

Lenten Companion



Prepared for individual and small group study
Lent 2020

St. Matthew Catholic Church
8015 Ballantyne Commons Pkwy., Charlotte, NC 28277



Prayer for St. Matthew Parish

Almighty Father,

You alone are the Lord and the Creator of all that is good and holy. You have beautifully made me in your holy image. You called me by name before I was born, and at my baptism, you permanently marked me as your child.

Send forth your most Holy Spirit. Renew my heart and the hearts of the entire St. Matthew faith community.

Pour your grace down upon me so that I may fulfill my baptismal call to know you, love you and serve you through prayer, worship and service to others. Set my heart on fire, that I may go forward and renew the face of the earth.

I ask this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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This study guide has some reflections in it that will pair well with the book, *You're Amazing*, by Justin Fatica. *You're Amazing* has daily reflections, one for each of the forty days of Lent. This booklet is a weekly companion to give some direction to a weekly reflection or small group discussion. If you aren't reading *You're Amazing*, this companion should still make sense.

You can jump in at any point that you happen to pick this up, so don't feel like you need to start with page 1 and go from there. You might only get going in your group with the first week of Lent, and decide to start on page 11. You might not get going until week three, and in that case, start there.

On page.34 there is a small group format called "Passion" that has some great guidelines for how to get started with faith sharing in your group.

Three Weeks Out: Longing for Lent

Each year, I am surprised to find myself longing for Lent. There is a kind of overwhelming indulgence that I slip into from Thanksgiving through the new year. On New Year's Day, the resolutions set in, only to be abandoned weeks, days, hours later. At any rate, by the beginning of Lent I most often find that I have given them up. These resolutions, usually undertaken for the improvement of self and without a supporting team, fail the test of sustainability.

The kind of self-improvement and overhaul of my life that I have planned for the beginning of the new year lies unfulfilled until it is reworked, redirected and reengaged in the Lenten journey toward Calvary. Each year, I think I can improve my life all on my own and find that unless my goals are rooted in the life of Christ and enlivened by the Holy Spirit, they will ultimately be found wanting and unaccomplished.

Lent is not just a second chance at self-improvement. Rather, Lent is an invitation to dive deeply into the life of Christ. The sacrifices we offer, prayer time and spiritual reading we undertake, and alms we give to the poor, are, in some ways, the fulfillment of nature's invitation to live a healthy, wealthy and wise life. True health is knowing and living as though your body truly is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Wealth comes from giving all to God and trusting Him to use it for your benefit, the benefit of your neighbor, and the benefit of all of humanity. Wisdom drips from the pages of sacred Scripture, brought to life through the lives of the saints and those books written by men and women renowned for their faith and tested through time. Wisdom comes from increased participation in the liturgies and prayers of the Church.

Discussion Questions

1. What's something from the parish mission, last week's homily, something you read, or something someone has said to you over the last week that you'd like to remember and contemplate?
2. What's a goal that you have set for yourself recently, but have found yourself unable to accomplish? Why have you been unable to accomplish it? Does your goal contribute to the building up of the body of Christ? If so, how?
3. Brainstorming: What are some ways in which it is possible to pursue true health, wealth and wisdom as we start to move toward Lent?

Scripture for the Week

Psalm 84

Genesis 1-2

Luke 15:11-32

Sunday Gospel, February 9: Matthew 5:13-16



Two Weeks Out: Sustainability

Lent is a new beginning, and like all new starts, sustainability is key. Often, novelty tips the scales in the direction of enthusiasm over practicality. I, personally, have a habit of over-reaching with goals – “I’m going to paint the whole house this weekend” is an actual sentence that has escaped my lips... we all know that to be impractical, but I can convince myself that it is possible. End result: only painting some of the house, feelings of un-accomplishment running rampant and a general lack of motivation to finish the project. Others under-reach – some from fear of failure at a new venture, some from pride and an inability to ask for help, and some just from a lack of knowledge of how to accomplish such a goal. Whatever it is, most of us struggle with setting appropriate goals.

The Catholic Church, in her wisdom, has set some basic Lenten goals for us. No meat on Friday, fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. This is the beginning. This is what we do to get started. Add in a dash of Scripture reading, increased prayer time and amplified alms-giving as a side dish to this main course.

It’s no coincidence that Jesus is the Bread of Life, and we are asked to give up some of our dependence on food during Lent. Detachment from the foods we savor and from our normal rhythm of eating gives us some space to consider the true purpose of food. The little bits of hunger engendered by the fast remind us of our need for food, and hopefully, of our even deeper need for spiritual nourishment in the Eucharist.

The reading of Scripture, even one verse a day, reminds us of the plan that God has for my life, our lives, for all of humanity from beginning to end.

The extra money and time given to the poor, the needy and the Church draw us out of our own sphere of influence and makes it possible to look beyond the mirror of our own community. We all need help seeing beyond our daily lives – our daily concerns can be so perpetually present, like the small child who never tires of calling your name, “mom... mom... mom...” They are not impossible to see past, but it

can be challenging to rise above those daily concerns, and help and encouragement are a welcome relief.

If beginning is where you are, then that is a great, magnificent, beautiful thing.

The Church gives some basic guidelines, a bare minimum, non-negotiable beginning. (This is akin to your doctor telling you to eat your vegetables and go out and get some exercise every day, even if it's just for 10 minutes.)

