

# Meeting Jesus on the *Margins*

MEDITATIONS ON MATTHEW 25



Bo Cox ♦ Allison Duvall ♦ Hugo Olaiz ♦ Mike Kinman  
Lee Anne Reat ♦ Becca Stevens ♦ Richelle Thompson

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# Meeting Jesus on the Margins

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**T**hen the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

—MATTHEW 25:34-40

## CHAPTER 1

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### Meditations on Matthew 25

*For I was hungry  
and you gave me food*

### *Ash Wednesday*

*Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith. —THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, pp. 264-5*

The simplest question is the most useful: Why?

We need always to be asking “Why?” and not letting our quickest answers, which are most deeply rooted in our prejudices, be our final answer.

When we see someone using the steps of a public library as a bed at night, we need to ask “Why?”

When we read a story about a transgender teenager committing suicide, we need to ask “Why?”

When we go into a grocery store in an impoverished neighborhood and see a fully stocked liquor shelf and no fresh produce, we need to ask “Why?”

When we learn we incarcerate a higher percentage of our citizens than any nation in the world, we need to ask “Why?”

When we see young people of color burn down the Quik Trip convenient store in Ferguson, Missouri, we need to ask “Why?”

And as we embark on our Lenten journey, we need to ask “Why?”

Our first answer, rooted in what we’ve always been taught, might be that we observe Lent as an exercise in self-flagellation, so that, in Paul’s words, we might not “think of ourselves more highly than we ought” (Romans 12:3). We might think our Lenten observance is grounded in our unworthiness. But we need to dig deeper.

The prayer at the beginning of our Ash Wednesday liturgy gives us the answer. We observe a holy Lent to remember Jesus’ gospel of “pardon and absolution.” Lent is not about confession and repentance as punishment but as a profound, grace-filled unburdening so that we might encounter the living Christ in all Christ’s abundant joy.

This book sets our Lenten journey in that context of meeting Christ...meeting Christ right where he tells us he will be...in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. It is a journey of seeing all those people as Jesus. Of asking “Why?” and not being satisfied by our first answer. Of realizing that those whom the world of power and privilege label as “them” are really the deepest and most sacred portion of “us.”

—MIKE KINMAN

In Fritz Eichenberg's 1953 wood engraving, *Christ of the Breadlines*, Jesus stands with six others who appear to be poor and perhaps homeless, huddled under blankets. Their heads are bowed. In prayer? In shame? In exhaustion? Jesus shares the despair and humiliation of the hungry waiting in long lines to receive their daily bread.

The fundamental lesson of Matthew 25 is that when we respond or fail to respond to the needs of others, we are responding or failing to respond to Christ. Salvation, in this passage, is a matter of how we treat "the least of these." Churches are very good at feeding people. Church folk are known for sumptuous potlucks and parties. We respond readily to calls for food at pantries that serve the poor, and many congregations serve dinners at shelters or in their own dining rooms to neighbors in need. We give generously to international organizations such as Episcopal Relief & Development when famine threatens whole populations.

But is that enough? We may be responding to only one aspect of the hunger that grips our sisters and brothers and ignoring our own hunger in the process. If we look closely at *Christ of the Breadlines*, we see more than hunger for food. Each person in the line is turned inward, alone and vulnerable. What we see goes beyond hunger for food. We see hunger for connection, hunger for relationship. Isn't that a hunger we all share, regardless of our economic circumstances?

When we recognize Christ's presence as we gather around tables with the poor, feeding programs transform into eucharistic celebrations, as hearts are filled along with stomachs. When we join in the meal we soon discover that we, too, are the hungry in need of food. We, too, are the lonely, afraid, and in need of friendship. We discover Christ in the other and Christ in ourselves.

—LEE ANNE REAT



## FEBRUARY 12

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They call it *la bestia*, which is Spanish for “the beast,” and it runs from southern Mexico all the way to the US border. On a cargo train there is neither coach nor business class, but if you’re foolish enough, or desperate enough, you might climb atop *la bestia* and, along with thousands of fellow freight hoppers, attempt the longest leg of your perilous journey to the US.

How dangerous that journey is! Men are often robbed or extorted. Women are sometimes raped or kidnapped. Along some sections of the trip, gangs may force you to pay \$100 for the privilege of riding; if you refuse or cannot pay, you’re thrown off the train.

Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans ride *la bestia* to flee poverty and hunger. Ironically, the ride itself makes them poor and hungry.

Have you seen the YouTube clip? When *la bestia* approaches the town of Guadalupe in Veracruz, the migrant workers encounter a miracle: a small group of women, known as *las patronas*, standing by the railroad track with bags of food. If you’re strong enough, you hold on for dear life with one hand and stretch the other out, as far as humanly possible, toward one of the *patronas*. And if you’re lucky, you’ll be able to catch a bag of rice or beans, a loaf of bread, or a bottle of water.

