



Living Well Through Advent 2018



*Practicing Generosity With All Your
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

Living Well Through Advent 2018



*Practicing Generosity With All Your
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

The Living Compass ministry initiative was created with a generous gift from Ab and Nancy Nicholas. While Ab passed away in 2016, their generous support continues to inspire us and make this resource possible.



Outfitting individuals, families, congregations, and communities with tools and training for the journey toward wellness and wholeness.

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Contents

About the Writers	4
The Right Rev. Brian L. Cole	
Amy Cook	
Randall Curtis	
The Rev. Shannon Kelly	
The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner	
Introduction	6
The Living Compass: A Brief Overview	8
Ways to Use Practicing Generosity	10
The First Sunday of Advent	11
Daily Spiritual Practice: <i>Being Generous with Ourselves</i>	13
The Second Sunday of Advent	19
Daily Spiritual Practice: <i>Being Generous with Others</i>	21
The Third Sunday of Advent	27
Daily Spiritual Practice: <i>Being Generous with God</i>	29
The Fourth Sunday of Advent	35
Christmas Eve: <i>Creating Space to Receive Generosity</i>	37
Christmas Day: <i>Receiving the Gift of Generosity</i>	38
<i>Living Well Through Lent 2019</i>	41
<i>Vivir Una Buena Cuaresma en el 2019</i>	41

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About the Writers

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The Right Rev. Brian L. Cole is the 5th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of East Tennessee. Prior to serving as bishop, Brian served parishes in Lexington KY, and Asheville NC. Bishop Brian is an Associate of the Order of the Holy Cross and a life-long St. Louis Cardinals baseball fan. Brian is married to Susan Parker Weatherford and they have one son, Jess, who is completing undergraduate studies at Samford University in Birmingham AL. Brian and Susan share their home with a black and white Shih Tzu, Jerry Lee, who has convinced Brian he is a dog person.



Amy Cook is now in her second year as the Faith Formation Working Group Head for the Episcopal Diocese of California, after thirteen years on the bishop's staff in Massachusetts. She settled into Oakland with her husband, Ron, and two cats, Nick and Nora. Amy oversees adult faith formation and works with college chaplaincies, diocesan camps, and the ordination process. Amy also loves participating in community theater as an actor, costumer, and director.



Randall Curtis lives with his wife and teenage daughter in North Little Rock, Arkansas. They share their home with two pugs, an Australian shepherd, and at least 20 tortoises from all over the world. With more than 20 years' experience in Episcopal Youth Ministry, he currently works for The Episcopal Church in Arkansas where he is the Evangelist and Ministry Developer for youth





and young adults. Randall is also the program coordinator for the Forma Certificate in Family and Youth Ministry.

The Rev. Shannon Kelly's passion and vocation has focused on advocating for and ministering with children, youth, and young adults through the churches she has served and the communities in which she has lived—in California, New York, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts. She currently serves as Officer for Young Adult and Campus Ministries for The Episcopal Church. Shannon lives in Sandwich, Massachusetts, with her husband, teenage son, and amazing hound dog (who she loves to take for walks).



The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner—founder of the Living Compass faith and wellness initiative—has served his community for more than 30 years as an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, spiritual director, and author. In addition to his coaching and psychotherapy work, he leads wellness retreats for organizations and leadership teams. Scott has been married to Holly Hughes Stoner for 40 years and together they are the co-creators of *The Teen Compass* and the *Parent Wellness Compass*. In his free time, Scott loves cycling, running, and soccer, and spending time with family.



Introduction

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The season of Advent, along with these reflections and practices, provides us with the opportunity we need to slow down so we can make counter-cultural choices, choices that will help prepare us for the true meaning of Christmas.

We are pleased to include the voices and deep reflections on *practicing generosity* from four featured writers. Randall Curtis begins on the first Sunday of Advent by inviting us to explore how giving more of ourselves might be the perfect antidote to the anxieties and worries created by tempting distractions. The reflection for the second Sunday of Advent, written by The Rev. Shannon Kelly, reminds us that a daily practice of gratitude makes it much easier to be more generous.

In his reflection for the third Sunday of Advent, The Rt. Rev. Brian Cole explores how two very different role models show us that when we share generously, we are living the lives God intended for us. In our final Sunday reflection, Amy Cook writes beautifully of the gift of generosity Elizabeth offered when she put her own good news second in order to be present to Mary's news, and invites us to wonder how we can be more generous in creating space for the good news of others.

In addition to expanding on each writer's reflections throughout the week, each Monday we invite you to engage more deeply with the theme of *practicing generosity* through a specific daily practice for the week. The daily practice for week one is "being generous with ourselves," week two is "being generous with others," week three is "being generous with God," and the daily practice for the fourth week in Advent is "receiving the gift of generosity."

It has been a joy to write the daily reflections for this devotional, inspired by our four guest writers. We at Living Compass are grateful and honored to walk with you on the journey through Advent toward Christmas.



The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner

Director, Living Compass Faith & Wellness Ministry



Advent Year C	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
First Sunday of Advent December 2, 2018	Jeremiah 33:14-16	Psalm 25:1-10	1 Thessalonians 3:9-13	Luke 21:25-36
Second Sunday of Advent December 9, 2018	Baruch 5:1-9 OR Malachi 3:1-4	Luke 1:68-79	Philippians 1:3-11	Luke 3:1-6
Third Sunday of Advent December 16, 2018	Zephaniah 3:14-20	Isaiah 12:2-6	Philippians 4:4-7	Luke 3:7-18
Fourth Sunday of Advent December 23, 2018	Micah 5:2-5a	Luke 1:46b-55 OR Psalm 80:1-7	Hebrews 10:5-10	Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Living Compass—working with The Rev. Pedro Lopez and The Rev. Uriel Lopez from the Episcopal Diocese of Texas—has also published: *Vivir Un Buen Adviento en el 2018 Practicando la Generosidad con todo el Corazón, Alma, Fuerzas, y Mente*—a Spanish Advent guide with completely original content by featured writers El Revdo. Pedro Lopez, El Revdo. Uriel Lopez, and Obispo Hector Monterroso. To learn more or to order, contact us: info@livingcompass.org.



