

## Finding Jesus, Discovering Self

### **ONE – Leaving Home**

*“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth. . . .”*

If Jesus *came from Nazareth*, it means he left his hometown.

- Why might he have chosen to leave?
- Who and what did he leave behind?
- What could he gain by acting on that decision?
- What might he lose?
- What is the cost of his not leaving?
- And the promise of his leaving?
- Do you believe Jesus just picked up one day and left Nazareth, or do you believe he may have thought about leaving or actually attempted to leave at other times and then decided to stay instead?

Nazareth for Jesus was a geographical place, but Nazareth can also be a symbolic way of thinking about jobs, relationships, institutions, convictions, addictions, securities, obsessions, fears, and hopes.

Name your Nazareth—perhaps one of several.

- List the promises, benefits, and gains of staying there.
- List the costs, downsides, and losses of staying.
- And what about the alternatives—the costs, losses, and downsides of leaving as well as the benefits, gains, and promises?

Put a symbol of your Nazareth on the floor. It could be a drawing, a legal contract, a household or office item, a piece of jewelry, a rock, a rope, or anything that says “Nazareth” to you.

Straddle this representation of your Nazareth and close your eyes. Imagine yourself leaving it, and when ready, take some steps forward. Note how you feel.

Now once more straddle your Nazareth, and with your eyes closed imagine staying. Do not move. Stay as long as you want. Again, note how you feel.

Stand astride your Nazareth one more time. With your eyes closed, imagine you are a scale holding the option of staying in one hand and the option of leaving in the other.

- Which hand feels heavier?
- What might that weight tell you about your Nazareth?
- And concerning your Nazareth, what more might you now know about your choices and your process for deciding what to do?

### **TWO – Beginning the Journey**

We don't know why Jesus chooses to be baptized by John. The gospel writers never raised that question. All we know is that Jesus leaves Nazareth and goes to a river where John preaches an apocalyptic message calling people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And once there, and for reasons still unexplained, Jesus enters the very waters that his ancestors crossed on the way to the Promised Land.

- From what or whom may Jesus be seeking liberation when he leaves Nazareth?
- What streams of thought about his life and the people in the world around him might he have followed to reach that decision?

Recall Bible stories about the Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary the early Israelites erected in

the wilderness. Inside was the Holy of Holies. In turn, the Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments, which were separated from the rest of the structure by a curtain. The Tabernacle represented the dwelling of God in the midst of the Israelites. They carried it with them after the exodus. During King Solomon's reign, the Temple replaced the Tabernacle. When the Jewish people were exiled in Babylonia during the fifth century BCE, the Tabernacle was carried away and never again found.

Name the heavens, havens, homes, or even hiding places where God is said to be residing in the world around you.

- Where do you, personally, imagine God resides?

Coming up out of the water, Jesus looks up and sees the heavens open and the Spirit descending upon him.

- What might this imply about the mysterious nature of God's dwelling place?

At the end of the narratives that describe Jesus' death, the curtain at the door of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple tears from top to bottom. Originally, the New Testament was written in Greek, and the word describing the tearing can also be translated as "rip" or "rend." The same Greek word for "tearing" is used when the heavens open at Jesus' baptism in Mark's gospel.

- If God were to escape from the institutional walls or stained glass or liturgies or theologies of our day, what do you imagine might happen?
- What do we accomplish by keeping the Divine in that container— safely exiled from the ordinary?
- How do you "contain" and keep distant and hidden that which is called Mystery, the Other, the Divine in your life?
- Do institutions and long-standing attitudes, convictions, rules, ambivalence, and indifference play a role in your choices to do that?
- If you were to peek inside that container or even rip it wide open, what do you imagine you would let loose?
- How do you keep your Holy of Holies pure and separate from everything else in your world and your life?

Ponder what, if anything, that might say about your most intimate connections to the sacred and/or the profane.

A voice from heaven tells Jesus he is a beloved son who is well pleasing. Close your eyes. Silently or aloud say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Then in your mind's eye, see Jesus and imagine his unspoken response.

Now visualize what it would be like for you to have God descend upon you. Ask yourself:

- If that were to happen in my life, what might I have to give up or take on?
- The word beloved—what does it mean to be a beloved one? Look around your office or school or dining room table and wonder:
  - Who has ever called me a beloved son, daughter, friend, spouse, lover, or colleague?
  - From whom do I yearn to hear those words?
  - To whom have I given that blessing?
  - Who has waited and still waits to hear me say, "You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased"?

### **THREE – Living with Wilderness**

In the original Greek, the gospel stories were neither separated into chapters and verses nor punctuated. Consequently, in the earliest accounts of

Jesus' baptism, the last sentence—"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"—is followed at once by the opening sentences of his wilderness experiences.

Close your eyes and revisit images of Jesus at his baptism, going down into the water and then coming back up, encountering the dove and hearing that he is the beloved Son of God. See yourself in the wilderness that Jesus will enter. Take a long look at everything around you—near and far. Be curious and engage your imagination as you ask yourself:

- How does Jesus look?
- What thoughts, fears, concerns, certainties, doubts, other feelings, and questions might be spinning around in his head? And his heart?

In Mark's gospel, the same Spirit that just blessed Jesus in the Jordan River immediately drives him into the wilderness. In Matthew and Luke, the same Spirit leads him instead. Pause and in your mind's eye see Jesus being driven by the Spirit. Then see him being led by the Spirit.

- Does the story change when you picture Jesus being immediately driven into the wilderness instead of led? How?

Describe what the Spirit might want Jesus to experience, learn, discover, and know about himself immediately after hearing, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

- What might the Spirit want Jesus to know about the world?
- And about God?

Re-read the passage and observe that in the opening words we learn that the tempter's agenda is to test Jesus. In Greek, the word for "test" can also mean "tempt" or "put to the test." Look up or recall other words for "test."

world, what things, ideas, and situations test us?

Write in your journal about a time when you felt as though your life depended upon a particular test, and recall the feelings you experienced during and afterwards.

In Jesus' time, Roman forces controlled his homeland. Historical accounts and archeological findings indicate that rampant poverty contributed to political, military, and religious unrest throughout the Galilean countryside and in Jerusalem. Roman officials, Temple tithes and taxes, and the expansion of large estates that swallowed up small family farms imposed extraordinary financial burdens and frightening prospects for the future upon the Jews. Landowners, merchants, fishermen, and others who had been self-sufficient faced the reality that they would forfeit their farms, businesses, and other enterprises upon failing to pay taxes. They would then become day laborers and unemployed, homeless "expendables."

