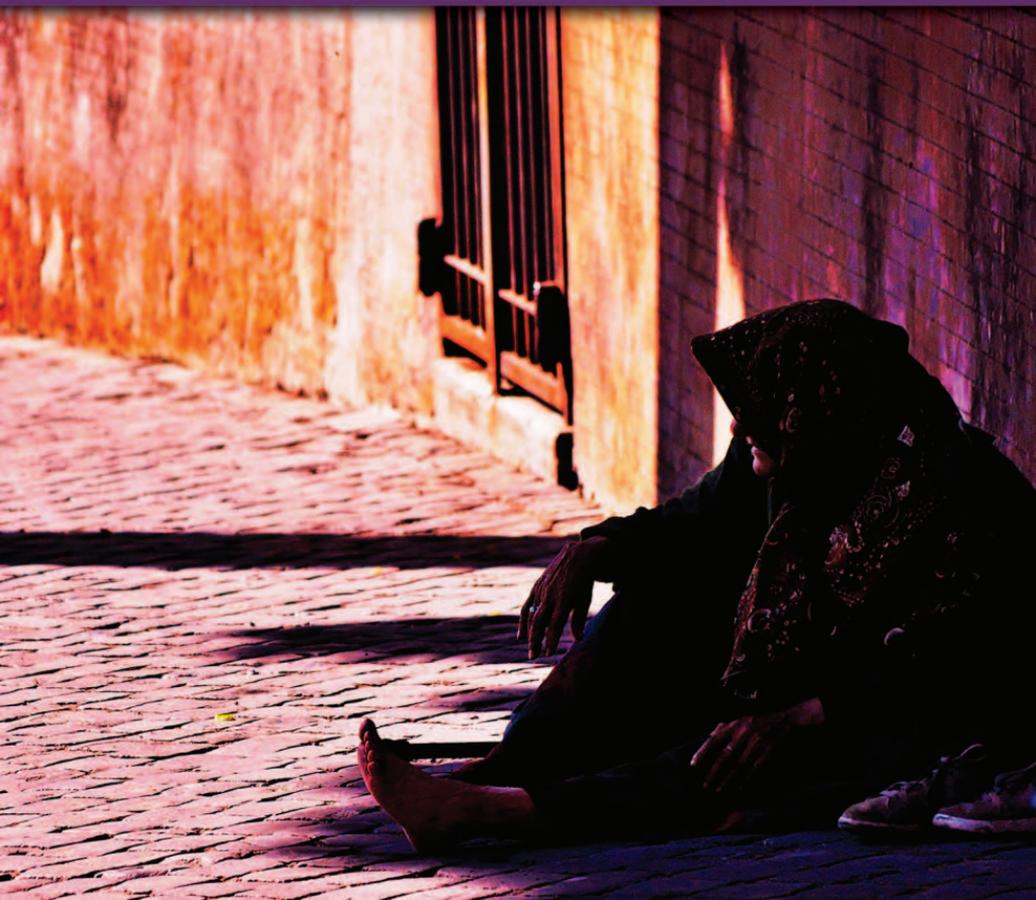


A 40 DAY BIBLE CHALLENGE

The SOCIAL JUSTICE BIBLE CHALLENGE

EDITED BY MAREK P. ZABRISKIE



The Social Justice Bible Challenge

A 40 Day Bible Challenge

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Edited by Marek P. Zabriskie

FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio

*To my parents, Charles and Gail Zabriskie, who taught me
the importance of caring for others, especially those in need*

Preface

The Bible Challenge began as a simple idea: to encourage daily reading of scripture. Simple ideas can bring forth great change.

Developing a daily spiritual discipline or practice is crucial for all Christians who wish to be faithful followers of Jesus. Saint Augustine and many other great Christians have written about the power of reading the Bible quietly on our own. There is no other book in the world that can so transform the human heart, motivate the human spirit, and give us the mind that was in Christ Jesus himself.

The Bible remains the world's best-selling book year after year. However, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, and other mainline Christians often do not read it. Church historian and author Diana Butler Bass reports that among the 22,000 Christian groups and denominations in the United States, Episcopalians are the best-educated group but drop to nearly last when it comes to biblical literacy.

The goal of The Bible Challenge is to help individuals develop a lifelong, daily spiritual discipline of reading the Bible so that their lives may be constantly transformed and renewed. Studies reveal that prayerfully engaging scripture is the best way for Christians to grow in their faith and love of Jesus.

