



PREPARING TO BECOME THE  
**BELOVED  
COMMUNITY**

**LENT - YEAR B**

# Preparing to Become the Beloved Community

## Year B

**Lent 2024, 2027, 2030**

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Learn more about Becoming the Beloved Community and The Episcopal Church at [www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation).

Share reflections and queries by writing to [reconciliation@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:reconciliation@episcopalchurch.org) or on social media using #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 Episcopal Church’s Racial Reconciliation Team

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# LENT I

## Becoming the Beloved Community

### 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 for ever. Amen.

### Read the Scripture Together: Mark 1:9-15

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

<sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

### Reflection: Where Fear Tempts, Agape Love Connects

In today's reading, Jesus is tempted by Satan while in the wilderness with wild beasts, but angels wait on him. Do we dare to trust, when we are scared by events around us and tempted to live only for our own security, that angels are also with us, bringing our needs to God? When it feels like a safer bet to seek power over others than to honor our interconnectedness, can we be strengthened through our unity with Christ, to live in love rather than fear?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us that agape love seeks to preserve and create community. In his own writing he defines agape as "purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is the love of God operating in the human heart." Agape love is the highest form of love for all humanity and all living things. Through agape love, we see our connections to each other. The Lakota saying "Mitakuye Oyasin," translated as, "We are all Related," teaches us about agape love.

In the Anishinaabe creation story, there was a great flood. The whole earth was under water. Many animals dove underwater to find earth and bring it back to the surface. After many unsuccessful attempts by others, Muskrat took his turn. He had no fear and dove in, determined to find some earth. The others feared for him because he was small and weak. Muskrat was under the water for a long time. Surely, he must have drowned. Eventually, Muskrat's lifeless body floated to the surface. On further examination, the others were shocked to witness that Muskrat had indeed found some earth and brought it back. Muskrat sacrificed himself for the others. Turtle was so astonished by Muskrat's love and sacrifice that he himself offered his shell to carry the earth for all. Thus, Turtle Island came into being as home for all of creation.

It is with all tribes on Turtle Island that we must learn to conquer fear and the temptation to live for ourselves—just as Jesus did in the wilderness. When Turtle Island came into being, wild beasts roamed, vicious in their attacks. The people of all tribes needed to be alert and ready. But lest fear take over, the people of Turtle Island were a spiritual people leading a prayerful life of thanksgiving. The Creator is gracious toward us, sustaining us through times of great trial and fear.

As descendants of the first tribes of Turtle Island, we are here to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. We, as descendants, are here to tell our stories of conquering fear and temptation through action and prayer.

We believe, as descendants on Turtle Island, that we are interconnected to everything, including each other and our ancestors. If we are connected, then we are our ancestors, and we are our grandchildren. We are the generations before us, and we are the generations yet to come. Through Spirit, we are connected to all of creation: the Earth, water, fire, air, muskrat, turtle, and wild beasts.

We are also connected by our experiences of fear and temptation. Jesus knew about this interconnectedness. In the wilderness, he acknowledged the spirit of temptation but did not fall. Instead, Jesus chose to take on his sacrifice for us, for our ancestors, our grandchildren, and for all of creation. Even when we fear or are tempted, when action and prayer seem hard, or when we feel disconnected, we can trust that Jesus has overcome, that he did not fall, and that we are always connected to him.

### **In the Labyrinth: Becoming the Beloved Community**

The vision of Beloved Community rises from a commitment to follow the Bible's most important commandments: to love God and love our neighbors, in whom we see the face of God.

Beloved Community is the community that loves as God intends: where truth is told and hierarchies of human value are dismantled; where each person and culture is protected and honored as an equally beloved, interconnected part of the human family of God; and where we counter human selfishness—the true root of sin and racism—with the selfless love of Jesus. Our trust in God's love frees us from fear to live in Beloved Community.

### **Make It Real: Connection to All Creation**

*Discussion:* Gather in groups, ideally with no more than eight people, using the following questions as a guide for discussion.

- Describe how it feels to know that you are loved by God and by others. How does knowing this transform your life?
- What is it like to know that you are connected to all of God's creation throughout all time?
- When have you experienced agape love extended to you by another? What elements made it agape love?
- Recall a particular time and place when you experienced being a part of the Beloved Community. What elements made it a Beloved Community?
- What is your part in sharing agape love and being part of the Beloved Community?
- Where do you see possibilities for incarnating agape love more intentionally in your life, your community, and toward all aspects of creation?