According to the text, the tempter tests Jesus three times. Each time Jesus rejects the offer and states, "It is written." He then quotes passages from Hebrew Scripture attributed to Moses. The first time the tempter challenges Jesus to turn stones into bread. Imagine what people in Jesus' time would be saying to each other about him if he could change stones to bread.

- What, for him, would be the positive side of accepting the tempter's offer and being able to do that?
- And the downside?

The second time the tempter takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. The tempter then challenges Jesus to throw himself down and quotes Psalm 91:11–12: "For it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Once again Jesus rebuffs the tempter. Go beyond the obvious reason he may have chosen not to be hooked by this test by making two lists. Again imagine what life may have been like for first-century Jewish people who were poor, marginalized, or just one tax payment away from losing all. On one side list the costs and

promises, pros and cons, benefits and liabilities Jesus might have considered if he were to throw himself down. On the other side, write down the costs and promises of not succumbing to temptation.

Finally, the tempter shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor and says, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." In your journal describe your reaction to this offer and take into consideration the other temptations. Then describe what you imagine Jesus really stood personally to gain or to lose by accepting instead of rejecting each of them.

The passage ends with Jesus dismissing the tempter with the words: "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Note that this is the first time Jesus refers to his tempter as "Satan."

- Why, after being blessed at his baptism, might the same Spirit have driven Jesus to a wilderness to deal with these issues?
- As he leaves the wilderness, to what is Jesus saying no?
- To what might he be saying yes?
- What might he know about tests, temptations, himself, and God that he didn't know before? And still not know?

Make a list of words that describe wilderness for you. Then, using whatever art supplies are handy—paper, pencils, crayons, pens, paints, clay, straw, rocks, grass, leaves, sand, dirt—create an expression of wilderness.

Placing your representation in front of you, wonder about such places in our geographical, political, and spiritual worlds today. Name wilderness places that we encounter. Looking back, recall a specific wilderness in your life.

- Were you driven or led there?
- Why do you call it a wilderness?
- What experiences with tests, temptations, and new questions, possibilities, choices, and decisions did you have while you were there?
- How were you different after spending forty days or hours or weeks or years in that place?

Where do you find yourself in a wilderness today—here and now? Is it in a relationship that matters, in your job, within your family, in terms of your health or aging, in your spiritual community, or as a stage of your spiritual journey? From within that wilderness, what are you discovering about temptations to

- Provide for others?
- Defy natural laws?
- Seek power?

As for questions in your wilderness:

- To what are you saying yes or no?
- And to which questions are you saying neither yes nor no but choosing, instead, to live with ambiguity or even considering "both/and" instead of "either/or"?
- What are you discovering there that you could learn in no other way?
  - About tests, temptations, devils, and even angels?
  - About being hungry?
  - About your world? Yourself? God?

In ancient texts, another name for Satan is Lucifer, which is translated as "light bringer."

- How might Satan "enlighten" Jesus in the wilderness?
- When you met Satan in the darkest places of one of your wildernesses, what might you have seen for the first time?

- Today, here, now, in your world and life, what, if anything, may Satan be bringing into the light?

#### **FOUR – Returning Home**

Luke tells us that on leaving the wilderness and being tested, Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit. Consider his options about what to do next, and then wonder why he returns to Galilee and goes to synagogue “as was his custom.” What might Luke be telling you about Jesus the Jew as he goes home?

Jesus reads from a scroll containing text written about 520 BCE, when Jews, exiled and held captive in Babylon for seventy years, began returning home to Jerusalem. In the scroll the prophet Isaiah envisions the future. Luke seems to suggest that Isaiah’s words offer a clue to how Jesus’ life will be committed to a radical reordering of human community. Is it possible that Luke wants us to see people in Jesus’ homeland enduring a form of captivity and oppression that echoes their Jewish ancestors’ ordeal in Babylon centuries earlier? Think about the ways the Romans and temple priests might be keeping these people poor and blind to what is happening to them. Under such conditions, what would a Jubilee Year in Galilee in the first century look like?

Imagine the gracious words and comments Jesus’ neighbors make to one another as they describe how he has changed since they saw him last.

- Why is a prophet not commonly accepted in his hometown?
- What might Jesus have said or done in the synagogue that could incite so much anxiety and anger that they want to throw him off the cliff?

In your Nazareth hometown—or wherever your Galilee may be—who are among the poor, blind, captive, and oppressed?

- What might be good news to those in poverty there?
- Should the blind recover their sight, what might they begin to see?
- How would the world change if those who are oppressed in your Galilee were to be set free?
- Starting creation over again with a Jubilee Year would be welcomed by whom? Resisted by whom?

Reckon the cost and promise to you and those who matter to you most upon hearing good news, being released from binds, seeing for a change, being free, proclaiming that it is a new ball game, another chapter, a chance to start all over again.

- Ask yourself about a truth in your head and heart waiting to be spoken and heard for the sake of healing a world, nation, church, family, or even yourself.
- How might the choices before you determine whether your friends and colleagues say gracious words about you or, enraged, attempt to throw you off a cliff?
- How might the edge of a cliff outside of town be the place that your healing begins?

#### **FIVE – Weathering Storms**

The disciples are taking Jesus across to the other side. It is evening, and there are other boats with them. Smell the sea. Imagine you are one of the disciples on the boat with Jesus as you set out and leave the crowd far behind.

Suddenly the wind picks up. The sky darkens. The waters become angry. Waves begin to beat the boat, and water washes over it, threatening to swamp everyone aboard. Describe what is happening around you and the thoughts racing wildly through your brain. Name the feelings that grip you.

Jesus is asleep on the cushion in the stern. Believing you are perishing, you awaken him. He rebukes the wind and tells it to be still; the wind ceases, and a dead calm follows. Write down what you say to yourself.

Jesus turns and asks you: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

- Why are you afraid?
- After you wake Jesus up during the storm, what might he be implying about your assumption that he alone can save you from perishing?
- If you had had "faith," how might the outcome have been different?

Listen to your answers. Instead of responding to Jesus about your fear and lack of "faith," what do you find yourself talking about? In your journal or voice recorder, record the conversation.

Name a great storm arising on the horizon of your world, nation, community, religious community, neighborhood school, or local zoning commission.

- In what ways are those boats getting battered and being swamped?
- As the storm rises, what can you say about the fears within you?
- As you look to be saved, who is it you admire, praise, and pin hopes on to still the storm? To whom do you cry out? Or whom do you passively count on to deliver you from this storm?
- What is the missing "faith" that might make things different?
- What keeps you from looking inwardly at your fears and relying on a faith within you that could make a difference in the storm?

