

LENT and **LABELS ARE FOR JARS™**

This Lent, you are invited to participate in **Labels Are For Jars**, an effort to help feed hungry people in Lawrence, MA. **Labels Are For Jars** offers this daily guide for Lenten reflections, as well as a unique opportunity to help feed some of our neediest brothers and sisters through our Lenten almsgiving.

LENT

Lent, the period of weeks leading up to Holy Week and Easter, is a unique gift from God. During Lent, we are invited to renew our relationships with God, turn away from sin, and experience reconciliation with God and others.

We traditionally embrace three disciplines during Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. None of these is an end in itself. Instead, each discipline helps us better focus on God and on living God's love.

PRAYER

The goal of Lenten prayer is to dedicate more of ourselves to building our relationships with God. To make best use of this **Labels Are For Jars Lent Guide**, you are invited to set aside some period of time each day during Lent (perhaps half an hour) to communicate with God through reflective prayer. Each day, you are invited to read in your bible the Gospel passage listed in this guide, and then to consider the reflections and questions for the day. You may want to keep notes of your reflections each day.

FASTING

Through fasting, we recall that God gives us all the gifts we have in life - not just food, but breath, health, speech, thought, love, and every material good. By choosing to deny ourselves some food and drink during Lent, we gain a better perspective on all of the material blessings God gives to us. In addition to observing the Lenten fasting regulations of the Church, each of us chooses particular ways to fast during Lent.

ALMSGIVING

Almsgiving is our sharing the best of our treasure with people who are in need. All that we are and all that we have are gifts from God. It is tempting to grasp those gifts for ourselves, without considering God or other people. When we sacrifice the best of our gifts for people in need, we become better focused on God and others. We grow closer to God and all of our brothers and sisters by living God's generous love.

Labels Are For Jars is a fantastic focus for Lenten almsgiving. **Labels Are For Jars** raises money to help feed hungry people in Lawrence, MA. In Lawrence today, 75% of children are at risk for hunger. **Labels Are For Jars** raises money to provide food for hungry people in Lawrence through the Cor Unum Meal Center. Cor Unum provides free hot meals to hundreds of people every day, 365 days a year. **100% of the alms you contribute to Labels Are For Jars during Lent will help provide food through Cor Unum. Every dollar you contribute will provide one full, nutritious meal at Cor Unum.**

To participate in the **Labels Are For Jars** Lenten program, all you need is an open heart, the desire to grow in the Lord, and a jar.

ASH WEDNESDAY and **LABELS ARE FOR JARS™**

Wednesday, 2/22 (Ash Wednesday): Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18

In this passage from Matthew 6, Jesus criticizes certain people whom he observes pursuing what should be good religious practices with the goal of gaining the attention and praise of other people. This is a pathetic goal, and it is fairly easily achieved. Jesus makes clear that the true goal of religious practices should be greater union with God. Human beings are created with only one purpose: union with God. God is the source of all life, love, and goodness. God has the answers to our questions, the healing of our ills, and the plans for our lives. Only God offers us true happiness, power, hope peace, and joy - on this planet, and eternally. Is your goal for Lent greater union with God? If so, you are on the right track. In the Ash Wednesday liturgy, the Church offers us two spiritual counsels for pursuing this goal: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel". Six weeks, if lived cruising along with secular culture, pass in a flash. Six weeks, lived one day at a time with an intensified focus on turning away from sin and being more faithful to the Gospel (the teaching of Christ), should be a rich, extended, challenging, and very rewarding season. Reflect today on the extent to which you intend to live this Lent, one day at a time, actively turning away from sin and being more faithful to the Gospel. If your intentions correspond with these directions, you are on the right track.

ALMSGIVING!

To begin Lent, put a **Labels Lent Jar** wrapper on an empty jar. Place your **Labels Lent Jar** in a location that is very visible to you, and each day during Lent place in it an amount of money that will be a reasonable daily sacrifice for you. Your sacrifice will help feed some of the neediest of our brothers and sisters through the Cor Unum Meal Center. **Every dollar you contribute will provide one full meal at Cor Unum.**

Thursday, 2/23: Luke 9.22-25

As you begin your reflection today, spend a few moments recalling yesterday's prayer. What is honestly in your heart and mind as your goals for Lent? What honestly are your intentions for pursuing your Lenten goals? After answering these questions, read today's passage from Luke 9. Jesus makes the straightforward claim that he personally offers the way to salvation - the way to God, to love, to life now and eternally. Salvation is offered through a person's deciding to live as a disciple (follower) of Jesus. Jesus entirely recognizes everyone's freedom to choose whether to be his disciple. He never forces Himself on anyone. However, Jesus states clearly that if a person chooses to follow Him, the person must deny himself (not have himself as the center of reality), take up his cross daily (accept daily the passion involved in following Jesus), and persist in growing as a disciple. Imagine Jesus speaking the words of this passage to you, directly in reference to your goals and intentions for Lent. How do you react?

