

Keeping the Faith – Contemporary Spiritual Practices for Contemporary Christians

As Christians, we ought to embrace the world in which we live. After all, this is still God's world. Yet that is increasingly hard to recognize as many of us get swept up into the latest Tweet, Facebook post, or viral video. We are constantly entertained. And with the ease of working from anywhere, we are constantly working. Technology allows us to communicate effectively and connect with others, even on Skype calls across hemispheres.

With all of the time-saving and people-connecting devices we have, what about our time to connect with God? Does the pace of the world can move so quickly that we have no time for God?

These weekly studies are a way to connect to God by exploring spiritual disciplines for the Twenty-First century. Historically, Christians have used the time of Lent, the weeks leading up to Easter, as a time of self-reflection and examination. By practicing spiritual disciplines, the faithful draw closer to God. Some of the spiritual disciplines in this study are very similar to the practices Christians have kept over the millennia. Others offer new insight to address the way we live. Over this 6-week journey, may you also discover new practices to incorporate into your daily life and renew your passion for God.

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Keeping Silence: Sabbath and the Time of Your Life

Scripture: Genesis 2:2-3 & Matthew 14:22-23

Sabbath. Maybe you remember it as one of the 10 commandments or something that we're supposed to do each week. But practicing Sabbath can be difficult... either because we feel we're just too busy or maybe because we just don't know what Sabbath really is. We certainly know work... and doesn't it feel that sometimes the work never ends? Is life just "too busy" to offer any kind of rest or break or anything? Do you give reasons for not taking breaks? Do any of those sound like, "I can't afford it", "I'm the only one who can do this job," or "I'll be too far behind when I get back." Sabbath asks us to answer each of those statements in a unique way.

Keeping Sabbath and taking a vacation are not necessarily the same thing. You can experience Sabbath on vacation, but vacation is not Sabbath. Sabbath is intentionally spending time with God. It is an intentional break from culture and saying, I will take this time to spend with God. As the commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." Sabbath may be a time kept in silence or it may be a time of intentional exploration of your faith with other people. It may be in prayer or it may be in reading Scripture.

Remember that commandment about the Sabbath? The commandment was not only for God's benefit, but also for God's people, and it wasn't just a nice thought either. Sabbath had and still has political connotations. As the commandments and laws were given to the Israelites, they were coming from a time in their life when they were slaves. They had to work. The cost to rest would have been great. They, too, may have said they couldn't leave... because they couldn't afford to leave...because they would just return to more work if they took a break...because they were the only ones who could make these bricks...

So, when they left Egypt and left that slavery behind, they were a little lost. They didn't have to make bricks anymore. For so long, they were known as people who made bricks. Now, they were told "remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." Remember who you are and whose you are. Sabbath is a time for us to be reminded that we are God's children. The kingdoms of this world don't hold power or sway over you. You are a part of God's kingdom. Work on building for God's kingdom today. Do not fall for what this world wants to impose. Because if the kingdoms of this world had their way—we'd be making bricks 7 days a week. And no one does that, do they?

When was the last time that you spent intentional time in Sabbath? In the reading from Matthew, Jesus has just finished calling his disciples and teaching the crowds. After a busy day, does Jesus have meetings to talk about the next steps and put a plan of action together because he only has a short time to spend there? Instead, Jesus withdrew to a quiet place to pray. After calling disciples, giving an amazing sermon, and getting attention from all corners... Jesus leaves and goes away to a place to pray. It's neither the crowds nor the disciples who define who Jesus is. He doesn't give into their demands on his time. He's not defined by the *brick, brick, brick* or *work, work, work* mentality of this world. He defines who he is. If we take what Jesus said and did seriously, why do we still think *brick, brick, brick* or *work, work, work*?

Practicing Sabbath can be hard. As a student, there are classes and work to do. Starting a career, it's hard to tell a boss that you can't do something. As a parent, it's hard enough to find time with your children, let alone time to connect with God. The though it's hard, that difficulty

makes it all the more important. In Sabbath, we aren't doing mindless recreation. It is experiencing re-creation. We are reminding ourselves of the created beings that we are and who our Creator is. Our creator isn't our boss or our professors or even a smartphone. It's God. Find ways to connect with the Creator in Sabbath.