Look around and out to the horizon where a new storm may be approaching and threatening your own small boat—be it your marriage or career or retirement, or your anxieties during the day and dreams in the night. As waves batter and water swamps, consider the following:

- In this personal and perhaps private storm, of what are you afraid?
- Whom do you count on to rescue you and get you safely to shore?
- Are you aware of a "faith" that you have that could still the storm and see you through?
- Why do you suppose you choose to stand in awe of others who might save you?
- What prevents you from rebuking the wind yourself?

## **SIX – Speaking One's Truth**

Re-read the scriptural text with curious eyes, and imagine what life might be like for the woman with the hemorrhage as she goes about her day and dreams in the night. Imagine her thoughts and hopes after so many failed attempts to be healed. Study the expressions on her face and touch the feelings in her heart as she leaves her house in a society where purity laws classify women with her condition as "unclean."

Now stand up and be the woman with the flow of blood. Envision yourself in her clothes and her state of physical, emotional, and financial destitution. Be conscious of all your thoughts and feelings as you stand outside the crowd that has gathered around Jesus. When you are ready, walk into the crowd and toward him.

Stand behind him and say, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Then, as you feel the moment to reach out has come at last, touch his garment.

Take some time to write in your journal or to express in art materials or to ponder, while listening to music, your experience of being this woman. Write a dialogue with her by asking a question, waiting quietly for her reply to break the silence, and then writing down her reply.

The common definition of hemorrhage is to bleed profusely or uncontrollably. Another definition is a sudden, uncontrolled, and massive loss of something valuable. Shift gears and use words, phrases, and your imagination to describe what has been happening medically for eighteen years to the woman with a flow of blood. Now think about her condition metaphorically, and consider her daily struggles from that perspective.

The text says that when she touches Jesus' garment, she stops hemorrhaging and feels healed of her disease.

- Where in your world or across the world do you see people who are willing to break through crowds, institutional barriers, and other obstacles to find, reach out, and connect to a source of healing?
- And in your life, where, when, and how have you yearned for and searched for an unconventional source of healing in the midst of more conventional ones?
  - If found or encountered, what form did it take?
  - Is it one you still return to and/or rely on today?

The climax of the story occurs publicly when “the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.” We can't know this woman's truth. But you can search for your own.

Write a statement in your journal that expresses your understanding of the phrase “whole truth.” Begin by pondering truth that comes effortlessly to mind. Now summon up a time when an event or circumstance may have led you or driven you to choose whether or not to dig deeper into all the layers of your truth—the truth of who you are that could no longer be rationalized, justified, or explained away. Finally, ask yourself: What really is my truth? The truth that is behind my mask or persona; the truth that exposes places within that have been hidden, buried, disguised, ignored, feared, or kept secret for a long, long time? The truth that contains my deepest, most personal longings, secrets, regrets, desires, dreams, potentials, fears, fantasies, and foibles?

As you recall or relive the details of that time, recapture moments when you felt ambivalent, scared, fearless, cowardly, anxious, and assured as you lived the persistent, annoying, frightening questions about whether or not to face your truth, to consider seeing it anew, and to acknowledge and accept it.

If you chose to peek at, dig into, or attempt to fully expose that whole truth to yourself, recall whether you then decided to disclose it to another.

- If, on one hand, you chose not to tell another, why?
- What resulted from not disclosing your whole truth?
- If, on the other hand, you did speak your whole truth, how did it impact your relationship with the other?
- Was the cost worth the promise?

Look around your world and name someone living or dead to whom you want to speak the whole truth today. List the known consequences—positive and negative—of doing so and of not doing so.

At the end of the story, Jesus does not tell the woman that he has made her well. Instead, he tells her that her faith has made her well. Re-read the text with open eyes and ears, and be curious about what Jesus may be seeing and hearing when he makes that comment about her faith. Note what he says and does not say.

- How do you understand the relationship between telling one's whole truth, having faith, and being made well?
- And finally, today, where or when do you find yourself in the tension of whether or not to delve into, unearth, and then disclose a whole truth that you've closeted and kept safe from exposure—a truth that could become a passage to a healing that awaits you?

## **SEVEN – Loving with All**

*“Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”*

In this exchange between Jesus and the lawyer, the gospel writer chose his words and characters carefully. Think about the lawyer. If he knows nothing else, he does know the law. So why a test? To see whether or not Jesus knows the law? To uncover hidden truth? Or for some other reason? Next, mull over the broader implications of the lawyer's question. Begin by contemplating what it means to inherit something, what kinds of things we inherit, and how inheritances happen. List items, characteristics, attitudes, and legacies that you have already inherited in your lifetime, as well as those things you hope or plan to inherit someday. Also ponder the phrase "eternal life"—your own understanding of those words as well as others' explanations and definitions. Now, in your own words, say or write what you believe the lawyer is asking—what he really wants to know.

Interestingly, Jesus replies not with an answer but with another question. In response, the lawyer references the Sh'ma, ancient words from Deuteronomy that express a core tenet of Jewish people. According to Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, "Although Judaism has no catechism, the biblical verse 'Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Edhad—Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One' comes closest to being Judaism's credo."<sup>48</sup> When Jews recite the Sh'ma three times daily, the six opening words are followed by text that contains the first part of the lawyer's response.

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.  
Blessed be His Name whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.  
And thou shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul,  
and with all your might.  
And these words, which I command thee this day,  
shall be upon your heart,  
and thou shall teach them diligently unto your children;  
and shall talk of them  
when thou sit in your house  
and when thou walk by the way  
and when thou lie down, and when thou rise up.  
And thou shall bind them for a sign upon your hand,  
and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.  
And thou shall write them upon the door-posts of your house  
and upon your gates.

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind."*

Look up the word all in a dictionary and a thesaurus and then ask yourself:

- What do I know about the heart? All my heart?
- What can I say about all my soul?
- All my strength—what does that refer to?
- And what might the word all mean when it comes to my mind? God commanded Moses, the wandering Jews in the desert, and every generation to follow to love with all.
- Why do you think God wants and values all?
- And the word love—why might God choose the verb love instead of respect, obey, submit, follow, defer, or comply?
- In what ways do we demonstrate what it means not to love?

Write the equation "loving with all =" on a piece of paper. Now fill in what one is required to do without using the word love.

In this encounter, Jesus affirms the lawyer's answer. Reflect on your whole heart, your whole mind, your whole soul, and your whole strength.

- Which of these parts do you rely on the most?
- The least?



- Which have you loved with?
- Which do you love with the best?

Consider the next admonition: “and your neighbor as yourself.”

- Can you describe what happens when you love your neighbor with all but love yourself with less than all?

