



PREPARING TO BECOME THE
**BELOVED
COMMUNITY**

LENT - YEAR A

Preparing to Become the Beloved Community

Year A

Lent 2023, 2026, 2029

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Prepared by the Program Group on Ecumenical and Interreligious Life in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles and The Episcopal Church's Racial Reconciliation Team, with reflections from the Rev. Phil Hooper, the Rev. Canon Cathlena A. Plummer, Lelanda Lee, Canon Judith Conley, and the Rev. John Caleb Collins (Quidera).

Learn more about Becoming the Beloved Community and The Episcopal Church at www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation.

Share reflections and queries by writing to reconciliation@episcopalchurch.org or on social media using [#belovedcommunity](https://twitter.com/belovedcommunity).

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WELCOME

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. —Mark 1

This Lent, the Diocesan Community is invited into a journey to commit in new ways to becoming Beloved Community and growing loving, liberating, life-giving relationships across the human family of God. We make the journey not only as individual Christians and congregations, but as a whole church. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings and their supporting officers share “Becoming Beloved Community,” a new vision document that lays out the Episcopal Church’s long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice. A second resource — “Becoming Beloved Community Where You Are” — details many ways for individuals and congregations to take concrete steps toward change and healing. The Program Group for Ecumenical and Interreligious Life has adapted this resource from its original Advent setting to a Lenten one.

The journey is framed around the labyrinth. Why?

In the ministry of racial healing and justice, none of us walks a straight line. We enter the labyrinth wherever God has provided an opening – telling the truth about our church’s story around race; discerning and proclaiming God’s dream of Beloved Community where we are; learning and practicing Jesus’ way of healing and love; and bravely working to transform systemic racial injustice. We keep moving from one quadrant to another and back. No one is ever really finished. That is the way of ongoing spiritual formation. As you “walk” sections of this labyrinth, gather a group, and together engage the scriptures, reflections, and activities.

Beginning the Journey...

Designate a facilitator who will carefully preview the session. Set aside at least 45 minutes for each session, and consider these **Conversation Tips**:

Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share. Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story. Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry regularly welcomes us to live not just as the church but as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement: the ongoing community that follows Jesus into loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God, each other, and creation.

May God bless and grow us into vibrant embodiments of the Christ we welcome and follow, this Lent and always.

Prayerfully offered,

The Program Group on Ecumenical and Interreligious Life in the Diocese of Los Angeles
The Episcopal Church’s Racial Reconciliation Team
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LENT I

Becoming the Beloved Community

The civil rights movement in the United States that Dr. King led was a movement that began in the Church. It was the biblical imperatives lived by people of faith that gave the movement its foundation, fire and perseverance to not turn back. Today our work is not done. This Lent you are invited to reflect on how you embody the Beloved Community and how you are incarnating God's agape love in your life and in your community of faith in meaningful and steadfast ways to help a challenged world.

The core value of the quest for Dr. King's Beloved Community was agape love. Dr. King distinguished between three kinds of love: eros, "a sort of aesthetic or romantic love"; philia, "affection between friends" and agape, which he described as "understanding, redeeming goodwill for all," an "overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative"... "the love of God operating in the human heart." He said that "Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people... It begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both... Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community" (King's 1959 Sermon on Gandhi).

Pray the Collect for This Sunday

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Read the Scripture Together: Matthew 4:1-11

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Reflection

It is important to remember that just before Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted, he is baptized. Emerging from the waters of the River Jordan, standing at the outset of his public ministry, Jesus is suddenly caught up by the Spirit into an urgent set of questions: for whom are you doing all that you are about to do? Is this about you, or is it about all of us, together?

We are baptized into those questions as well. They are at the heart of our baptismal covenant, and they underlie the vision of the Beloved Community: an orientation toward life that is about we, not just me. As we enter into our own wilderness journey through Lent, we must ask God's Spirit to help us be honest with ourselves. Can we let go of a self-serving, self-soothing type of spirituality when it deadens us to the needs of the world? Are we committed to the type of discipleship that sees and values our neighbors, especially those at the margins? Are we committed to the well-being of all God's creation? Are we ready to face the truth about ourselves and our shared histories, including the parts that challenge us?