The Living Compass: *A Brief Overview*

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Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.

—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

Living Compass provides tools and trainings to assist individuals, families, and congregations as they seek to live the abundant life God intends for them in all areas of life—heart, soul, strength, and mind. We use these four sections as our compass points to help guide and equip us in eight areas of wellness.

Areas of Wellness

Heart

- **Relationships.** The ability to create and maintain healthy, life-giving connections with others.
- **Handling Emotions.** The ability to process, express, and receive emotions in a healthy way.



The Living Compass

Soul

- **Spirituality.** The ability to develop and practice a strong personal faith, and to discover a meaningful purpose in life.
- **Rest and Play.** The ability to balance work and play and to renew oneself.



Strength

- **Resilience.** The ability to deal positively with the adversities of life.
- **Care for the Body.** The ability to build healthy habits and practices regarding our physical well-being, as well as the ability to end unhealthy ones.

Mind

- **Organization.** The ability to keep track of and make good use of possessions, money, and time.
- **Vocation.** The ability to align our life's purpose with the gifts and talents given by God. This includes work, volunteer service, and any educational/enrichment activities.

Creating resources grounded in the integration of faith and wellness is what makes Living Compass different from other wellness programs. Living Compass believes we all have many compasses that compete to guide our lives, often outside of our awareness. When we choose to make faith the compass that guides decisions in all areas of our lives, we are better able to experience wellness and wholeness. It is worth noting that “health,” “healing,” “wholeness,” and “holy” all come from the same root word “hal” or “haelen.”

Ways to Use Practicing Generosity

This guide is intended to be used for daily personal reflection as you journey through Advent. Each Sunday begins with a reflection written by one of our featured writers. Every Monday in Advent we offer a daily spiritual practice around the theme of *practicing generosity*. The other days of the week begin with a scripture or quote, followed by a reflection, and then space for you to record any thoughts, feelings, or insights. If you'd like to write more than space allows, we encourage you to purchase a journal to use with this guide.

Practicing generosity can also be used by groups. Each week, people could gather—in a home, at a local coffee shop, or at church—to discuss their responses to the daily reflections. We all benefit from a community of support, and this guide can be used to form or deepen that community.

A couple of other suggested uses:

- Congregations could make this guide available to its members to help keep the focus on Christ during the season of Advent.
- As the resource for a half- or full-day Advent retreat. The retreat leader could offer the daily reading as the reflection, or as a starting point for their own reflections. Following each reflection, participants could record their responses, either in the guide, or in a separate journal. Giving each person a copy of this guide would ensure that the experience of the retreat would stay with them throughout the remainder of Advent.

The seasons of Advent and Christmas are filled with the presence of generosity, if only we remember to pause and open ourselves to receiving this gift. This Advent season, however you use this guide, our hope and prayer is that you feel supported in your desire to more fully practice your faith in a way that is deeply renewing.

The First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2018

Reflection

by Randall Curtis



I am like many Americans—an easily excitable consumer. I am certain that Internet ad companies love me. I love finding *the new* restaurant, listening to *the new song*, watching *the new show* and finding *the new internet meme*. When a squirrel jumps across the path where my dog and I often walk, I am the person who agrees with my dog (at least initially) and thinks chasing the squirrel is a really fun idea. I write this with a confessing heart, but I also know that I am not alone.

In a world that is filled more and more every day with tempting distractions, like cell phones, tech gifts, and pop-up advertisements everywhere, it is easy to fall into the trap of trying to consume the newest trend. It is easy, in the race to keep up with it all while worrying about what we might be missing, to spend the day jumping from new excitement to new excitement, from new worry to new worry.

In the first reading of Advent we are told to, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.” These distractions are the new “drunkenness and worries of this life,” which means that as we prepare for Christmas and God breaking into the world, we will have to make sure we look up from our phones to see it.

This Advent can be a time to prepare for Christmas by stopping the drunken consumption of the newest thing. To put our phones down and stop the worry that is only a notification away.

Then we can ask ourselves:

- What am I missing when I get distracted by “the new”?
- Am I giving more than I am taking from the world?

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

- How can I be on “guard” against all the ways the insatiable quest for the new sneaks up on me?
- Are there others in my community who need something basic that I could provide, yet might not see in my quest to discover the latest and greatest?
- How can I offer generosity toward my fellow human beings rather than mindlessly taking what the world offers, only a tap or swipe away?
- How can I be more generous to my family, friends, and community as I prepare for the coming of Christ into the world?

Advent is the perfect time to explore how we might give more of ourselves on behalf of God in the world, and how that generosity might be the perfect antidote to being “anxiously drunk.” One way we can “be on guard” is to ask and answer questions like these together. I hope you’ll join me.



Monday, December 3, 2018

Being Generous with Ourselves

You can't pour from an empty cup.

—Anonymous

Each Monday a spiritual practice will be introduced related to our theme of *practicing generosity*, and we will invite you to try that practice throughout the week. This week's practice is *Being Generous with Ourselves*.

Focusing on being generous with ourselves may seem like an unlikely place for a Christian devotional to begin, as we often associate being a Christian with loving and giving to others. In some Christian circles giving yourself away to others to the point of exhaustion, and even burnout, is celebrated as a badge of honor. Such a mindset sees self-care as selfish and self-centered.

Yet the quote above says, “You can’t pour from an empty cup.” We can’t be generous with others if we don’t have something in our emotional/spiritual/physical cups to give. I would like to invite you to think about self-care, not as being self-centered, but instead as a way of nurturing a *centered self*, a person who is able to care for others from a non-anxious place of fullness.