Friday, 2/24: Matthew 9.14-15

In today's gospel reading, Jesus confirms the purpose of religious fasting: to grow closer to God. If done in pursuit of union with God, fasting physically reminds us of our spiritual goals, increases our awareness of God as the source of all good, deepens our appreciation of God's loving care for us, and broadens our sense of solidarity with all people who are in need. True religious fasting focuses our prayer and heightens our spiritual sensitivities. Sincere fasting that is an act of faith becomes a movement of thanksgiving to and sacrificial love for God. The Church's official rules for fasting during Lent are remarkably minimal (two days - Ash Wednesday and Good Friday). Our regulations for Lenten abstinence from meat on Fridays are extremely modest and quite different from fasting. We are therefore left to decide for ourselves our practices of Lenten fasting. Spend some time considering today what pattern of fasting this Lent would be for you healthy, reasonable, positively challenging, and entirely oriented to the goal of greater union with God. Make your plan and begin your fasting. If in a week or so you find that your fasting plan does not increase your focus on God, reflected in increased Christian behavior on your part, adjust your plan. The goal of Lenten fasting is primary; the details of Lenten fasting are secondary.

Saturday, 2/25: Luke 5.27-32

Two kinds of people are portrayed in today's reading. It would be good to compare yourself to both. First, there are people who are sinners who welcome Jesus and experience His eating and drinking with them. As you begin Lent, do you openly recognize yourself as a sinner and welcome Jesus into your life? Second, there are people in the passage who are so focused on others' sinfulness (and therefore

very puzzled by Jesus' fellowship with sinners), that they do not end up welcoming Jesus or experiencing His eating and drinking with them. Be sure to dedicate some time to reflecting on this second group. Many of us pay a great deal of attention to other people's sinfulness - people we know personally, people we observe from a distance, people who directly affect us, people whose behaviors cause problems in the world. With countless variations, many of us dedicate much time and energy to focusing on others' sinfulness. If this applies at all to you, are you willing during Lent to stop doing so? As your thoughts turn toward others' sinfulness, are you willing to shift your attention elsewhere? If so, this may be of great spiritual value during Lent. If not, please review the reading on which we reflected on Thursday, and your reactions to it two days ago.

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT AND LABELS ARE FOR JARS™

Sunday, 2/26: Mark 1.12-15

When Jesus goes to the desert for 40 days, He is tested by Satan to see what kind of a Son of God He is. Is He a Son who is faithful, trusting, focused, clear, strong, patient, and courageous . . . or will He give in to Satan's temptations and slip away from His relationship with God the Father? Jesus, who is as humanly tested as much as any of us, remains steadfast in His loving relationship with the Father. The qualities of a true son of God that Jesus demonstrates are made available to all of us through baptism. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit within us, we are able to live as faithful sons and daughters of God, if we choose to do so. Lent can positively be for us, one day at a time, a test of what kinds of children of God we are. Are you eager to enter into this test this week?

ALMSGIVING!

During the past few days, you hopefully have figured out how you will fast during Lent. This week, calculate the cost of the food from which you are fasting during Lent, and add that to your **Labels** jar. By doing this, you are both offering your fast to God and directly offering the equivalent of what you would have eaten to help feed the hungry through **Labels**. **Every dollar you contribute will provide one full meal at the Cor Unum Meal Center.**

Monday, 2/27: Matthew 25.31-46

Tests are supposed to be easy if we are given the questions in advance. At the end of our lives, each of us will be judged by God for eternal life or eternal death. God's judgment will not be based on a test in the form of a sheet of written questions. It will be a test like the one we witnessed Jesus experience in yesterday's reading - the test of what kind of children of God we are, based on the ways we have led our earthly lives. In today's uniquely important passage from Matthew 25, Jesus reveals the exact criteria on which we will be judged. For the test of eternal life, Jesus gives us the questions in advance. Read through this passage and consider the proposition that this is all you need to know to understand the path to eternal life, and to union with God during your earthly life. God presumably does not restrict judgment to only the six specific actions of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. What do you think is the commonality of these six actions, which presumably extends to many similar actions?

Tuesday, 2/28: Matthew 6.7-15

In the Lord's Prayer (cited in today's reading), we pray, ". . . thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." There is a direct sense of immediacy in the Lord's Prayer - we pray that God's will be done on earth today, not some time off in the future. Recall your conclusions from yesterday's reflection on Matthew 25. Based on Matthew 25, what do you think God fundamentally wills us to do on earth today? Is it not to concretely address the practical need of the people we encounter today? Consider the proposition that this is what God wills to be done on earth today - for you to concretely address the practical need of the people you encounter. Are you willing to try to put this into action today? If so, get going. If not, why not?