1. Abstain from eating meat on Fridays and fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.
2. Increased relationship with God through daily prayer and spiritual reading of Scripture and books known to be filled with truth and wisdom. Open up your conversation with God and let Him bring new topics to the table.
3. Increased material contribution to those in need, by means of the Church or some other charitable institution.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the goal of each one of the three beginning steps? How are these goals personal and communal?
2. How can I live out each of these three guidelines in my own life?
3. How do I find the balance in these three steps that will both draw me deeper into Christ's life and also be sustainable for the forty day walk to Calvary?

Scripture for the Week

Genesis 14:17-20

Daniel 1

John 6:1-14

Sunday Gospel, February 16: Matthew 5:17-37

Sunday Before Ash Wednesday: Setting the Pace

I was going running the other day, and every step was painful. I've probably had five runs in my whole life that felt like a "good run." I just assumed that they were, more or less, supposed to be pain and suffering. This particular run brought a revelation. Hating every step, I decided I would just go a little faster so that it would all be over sooner. So I sped up a tiny bit. My stride instantly felt more comfortable, my breathing became easier, and I found myself enjoying the process. I was shocked that running faster made the run easier. It still boggles the mind, but I guess there is something to be said for running at the right pace for the day rather than trying to stay slow and causing myself to dread running. Faster running left me sore the next day, a little bit more out of breath, and a bit more fatigued, but it was better, more fun and encouraged me to run again the next day. I have to play with the pace each time. Having a coach would help, but I can still make progress without one. Through trial and error and adjustments along the way, I can make small but consistent improvements if I keep going each day. I shouldn't have been so shocked by all of this, because with a little reading, I found that all runners talk about finding the right pace.

I also shouldn't have been shocked because this is exactly the same pattern I have found in my spiritual life, especially during Lent. If I am too weak in my Lenten practices, then I find it unsustainable and every day, the pain and the friction of trying to move too slowly exhausts me and I give up before I get to Easter. If I am too enthusiastic, then as when sprinting, I run out of energy before the finish line. Either way, I don't make it. Through a series of adjustments, I have to find the right pace. And it's different every year. A coach, i.e. a spiritual director, could help you find your pace. If you have one, great! Talk through Lent with them. Many of us don't have a spiritual director though, and so we have to make the adjustments based on the wisdom gained through prayer, reading of Scripture and those books known to give good advice, and through words of wisdom dropped in homilies and the prayers of the Mass. It takes some time, we make mistakes, we may over-adjust here and there, but in the end, it is worth the effort.

Last week's reflection included the basic guidelines of the Church. These guidelines might be exactly the right pace for you. If this is how you have been exercising for Lent for the last few years, however, it might be time to go a little faster. It might be time to extend your prayer time, study a lengthier passage of Scripture. Pick up a personal fast or take on an extra "no meat" day each week. Take on something that gives you a reminder each day of your Lenten walk to Calvary.

Each year of your life has a different set of influences, stresses, encouragements, etc. Each Lent, therefore, requires its own reflection. Do something different this Lent – something that fits the circumstances of your year. Find the pace for this year that will keep you going, leave you a little bit sore but a little bit stronger in the end. Find the pace that motivates and keeps you moving through Calvary toward the Resurrection.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you feel the discomfort of going the wrong pace in your spiritual life?
2. Where could you pick up the pace in your spiritual life? Where could you slow yourself down a little bit and make a little space for those kinds of things that really keep you moving forward?
3. Are the three basic practices outlined last week the right pace for you or do you need a bit more?

Scripture for the Week

Genesis 15:22-17:7

Psalms 27

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Sunday Gospel, February 23: Matthew 5:38-48

Ash Wednesday: Ready or not here we go...

A couple of weeks ago, we had a parish mission offered by Justin Fatica, Father Peter John Cameron and the Hard as Nails ministry team. They offered us a perspective on life and the faith that brought to our attention the intensity of charity, a love of truth and an acceptance of weakness, and the opportunity for forward movement with a recognition of current progress. In the forward to Justin's book, *You're Amazing*, we are asked two questions:

- 1) How passionate are we about the life God has given us?
- 2) Do we want to be on fire with love for God and neighbor?

The rest of his book helps us simultaneously answer questions about the current state of affairs in our lives, and answer them by setting goals.

I am currently _____ and I want to be _____.

Every page of *You're Amazing* may not speak to you. Maybe none of the words will speak to you. But the book is meant to be an encouragement to open your heart to the Holy Spirit, your mind to the Word of God, and your life to the will of the Father. Read the suggested Scripture passages and have deep and meaningful discussions with others about the concepts hidden within and the images they evoke in your own life. Tie the readings to the goals you are setting for yourself or your family this Lent. Most importantly, tie the concepts to the overall goal of Lent: to be with Christ in His suffering and death, in His preaching and teaching and in His resurrection and ascension into heaven.

I encourage you to take each day seriously and simply, asking God to draw you more and more deeply into His divine life each day.

Today we start down a path that takes us through the joy and celebration of Palm Sunday, the sorrows of Holy Week, the sacrifice of Calvary and the light and glory of the Resurrection. This pattern is repeated each year, and yet each year it is new. Renew your commitment to Christ this Lent. Walk with the other members of the Mystical Body and draw encouragement and truth from one another. It's going to be an amazing journey.