As the train passes at thirty miles an hour, the *patronas* do not ask questions. They simply give away the food.

“Adiós, abuelita,” call some of the riders as they catch the only decent meal they’ll have on that train. “Adiós, my child,” replies seventy-five-year-old Leonila Vázquez. “God bless you.”

—HUGO OLAIZ

## FEBRUARY 13

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Pipes frozen again, windchill below zero, my Lenten journey begins in the bitter cold of winter. Spaghetti night is postponed until the pipes thaw out again, so soup it shall be...tomato soup that reminds me of the bounty of late summer.

Shelves in our garage hold a rainbow of mason jars full of bright yellow, orange, red, and purple tomatoes from the summer harvest. I pick diced yellow heirlooms and plump whole Romas. With some aromatics—sautéed garlic and caramelized onions—this meal will be simple, yet nourishing.

The wind squeals as it tears past my kitchen window. In the pale yellow light of the street lamp, I see neighbor boys pulling their jackets close to their bodies, hurrying home, pushed faster by the blowing snow. A solitary figure trudges the opposite way, headlong into the snow. His body (thankfully) appears well-layered against the storm. He pushes an unwieldy shopping cart over the icy ground, back wheels whipping side to side. Amidst the cans and bottles in the cart are some trash bags. A blanket is tucked in the childseat. I watch him walk past the house until he's out of view. I wonder where he's headed. The Family Dollar Store is just down the street, several day centers for the homeless within a few blocks. I return to stirring the pot on the stovetop, add the tomatoes, broth, and some spices to the pot. I say a prayer. I feel a sadness creeping and settling in my stomach, along with embarrassment at how I had felt just moments before: complaining of frozen pipes and cranky about

streams of cold air breaking through cracks under our front door. All the while I am at my warm stove, stirring a colorful, bubbling pot. The lonely figure outside my window, pushing his argumentative cart, leaves me standing convicted.

This Lent begins with a recognition of my privilege and my blessings. I often give up something during Lent, deny myself something from my abundance. Perhaps this Lent I will not give up but instead give away. I can give away my time, giving of my energies to assist a neighbor, an agency, or a ministry. I can give away from my abundance, offering ingredients and time to provide soup at a community meal, or offering the warmth of a winter coat from my closet.

Perhaps, by giving away instead of giving up, I will discover a greater abundance, the paradox of our faith.

—ALLISON DUVALL

## FEBRUARY 14

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A feast without a fast is gluttony. So each year the church community sets aside a season of fasting for all people to remember what it means to know hunger and to long for a feast. Hunger is one of the gifts of Lent. Hunger can carve compassion onto hearts, close up the space between myths and facts in social justice, and clear foggy, sated minds.

To be hungry in a Lenten sense is to remember that the pronouncement by Jesus that the poor will always be with us is a blessing, not a curse. It's a blessing to remember our poverty and hunger and to remember how we have been fed. A church without beggars is a museum. So it is that as beggars we bless the church with our presence. All people who attend church services are beggars, holding out hands for a bit of bread as we are reminded of our hunger. Thank God we know our hunger and where to turn for food. Fasting is a reminder that hunger is not just a theology though; it is a real physical pain and a longing to be fed.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline carved out of abundance. When someone decides to fast, it is a preparation of their body, mind, and spirit for renewal, penitence, or healing. It is the connection between the haves and have-nots, even though fasting itself is just a small taste of hunger.

Matthew 25 teaches that Christ is in the hunger, and Christ is in the morsel of bread offered at altars. May this season allow you to know both the gift of hunger and the gift of being fed.

*God forgive us our gluttony and unsated appetites. Forgive us our need to fill ourselves with things that never stop the hunger. Thank you for the gift of fasting. Teach us to tune our ears to hear the cry of those around us who are hungry, thirsty, naked, suffering, and dying, so that in serving one another in need, we find ourselves beside you. Amen.*

—**BECCA STEVENS**

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Bo Cox** spends his time working at a state-run psychiatric hospital where he helps lead recreational activities and is a therapy dog handler. When he's not there, he's in the woods with his wife, Debb, and their furry children. Sometimes he finds time to write; he's written for Forward Movement for almost a quarter century; the first half of that from inside prison and the second half from outside. He prefers outside.

