

Day 33 SUNDAY

“Who do you say that I am?”

Matthew 16:13-20

Focus verses:

Matthew 16:13-16

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Reflection

Prayer

Halfway through Matthew’s Gospel, the camera lens zooms in. We’re no longer watching Jesus feed crowds or silence storms. Now Jesus turns to his disciples – and to us – and asks the most personal question in Scripture: “Who do you say that I am?”

We already know the answer. But Peter speaks it for the first time: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Peter’s confession matters. It signals a turning point in the Gospel and in his own life. And it reminds us that faith is chosen.

“Deconstruction” has become a buzzword lately. So-called ex-vangelicals deconstruct the faith of their childhood. Feminists deconstruct biblical womanhood. Queer Christians deconstruct harmful interpretations of Scripture. The word “deconstruction” evokes the painstaking work of pulling apart what no longer holds true, brick by heavy brick.

But deconstruction assumes construction happened first.

For many of us, faith began as an inheritance: the God of our parents, the theology of our childhood church, the doctrines we absorbed before we knew how to question them. I still remember walking into my first seminary class confident in the faith I’d carried since childhood. But my professors didn’t want me to repeat it — they wanted me to wrestle with it. Each class shook my foundations. But somewhere in that rubble, I began building faith for the first time, not blindly accepting but asking: *Do I believe this? Why? Who is the God I am choosing to follow?*

Peter’s confession is a revelation, both for him and for the future church. This Lent, “Who do you say that I am?” is a question worth asking and answering for ourselves.

Where are you rebuilding or reexamining your faith right now? What truth about Jesus feels newly discovered – or newly claimed – in this season?

Living Christ, you ask us who we say you are. Give us courage to answer honestly and faithfully. Steady us as we build, claim and renew our belief in you, the Messiah and Son of the living God. Amen.



Day 34 MONDAY

Jesus' light can guide our steps.

Matthew 17:1-13

Focus verse:

Matthew 17:2

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light.

Halfway through Matthew's Gospel, we arrive at another turning point: the Transfiguration. Recall that at Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven announced, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Here on the mountain, we hear the same words, but with a crucial addition: "Listen to him!"

Everything about this scene is luminous. Jesus' face shines like the sun, his clothes become dazzling white, and suddenly Moses and Elijah – giants of Israel's story – stand beside him. It's overwhelming, holy and beautiful. Peter wants to stay forever. "Lord, it is good for us to be here," he says, offering to build three dwellings on the mountaintop for Jesus and the two prophets.

Peter is not wrong. It is good to be there. Anyone who has ever attended a youth retreat, a church conference, a pilgrimage or even a quiet weekend of prayer knows the sweetness of those moments. Hearts open, prayers deepen and God feels near. These mountaintop experiences give us clarity and courage and joy. They remind us of who Jesus is — and who we are, too.

But the story doesn't end on the mountain. It can't. The voice from the cloud gave a command: "Listen to him." Listening means following Jesus back down the mountain into the world's pain, into conflict and confusion and onto the road that leads straight to Jerusalem, where Jesus will suffer and die.

Mountaintop moments are gifts, but they're not destinations. They are fuel for the harder, holier journey ahead. Faith is confirmed not in the glow of transfiguration but in the valleys where fear, grief and resistance meet us. There is work to do; there are people to love, burdens to carry. There is justice to seek. And Jesus walks ahead of us, still speaking, still calling, still worth following.

Reflection

When have you experienced a mountaintop moment in your faith? How might that experience strengthen you for the more difficult path Jesus is calling you to walk now?

Prayer

Radiant God, thank you for moments when your presence feels bright and unmistakable. Help us listen to Jesus — not only on the mountaintop, but also on the road below. Give us courage to follow him into the places of need, sorrow and hope in our world. May the light we glimpse in him guide our steps each day. Amen.

Day 35 TUESDAY

God uses our gifts to bear fruit.

Matthew 17:14-20

Focus verses:

Matthew 17:19-20

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

Reflection

Prayer

The disciples have just returned from their own attempts at ministry: attempts that, frankly, haven't gone well. A desperate father brings his suffering son to Jesus because the disciples could not heal him. Jesus calls their faith "little"; but for Matthew, this word doesn't mean unbelief. Rather, "little faith" means distracted faith — faith overwhelmed by fear, discouraged by problems that look like mountains, shaken by all that seems unchangeable in the world.