Discussion Questions

1. In the areas of time spent in prayer, how you spend your money, your relationship with food, your relationships with your family members, how would you fill in the blanks:
I am currently _____
and I want to be _____.
2. What little changes can you make to help you move from where you currently are to where you would like to be?
3. What big changes will be required of you to complete the change from where you are to where you would like to be?

Scripture for the Week

Genesis 3

John 16:5-24

Ash Wednesday Gospel, February 26: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Sunday Gospel, March 1: Matthew 4:1-11



Week One: Be Real

C.S. Lewis wrote an interesting book called *The Great Divorce*. It isn't a theological treatise, but rather an imagining of one aspect of life in Christ. Lewis was a true artist in his use of imagery. In particular Lewis' images of purgatory and heaven encourage me to reflect, as Justin Fatica does in the first section of his book, on my own reality. The main character is travelling from purgatory to heaven, and on arrival, he finds that the reality of this gateway to heaven is so much greater than he is, the grass won't bend under his feet and his teeth can't bite the apples. The reality of the grass and the apple is too much for his purgatorial presence to fully encounter and engage. As he travels through this gateway to heaven and approaches God, the reader understands that he will become more and more real, passing from a shadowy existence into full and complete existence in Christ. Again, Lewis is not writing a theological treatise and this is not a statement about heaven or purgatory. But the image of reality flowing from and being realized in our alignment with God has stuck with me.

How can we embrace this reality and begin moving toward it here and now rather than waiting to experience it all at once later on, and consequently finding ourselves underprepared for it? How can we already begin living the most real life possible to us?

The first step to bridging the gap between who we are and who we are created to be is to take a good look in the mirror. In the mirror I see who I am and who I am trying to be. I see my relationships, both with God and with my neighbor. I see my relationship to creation. I see my failures and my successes. The goal is to see through the simple reflection to the image of God inherent in our nature from its very creation. Seeing this double image reflected back to me, one of my fallen humanity with its various points of failures, successes, weaknesses and strengths, the other of the image of God, can be a bit dizzying. The lines won't match everywhere, they'll seem to match in other places. The colors might be similar but not quite the same. The images might appear to be in complete contradiction with one another.

The reality needs to be assessed, the lack of clarity resolved, the images aligned.

Aligning the images and converting the reality of my fallen life into the resurrected life of Christ, takes honesty and simplicity given through grace. Looking in the mirror and finding that I don't line up with the image of Christ that I was created to be has a motivating power. Seeing that we can live in His image and with His life, we begin to take the first steps. In the first chapter of *You're Amazing*, Justin says that he discovered the naked truth that "If a person decides to hand his or her life over to God – and I mean completely – then that person is an example of what it means to be real." *Gaudium et Spes*, written at the Second Vatican Council, says a similar thing in paragraph 22, part 1, "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light," and further along it says "This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self." (GS 24.3) We must begin by giving our life over to God.

Once we give our life over to Him, our choices simplify. A wider gap seems to grow between the good and the bad. The good will be more apparent and therefore easier to choose. The more we choose it, the easier and the sweeter it will become to make those choices. We will be able to say with the guilelessness of a child, *It is good, so I want it!* We are made able to embrace the joy of encountering God. Like Peter, when we are called, we should run to Him so quickly that we don't know whether we are still on the boat or have, in fact, stepped out onto the water. In Justin's words, "We weigh our options so much that fear and trepidation at what might happen paralyzes us. We miss opportunities because we are sitting around waiting for other people to give us permission to be that kid again." (p.10)

God gives us grace, strengthening the will to choose the good and avoid the evil. With each choice we make, our priorities are more clearly outlined and aligned: love God; love neighbor; serve our family, which is the domestic church given to us. Good fruit will more easily grow out of our actions and choices. Our life will become more and more

habituated to the joy of the Gospel and that joy will flow into the lives of all those we encounter.

The more good choices we decide to make, the more we will find those places where the door sticks a little, and maybe even feels locked. As we become more and more aligned to the life of Christ, we will find more of those little outposts of resistance that we didn't know existed in our souls. Sometimes these holdouts of weakness and brokenness are harder to fight because they have been unknown for so long. Sometimes we come up against a big thing that we have been fighting, or have thought is too big to fight, but we know we alone are incapable of conquering. Luckily, we never have to go into battle alone. Christ fights with us and for us, and He brings along the entire Church, His Mystical Body, to accompany us.

One of the desert fathers, in speaking about the importance of self-reflection, recommends to his spiritual son that he reflect as though he is sitting on a high mountain inside his soul, gazing down at all of the activity, some directed by his own mind and nature, some directed by God and some directed by the devils who are aspiring to influence us to sin. We have to be able to take a sincere and true look at ourselves and say, *these are the things that are of God, these are the things that are of nature and incline me toward God, and these last are the evil tendencies which the devil and my fallen nature present to me.* We must give the good and evil to God, allow Him to discard the evil and enhance and breathe life into the good.

Once you know your weaknesses and strengths, it is easier to ask God to fight your battles and let Him take charge. You see how those weaknesses will damage your advantage in every battle you find yourself in. You have no choice but to invite God into those battles and ask Him to take charge, giving you only those jobs that you are most capable of accomplishing.