Wednesday 2/29: Luke 11.29-32

In Luke 11.29-32, Jesus says that He offers people a great sign - His words. He cites Old Testament examples of the words of Jonah and Solomon that drew very unlikely people to God. Words are one of the principal means through which God works in the world. The words we choose to say are some of the

most powerful gifts that God offers other people through us. Add this reality to your reflections of the past few days. Today, work actively to recognize the concrete needs of the people you encounter. Heighten your consciousness of your ability to speak words that somehow directly communicate something true and good - something of God - to these people in their need. Take action and speak! If you find you cannot speak or are unwilling to speak, what is going on inside of you?

Thursday, 3/1: Matthew 7.7-12

Jesus teaches in this passage that people who seek good from God receive good from God. While there is plenty of mystery and much room for discussion about how this unfolds in the world, Jesus' basic affirmation remains: people who seek good from God receive good from God. Why, then, does the starving person who prays for food not receive food? Why does the lonely senior who prays for companionship not receive a friend? In so many cases, the answer to these questions is surely not that God does not answer these prayers, but that the people who are meant to be instruments of God's answers do not choose to serve as God's instruments. There is more than enough food on the earth for everyone to eat abundantly. There is no question that God provides the grace for us to feed one another. The question is whether we do anything to accept that grace and take action to share our food. Reflect on this passage and apply it to your intentional actions today. When you make the choice to speak and act in response to the practical need of anyone you encounter today, you may be the instrument of God's answer to their prayer. How does this truth affect you?

Friday, 3/2: Matthew 5.20-26

Do you do things that offend other people? If your answer is "No", you are either extraordinarily holy or delusional - most likely the latter. We all make choices that offend, hurt, and damage other people. In today's gospel passage, Jesus offers us the path of freedom from the harm we cause to others - approaching them to pursue reconciliation. Whether reconciliation follows, it is almost always possible for us to approach the people who justifiably have something against us and to sincerely say "I'm sorry". Consider this in the spirit of Matthew 25: When I had been offended by you, you asked for my pardon. Today's passage is a tremendous opportunity for spiritual growth for all of us who are able to accept Jesus' words with honesty and the will to take action. What will you do today with this passage?

Saturday, 3/3: Matthew 5.43-48

Jesus explains in this passage that His true followers go beyond loving people who are close to them or people who love them. True disciples of Jesus love their enemies and love those who persecute them. When we hear these challenging words, we often immediately think of specific people who are our personal enemies or who have personally persecuted us. That immediate consideration of the people who are most difficult for us to love may discourage us from listening to Jesus, because it may seem impossible to even consider loving the people with whom we have had our most painful life experiences. Based on this week's readings, it might be worthwhile to consider a different approach. This week, we have focused on meeting - in deed and in word - the straightforward needs of the people we encounter each day. We have explored reasons for doing this that have nothing to do with the goodness or badness of the people whose needs we meet. This is true love. True love has nothing to do with whether we like or dislike a person. It has to do with addressing the basic needs that any human being has as a child of God. With that proper understanding of true love, it is much easier to consider loving people for whom we have very negative feelings, even our enemies and those who persecute us. Today, consider the possibility that the practical entry point for loving your enemy is not your feeling about your enemy, but the act of loving - the act of responding to that person's fundamental human needs.

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT AND



Sunday, 3/4: Mark 9.2-10

Peter, James, and John in this passage have a unique experience. Jesus is transfigured before their eyes. They are given a vision of His true glory. They are enveloped by the presence of God and receive a direct revelation from God the Father: "This is my beloved son. Listen to Him". While Jesus' transfiguration is something we can only imagine, what Peter, James, and John experience on the mountain is actually offered to every disciple of Jesus in every generation. In various ways, we are given glimpses - spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally - of the full glory of Jesus. God the Father continually reveals to us that Jesus is His beloved son. Most importantly, God the Father

continually tells us to listen to Jesus. Listening to Jesus involves opening ourselves to His word, reflecting on it, and taking action as a result of it. That is what we have been trying to do each day during Lent. If this resonates with your observance of Lent so far, that's great news! As we enter into the Second Week of Lent, what are your intentions vis-à-vis listening to Him?

ALMSGIVING!

Most of the people who are helping feed the hungry through **Labels Are For Jars** have heard about the project by word-of-mouth. This week, consider ways you might help expand the number of people sacrificing to help feed the hungry by telling other people about the project and encouraging them to get involved in **Labels**. For inspiration and images, you might visit the website of the Cor Unum Meal Center, www.corunummealcenter.org.