The sequence is heart, strength, soul, and mind, and then neighbor as yourself. However, the Sh'ma doesn't begin with the words “you shall.” Instead, it begins with, “Hear, O Israel.” Many scholars consider a new translation of the Torah by Emmett Fox to be closest to the original Hebrew. Fox's prelude to the Sh'ma is “Hearken, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH (is) One!” Note that this means not merely that there is one

God, but that God is whole, complete, perfect: One. Contemplate the differences between having one God and having a God who is One, and consider the ways in which each description impacts your understanding of the Sh'ma and what God wants from each of us.

Write the words to the Sh'ma in your journal and personalize the lawyer's response to Jesus by changing the words you and your to I and my. Say this version aloud several times, and then listen to what the voices in your head and, perhaps, your heart, may be saying or asking. Question those voices; ask them, how might the ways I love myself be related to the ways I love others and God?

Finally, wonder what Jesus may have meant by the word live. Then, using words, art materials, a musical instrument, and/or body movement, express your response to the question, what is the life I want?

## **EIGHT – Standing up Straight**

Think about this woman who has been bent over for eighteen years, and envision how she looks. Moreover, imagine life for her in a patriarchal society governed by purity codes. In such a culture, infirmities are believed to be a consequence of sinning—violating God's law. With that in mind, consider what you know about how people with physical and mental conditions are treated in other Bible stories, and wonder about this woman's relationships with and to others in her family and community.

Stand up, take a deep breath, bend over as far as you can, and walk around the room as she might. Be aware of what your body tells you about your worldview and living life as a bent-over one.

Then as the bent-over woman, stand up straight, look around, and observe what happens to you and your world. Identify thoughts, feelings, and perspectives that shift, suddenly, on being set free. Pinpoint promises and dreams now possible after the past eighteen years. Also contemplate and anticipate new fears and anxieties that may be born as a result of your healing. On one side of a page, list what this woman may gain from being healed. On the other side, list what she may have to give up. Now ponder these questions:

- “A spirit of infirmity”—how would you describe it?
- What do you suppose Jesus sees when he looks at the bent-over woman with a spirit of infirmity?
- Does he perceive something about her that others might miss?

Though she has not sought him out, asks nothing of him, and does not request healing or mention repentance, Jesus calls her over and announces that she is set free from her ailment. When he lays hands on her, she stands up straight and praises God.

- What is going on between Jesus and the unnamed woman?
- What does calling this woman over in the synagogue and touching her on the Sabbath say to you about Jesus?

The synagogue leader speaks up.

- What do you speculate about a man in such a position of religious authority? He is indignant.
- What does it mean to experience “indignation”?
- Where in this man’s deep sense of responsibility, or in his anxieties and fears, might this indignation reside?

Nowhere else in Scripture is a woman called “a daughter of Abraham.” Hear the crowd talking among themselves as Jesus calls her “a daughter of Abraham.” Wonder, too, about the synagogue leader’s reaction and the woman’s.

Look at the evening news or around your office, classroom, congregation, grocery store, or kitchen table, and see bent-over ones in the world today.

- What bends them out of shape and weighs them down?
- Who really sees them?
- To whom are they invisible?
- Flaunting authority, who calls them over, announces they are free, and then touches and empowers them to stand up straight?
- Where are the indignant voices of authority you hear saying “not today” or “not in this place” located?
- How do the indignant ones in your communities, institutions, and even your family forbid the crossing of certain boundaries, calling it unlawful and unacceptable?

Stand in front of a mirror and be bent over, weighed down, bound, and not free.

- Who or what in your life is bending you over?
- Name a part of your life that is dying to stand up straight.
- Uninvited and even unsought, who—from afar or from deep within— is calling you to move toward healing?
- Who, in your outer world and/or your psyche and soul, are the “synagogue leaders” telling you, “Nobody gets it all,” “Be glad you have what you’ve got,” “If you had only listened to me,” and “What will people think”?
- Who is your inner synagogue leader, that keeper of order, law, decorum, boundaries, and good sense, who is necessary and helpful but who responds with fear when another inner voice coaxes you toward freedom and beckons you to stand up straight?

Mull over choices you may be making every day to stay in comfortable bondage rather than brave the bewildering possibilities and the new challenges that you would face—and embrace—if you were unbound, set free, and able to finally stand up straight.

## **NINE – Binding Wounds**

Allow yourself to read the Good Samaritan parable as though you were encountering it for the very first time. Try reading it aloud so you can hear the words and phrases anew. As you do, notice what the story tells you about each of the characters. Take note of information about them that is missing.

Like all parables, this one leaves blanks for you to fill in. However, we do know a few things. For example, in those days, as now, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho passed through deserted areas. “Samaritans were actively persecuting and harassing Jewish pilgrims,” says biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine.<sup>62</sup> Other scholars agree, noting that concern for one’s wellbeing and life was just one reason people often traveled with partners or in caravans. Priests and Levites from other cities, who rotated periods of service in the Temple in Jerusalem and were part of the

established religious order, would have been among those travelers. That made the road from Jerusalem to Jericho a popular route.

Then there were the Samaritans. Biblical scholars report that their history goes back to the days following Solomon's reign, when the united empire split. Ten of the twelve Jewish tribes became a kingdom in the north called Israel. The two remaining became the kingdom called Judah (later Judea) in the south. In 722 BCE, the Assyrians occupied and destroyed Israel. Afterward, the Assyrians moved part of the native population out and shifted people from elsewhere in the Middle East in. The mixed inhabitants took their name from Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, and became known as the Samaritans. They practiced an orthodox form of Judaism, adopted their own version of the five books of Moses as their Bible, and built their own temple on Mount Gerizim in the fourth century BCE. In the first century BCE, John Hyrcanus, king of Judah, destroyed Samaria. It was rebuilt by Herod the Great about 30 BCE, and according to Amy-Jill Levine, the Samaritans' culture in Jesus' time rivaled that of the Jews. The two groups abhorred one another so much that in those days calling a Samaritan "good" would be an oxymoron for a Jew. "It would be like saying 'good Nazi.'"

Jesus reports that the priest, Levite, and Samaritan each see the wounded man. But only the Samaritan sees him up close and feels moved by pity. Synonyms for pity include compassion, sympathy, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, and understanding. Another is shame.

- What do you imagine that each of the characters really sees? Does not see?
- The gospel tells us that the traveler was "half dead." When you read or hear the expression "half dead," what comes to mind?

Stand up, step into this story, and one by one become the characters. Try making sounds or moving about in ways that help you view them from new perspectives in your outer and your inner worlds.

Be the unidentified man, and as you walk down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, imagine robbers beating you, stripping you, and leaving you half dead. Then, lying half dead in a roadside ditch, be aware of the priest approaching and walking by. Be aware of the Levite coming your way and passing. And then be aware that another is nearby and that this other stops, sees you, and comes over. Let your thoughts and feelings rise as you realize that this stranger approaching you, touching you, and then binding your wounds is a Samaritan.