When God is fighting your battles, it opens up the possibility for you to love unconditionally. A great weight lifted leaves space for enormous and heroic action. "It is one of the most fulfilling things in the world to love someone unconditionally and to expect nothing in return, and it

can have a powerful effect on others.” (p.35)

It can be terrifying to be loved this much and this freely and to have this world of active love open up before us. It takes courage to receive this love. Over the next week, the chapters you will read from *You’re Amazing* deal with courage and how to live it out.

“Don’t you long to shout to those youths who are bustling around you: Fools! Leave those worldly things that shackle the heart – and very often degrade it – leave all that and come with us in search of Love!”
– St. Josemaría Escrivá (*You’re Amazing*, p.32)

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it so hard to give ourselves up to Jesus? What does that actually mean?
2. Why is confessing our sins or saying sorry so difficult?
3. We live in an era of self care and self interest. What are the legitimate boundaries between self care and self-centeredness? Where does God’s will fit in?

Scripture for the Week

Proverbs 28:18

2 Corinthians 11:30

Galatians 5:1

John 4:1-30

Sunday Gospel, March 8: Matthew 17:1-9



Week Two: Be Courageous

*I will fear no evil for thou art
with me*

Ps 23:4

Last week, we were encouraged to be real – to find out who we are, where we are going, what our role on that journey is, and what God’s role is.

This week, we are encouraged to be courageous. Courage is the virtue that helps us overcome adversity and seeming impossibility. Courage helps us look at a problem and say, *I’m doing it anyway...* Now, this attitude could obviously be inappropriate at times. But sometimes, the devil throws us a problem and makes it look huge, enormous, undefeatable, and (without courage) stops us in our tracks. We turn back and go a different direction, or we shrink against the wall waiting for an easier door to open.

Simply put, this is not an option.

We must face the dragons that come before us. We must climb the mountain between us and the truth, between us and love, between us and beauty, between us and goodness, between us and God. We cannot let our achievement of these transcendentals be stunted by petty problems exaggerated by the devil. How do we know they are petty? Because the devil has nothing but pettiness at his disposal. He can’t fundamentally harm us unless we participate. He can only try to stand between us and God, but he can’t actually remove God from our lives. He shouts and screams and flashes lights so that it is hard to keep our focus on God, from whom our courage and our confidence in victory flows.



When I think of courage, my mind often wanders to the martyrs, early Church and more recent, who had to face adversity and, ultimately, offer their life for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. St. Ignatius of Antioch comes particularly to mind. On his way to martyrdom, he begs his followers not to rescue him, saying, “Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose means it will be granted me to reach God. I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*) I’d love to believe that faced with a similar trial, I would have similar courage. That kind and level of courage, however, does not start in the moment of martyrdom. It begins with embracing each struggle as it comes along, from the smallest to the greatest, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, “Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (*Phil. 4:13, RSV*) Practice courage in the little things, so that we can have courage in the big things.

We must have courage - courage to set the goal at victory and courage to strive for it; courage to attempt the seemingly impossible when that is what God is calling us to do; courage to face our own sinfulness and confront our own weakness; courage to confront our brothers and sisters in charity and courage to recognize when we are confronting them out of pride. We must have the courage to suffer well, to suffer with our whole humanity, body and soul, looking at it and recognizing it for what it is and then choosing it and rejoicing in it for the sake of the good that is born from it. We must have the courage to persevere in the fight, even when it appears that we are not winning. We must have courage to be outward focused, seeing others instead of just ourselves, and the courage to give our life for our neighbor, from the smallest gifts that last only a second or two, to the biggest that require an immense effort. We must have the courage to listen for the voice of Christ in those speaking to us, even if they aren’t doing it in the most tactful manner. We must have the courage to quiet our lives, stop the

movement and rest in Christ.

It is from this last kind of courage that the other expressions of this virtue gain their strength and power. Without the courage to listen to Christ, discernment will be impossible and we will not be able to know in which direction to expend our courage. Consequently, we will find ourselves fighting the shadow instead of the dragon. We must first have the courage to face Christ and then enter the battle that He points us to, with His strength, and in the way that He directs us.

Discussion Questions

1. What dragons do you face in your life? Are they more internal or external, personal or social?
2. How do we understand ourselves better when we are in service to others? What are some of the sources of your courage?
3. Is it courageous to let ourselves be humble? Why is it so difficult?
4. With which cardinal virtue do you struggle the most? (See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1805-1808)

Scripture for the Week

1 John 4:4

Exodus 14:13

Romans 12:1-2

1 Samuel 17:19-58

Sunday Gospel, March 15: John 4:5-42



Week Three: Be Prayerful

Last week, we talked about courage and how important it is to have courage so that we can receive God's love and, in turn, love God and our neighbor. It takes courage to fight the battle against sin and disorder. It takes courage to fight for truth and beauty.

Where do we get all of that courage? From prayer. Courage is one of those virtues you don't know you have until you have to put it to use. Then you find out, in the midst of the testing fire, whether or not you have it. You may not feel it growing through your prayer, but when you are put to the test, you will find yourself more able to accomplish the task at hand.

Prayer is often like that. You may not feel it working, but it is silently building you into the person God intends for you to be and, bit by bit, strengthening your relationship with God and your neighbor.