Monday, 3/5: Luke 6.36-38

At the beginning of today's reading from Luke 6, Jesus urges His disciples to stop judging, to stop condemning, and to forgive. All of these points are obviously regarding spiritual actions toward other people, rather than physical actions. Continue to read Jesus' subsequent words as applied to spiritual, rather than physical gifts: "Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you." In your daily life, how generous are you in giving spiritual gifts to others - very generous, somewhat generous, not generous, stingy? (If you're unclear what "spiritual gifts" are, spend some time thinking about it in light of Jesus' words in this passage.) Based on your honest assessment of your level of generosity in giving spiritual gifts to other people in your daily life, how do you react to Jesus' straightforward explanation of the return of gifts you should expect from God? Could this positively affect your behavior today?

Tuesday, 3/6: Matthew 23.1-12

Jesus in this passage criticizes certain people who preach religious principles but do not practice them. Among these people's faults, they do not lift a finger to help the people to whom they preach. Jesus explains that His disciples must be different: "The greatest among you must be your servant." Recalling yesterday's reflections, people have very different self-understandings and perspectives when they give gifts to others. To sincerely understand oneself as the servant of others, and to honestly believe that to be the greatest means being the servant of others, is a huge deal. This self-understanding and perspective does not come automatically. For many of us, understanding ourselves as servants of others and living daily with this perspective would involve significant change. Spend some time today reflecting honestly before God about the extent to which Jesus' words - "The greatest among you must be your servant" - connect and don't connect with the way you understand yourself and the way you live your daily life.

Wednesday, 3/7: Matthew 20.17-28

Today's text from Matthew connects with yesterday's. Jesus today notes that worldly leaders lord their authority over other people. Jesus says to His followers that they must be different: "Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave." Jesus explains why this must be true by speaking about Himself (the "Son of Man"): "Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Yesterday, we reflected on the self-understanding involved in being a servant of others. Today, shift your reflection to a consideration of how one needs to understand/see other people in order to live as their servant. Perhaps take as your starting point your impressions of how Jesus understands other people in giving His life for them. After you've reflected on how one needs to understand/see other people in order to live as their servant, honestly consider the ways in which you connect with this in your daily life.

Thursday, 3/8: Luke 16.19-31

Today's reading builds on our reflections on living as God's servant of other people. Jesus tells a story of a rich man who chooses to ignore the basic needs of an economically poor, seriously ill man named Lazarus. The story assures us that the rich man knows who Lazarus is (he knows his name), but chooses to do less than dogs do to address Lazarus' obvious needs. In your prayer today, are you willing to consider how you are like the rich man? It takes real courage to honestly do this. Many adults lack the courage to genuinely enter into this passage.

Friday, 3/9: Matthew 21.33-43, 45-46

This reading from Matthew 21 shifts to a very different perspective regarding servants. Jesus tells a parable in which a landowner sends his servants to his tenants to collect the produce they in justice have promised to him. The tenants respond by beating, killing, and stoning the servants. Jesus in this parable is clearly speaking about servants of God who have are unjustly, violently rejected by the people to whom God sends them. Consider today in your prayer that if you choose to live as a servant of God, you are guaranteed to be rejected - sometimes forcefully or even violently - by the people to whom God sends you. What comes to mind as you consider this reality? How do you react in terms of your willingness to live as God's servant?

Saturday, 3/10: Luke 15.1-3, 11-32

This is one of Jesus' best-known parables. Many people focus on its first half and call it the "Parable of the Prodigal Son". The parable, in fact, is centrally about the merciful father, and the older son, portrayed in the second half, is as significant as the younger. The father in the parable no doubt represents God the Father, whose love, mercy, forgiveness, and eagerness for the return of His sinful children cannot be exaggerated. The younger son in the parable represents any truly repentant sinner who wants to return home to God the Father. The older son equally merits our attention. Despite the father's pleading, he cannot bring himself to accept that his sinful brother should receive such complete reconciliation with their father, and that the father celebrates his sinful son's return. The father wholeheartedly invites the older son to share his joy, but he cannot and does not force him to do so. Many of us should be able to relate to the older son. We might accept the all-encompassing mercy God offers us personally, but we have a harder time accepting that God extends this mercy to certain other people - perhaps people we do not like, people we hate, people who have hurt us, or people who have committed certain kinds of offenses. Lent will drive us toward the truth we must choose to accept or reject: a servant of God is first and foremost to be an agent of merciful, forgiving, limitless love for the worst sinner in the world. Pray about this.

THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT AND

LABELS ARE FOR JARS™

Sunday, 3/11: John 2.13-25

In this passage from John 2, we witness Jesus' forcing out of the temple area in Jerusalem people who have made His Father's house a marketplace - people who have turned what is supposed to be holy ground into a place for selfish profit. The text reveals that Jesus cares deeply about sin, and is willing to act powerfully to oppose it. At the beginning of Lent, we resolved to turn away from sin. Today, is your resolution to turn away from sin, one day at a time during Lent, stronger or weaker than it was on Ash Wednesday? As He is in John 2, Jesus is eager that sin be driven out of your life. Looking to the week ahead, what are your intentions for pursuing the rejection of sin and increasing growth as a disciple of Jesus? Your intentions are important, because this week's readings will expose us to the sinfulness of some of Jesus' opponents during His public ministry, and challenge us to confront the same kinds of sinfulness in our own lives.