### **Activity: Show and Tell**

*Suggested Materials:*

- Index cards
- Pens or pencils

*Instructions:*

1. Distribute an index card and a writing instrument to each participant.
2. To prepare the community for the work of becoming the Beloved Community, begin with a small practice.
3. Invite each person to write or draw something meaningful about their lives and culture that they contribute to the Beloved Community.
4. After adequate time for preparation, invite each person to share what they wrote on their card. Encourage participants to share courageously, take risks, be vulnerable, listen to each other attentively, embrace differences, celebrate the quirks of life, and learn from each other.

5. At the end, invite participants to take home their index cards as a reminder of their place in the Beloved Community.

### **Closing Prayer**

Holy and gracious God, we thank you for allowing us to live another day. We pray for all those who are unable to pray, for our ancestors and descendants. We ask that we may talk for you and do for you that which is needed to bring all people closer to you through the body of Christ. Through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.

# 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: Mark 8:31-38

<sup>31</sup> [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

### Reflection: Walking Alongside the Other

Jesus' rebuke to Peter, followed by his challenge to "Take up your cross..." often strikes us as a call to arms. However, it is more of a call to "not-arms," as he rebukes Peter's desire to marshal a holy army and invest Jesus as a military king. Jesus instead calls Peter and the other disciples to carry their crosses, not yet a symbol of Christianity, but a tool for Roman power and control. The disciples and early Christians were called to lead what would have been considered nearly criminal lives under Jesus' alternative kingdom, the kingdom of God. Carrying the cross always ends with one's death, either death at the hands of the Romans, as happened to many disciples, or death to self and ambition, as often happens to us when we follow the way of Jesus.

Jesus' path of suffering, and our potential path of suffering as his followers, lies alongside the path of the outcast and the marginalized, the other "cross-carriers" whom society has made to bear the burdens of our unjust hierarchies. As disciples of Jesus, we will find that taking up the cross will involve doing what Jesus did: healing the sick, extending forgiveness, and inviting everyone into Beloved Community. It will mean working to change social institutions and systems of power in our society that are sick with racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and factionalism. We will have to walk alongside those whom society marginalizes, demonizes, and profits from, harming the Beloved Community. Just as in Jesus' day, those whom we oppose will push back. This difficult work is what we are called to as followers of the Way.

## **In the Labyrinth: Repairing the Breach**

God came among us in Jesus because of the deep, divine love that heals and repairs the world. What social institutions and systems are broken around you? Where do you notice systems and structures that reflect racial injustice? How have you been part of how these systems were created and maintained? How does your own individual brokenness play a role in the breach? Together, how could we participate in the repair, restoration, and healing of institutions and systems?

## **Make It Real: Envisioning the Repair Work**

*Discussion:* Gather in groups, ideally with no more than eight people, using the following questions as a guide for discussion.

- Where in your community, either your church or the surrounding area, do you witness a breach in society? Who is this breach harming? How is it being perpetuated?
- How satisfied are you with your personal (or your church's) level of engagement with repairing the breach?
- How do you imagine that this breach might be repaired? What are the skills and information you need to begin? What are your first steps?
- Whom will you walk alongside in this work?
- What obstacles do you face in repairing the breach? Whom might you stand against?
- What are your sources of strength or courage as you consider repairing the breach?
- What is one specific action you could take to move forward in your journey as a repairer of the breach?

## **Activity: Stained-Glass Window**

This activity can be done by individuals working alone or collaboratively in small groups.

