



Love One Another
Reflections on Race, Power, and Privilege
A Lenten Guide for Lectionary Year C
from the North Carolina Council of Churches

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Introduction

When we set out to prepare this year's Lenten guide, the contributors were told they could choose whichever lectionary passage they wanted to write about for their given date as long as the focus of their reflection was race, power, and privilege. For most days, there were at least four passages to choose from, and for some there were multiple. You will see selections in this guide chosen from the Old Testament, New Testament, and Psalms reflecting a variety of authors and tones. Remarkably, without consulting with each other, almost all of us have written about the need to recognize the humanity in one other – a call to move beyond division as we acknowledge that we are all beloved children of God.

Also connecting these reflections is a need for self-awareness and acknowledgement of how we can contribute to changing structures of race, power, and privilege beginning with ourselves. In a situation that can sometimes seem overwhelming, we begin by working internally to build change externally.

Finally, we are reminded of all that is seen and unseen when we approach an individual or situation. Do we pass judgement based on the color of skin or quality of clothing? Do we reject a cornerstone because we don't recognize its strength and steadfastness – because it doesn't look like the cornerstones we are used to?

We hope the words you find here will inspire you to reflect deeply, assess honestly, and then to act decisively to make our society more just. We have lost ground in ways and places where we thought progress was rooted. May we recall our responsibility to love one another not just in words but through ensuring more just structures in our world.

**~The Staff of the NC Council of Churches
Lent 2016**

Ash Wednesday — Psalm 51: 1-17

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Today happens to be the first day of the most important season of the Christian year, Lent. Today many of us will mark ourselves with ashes as a reminder we're not as good as God knows we can be. Sometimes we're not even as good as we know we can be.

David's prayer, the Psalter for today, acknowledges this. He prays for a clean heart, for a right spirit, for joy, and for the assurance of God's presence. If David already had these things, he wouldn't be asking for them in the song. If David didn't know what

these things are, he wouldn't be asking for them in the song. He knows what they are because he once had a right spirit and the assurance of God's presence. Now he does not have them, and he wants them back.

Sometimes it takes a while for us to miss something we thought we had all along. Sometimes we don't even know we had it until it's gone. David had joy and the assurance of God's presence back in the day when he slew Goliath, back in the day when he danced in the streets to celebrate victory over his enemies, back in the day when Israel was united under one leader — a leader with a clean heart and a right spirit. It's possible David didn't know the great gifts he had until they were gone. It's possible David took his right spirit and the assurance of God's presence for granted. He wouldn't be the first to do so...

Only when the gifts are gone does David fully understand their significance. Acknowledging their significance also helps David recognize his own complicity in letting them go. He got lazy toward his work, sloppy with his leadership, complacent about his power, and squishy on the rules. Psalm 51 is David's recognition that he assumed too much about his victories in battle, too much about his accumulation of wealth, too much about all the good things happening in his life. David began to assume all this success was the result of his outstanding resume. David does have a good resume, but he has it because he stands on the shoulders of generations who came before him, people who were not complacent and didn't bend the rules. He has an outstanding resume because he is surrounded by loyal supporters and an able staff who do have clean hearts and right spirits. Here at last, David recognizes he took all that for granted.

We can learn a lot from David on this first day of Lent, starting with the recognition that none of us is self-made. We, too, stand on the shoulders of generations who have come before us in ways great and small. It's a good exercise for anybody, not just King David, to think about all the people who helped us get where we are and all the people who continue to support where we are going. On this first day of Lent, we can call ourselves to remember some of the things we now take for granted or have forgotten altogether.

Among several important things we have forgotten is caring for our neighbors. Instead, we've divided ourselves along social, economic, and religious lines, each of which can obscure the more salient matter of racial inequity. In a few short years, we've gone from being a nation that welcomes "the wretched refuse of your teeming shore" (Statue of Liberty quote), to a land filled with governors who decry settling anyone from war-torn Syria, most of whom have darker skin than the governors refusing to welcome them. We've gone from a nation that wrote into its founding documents, "any law...

impeding the free exercise of religion” (Art. 1, US Constitution), to a land filled with politicians who declare a particular faith tradition unacceptable for the President of our country and others who go so far as to suggest barring entry into the country to practitioners of that faith, pretending to ignore that nearly all people in that faith tradition have darker skin than nearly all the politicians who decry their faith.