In yesterday’s reflection, Randall Curtis invited us to reflect on the words from the Gospel reading: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.” Being generous in caring for ourselves is always essential, but uniquely so during the holiday season when we need to be on guard so that we are not weighed down by the pressures and worries that enter our lives this time of year. Our reflections for this week will help us to look more closely at the challenges we might encounter as we move through Advent and how we might be more generous with ourselves in the midst of those challenges.

Making it personal: Have you ever had the thought that self-care is selfish? What does the idea of being generous with yourself bring to mind? What are some of the challenges you face right now to being generous with yourself?

Tuesday, December 4, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Heart

Riches are not from abundance of worldly goods, but from a contented mind.

—Unknown

Emotional Wellness is one of the aspects of wellness included in the *Heart* quadrant of the Living Compass. As we continue to reflect on this week's spiritual practice of being generous with ourselves, we invite you to reflect on how you can practice self-care regarding your own emotional wellness.

Is there something that is worrying you this holiday season? Perhaps naming it can help you to begin to diminish its power. It is easy this time of year to worry, to feel discontented because we may feel we don't have "enough" in our lives—enough time, or money, or friends, or presents, or the perfect family or home. We then may worry about how we are going to have a perfectly wonderful Christmas holiday given all that we feel we are lacking.

The quote—"Riches are not from abundance of worldly goods, but from a contented mind"—encourages us to move from a scarcity mindset to an "enough" mindset. This mindset believes that what we already have is enough. Who we already are is enough. Our friends are enough. Our family is enough. We already have enough of what we need to be content. And when we are able to shift from always wanting more to learning to love and appreciate what we already have, we become free from the insatiable consumer appetite that Randall Curtis so perfectly described in Sunday's reflection.

Perhaps being generous with ourselves this year is simply learning to love, celebrate, and believe that whatever we already have is enough.

Making it personal: Write down one or two things you are worried about right now, especially as it relates to this time of year. Name any feelings you have right now of scarcity, of not having "enough" of something in your life. What might help you to let go of or make peace with what you have named?



Wednesday, December 5, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Soul

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

—Psalm 25:4,5

The Soul quadrant of the Living Compass focuses on our spiritual wellness. What better way to practice being generous with ourselves during this season of Advent than making time to tend to our spiritual lives? Setting time aside each day for prayer and/or a spiritual reading are common spiritual practices that will nurture and strengthen our spiritual lives.

If you are looking for a suggestion for a simple daily prayer practice, you might want to try a practice called, “Receive, Release.” Find a quiet, comfortable place and take a few minutes (you might even want to set a timer) to be still. Begin with a few deep breaths, and then silently repeat the word *Receive* on your in-breath and the word *Release* on your out-breath. Do this for a few minutes and then see if God gives you other words to replace these two. Perhaps you need to receive and breathe in “courage” today, or “peace.” And perhaps you need to release and breathe out, “worry” or “judgment.” If no words come to you simply stay with *Receive* and *Release*. This exercise is useful because it will calm your mind and help you focus on your own inner thoughts and feelings, and help center you for the rest of the day.

Regularly filling our spiritual cups is not only an excellent way to practice self-care and to be generous with ourselves, it is also what in turn empowers us to be able to be generous with others.

Making it personal: If you tried the, “Receive, Release” practice, how did it go for you? Do you notice a connection between the state of your own spiritual wellness and your capacity to be generous with others?

Thursday, December 6, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Strength

Boundaries are a part of self-care. They are healthy, normal, and necessary.

—Doreen Virtue

The *Strength* quadrant of the Living Compass addresses how we care for our physical wellness and how resilient we are in managing stress. This time of year can present unique challenges to both caring for our physical well-being and regulating our stress as there are ample opportunities to indulge in excesses—how much we eat, drink, spend, and how busy we choose to be, just to name a few.

One healthy practice that allows us to be generous with ourselves is the practice of setting reasonable boundaries. As the quote from Doreen Virtue says, “Boundaries are a part of self-care. They are healthy, normal, and necessary.” When we set good boundaries for ourselves, we feel less stressed, more rested, and have more energy. When we don’t, we feel just the opposite—tired, cranky, and maybe even taken for granted or resentful of others.

Setting boundaries involves learning to say “no” and not feeling guilty. Saying “no” is actually a way of saying “yes” to our own well-being. As you look ahead to the time between now and Christmas, what boundaries do you want to set that will help you feel less stressed? What do you want to say “no” to and what do you want to say “yes” to, even if your “no” might disappoint others?

The first step is to honestly believe that it's okay to set healthy limits and goals for ourselves. Then, with practice, we will find that the positive benefits of setting healthy boundaries far outweighs the discomfort we may experience in doing so.

Making it personal: In general, is it hard for you to set healthy boundaries for yourself? Is there something that you are struggling with saying “no” to this holiday season? If so, what might help you get over your discomfort so that you can be generous with yourself by setting healthy limits on your time, energy, or finances?



Friday, December 7, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Mind

It's not more vacation we need; it's more vocation.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Vocation is one of the aspects of wellness in the *Mind* quadrant of the Living Compass. Vocation is related to knowing and living out our purpose, our calling in life. It means knowing who we really are and showing up as our true, best, authentic selves—whether at work, home, in our community, with friends, or with family. When you reflect on the times in your life when you felt most fully alive at work or in service to others, chances are those were the times you were fully living out your vocation.

There is an old story that illustrates the importance of showing up as our true, authentic selves. Rabbi Zusya was a wise Hasidic master who lived in Poland in the 18th century. A story is told that one of his students once asked him, “Rabbi Zusya, what if when you die and go to heaven, God asks you why were you not more like Moses?” Wise Zusya thought for a moment, then answered, “The question God might have for me is not why was I not more like Moses, but why was I not more like Zusya.” The rabbi’s wisdom continues to be relevant and valuable.

Last Sunday’s reflection invited us to be on guard against the many distractions that bombard us this time of year. These distractions can tempt us to try to live the lives we think we ought to be living, trying to live up to others’ expectations of us. Giving in to this pressure can create the very opposite experience of feeling fully alive, of simply living as our authentic selves.

How might you show up more fully as your true, best, authentic self this season of Advent and Christmas?

Making it personal: What comes to mind when you think of vocation? Reflect on times over the last few months or years when you have felt most fully alive in work or service to others? How might you live out some of that aliveness during the seasons of Advent and Christmas?

Saturday, December 8, 2018

Practicing Generosity in Thought, Word, and Deed

Pause today and notice something you have worked hard on and recognize yourself for it. Acknowledge your effort.

—Kristin Armstrong, Olympic Gold Medalist

Each Saturday we provide a space for you to pause, reflect upon, and integrate into your life what you have learned during the past week. The most important learnings from the week most likely will be personal, the things that emerged for you as you interacted with the reflections and the prompts.

The process of change usually happens in stages. First, we have a thought, a new idea, or insight into something that we might want to change. Next, we often speak that thought out loud in a conversation with others, or in our prayers. For example, “I am starting to think that I am ready to _____ and I may need your support in doing _____. Finally, change involves action, doing something different. We describe this three-step process as changing in thought, word, and deed.

In reviewing your notes and reflections this week around the theme of being generous with yourself, did you have any new thoughts or ideas? You might want to make a note of them below or in a separate journal. Did you have a word or a conversation with someone or with God about what you were thinking? Finally, did you do anything new or different in this week in light of what you wrote, thought of, or talked about? You might want to take a moment and reflect on any thoughts, words, or deeds from this week that you want to be mindful of as you journey through the remainder of Advent.

Making it personal: What was the most important insight you had this week as you read and reflected on being generous with yourself? Is there anyone with whom you would like to share this? Is there anything you would like to do based on this insight?

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2018



Reflection

by *The Rev. Shannon Kelly*

Advent is a time of preparation and our reading today is a call to just that. A call to let go of the past and lean toward a future that is yet unseen. John the Baptist, a prophet and truth-teller, is calling people to “Prepare the way of the Lord.” How does one prepare for the coming of Christ? We prepare by readying our hearts, souls, and minds to receive Christ and in this act, we are opening ourselves to new possibilities, new thinking, new living.

I find gratitude to be an extremely useful tool in preparing myself for anything because it reminds me of what I have, the experiences that shape me, and the love that surrounds me. Each day, at the end of the day, I write down three things for which I am grateful. (Sometimes a few more if I can’t narrow it down to only three.) They can be simple things like dinner and games with my family, finishing a project, or watching the sunset as I walk my dog. Or they can be big things like when a loved one reaches a goal, a new job, a birth, a wedding, or adoption. Truth be told, there are also days when I struggle to come up with one, let alone three, and on these days when I dig deep to find what seem like small and insignificant things to be thankful for, I realize that no matter how bad my day, there are always at least three things that made my life better. And when I do that, it completely reframes the day. I also have discovered that there is a close link between how grateful I am and how generous with others I am able to be. It is in giving gratitude for the day that is past that I’m able to more fully prepare and embrace the next day, being more generous both with myself and with others.

Melody Beatie wrote, “Gratitude makes sense of our past, peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.” Naming our gratitude for what may seem like small things in our lives often allows the big

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

stressors to melt away, even for a moment. Sometimes, it is in giving thanks that we are able to live in the moment, to let go of the anxiety, to leave behind the “what if’s,” and truly prepare the way for God to come into our lives in the most unexpected and generous ways.

Our world is a challenging place right now, one that can consume us if we let it. Finding our voice of gratitude helps ward off the weightiness of the news and events happening around us, because gratitude is also a form of love. In practicing gratitude, we find those things that we truly love and those things that sustain us. In the words of The Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, “Love will show us the way.”

Take some time this week to write down three things for which you are grateful. If they involve another person, reach out to that person and let them know. Notice what brings love into your life and cultivate it. In doing so, you will change your world and prepare the way of the Lord.



Monday, December 10, 2018

Being Generous with Others

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

This week the focus of our spiritual practice shifts from being generous with ourselves to being generous with others. Beginning today and continuing through Friday we will be reflecting on the question, “With whom in my life am I being called to be more generous, and how specifically might I do that?”

Shannon Kelly wrote yesterday about the connection between gratitude and generosity. Being thankful, and then expressing our gratitude to others are ways of both preparing for being generous, and for being generous. Think of a time when someone has expressed how grateful they are for who you are or for something you have done. How did that make you feel? Chances are even the memory still creates a feeling of well-being within you.

When we take time to be generous with others by sharing our gratitude for them, we make their day. As we prepare to enter the season of exchanging gifts, it is worth reflecting on how easy it is for us to give the gift of our gratitude to another. It costs us nothing but a moment of our time to express, in words or by actions, the gratitude we feel.

We would like to join Shannon Kelly’s invitation to keep a gratitude journal by including a place in the “Making it personal” section this week to record three things each day for which you are grateful. We also invite you to think of one specific way each day you can be generous with someone else in your life.

Making it personal: Three things I am grateful for today:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I was/will be generous with someone today by _____

Tuesday, December 11, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Heart

Whatever we appreciate, appreciates.

—Unknown

The word *generous* derives from the same root as the words that mean “to give birth,” (i.e., *genesis* and *generative*), and it is easy to see why. When we are generous with others, we are offering life to them. We are lifting their spirits, creating space for new life and growth in them. Being generous is like lighting a spark in someone else’s life. We never know what that spark may ignite within them and what may come into being because of that spark.

It is not uncommon to look back at something we have achieved and realize that there was a person or group of people who truly believed in us, and said just the right things to encourage us, or gave us just the support we needed to get started or to keep going. Their generosity gave life to us and gave us the ability to achieve something we otherwise would not have been able to accomplish.