### *Suggested Materials*

- Crayons, markers, or colored pencils
- Pens or pencils
- Rulers
- Paper

### *Instructions*

1. Invite participants to take a piece of paper and write "Repairing the Breach" along the bottom of the page.
2. Draw a big "V" across the whole page. The two bottom corners of your page, created outside the "V," are the sides of the breach. Give these "sides" of the breach names (e.g., God's Kingdom, the Way of Love, peace, harmony, Beloved Community, etc.).
3. Inside the "V," using a ruler and a writing instrument, draw intersecting lines at random to create the impression of a stained-glass window inside the breach.
4. Ask participants to consider what it means to be repairers of the breach, to take up their cross and engage. Invite them to brainstorm the following:
  - a. Words that strengthen them in this work, such as "hope, bravery, or love."
  - b. Role models in the great "cloud of witnesses" who have led in this repairing work.
  - c. Names of people or other aspects of God's beloved creation who suffer in the breach.
  - d. Skills we have or might develop to engage this work.
  - e. Actions we might take to repair the breach.
5. In each of the blank spaces created between the intersecting lines on the paper, have participants write or draw their choice of these words, symbols, names, images, actions, etc.
6. Then, invite them to color in the spaces behind the words or images to fill in the stained-glass window.



7. Invite participants to share with the group what this exercise was like for them. Is there a prayer in their stained-glass window they might like to share with others, or remember going forward?
8. Invite them to take their stained-glass window drawing and hang it somewhere where they will see it and be reminded of their call to be a repairer of the breach.

### **Closing Prayer**

Gracious God, we thank you for creating us with hearts, minds, and imaginations that can help us to see the brokenness of our society clearly. Help us to envision a way for those breaches to be repaired. Grant us courage and wisdom as we discern how we might take up this work. Help us to remember all those who are engaged in this work together that we might follow in their example. Guide us in knowing what we need from you to equip us and sustain us as we work for racial justice. We thank you for calling and using us to bring about justice and peace on the Earth. May we embody your love to all people. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## 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 2:13-22

<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup> Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup> He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." <sup>18</sup> The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." <sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

#### Reflection: Proclaiming Love in Broken Places

On a 30-foot concrete wall topped with layers of razor wire stands a mural painting of George Floyd and the words, "I can't breathe." It's not in Minneapolis. It's not even in the United States. It's in Bethlehem, the West Bank town where Jesus was born, splashed across the massive separation wall built to physically partition one part of God's Beloved Community from another.

Not far away in Jerusalem, massive security surrounds the hotly contested landmark known by many names: the Noble Sanctuary (al-Ḥaram al-Sharīf) or Al-Aqsa Compound to Muslims, and the Temple Mount to Jews. This is the spot where Jesus turned over the tables of corruption in anger and said, "No, not in this holy place." What would he say now in this land we call holy, so breathtaking in its beauty and heartbreaking in its tragedy? What would he say to all those who through conflict have kept peaceful coexistence and Beloved Community out of reach?

We need look no further than our own context to find hatred, injustice, and violence. What in our own communities do we dare to name as denying God's will for us? Where would Jesus turn over the tables in our own country? At the U.S. Capitol building? In courtrooms? In jails and prisons incarcerating inordinate numbers of people of color and the poor? At churches that turn a blind eye? Where do we need to proclaim the Beloved Community and tear down walls of oppression?

## **In the Labyrinth: Proclaiming the Dream**

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, neighbors, and civic partners, as well as to your own stories of moments where you shared Jesus' outrage, what might you hear? Where does your anger point you to a dream, a vision, or a hope, denied and denigrated? 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: Finding Courage**

*Discussion:* Gather in groups, ideally with no more than eight people, using the following questions as a guide for discussion.

- Take a minute to think about a time when you wanted to “flip a table” over hatred or harm directed toward a neighbor. Many have strong recollections from childhood. You may feel vulnerable to share this story of your anger at injustice with the group. Be brave.
- What does your anger at injustice show you about your dream for Beloved Community?
- What injustices do you witness in your community or context today, and how do they contradict the teachings of Jesus and God's dream for a Beloved Community?
- It takes courage to proclaim the dream in the face of injustice. What gives you strength to take a stand?
- When have you proclaimed the dream? How did your faith support your proclamation?
- When have you seen injustice but failed to act? What did you learn from this experience?

## **Activity: Prayer Beads**

This activity can be done by individuals working alone or together in a small group.

### *Suggested Materials*

- Assorted beads
- String
- Scissors

### *Instructions*

1. Take a piece of string and an assortment of beads.
2. As you consider what it means to proclaim the dream of Beloved Community, think of words that strengthen you in this work, such as “hope, courage, faith, or strength.” What helps you transform the anger of consciousness into loving action?
3. As you place each bead on the string, pray that you might be filled with these qualities as you follow the way of Jesus.
4. When you are finished, tie the string of beads together for use as prayer beads.
5. As you wear or use your prayer beads, be reminded of your call to be a proclaimer of the dream.

