibility of taking Jesus’ challenging words to heart and choosing to obey—however unsuccessful we may be much of the time. Changing on the inside can be hard and slow, but unlike resolutions to change external behaviors, the change has the potential to be profound and lasting. Jesus promises to be with us throughout this process: “Keep company with me,” he says, “and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (Matthew 11: 30, Message version)

This week’s discussion questions

Before coming to this discussion, read Matthew 6:19 – 7:12. Read it in one go, and try to imagine being there listening to Jesus. Then spend some time reflecting on it, and review the questions below before coming to the group discussion.

1. Take some time to share how the practice of stillness went for each of you this past week. How did it impact your daily life? Did you notice any changes over the course of the week? How might this practice help you on a regular basis in the future?
2. Read Matthew 6:19-34 together and then discuss the following questions:
 - What are the things you treasure the most? How do you know? How do these things influence your life?
 - Very few people think their god is money. Why is money such a deceptive master?
 - How are treasuring things and worrying about things connected?
 - Do you consider yourself an anxious person? What worries you most, and why?
3. Read Matthew 7:1-6. In what situations do you find yourself judging others? What do you think drives this need or desire to judge?
4. The speaker on Sunday suggested that worry and judgment are both motivated by fear. Do you agree with this? Why, or why not? Read Matthew 7:7-12. How does this picture of God help us address the drive to worry and judge?
5. In this passage, Jesus says, “Don’t worry” and “Don’t judge.” Do you think it is possible to take these words literally? Why or why not?

Stillness Practice

Take some time in complete silence as a group. Sit with your eyes closed in a physically neutral and comfortable posture so your body is not a distraction. Center yourself by focusing on your breathing. Consciously be aware of God’s complete love for you. Imagine the room filled with God’s love and you are immersed in it and breathing it in. Any time you have a negative or unloving thought or feeling about yourself, don’t panic—just let it go and breathe it out. Return to a focus on God’s love.

Once you have centered yourself this way, consider a situation that is worrying you, or a relationship that feels judgmental. Think about your emotions: what is driving them? Take your time with this; relax and don’t force it. Do this in an atmosphere of love—be honest but don’t condemn. Hear Jesus’ words for you and for anyone else involved in this situation: *Blessed. Loved. Favored. Accepted.* Repeat these words in your mind—focusing first on yourself, and then on anyone else involved.

Picture in your mind a field filled with beautiful flowers, each intricately and uniquely created. In the presence of our loving God, choose to let go of anxiety in this moment; choose to love in this moment and to withhold judgment.

When you have finished, write about your experience in your journal. Note down any thoughts or feelings you had about letting go of your worry or your feelings of judgment. Was this easy to do or difficult? Be as honest in your journal as you were in the stillness and keep your journal safe and private!

Practice for the week

This week, take some time each day to repeat this stillness meditation. Practice immersing yourself in God's unconditional love and acceptance and letting go of worry and judgmental thinking. As you repeat this exercise, make notes in your journal each time and see how you evolve with practice. Invite God to empower you to see yourself and others as blessed, loved, favored, and accepted. As you have thoughts about yourself, and as you interact with others throughout the day, consciously return to the view that you and they are blessed, loved, favored and accepted. As you feel worries begin to rise within you, re-center on God's love and goodness. Notice times when you sense God's presence and empowerment. Journal about these.

Lenten Challenge Series 2020
Inside Out and Upside Down—Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

Annex 1: Lenten Reflections

Introduction

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

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

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

Reflection #1: Indifference

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

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

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

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

... Are you rich or poor in spirit?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reflection #2: Joy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reflection#3: Doubt

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or hold your head under as you drown—

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

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

Not. A. Word.

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

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

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

Nominal.

Lukewarm.

Indifferent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Annex 2: Lenten Coloring

Stillness to...

- ...reflect on who we are and want to be...
- ...recognize our goodness...
- ...identify our struggles...
- ...center ourselves on Jesus...
- ...find compassion for ourselves and others...

The image on the following page is made up of five unique Celtic-style knots, each representing one of the stillness themes for Lent.

As you color, follow the flow of the design as it moves *over* and then *under* the lines that intersect it. This rhythm reflects our awareness of God. Sometimes we see God's presence clearly, and sometimes we cannot see God anywhere. Still we continue to follow Jesus, trusting that we will be "over" again soon.

