

Day 26 SUNDAY

Mercy is the only faithful response.

Matthew 12:1-14

Focus verses:

Matthew 12:11-12

He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

Sabbath was a treasured gift in Israel: a day of rest, freedom and delight. The Pharisees weren't wrong to care about it; they wanted to honor God's law. But when they ask Jesus if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, Jesus asks a simple question: If a man has only one sheep, and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, won't he pull it out?

Of course he will. Mercy matters most, especially for the poor. That lone sheep is the man's livelihood, his survival. The law was never meant to prevent compassion; rather, it was meant to cultivate it. "How much more valuable is a human being" than a single sheep? Jesus asks.

We still face moments when the law and mercy collide. Consider Guilherme Silva, a Brazilian father detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement while driving to pick up his four-year-old daughter — despite having no criminal record and working toward legal residency. Or Rümeyya Öztürk, a Turkish Fulbright scholar and Ph.D. student, who was arrested by masked officers on her way to break her Ramadan fast. Or Esdrás R., an 18-year-old Guatemalan student detained during a workplace raid, leading his community to rally in anguish for his release.

The harshest among us speak of "illegals" as if a human being can be illegal. But Jesus will not allow us to look at suffering people and shrug. When someone's "one sheep" — their child, their education, their stability, their whole future — falls into a pit, mercy is the only faithful response.

Jesus shows us that compassion is not the breaking of God's law but its fulfillment. Sabbath means rest, freedom and restoration, and these gifts cannot be reserved for the comfortable. They belong first to the vulnerable.

Reflection

Where might you be tempted to defend rules instead of offering mercy? Who in your community needs you to reach into the pit and lift them up?

Prayer

God of compassion, soften our hearts when we cling to what is familiar or safe. Teach us to see the worth of every person and to choose mercy over fear. Let our Sabbath keeping and our law abiding reflect your justice, your tenderness and your love. Amen.

Day 27 MONDAY

Our work is to sow faithfully.

Matthew 13:1-9

Focus verse:

Matthew 13:3

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

Chapter 13 opens the third major teaching section of Matthew's Gospel: the first time Jesus turns to parables. Opposition to his ministry is increasing, and Matthew makes clear that Jesus begins teaching this way because of growing resistance. Parables become his strategy for those ready to learn more deeply: his disciples, the curious, the committed, the ones willing to lean in. Parables, when connected to daily life, are simple enough to remember yet profound enough to open doors into God's mysterious ways.

This first parable describes a farmer who doesn't plant seed in tidy rows but casts it widely and extravagantly. His method is almost wasteful, reckless — scattering seed on the path, among thorns, on shallow soil and, thankfully, on good earth. This lack of human efficiency suggests divine generosity. Like this sower, God lavishes grace, mercy and love without caution or calculation.

And the results? Mixed. Some seeds are snatched away, some shrivel, some get choked out. But some — *some* — produce a harvest beyond what anyone dares to expect.

I think of this parable often in ministry. After 27 years of sermons preached, hospital rooms visited, youth retreats led, worships planned and classes taught, I still wonder: *Was it enough? Did any of it take root?* And then — unexpectedly — a note from a former student arrives. A pastor writes to say the *Outlook* liturgy has brought her comfort. A young woman shares that she has entered ministry because I was the first female pastor she'd known.

Every time, I'm stunned. And I'm reminded: God works through us not because we are perfect, but because God is faithful.

Real ministry isn't epic. It's the steady accumulation of small, almost imperceptible acts: a phone call returned, a prayer whispered, a meal delivered, a presence offered. Our work is to sow faithfully. God's work is to grow the harvest.

Reflection

What seeds has God entrusted to you — small acts of kindness, courage or faith? Where are you invited to sow generously, trusting God with the growth?

Prayer

Sower of life, teach us to scatter love with open hands and hopeful hearts. When our efforts feel small or uncertain, remind us that you bring the growth. Make our lives fertile ground for your grace, and let the seeds we scatter bear fruit far beyond what we can see. Amen.



Day 28 TUESDAY

We are called to plant mustard seeds.

Matthew 13:31-33

Focus verses:

Matthew 13:31-32

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed — tiny, unimpressive, practically invisible in your hand. But when planted, it grows into something far larger than anyone expected. Not a towering cedar or a majestic sequoia, mind you, but a mustard bush: a scrappy, persistent, wildly spreading plant that refuses to stay contained.

