



God blesses those people who depend only on him.
They belong to the kingdom of heaven!

—Matthew 5:3

WEEK 22

Jesus Shares His Message

Guide: Let the Word Penetrate

This week we seek to know Jesus more intimately by entering into the depth of his words. Lovers listen. Lovers devour the words of the other. This week we want to come to savor the words of Jesus and let them penetrate our hearts.

When Jesus' turn comes to read in the synagogue in his hometown, he picks up the words of the prophet Isaiah, which must have been part of his prayer for years.

"The Lord's Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen'" (Luke 4:18–19).

When Jesus begins his preaching in Matthew's Gospel, he looks out and sees the crowd that gathers to hear him. They are not the spiritually rich. They are weary and they are full of mourning. Justice is something they can only hunger and thirst for. And they are the ones reviled and rejected by self-righteous religious folks. Jesus announces to them that they are truly blessed by God.

We can't help but fall more deeply in love with Jesus as we see how his mission takes him to the heart of our life's struggle. He offers us good news and freedom. If we had expected Jesus to be saying that we have to be holy *before* we come to God, we are quite surprised when we actually chew his words. His preaching gives us such a powerful picture of God's love for us, precisely *in the midst* of our poverty and powerlessness. And his message contains the clear and all-encompassing commandment to love one another the very way God loves us.

This week, let us become familiar with the message that comes from the heart of Jesus. Read the Scripture readings this week very carefully. Commit them to memory. Imagine the scenes, the people, their lives, their reactions.

From morning until night this week, in the midst of all we do, in all those background times, we can let the words of Jesus console us. Especially in the places where I might feel captive and in need of freedom, I can feel his presence. I can become so conscious of his being with me throughout this week as I show mercy and try to be a peacemaker. I can hear his words of assurance and blessing when I feel quite spiritually poor and discover I can't depend on my strength but only on him.

Use the resources to get started. Lovers listen. As we let his words echo around in our life this week, our hearts will be drawn ever closer to his. And our desire for this union will grow this week.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

We want to let the words of Jesus draw us to him. Who is he? He is one who stands up and says that God blesses us when we are most vulnerable and in need. He proclaims it, he lives it in his own compassion and outreach, and he died for saying

it. This is who he is—the one we are coming to know and love and be drawn to follow.

We must begin by listening. We want to listen with the fascination and focus of a lover. How many times have we heard the readings selected for this week? How many times have they left very little impression on us? This week we want to go to those readings hungry for everything they can tell us about Jesus.

If it helps, read each reading many times throughout the week. Read each reading all the way through to get the context and the whole message. Then, go back and read it more carefully, noticing words that surprise you. It can help to compare translations of the readings. Notice how seeing different ways of saying the same thing can reveal the meaning more deeply.

After a particular reading is familiar, reflect on who the audience is. For whom is this good news? Who is threatened by it? Can I place myself in that scene and feel proud of Jesus for his words of comfort and liberation? And then can I experience these words as addressed to my heart?

As we've noted before in this retreat, the real fruit of the week's reflection will occur to the degree that the reflection makes its way into the background of our everyday lives. From the time we wake, until the time we sleep, we can let each and every human experience be open to being an experience of intimacy with Jesus. The readings will help us get there. The more those words of Jesus penetrate my heart, the more I will experience every part of my life addressed—my ambivalence, my fears, my hungers, my efforts to be merciful and a peacemaker.

- Do I feel joined to Jesus in this or that act of my day, drawing nourishment that bears fruit?
- Can these words expose moments when I go away sad because I can't bring myself to be heroic in this or that choice, when my possessions are at stake?

- Can I imagine being judged at the end of time by how I deal with the seemingly unimportant people in my life today?
- Do I walk through my day as though I'm in search of a treasure or fine pearl—where everything else pales in importance in comparison to the desire to give myself completely to being with the one I love in his mission?
- Can I give him thanks this very morning or afternoon or evening—in these events—for his liberation, for the blessedness he is revealing to me about my poor but humble spirit?

Give thanks each evening before I go to sleep for the growing presence of Jesus' spirit in my day, drawing me to greater freedom and joy and being with him in giving my life away.

And please consider sharing any graces from this week with others making the retreat by going to the online retreat page and clicking on the "To Share" link. This could allow many other people to profit from the graces offered you.

For the Journey: Listen Carefully

We are in the midst of a courtship process. Jesus is walking through the villages of his time and into the living spaces of our own hearts. He continues performing those acts of healing and feeding, teaching and comforting, which are meant to impress us and encourage us to follow him.