In the first week of Lent, we talked about being real, opening up all of the doors in your soul, and finding out who you are, who you were created to be, and who God is calling you to be in eternity.

How do you have the power to sustain all of that reality? How do you have the courage to keep moving and to persevere on the path to holiness and whole relationships with God and neighbor?

The simple answer is by building your interior life through prayer. Part three of *You're Amazing* is all about how to pray, and how prayer makes it possible to start down the path to holiness and then to keep moving on that path. Justin has a lot of helpful tips in there that can't be fit into these two or three pages.

In many ways, building a relationship with God really isn't that different from how we build human relationships. If I want to make a new friend, I have to spend time with them. The more I spend time with them, the more my relationship grows. The more intentional and focused the time we spend together, the more quickly the friendship builds into a deep and lasting relationship. Normally, you meet

someone and think, *I'd like to be friends with them*. Maybe you meet at another event by chance and decide to spend some time together. If this only happens once, that young friendship dies. A generous new acquaintance will take the challenge again if you try to start over a month, a year, or 10 years down the line. But willingness alone does not a new friend make. We have to spend time together, build the relationship, let the influence of our new friend change how we live day to day. Generally speaking, there are some natural limits to our friendship building activities. Notably, we are limited by time and the other relationships in our life. Typical friendships have limits that you learn as the friendship grows. We strive to learn and maintain appropriate boundaries, which means that mutual and perfect access to the life of the other is not given or received. But, within limits, the more I bring this stranger into the ups and downs of my daily life, into the big experiences of my years and into the fears and joys of my deeper thoughts, the more the friendship grows. The more often we spend time together over dinner, or travels, or events, the more the lives of our friends affect and influence our own, and vice versa. Through these shared experiences our friendships grow, but our ability to share these experiences can only reach so far.

Our friendship with God, however, doesn't have these natural limits. He can never know me too much. He can never be too interior to my life. Having created my very nature, it is His to know and to own and to dwell in. Being a good friend, however, He only enters to the degree to which we invite Him. He cherishes every conversation as an invitation into greater relationship. He gives Himself to us completely on the cross, and then personally through the Eucharist. Through prayer, our conversation with Him, we build our capacity to receive His life and by building our capacity, God fills us more and more, so that we never lack His life if we desire to be filled by it.

The realities of intimate relationships exist here, because whether I am befriending God or man, I am still a human. I once heard that you know you are really friends with someone when you can spend time with them in absolute silence, communing without speaking. Although this

may not be a measure of the depth of human friendship, it seems to be a special aspect of a friendship. Sometimes spending time with others in silence is a bit awkward, but the better you know the person, the more comfortable it is to be with them in stillness. Being able to give ourselves totally to God brings a depth to the silence that cannot be reached in normal human relationships, making that silent time together all the more necessary. The more often we bring our life to God in silence, the more we are able to bring Him with us into the hectic atmosphere of our daily lives. In the silence, the Holy Spirit aligns our life with Christ. Recalling the image from week one, through time spent in silence with God, our reflection in the mirror is brought slowly into alignment with the image of God, and our blurred vision becomes more unified. The picture clears up and the dizziness stills.

After a friendship has reached a certain point, we begin to see things or hear stories, and our reactions become, *my friend would love to hear this story* or *my friend would find these flowers beautiful*. This only comes with the knowledge that results from time spent together. When we spend time with God, and truly get to know Him and allow ourselves to be known by Him, a similar level of friendship develops. We might find ourselves unconsciously thinking, *God would love to hear this story* or *God would find great joy in this*. The difference between God and other friends is that God is omnipresent; the more you build a relationship with Him, the more we are able to recognize God's presence in each moment of every day. We begin to commune with Him from moment to moment, not only when we have time dedicated solely to prayer.

If you are just getting started with prayer and an interior life, don't be discouraged. I like Justin's advice in *You're Amazing*. He says, "think of prayer like beginning to work out after taking a long hiatus from physical activity: You have to ease into it." (p.89) Just like working out, it is best to start slowly, and let your prayer life build naturally. Don't get discouraged by small setbacks. Just keep going and soon it will begin to get a little bit easier. And if you need a coach, ask someone farther along the path how to find a spiritual director or where to get

some help!

To get started, Justin outlines what he calls the *five minute prayer*, good for beginners and those who are more advanced. For one minute, tell God what you're sorry for. Then take a minute to tell God what you are thankful for. Take a minute to place your prayer requests before God. Take one minute to surrender to God. End with one minute of silence. Because it is only five minutes, it can be done anywhere, or at any point in the day, or even multiple times in the day. Start with once, and then move to twice a day. Alternately, you could move to expanding, little by little, the time spent, two minutes instead of one.

A note about distractions (we all get them)

Sometimes silence feels like a battle ground, distractions falling all around us. Distractions seem big and bad. Sometimes they are bits and pieces of life that we can give to God. Sometimes they are the devil knocking at the door trying to invade your time with God. Practically speaking, when a distraction arises, I like to show it to God, and then put it down. And if it tries to get back up, I say again, *God I give you _____*. Sometimes the distraction goes away. Sometimes God shows you this isn't a distraction, this is the conversation He's been wanting to have with you. Eventually, the habit of putting these moments before God becomes second nature. Focus builds.

Discussion Questions

1. How can you increase either your quality of time or quantity of time with God?
2. How do you pray? Do you sit with God in silence?
3. How can you make your prayer life a bit better?