Examples like these show how we are losing face with our own precepts. Like David, we have forgotten our right spirit. Like David, we can be reminded. If David can confess his transgression and resolve to live differently, we can follow his example.

A lot of words are uttered at the beginning of Lent about how sinful we are—human depravity, evil hearts, rotten apples, and all that. I’d like to suggest a more positive exercise. Let’s spend the next 40 days remembering how fortunate we are and calling attention to the hard work that has brought us to this place. Let’s remember those who sat down on buses or stood up for voting rights; let’s remember those with right spirits who show kindness in the face of hatred; let’s remember those with clean hearts who pursue justice against all odds. In this way we might find ourselves being a little more humble, a little more gracious, and a little more conciliatory to those around us. And that would make us all a little less sinful, just as a by-product.

For the next 40 days let’s get in the habit of remembering the gift and let the joy of remembering change our lives. Let us reclaim our status as those who have clean hearts and right spirits.

Prayer: Loving God, as we enter this holy season of Lent, help us to remember and to honor the efforts of those who have gone before, on whose shoulders we now stand. And help us to carry on their work for justice in ways small and large. Amen.

~Jennifer Copeland

First Sunday in Lent — Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.

When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The scriptures for the first Sunday in Lent can be viewed as a roadmap for one's Lenten journey. The lessons embody the theme of journeying: travel, protection, and longing for a destination. First, in Deuteronomy we are reminded that our spiritual heritage comes from a "wandering Armenian." Our spiritual ancestors were wanderers, strangers, and migrants who found God in the midst of the wilderness. To me, this raises the question of immigration and how the church is called to respond to immigrants and refugees

As we enter an election year, we often hear hateful rhetoric about how Americans should respond to those crossing our borders: building a wall, deportation, not providing basic human services, detention, etc. However, in the scriptural passage, as the Israelite community has been called together for celebration and remembrance, God says: "Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house." The immigrants, the poor and the oppressed are included fully in this celebration, and we are called not only to meet their needs, but also to celebrate God's loving and faithful provision with them. There is no room for exclusion in the church;

we are all called to give from what we have been given to neighbors and strangers regardless of where they come from.

The Gospel lesson this week also speaks to journeying, in particular to Jesus' physical and spiritual journey in the wilderness. According to Luke, Jesus has not eaten anything for 40 days in the desert. He is in a very vulnerable state and in the midst of his suffering the devil appears, offering Jesus food, power and wealth. In moderation these things can be blessings, but in excess they are a curse. The cross is not about excesses of fame, money or power. The message is clear: in order to follow the way of the cross, we must forgo those things that the cross is not – fame, fortune and power—for all of the things Jesus embodied, such as justice, mercy and compassion.

As we begin our Lenten journey, may it be one that expands our horizons and connects us with others, including those who are different from ourselves. May it be a time of reflection on the temptations that we face in the world today, including coveting power, wealth and fame.

Prayer: Gracious God, you are our way in the wilderness. In our own times of testing be our spiritual nourishment, protect us with your angels, and show your authority in our lives, so that we may hunger for righteousness and live in peace and safety, worshiping and serving you alone; through Christ Jesus our Lord.

--From the Presbyterian Church USA Prayers for Lent

~Jennie Belle

Second Sunday in Lent — Philippians 3:17-20; 4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Shortly after the New Year's resolutions start to fade, many of us begin to consider what to give up for Lent. I'm no exception. Rarely have I done more than to think of all the unhealthy habits I need to change. Maybe I should give them up for.....Lent? Then I remember the oft quoted myth that it takes 21 days to develop a habit. I could squeeze in losing two unhealthy habits, again.....for Lent.

This year I am feeling the need for a more solemn self-examination. The season of Lent falls in the early months of what is already shaping up to be one of the most contentious years in the United States; at least in the lives of many of its citizens. Not in many people's lifetimes has there been more divisiveness and outright aggression, even and sometimes especially, among the people of God. How do we, as citizens of Heaven, imitate the example of Jesus Christ in our response to the ever increasing divide among us here on earth? How do we counter the loud voices of the enemies of the cross?

This year I want to suggest that what we give up is something we may not recognize we have. I would propose during the days of Lent, we thoughtfully begin to identify our own privilege. What are those things that we can do more easily, not because we are especially talented or trained, but because of our citizenship, the color of our skin, the money in our pocket, our gender, our sexual orientation, or because the space we occupy is accepting of our actions and desires? What if we walked out of the door each day for 40 days, recognizing the things we can do without thought that someone else must do in secret or not at all? What if we left those privileges at the door and made a conscious effort to experience as closely as we can, walking in someone else's shoes?