Jesus, alone in the wilderness, quoting the sacred texts of his people, says yes. Yes, I am committed. Yes, I am ready. Yes, let us begin to speak of a world in which all are fed, all are safe, all are seen as precious and worthy. Not just me, but we: a Beloved Community that reveals the loving, communal heart of God.

- The Rev. Phil Hooper, SMMS

Make It Real

Gather in groups, ideally of no more than eight people. Share **Conversation Tips** from the welcome letter.

Now invite people to pause and recall a particular time and place when you felt beloved of God. A time you knew God's love for you. What was this like?

Next, recall a particular time and place when you have not felt God's love. When do you most notice this love feeling elusive?

Share your experience with a partner. Then reflect in the small group. What did it feel like to share about being beloved? Disconnected from God's love? To hear someone else's story?

What Did You Learn?

Now as a whole group, using the **Conversation Tips**, share stories. Then recording the elements of agape you discovered and record them together on a large piece of paper.

- What Gospel texts come to mind of experiences of Jesus showing agape love? What are the elements that made it agape love?
- When did you experience agape love extended to another or group of people either in your own experience or in a story you read or heard in the news. What elements were present that made it an agape love?
- When did you experience agape love extended to you by another? What were the elements that made it agape love?
- Recall a particular time and place when you experienced being a part of Beloved Community.

Wrapping Up

How do you feel as you recall and share these realities? Where do you see possibilities for incarnating agape love more intentionally in your life? Name them together.

Closing Prayer

You may wish to give thanks for God's grace, wisdom, and abiding love, and for the honesty, courage, and vulnerability people demonstrated. You may return to the promise of forgiveness and new life that we receive in Jesus Christ.

LENT 2

Repairing the Breach in Institutions and Society

Baptismal Question

Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People: I will, with God's help.

Core Questions

What institutions and systems are broken near us? How will we participate in the repair, restoration, and healing of people, institutions, and systems?

Pray the Collect for This Sunday

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Read the Scripture Together: John 3:1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Reflection

The Gospel lesson about a pious leader that meets Jesus in secret. That's the gist of it after all, isn't it?

As a young girl I was greatly influenced by my older brothers to do things a girl should not do, such as steal money from my grandmother's purse to give to my older brother—for which I was rewarded with use of his Walkman for 30 minutes. (For those who never knew the joy of having a Walkman, it is a portable cassette player used to play music in private.)

It was always at nighttime that my brothers schemed for me to do terrible things, but the lesson in it all was that they always got caught, and I did not know any better.

So as the Gospel is saying to us in this passage, a very well-known Sanhedrin leader, Nicodemus, is meeting with Jesus in the dark corridors as if he didn't want to be caught.

Jesus was out doing miracles, healing the hurt and providing hope for the lost. So why would he give any notice to Nicodemus?

The eyes of the law-abiding and law-enforcing Nicodemus are finally beginning to open. He is starting to come into the light. The kingdom of God that Jesus is telling him about involves grace, justice, and abundant love, which is extended not just to those in the inner-religious circle. God helps us to repair the breach. For God does not only love the descendants of Abraham and those who are good rule-followers and meticulously obey the Mosaic law. Rather, God loves the cosmos and gives us the example of Jesus, who leads us on our path to reconciliation.

God loves the whole world.

- The Rev. Canon Cathlena A. Plummer

In the Labyrinth: Repairing the Breach in Institutions and Society

God came among us in Jesus because of the deep, divine longing to love and repair this world. What social institutions and systems are broken around you? Where do you notice systems and structures that reflect racial injustice? How could we together participate in the repair, restoration, and healing of institutions and systems?