*pages 22, 38, 46, 74, 86, 94, 100*

**ALLISON DUVALL** is a young adult hailing from the Diocese of Lexington. She has served as a parish musician at St. John's Episcopal Church in Versailles, Kentucky, and as the executive director of Reading Camp, a literacy ministry of the Diocese of Lexington for elementary-school students who are behind grade level in reading and other academic skills. In 2013, she joined the staff of Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM), the refugee resettlement service of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, as the manager for church relations and engagement. In this role, she supports the community outreach staff of thirty EMM local affiliate offices across the United States, and educates and equips dioceses, congregations, and individual Episcopalians to find their own place in the welcoming ministry of refugee resettlement. She served as a deputy to General Convention in



2009 and 2012 and currently serves as an at-large board member for Episcopal Appalachian Ministries.

*pages 16, 25, 36, 44, 54, 64, 82, 88*

**MIKE KINMAN** is the dean of Christ Church Cathedral, a vibrant Christian community and sacred public space in St. Louis—a place where all downtown comes together for celebration, conversation, and to work for the common good. His passion for the gospel is as a force for reconciliation, and in St. Louis that means the cathedral being in the middle of the deep divides of race and class. He serves as founding board president for Magdalene St. Louis, an organization modeled after the successful Magdalene program in Nashville that offers housing, supportive community, and a new life for women who have survived prostitution, abuse, addiction, and sex trafficking. Michael lives with his wife, Robin, and sons Schroedter and Hayden in St. Louis City.

*pages 10, 50, 56, 60, 76, 96, 104*

**HUGO OLAIZ** works for Forward Movement as the associate editor for Latino/Hispanic resources. Hugo was born in Argentina, where he spent half of his life. Always curious about foreign languages and cultures, he studied classics, linguistics, and translation in college. He serves as a greeter at Church of Our Savior, a bilingual parish (English and Spanish) in Mount Auburn, a historic neighborhood of Cincinnati. He lives in

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*pages 14, 24, 34, 48, 68, 90, 106*

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*pages 12, 20, 32, 58, 72, 84, 102*

**BECCA STEVENS** is a premier preacher and speaker in the United States, proclaiming love as the most powerful force for social change. She is an Episcopal priest and founder of Magdalene, residential communities of women who have survived prostitution, trafficking, and addiction. In 2001, Becca founded Thistle Farms, which currently employs sixty residents and program graduates, and houses a natural body care line, a paper and sewing studio, and the Thistle Stop Café. Her most recent book is *The Way of Tea and Justice: Rescuing the World's Favorite Beverage from its Violent History*.

*pages 18, 28, 52, 66, 80, 98*

**RICHELLE THOMPSON** serves as deputy director and managing editor at Forward Movement. Her passion for hearing and telling stories and writing in a way that moves people has guided her vocation, first as a newspaper reporter, then as director of communications for the Diocese of Southern Ohio, and continuing with her ministry at Forward Movement. She and her husband, an Episcopal priest, have two children, a horse, a dog, and two rabbits. They all live in God's country in Northern Kentucky.

*pages 30, 40, 70, 91, 108*

## ABOUT FORWARD MOVEMENT

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Forward Movement is committed to inspiring disciples and empowering evangelists. While we produce great resources like this book, Forward Movement is not a publishing company. We are a ministry.

Our mission is to support you in your spiritual journey, to help you grow as a follower of Jesus Christ. Publishing books, daily reflections, studies for small groups, and online resources is an important way that we live out this ministry. More than a half million people read our daily devotions through *Forward Day by Day*, which is also available in Spanish (*Adelante Día a Día*) and Braille, online, as a podcast, and as an app for your smartphones or tablets. It is mailed to more than fifty countries, and we donate nearly 30,000 copies each quarter to prisons, hospitals, and nursing homes. We actively seek partners across the Church and look for ways to provide resources that inspire and challenge.

A ministry of The Episcopal Church for eighty years, Forward Movement is a nonprofit organization funded by sales of resources and gifts from generous donors. To learn more about Forward Movement and our resources, please visit us at [www.forwardmovement.org](http://www.forwardmovement.org) (or [www.adelanteenelcamino.org](http://www.adelanteenelcamino.org)).

We are delighted to be doing this work and invite your prayers and support.

**"If you want to feel the presence of Jesus, go to prison. People don't bring Jesus to prison. He is already there with the prisoners. You can see Jesus in the fear, longing, sickness, injustice, and gratitude of the people you meet inside. I have known many women who knew the backside of anger, the underside of bridges, and the short side of justice long before they knew the inside of prison walls."**

**—Becca Stevens, Episcopal priest and founder of Magdalene, residential communities of women who have survived prostitution, trafficking, and addiction**

Where do you meet Jesus? In the the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus urges us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoners. And in doing so, we meet Jesus. These daily reflections from well-known faith leaders offer boots-on-the-ground stories of serving and being served by "the least of these." The meditations also explore our own hunger, our vulnerabilities, and the times we are imprisoned, either self-imposed or by circumstance. Come and meet Jesus each day this blessed Lenten season.

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