Discussion Questions

- 1.) What are your reasons for not practicing Sabbath?
- 2.) How many hours a week do you spend working? How many do you spend in silence?
- 3.) Are your times of Sabbath about recreation or re-creation?

Get to Work!

- 1.) Take 2 minutes every day to sit in silence. If you can do more, increase the time every day.
- 2.) Take a fast from media—Disconnect from your phone, email, internet, TV...anything that creates extra noise for you and makes it hard to connect with God.
- 3.) Find a designated space that you can connect with God—it may be your local sanctuary, a spot in the middle of some trees, a table at a local coffee shop, or your own prayer closet.

Going Further

Unplugged: Tech Sabbath strengthens connection to God by Mary Jacobs as found in the United Methodist Reporter: <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=7622>
National Day of Unplugging: <http://www.sabbathmanifesto.org/unplug/>

Keeping the Word: Reading as Spiritual Practice

When I was in college, I took a class that I absolutely hated, but that, through the vagaries of departmental course requirements, I couldn't drop. The professor was a well-known personage in our city, with some pretty strong ideological commitments that made their way into the syllabus. It certainly didn't help matters that I disagreed with him entirely about just about everything. And oh, how I loathed the course readings. Every single book made me angry. My roommates always knew when I was reading for that class, because I would sit on my bed, armed with a pen and a stack of post-it notes, and mumble to myself, deeply absorbed in arguing with authors.

I can imagine that those poor roommates wondered if I might have been losing it... but when the semester was over, and my blood pressure dropped, I found myself grateful for one thing: over the course of those miserable weeks, I'd become a different kind of reader. I experienced books in a whole new way.

Read Luke 4:14-21

I think of that terrible class as I read this passage from Luke. Jesus has just emerged from forty days of temptation in the wilderness (not quite as long as a semester, but inarguably more difficult) and now, strengthened, he returns to his hometown to begin his ministry. He goes to the synagogue and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He reads these words, sits down, and begins to teach – by interpreting what he's just read. He places himself in conversation with the text and makes it his own. These are no longer just ancient words, they are speaking to him and to the people gathered there. *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

Jesus isn't angry at Isaiah, or castigating his arguments, or making snide comments on post-it notes. Jesus is better than me (obviously). But both of these instances demonstrate something critical about how reading can become a spiritual and holy practice. Jesus is reading the scriptures. What is it about reading the Bible that helps us to grow in faith?

There are those who will tell you of moments when, in despair, they flipped open the Bible and immediately, serendipitously, miraculously, came upon a passage that spoke to them with a word they desperately needed to hear. I've had those moments, every now and again. But my luck seems to be such that I more often land on something inscrutable or infuriating – something from 1 Chronicles. Or Leviticus. Or 2 Timothy.

Still, one of the things that can be so wonderful about reading the Bible is that it invites us into conversation. Because its writings are so ancient, because its cultural context is in many ways so different from our own, we are likely to have questions. We are likely to read passages and want to know more.

The average newspaper is written at a fifth grade reading level. Did you know that? Part of me thinks that's a great thing, something that all but guarantees access for a good percentage of adults. But I balk as well: aren't some things too complex to boil down to things a ten-year-old should understand? Shouldn't we ask more of readers than quick and easy comprehension?

When Jesus picks up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he is reading a complex text that reveals motifs and themes that run throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. And he delves right into them, confronting those gathered with a new interpretation. They don't much like his interpretation... in fact, they try to run him out of town.

Reading can be food for the mind and soul. And Christians have known this for centuries. Did you know Christians were largely responsible for popularizing the codex form – the book form – of writings? Previously, most long texts were written on scrolls, but Christians liked to flip through the Scriptures and letters – they liked to cross-reference as they discussed and interpreted and worshipped – and scrolls aren't conducive to that sort of reading. We're "people of the book" in more ways than one!

This engagement with other times, places, and with other thinkers, can be a means for us to grow in contemplation and in wisdom. We can read for information, and we can read to spark reflection. We can read to hear God's word to others through the history of the world, and we can read to hear God's voice speaking to us.

Read Acts 8:26-40

I learned a great deal about myself reading all those books that made me so angry in that terrible class I had to take – I learned what mattered to me, learned what sort of arguments grab me, and I learned what kinds failed to compel me. That was an important learning – but it's not much of a spiritual discipline. If we want to grow in wisdom, if we want to let texts – biblical and otherwise – shape us toward God, we have to read with what one of my colleagues calls "a baptized imagination." Much like the Eunuch talking with Peter, we have to realize that our understanding of the Bible, like our understanding of all sorts of books, can lead us toward God if we allow ourselves to ask questions and reflect according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. *How can I understand what this is about?*, the Eunuch asks. We can only really understand Scripture if we come to it within the context of faith; if we approach it, expecting it to reveal something of God. If we come to it in faith, in the trust that we can be moved and challenged by it, we will find the Word we need.

Social scientists and philosophers have mused a great deal about how our reading on the internet and on e-readers has changed us in recent years. We read sites that are geared toward our pre-existing interests or biases; we are less likely to read longer pieces. We don't write comments and questions in the margins. We are more likely to skim. Are we losing things in these practices? Of course, at one point, the codex was new reading technology, and those early Christians were 'early adopters.' So maybe too much hand-wringing about e-readers diminishing the spiritual nature of reading isn't entirely necessary.

I have loved to read for as long as I can remember – I have loved the ways that great novels reveal the ambiguities of people's lives, the ways that narratives bear witness to the unexpected, the tragic and the comedic, in the unfolding of time and history. I love the way books allow me to enter worlds I have never imagined, and ask questions I might otherwise ignore. Books, words, invite us into knowledge of ourselves, our world, and our God, in ways few other things do.

Discussion Questions

- 1.) Do you read? What do you like to read? Why do you like those sorts of books?
- 2.) When's the last time you were pleasantly surprised by something you read? What was it?
- 3.) What do you think of this idea of reading with a "baptized imagination"?
- 4.) How do you like to read Scripture? Full of questions? Armed with a study bible? For devotional purposes? As the basis of prayers?

Get to Work!

Practice *Lectio Divina*, a way of reading that slows you down – allowing for meditation, contemplation, and growth in awareness. See http://www.upperroom.org/daily/?page_id=9 for a guide from the *Upper Room*.

Read something outside your normal picks. Ask a friend or pastor for recommendations. Check out this article for why we should be reading widely:

http://www.salon.com/books/laura_miller/2010/11/02/nanowrimo

And this one for how to challenge yourself to read widely:

<http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6716759.html>

Going further

Check out this wonderful poem by Billy Collins, "Marginalia":

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/marginalia/>

Or this piece I wrote about reading:

http://www.youngclergywomen.org/the_young_clergy_women_pr/2010/10/bookworm.html#continue

There's a wonderful chapter about spiritual reading in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* by Marjorie Thompson

Keeping Track: Eating Faithfully

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 8:15 & Luke 5:33-39

“I know all about fasting...I read how Beyonce did the Master Cleanse!” I was stunned to hear this comment from a young adult when we started to talk about what fasting was. For those who aren’t aware of the Master Cleanse, it’s a diet designed around a lemonade drink composed of lemons, maple syrup, cayenne pepper, & water. There are a list of instructions and cautions for this diet, but let’s be clear, Master Cleanse is not the same thing as fasting....

We have a culture obsessed with food in good ways and in bad. We’ve seen reports of how Americans are extremely overweight and shows like *The Biggest Loser* on NBC garner huge ratings. There have also been some important conversations on knowing where your food comes from and what chemicals may or may not be in your foods by such authors as Michael Pollan (*Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual*). These conversations are all important. But what do they tell us about fasting?

We have a lot of negative connotations around fasting. It is giving something up after all...but it’s not a negative thing to do. And fasting isn’t just another fad diet to lose weight. Last year during Lent, my fast was to eat only at my dining room table. It had become far too easy to make a quick run through the drive through window in between appointments or to balance a plate on my lap next to my computer. But, I didn’t enjoy what I was eating or pay much attention to what I was doing. By sitting at the table, there were no other stimuli, and it forced me to cook more as well, which meant I paid more attention to labels and ingredients. I often read a book with my meals, which became a centering time as well, away from the sounds of canned laughter on TV or the beeps of emails coming in. I was fasting. I was fasting from diversions and focusing on enjoying food rather than stopping my stomach from grumbling.