- Next, be one of the robbers and strip the man, beat him, and leave him half dead.
- Be the priest. When you see the beaten one, pass him by.
- Be the Levite, see the beaten man, and pass by.
- Finally, be the Samaritan and draw near to the wounded man. When you see him, be moved by pity.
- Now be still and reflect on which characters you identified with the most and the least.

Begin to deepen your experience of this story by imagining that you are a first-century Jew listening to Jesus as he tells it. Tune in to the silent rationales and excuses the religious ones, the establishment, and the authorities make for walking by the robbed and beaten one on the side of the road. Think of reasons why the Samaritan—the enemy, the stranger, and the despised one—chooses to draw near.

Look around your house and out the window and see those in your families, neighborhoods, cities, and elsewhere who are beaten, stripped, robbed, and left half dead.

- Who does the beating?
- What are they stripped and robbed of?
- In what ways are they left half dead?
- Is there a difference between being half dead and being half alive?

Although the thought of walking by beaten, robbed, and half-dead ones in the world around us may be uncomfortable, summon a time when you intentionally or unintentionally did that. Dredge up your thoughts and feelings back then.

Also remember a time when you drew near to someone in dire straits.

- As you got closer, what did you see that you could not see from a distance?
- Did your feelings change when you drew near?
- Did you help the person on the spot?
- Are you aware of the outcome of your choice to help or not to help?

In addition, call to mind a time in your life when you felt robbed, stripped, beaten, and abandoned. See those in your family, neighborhood, country, world, or inside your body, psyche, and soul who threatened your vitality— your life.

- Who were the authorities—religious, political, educational, professional, parental, living or dead—who walked by?
- And who or what symbol of a “Samaritan” who is outside or within your psyche and soul drew near, felt pity, and then cleansed your wounds, carried you to safety, and possibly even offered a hospitable place for you to rest?

Identify an actual road—or an interior one—that you travel daily, weekly, annually, or perhaps for the first time. See the “violent” ones on that road—those who intentionally beat you; rob you of your time, energy, livelihood, relationships, creativity, health, or life-force; and leave you feeling wounded, helpless, and half dead.

- Can you name thoughts, attitudes, fears, prohibitions, inner voices, rules, projections, rejections, or other issues that allow those thieves and muggers to have so much power and dis-able you?

As you think about those robberies and beatings, name places and times where you can recall robbing yourself and beating yourself up.

- Of what were you robbed?
- Who or what caused you to do that?
- What did you lose in the process?
- Where did you feel most wounded?

Now look around your office, place of worship, neighborhood, or even your family.

- Who, among those you observe, might symbolize the Samaritan in your worldview—the one you despise, reject, and even hate?
- From what, or where in you, do those negative thoughts, feelings, and attitudes originate?
- In what ways do you deliberately avoid, marginalize, and ignore these alien ones?
- Where—around you as well as within you—does this hated, despised, distant, and life-threatening one lurk?

Imagine what your Samaritan—the one deep within who feels condemned by your inner authorities and remains banished by your fears, anxieties, and insecurities—might be waiting patiently to say to you. Moreover, ask yourself, is there something that I need to know that only this Samaritan can tell me?

Also ask yourself, is there a healing from my wounds, pain, trauma, and hatred that can come from no one else?

Continue to mull over questions raised by the story of the Samaritan, and wonder why Jesus told this parable and how might he have come to know this story. Ask yourself, in what ways do I struggle with the reality that this is a story that is alive in the world around me, in my life, and within my psyche, heart, and soul?

## TEN – Crossing Boundaries

Jesus leaves his Jewish homeland in Galilee and crosses over the frontier into the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon. Could it be because something has wooed, tempted, or even called him? If so, what? Moreover, in leaving Galilee, who or what might Jesus want to leave behind or discover in another place?

A woman comes out shouting at him for mercy. Imagine what her neighbors must be thinking. A non-Jewish mother pleads before this Galilean Jew for her daughter. The same Greek word is translated here as “left that place” and “came out.” Matthew thus puts us on notice that he is telling a story in which both Jesus and a Canaanite woman, whose tribes are ancient enemies, “come out.” Jesus coming out of his familiar home turf and the woman presumably coming out of her house in a foreign land set the stage. But what did they come out of? And what have they come into?

Read the story over several times. Then standing up, close your eyes and be the story. Be the woman. In your mind’s eye see Jesus drawing near. Take a step and come out toward him. Shout, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” You wait for a response. Silence. No answer at all. You hear his disciples urging him to send you away, and you hear his response to them. You take a step closer and kneel before him. “Lord, help me.” He speaks to you, saying it is not fair to throw the children’s food to the dogs. You agree, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” He then says to you, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Take time to be still before you stand.

Pause. Take a deep breath, again close your eyes, and this time be one of the disciples. You are nearby when the woman begins shouting. You speak out to Jesus, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answers in words you have heard before. He answers in words you already know are about him as well as about you: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Watching, you see her approach and kneel before Jesus. You listen. You hear him speak of her great faith, telling her that what she wishes will be done. Ponder what is happening for you.

After another deep breath, close your eyes and be Jesus. Leave “that place” called Galilee, the only world you know. Step over the line and cross the boundary into a strange and unknown land. You hear the woman shouting at you, asking for mercy. You do not answer her a word. The disciples come and urge you to send her away. You remind them, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The woman draws closer to you. Kneeling before you, she asks you to help her. You respond, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” You hear your own words as she agrees with you, yet she persists. “Then Jesus answered her.” You answer her. Only then, after an awful silence and the devastating “No,” do you now say to her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Feel what it might be like to be in Jesus’ shoes.

Write down from the inside out what it was like for you to experience being the woman, one of the disciples, and Jesus. Include any additional perceptions, questions, or confusion concerning each character and the connections between them.

- To what is Jesus initially saying yes?
  - And then no?
- What is the yes that the woman will not relinquish or surrender?
  - And the no she is unwilling to accept as an answer?
  - What brings her to that place of believing she has nothing to lose, allowing her to gamble everything on her no rather than submitting or agreeing or walking silently away?
- How would you describe to someone what is going on between Jesus and the woman?
  - Between Jesus and the disciples?
  - Inside the woman, the disciples, and Jesus?

Jesus speaks of the Canaanite woman’s great faith. In your own words, describe her great faith.

Discover for yourself what she is doing or saying that leads her to the healing she seeks.

- What do you discover here, in this story, about Jesus' life map? And those maps within the disciples—and even the woman?

As the story ends, think of new questions that may now haunt, preoccupy, mystify, and challenge the woman, the disciples, and Jesus. See Jesus leaving the place, going up the mountain beside the sea, and sitting down alone.