ALMSGIVING!

In many cases, the economically poor and hungry must beg in order to live. Your almsgiving through **Labels** this Lent makes it possible for more people to be given the food they need - not to have to beg for it. This week, would you be willing to stand in for your hungry brothers and sisters by asking some of your family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to make contributions to your **Labels** jar? **Every dollar they contribute will provide one full meal at the Cor Unum Meal Center.** How many meals might you provide through your outreach this week?

Monday, 3/12: Luke 4.24-30

Jesus in this passage is in his hometown of Nazareth. People who are familiar with him as a neighbor are offended by the words He speaks to them. They react violently and attempt to kill Him. It is easy for us to see how mistaken these people are. While Jesus' words may be difficult for them to accept, we know that whatever He says is entirely for their good. Whatever change or tension He introduces into their lives, it is meant to lead them to God and salvation. While it's easy for us to see this about the crowd who so violently reject Jesus in Nazareth, it may be more difficult for us to recognize this reality in our own lives. Can you recall times in your recent life - not in the

distant past - when the words and teachings of Jesus have been too much for you, and you have dismissed or rejected them? Spend some time seriously considering this in your prayer today.

Tuesday, 3/13: Matthew 18.21-35

We have all experienced God's forgiveness. Most of us have experienced complete forgiveness from God through the gift of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Having received God's complete forgiveness, most or all of us have withheld mercy from other people. The words in today's parable apply directly to us: "I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?" Think about people in your life from whom you have recently - not in the distant past - withheld full mercy. Imagine that the words just quoted are spoken to you by God. How do you react? Speak directly to God about this in your prayer today.

Wednesday, 3/14: Matthew 5.17-19

In this passage from Matthew 5, Jesus refers to an obvious truth: through the way we live, we all teach other people how to live. When we live holy lives, we teach others how to live holy lives. When we live sinful lives, we teach others how to live sinful lives. Many of us lack the honesty and courage to acknowledge that when we sin we teach others how to sin, but it's the truth. In your prayer today, speak with God about the ways you currently teach others to sin. This spiritual exercise requires time, reflection, honesty, and real courage.

Thursday, 3/15: Luke 11.14-23

In the crowd of people who witness Jesus' casting out a demon in this passage, some oppose Him. Perhaps they dislike Him or hate Him. Perhaps they are envious, jealous, or threatened by Jesus. Perhaps Jesus confuses them, raises questions with which they are uncomfortable, or does not fit into their narrow expectations. Whatever the case, some people in the crowd oppose Jesus. Instead of stating directly their problems with Him, some of Jesus' opponents fall back on sin: they make false statements about Him - that He casts out demons by the power of the devil. These false statements are, as Jesus explains, logically ridiculous. Nevertheless, the false statements are made. Making false statements about people we oppose is one of the single most common sins that we commit from our youngest days through old age. It is a sin that separates us from God, other people, and our own integrity. Many or most of us can be very reluctant to admit this sin. If you have the honesty, reflect today in your prayer on how making false statements about others is currently part of your life.

Friday, 3/16: Mark 12.28-34

Jesus today teaches that God's greatest commandment has two parts - that we should love God with all of our being, and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. In this teaching, Jesus affirms that God commands. God's commandments are true and obligatory. We can do whatever we want with God's commandments, but we cannot change the fact that they are true and obligatory. In the biblical passages we have heard this week, all of the people who oppose Jesus have received commandments from God that teach them not to behave the way they are behaving. One way or another, they have not chosen to accept that God's commandments are true and obligatory. In your prayer today, speak honestly to God about the extent to which you do and don't accept His commandments as true and obligatory - especially the fullness of the truth that He reveals to you through His Son.

Saturday, 3/17: Luke 18.9-14

Luke tells us that Jesus addresses this parable to people who are convinced of their own righteousness but despise everyone else. Those are strong words! To be convinced of one's own righteousness is to be confident that one's relationship with God is very good, and that one's actions are in excellent harmony with God's truth. What does it mean to "despise everyone else"? In the parable, the Pharisee recognizes that the tax collector is a sinner. He is thankful that he is not similarly sinful. He praises himself for performing religious works. He addresses words to God, but actually speaks his prayer "to himself". At least in this parable, the Pharisee's "despising everyone else" includes recognizing that another person is a sinner, not turning to God for guidance on what he might do to be God's instrument for the sinner, not praying for the sinner, and not reaching out in any other way to help the sinner. If this is an example of "despising everyone else", it is a sobering passage for us to consider in relation to ourselves.

THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT AND

LABELS ARE FOR JARS™

Sunday, 3/18: John 3.14-21

John writes of Jesus in today's Gospel reading: ". . . the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God." This text emphasizes the truth that our choices for and against God are made through the daily decisions we make about how we act. These decisions are seldom complicated or dramatic. In fact, they are usually simple, but very profound. During the upcoming week, we will be invited to consider the simple but profound decisions we make that lead us closer to or further from God. At this point in Lent, what is your level of interest in actively pursuing this exercise? Speak to God about this.

ALMSGIVING!

If you have been pursuing the almsgiving possibilities offered during recent weeks, you are doing much to grow in union with God and to be more connected daily with your brothers and sisters in need. This week, consider whether there are other material areas of your life that you might like to redirect toward doing God's work for the economically poor. If those areas are near at hand, consider redirecting the treasure involved to your **Labels** jar.

Monday, 3/19: John 4.43-54

Jesus' healing of the royal official's son in John 4 is a great miracle. As you read the passage, consider the simple decisions the royal official makes before the healing takes place. He decides to do something about his son's critical illness. He decides to approach Jesus about the crisis. He decides to travel from Capernaum to Cana to try to get Jesus to come to his home. He decides to speak directly with Jesus. He decides to ask Jesus to come heal his son. Remarkably, when Jesus tells him "You may go; your son will live", he believes Jesus and returns to his home - he decides to follow Jesus' instructions. Imagine yourself in the royal official's position, making these decisions. The decisions are very simple, but are they easy to make? What qualities emerge in the royal official as he makes these decisions?

Tuesday, 3/20: John 5.1-16

We read today from John 5 another miracle of Jesus - the healing of a man who has been ill for 38 years. Jesus encounters the man at a pool near the temple in Jerusalem. Sick people gather at this pool and apparently await an occasional movement of its waters. When the water moves, it apparently offers the possibility of supernatural healing to the first person who enters it. The man tells Jesus, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." Spend some time imagining yourself in this man's life situation - sick for 38 years, somehow getting himself to the pool, hoping for a miracle, having no one to help him, and watching other people continually reach the stirred-up waters before him. How might these realities negatively affect your disposition, your attitudes, your outlook on the world, and your perspective on God? Considering the many reasons why the difficulties, disappointments, and loneliness of his life might discourage the ill man, it is remarkable that when Jesus tells him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk", the ill man does so - and is healed. What kinds of simple but very important decisions do you imagine the man has for years made about how he lives his life that prepare him to make the decision to respond so quickly to Jesus?

Wednesday, 3/21: John 5.17-30

During the past two days we have looked at simple but profound decisions made by people who accept healing grace offered to them by Jesus. In today's passage from John 5, Jesus states directly who He is and what He ultimately offers to people. Jesus' words are very clear, if you take the time to reflectively read this passage. Jesus claims that He sees and does everything that God the Father does. He claims that God the Father has given Him the full power of eternal life. He claims that God the Father has given Him all judgment of the world. Jesus claims that He offers the power of eternal life - which is infinitely greater than any temporary healing - to anyone who hears His word and honors God the Father. To those who hear His voice and respond by doing good deeds, Jesus offers eternal life. Jesus' offer of complete, eternal healing and life is made to you. When you hear how He describes Himself and what He explains about judgment in this passage, how do you react? Depending on

your reaction, what are the kinds of simple but profound decisions you think you need to make in the way you live your life today?

Thursday, 3/22: John 5.31-47

In this passage, Jesus addresses some of his critics who do not accept that He has come from God the Father. Jesus' analysis of their lack of belief in Him is straightforward. While they have witnessed His astonishing works and have heard His words, they have not accepted them for what they are. While they are religious people who affiliate themselves with the Hebrew scripture, they have not allowed that scripture to penetrate their souls, so that it might point them to Jesus' divine origin. While they are literally members of God's Chosen People, they do not have the love of God within them, so that it might reveal to them the identity of God's Son. These people have presumably made day-to-day, simple but profound decisions that have made them religious on a surface level but have not led them to the intimate relationship with God that would allow them to recognize His Son. As you live your regular life on this day, what simple but profound decisions can you make to try to ensure that your soul is genuinely growing in God, and not floating on some surface level of religiosity?