During these 40 days of Lent, is there something that you need to keep track of? Not just in terms of calories or pounds, but keeping track of what you’re doing rather than doing something mindlessly. As Qhoelet writes in Ecclesiastes, we should “eat, drink, & be merry.” We should enjoy what we have! So, concentrate on what you are taking for granted...Keep track.

Discussion Questions:

- 1.) Have you practiced a fast before? What did you fast from?
- 2.) Did you include something in your fast rather than just abstain from something? What did you do (intentionally or unintentionally)?
- 3.) When someone says “fast from...” what do you think about?
- 4.) If you were to fast from something, what would help to keep you accountable?

Get to Work!

- 1.) Practice a fast this Lenten season. It may be food or media or caffeine. Don't just give something up, but pick up a spiritual discipline.
- 2.) Keep a food journal—keep track of what you're eating and where it comes from. Do you notice any patterns?
- 3.) Volunteer at your local food pantry or soup kitchen.

Going Further

Just Eating Curriculum by Church World Service

<http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/hunger/pdf/justeatpart.pdf>

[The Northern Illinois Conference Program Office can contact trained group leaders of this curriculum.]

The Daniel Fast

<http://www.daniel-fast.com/>

Keeping Connected: The Spiritual Discipline of Friendship

Who are your favorite movie heroes? Chances are that they can fight crime, right the wrongs of the world, and never, ever need anybody else to do it. Whether they have atomic powers or they're just super, most are self-contained, not needing anything or anyone else. The smallest atom may be self-contained, but by itself, it's pretty insignificant, hardly noticeable. When it is with others, though, the atom is amazing. When it's connected with other atoms, the simple and miniscule entity can form great things.

Read Acts 2:41-47

After the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the apostles were by themselves without their teacher for the first time. So they did what any good church leaders would do: they waited on God and then began preaching. Having heard the good news of Christ, many asked how they could be saved. They were instructed to repent and be baptized. My favorite part is what comes next. The new converts did not retire with their Bibles to begin their study. They did not abscond for prayer and meditation. Instead, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Having connected with God, these new Christians devoted themselves to staying connected to one another and to the Church.

Staying connected today is both easier and more complicated than ever before. We have computers, smartphones, and social networking. We can follow our friends on Twitter or read their status on Facebook. With a few key strokes, we can update several hundred "friends" about our life. We are connected instantaneously across the country. For many young adults, Facebook is a way of connecting without being physically present. Meaningful information about life is shared in seconds. Friends are able to keep in touch with each other in ways unimaginable in Biblical times.

As simple as it is to connect, I wonder if these are the types of practices we need to build healthy Christian relationships. The earliest church, as reported by the writer of Acts, met together "day by day." They experienced common practices of worship. They believed together and held property in common. The needs of any were met by the resources of the many. They ate together, sang together, and served together. You can't get that on Facebook or Twitter.

For many who have grown up with social media, these electronic means of communication help them keep up deep relationships. Electronic communication allows them to pick up conversations more rapidly in person, without all of the "catching up." But there is still a deeper connection to be made. In all honesty, the Facebook friends out in the farthest reaches of the continent are not my deepest friendships. The relationships that are most influential to me are the ones that are maintained face to face. The relationships that sustain me are the ones that are forged

over too many cups of coffee. They are shaped by common experiences of worship and the sharing of meals.

The trouble is that true friendships are risky. True and lasting relationships are built on truthfulness, and that can be... uncomfortable. What if people don't like me when they know who I really am? What if they make fun of me? What if they judge me? The uneasiness of honesty can't be denied. But if we are to be connected on a deeply personal level, we must take the risk and be truthful with our friends.

True and deep connections with others are not easy. They require vulnerability. But thankfully, such difficult relationships are worth it. They give us a support system during difficult times, when we wonder what to say because there is nothing to say, like when someone is enduring a life-threatening illness. And there is a sense of joyous community during the good times. Our best friends bring out the best in us.