Imagine his feelings and thoughts and what he may wonder and pray about.

Look around. Today, two thousand years later, people and institutions are also being called to risk crossing frontiers into unfamiliar and challenging places that might teach them about their past, present, and future.

- Who are they and where are they?
- How do you see them being invited to read the life maps they use to make sense of the world with new eyes?

And you. Name and label the outsider—the marginal and even alien inner Canaanite woman—who keeps you restless and disturbed by your life and the world. Listen to the enemy voices: job loss, cancer, divorce, old age, violence, high oil prices, pornography, pollution, global warming, terrorism, and AIDS.

- Where, when, and how do these voices plead with you to reassess things you are certain about and take for granted?
- What do you know of a voice from within calling you to question what seems always to have been true?
- What might you gain and what might you have to give up if your no turns into a yes?
- Under what circumstances, pressures, threats, hopes, yearnings, or dreams do you refuse to take no as an answer?

Imagine what the teller of this story may well want you to know about the life map that you rely on to chart your life. Then return to life maps you have in your drawers, pockets, psyche, and soul, and remember when they gave you good direction and when you discovered they didn't agree with the ground. Remember also the frontiers you've crossed and those you've looked at from a distance because your map said, "Don't go there."

Journal about how you know this story as your story. Include the places in your real and in your imaginary landscapes where you encounter all the characters, including the tormented daughter. Revisit those journeys, but also look beyond your doorway or window at the road you never take—and even at the horizon—and wonder.

## **ELEVEN – Choosing Life**

Imagine yourself to be the blind beggar named Bartimaeus sitting by the roadside in the town of Jericho. Sit on the floor with your eyes closed and become Bartimaeus. Be immersed in the sounds and smells that surround you. Hear the noise and the voices. Beg for alms. Give words to the darkness that is your world day after day. Consider your place in the world, the way you get along with all the others—those who stop and those who pass you by. Ponder your future and what it holds.

A crowd comes by. When you hear that Jesus is among them, you shout out to him, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Describe the mercy for which you cry. Mutter the words of rebuke directed at you. Give yourself reasons why they are so stern as they order you, a blind beggar, to be silent.

You cry out all the more. Jesus stops and stands still. He tells his companions to call you over to him. Springing up, you throw off the cloak that defines you to all the world as a beggar.

Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” Wonder about such a question when the answer seems so obvious.

- Is there something else that you, a blind beggar, want other than your sight?
- Why might Jesus ask you that question?
- What does this question do to and for you?

Jesus tells you to go, for “your faith has made you well.”

- Jesus says nothing about having healed you. He attributes your seeing to “your faith.” How—in what you have done and said—have you exhibited a “faith” in something or someone other than Jesus?
- Describe the tension between Jesus, you, and those who sternly order you to be quiet.

Recall a time recently when you sensed that you could no longer see, or that you lacked vision, or that you were blind to what was going on within and around you. Ask yourself:

- What do I spend my days watching in order to avoid seeing?
- How are my words and actions cries for mercy? What kind of mercy do I long for?
- How am I shouting out for more from life in the way I eat, drink, play, work, love?

Listen to the voices rebuking the Bartimaeus within you, ordering you to be silent.

- How do those voices—the ones within you and the ones without— devour the longing and swallow up the hope of what you want, of what you yearn for?

In your personal drama, what brings your inner Jesus to a standstill, compelling him to ignore all your internal voices that try to silence the blind beggar within you? What is it that urges this Jesus to call out to the Bartimaeus in your heart? And what is the cloak—the camouflage or disguise you wear—that, like Bartimaeus, you must throw off in the hope of healing? Are you willing to take the risk of letting that cloak go?

Again hear the question Jesus asks—what do you want?—and write down something of the healing and wholeness for which you yearn in your most significant relationships, your family, your job, studies, health, heart, guilty conscience, or sagging spirit.

- If you were healed from whatever blindness or infirmity keeps a part of your body or spirit in darkness, how might your life be different?
- Along with the new hopes and joys, what fears and unforeseen demands might arise?

A blind beggar named Bartimaeus sits by the roadside until Jesus asks him what he wants done for him. When Bartimaeus replies, Jesus says, “Go, your faith has made you well.”

Deep within you, what do you know of a “faith” named Bartimaeus that is longing to shout, waiting to happen, and ready to throw off a mantle and lead you to healing and wholeness?

## **TWELVE – Discovering God’s Kingdom**

Before you begin to explore the overarching question posited by the parable, consider the following.

No matter what your faith or spiritual roots, it is possible that you have already heard this parable, a variation on the theme, and even explanations of its meaning. Perhaps in a book of Bible stories, perhaps in a sermon or article, or perhaps because you saw someone wearing a mustard seed on a chain and asked why. If you can, imagine that you are a first-century Jew who has come to hear these words of Jesus for the first time.

This parable is about a specific seed. Look at the information the text in Mark's gospel gives you about a mustard seed. See what words describing this particular seed stand out for you, and then allow your mind to wander beyond the passage and think literally and metaphorically about seeds overall. Take into account what they look like, what their function is, what they contain before opening, and what must happen if they are to germinate and become something else.

Although most people eat and enjoy mustard, few know that the plant that grows from a mustard seed germinates quickly. Depending on the variety of mustard, the plant develops into a weedy shrub that is anywhere from two to six feet tall. Even domestic varieties get out of control and often become a nuisance. In Mark's gospel, it is most likely that the plant referred to is Black Mustard (*Brassica nigra*), the tallest of the Middle Eastern mustard plants. It could grow to six feet.

In Jesus' time people used mustard for multiple reasons. Indeed, the Roman author Pliny the Elder, who died in 79 CE when scientific curiosity brought him too close to an erupting Vesuvius, wrote:

Pythagoras judged it [mustard] to be the chief of those plants whose pungent properties reach a high level, since no other penetrates further into the nostrils and brain. Pounded, it is applied with vinegar to the bites of serpents and scorpion stings. It counteracts the poisons of fungi. For phlegm it is kept in the mouth until it melts, or is used as a gargle with hydromel (a mixture of water and honey that becomes mead when fermented).

For toothache it is chewed. . . . It is very beneficial for all stomach troubles.

. . . It clears the senses, and by the sneezing caused by it, the head; it relaxes the bowels, it promotes menstruation and urine.

However, Pliny also wrote:

It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed, when it falls, germinates at once.

Furthermore, in Jesus' time one was not supposed to sow mustard seed in a garden because plants couldn't be mixed ("You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed"—Leviticus 19:19; and "You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, or the whole yield will have to be forfeited, both the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard itself"—Deuteronomy 22:9). Each variety needed its own space. Since mustard is a seed-bearing plant and volunteers can shoot up anywhere and everywhere, mustard could be cultivated in a field, but it was considered unclean in a garden.