This week we sit down with him on the side of a hill, while he sets out his personal inauguration address. He has revealed himself as the one who fulfills the prophet Isaiah's foretelling of the one who would have the Spirit upon him to bring good news and recovery. Jesus now foretells how he sees himself living as well as those who would be so attracted to him so as to live like him.

We sit down with the other disciples and watch their reactions to this strange new way of living and interacting. Perhaps you see some who smile at such simplicity and naïveté. Perhaps you catch sight of a few faces who begin glowing with excitement as they want to hear more of what fires their imaginations.

You may visualize Jesus turning to you when he says, "Happy are you when you are a peacemaker or person of mercy." It is not a demand but a gentle invitation to do what is good for you. While others may quietly scoff or snicker at these words of his new way, you yourself might feel a pull toward this manner of following and revealing the Master.

There might be one or two things you may wish that he had not said as you listened. You may resist or find personal difficulty in imagining yourself being meek or poor of spirit. It is very humbling and blessed to pray with our resistances to his teachings. He knows our ways, and our ways are so deeply influenced by the ways of this earth and our cultures.

The one who is doing the inviting does so with full awareness of our ways; he embraces them and calls us through them. We are of this earth and he asks us to learn a radically new way that is as strange to us as walking and living on another planet. We continue watching and listening and letting him come closer so that the transition to the new planet will not be so strange or even absurd. We learn, as did the early members of his way, to embrace our real fears and questions about following Jesus so intimately. His teachings are meant to put us all in the tensions with which the early followers found themselves. These tensions are caused by our having lived so long according to our own cultural and personal inauguration addresses.

The call of Jesus to each of us is not an impatient imperative but rather a timely invitation to a relationship that will slowly move our desires to live those ways that moved others to distance themselves from the Master. Perhaps as we pray

this week, we find fewer and fewer listeners remaining on the hillside. We have felt the inclinations to silently slip away having wonderful excuses and with great promises and intentions to return.

Here we are, though, still listening to his words, listening to our own inner words. The prayer for us this week remains. Is there a call welling up in me out there?

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

In prayer today I read the Gospel from John. In it you invite me to stay joined to you and you say that together we will produce fruit. The desire in me is so deep to do that. How? Where? What will we do together? I reread these too-familiar passages in the Gospel, but now they come to life in a new way. Stay joined with you and you will stay joined with me. Together we will produce fruit. It's a powerful invitation and I want to accept it.

I picture you on a hillside talking to us in the crowd. You came and brought your message to the poor—to them—but I can see the poor you are talking to and I am one of them. Now you are offering us life, a life with you. You see us, not as a crowd, but as individuals, each struggling to be freer people, poor in spirit and wanting something more—wanting to be closer to you. And you give us an answer to that desire. You offer us yourself, your friendship, and ask us to join in your life of serving the poor—others like ourselves.

Dear Jesus, you see me as a captive who needs to be set free of my limitations, my selfishness, and my seeking of the easy way out. I feel you there for me, next to me, as I begin to sense how I want to serve you and how I need to be free to do that.

I feel you accepting of me, with all of my limitations, all of my shortcomings. I am so aware of them all, and yet right there in the midst of my weaknesses, you accept me and love me and ask me to join with you. I feel the pull of your

invitation and I feel my love for you growing deeper. Your care and gentle manner are so attractive—how could I turn down your invitation? Yes, I want to go with you. But somewhere inside I feel the voice asking, “What will it cost me?”

I love what you say about being merciful, helping those who grieve, and being a peacemaker. Yes, I will do that with and for you. Then you ask me to be humble, and I want to balk at that. Humble? Poor of spirit? And yet I know so well that when I am capable and self-sufficient and independent, I don't turn to you, my loving friend, for help. Now I want something different—to turn to you more, always, for help and support and friendship. Teach me to be humble. Show me what it means to be poor of spirit. I don't always know how to change the way I live to become more poor, but that is my desire now. Please show me how to be humble. Give me the grace to want to be humble. Let me bring all the ways I resist being poor and humble to you. I know only that this is the way to be closer to you and your love.

Our world teaches us one way: you offer another. I am so deeply immersed in this world and I feel myself resist, and yet the flame in my heart is growing stronger as I watch you and love you more each day. Teach me. Thank you for loving me so much that you invite me to go with you.

Scripture Readings

Luke 4:14–21

Matthew 5:1–16

Matthew 13:44–46

Luke 6:46–49

Matthew 25:31–46

John 15:1–7