More than 500,000 persons in 2,500 churches in over fifty countries are now participating in The Bible Challenge. We also offer The Bible Challenge Gospel Series: reading each book (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) over a 50-day period. *The Social Justice Bible Challenge* builds upon this hunger to engage in scripture and connects our desire to help with God's mandate to love and serve others. These Bible Challenge books are an ideal resource for individuals, churches, and dioceses during Lent, Easter, or any time of the year.

Regular engagement with the Bible develops a strong Christian faith, enhances our experience of worship, and helps to create a more committed, articulate, and contagious Christian. This is exactly what the world needs today.

With prayers and blessings for your faithful Bible reading,

The Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie
Founder of The Bible Challenge
Director of the Center for Biblical Studies
www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org
Rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church
Fort Washington, Pennsylvania

How to Read the Bible Prayerfully

Welcome to The Social Justice Bible Challenge. We are delighted that you are interested in reading God's life-transforming Word. It will change and enrich your life. Here are some suggestions to consider as you get started:

- You can begin The Social Justice Bible Challenge at any time of year.
- Each day has a manageable amount of reading, a meditation, a few questions, and a prayer, written by a host of wonderful authors.
- We suggest that you try to read the Bible each day. This is a great spiritual discipline to establish.
- If you need more than forty days to read through *The Social Justice Bible Challenge*, we support you in moving at the pace that works best for you. And if you want to keep going when you're done, a list of additional scripture citations is included in the book of the back. Keep reading!
- Many Bible Challenge participants read the Bible using their iPad, iPhone, Kindle, or Nook, or listen to the Bible on CDs or on a mobile device using Audio.com, faithcomesthroughhearing.org, or Pandora radio. Find what works for you.
- Other resources for learning more about the Bible and engaging scripture can be found on our website, ForwardMovement.org. In addition, you can find a list of resources at thecenterforbiblicalresources.org. The center also offers a Read the Bible in a Year program and reading plans for the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs.

- Because the Bible is not a newspaper, it is best to read it with a reverent spirit. We advocate a devotional approach to reading the Bible, rather than reading it as a purely intellectual or academic exercise.
- Before reading the Bible, take a moment of silence to put yourself in the presence of God. We then invite you to read this prayer written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

- Consider using the ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina*. In this form of Bible reading, you read the text and then meditate on a portion of it—be it a verse or two or even a single word. Mull over the words and their meaning. Then offer a prayer to God based on what you have read, how it has made you feel, or what it has caused you to ponder. Listen in silence for God to respond to your prayer.
- We encourage you to read in the morning, if possible, so that your prayerful reading may spiritually enliven the rest of your day. If you cannot read in the morning, read when you can later in the day. Try to carve out a regular time for your daily reading.
- One way to hold yourself accountable to reading God’s Word is to form a group within your church or community—particularly any outreach and ministry groups. By participating in The Social Justice Bible

Challenge together, you can support one another in your reading, discuss the Bible passages, ask questions, and share how God's Word is transforming your life.

- Ask to have a notice printed in your church newsletter that you are starting a group to participate in The Social Justice Bible Challenge. Invite others to join you and to gather regularly to discuss the readings, ask questions, and share how they are transforming your life. Visit the Center for Biblical Resources website to see more suggestions about how churches can participate in The Bible Challenge.
- Have fun and find spiritual peace and the joy that God desires for you in your daily reading. The goal of the Center for Biblical Studies is to help you discover God's wisdom and to create a lifelong spiritual practice of daily Bible reading so that God may guide you through each day of your life.
- Once you've finished one complete reading of the Bible, start over and do it again. God may speak differently to you in each reading. Follow the example of U.S. President John Adams, who read through the Bible each year during his adult life. We highly advocate this practice.
- After participating in The Social Justice Bible Challenge, you will be more equipped to support and mentor others in reading the Bible—and to connect your ministry of advocacy and assistance with Holy Scripture.

We are thrilled that you are participating in The Bible Challenge. May God richly bless you as you prayerfully engage the scriptures each day. To learn more about The Bible Challenge, visit us at: www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org to see all of our resources.

The Social Justice Bible Challenge

A 40 Day Bible Challenge

Introduction

A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization.

—SAMUEL JOHNSON

*The degree of civilization in a society
can be judged by entering its prisons.*

—FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.

—MAHATMA GANDHI

The test of morality of a society is what it does for its children.

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

*...for the test of a civilization is the way that it cares
for its helpless members.*

—PEARL S. BUCK

What kind of Christian are you? Do you, like many conservative evangelicals, focus on personal salvation? Or does social justice and outreach guide you as it does many members of liberal mainline churches?