Say aloud Jesus' opening words that ask what the kingdom of God can be compared to. Empire is another word for kingdom. In the first century, Jesus' audiences would hear references not only to the kingdom of God, but to the empire of God and kingdom of heaven also. The former was used in opposition to the empire of Caesar, a phrase used by the occupying and oppressive Roman armies and rule. So when Jesus' audience used or heard the phrase "empire of God," it was intended to be a counterpoint to the autocratic rule over them by the tight and orderly Roman oppressors whom Caesar carefully and strategically planted in Jerusalem.

With all that in mind, imagine you are a loyalist to the empire of Caesar, standing on the fringes of a crowd listening to Jesus compare the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. You know something about mustard seeds and mustard plants. You also know that for Jesus' Jewish audience the empire of Caesar is the enemy.

- What do you hear Jesus saying about the potential held in that seed?
- If allowed to germinate, what might this kingdom of God be or represent or do within the boundaries of the well-ordered empire of Caesar?

Now, using whatever art materials you have on hand, create a picture of a perfect garden—your perfect garden. You could also create one by making a collage or taking a picture with a digital camera. Then sit with your perfect garden and recall who taught you how to plant and maintain gardens.



When you feel ready, add weeds—ones from your garden or ones penciled or crayoned in—to your picture.

Place the picture in front of you and again sit with it. Recall an actual experience of having unwanted, prolific, noxious, invasive, unwelcome, offensive, and aggressive weeds of any kind in your flowerbed, yard, or vegetable patch, or in a community garden, a nearby vacant lot, or the yard of an abandoned house.

- Who taught you to call those plants weeds?
- And when you saw them in your flowerbed, yard, vegetable patch, or other places nearby, how did you react and/or feel about having to deal with them?

Look around and see where and how you have planted well-tended, orderly gardens in your life. Not just the ones outside your front or back door, but those in other places and in your psyche and soul, too.

- Symbolically, who or what are unwanted, prolific, noxious, invasive, unwelcome, offensive, and aggressive “weeds” that break through their protective shells and germinate, taking root in the world around those gardens?
- And what about the weeds in the world that cross boundaries and thresholds and make their way into your carefully tended, orderly personal gardens?
- Are those “weeds” people, conditions, situations, thoughts, feelings, obsessions, or desires—or something else?
- What might weeds in your life be trying to alert you to in the world and in your life?
- And what might those weeds be trying to tell you about the kingdom of God?
- In your journal, finish the sentence, “The kingdom of God is like . . .”

Additionally, reflect on your ongoing efforts to maintain order and weed the established and tidy garden that is your life. Now re-read your sentence describing the kingdom of God and ask yourself, why am I doing that?

### **THIRTEEN – Entering the Heart of the Matter**

Imagine being outside the city watching Jesus of Nazareth as he draws close to the walled and golden city of Jerusalem, sitting in glory atop Mount Zion. Observe the Jew on a donkey approaching the center of the Jewish universe and the abode of God. The holy city has become in his day a bastion of Roman power where Temple priests serve as pawns of Caesar.

As Jesus enters the city gate, see waving palm branches and hear crowds cry, “Hallelujah!” Through such gates as these, Roman generals enter defeated cities proclaiming the kingdom of Caesar, who as emperor is worshipped as a divine “Son of God” and “Savior” by order of the Roman Senate. On this day see, instead, a ragtag parade surrounding Jesus and announcing a kingdom of God. Pax Dei rather than Pax Romana. Yet rather than ascending a restored throne of the Jewish King David, Jesus will die the death of a political criminal.

Watch as Jesus goes first to the Temple. Inside see the tables of the money changers and of those who sell doves being tossed over. More than a “cleansing of the Temple,” his symbolic move recalls the prophet Isaiah’s judgment on those who turn a “house of prayer for all people” into what the prophet Jeremiah calls a “den of robbers.” “Robber” priests in collusion with Rome are stealing hope from pilgrims held hostage to a priestly brokerage system at odds with the Torah’s promise that sinners will be reconnected to God, the separation between them bridged, and what was torn asunder made one again.

It’s a scene that calls to mind the moment of truth in *The Wizard of Oz*: Toto has grabbed the curtain and the horrible hoax is revealed for all to see. A price will be paid.

Reflect on religious and political places of power throughout history and in the world today as you imagine what Jerusalem and the Temple, the heart of political, military, and religious authority, represent for Jesus. Name thoughts, feelings, instincts, situations, and anything else that might draw Jesus there now. See him entering the city gates and imagine any hopes and

fears, longings and apprehensions he may have in those moments.

- What does Jesus risk as he enters the city? What might finally going to Jerusalem promise him and his followers?

Look around to find and focus on the “Jeruselems” in your world.

- What is the heart of the matter in this country, or in your corporate world or neighborhood or community or congregation, that you circle around but are intent on avoiding or even denying for days, months, even years? What is your strategy for putting off and delaying ever going there?

Where between and among people like us is a Jerusalem that awaits our risking all by finally living and speaking out loud the truth? Ponder Jeruselems you have known in the past.

- When have you gone there? What had to happen finally to get you there?
- Over the years what strategies, tactics, detours, and diversions have you inherited, developed, depended on, and used to avoid going to Jerusalem?

Search your home, neighborhood, and country, and even your psyche and soul. Name a Jerusalem of yours that even now awaits your arrival. Consider the last place in the world you want to go, a place filled with both dread and promise, where although you will die there it is at the same time the only place you will ever come alive. Write something about your Jerusalem. Name your unfinished business. Identify the relationship with a person, a career, a persistent fear or ancient guilt, a shattered dream or broken promise, an addiction or obsession or a lie you are living—a bogus kind of security or comfort that keeps you captive to a charade. Going there to die is your only hope of living.

- How have you convinced yourself until now that there is no need to ever go there?
- Name the ways you continue to circle and avoid the Jerusalem that waits and will not go away.
- And as you circle and circle, what will it take for you to stop and then step through those gates?

## **FOURTEEN – Betraying Trust**

Whether you are reading these Scripture passages for the first time or for the hundredth, read them again with a director’s, novelist’s, or detective’s eye. Assume that your task is to bring Judas to life in a movie, story, or play. Begin by writing down your description of Jesus’ betrayer, whose name literally means “Jewish man.”

According to the gospel stories, Judas is a disciple of Jesus but also a man the chief priests and elders can buy for a price. In Matthew’s story that bounty equals thirty pieces of silver. What facial characteristics or expressions help make your interpretation of one named Judas come alive? What about his build, his stance, his clothes, his movements, his mannerisms, or the tone of his voice? If you have a copy of the New Testament, compare the stories in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, and wonder what you would want your audience to know, experience, and feel about Judas’s incentive to hand Jesus over to the authorities.