Would we walk into our usual first stop of the morning, a good feeling fair-trade coffee shop without non-essential funds? Or we have money but could we use the restroom as a transgender child of God without confusion and possible condemnation when the

choices are “Men” or “Women.” Once we are open to consciously putting ourselves into situations that are at best, uncomfortable for others, it becomes difficult to deny that most of us wear at least a few layers of privilege.

In this time of reflection and self-examination, may we acknowledge the disparities that exist among us. May we feel as deeply as Paul who as described by St. John Crystostom “weeps for those at whom others laugh; so true is his sympathy, so deep his care for all men.”

Prayer: Dear Lord of all creation, open our eyes and hearts to the very real struggles of our fellow man. Remind all of us who claim our citizenship in Heaven that in your eyes, and in our eventual home, nothing divides us. Amen.

~Chris Pernell

Third Sunday in Lent — Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

This Third Sunday in Lent, we hear the words of Isaiah, speaking to a community that has long been exiled in Babylon. To a community far away from home, their lives in the hands of an empire that defeated them, their hopes of seeing home again waning after so many years, Isaiah says, “delight yourselves in rich food.” To the exiled listener, this sounds like a luxury out of reach. But Isaiah is inviting them to see an alternative vision of the world – one where God’s promises to David extend to all, and all are invited to participate in the restoration of their lives as covenant people. Even while they are living in a strange land under the rule of a foreign empire, Isaiah offers an alternative vision.

We hear these words during our Lenten journey to the cross, so we hear them in conversation with the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus offered an alternative way to live within the rule of the Roman Empire – another empire, another call of the people of God to live differently within it. Jesus challenged individuals to leave their lives and follow him, but he also challenged the ideals and system of Empire. Rome ruled by might, Jesus said the meek shall inherit the earth. Rome oppressed, Jesus set free. Those whom Rome and the societal norms of the day cast out, Jesus embraced. “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.”

We also hear these words in a time of turmoil – a climate where rhetoric of hate is appealing to many. We live in an all too familiar Empire, ruled by money, greed, and the interests of the few, no matter who is exploited or forgotten along the way. We live in a system based on racism and inequity, a system that privileges those with white skin, yet has a vested interest in white people denying this fact. Isaiah offers this alternative vision for living within an Empire – where all are welcomed, invited, nourished, and delighted. This surely is a foreign, far-fetched vision in our land of food deserts, where even basic nutrition is not accessible to all (let alone delight!). Yet Isaiah also offers a call for repentance. Even though he says, “let the wicked forsake their way” (and most of us would like to focus on the “their”) we are all included in this call to repent. We all participate in the injustice of Empire, and many of us, particularly those of us with white skin, benefit from it. So we repent, we hope, and we take up the mission of living into this alternative vision. Dismantling systems of power and race to live into the vision of Isaiah and the vision of Jesus where the system is not skewed to benefit the few, where violence does not win the day but all thrive and live an abundant life, seems like only that: a vision, a dream. There is a profound gap between where we are and where we need to be.

And yet, God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts. God calls us beyond our imaginations, our abilities, and our understanding, and this is the good news; this is where God meets us. We must face these systems of power and race and day by day live more fully into God’s vision with both repentant and hopeful hearts.

Prayer: God of endless grace and welcome, help us to stand for light, love, equality, compassion, and hope even when our reality is so far from your vision for the world. Let us lessen divides, broaden welcome, and usher in justice as we journey to the cross this Lent. Amen.

~ Shannon Axtell-Martin

Fourth Sunday in Lent — Second Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Reconciliation is one of those things that sounds great in concept but can be really hard to execute. People love to talk about it, but true reconciliation is difficult, long-term work.

For it to occur and have meaning, the person seeking reconciliation must admit they were wrong. Without excuse or prevarication. No wishy-washy “If you were offended by what I said.....” or “My words may have been misinterpreted....” It takes sincere, thoughtful, heartfelt regret for things done or left undone. Plus it usually takes some work on oneself to surrender strongly held, internalized justifications and lies in order to fully acknowledge mistakes and work toward forgiveness.

Just going through the motions does not count.