Of course, the question itself sets up a false dichotomy. Neither practice should be pursued to the exclusion of the other. To be faithful followers of Christ is to dive deeply into scripture and prayer, seeking and receiving personal salvation. And to be faithful followers of Christ requires us to love our neighbor and to strike down injustices.

To weigh one more heavily than the other throws the gospel out of balance. That conservative evangelical churches and liberal mainline churches have struggled to find a balance between personal salvation and community redemption/restoration seems obvious.

This volume is an attempt to bridge the gap between the Bible and social justice. It highlights some of the Bible's most emphatic and powerful verses that command us to exercise compassion, treat everyone equally, and care for widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor. For those who are invested in the work of social justice, this book connects their compassion to God's Word. And for those who are deeply engaged in scripture, it commands action.

Broadly speaking, many denominations fail in this regard. For instance, my denomination, the Episcopal Church, excels at helping others in need, combatting poverty, and speaking out on issues of social justice. We tend to be more comfortable with outreach and mission than the interior work of studying the Bible and evangelizing. Perhaps your congregation or denomination is just the opposite: deeply rooted in scripture and comfortable with sharing a personal story of salvation but not connecting that to work in the world beyond the church doors.

Both groups face a similar problem: the critical combination of both knowing God's word and putting it into action.

The Bible has inspired Christians to found hospices, which have become hospitals that have healed the sick and hurting the world over. Christians have founded schools that have evolved into great universities. For centuries, monasteries functioned as academies of learning, homeless shelters, food distribution centers, and hospitals for entire communities. Today, individuals and denominations are on the front lines, advocating for refugees, appealing for equality for

all people, regardless of race, age, or sexual orientation, and working tirelessly to help the poor, the homeless, the imprisoned, and the hungry.

To follow God's teaching on social justice means to stand up and demand that police in our communities and across our nation treat all citizens with the same respect and courtesy, not showing favoritism to whites over blacks, but providing equal service and protection for all. It calls us to demand that banks lend equally, giving some of our nation's poorest citizens in the most challenged neighborhoods the ability to borrow money and create and grow businesses.

Bono, the frontman of the Irish rock group U2 and outspoken philanthropist, addressed this issue at the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. "It's no coincidence," he said, "that in the scriptures, poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times. It's not an accident. That's a lot of airtime, 2,100 mentions. You know, the only time Christ is judgmental is on the subject of the poor. 'As you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me' (Matthew 25:40)."

Bono is right; 2,100 mentions is a lot of airtime for poverty, especially when you realize that sin is only mentioned 1,610 times, and terms related to sex and sexuality are mentioned a mere 26 times. Yet, over the past few decades Christians have had passionate fights and divisive debates over a handful of texts about human sexuality. Meanwhile, little has been said about the 2,100 passages that demand our care for the poor and marginalized.

If we were to cut out all of the passages of scripture that speak about human sexuality, the Bible would remain almost completely intact. If, however, we were to remove all of the passages where God calls for justice and demands care for the poor, the resulting Bible would

be substantively gutted, with sizeable gaps found on most pages. God cares passionately about poverty and justice—the evidence is on virtually every single page in the Bible.

In his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*, author Rick Warren asks of evangelicals, “How can we have missed it?” Indeed, Christian evangelicals in the United States have been latecomers to recognizing the Bible’s overwhelming message of compassion toward the poor and marginalized and the resounding call for Christians to address these groups. For decades, evangelicals have focused on “saving souls” and preaching about individual salvation. Today, more and more evangelical churches are discovering God’s vital call to serve the neediest among us. Verna Dozier, a wonderful educator, theologian, and lay Episcopal leader in Washington, D.C., spoke about this disconnect in her book *The Dream of God*: “I believe the Christian church has distorted the call, narrowed it from a call to transform the world to a call to save the souls of individuals who hear and heed a specific message, narrowed it from a present possibility to a future fulfillment.”