The quote above says it succinctly: "What we appreciate, appreciates." Expressing our genuine appreciation to others is a simple and powerful way of being generous with them. So often we associate generosity with giving in a way that involves money, but there are so many other ways, often much more significant ways, of being generous.

Perhaps today you can think of someone in your life to whom you would like to show a little extra appreciation. Give it a try and see if, in fact, what you appreciate, appreciates.

Making it personal: Three things I am grateful for today:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I was/will be generous with someone today by



Wednesday, December 12, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Soul

*Walking with a friend in the dark is better
than walking alone in the light.*

—Helen Keller

Holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas can make us both grateful for those whom we can be with, while at the same time reminding us of those we are separated from, either by death or other reasons. And when we are grieving, the holidays can magnify our feelings of sadness.

In general, our culture has a hard time talking about grief, and this is especially true this time of year. This is unfortunate because the primary way we are able to bear our grief is by talking about it and sharing it with others. When it comes to grief, we really only have two choices. We can express it through words, or it will be expressed in some other, often less desirable, way, such as isolating ourselves from others, developing physical health symptoms, or experiencing prolonged emotional distress. However, when grief can be acknowledged and talked about, it can be endured, healing can begin, and eventually we can begin a new chapter in life with a deeper appreciation of life because of our grief.

We invite you to think of someone you know who is grieving and for whom the holidays this year might be especially difficult. Now think about ways you can be generous with the gift of your time and attention, and reach out to them—either by phone or a visit in person. Your generous gift of remembering them and their grief will go a long way toward helping them feel less alone.

Making it personal: Three things I am grateful for today:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I was/will be generous with someone today by _____

Thursday, December 13, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Strength

Love will show us the way. ...

If it's not about love, it's not about God.

—Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church

The way of Jesus is the way of love. It is as simple as that and as hard as that. The simple part is loving those who love us, those whom we take delight in being with, and those who give us back as much love as we give to them.

The harder part is when Jesus calls us to love everybody, especially his challenging teaching about loving our enemies. In the polarized times in which we live, it is easy to divide the world into those whom we love and those whom we do not, but Jesus would have none of that. He calls us to love everybody.

We invite you to reflect on how you might be generous with, and extend love to, someone you may find difficult to love. This could be someone very different from you, someone not in your “tribe,” someone with whom you strongly disagree. Think of one specific person and take a moment to reflect and pray about how you could be more generous and loving with this person. It could be someone you will see or spend time with this holiday season. How might your change of heart help make this a more loving Christmas?

In the spirit of Michael Curry's quotes, let Love show us the way to soften our hearts, and to remember that being generous with others is all about living out God's call to love because, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

Making it personal: Three things I am grateful for today:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I was/will be generous with someone today by _____



Friday, December 14, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Mind

Rings and jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts.

The only true gift is a portion of thyself.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Imagine the following scene. You are at a holiday party talking with someone, but soon realize that you don't have their full attention. You notice that instead of looking at you they are looking over your shoulder, scanning the room. You get the distinct feeling that they are looking for someone they believe will be more important or interesting to talk with than you. Soon they move on to their next conversation, departing with a token, "It was great to see you," which leaves you feeling annoyed and devalued. To be overlooked or brushed off is a painful experience most of us have faced at some point in our lives.

Giving the gift of our full attention to another is one of the greatest gifts we can offer. As we think about the gifts we may want to give this time of year, let's not limit ourselves to thinking of only material gifts. As Emerson says, "The only true gift is a portion of thyself."

When we have something significant to say we may start with, "I need your undivided attention right now." Such a simple concept—undivided attention—and yet it is something that is increasingly rare for us either to give or receive, especially during a season that is filled with demands on both our time and attention.

As you continue to focus on being generous with others, pause and think about those who might need your undivided attention right now, and how you might give them the gift of "a portion of thyself."

Making it personal: Three things I am grateful for today:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I was/will be generous with someone today by _____

Saturday, December 15, 2018

Practicing Generosity in Thought, Word, and Deed

Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.

—William Arthur Ward

We are a little more than halfway through Advent, and we hope that this devotional is enriching your journey. If you have struggled to make time each day to read the reflections and respond to the prompts, don't fret about it. There is no test, and there are no grades. Be gentle with yourself and simply use the reflections when they are helpful in nurturing your spiritual growth.

Every Saturday during Advent we invite you to take a moment to pause and integrate what we have learned during the past week. The most important learnings from the week are most likely personal, those that emerged for you as you interacted with the reflections and as you reflected on how to make what you learned personal to your own life.

In reviewing your notes and reflections this week around the theme of being generous with others, did you try the gratitude practice and write down some things that you were grateful for each day? Did you practice being generous with others in any of the ways that you were invited to do? Did you do anything new or different this week in light of what you thought or talked about? You might want to take a moment and reflect on any thoughts, words, or deeds from this week that you want to be mindful of as you journey through the remainder of Advent.

Making it personal: What was the most important insight you had this week as you read and reflected on being generous with others? Is there anyone with whom you would like to share this? Is there anything you would like to do based on this insight? Finally, you may want to pause and reflect again on the quote above from William Arthur Ward: “Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.”

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2018

Reflection

by *The Rt. Rev. Brian Cole*



I recently received my kindergarten report card in the mail. My eldest brother, who had been assisting my mother in another round of downsizing to a smaller living space, sent me the 45-year-old record of how life was for me as a 5-year-old navigating half-day school.

It was mostly a pleasant reminder that I enjoyed school and flourished in that environment. The highest mark was “E” for Excellent and the report card had numerous E’s.

Except for sharing. Alongside the phrase, “Shares Well With Others,” there was the letter “N” for Needs Improvement. The marks were given out each quarter. Each quarter my sharing skills received an N. My five-year-old self was not a sharer.