Make it Real: In Solidarity Exercise

Jesus' death and resurrection are so close we can sense him. Dwell for a moment with your own anticipation of the passion. After some silence, as a whole group, sing or speak this hymn:

*Praise the one who breaks the darkness with a liberating light.
Praise the one who frees the prisoners, turning blindness into sight.
Praise the one who preached the Gospel, healing every dread disease,
Calming storms and feeding thousands with the very bread of peace.*

Invite people to pause and silently imagine communities near and far who live in darkness, illness, hunger and fear: refugees, immigrants with or without documentation, prisoners and detainees in the criminal justice system, victims of human trafficking, and many others. What unjust systems and institutions in our society disproportionately target people of color? In a posture of deep prayer, name these systems aloud. Name and capture them.

Closing Prayer

You may wish to give thanks for God's grace, wisdom, and abiding love, and for the honesty, courage, and vulnerability people demonstrated. You may return to the promise of forgiveness and new life that we receive in Jesus Christ.

LENT 3

Proclaiming the Dream of Beloved Community

Baptismal Question

Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People: I will, with God's help.

Core Questions

How can we publicly acknowledge things done and left undone? What does Beloved Community look like in this place? What behaviors and commitments on our part will foster reconciliation, justice, and healing?

Pray the Collect for This Sunday

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Read the Scripture Together: John 4:5-42

4⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Reflection

The Samaritan woman experienced something in Jesus’ presence that was essential to the alien blue people called the Navi in the 2009 film “Avatar.” It was reflected in the Navi’s saying, “I see you.” When the Navi experienced true person-to-person connection, they said, “I see you” to each other. It was the highest compliment and profession of love in the Navi culture to be truly *seen* by another person—to be truly known . . . and loved, by another.

The Samaritan woman’s encounter with Jesus was life-changing because she felt *seen* by Jesus even after he confronted her about having had five husbands and then one who was not her husband. Perhaps for a woman in the Samaritan culture, she was unused to being seen because of societal misogyny and her life choices. Jesus, a man, a stranger, and a non-Samaritan, not only asked the woman for a drink of water but engaged her in a conversation that included an offer of water that “will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Being *seen* by Jesus emboldened the Samaritan woman to go back to the people in her city and say, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” She sought the affirmation of others about her experience: “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

When we truly encounter Jesus in our lives, it is like being *seen* for the first time. Jesus accepts us in all our life choices just as we are and still offers us living water. Will we bring our siblings from our cities to experience being truly seen by Jesus and to share in his offer of living water? The Samaritan woman’s testimony was the initial summons to come and see Jesus. Perhaps an apt description of the Samaritan woman might be evangelist, as one who shares her experience of Jesus rather than as one who seeks to convert others to believe. It was the experience of hearing Jesus himself that caused the people of the woman’s city to believe.

-Lelanda Lee, lay person from St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Longmont, Colorado

In the Labyrinth: Proclaiming the Dream of Beloved Community

Healing, reconciliation, and justice are big ideas, but they all begin with exploring our stories, shared history, and deepest longings. If you listened closely to your church and your neighbors and civic partners, what might you hear? What experiences have people had around race, ethnicity, and culture? Is there a shared vision of Beloved Community? What collective commitments and behaviors could you all make that would begin to foster Beloved Community?

Make It Real: Listening & Learning Session

Gather in groups of ideally no more than seven people each. Review the **Conversation Tips**:

Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share. Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story. Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.

Ask each participant to tell a story using one of the prompts below. Allow at most two minutes for each story, with a little silence but no discussion between each. Each group should designate a timekeeper who will gently but clearly indicate when each speaker has 30 seconds left, then 10 seconds, and when time is up.

Story Prompts for Group Sharing:

1. When I walk around this neighborhood/town/city/community, I feel...
2. When I look at our neighborhood/town/city/community, I dream of...
3. To me, Beloved Community looks like...
4. I was especially aware of my race when I...
5. I was saddened about race in our neighborhood/town/city/community when...
6. I was grateful for race in our neighborhood/town/city/community when...
7. To foster Beloved Community, I hope to...

Offer everyone the opportunity to share a story. If there is time, go a second round and invite each person to choose a different prompt. Leave 10 minutes to discuss the following questions:

- What surprised you? Did someone's story change the way you view a situation or idea?
- What stories and perspectives do you wish you could hear? How can you humbly invite those voices to the listening & learning process?