Scripture for the Week

Luke 10:38-42

1 Kings 19:9-13

Sunday Gospel, March 22: John 9:1-41



Week Four: Be Humble

Let's start with a quick recap. Our Lenten journey started with facing the reality of who we are and who we are meant to be. The next week, we talked about having the courage to move, the courage to face the difficulties, and the courage to receive God's life-changing love and in turn love others with that same love. Last week, we talked about the importance of building a relationship with God through prayer, especially through silence. In this prayer, we look at God and get to know Him better, and consequently discover how He moves and works in us and in the world. This week is all about humility.

What is humility? Humility is knowing, recognizing and accepting the truth of who I am, as I exist today, as I was created to be, and as I am called to be in eternity. Humility is the reconciling of these three realities into one reality: knowing yourself as you truly are.

There is a general principle that says that you can only give what you have. Knowledge of self is a kind of self-possession, and consequently, the more I know myself, the more fully I can give myself. This real knowledge of self, called humility, is a different and more encompassing kind of self-knowledge that allows us to give ourselves even more completely.

How do we come to this new knowledge of self we call humility? This is a big question, but we can at least make a start.

The more we build our relationship with God, the more we begin to see the world as He sees it. This new perspective changes our understanding of ourselves and of our neighbor. With this new vision, we are invited again, and this time in a more profound way, to give ourselves over to God. Greater knowledge of self means that we get to give the gift of self again and in an even deeper way, first to God and then to neighbor. The more we embrace God's perspective, the more we are able to see the truth of who our neighbor is and the greatness of being made in God's image and likeness is opened up to us. This newfound humility allows us to cherish the significance of each act to

which God calls us and of each person we encounter.

Humility also demands of us that we note our own limitedness and the beauty of the Mystical Body of Christ. St. Paul writes to the Colossians saying, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.” (Col 1:24, RSV) He speaks here of sufferings but the same could be said of strengths. No man acts alone who acts with Christ. The entire Mystical Body of Christ acts with him, rejoices with him, suffers with him.

As the line from Colossians intimates, we must also recognize that our talents, gifts, virtues, etc, add to the greatness of the Mystical Body, in addition to our sufferings. Humility demands that we know our story, and that we share it when called upon to do so. Sharing it helps orient us and others to our role in the work of salvation. Justin and the Hard as Nails Ministry challenges us to consider our three *minutes of power*. The three-minute challenge is to spend one minute recognizing and sharing one of our greatest challenges. The second minute is spent sharing all that Jesus has done for you to help you overcome that challenge. The third minute wraps it up by sharing your gratitude and how this challenge in your life has changed you. Recognizing our wounds and knowing how God works in them and how He has changed us is a substantial part of humility. Humility requires us to be unafraid of those wounds because we know they are never too big for God - no matter how great they seem.

In a couple of weeks, we will sing out *O Felix Culpa*, translated *Oh Happy Fault*, rejoicing in the fall of Adam and Eve, not in itself but because of the greatness of redemption and the Resurrection. Each of these challenges in our life, each of the things that we could spend a powerful three minutes reflecting on and sharing is an invitation to cry out *oh happy fault!* because the good drawn out of it is so great.

How can we embrace this new view practically speaking? There was a man named Viktor Frankl, who was one of the many who entered the Nazi death camps and one of the few who walked out. A psychologist by trade, he put his skills to good use, finding a way to focus on

goodness despite being surrounded by evil. Viktor Frankl survived his days of confinement and torture by buddying up with another inmate and making an agreement to share one joke and one moment of beauty each day. It was not an easy accomplishment, but simple doesn't always mean easy. He relates that one of the days his moment of beauty was looking down during one of the cold winter marches to see a smudgy rainbow in an oil spill. That day, the beauty of that tiny rainbow was his inspiration to choose life and not death, the reminder that good and beauty exist and therefore he should keep going and keep seeking.

I think this same image can be extended to include our approach to the people we encounter each day. If we approach each person as a gift from God and an image of God, then we are looking for the beauty in that person. We might be able to see only the tiniest aspect of it. There might be such a war raging in our soul or in a particular relationship that the image of God in the other seems small and we see only a spark and not the full flame. But if we look hard enough, then surely we can find something lovable in this other person. If we look hard enough, then we will find something to grasp that will allow us to wait out the war, and love the person despite the turmoil. This is an image of a humble approach to my neighbor. Sometimes I can't feel the desire to love the other. Sometimes I can't feel the desire to even look for the lovable aspects of the other. But if I want to fully live then I must, especially in these difficult moments, cling to the good that I can see, cling to the beauty that is available in the life of this person I am faced with, cling to those things that draw us together as members of the same Body, ruled by the same head, Christ Himself.

Joy and love follow this humble approach. There seems to be an inverse correlation between gaining knowledge and being joyful: the more difficult it is to gain the knowledge, the more easily the joy flows from it. The harder it is to find Christ in your neighbor, the more joy you take in the discovery and the more love you consequently have for Christ and neighbor.

Embrace humility, both in your approach to yourself and your

neighbor. Seek out the image of God and know the goodness that comes from being made in that image.