And if it can be ridiculously complex to get a sincere apology for even simple and straightforward wrongs (the person who ran a stop sign and smashed into your car; the neighbors whose dog uses your yard as a bathroom), what chance do we have on the really difficult stuff? It’s why personal injury lawyers make fortunes and even robust diplomacy cannot seem to steer the world away from perpetually teetering on the brink of war.

Few things for which reconciliation is desperately needed seem more complex than this nation’s history of oppressing and exploiting people of color. Since its very founding, America has operated on a system where non-Europeans were obstacles or property, and, in both cases, sub-human. Less than. The other. The genocide perpetrated against indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans, and now the tandem exploitation and

condemnation of Latinos have left this country with a profoundly bitter legacy that seems almost insurmountable.

Almost.

Reconciliation among individuals will be an eternal process. Some folks will never see the wrong and some will never forgive. But progress has been made and can be made with leadership, with the hard, good work of conversation toward better understanding, and with an institutional commitment to better days. Perhaps everything will not exactly become new, but most things can become fundamentally better.

As Paul reminds us in his second letter to the Corinthians, reconciliation is a ministry, and ministries are usually not transient. Otherwise, it could be a committee or a task force or whatever title you assign to a group executing a finite project. Ministries address the problem at hand, so if your faith community has a soup kitchen, in this moment, it provides food to those who most urgently need it. But the work of your ministry is also to address the circumstances that leave people hungry. You're not trying to get out of the work of feeding those in need, but you want to make sure that the policies and structures that prevent people from feeding themselves are diminished and eventually eliminated.

Because we are human, imperfect in the best of times, I imagine we will always need the ministry of reconciliation with us as its messengers. And as we commit to that work among ourselves as individuals, may we also commit to holding our leaders accountable to be messengers and actors at a level that creates true, sustained, structural change.

Prayer: God who sees know other, only all, help us to engage in the difficult important work of reconciliation with the understanding that we must work within ourselves and within our broader world if everything is to become new. Amen.

~Aleta Payne

Fifth Sunday in Lent — John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

During this fifth week of lent we are called to do an evaluation of our conscience and examine whether we are conscientious of the impact of our actions and inactions.

Jesus in John 12:1-8 has just resurrected Lazarus and is dining at his home with his siblings when Judas of Iscariot criticizes Martha for using expensive oils to anoint his feet rather than selling it to give it in charity to the poor. At first, one might be taken aback as to why Judas' action would be of a reprehensible nature because he was suggesting doing a good deed. However, a good deed loses all of its essence if the motive which inspires it is selfish. As it turns out he wanted to cash out the money from the oil and keep it to himself. Technically Judas is poor so it could count as charity, but with that logic we can justify all of our misdeeds. In our days, where everything is capitalized, we often don't see past the exchange of dollar bills. When we pay for our electric utilities, there's a disconnect between the consumer and production of the consumed good. We often disregard the burden laid on other members of society because we feel that we've done our due diligence by paying for a service or thrown a dollar or two in some charity box that month.

The Pope has asked us to consider the other with whom we share this common Earth and to be aware about how our actions impact them directly and indirectly. When we power our heater during the winter months, trains of coal are lugged to power plants generally situated in remote, but still populated rural areas inhabited by individuals of

low income. Once combusted, clouds of smoke darken the sky and contaminate the oxygen source of nearby residents. These residents are often people of color who are too poor to contemplate moving elsewhere. For those who have the means to do so, the value of their properties are diminished because of the proximity to the coal-fired power plant. Not only has their neighborhood value progressively decreased, their health is negatively impacted by the pollution and they reap no benefits. The scarce few who actually work at the power plant earn a meager income. No matter how we do the checks and balances, these children of God end up losing more than they gain, and our impact from heating our own house affects their lives directly.

So we can give ourselves a pat when we donate or volunteer to help others. Or we can act as the Pope has called on us to care for our common home to ensure the livelihood of all who inhabit it.

Prayer: God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth for not one of them is forgotten in your sight. Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live. The poor and the earth are crying out.

O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to you!

-- *From the Papal Encyclical on Care of Creation*

~Susannah Tuttle and Sandrine Charles

Palm Sunday — Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

This is, of course, Palm Sunday, and there is plenty in the Lectionary specific to that. But I chose this passage. Huh.