As much as relationships change us, they also change the world. Acts reminds us that the early church was not consumed with self-interest. Instead, as the church gathered, ate, sang, and prayed, the world watched. They maintained the goodwill of the people around them and God added to their number daily. That must have been more than just a social group. It was a group committed to a message of love and acceptance. This simple act of connecting changed the world.

It is amazing to think that connecting with people can change the world. But time and time again it does. Friendships open themselves to outsiders. Hands are joined in service. Hearts are warmed with compassion. And the world changes. It is a funny thing that as much as we glamorize the individual hero, what changes the real world the most are the connections we make with one another. Do you want to change the world? Keep connected.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1.) In what sense can the Christian life be described as individualistic? In what ways is it communal?
- 2.) How much does the congregation of which you are a part resemble the early church described in Acts? Is there anything about the early church gathering that challenges you? Are there parts you find farfetched?
- 3.) How has social media changed the way we connect with one another? Are these changes good, bad, or neutral?
- 4.) How do you connect genuinely and deeply with fellow Christians? How often do you connect this way?
- 5.) What would you like to change about how you connect with other Christians?

Get To Work!

- How have you connected with others most deeply? Who are your best friends? Are there friends with whom you are no longer connected?
- This Lent, challenge yourself to connect deeply. Reconnect with old friends for a meal.
- Make time for a conversation that has been put off for too long. Take the risk of friendship.
- This week, have one face to face conversation that helps you keep connected.

Going Further

Check out the movie "The Social Network."

Closing Prayer

God of our communion, give us the grace we need to keep connected. Let us not seek to be heroic individuals, but instead teach us to live together. When our days get busy, give us time for friends. When we feel most isolated, surround us with love. Give us the courage to take the risk of caring deeply. Amen.

Keeping the World

What comes to mind when we say artificial? What is the difference between artificial and natural?

Disney World in Orlando is a trip into another world. Everything has been carefully planned, engineered to create a magical experience to guests. And as you walk, there is always something to purchase, always something else to consume. Although Disney has become a little more aware of the outside world, such as researching environmentally-friendly growing practices at Epcot's The Land attraction, the park as a whole still feels artificial. There are a few messages about recycling. But can we really learn recycling in a place where thousands of meals are consumed from disposable packaging? Can we learn about living responsibly in a place created to entice us to excess? The artificial world Disney has created distracts us from the honest message they offer about the environment.

Disney isn't the only place creating an artificial world. For many of us, all we need to do is open our doors. In our urban and suburban lives, it's hard to connect with nature. Our lives are made up of bricks and mortar, asphalt and concrete. Our meals often come from boxes or bags. For some of us, we are closest to nature when we visit the produce section of our grocery store.

It has not always been this way. In the time of Christ, the connection with the earth is obvious. The disciples of Jesus plucked grain for a snack as they walked from one place to another. The catch of the day was not found on a menu but in the net pulled from the sea. A meal out meant fishes and loaves, not a burger and fries. Keep that in mind as you read Matthew 6:25-33.

Read Matthew 6:25-33

Here Jesus instructs the disciples about anxiety for consumption. The temptation was to store up more than enough for today. Then Jesus asks the disciples to think of the birds of the air. They do not plant or store in barns, yet they always have something to eat. The plants of the field do not toil for clothing, yet they are clothed beautifully. I think the message is this: depend on God's good creation.

Through our connections with the world around us, God has provided for our survival. God's creation is inherently sustainable. Keeping the world means living in ways that create a positive future for our lives and for the world.

Living in the suburbs, I often wonder where my reminders are of the earth on which I depend. For me, genuine connection to nature is important. Even as I try to get into nature for renewal periodically, I find that the daily little reminders of my dependence on creation are most important. Maybe it is as simple as honestly acknowledging my dependence on the food I eat as I pray before a meal. The simple discipline of filling my reusable water bottle reminds me of the importance of keeping the earth for the future. Caring enough to sort the recycling from the garbage is a small testimony of my care.