## **Closing Prayer**

Loving God, we pray today for the invitation to have more grace with ourselves and each other during these trying times. Let our anger show us where the dream of Beloved Community is denied and remind us that we all desire to belong. Embolden us to invite everyone to the table. Give us courage to proclaim your will of Beloved Community in every place we go. Help us to deepen our relationships with neighbors who are different from us. May our dreams resonate with your dream of healing and wholeness for the whole creation. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

# 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 3:14-21

<sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> “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.

<sup>17</sup> “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. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

### Reflection: In the Light of Christ's Love, Shame Withers and Truth Liberates

God seeks to heal us in our broken places and invites us into the light. When it comes to healing racism in the church, truth-telling and hearing are essential. Bringing our deeds, histories, and covert systems into the light creates the possibility of cultural and personal healing. From defending chattel slavery, to participating in the removal of Native children to American Indian boarding schools, to ongoing complicity in systems of exploitation and harm, The Episcopal Church has a lot of truth-telling to do.

As we know in our own lives and communities, fear and shame can cause us to disconnect from the truth—and therefore from ourselves and each other. Instead of trusting in God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit to work through the body of Christ no matter how broken we are, we can believe distortions that suggest we are unlovable and unsalvageable. We can resort to defensiveness or to dominating the narrative. Instead of turning toward God together, instead of telling the truth and listening to each other with humility, curiosity, forbearance, and courage, we can alienate and oppose people who know, see, or live, differently from us—people whose truth may feel unbearable for us to acknowledge. We can fall silent. When truth is absent, our relationships will be warped and fragmented.

God offers us a shameless path in Jesus Christ, who truly loves us and calls us to follow his way, truth, and life courageously. By seeking the truth with curiosity and telling the truth with compassion, we open the floodgates of justice and mercy for all people. Can we step into the light together?

## **In the Labyrinth: Telling the Truth**

We cannot become who God created us to be unless we examine what we think we know about life and community—including by the light of what others think and know. Who do we say that we are as a church community? How do our narratives reflect or distort us as the body of Christ? How is the truth about us more complex than we've acknowledged? To whom do we need to listen? What do we, as a church, have to lose to include those who have felt excluded and to bring what is hidden into the light? Historically, there have been too few narrators of the world's story. How does our assurance in Jesus free us up to enter into dialogue, to share and receive each other's narratives?

## **Make It Real: The Way to Truth**

*Discussion:* Gather in groups, ideally with no more than eight people using the following questions as a guide for discussion.

- What are the sources of guilt, shame, and fear in our relationships? In the life of the congregation and wider community to which we belong?
- How does what we keep hidden disconnect us from essential relationships with God and each other? Can we imagine holding the truth up to God?
- How do you receive God's gifts of grace, mercy, love, and hope? How do you respond to God's invitation to move past fear and shame? Do you find it difficult in any way?
- How have we approached truth-telling about oppression, poverty, privilege, and other forms of injustice in our midst and the world?
- How can our community become ready to engage in a fuller truth-telling process? What conversation can we have that will move us and our communities more fully toward liberating truth and healing? To whom do we need to listen?
- What is one thing we can do now to put love-overcoming-fear and truth-overcoming-shame into practice as individuals and as a community?

## **Activity: Personal Journaling**

*Suggested Materials:*

- Paper
- Pens or pencils

*Instructions:*

1. Invite participants to take a piece of paper and a writing instrument.
2. At the top of the page have them write: "I am..." and number the page along the left column from 1 to 20.
3. Truth-telling starts with understanding where we are. Ask participants to spend some time writing 20 "I am..." statements about who they are as a person, both characteristics and behaviors. They may start with identities (e.g., mother, sister, friend) and let the exercise take them where it leads (e.g., vulnerable, broken, longing). Encourage them not to worry about whether their statements are "negative" or "positive."
4. Next, have participants turn the page over and write: "We are..." and repeat the activity, exploring who we are as a church community.
5. Then, invite the participants to spend some time exploring the following prompts through journaling: "What do you notice about who you are as an individual? What do you notice about who we are as a church community?"
6. As the journaling time comes to an end, ask participants to continue writing throughout the week and allow what comes up to speak to them on a deeper level.