Friday, 3/23: John 7.1-2, 10, 25-30

The people in this passage are interested in the same question as we: Who is Jesus? They are aware that some of Jesus' opponents are trying to kill Him. When they see Jesus preaching publicly in Jerusalem, they wonder if those opponents have concluded that Jesus really is the Messiah. They remind themselves of their understanding that when the Messiah comes no one will know where He is from. They say that they know where Jesus is from (presumably meaning his geographical origin), so He must not be the Messiah. This passage is filled with irony. When the Messiah comes no one will know where he's from . . . and these people are sure they know where Jesus is from . . . and so they are sure He can't be the Messiah . . . but in fact they don't really know where He is from (God the Father). During a week of reflecting on simple but profound decisions, it is easy to see that these people make the simple but profound decision to allow their very limited knowledge and understanding of reality to be the final arbiter of their acceptance or rejection of the truth. Do you recognize ways that this connects to your openness to growth in the truth?

Saturday, 3/24: John 7.40-53

This passage includes the description of certain religious leaders who are determined to destroy Jesus, and who aggressively bully those who do not cooperate with them. It also includes the description of another religious leader - Nicodemus - who has the courage to question this unjust condemnation of Jesus. This week, we have reflected on simple, daily decisions that profoundly affect the growth of our relationship with God. Reviewing some of the decisions on which you have reflected this week, how does the issue of courage work into the simple but profound daily decisions you make that result in your growing closer to or further from God?

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT AND LABELS ARE FOR JARS™

Sunday, 3/25: John 12.20-33

This passage from John 12 parallels our observance of Lent: The passion of Jesus, through which the world is reconciled with God, is drawing near. Jesus' words in the passage reflect the gravity, the trouble, and ultimately the glory of His passion. The next ten days of Lent are not a wind-down, but a build-up to our entering into Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. Spend some time during your prayer today speaking with God about your level of eagerness to continue your Lenten spiritual journey.

ALMSGIVING!

This week, as you continue your pattern of Lenten almsgiving, assess what you've been doing. Take a look at your **Labels** jar. All the money you've collected in there will help feed the hungry. How do you feel about that? What are your thoughts about the material sacrifices you've been making? Are you better off having made them? When Lent comes to an end, will you want to continue any of these sacrifices? How do you view your experience of telling others about **Labels**, and of asking others to sacrifice for the poor? Are those experiences you would like to be permanent parts of your life?

Monday, 3/26: John 8.12-20

In this memorable passage from John 8, Jesus encounters a woman who has been condemned to death for adultery. Jesus ultimately tells the woman: "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin anymore." As we move toward Holy Week, it is more and more important that we be honest with ourselves about our understanding of Jesus' words and about what effect, if any, they have in our lives. In your prayer today, imagine yourself, with your serious sin, in the place of the adulterous woman. Imagine Jesus' speaking directly to you the words He offers the woman. Reflect honestly on each of these questions: What does it mean to you when Jesus tells you He does not condemn you for your sins? What, if any, impact does this currently have on your life? When Jesus tells you to sin no more, how do you honestly react? What, if any, impact does His command to sin no more have on your life?

Tuesday, 3/27: John 8.21-30

Continuing our reflection on John 8, Jesus today says to some of His enemies: "You belong to what is below, I belong to what is above. You belong to this world, but I do not belong to this world. . . ." Given the choice to accept or reject Jesus - to belong to this world or to belong, with Him, to what is above - these enemies face the real possibility of dying in their sins. In your prayer today, imagine Jesus' saying these words to you. Hopefully strengthened by the spiritual insights you have gained during Lent, how do you understand His words? How do you react to them? Do they actually connect with the way you choose to live your life this day?

Wednesday, 3/28: John 8.31-42

Jesus says at the beginning of today's reading, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." If you have been observing Lent, you have hopefully experienced spiritual insight and growth during the five weeks since Ash Wednesday. Drawing on this insight and growth, in your prayer today imagine Jesus' speaking this sentence directly to you. Dedicate some reflective time to each of the four clauses of the sentence: "If you remain in my word". . . "you will truly be my disciples". . . "and you will know the truth". . . "and the truth will set you free". For each clause, what is your understanding of what Jesus is saying to you? How, if at all, do His words connect with the way you choose to live your life this day?

Thursday, 3/29: John 8.51-59

In this passage, Jesus tells people who don't understand Him that "Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad." We should be able to understand Jesus' words here. Abraham was one of the great figures of salvation history. God made a covenant with him in order to draw humanity closer to Himself. God made promises to Abraham to about blessings that would extend forever to his countless descendants. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment for humanity of God's all of promises to Abraham. For this reason, Jesus tells the crowd that Abraham rejoiced and was glad in His coming. Imagining Jesus' saying these words to you today, and realizing that many people around you oppose Jesus, how do you react to His words about rejoicing and gladness? In your life today, will you experience any real rejoicing and gladness because Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises to humanity?