I believe we have a deep-seeded drive to keep the earth that stems from the conviction that the earth represents life. We are sustained by the earth. Without clean air, we would not exist. Without fresh water, we would die. Even the temperature range of the climate around us is

vital to life. Yet we can get away from anything we don't like in the environment. We can afford to control the temperature of our homes. For many, we pay higher prices in gas without too much of a burden. We can invest in cleaners and purifiers that make our home and living environments clean. We even have the resources to create an artificial environment.

For many, there is no escape to such an artificial world. What happens to the world happens to them. Clean or dirty, they drink the water at hand. When the weather changes, they feel it in their bones. When pollution fills the air it fills their lungs. For them, the world is life. In this way, keeping the earth is more than a private spiritual discipline. It is more than something we do because we feel like we should. Keeping the world is a life giving discipline of social justice.

Discussion Questions:

- 1.) How "artificial" is the world around you? Is this a good or a bad thing?
- 2.) How do you feel connected to the earth?
- 3.) What are the practices of your life that lend themselves to sustainable living? What practices of your life tend toward consumption?
- 4.) How are you reminded that the world represents life?
- 5.) Do you believe that keeping the earth is a social justice issue? Where should it rank on our list of Christian priorities?

Get to Work!

Identify a discipline you can practice daily that will remind you of your connection to the world. Practice it. Take a moment each day to give thanks for creation and renew your commitment to keep the earth.

Going Further

Read *Freedom*, by Jonathan Franzen.

Read *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy (it's also a movie, but the book is better if you have the time).

Closing Prayer:

God and giver of life, we never cease to be amazed at your creation. Remind us each day of our connection to this world that sustains us. May we be responsible stewards as we keep the world. Amen.

Keeping Count: the Spiritual Disciplines of Earning, Saving, Giving, and Spending

Money. It's one of those things that we talk about in the abstract. It feels too personal to mention, even in families, even among friends. It's taboo. Whereas my best friends may know all the dynamics and details of my sex life, or my politics, I would never talk about my income or ask about theirs. It seems somehow, oddly, crass to talk about something so mundane yet so personal.

I wonder if part of our reticence to talk about money stems from our fear of judgment: we only want to share information we are prepared to defend. And most of us (or many of us, or maybe just me) aren't nearly as careful with our money as we'd like. Maybe we're not as careful as our faith calls us to be.

Read Exodus 20:1-6

There are those who read these first commandments (some of the Big Ten) as a condemnation of other faiths. They can be a way of knocking those idol-worshippers who don't worship Yahweh or Jesus. Knocking other faiths is wrong on a whole number of levels, but in this instance, it seems to be missing the point of what God is telling Moses.

Now, to be fair, the Lord God, the God of the Burning Bush and the Exodus, is making it clear that the Israelites are not to worship other gods, like the gods of the Egyptians, or the varied deities of their neighbors. But if you're familiar with the story, you'll recall that the people grow impatient waiting for Moses to return from his holy sojourn, and they ask his brother Aaron to make them an idol. They don't ask for a statue of some Canaanite fertility god. They don't ask for a rendering of Ba'al. They request a golden calf: a double symbol of material wealth. Cattle, of course, are expensive to purchase and maintain, but they also provide abundant food. Gold is, well, shiny and hard to come by. People have been drawn to gold since antiquity.

Aaron makes them this golden calf, and they set about worshipping it.

"You shall have no other gods before me."

The Lord reminds Moses, and others, elsewhere, throughout the Old Testament: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The people belong to God, and not to anything or anyone else. They are not to be enslaved by anything; they are a free people.

Whether or not we'd attribute our reasoning to biblical reflection, many of us might say that our relationship to money is influenced by the notion of idolatry. Some, though I don't know who would admit to it, chase the almighty dollar and let it rule their lives. It impacts their choice of work, their spending and saving habits, and the way they relate to others. Some are aware of the temptations associated with money and so, eschew consumerism for financial prudence. Still others are aware of how money tempts, and yet want to enjoy this life, and celebrate it, on occasion.