For Episcopalians, the call to combat poverty and address social injustices is embodied in the vows we take as our Baptismal Covenant:

Q: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

A: *I will, with God’s help.*

Q: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

A: *I will, with God’s help. (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 305)*

Despite the fact that we also commit to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,” we often prefer to preach

through our actions rather than through our words. As a result, many of our members are passionate about outreach, mission trips, helping those in need, reducing poverty, and addressing social injustices, yet these same members often struggle to know where in the Bible God urges us to carry out this work. Micah 6:8 presents us with a very clear charge:

[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

This is one of the most succinct and vital passages in the Bible. It summarizes what God would have us do. It is a verse worthy of committing to memory, writing down, and setting daily before our eyes. The Hebrew word for justice is *mishpat*, a word that puts an emphasis on action. The word for kindness used here is taken from the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which conveys God's unconditional and steadfast love, grace, and compassion. Chesedh supplies the motive or attitude that we carry within us, while mishpat is the resulting action of a heart ready to serve God by caring for those around us with justice, especially caring for the most vulnerable. Additionally, the Hebrew word that translates most closely to humble or righteous is *tzadeqah*, which means to lead a life with right relationships, not only with God but with everyone in our lives.

At the heart of social justice in the Bible is the notion of righteousness or living in a right relationship with God and with others. The biblical concept of *tzadeqah* calls us to examine each relationship and all of our conduct, ensuring that we act at all times with fairness and equity in our daily transactions. If *tzadeqah* were a reality, there would be no need to speak about social injustice or to combat poverty, because neither would exist. This book would be unnecessary. But since the

time when the first scriptures were written, the poor have suffered and injustice has thrived. Still there are beacons of hope, examples of people living into the gospel call, modeling the type of care and love of the other that we might adopt in our own lives.

Throughout the Old Testament, there is a constant emphasis on caring for widows, orphans, strangers, foreigners, refugees, immigrants, and the poor. In Zechariah 7:9-10 we read:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

In the agrarian society that shaped the scholars who compiled the Hebrew scriptures, widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor lacked power and status. They were the untouchable class of their day. Starvation, abuse, and exploitation were daily threats and familiar realities. The Bible makes it clear that we are—and will be—judged on how we treat the least among us. God cares passionately and relentlessly for those who face the greatest challenges in this life.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we read that Jesus goes up the mountain and sits down, which is what rabbis did when they offered their most profound teaching. He teaches them saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus gives a similar address, but he walks down to where the people were gathered and stands among them and says, “Blessed are you who are poor.” (Luke 6:20) In Luke, Jesus does not say “poor in spirit,” but simply “blessed are you who are *poor*.” The Greek word is *ptokos*, which means the poorest of the poor. These are the people who are unsure on a daily basis whether they can feed their family and sustain their lives. Their plight touches God’s heart, and in their lives God’s presence is found.

Wander into any mainline Christian church and attend a class on basic Christianity, and you may find lessons focusing on Christian doctrines about heaven, hell, baptism, Communion, the nature of God, sin, redemption, salvation, sexuality, ethics, and grace. But perhaps a more truthful course on the basic tenets of Christianity would teach participants (disciples of Jesus) how to minister to the poor, the sick, the elderly, and those in prison, as well as advocacy measures for those without access to institutional power, basic or higher education, voice, or hope. Both methods of formation and education are needed, but teaching about Christian practices, behaviors, compassion, and responsibilities is just as vital as the teaching of Christian doctrine. The authentic preaching of the gospel requires both belief and practice.

Indeed, Jesus began his ministry with a mandate to care for the poor. In Luke 4:17-19, we read that Jesus went to the synagogue on the sabbath as was his custom and had them unroll the scrolls until they found a passage from the book of Isaiah:

He unrolled the scroll and found the place
where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This was Jesus’ mission statement—the opening proclamation of his ministry. Of all the texts that Jesus could have read aloud to the congregation, he selected one of the most powerful passages in

the Hebrew scriptures to call our attention to the plight of those who suffer.

Jesus knew what it was like to be poor. He was born into a poor family. The gospels note that Jesus' parents offered two turtle doves as payment for Mary's rite of purification following Jesus' birth. The temple had a sliding scale for this ritual. Two turtle doves was the fee for the poor.

Jesus' mother, Mary, traveled from Nazareth to a Judean hill town in order to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Upon greeting her cousin, Mary offered a song of praise that has gone down in history:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:46b-53).

This is a revolutionary hymn sung by a teenage Jewish peasant, living in Roman-occupied Palestine, who is envisioning a world turned upside down—where the poor and downtrodden, those crushed by oppression, exploitation, and unfair conditions end up victorious—obtaining freedom and power. What must it have been like for Jesus

to be raised by a mother who spoke openly against social injustices and called for eliminating the poverty that plagued her community? No doubt, her concern for social justice shaped Jesus' outlook on life. Story after story reinforces Jesus' compassion for the poor and for victims of injustice, living in poverty. Jesus raises the son of a poor widow (Matthew 9:13). He shows great respect to a woman who is a social outcast (Luke 7:38), and he speaks with women in public, something other men would never do (John 4:27).

Jesus constantly pushes against the boundaries of his society, stretching them to allow more people to be embraced by God's compassion, grace, and forgiveness. Jesus not only challenges his disciples to care for the poor and marginalized, he commands them to open their homes to the poor, the blind, the maimed, and the outcast. In Luke's Gospel we read:

[Jesus] said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 12-14).

The early church appointed deacons to work with the poor and needy in the community. Deacons were to care for widows and orphans and to champion those who were most vulnerable in society. They helped with the daily distribution of food. While Christians were a tiny percentage of those living under the Roman occupation, they did remarkable acts of service for the poor. Many Romans admired them. Even the Christians' greatest opponents took note and said, "Look how they love one another."

Throughout the history of the church, saintly figures have offered gripping examples of care for the poor and the needy. Saint Francis of Assisi, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, gave up his wealth in order to be one with the poor and to better serve those in need. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a fire-and-brimstone preacher, who started the spiritual renewal of the Great Awakening in the Americas. Yet, in his discourse “The Duty of Charity to the Poor,” Edwards reveals a far more compassionate side: “Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more preemptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor.” Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) helped to found the discipline of Christian Socialism, believing that capitalism appealed to selfishness and was not ideally suited to establishing the kingdom of God that Jesus envisioned. He suggested that the kingdom of God was not a future goal but rather a present reality. His writings and teachings inspired others to found urban churches to serve the poor.

Few have done more to care for the poor and fight for social justice than Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Widely credited with helping to dismantle apartheid in South Africa, Tutu once said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” In this same vein, Pope Francis’ huge heart for the poor has resulted in his preaching that God’s other name is compassion. The Episcopal Church’s Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, blends a powerful faith rooted in the Bible and in prayer with a call to liberation and social justice. He has said:

Jesus didn’t start an institution, he started a movement.
The same movement as Abraham and Sarah. The same
movement as Moses and the Israelites. The same movement

Amos described, when he said, “Let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” This is a movement commissioned and commanded by God to transform this world from the nightmare we’ve too often made it, and into the dream that God has intended all along.

Following the footsteps of Jesus, alongside exceptional leaders like Pope Francis and Bishop Curry, we can blend a passion for the Bible and fervent prayer with a strong call for social justice and combating poverty. The poor are on God’s heart and should be on ours. We are called to fight poverty and injustice wherever we find it and to support the millions of people around the world living in desperation.

Marek P. Zabriskie

Genesis 2:7-17

⁷Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land

of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Reflection

The Bible teaches that we are of one substance with the soil. We are made from the dust of earth and the breath of God. This teaching echoes in our souls. The wisdom it provides is not disproven by evolutionary theory. As farmer-scientist John Jeavons has said, “Man, despite his artistic pretensions, his sophistication and many accomplishments, owes the fact of his existence to a six-inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains.” All human life depends on food—and food depends on soil, water and sun: the providence of God’s creation. No human being made it; all receive it as gift.

Rich and poor both receive life from God. But rich and poor do not have equal access to nutritious food directly from well-tended soils. Where I live, poor people have easy access to free processed food donated by large companies seeking to manage waste. Strange as it is to say, our widespread obesity epidemic can be traced to past policy decisions that prioritized economic expansion over soil stewardship. Nutritious fresh fruits and vegetables grown in a manner that stewards the soil are harder to find. But wealth shouldn’t determine health.

How can we develop an agriculture that treats the soil as gift from God? How can we create a food system that more fully reflects God’s grace and abundance, providing not only rain and sun but also fruits and vegetables to the wealthy and the poor alike? In every geographic location, Christians are hard at work seeking answers to these questions. We are rethinking how we source the food we provide to those in need through our charities. We are starting food gardens on church property and creating farm-based ministries. We are asking how we are called to steward the land in our care.

Like us, the soil was created by God for good. As we tend it, we learn our place in God's creation.

The Rev. Nurya Love Parish
Plainsong Farm and Ministry
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Questions _____

What do you know about the natural systems on which your life depends? What would you like to know?

What one small thing can you do to develop a food system that reflects the experience of Holy Communion: where all are fed in a manner which restores relationship between God and our neighbors?

Prayer _____

Holy and Eternal God, you have formed us from the dust of the earth and given us the breath of life. Give us also your wisdom, that we might know our place in your creation. Day by day enable us each to take one next, imperfect, possible step to serve you, even against adversity. This we pray in the name of Christ our Lord, through whom we have been reconciled to you and in whom we find our greatest joy. *Amen.*