Discussion Questions

1. Simple doesn't mean easy. What are some of the struggles in your life that are simple and yet difficult?
2. Do you have a Happy Fault? What good has God drawn out of it?
3. How do you find quiet in your storm and the humility to search for the joy amongst the turmoil and the suffering?

Scripture for the Week

Psalms 139:14

Philippians 2:5-8

1 Peter 3:15-16

Proverbs 16:3

Sunday Gospel, March 29: John 11:1-45

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness... so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Gen. 1:26-31)



Week Five: Be Enthusiastic

We've spent the last four weeks, and then some, taking steps to building our relationship with God and neighbor. We are nearing the end of Lent. Let's take this week to talk together about sustaining those relationships.

I was with my family for Christmas, and in the middle of chaos, soccer balls bouncing around, drones buzzing past my face, music playing, kids running, and dogs chasing, my nephew, who is six, shouted from across the room "Mom! Mom! Mom!" and when she answered he looked up and shouted "I LOVE YOU!" This kind of enthusiasm for play and for love and for sharing a moment is often left in childhood. We don't bring it with us into our adult lives. We get caught up in a variety of fears, some of rejection and some of embarrassment or exposure. We become more and more afraid that this thing we think is wonderful doesn't really merit all of this enthusiasm. But the reality is that the love of the game and the sharing of that love go hand in hand. If we don't share the enthusiasm and joy we have in what we are doing, the joy and enthusiasm shrivel up. We let inhibitions rise like an undefeatable wall and the joy slowly melts away.

The faith is like this too. We can share our enthusiasm and joy in the faith with others, and we can participate in theirs. The more we share and the more we embrace the joy and enthusiasm of our neighbor the greater it gets. Sharing allows for us to break the limitations and unnecessary boundaries erected by our adulthood, our worries and anxieties, our fear of being tricked or played or simply being overly enthusiastic. There is no limit to the goodness of God, so there doesn't have to be a limit to your joy or enthusiasm for the faith, or for the life that the all-good God has created and curated for you.

Sometimes we feel a lack of enthusiasm or a lack of joy and need some help building the reserve back up. Sharing is one way to supplement the lack of enthusiasm in your life, but it isn't the only way. Read the Bible. Earlier, we talked about reading the Bible as a way to get to know God and build a relationship with Him. The Bible is the living word of God and, since it is living, you can interact with the Word of God through reading. Engaging with the Scriptures is engaging with God Himself.

God is the source and summit of our joy. Any interaction with Him will supplement and strengthen the joy you feel. Receive the grace of the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Sacraments, Holy Communion. Receive Jesus' own Body and Blood, soul and divinity through the frequent reception of Holy Communion. He is the source and summit of our life and our joy.

Another key to building and maintaining your joyful relationship with God is to pray expectantly. Remember with every prayer that you breathe out, God wants what is good for you and is building your life to be receptive to the best good, which is eternal life in perpetual bliss with Him. Momentary setbacks are nothing compared to the omniscience and omnipotence of the immortal God. In times of struggle, remember that God wants your good, and repeat it until it makes sense. Just like reworking a tough math problem when you were a kid - keep working it until it makes sense.

Even when you feel as if you are losing, or maybe especially when you feel as if you are losing, keep moving forward. Keep praying. Keep reading the Bible. Remember that you are made in the image and likeness of God, and that his desire is to invite you deeper and deeper into His life with every passing moment. Keep committing acts of love for your family, friends, coworkers, and especially those people that get on your nerves.

And when you are really down, as we all are sometimes, remember that you are amazing, and that the root of that amazingness is in your very creation. It is fundamental to who you were created to be and cannot be stripped from you. You are amazing.

Discussion Questions

1. What is a struggle in your life that is simple and yet difficult?
2. When do you feel defeated and need encouragement?

Scripture for the Week

Hebrews 4:12

Matthew 24:13

Colossians 1:17-20

Sunday Gospel, April 5: Matthew 26:14-27:66

Easter Sunday

If any man be devout and love God, let him enjoy this fair and radiant triumphal feast. If any man be a wise servant, let him rejoicing enter into the joy of his Lord. If any have labored long in fasting, let him now receive his recompense. If any have wrought from the first hour, let him today receive his just reward. If any have come at the third hour, let him with thankfulness keep the feast. If any have arrived at the sixth hour, let him have no misgivings; because he shall in nowise be deprived thereof. If any have delayed until the ninth hour, let him draw near, fearing nothing. If any have tarried even until the eleventh hour, let him, also, be not alarmed at his tardiness; for the Lord, who is jealous of his honor, will accept the last even as the first; He gives rest unto him who comes at the eleventh hour, even as unto him who has wrought from the first hour.



And He shows mercy upon the last, and cares for the first; and to the one He gives, and upon the other He bestows gifts. And He both accepts the deeds, and welcomes the intention, and honors the acts and praises the offering. Wherefore, enter you all into the joy of your Lord; and receive your reward, both the first, and likewise the second. You rich and poor together, hold high festival. You sober and you heedless, honor the day. Rejoice today, both you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the fast. The table is full-laden; feast ye all sumptuously. The calf is fatted; let no one go hungry away.

Enjoy ye all the feast of faith: Receive ye all the riches of loving-kindness. Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free. He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it. By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive. He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh. And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry: Hell, said he, was embittered, when it encountered Thee in the lower regions. It was embittered, for it was abolished. It was embittered, for it was mocked. It was embittered, for it was slain. It was embittered, for it was overthrown. It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains. It took a body, and met God face to face. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen.