Read Mark 14:1-9 or John 12:1-8

Near the end of Jesus' life, one of his friends (in John's Gospel, it's Mary of Bethany) uses a costly jar of perfume to anoint his feet. In John, the gesture is even more extravagant. She wipes his feet with her hair. In a world of sandy, blistered and cracked feet, the act is incredibly gracious... but it is not well received by the others. John puts the words of complaint in the mouth of Judas, citing his ulterior motives. Mark suggests that the disciples are simply upset because of the waste. This perfume could have been sold for an exorbitant sum, and the money used for the poor. Jesus replies with words that may jar us. Leave her alone... "the poor will be with you always."

Really? We often assume Jesus would never prioritize such a display over the needs of the poor. We assume for good reason. Jesus speaks of following him with no money in our purses and tells us that we ought to be giving the naked the clothes off our backs. And now we get "the poor will always be with you"?

It sounds like a justification of poverty... or it can sound that way if we're not careful. One of my teachers said this was simply a statement of fact: there is nothing we can do in this life to eradicate poverty. There will always be those in need. Our utopian visions and hopes are just that. But that doesn't mean there is nothing to be done about it. The poor will always be with you, and we must never forget them. We must always be working on their behalf. The Scriptures are full of this call and of condemnation for those who ignore or abuse the economically and politically vulnerable. But our call, and our lives, require other things as well.

Sometimes they require incredible appreciation of the bounty of this life. Sometimes they require perfume poured out and offered up in love and gratitude.

Clearly we all need to find some sort of middle road. We need to use money in an instrumental way, rather than worshiping it. But we also need to be careful, too, and thoughtful, about how we earn it, and how we spend it, and how we save it.

Mary's anointing of Jesus is not analogous to just going ahead and spending some money on pleasures large and small now and again; it is a particular act of worship and grace. That said, it is also a reminder that we need to find balance.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, famously wrote, "Earn all you can. Give all you can. Save all you can." It is this bit of wisdom which he fleshes out in his sermon "On the Use of Money." Wesley helped the poor, working class people of 18th century England to climb out of poverty; his work laid the groundwork for a British middle class. In short, it's good advice. But those who Wesley reached out to never forgot that the earning and the saving were part and parcel of the giving. All three go together.

They go together differently for different people, however. "Earning all we can" doesn't mean we pursue six-figure salaries. As we pursue vocations, rather, we have to place our needs and gifts in the context of what the world needs from us. We should save all we can, too, but not to the point where life becomes about the joyless accumulation of capital. We should give all we can, but we have to be aware of what we can give.

This monetary trinity seems like common sense, and yet it is radically counter-cultural. Our culture tends to tell us that what we have is ours, and no one ought to suggest that we should be giving it away. There is always the newest smartphone or iPad. Our culture is equally ambivalent about the nature of earning: CEOs, celebrities, and politicians are encouraged to earn all they can, often at the expense of others, while everyone else is encouraged to take pay cuts and tighten their belts, to make do with less.

This isn't to say that our culture is all bad, all the time... but Christians are called to examine the assumptions and values of various aspects of our culture and to question the givens. We are called to look at the facts and current trends of our economic life and reflect biblically, theologically, and faithfully on the situation at hand. What does it mean that the gap between rich and poor is widening again? What does it mean when education becomes out of reach for many due to rising costs?

Our relationship with money is complicated, but it is worthy of our attention, for both good and evil are within its reach.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1.) What does a faithful relationship to money look like? Do you save? Do you give designated amounts to various causes? Do you have a budget?
- 2.) How do you make decisions about money? About spending?
- 3.) Have you ever heard a distinction between justice and charity made? How does that distinction speak to this discussion of money?
- 4.) How does our quest for the "abundant life" impact the possibilities of abundance for others?

Get to work!

Make a budget, if you don't already have one.

Can you distinguish between luxuries and necessities?

Can you cut back on some luxuries -- try it just for Lent! -- to increase your savings and your giving?

Going Further:

Take a look at what the UMC social principles say about money:

<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=1736>

Check out this editorial by the St. Paul Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on government, money, and collective bargaining:

<http://www.startribune.com/opinion/commentary/115328634.html>

The book *Practicing our Faith*, edited by Dorothy Bass, has a chapter on "Household Economics" that includes some good reflection.