Without going to a dictionary, write down your definition of the word betray. Now add words and phrases to your attempt as a director, novelist, or detective to bring Judas to life. You might also draw pictures or cut them out of a newspaper or magazine to create a montage that expands your view of Judas. Now sit quietly with your characterization of this one who betrays in front of you. Continue to add anything else that makes your “picture” of Judas complete.

Although there are no recorded accounts of Judas’s ancestral lineage, for over two thousand years his role in the gospel stories has been defined by one word: betrayer. Once again look at your picture of Judas and your definition of betray. Judas’s betrayal is sealed by a kiss. Indeed,

some translate the original Greek not as “and he kissed him,” but as “he kissed him much.”

- What more might Judas’s kiss tell you about the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of one who betrays Jesus?
- And what does that kiss say to you about other betrayals sealed with such intimacy?

From the first time Judas appears in the gospel narratives, he is labeled a betrayer. However, Judas is not the only one whose actions may have betrayed Jesus. For example, some would say the disciples betray Jesus by falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane instead of honoring his request to “watch and pray that you may not enter temptation.” Others point out that Peter, in particular, betrays Jesus when he denies him three times. Could the fact that the disciples flee when Jesus is arrested also be considered a betrayal? And what about their choice not to show up at Jesus’ crucifixion?

And finally, is it possible that even God may betray Jesus by not showing up at Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion?

While considering whether Judas is the only one to betray Jesus, use your historical imagination. Be Judas and stand before Jesus. Look at him curiously as one who is stirring many feelings inside. Acknowledge what you see and feel. Then ask yourself, is it possible that Judas acts as he does because he feels as though Jesus has betrayed him?

Shift gears and look far beyond wherever you may be sitting or standing. Name those leaders of our political, financial, educational, and religious institutions who you feel betray our country, communities, families, and you.

- What form do such betrayals by those in power take?
- Have you ever intuited such a betrayal before it happened?
- If so, what kept you from believing it, acting on it, or preventing it?
- And what do you still want to say or do in the moments, hours, and days after you knew beyond a doubt that those leaders had betrayed you?

Recall a time of feeling betrayed by a family member, lover, partner, mentor, or close friend.

- Did you see it coming?
- How did you feel, react, or respond?
- What was the outcome?

Recall a time when another said or implied that you betrayed him or her. If you agree that a betrayal took place, consider the following:

- What did you hope—consciously or unconsciously—to change, transform, or revenge when the betrayal occurred?
- Was your betrayal the result of an impulsive action or a calculated one?

Whether you were driven or compelled to betray another, once your actions were labeled, they introduced you to someone in your psyche, and perhaps your soul, named “Judas.”

- How did you “kiss” the other?
- How would you describe the havoc your Judas wrought?
- What subsequent violence, passion, and “death” did your betrayal precipitate?
- How might your life be different today if you had resisted “thirty pieces of silver” or some other temptation that your Judas accepted?
- What did you want or need or expect from the one whom you betrayed that you could not give to yourself?

In a later chapter, Matthew follows up on Judas’s story and tells us that in his grief and under the burden of his guilt, Judas returns to the Temple and throws the silver down before the chief priests and elders. He then departs and hangs himself.

As you look back on a personal act of betrayal, ask yourself:

- What have I killed, punished, or even sacrificed as Judas did in hopes of atoning, making it right, and easing the burden of my guilt?
- When, where, and how did this event reveal that I might also have betrayed myself?
- What did betrayal of another and possibly myself invite into my life that could not have entered any other way?
- And what remains enlightened by this betrayal that would otherwise remain in the dark?

## **FIFTEEN – Epilogue: Breeding New Algebras**

Yearning, loss, emptiness, and death—unplanned feelings and uncomfortable occasions that invite us to step outside the box and beyond our horizon in hopes of discovering our paths to healing and wholeness. Along the way, we may find many who help point us in those directions. For some it is Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Muhammad, or others. On this particular journey, the person pointing a way to an authentic life has been a Jewish man named Jesus.

As you read and re-read the chapters containing the stories of your life, continue to let questions about your truth guide you. Wonder about the time you ran after and knelt before someone you hoped might tell you where to find a life that is deep and enduring.

Look out your window and see a woman on a distant road far from home carrying a broken jar from which meal spills along the road:

- Where is she and what is happening to her?
- How can this loss occur without her noticing it?
- If she were aware of what is happening, what might she do?
- And how might this change the end of the story?

See yourself walking along a distant road far from home, carrying whatever you have that is \ most valuable to you. As you head home, the jar holding this treasure breaks, but you're oblivious to it. You keep walking as the contents you depend on steadily leak out. Finally, you reach home, put the jar down, and discover that your container is empty.

- How does your container get broken?
- Moreover, how does that which you have made to matter the most leak out without your knowing it?
- In what way might the surprise of discovering your jar is empty be an essential part of arriving home?

Recall Barbara Hurd's description of a holy path of emptiness (see p.114) and see if you can locate the shul or temple in your life. Scan your inner and outer worlds to determine what cave carved out of water has imprisoned you and held you hostage for three days or longer.

- Where is your "enormous white space, the unguarded void, the clearing"?
- Where around and deep within you might a different kind of temple be waiting?

Each of the stories about Jesus and the people and situations he encountered from day one mirrors our life stories, too. The characters are but reflections of the dramas we live between and deep within each of us. Consequently, at different times and in different places, they get tightly woven into the tapestry of committed relationships and family, days on the job or in the office. They become the warp and woof, the threads of our beliefs and certainties, faiths and convictions, worries and fears. These stories even get woven into our anticipation of our unavoidable death.

- What is the tomb that holds you prisoner?
- How are you walking around lifeless in the dark in search of life?

- What is the fear that seals the bargain you make between being safe and staying dead?

Looking back on the stories about Jesus of Nazareth whom you have found in the pages of this book, contemplate new possibilities for discovering more of your whole self that have become apparent. Theologian and author Harvey Cox writes:

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested that the only way to answer the question, "What am I to do?" is to ask, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" Stories do that. They start the mind and memory racing. They spark connections and associations. They recall similar experiences in the life of the hearer.

Like all of our lives, your life is an unfinished book containing chapters filled with stories, and you, too, have an epilogue that waits to be written.

- What is the null point in your life today? Where is the zero waiting to teach you new algebras? What must be sold, lost, or die on your way to learning a different way to compute your life and to discover a new way to live your days? What is the first sentence in the story of the rest of your life?

**What is the first sentence in the story of the rest of your life?**