

## Dear friends in Christ,

Some of our favorite seasons of the church year remind us of God's promises fulfilled. At Christmas, we bear witness to the birth of the Messiah. At Easter, the long-awaited hope for salvation from death and sin is fulfilled in the resurrected Christ. But Lent is not a season of a promise fulfilled. It is a season of remembering the promise we so yearn to see realized. In these 40 days, we remember our spiritual forebears and their long journey from slavery in Egypt to liberation in the Promised Land.

We commemorate Jesus' solitude in the wilderness and the still-nascent hope he inspired among the first disciples. And we recall Jesus' journey to the cross and the ways that hope seemed to fall under the shadows of Golgotha.

Our fasting and prayer in this season remind us of our dependence on God and our longing for the fulfillment of God's promises for God's world. This very yearning lies at the heart of who we are as church together. In the last year, we have seen the number of hungry people around the world rise, as it has for the last five years. We have watched as hunger ministries expanded to serve an ever-growing number of guests. And we have longed together in hope for the time when we "will hunger no more, and thirst no more ... and God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes" (Rev. 7:16-17).

Yet, our longing never led to inertia nor despair, despite the discouraging forecasts of the past year. We are an Easter people, ever journeying toward the cross but trusting in faith that God's story does not end on that hill.

In this season of Lent, as we look back on the last year and recommit ourselves to living into that promise, we are invited to recall not only how far we are from the promise of a just world where all are fed but to reflect together on what it will take to get there

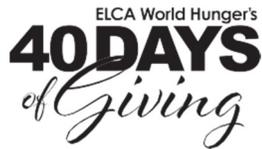
Each of the five sessions of this study is a piece of the answer to the question "What will it take to end hunger?" As so many of us know, this is not a thought experiment but an existential question concerning where and how we are to be church in a world where 690 million people are undernourished. Along the way,

we will visit companions and partners around the world and learn from each of them about one of the "tools" we will need if we are to be a church committed to ensuring that all are fed.

So, we invite you to journey with us, to explore, learn, be challenged and be inspired together.

May God bless our journey this Lenten season, and may the God of all yesterdays and tomorrows enflame our yearning for justice, that this church may be what and where it is called to be in God's world

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## WEEK 1 – A Bigger “We”

*“Your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:4).*

Almost eight years had passed since Marina set foot inside a church building. A car accident when she was in her late 40s had left her homebound with chronic pain and without use of her legs. One of her favorite visits in her home was on Sunday afternoon, when her pastor would come by to give Marina Holy Communion and pray with her. With a half flight of stairs leading up to the church door and more stairs between the foyer and the sanctuary, worshiping with her congregation was not an option.

That’s why Marina was so surprised to get a call from her pastor in July 2020 asking her to be part of a conversation about reopening the building for worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was quiet in that first Zoom meeting, listening to the other 10 people share their ideas and concerns. Some were scared, some weren’t, but most were exasperated and at a loss. One man seemed to put it best when he said, “This is all new to us. We’ve just never had to think about what it would mean to not be in church together ever.”

Before anyone could murmur agreement, Marina made her sole contribution to the discussion: “Whaddya mean ‘we’?”

This “we” – or, more specifically, this call to reexamine “we” – is at the core of the gospel message for Ash Wednesday this year and, indeed, of the church’s vision of a just world where all are fed.

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-21 is the starting point on the journey through Lent. In this excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonishes his audience about public, showy displays of spirituality. Rather than take pleasure or pride in giving alms, we are to hide the deed even from ourselves. Rather than pray in public, we are to retire to private rooms. Rather than display the effects of our fasting, Jesus tells us, “put oil on your head and wash your face” (6:17).

In fact, each of Jesus’ directives seems to contradict the very notion of what we have come to call “being a public church.” The sermon of Jesus appears to favor private spirituality over public displays of faith. He seems to suggest that faith is best lived out in the quiet and private spaces of our hearts rather than in public.

However, reading the sermon in this way misses the fact that the Gospel of Matthew is a call to be this very public church, which will “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). We might believe that the message of Lent is to practice private piety, yet Jesus focuses here not on the mere practices of faith but on the community of faith. In other words, Jesus is talking not about the what but about the who — who we are and who God is.

Michael Joseph Brown hints at this in his commentary on Matthew in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Fortress, 2007), noting the subtle assumptions about privilege in Matthew 6. Jesus’ command to the disciples to pray in their “room” (6:6) assumes they have a private room to retreat to, even though Jesus himself “has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). “Almsgiving,” as Brown writes, “assumes that you have something to give.” Even fasting assumes that one has the means to make choices about when to start and stop their own hunger.

Jesus' message is a challenge to a privileged church to think more carefully about who they are. The problem isn't that they are doing the wrong things. Giving alms to support neighbors is a good thing. Praying in the synagogue is, well, what is supposed to happen when the community is gathered. They are going through the right motions. But they have forgotten why they are doing them, and they have forgotten who they are. Their practices are no longer about the good of the community or the good of the neighbor but are mere performances, focused entirely on themselves. Almsgiving, praying, fasting — these are practices meant to remind us of each other. But has being faithful become a matter of making sure we are seen rather than of training our hearts and minds to see each other? Marina's fellow congregant in the Zoom call was more than willing to help the church with what it needed to do. But as her question revealed, he had forgotten who the church is called to be. His "we" was no more than an "I."

Yet even when the church forgets, God remembers. In each of the dictates to his followers, Jesus reminds them of the "Father who sees in secret." He reminds us that God's concern for us is not measured by our conspicuousness, nor is it limited by our narrow imagination.

Accompanying our neighbors in God's work of building a just world where all are fed means reimagining who we are and who we are called to be. There are so many stories shared across this church about friends and neighbors addressing hunger and poverty together. But perhaps the significance of faith in God, who "sees in secret," is best exemplified not by the stories we can tell but by the stories we can't — stories of God at work "in secret" and in hidden ways. These are the stories we don't hear, of neighbors whose names can't be shared.

They include the story of the clinic that cannot be named because unjust laws would put its noncitizen clients at risk. They include the story of women in a shelter whose names must be hidden to keep the women safe from their abusers. They include the story of ministries in conflict zones whose details cannot be shared without exposing workers and guests to violence. These are the stories that cannot be trumpeted but are nevertheless triumphant examples of the work of God, "who sees in secret."

Ending hunger means seeing what unjust power tries to keep hidden. It means defining "we" in a way that threatens the principalities and powers — including our own privilege — that make everything about "I." And it means remembering, when we are isolated or marginalized, that "I" am never excluded from God's "we."

Jesus' call in the Gospel reading reminds us that being the church requires a definition of community that is more expansive, more diverse and, thus, more beautiful than the exclusive vision put forth by those in power.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think, journal or share about a time when you felt left out or unable to speak because of fear. How does that memory impact your reflection on this reading and devotion?
2. The members of Marina's church were unable to see that their ability to climb stairs gave them the privilege to gather together in one space. The members of the ancient church to which Jesus was speaking were unable to see that their ability to give alms, fast and pray in private rooms was a privilege. What are some ways that privilege might affect who feels included in your community?
3. What does your church community look like? In what ways are all neighbors in your community invited to share their experience and ideas openly and freely with your congregation?

## PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, you bring light and life for all the world. Help us to listen, learn and love until your light and life fill every community. Amen.