Along with the tangible reminder of early school days provided by the report card, a recent documentary also took me back to childhood. *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?*, a film on Fred Rogers and his PBS series—*Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*—examines the life of Mr. Rogers and his life’s work of teaching children. Like many who grew up with Mr. Rogers, I found the film to be quite moving. Here was a safe adult, teaching children how to be good and faithful neighbors to all, whether the neighbors were real or from the “Land of Make Believe.”

I was surprised, but am now convinced, that the film made the point that Mr. Rogers was somewhat radical in his inclusive message of love and sharing with all. While the zip-up sweaters and soft voice of Mr. Rogers made him an unlikely revolutionary, his consistent message of love for all in “his” neighborhood and sharing with others was a counter-cultural move. Our world tends to limit who we understand to

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

be our neighbors. And while we expect kindergarten children to share, the real world does not tend to advise it or reward it when adults share.

John the Baptist, a biblical character rarely confused with Mr. Rogers, also invites all his neighbors to share. But he doesn't take the soft-voice, nice-sweater approach. Rather, he opens with, "You brood of vipers!" That's not exactly polite talk, nor does it suggest using your inside voice.

When the crowds who came to see John asked him how to get off the Vipers list, he tells them the most radical thing—share. Share your coat, share your food, treat each other fairly. If they do these things, John tells them they will bear fruit that will please God. They will live as God intended, by sharing generously like the generous God who created, and shares with, them.

Living generously is what we are made by God to do. It's not easy—just check your kindergarten reports. However, when we practice generosity and share with others, we join John and Mr. Rogers in growing up fully into our God-given call.



Monday, December 17, 2018

Being Generous with God

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

—Philippians 4:7

We began in week one by focusing on being generous with ourselves, and then turned in week two to a focus on being generous with others. This week we will focus on being generous with God. We realize, of course, that God does not need our generosity in the same way that our neighbor does. That it is we, as people of faith, who want and need to ground our generosity in our love for God and God's love for us.

In the service of baptism for many faith traditions, the adult being baptized or the sponsors on behalf of an infant say repeatedly, in response to a series of questions about living a Christian life, "I will with God's help." This week we will focus on how we will be generous with God's help.

Brian Cole wrote that, "Living generously is what we are made by God to do." We practice generosity in our lives not merely because it is a good thing to do (which of course it is), but because God has first been generous with us and, in turn, we long to share that generosity with others.

Being generous with God then takes on two meanings. First, we want to be generous with God with our time, talent, and treasure, gifts that have been given to us in the first place and are now ours to give back. Second, being generous with God means we want to share the love of God with others, being generous as God has been with us.

As we approach the remaining days of Advent, we invite you this week to deepen your spiritual journey by reflecting on what it means to ground your generosity in your faith, to answer the question, "Will you practice generosity with others?" with, "I will with God's help."

Making it personal: What comes to mind when you think of the idea of being generous "with God's help"? In the passage from Philippians above, do you see a connection between "the peace that surpasses all understanding," and being generous with God's help?

Tuesday, December 18, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Heart

The Christian life is not about believing or doing what we need to believe or do so that we can be saved. Rather, it's about seeing what is already true—that God loves us already—and then beginning to live in this relationship. It is about becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God.

—Marcus Borg

We have already learned that one of the areas of wellness in the Living Compass is *Healthy Relationships*. We have reflected on how healthy interpersonal relationships take time and attention and that, “What we appreciate, appreciates.” The foundation upon which all healthy relationships are built is always love, never shame, fear, or guilt.

Now let's extend what we know about healthy interpersonal relationships to our relationship with God. We discover that, like any relationship, the more time and attention we give to the relationship, the stronger it becomes. And just as important, we discover that a healthy relationship with God also needs to flow from a place of love, and not from a place of shame, fear, or guilt. As the above quote from Marcus Borg reminds us, "It's about seeing what is already true—that God loves us already—and then beginning to live in this relationship. It is about becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God."

Making it personal: How do you like to intentionally spend time with God? As you reflect on your relationship with God, do you see it based in love, or is any part of it based in shame, fear, or guilt? If the latter is true, how might you shift your thinking so that it is grounded more in love? What might be different in your life if you were to spend time strengthening your relationship with God?



Wednesday, December 19, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Soul

Unless approximately one-seventh of life is also ceasing from work, putting spaces, paragraphs, and parentheses around my efforts, work always becomes compulsive, addictive, driven, unconscious, and actually counter-productive for self and for those around us. We also need not to work.

—Richard Rohr

The *Soul* quadrant of the Living Compass addresses two aspects of wellness: *Spirituality* and *Rest and Play*. These two areas converge when we focus on the ancient spiritual practice of sabbath time. Sabbath time is so valuable that it is included in the Ten Commandments. “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:8-10).

Making sabbath time a priority is counter-cultural in a world that celebrates busyness, especially during this time of year. In the quote by Richard Rohr, our behavior this time of year, or at any time of the year, easily can become “compulsive, addictive, driven, unconscious, and actually counter-productive for ourselves and those around us,” if we are not mindful.

So one concrete way to be generous with God is to create some intentional pauses in our lives during the days between now and Christmas. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a whole day of sabbath time; it can simply be ten minutes or a half-hour here or there where we choose to slow down and become conscious of the true meaning of the season we are in (Advent), and the season we are preparing to celebrate (Christmas). Once again, we discover that being generous with God, as with others, involves giving our time, conscious presence, and attention.

Making it personal: Is the concept of sabbath time something you practice in your life right now? Why or why not? Are you aware of any of your behaviors around the holidays that might be in any way driven, compulsive, or addictive? If so, how might becoming conscious of that tendency help you to make some different choices?

Thursday, December 20, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Strength

*For all things come from you [God], and
of your own have we given you.*

—1 Chronicles 29:14

In Brian Cole's reflection last Sunday, he candidly shared the fact that his kindergarten report card noted that when it came to sharing well with others, he received an "N" for Needs Improvement. Undoubtedly most five-year-olds are still learning that lesson, and if we adults are honest, we would most likely admit that we, too, are also still practicing this lesson.