Little faith sees poverty, injustice, hunger and division and quietly concludes, *This is just the way it is.*

But mustard seed faith – small as it is – anchors itself in God. It is not blind to the mountains; it trusts that God is bigger than what stands in the way. Mustard seed faith does not require heroics. It requires persistence, hope and the willingness to offer what we have, believing God can grow it into something more.

Villisca Presbyterian Church in rural Iowa – a congregation of about 50 people – started something called the Blessing Box more than 20 years ago. During worship announcements, members share a blessing from their week, and with each blessing they add one dollar to the box. Some Sundays the gift totals only a dollar or two. On other Sundays – like when someone turned eighty – the box grew by \$80.

Whenever someone in town had a need – a new parent, a teacher arriving in the community, a neighbor struggling – the church emptied the box and gave away the funds. Over time, the community has quietly shared more than \$3,000 in blessings.

"We've always had the attitude of 'whatever we have, we can share,'" their pastor, the Rev. Sandy Wainwright Rossander, told the Presbyterian News Service. "A small gift is just as significant as a large one. . . . Even in our smallness, we can still make a difference in the mission of the church."

This is mustard seed faith: small, steady, generous. Not overwhelmed by what it cannot do, but faithful in doing what it can, trusting God to grow every offering of love.

Where do you feel overwhelmed or discouraged today? What small act of faith – one seed – might God be inviting you to plant?

Mountain-moving God, anchor our hearts in you. When problems seem too big and our efforts too small, remind us that even mustard seed faith is enough. Take what we have – our time, our gifts, our small offerings of love – and use them to bear fruit for your kingdom. Amen.



Day 36 WEDNESDAY

We are called to reconciliation.

Matthew 18:15-35

Focus verses:

Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Reflection

Conflict is baked into being human. We annoy and disappoint one another. We misunderstand, betray and wound each other, sometimes without meaning to, sometimes with more calculation than we'd like to admit. And the church, for all its hymns and hospitality, is no exception. We are a community of ordinary people trying – and often failing – to love well.

Matthew knows this. So he highlights Jesus' advice on conflict in this fourth major teaching section of the Gospel.

Jesus gives us a process of forgiveness that sounds simple but asks everything of us: Go directly to the person who has hurt you. Speak honestly. Listen earnestly. Bring others in only if needed. And forgive – not once, not seven times, but 77 times.

In other words, stop counting.

Stop keeping score. Stop tightening your grip on the grievance.

Everything in us resists this. Avoidance is easier. So is resentment. Walking away feels cleaner. But according to Jesus, reconciliation is the holy work we owe one another, because God never stops doing this work with us.

Ursula Le Guin paints a striking picture of conflict in her novel *The Dispossessed*. In this world, conflicts are always worked out directly, starting from childhood. When her main character, Shevek, finds himself pulled into a petty fight with another child and the teasing escalates to arguing, tussling and crying, no adults intervene. No other children gather to gawk or cheer. Eventually, the boys work it out and return to their play.

That is the kind of community Jesus envisions. Conflict is seen as a natural part of community, not a threat to it. He envisions a church where we tell the truth in love. A church where mercy is generously offered and where relationships are prized enough to repair – again and again – because we belong to one another in Christ.

Where do you feel the tug to avoid conflict rather than address it? What might happen if you approach that difficult conversation not to dominate or win but to repair?

Prayer

Reconciling God, teach us the courage to face one another honestly and gently. When we are hurt, guide our words. When we have hurt others, soften our hearts. Free us from keeping score, and shape us into a people who choose repair over resentment, mercy over avoidance and love over fear. Amen.

Day 37 THURSDAY

Jesus calls us to welcome all.

Matthew 19:13-15

Focus verse:

Matthew 19:14

*But Jesus said,
“Let the children
come to me, and do
not stop them, for it
is to such as these
that the kingdom of
heaven belongs.”*

Reflection

Prayer

As Jesus leaves Galilee and begins the long, painful journey toward Jerusalem, the disciples are learning just how demanding the work of God’s kingdom will be. In today’s passage, parents bring their children to Jesus for a blessing, but the disciples, wanting to protect Jesus from interruptions, step in to block them. In the first century, children carried little social significance. They weren’t valued, weren’t influential and certainly weren’t considered worthy of a teacher’s time. From the disciples’ perspective, these little ones were getting in the way of very important work.