Palm Sunday is a big deal to those of us who consider ourselves followers of Christ. By choosing to write about this Psalm, I am not ignoring the significance of the fronds or the colt or the adoring crowds. Nor am I ignoring what comes over the course of the next week when things will go horribly awry in the way that they must. Without the horror of the torture and execution, without the miracle of resurrection, Jesus goes down in history as just another prophet.

What inspired me to write about this Psalm is its joyful, optimistic tone even as we approach one of the darkest weeks in the Christian church's year. Which, in 2016, happens to come in what is already a plenty dark calendar year. Why in the world are we so angry? Or perhaps better asked, why is the world so angry? Perhaps we need to talk about some steadfast love.

When we talk about race, power, and privilege, there is so much of the conversation is grim – past, present, and inevitably future. Rights that appeared to be won are being stripped away. Language in the public square has taken a vicious, unimaginable turn. Even some of those entrusted to protect and serve seem to have placed a qualifier on that pledge.

And yet we are promised twice, right off that bat, that God's "steadfast love endures forever." No qualifiers. No language separates those who will be loved from those who won't.

Further down, there is promise to those who have been minimized or told they were unworthy.

"The stone that the builders have rejected has become the chief cornerstone."

So the people who should have seen the value and importance of who was before them failed in that basic task, but that didn't mean that all was lost. Can you imagine the builders' faces when they realize it? Everything is supported by that stone, the individual, the very group, that they deemed unworthy. But don't be distressed because the Lord is doing marvelous things.

This Psalm, so full of promise, should not be a distraction from what comes next in the story of our Lord. Powerful people are going to grab him, torture him, and publicly execute him, because they are afraid of him. They have been since he was born. Remember Herod?

In today's world, brown children are less valued and their futures sacrificed with disturbing regularity. They are poisoned in Flint, gunned down in Chicago, inhibited from voting – their surest path to leadership that represents them – in North Carolina. All by powerful people.

It is heartbreaking and infuriating, but rather than dwelling there, let us remember that we are a resurrection people, that God's love is steadfast, that the Lord has made this day for us all. That doesn't mean we sit and wait for God to rescue us from this bitter and divided time. It does mean that we keep the faith, that we continue the good and important work of opening gates, and we optimize the opportunities for those

cornerstones to serve the crucial role they are meant to have in the foundation of our society.

Prayer: Remind us in these troubling times of your steadfast love, our God and our protector. Help us to ensure that the gates are opened and remain open for all. Amen.

~Aleta Payne

Maundy Thursday — John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."

For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer.

You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I sat, my oils and powder mixture by her feet. Pulling one foot out at a time, our spirits huddled in the living room where we were praying and talking about race and power dynamics. It was late at night, around the hour that Jesus perhaps sat with his disciples for the last supper. Here, I was washing her feet, delighted to serve this woman who was so generous to the community, and who welcomed me to her table of love. As I am massaging each vein, I hear the others discuss "Black lives matter." In my head I repeat this phrase, and listen intently to my spirit wanting to serve hers, and only catching parts of the conversation. "Yes, Black lives matter, and all lives matter."

Jesus served his disciples in this most humble way, by washing their feet, the place where the most dirt, grime, and unwanted substances collect on the human body, a place so easily ignored. And that is why it is an act of humbleness and love. This day, Maundy Thursday, is the day Jesus broke his body with bread, and poured his blood with wine, and took time to wash the disciples feet with humble love.

During this evening in December, I, a Black woman, sat with two Indian women and a White man in one of the women's living room. The conversation started at an Indian restaurant where the owner invited my friend and me to her home to pray. I was honored to have people engaging, through prayer, and a faith lens, the topic of racism and power dynamics related to the Black experience – that spoke love to me. They were willing to place themselves in a humble position to rub off dirt, grime, and unwanted feelings to try to understand how to make life different for Black lives, and for all lives. It is easy to ignore race and power dynamics if it doesn't affect you. And yet, it affects all of us.

One of the Indian women mentioned in past conversations, marginalization, and how she feels the pressure to negotiate her cultural dress during worship services. She wants the Christian tone to be, "Our God" and not, "My God." It is an extreme act of love and humbleness to put yourself in the position of someone else, whether you are White person trying to understand a Black person's perspective, or Indian person trying to understand a Black person's perspective, or a Black person trying to understand the Indian person's experience – we all experience race, power, and privilege in some way, and to lend ourselves to understand each other is a powerful act of love.