Sometimes I think churches forget and neglect their value. Many congregations — especially small ones — look at larger churches with professional choirs, multiple staff and brand-new buildings and wonder, "What do we have to offer?" That crisis of confidence deepens when they can't find a pastor — when search committees wait months or years for applicants. Congregations in that situation can find it easy to believe they have nothing worth claiming.

But that's simply not true.

A church's value is not defined by its size, staff or sanctuary count. The church is not a building or a budget line. It's the living body of Christ. Still, we church folks often think too small. We are too shy about what we have to offer. Too humble to speak joyfully about the hope we carry. We don't want to be like those "pushy" Christians, so we whisper good news into a world that's screaming bad news.

I have a Big Hairy Audacious Goal — a BHAG — for the *Presbyterian Outlook*: I want our platform to grow so large that the stories of our church's ministries drown out the messages of anger, division and hate. I want us to fill the internet's dark corners with light. I want us to get loud about God's love and Christ's radical welcome — so loud that fear-based versions of Christianity lose their megaphone.

This is mustard seed work. It starts small and grows quietly, yet it spreads farther than we can imagine. And Jesus promises that this is exactly how the kingdom comes.

Reflection

Where might God be planting a small seed in your life or community? What seemingly small gift, ministry or act of love might God be waiting to grow into something far bigger than you expect?

Prayer

God of mustard seeds and hidden yeast, teach us not to despise small beginnings. Expand our vision, enlarge our courage and help us believe that you can grow your kingdom through our ordinary gifts. Make us bold in sharing your love, persistent in sowing hope and joyful in watching your grace take root. Amen.

Day 29 WEDNESDAY

God works through the ordinary.

Matthew 13:54-58

Focus verses:

Matthew 13:57-58

And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own hometown and in their own house." And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Reflection

Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and teaches in the synagogue. The people are astonished. They recognize his wisdom; they witness his deeds of power. Yet their reaction isn't wonder or gratitude. It's offense. This is a scandal!

The Greek word used here – *skandalizō* – can mean to trip, to stumble, to feel scandalized. But it wasn't Jesus' message that scandalized them. They didn't reject his teaching — no, they rejected him. Isn't this the carpenter's son? Aren't his sisters still here with us? They cannot see past who they think he is: Joseph's boy, the kid who grew up down the street, the one they've known forever.

There's a human truth here. Once we think we know a person, we can find it almost impossible to see them differently. Familiarity dulls our imagination and blinds us to transformation.

There's another truth: We often trust the outside expert more than the person in front of us. The outsider comes with credentials, degrees, distance. And distance feels safer. After all, the outside expert doesn't know our history. Our flaws. Our secrets.

Jesus, on the other hand, knows us too well. His authority comes not from letters after his name but from a life lived in our midst — eating our food, walking our streets, knowing our joys and failures. The grace that meets us in our most familiar places can feel threatening. It sees us as we really are.

Nazareth couldn't receive the Messiah because they couldn't imagine greatness coming from their own neighborhood. They couldn't fathom God working through the ordinary, the local, the familiar. Sometimes, neither can we.

Where might you be resisting God's voice because it comes through someone familiar — or because it asks you to be seen too closely? What would it take for you to welcome Christ's authority in the ordinary places and people around you?

Prayer

God of surprising grace, open our eyes to your presence in the familiar. Heal the ways we dismiss those closest to us. Give us humility to receive wisdom from unexpected voices and courage to be known by you in the deepest places of our lives. Amen.



Day 30 THIRSDAY

God provides abundance amid scarcity.

Matthew 14:13-21

Focus verses:

Matthew 14:16-17

*Jesus said to them,
“They need not go
away; you give them
something to eat.”
They replied,
“We have nothing
here but five loaves
and two fish.”*

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle story recorded in all four Gospels, signaling its importance to the early church. In this account, we encounter a God who provides abundance even when resources appear scarce. We also hear our clear call: We are to feed the hungry. And when we look around our world today – food pantries stretched, benefits from SNAP and the United States Agency for International Development threatened, millions unsure where their next meal will come from – we see how urgent that call remains.