But Jesus stops the disciples in their tracks: “Let the children come.”

Here Jesus isn’t just being tender; he is being radically corrective. These children – so small in their own world – have great significance in God’s kingdom. Their worth is inherent, their presence essential, and Jesus insists they be welcomed.

Jesus’ welcome extends far beyond children, stretching to all whose worth is overlooked: those with little status, little power, little voice. In our world, too, those “little” ones are often the hardest to reach and the easiest to ignore.

That’s why I’m such a fan of The Missing Voices Project at Flagler College in Florida. This Lilly-funded initiative equips churches to welcome youth who are rarely found in pews: foster kids, LGBTQ+ youth, unhoused teens and young people carrying trauma or distrust from past harm. These are beloved children of God, yet welcoming them requires patience, courage, creativity and deep faithfulness. Such a welcome requires congregations to move beyond comfort and convenience into committed, costly relationship.

This is the holy work Jesus calls us to.

Who are the “little ones” in your community — the overlooked, the undervalued, the ones who seem to get in the way? What would it look like to welcome them as Christ welcomes them?

Welcoming Christ, open our eyes to the people the world overlooks. Teach us to make room, to reach out with courage and to embrace those you call precious. Give us the faithfulness to welcome not just those who are easy to love but those who need love the most. Amen.

Day 38 **FRIDAY**

Jesus calls us to compassion, not comparison.

Matthew 20:1-16

Focus verse:

Matthew 20:15

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?

Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard isn't meant to teach us how to run payroll or negotiate hourly wages. The story is designed to pry open our imaginations so we can glimpse God's radically different economy.

In this parable, the landowner goes out again and again to hire workers. Those hired at dawn agree to the usual daily wage. Those hired at nine, noon, three, even five o'clock, just an hour before quitting time, are promised only "what is right." But at day's end, every worker receives the full day's wage.

It feels outrageous. Unfair. Backwards.

But Jesus wants us to notice what the landowner sees: not résumés or productivity metrics, but need. The last-hired workers weren't lazy – they simply weren't chosen sooner. Maybe they were overlooked. Maybe they didn't stand out. Maybe they were smaller or didn't "look the part." Still they waited all day hoping someone, anyone, would give them a chance.

This story lands in a cultural moment obsessed with merit. We hear debates about "diversity hires" and "lowered standards." But talk of merit often ignores unequal starting lines. It assumes everyone has the same opportunities. The workers in Jesus' parable have all showed up. All are willing. But only some are chosen first — not because they work harder, but because someone in power deems them useful.

The landowner in Jesus' story refuses to play by those rules. He pays according to compassion, not comparison. Mercy, not merit. He honors need before achievement.

The kingdom of God is built on a generosity that startles us, stretches us, exposes our envy and invites us to see the world through God's eyes: a world where no one is left standing in the marketplace at the eleventh hour, unseen and unchosen.

Reflection

When have you been tempted to measure your worth or someone else's by merit instead of mercy? What might it look like to trust a God whose generosity disrupts your sense of fairness?

Prayer

Generous God, loosen our grip on comparison and scarcity. Open our hearts to your boundless mercy. Make us generous as you are generous, so that we may glimpse your kingdom in the way we give, welcome and love. 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.

Seventy-Seven Times

Inspired by Matthew 18:15-22

By The Rev. Lauren
Wright Pittman
A Sanctified Art, LLC.
sanctifiedart.com



Reflection

- Take time to sit with the image before you.
- What do you notice first? What colors, shapes or gestures pull your gaze?
- As you linger, what emotions arise — courage, curiosity, hesitation, gratitude?
- Do you see echoes of this week’s journey — Peter daring to confess who Jesus truly is, the disciples wanting to stay on the mountaintop instead of following Jesus into the valley, Jesus welcoming children whom the world overlooks, or a landowner whose generosity defies our instinct for fairness?
- Where might this image invite you to see as Jesus sees — to listen deeply, to cross boundaries, to trust God’s abundance over scarcity and to recognize mercy breaking open in places you least expect?

Prayer

Boundary-breaking God, help us see with the clarity and compassion of Christ. Where our vision is small, stretch it. Where we hesitate to follow you into unfamiliar places, steady us with your love. May what we behold in this image shape how we live – listening, crossing borders, welcoming the small, trusting your abundance – until our seeing becomes a way of discipleship. Amen.