Prayer: Dear I AM THAT I AM, you have taught us to love one another. Your son demonstrated the ultimate act of love through dying on the cross. You have given us a standard to uphold, and by your grace, we can do it. May you help us in the small acts of love, like being kind, saying nice words, treating each other well, and lending ourselves to listen to the hearts of those hurting, while we learn how to die to ourselves, and let you live within us. YHWH, you are the Most High God, and without your love, we will perish. May we lend ourselves to your standard, dying daily to flesh, and may your mercy compel us to wash our brothers' and sisters' feet. In the name of Yeshua, Amen.

~Joy Williams

Good Friday — Isaiah 52:13-53:12

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals – so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Good Friday arrives, and our eyes are finally opened.

The suffering servant is before us, and what we did not want to see, what perhaps we did not yet fully understand – and what we certainly did not want to acknowledge – now stands before us in confounding clarity, and it cannot be ignored.

Startled and astonished, we grapple with the shock of what we now see and struggle to understand:

We expected a king; we received one like a root out of dry ground – seemingly holding no promise at all. Having no form of majesty, one acquainted with suffering and infirmity, even ugly and despised – we almost cannot bear to look at him.

We are confronted with our prejudices, our ignorance of those who do not meet our expectations, our false standards of beauty and worth.

We wonder aloud why such suffering must be endured. Surely the servant has done something wrong, surely God has struck him down and turned away from him because of his own doings, but no: It is on account of *us*. *Our* infirmities and diseases, *our* transgressions and iniquities, *our* going astray.

We have played a part in the injustices we see. Uncomfortable, we consider the ways our security and wellbeing has come at the expense of others.

In our anger and in our astonishment at the injustice of it all, we want to cry out: “Stop! Stand up for yourself! Resist! Fight back! *Save yourself!*” And yet we are met with silence. If there are cries of resistance, we cannot hear them.

Our pride and often-violent predispositions drown out the voices of those who suffer in silence all around us.

More than anything, it is the mystery of it all that confounds us. How can such suffering and humiliation lead to exaltation? How can such anguish bring forth light? How can it be the *will of the Lord* to allow such pain to exist? *Why does it have to be this way?*

In reluctant humility, we acknowledge our ignorance. For all that has been made clear to us, for all that we believe in and hold dear, we recognize that there is still more that we do not know or understand, still questions that are yet to be answered.

It is Friday, and for now we do not know that Sunday is coming. Rather, today we stand shaken and bewildered before God's suffering servant, before all the sufferings and injustices of the world, and before ourselves with the staggering knowledge of our own responsibility – both in perpetuating injustice, and somehow, by the will and mystery of God, in helping end it.

Prayer: God of mystery, we acknowledge that we do not understand your ways. On this Friday, we confess the part we play in the sufferings of your world, we grieve for the pain that is before us and within us, and mourn the lack of justice for so many of your people. May our shock and astonishment spur us toward action and hope for a better world. Amen.

~Brian Hollingsworth

Easter — John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.”

She did not know Him. The Prince of Peace; the Savior; the Messiah; the Light of the World; and she did not know him.

I like to understand people. I like to know what guides their actions. I have always thought that I was gifted in the art of perception, but I have recently found that more often than not I am wrong. Just like the old adage, “You can’t judge a book by its cover,” I do not know how an individual is really feeling. I do not know their past. I do not know their struggle and I do not truly know them. This reminder has been increasingly evident in the last few years of my life as I have been made aware of the blessings bestowed on me as a middle-class white woman, I have watched and read news stories and books like “The New Jim Crow,” and I am thrown into new situations where the only thing I can do is listen and observe. I cannot change what I was born into but I can recognize, just as Mary did, when something needs to be said.

Mary knew Jesus, but she did not know him in that representation. She was so caught up in the physical appearance that she almost missed the presence of the risen Lord. Often I am so blinded by stigmas that I miss the opportunity to love my neighbor. Often I am so blinded by the desire to understand that I forget to listen. And, often I am so blinded by the negative images of race, power, and privilege that I forget to look for the hope; the hope for a better tomorrow because I know that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope (Romans 5:3-4).” Let us rejoice in the hope of the Glory of God.

Prayer: Gracious God, let us remember that with privilege comes responsibility, with responsibility comes accountability, with accountability comes honesty, and with honesty comes faithfulness. God of creation, equip us to live faithfully in your Kingdom and recognize the hope you have provided. Amen.

~Ashley Yohman