Closing Prayer

You may name hopes for deeper relationship with neighbors who differ from the gathered group. You may also acknowledge the dreams each person has shared, and how they resonate with God's dream of healing and wholeness for the whole creation.

LENT 4

Telling the Truth about Our Churches and Race

Baptismal Question

Celebrant: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People: I will, with God's help.

Core Questions

Who are we? What things have we done and left undone regarding racial justice and healing?

Pray the Collect for This Sunday

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Read the Scripture Together: John 9:1-41

9 As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am he." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰ His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple,

but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

Reflection

John begins this chapter by making clear the man was blind from birth and that it was through no one’s fault (sin). The reason it happened was so that **“God’s mighty works might be displayed in him.”**

John was purposeful in making it known that the healing took place in the daytime, followed by Jesus referring to himself as the light. The Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath law. Others accused him of being a sinner and could not perform miracles. The former blind man was on to something. He identifies Jesus as a prophet. It is interesting that he also becomes a teacher to the Pharisees, telling them God listens to anyone one who is devout and does God’s will. He told them that if Jesus wasn’t from God, he could not have healed him. For his truth-telling he was expelled from the synagogue. Jesus found the former blind man and told him that he was **speaking to the Christ**, and the man believed and worshipped him.

It’s Jesus’ turn to teach the Pharisees: “I have come in to the world to exercise judgment so that those who are blind can see and those who see will become blind.” The Pharisees responded, surely, we are not blind, are we? (Note: they asked Jesus, “Are we?”) **Jesus came back and said, “If you were blind you wouldn’t have any sin, but now that YOU say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains”** (emphasis added).

Lesson: Recognize that we are all born blind, so we must search for the light to see and own truth: the truth about oneself, one’s neighbor, and the environment in which we live. We have no recourse other than to 1) dismantle the oppressive systems, designed by humankind, that disrespect individual and group dignity; and 2) to love and care for the good earth given to us by the Creator.

Thank you, Jesus, for leading us in to the light of truth. That spit, dirt, and pool of water is the path that will free us to shout, sing, and dance the truth on our route to Beloved Community. Let us all live in the hope that beginning with ourselves, we can wash in that pool.

- Canon Judith Conley

In the Labyrinth: Telling the Truth about our Churches and Race

We cannot become what God created us to be unless we also examine all the things we think we know about life and community. Who do you say that you are as a church community? To whom do you need to listen to learn ways that you deny the truth about others? What do you, as a church, have to lose in order to include those who have felt excluded?

Make It Real: Inside/Outside Exercise

Gather in groups, ideally of no more than eight people. Share the **Conversation Tips** from the welcome letter. Now invite people to pause and recall a particular time and place when you felt welcome, as if your voice, ideas, and presence were valued (if it has never happened, imagine it in detail). Pair off and tell the story to a neighbor, for about one minute each.

Next, recall a particular time and place when you felt unwelcome, as if your voice, ideas and presence were not valued or received. Share with the same neighbor. Then reflect in the small group. What did it feel like to share about being welcome? Unwelcome? To hear someone else's story? What did you learn?

Now as a whole group, take a large sheet of paper and draw a circle within a circle.

- What racial, cultural, and ethnic groups experience their voices, presence, and ideas as valued and welcome in your congregation today?
- Which groups have been welcome and shaped your church's story since its founding? Write those groups in the inner circle.
- What racial, cultural, and ethnic groups are not present and/or not welcome in your congregation today, although they are in the same or a nearby town, area, or region?
- What groups have been unwelcome or on your church's margins in the past? Write those groups in the wider circle.

How do you feel as you recall and share these realities?

Where do you see possibilities for growing into Beloved Community? Name them together.

Closing Prayer

You may wish to give thanks for God's grace, wisdom, and abiding love, and for the honesty, courage, and vulnerability people demonstrated. You may return to the promise of forgiveness and new life that we receive in Jesus Christ.