“For all things come from you [God], and of your own have we given you.” That verse is familiar to many Christians because it is often repeated when the offering is collected during Sunday worship. The words acknowledge that what is being offered to God in worship is already God’s and that we are simply stewards of the gifts that God has already given us. This verse represents a mature understanding of generosity as it reminds us that when we are generous both with God and with others, we are merely sharing what God has already given us. All that is ours is actually created and provided by God.

This kind of spiritual maturity is the direct opposite of the inner five-year-old in all of us who wants to say, "All of this is *mine*, and I don't have to share if I don't want to. You can't make me." As we achieve greater spiritual maturity, we share not because we have to or because someone makes us, but because we genuinely want to. We are grateful for all that God has given us and we want to share that abundance, with God and with others.

Making it personal: If you reflected on your current level of “sharing well with others” would you give yourself an “E” for Excellent, “S” for Satisfactory, or an “N” for Needs Improvement? If you seek improvement, what small steps might you take in the next few days? How and with whom could you be more generous? Do you fully believe what is expressed in the verse above from 1 Chronicles? How does that belief impact your life?



Friday, December 21, 2018

Practicing Generosity with All Your Mind

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

—Galatians 5:22,23

In the passage from Galatians, which has become known as “The fruit of the Spirit,” we see that generosity, sharing well with others, is included in the list. Naming generosity as one of the fruits of the spirit reminds us that generosity takes time to blossom and mature. If we want to harvest fruit in our lives, we need to plant the appropriate seeds, water and nurture the seeds, and then patiently wait for the tree to grow and bear fruit.

A mature spirit of generosity takes time to develop. We must allow God to plant the seeds of generosity within us, and then we must continue to water and nurture those seeds until one day we will bear the fruit of generosity.

If, however, our generosity does not grow out of our relationship with God, it is likely to be short-lived and self-serving. Sometimes our generosity can be about our ego and a desire to say, “Hey, look at *me*, everyone. Aren’t I a generous person?” In contrast, when our generosity is grounded in our faith in God, then we say through our words and actions, “Hey, look at *God* everyone. Isn’t God’s generosity amazing?”

In the Gospel of Luke there is a story of Jesus healing ten lepers. All ten are healed, but only one comes back to Jesus to offer thanks. Jesus commends the one for his gratitude and says to him, “Your faith has made you well.” When we give thanks to God for the innumerable blessings that have been bestowed upon us, our faith indeed makes us well, along with others in our lives whom we touch and are touched by.

Making it personal: When you read through the nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians, do you see a connection between generosity and any of the other fruits? Do you see a difference in the type of generosity that is really about serving oneself versus the kind of generosity that is truly about serving others and God? Can you think of examples of these different motivations for being generous in your own life?

Saturday, December 22, 2018

Practicing Generosity in Thought, Word, and Deed

*We make a living by what we get, but we
make a life by what we give.*

—Winston Churchill

We have reached another Saturday in our Advent walk together, and again it is time to pause and integrate what we have learned this week. With Christmas just a few days away, it is the perfect time to take a few moments to reflect on what we are learning about generosity.

This week we focused on being generous with God, and what generosity looks like when it is grounded in our faith, and what it looks like when it is rooted in our ego.

Brian Cole started our week with a story about his kindergarten report card where he received an “N” for Needs Improvement when it came to sharing well with others. His reflection was a reminder that we, even as adults, are no different from five-year-old Brian in that there is continued room for improvement for us all when it comes to sharing with others and with God.

Making It Personal: In reviewing your notes and reflections this week around the theme of being generous with God, what did you learn? Did you have any new insights about generosity, and did you have the chance to talk with anyone else about what you are learning? You might want to take a moment and reflect on any thoughts, words, or deeds from this week that you found to be significant. Finally, you may want to reflect on the quote above from Winston Churchill: “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2018



Reflection

by Amy Cook

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."

I have a lot to learn from Elizabeth.

Luke's gospel begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, both described as "righteous" people but childless. In their day, children were the sign of God's blessing and their lack of a child specifically cast doubt on Elizabeth. She is the one labeled "barren" and she must live with this shame and suspicion even though she is known for blameless living. Zechariah is chosen by chance that year as the priest to enter the holiest place in the temple. While in this holiest of places an angel appears and says that Elizabeth is going to have a son. Zechariah immediately questions the angel and is struck mute for his doubting until the baby is born. Elizabeth does conceive and in her sixth month Mary comes to visit.

I imagine at the time of Mary's visit Elizabeth is bursting with news. Her place in society has changed. She is no longer looked at with suspicion or pity. By having a child, Elizabeth erases the whispers of God's punishment. This is probably the most exciting time of her life, but she is now married to a man who can't talk! In this moment of extreme joy and new life, Elizabeth and Mary meet and I'm sure she is longing for conversation.

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

If I were Elizabeth in this moment, I would have been tempted to run to Mary and start gushing about the greatest thing that has ever happened in my life. But Elizabeth does something different. She doesn't monopolize the conversation or even treat Mary as the relative who must listen to her news. Instead, Elizabeth generously affirms Mary's (the unwed teen) pregnancy. Elizabeth generously puts her own good news second, speaking prophetic words as the Holy Spirit moves in her. Her body reacts as she feels her child within her and accepts that as joy and perhaps confirmation that her own baby news didn't need to be first in the moment.

I wonder how I can be more generous with creating a space for the good news of others? I'm sure that Elizabeth had plenty of time to talk with Mary and share her thoughts and feelings, but in the moment of their meeting, Elizabeth didn't need to be first. And because she generously created this open space in her heart and head, the Holy Spirit filled in with prophetic words and Mary responded with a new song, literally.