A Los Angeles nonprofit called Every Day Action rescues surplus high-quality catered meals from film and TV production sets and delivers them to unhoused and underresourced communities across Los Angeles County in California. Hillary Cohen and Samanth Luu, two assistant directors with over a decade of experience on film and TV sets, founded the nonprofit after repeatedly asking why leftover gourmet food from catering services was thrown in a dumpster rather than donated. The answer was always the same: With all the liability issues, it’s just too complicated.

God provides abundance, but someone has to organize its distribution. Someone has to notice the waste, imagine a better way, gather volunteers, solve the logistics and show up day after day. Feeding the hungry takes creativity, commitment and a willingness to give not only from our abundance but also from our time and talent. Cohen and Luu solved the liability obstacles by drafting a contract that releases each studio from legal responsibility for excess food. Once the contracts are signed, the meals are packed – and the hungry are fed the food of celebrities.

Reflection

What “loaves and fish” do you have – money, time, community, food, influence – that you could give away as a sign of trust in God’s abundance? How might you participate in God’s multiplying work this week?

Prayer

Generous God, you feed your people when we have little, and you multiply our offering when we share. Help us trust your abundance, organize our resources for your sake and participate faithfully in your work of feeding the hungry and restoring life. Amen.

Day 31 **FRIDAY**

Jesus' grace reaches out to the whole world.

Matthew 15:21-28

Focus verses:

Matthew 15:25-28

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Reflection

Jesus has just confronted the Pharisees for elevating purity rituals over the desires of God's heart. But as he travels toward the far borders of Israel into Gentile territory, Jesus himself is confronted. A Canaanite woman dares to shout after him, begging him to heal her daughter.

Everything about her approach breaks the rules. Canaanites are the enemy. Gentiles do not address Jews. Women do not address men, and women certainly do not shout. Yet here she is: urgent, insistent, unignorable.

We expect Jesus to respond with compassion. Instead, his words land with a sting: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The Greek word *kynarion* – "dog" – was a common ethnic slur. Hearing Jesus speak it shocks us. It should.

The tension in this encounter is dramatic because it situates us, as readers, in a borderland between old and new, insider and outsider, expectation and surprise. Many churches know this borderland well. We stand between what once worked and what no longer does, between familiar patterns and an uncertain future. In these spaces, people feel stretched thin, anxious, unsure of what comes next.

But borderlands are places where something new is born from juxtaposition.

The Canaanite woman shows us what faith in the borderland looks like: desperate, courageous, persistent. She trusts that Jesus' mercy is broader than the boundaries humans draw. She challenges him not with hostility but with hope: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And the story turns. Jesus recognizes her great faith and grants her request, and from that moment his ministry expands beyond Israel. A marginalized woman – powerless by every social measure – becomes the catalyst for grace widening to the whole world.

Where do you feel yourself standing at a border between the familiar and the unknown? How might the Canaanite woman's courage invite you to trust a God whose mercy exceeds every boundary?

Prayer

Border-crossing God, meet us where old ways collide with new possibilities. Give us the courage of the Canaanite woman — persistent, bold, hopeful. Break open the boundaries we cling to, and widen our hearts for the ministry you call us to embrace. Amen.



About visio divina

Visio divina, or “divine seeing,” is a prayer practice that invites us to encounter God through art. Just as *lectio divina* guides us to listen deeply to Scripture, *visio divina* encourages us to slow down and see with the eyes of faith. Rather than analyzing the artwork, we allow it to speak to us through color, light, texture and emotion. As you gaze upon the image, notice what draws your attention, what stirs your heart, and how the Spirit might be inviting you to see God’s story in a new way.

Beseeking

Inspired by Matthew
16:21-23

By Hannah Garrity

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Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What colors, shapes or gestures pull you in?
- As you linger, what emotions arise — boldness, longing, discomfort, hope?
- Do you see traces of this week’s journey — Jesus moving toward the margins, crossing boundaries of ethnicity and tradition, widening the circle of grace and listening to the voice of the outsider?
- Where might Christ be calling you to see differently, to love more widely or to trust that God’s mercy spills across every human line?

Prayer

God, open our eyes to the places where you meet us at the edges. When we feel uncertain or resistant, soften our hearts. When we stand between the old and the new, steady us with your grace. As we behold this image, teach us to recognize your presence in unlikely places and unexpected people. May our seeing lead to deeper compassion, wider welcome and courageous faith until our lives reflect the boundless mercy of Christ. Amen.