Friday, 3/30: John 10.31-42

In this scene, people pick up rocks to stone Jesus. He asks them: "I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of these are you trying to stone me?" While few in the crowd may pay attention to Jesus' question, it's very important. Jesus only loves every person on the planet, including all the people who are picking up rocks to kill Him. Everything he has said to them, everything He has done for them, and everything He has shown them, is one hundred percent about love. His question is therefore deeply penetrating. What is it that He has done to cause people to want to throw rocks at Him? The question is relevant to the crowd in the gospel reading 2000 years ago, but it is more relevant for us, who know much more about Jesus than the people in the crowd. When we choose to sin, we choose to go against Jesus' love. Once we have any sort of personal relationship with Him, our choices for sin and against holiness are against Jesus personally. Take seriously today in your prayer the question Jesus asks the crowd, but direct it only to yourself in relation to your personal sin: "I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of these are you trying to stone me?"

Saturday, 3/31: John 11.45-56

This text from John 11 describes the hornets' nest of ignorance and fear that leads certain leaders to condemn Jesus to death. While Jesus' death becomes the means through which God brings salvation to the world, the thought processes and actions of the leaders who condemn Him are gravely wrong.

Any one of us should be able to relate to the terrible errors made by these leaders, as we have all been seriously mistaken in our thought processes and actions. We've spent the past week taking seriously words spoken by Jesus that are meant to lead us away from error and sin, and to invite us to fruitful relationships with Him. If any the leaders in this passage chose to respond positively to Jesus' words, they would not make their horribly wrong decision to kill Him. Based on your experience of scriptural reflection this week, are there ways you want to be sure you continue to listen to and respond directly to Jesus' words on a regular basis?

HOLY WEEK AND **LABELS ARE FOR JARS™**

Sunday, 4/1: Mark 14.1-15.47

Today we begin Holy Week. Our reading of Mark 14-15 invites us to enter into the account of Jesus' passion and death. As you read through the passage - something you might do several times this week - pay attention to the details of the words and actions of the various people who are part of the story. How do they act during Jesus' passion - both positively and negatively? What do you imagine is going on inside them to explain their words and actions? How do you relate to them?

Monday, 4/2: John 12.1-11

Judas is one of Jesus' closest twelve disciples. He has heard many of Jesus' words, witnessed some of His most powerful actions, and enjoyed a great deal of time with Jesus. Most importantly, Judas has been blessed to have a real, personal relationship with Jesus. He has experienced directly the infinite love that Jesus has for him. Everything Judas has received from Jesus is entirely good. In this passage from John 12, despite his personal relationship with Jesus, Judas shows himself to be a man of empty words and hollow spirituality. He reveals himself to be more like one of Jesus' opponents than a faithful disciple. Do you recognize any ways that your observance of Lent has made you less the kind of person Judas is in this passage, and more a faithful disciple of Jesus?

Tuesday, 4/3: John 13.21-33, 36-38

Simon Peter in this exchange with Jesus is confident that he will not waver in remaining faithful to Jesus as He enters His passion. Peter even declares that he will lay down his life for Jesus. At this stage of his life, Peter does not understand the limitations of his relationship with Jesus or his own weaknesses. Jesus assures Peter that he will deny Him three times this very night. He also assures Peter that at a later stage of his life, he will be able to follow Jesus' passion. Through your observance of Lent, how have you come to a more realistic understanding of your present relationship with Jesus, your weaknesses as His disciple, and His invitation to future growth and strength?

Wednesday, 4/4: Matthew 26.14-25

On this last full day of Lent, we read about Jesus at the Last Supper, surrounded by His closest disciples. The disciples are a mixed group, with varying levels of faithfulness, understanding, honesty, and closeness to Jesus. Lent has been an extended opportunity for us to grow away from sin and in faithfulness to the Lord. Spend some time today reflecting on your experience of Lent. What has been most spiritually beneficial for you? How has the season been positive in your growth as a Christian? Are there spiritual practices and disciplines that have been especially helpful for you during Lent? What might you do, both in your spiritual focus and your religious practices, to continue to pursue freedom from sin and growth from holiness after the close of Lent?

YOUR JAR!

After this Wednesday, we begin the observance of the holiest days of the year, the Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter.

Your helping to feed the hungry through **Labels Are For Jars** is a wonderful gift for God and the neediest of our brothers and sister. Please remove the money you've collected in your **Labels** jar. Count it, then put it in the form of a check or money order and mail it to **Labels Are For Jars**, 118 South Broadway, Lawrence, MA 01843. One hundred percent of the money you have collected will be used to feed hungry people through the Cor Unum Meal Center!

It is likely that the almsgiving you've pursued during Lent is meant to somehow continue to grow in the future. What are your thoughts and feelings about the material sacrifices you've made during Lent? Are you better off having made them?

For all of the hungry people whose lives you have changed through your sacrifice for **Labels Are For Jars**, many thanks! We hope that you will stay in touch with **Labels Are For Jars** in the months and years ahead! **God bless you!**