Creating Space to Receive Generosity

Christmas Eve

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

—Luke 1:46-49

Amy Cook's reflection for yesterday, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, was an inspiring culmination of everything we have been learning about practicing generosity with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. As she so beautifully described in her reflection on Elizabeth's response to her cousin Mary, the practice of generosity involves an intentional decision to make space for others and for God.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are times when we are often filled with many emotions. If we are not mindful, it is easy to make these days all about us and our emotional needs. Amy's reflection reminds us that there is a different choice we can make. We can be more like Elizabeth, who put her priority on making space for Mary's emotions and creating the space for Mary to share her news.

In addition to creating space for others today and tomorrow, it is also important for us to remember to pause and create space to give thanks for God's generosity. As we hear the Christmas story where there was no room in the inn for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, we are again reminded to make room in our own hearts and schedules for prayer and worship this evening and/or tomorrow. In doing so, we help create the space to receive God's gift of the birth of Jesus into our lives.

Making it personal: How will you be intentional today about creating space for the good news of others? How will you be deliberate today about creating space for the good news of the birth of Christ?

Receiving the Gift of Generosity

Christmas Day

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:1-5,14

During our journey together through the season of Advent, we have focused on how we can practice generosity with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Our shared journey has brought us on this day to the celebration of the most generous gift of all, the gift of God's love for us expressed through the birth of Christ.

At the beginning of our journey, Randall Curtis invited us to avoid the cultural distractions that pull us away from focusing on a life of generosity. Shannon Kelly showed us that practicing gratitude and practicing generosity are intimately connected. Brian Cole reminded us that the practice of sharing well with others is a habit that often needs improvement our entire lives. And Amy Cook inspired us with a fresh interpretation of the story of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, and how important it is to create space for one another's stories.

Today we focus on *receiving the gift of generosity*, specifically God's generous gift of the love of Christ. Listen anew to the opening words of John's Gospel, through the lens of what we learned about the root meaning of the word *generosity* being to give birth, to create a new beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

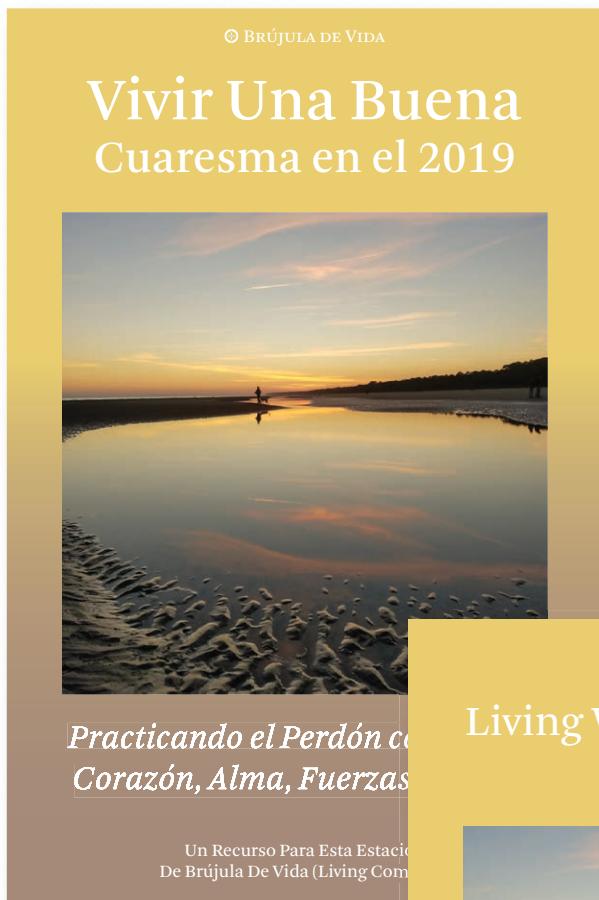
RECEIVING THE GIFT OF GENEROSITY



What does that mean to you this Christmas Day? What meaning might you carry forward with you as a reminder of God's lavish gift of Love, and how you might remain open to continue to receive the gift of God's generosity?

It has been an honor to walk this journey with you. May the Light of Christ continue to generously shine in and through you.

Notes/Reflections



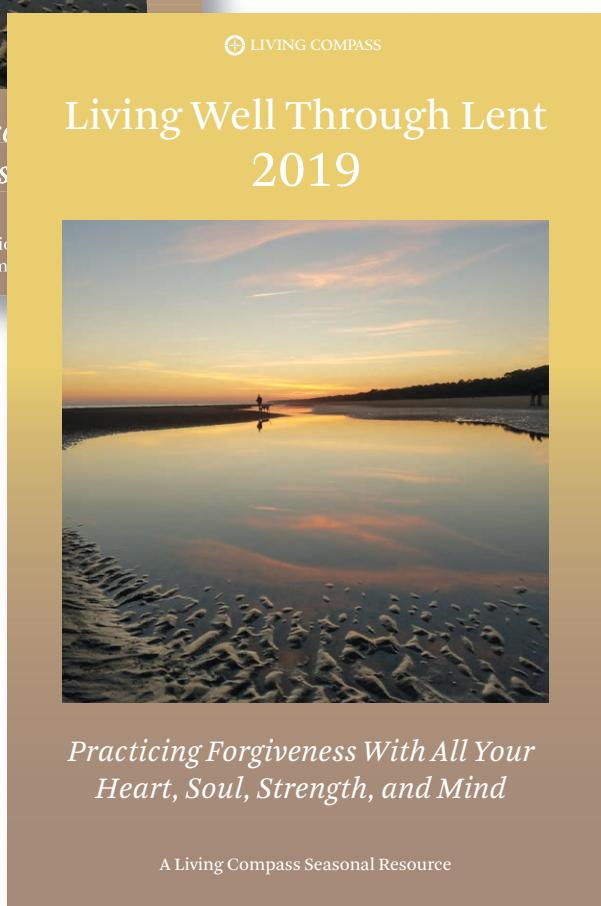
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