O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages. Amen.

Paschal Sermon of St. John Chrysostom

YOU'RE AMAZING™

Passion Groups

The heart of the Hard As Nails way of life is the Passion and cross of Jesus Christ. And a core way HN lives out that mystery is through a mini spiritual exercise called “Passion.”

“Passion” is kind of communal devotion, like the Miraculous Medal novena. The concept is simple: “Passion” offers a believer the opportunity to reflect consciously on how God is working in their life, and to share that reflection with the other members of a Passion group.

The key to doing “Passion” is taking up three vital questions:

1) What is a struggle you’re currently going through?

In the sacred banquet of the Eucharist, the memory of Christ’s passion is renewed. The Eucharist is the making present of Christ’s unique sacrifice on the cross. We have the courage to face our struggles thanks to the graces that flow from the Eucharist.

2) What are you grateful for?

The word Eucharist itself means thanksgiving to God for His works: creation, redemption, and sanctification.

3) What do you need prayer for personally?

The Eucharist is the greatest prayer of the Church and the greatest source of grace. We are confident to ask God for what we need because of the divine mercy and generosity that flow to us from the Eucharist.

As each person shares his or her three questions, the other members of the “Passion group” participate by listening intently. Once all have

shared, the Gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday Mass is read out loud. The members of the Passion group share their reflections on the Gospel by speaking about how it applies to the experiences they just shared. The goal in breaking open the Sunday Gospel together is to enable the members of the Passion group to participate in the Mass more passionately. Hearing the Gospel read at Sunday Mass will take them back to the graces and insights they received in the Passion Group.

So often we remain unaware of the interior battles people close to us are fighting due to challenges in their life. “Passion” is a way to bring those struggles to light, to accompany others at the deepest level, and to give them the assurance that their suffering matters and that it has a meaning. “Passion” gives purpose to pain and suffering by uniting it to the life-changing love that flows from the Passion of Jesus Christ. Passion can change the world!

The above information was taken from the Hard as Nails website, www.hanm.org. They have lots of great stuff over there - go check them out!



40 DAY LENTEN CHALLENGE

Watch *Our Lenten Reflections** on MATTHEW daily
Pray the *Our Father* at 3 pm
Look for opportunities to *Be Nice* daily

LET'S GROW TOGETHER!

* *Our Lenten Reflections* is available on our website under Parish News

STMATTHEWCATHOLIC.ORG



All of the icons found in this booklet, excepting the icon on p.32, were written by Abbot Damien Higgins, of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Redwood Valley, CA.

Find out more about Holy Transfiguration Monastery by visiting their website, monksofmonttabor.com.

Thank you for persevering through this little booklet.

If you have any feedback or suggestions for Lent next year, don't hesitate to reach out to the Small Groups team at smallgroups@stmatthewcatholic.org.



The icon on p.32 is taken from a picture of an icon found in the collection at Holy Resurrection Monastery

Find out more about Holy Resurrection Monastery by visiting their website, hrmonline.org.

This booklet was written and edited by Rachel Willoughby and the Small Groups Team, the Communications Team and many others in St. Matthew Catholic Church community for the use of St. Matthew's parishioners and small groups during the Lenten season 2020. It is written under the inspiration of and as a companion to Justin Fatica's book, *You're Amazing*.

Lenten Liturgical Services

Ash Wednesday, February 26

Ballantyne

Mass : 7:00 am, 8:15 am, 12:10 pm, 7:30 pm

Prayer Service and Ashes: 10:30 am, 3:30 pm, 5:30 pm

Waxhaw

Mass: 7:00 pm,

Prayer Service: 12:00 pm and 4:00 pm.

Chrism Mass, April 7, Cathedral of St. Patrick

10:00 am

Holy Thursday, April 9, Ballantyne

7:30 pm, Mass of the Lord's Supper, church

8:30 to 11 pm, Altar of Repose, gym

Good Friday, April 10, Ballantyne

3:00 pm, Stations of the Cross, church

7:30 pm, Service of the Passion of the Lord,

Holy Saturday, April 11, Ballantyne

Noon, Blessing of the Easter Foods, church

Easter Vigil, April 11, time to be determined.

Easter Sunday, April 12

Ballantyne

Sanctuary: 7:00 am, 9:00 am, 10:45 am, 12:30 pm, 5:30pm

Parish Center: 9:00 am, 10:45 am, 12:30 pm

CCHS: 11:15 am

*Waxhaw (*note the changes in Sunday Mass times)*

7:30 am, 9:00 am, 10:30 am, 12:00 pm

Maronite: 1:30 pm

There is no nursery on Easter Sunday.

Weekly Stations of the Cross

Ballantyne: every Friday in Lent at 7:30 pm in the Sanctuary

Waxhaw: TBD

Sacrament of Confession:

12 Hours of Confession:

March 6, 7:30 am - 8 pm (Ballantyne)

Ballantyne Campus

Every Saturday, 4 to 5:00 pm

Every Wednesday, 6:30 to 7:15 pm

Waxhaw Campus

Every Saturday, 3:45 to 4:30 pm

Interested in continuing your small group in the Easter season? Look for small group resources on the website and in the narthex in the weeks following Easter!