LENT 5

Practicing the Way of Love in the Pattern of Jesus

Baptismal Question

Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People: I will, with God's help.

Core Question

How will we grow as reconcilers, healers, and justice-bearers? How will we actively grow relationship across dividing walls and seek Christ in the other?

Pray the Collect for This Sunday

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Read the Scripture Together: John 11:1-45

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought

that she was going to the tomb to weep there.³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

Reflection

There is a time to grieve. Perhaps, when grieving, you, too, have heard the oft sincere but unhelpful attempts at providing comfort. “It is in God’s plan.” “This was meant to happen.” Or, maybe, like Jesus, you heard others say that lack of faith or lack of power was the reason for the grief. All of these are ways that we undermine grief and its sacred process in both the church and wider society. In this season of our life as church together, we are holding space for the vision of becoming Beloved Community through racial reconciliation and justice. In journeying together, we cannot avoid the pain, grief, and anger experienced by those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and then proclaim the good news of healing and resurrection with honesty.

Jesus models for us what it means to hold space for grief on that road to resurrection. Jesus does not skip steps or cover up the hurt that a community is experiencing. With the loss of a son, brother, cousin, and friend, Lazarus’ death impacts his whole community. In a society in which patriarchal structures and patrimony are essential to family inheritance and bonds, his sisters are likely experiencing anxiety and fear with their mourning. It is not a surprise that some present want Jesus to rush to the resurrection...to fix things. Yet, what does Jesus do? He is moved by his grief for his friend Lazarus and his love for Mary and Martha. The Gospel says plainly and simply that “Jesus wept.” In questioning his motives and his power, could it be that some saw his grief as a sign of weakness and powerlessness?

How do we see Jesus when he weeps with the grieving today? I often hear, “Why can’t we move on?” or that “slavery/segregation, etc., were so long ago.” Is the church colluding with toxic masculinity in treating tears of grief as weakness? Is the church afraid that plainly and honestly naming the ways in which the church has been complicit in the harm done to those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color will make the church seem weak? The church is called to boldly proclaim that “Jesus wept” just as much as we proclaim that “Jesus saves” and “Jesus resurrects.” Let us not deny the grief that must be experienced on the way to resurrection. A part of this journey is practicing the way of following Jesus amid grief, sorrow, and death so that we can share in his resurrection and new life.

-Fr. John Caleb Collins (Quidera)

In the Labyrinth: Practicing the Way of Love in the Pattern of Jesus

Loving our neighbor takes formation, practice, and commitment. How will each of us learn to be reconcilers, healers, and justice-bearers in Jesus' name? How could we practice sharing stories, growing relationship across dividing walls, and seeking Christ in the "other"?

Make It Real: This Far by Faith Exercise

Gather in circles of no more than 15 people. Review the **Conversation Tips**:

Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share. Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story. Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.

Now reflect on ways your congregation or ministry engages in loving your neighbors, within and outside the church. Make a list of the most significant ministries (no more than three). For each...

- Recall the story of how your church took up this ministry. Who had the idea? Why did others say "yes"?
- Describe the process of beginning the ministry. What was hard? What made it work?
- What (and who) did you not know at the beginning that you know now?
- How has God blessed you and your church through these ministries?

Now consider your conversations over the first two weeks. Think about people groups - racial, ethnic, and cultural, but also socioeconomic, ideological, and theological - with whom your church has experienced separation or even tension. With which of these do you wish your church would develop deeper relationship?

Once the circle has decided, reflect together:

- How could the ministry experiences you described before help you to approach the challenge of forming these challenging new relationships? How are those experiences a gift you can offer?
- What new learning and practice would help you to prepare for relationship across difference and division? Book study? Dismantling racism training? Story-telling training? Pilgrimage? Prayer? (For specific information, check www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation)

Closing Prayer

Invite people to name what graces they have experienced in these Lenten sessions. Name the gifts you need, as individuals and as a congregation, to keep walking the labyrinth and becoming Beloved Community. You might finally ask Jesus to dwell richly in you, so that you can share his light and be Jesus Movement people in the world.