**Closing Prayer**

O God, in whom we have life, thank you for your unconditional love and for your invitation to be courageous and vulnerable as we demonstrate honesty in community. We pray for all conditions of humanity; that you, O God, would make the truth of your love for all creation known throughout the world. Make your holy universal church, guided by the Holy Spirit, a leader in the movement of truth-telling and justice. We walk in expectation of your promise of forgiveness and new life that we have received in your dear Son, Jesus Christ. In his name, we pray, Amen.

# 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 12:20-33

<sup>20</sup> Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup> They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup> Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

<sup>27</sup> "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." <sup>29</sup> The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." <sup>30</sup> Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup> Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." <sup>33</sup> He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

### Reflection: Bearing Fruit that Heals

In our Gospel text for the fifth week of Lent, we encounter Jesus preparing us for what it means to live into the imminent reality of his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Those final, loving acts of grace for the world represent the fulfillment of his earthly vocation—what he was meant to do for all of humanity. By embracing and living out the truth of his human existence, Jesus glorified the Father. And we are now called and empowered to glorify God as well. To be a follower of Jesus, then, is to acknowledge and celebrate the many ways that we have been gifted by God in our particularity of being.

As we each embrace our humanity more fully, we participate in the work of building the Beloved Community and glorify God in our own beautifully diverse ways. Perhaps you are an expressive painter, or a soulful singer, a passionate baker, a master gardener? Or are you an industrious carpenter, a meticulous researcher, a dedicated potter, an expressive musician, or an agile dancer? Maybe you find yourself enthralled by the craft of writing, the logic of mathematics, or the fine art of listening as a tender nurturer of souls. As we practice cultivating our particularity of gifts and allow them to bear fruit that can be shared generously in loving service to the world, we fulfill what we are meant to do. May we learn to never hold back in letting our faith and our humanity shine brightly for others to see.

## **In the Labyrinth: Practicing the Way**

Loving our neighbor takes formation, practice, and commitment. How will we grow 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," reflecting our own giftedness by God?

## **Make It Real: Bringing Forth Fruit**

*Discussion:*

- Describe a time when you were fully alive. What did it feel like to inhabit that space?
- Now think about your own gifts, skills, and passions. What fruit are you bringing forth the world? What might you have to give to your community and the wider world? What will bear fruit? What do you need for these fruits to grow in you?
- How can we use the gifts that we are given to be agents of healing in our own lives and in our communities?
- How will you share your gifts with those around you? How can we be intentionally inclusive stewards of the different fruits that we bring to God's garden?

## **Activity: Go Outside**

*Suggested Materials:*

- Fruit
- Flowers

*Instructions*

1. Invite participants to take a walk around the church grounds and appreciate the natural surroundings. Provide them with this prompt: "While you are there observe your surroundings. What is the landscaping like? What messages do you think the physical property sends to its neighbors and to people passing by? Is there a garden? Are there spaces—no matter how small—that could be cultivated to create and share beauty and nourishment?"
2. Return to your meeting space. Invite participants to consider together if and how you might engage one of the following next steps.
  - a. Gather a variety of fruits you may have at home or from the grocery store. Just like people, different plants have different needs in order to thrive in the environments in which they live. Spend some time observing the fruit and their characteristics. Can you tell a story about these fruits? Where were they grown? What kinds of conditions did they need to grow? Who grew them? And how did they get to you?
  - b. Plan a visit to a community garden if there is one in your area. While you are there observe your surroundings. What do you notice about the garden plots? What kinds of things are being grown there? Talk to some of the people who are working there. Who uses the community garden? Do they grow produce for themselves or for other people?
  - c. Plan a community event where everyone helps to prepare plants to share in a garden space at your church for families and individuals to nurture and care for. These could be pollinator-friendly perennials, or succulents, or trees—whatever is native to where you call home, whatever expresses the particularity of your place.

## **Closing Prayer**

Most merciful God, you call us out into the world to proclaim your glory in the reconciliation of all things. Draw our hearts ever closer to you. Help us each day to follow Christ into the difficult and holy work of bearing good fruit for the sake of the world. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, the way, the truth, and the life, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.