

Good morning everyone. My name is Hannah, and it is an honor and privilege to be with you today as part of this holy tradition, on day 5 of the Novena of Grace. I'm relatively new to St Ignatius, but I'm immensely grateful and eager to be welcomed into this community of faith. I come to Portland as a year-long volunteer with Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest, where I have committed to living 12 months according to the four values of spirituality, community, simple living, and social/ecological justice, while serving full time at a local nonprofit.

What does this kind of weird, kind of beautiful thing of doing a year of service look like? Well, I live in intentional community with five other Jesuit volunteers. We share a house, around the corner from here actually, we have meals together most nights of the week that we shop for and prepare together on a shared food budget. We sit most nights in our kitchen drinking tea, listening to music, talking about our service and our spirituality, and what encountering people on the margins looks like in our lives. We talk about what it means to be a person of power and privilege engaging in the service that we do, and ways that we can best care for our planet. We go on walks, we visit other communities of Jesuit volunteers, and we have this beautiful ability to hone in on what's sacred, and special, and important in life. It's been this kind of process of removing a lot of distractions, a lot of noise, to refocus and reset, and encountering something other, and greater.

For me, choosing a year of service has been an intentional stepping back, and interruption, to the regular course of my life. To go deeper to what matters most to me. Similarly, in many ways, to this holy season of lent.

Today's gospel has been something I've been turning in my mind the last weeks and last days leading up to this morning. Matthew provides us with a clear message here, there's no gray area. Jesus describes the final judgement in this parable, separating sheep from goats. People that served him in life, and people who didn't, revealing to us "**whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me**".

Jesus makes a distinction not only between those who have compassion, and those who do not, but between people in a position to help, and those in need. Jesus identifies himself especially with the person in need, the disenfranchised, the people living on the margins at the mercy of the goodness of others.

I ask myself, when do I find myself in a position to help, and do I notice the needs of others and openly give of myself, or do I turn and close off to their needs? Who do I find most difficult to give to?

I think something I struggle with at times, is the *when* and the *how* of serving others. The sheep in this passage, the righteous followers of Christ, gave so freely and fully that they did not realize they were gaining heaven through their actions. They were simply present to and responsive of the needs of the community around them. It was an automatic response, an instinctive choosing of love.

I want to be in this group, I want to be someone who whole-heartedly, completely, gives. But I find myself stumbling, when the recipient of my love is someone I'm challenged by. It's one thing to sit with someone I care deeply about, to hear about their day, their struggles at work, a hardship in their family. Here, I find myself able to give, fully and automatically, when the love is easy. But it's not always instinctive. It's a harder choice to be generous and giving of myself and my time when it's someone whose relationship I am challenged by.

It's harder to choose to bear God's light and love to someone I disagree with, feel disconnected from, someone who I judge to be less worthy of my time.

I think this is an important lesson for me lately, and for this season of lent. Loving and wanting to love. How do I learn to choose Jesus when I don't feel like choosing Jesus. How do I continue to choose love, to choose kindness and mercy and generosity when it's hard, when it's someone I don't get on great with, when it's someone I struggle to see. When it's *inconvenient*.

Our faith is not meant to be *convenient*. We are called: to love our enemies, to living for and with the poor, to forgiveness and reconciliation. These are not easy, comfortable, or *convenient* tasks.

BUT this is when it matters: when we are inconvenienced by love. We give up things for lent to become more Christ like, to make space to more deeply encounter Him. I see lent as an invitation to look more attentively for His presence, and work towards His likeness, to search for the light in the darkness. Lent is an exercise in love. We are called to love, made from love and for love. It shouldn't be convenient. It's an active choice for something greater. Sometimes, like for the sheep in today's gospel, it is an automatic choice, but sometimes it's a burden.

So, what to do when it's hard? Choose it anyways.

A coworker who grinds on my nerves, a sibling or child who's pushing your buttons, a partner who hasn't been as present. CS Lewis says well "Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love him."

So, if lent is an invitation to go deeper, to be inconvenienced by love, what are the things I can do, how am I being challenged and called to grow in loving those around me? We have some beautiful actions given to us here by Jesus: feed the hungry, satiate the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned. I ask myself, who do I find most difficult to love? Who are the least of these among me? How can I begin seeing Jesus more clearly in them? What are ways I can serve the greatest needs of my community?

The righteous followers Matthew describes, the sheep, are so genuinely loving their neighbors and so ardently serving the needs of others, and they didn't know they were earning heaven by their actions. They asked "**Lord, when did we see you**". They were living their lives purely focused on God and the needs of their community, exemplifying a life driven by an authentic love. I think this is a beautiful moment for me: It's a recognition that our faith, our salvation, isn't about us! It's not just about love between God and me.

I have come to understand that we're not meant to get to heaven alone. We are not meant to get to heaven alone. We are here, where we are, to love and serve the people around us. To give and receive love.

Our faith, our church, necessitates community, loving one another is essential in gaining heaven. In today's gospel, there is a call to love and holiness emboldened with a call to mission – at the end of our lives, we will be judged definitively and fairly. And we know that we will be judged on how well we love the people around us who need love the most.

We are called to be men and women for and with others, and to answer to the greatest needs of the people around us. For me, God's love challenges and draws me to a life of justice and mercy. Service to others is how I most deeply encounter Christ.

The big, other, greater thing that I've been able to make space for in my life, since beginning this journey of service with Jesuit Volunteer Corps? An encounter with radical love. An opportunity to witness the love and light in the community around me, and when able, to be a bearer of that light by carrying with me Christ's love. It's been an opportunity for a re-ordering of my life.

I want to count myself in the group among the sheep, the group that so freely and generously gave. And I'm trying, and I think if it's not quite automatic yet, I can get there, by actively, and consistently, and repeatedly choosing love.

Let us take this season of lent, as a re-ordering, an invitation to go deeper, to engage more profoundly in loving and serving as Jesus calls us.

Almighty and ever living God,
you invite us deeper into your world, your people, your Lent.
May this time be one of outward focus;
seeking you in those we often ignore.
Help us live a Lent focused on freedom, generosity, and encounter.
Give us hearts hungry to serve you
and those who need what we have to give.

We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen