



SMLC VOICE NEWSLETTER

Spring 2025



Pastor Brian's Preponderant Business

The season of Lent is upon us. One of my Lenten disciplines this year is to read the daily email meditations of Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr. I have read a number of his books and have received his daily email meditations for years. Sometimes I am really good at reading his emails every day, and sometimes I am not so good at it. But this Lent I plan to read them all! Rohr's books and email meditations have had a significant impact on my sense of Christian spirituality. He has a way of relating deep theological insights in everyday language. And he emphasizes the importance of both inner contemplative spirituality and an outer spirituality of service and activism.

In the 1980s Rohr founded the *Center for Action and Contemplation*. He wanted to emphasize both dimensions of Christian spirituality, because he saw how many well-meaning activists, who dedicate enormous time and energy to helping those harmed by injustice, were burning themselves out in their attempts to change the world for the better. In addition to this holy calling, Rohr instructed those he worked with to be still and rest in the presence of God where they would discover a divine flame to rekindle their energy and reinforce their calling.

Similarly, Rohr notes how those focused on the inner journey will almost inevitably be pushed outward to the work of charity and justice in the world. As Christians dig deep in our relationship with God, the Spirit will inspire us to manifest the goodness and love we have connected with in real, concrete ways that benefit our neighbors in need. Thus, we see that all Christians have a calling to both the inner contemplative journey and a calling to the outward action of charity and justice.

This idea is nothing new; Jesus taught it as did the Hebrew prophets. In the church's earliest days, Christians understood that the faith journey had an inner and an outer dimension to it. One of the most important figures of the twentieth century who many have never heard of is the Rev. Howard Thurman. Thurman was an African American pastor, professor, theologian, and author. He is also considered by many to be a mystic and sometimes called the pastor of the Civil Rights Movement. He inspired modern contemplative-activists like Richard Rohr. And he inspired perhaps the most well-known clergyman of the twentieth century: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Thurman was MLK's spiritual mentor. He embodied the life of nonviolent resistance so evident in the life and teaching of MLK. His book *Jesus and the Disinherited* was an inspiration to many who sought to have their spirituality guide their social action.

This Lent we will be reading Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* on Thursday evenings, and exploring ways in which we can connect our sense of spirituality with a sense of social action and justice. Even if you are unable to join us for these discussions, I hope you will make it a Lenten discipline to read this short book. Copies are available for free in the church office. This book is a gift to humanity which has inspired generations of Christians to bring together the outer dimension of service and justice with the inner dimension of contemplative spirituality.

May you be inspired this Lent to follow the Spirit's call to both action and contemplation. And may God's peace be with you as together we dig deep, reach out, and change lives in Christ's name!

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Brian

Rev. Ryan's Reflections

We will stand together on firm ground, on the corner stone of our faith, in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, Son of God, who with the Holy Spirit is our one true Lord and Savior.

That is my mantra for the Church in this time that feels so divided and tenuous.

As the Apostle Paul writes, "the body is one and has many members" (1 Cor. 12:12). This acknowledges that we are many, and our various perceptions for how and why our time feels divided and tenuous can be different one from another. However, I do think we all feel some sense of division and tension in our lives right now regardless of our varying perceptions. Paul's words acknowledge that though we are different, we are one as the Body of Christ. We are united through our common Christian commitment to live as Christ followers and we can ground ourselves in this commitment to weather the feelings of tension and division.

I have been meditating on four themes within Christ's ministry over the last couple of months and I want to offer those themes as a reflection of the foundation in Jesus Christ upon which we stand. When members of our secular government, people or systems, try to sow divisions among us, we can resist these attempts to divide our community, while honoring our different perceptions by centering these foundational themes in our common Christian faith. We are many members of one body, the Body of Christ.

As Christians, committed to living as disciples of Jesus Christ, God made flesh, we are called to:

Worship God and God alone. Jesus comes to turn us back to God through himself (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). Jesus redeems us from our distractions and heals our relationship with God. Through the cross, Christ removes our sin and brings us into right relationship with God showing us that sin, hatred, enemies, and death are no more in God's Kingdom (Luke 6, Romans 6). In Christ, we give our full allegiance and our worship to God and to God alone. No person, place, or thing comes before us and our worship of God (Exodus 20:4; Deut. 5:8). Our centering of God in our lives then turns us to the next three themes.

Serve the poor and help lift people out of poverty. Jesus himself feeds thousands of people with only 5 loaves and 2 fish (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-38; Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-9; Luke 9:10-17). It is a miracle that Jesus does this with so little. What we may learn is that we too can give of what we have in order to serve our neighbors in need. We are called to be creative and use both religious and secular means to lift people out of cycles of poverty. Jesus said, "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6: 20b). God has particular concern for the poor and we see this through the ministry of Christ.

Reach out to the outcast. Jesus reaches out and has mercy on outcasts of society like prostitutes (John 8:2-11), taxmen (Mark 2:13-17), lepers (Matthew 8:1-3, Mark 1:40-42, Luke 5:12-13), unclean people (Matthew 8:28-34; 9:20-22; 12:22-32; Mark 3:20-30; 5:1-20; 5:25-34; Luke 4:31-36; 8:43-48) and foreigners (Matthew 8:15-13; 15:21-28; Luke 9:51-56; 10:25-37). Jesus said, “blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” The people Jesus ministers to in the Bible are those whom society had cast out. It is our own sinful human lines of division that define people as outside of God’s reach. Through Christ (God made flesh), God shows us that nobody, not even the most reviled by human standards, is ever beyond the love and grace of God.

Heal the sick. Jesus heals so many that it is nearly impossible to count. Open any gospel text to any page and you will easily find a time when Jesus heals a sick person or a crowd of sick people (examples: Matthew 8:5-13, Mark 1:29-34, Luke 5:17-26, John 5:2-9). Healing is a core expression of who God is to the world. God desires health and wellbeing for humanity and all of creation. We are called to work toward health and healing in the world.

These four themes simultaneously draw us into our faith and turn us out into the world as we serve God’s creation through our various vocations (jobs, careers, parenting, hobbies, volunteering, etc.). As Christians, committed to living as disciples of Jesus Christ, we live our lives through these Christian themes. We stand together rooted in these themes. And we stay united as many members of one body, under these themes.

These four themes may sound to some like “overt politics” weaving into the life of the church. I acknowledge that they do speak directly to our government’s policies, but they do not speak for or against any one politician. They are deeply biblical themes and if they are convicting us to change course in our policies and our politics, then let the voice of God work.

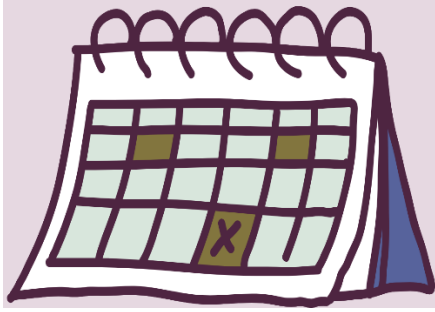
These four themes can guide us Christians because no matter we know that Jesus did these things – it's right there in the Bible. We know that Jesus is an expression of God’s will for all of creation. We are called to view the church, the economy, the government, and any other human construction through these themes.

I pray that you will meditate on these four themes in the coming weeks and months. Read the many passages of scripture in which you can find expression of these themes. Listen for how the Holy Spirit moves with you among them.

These themes are a part of the firm ground and the corner stone of our faith. They are Christ’s footsteps in which we can stand united as we acknowledge that we are many members of one body – the Body of Christ.

In great hope,
Rev. Ryan

SMLC CALENDAR



REGULAR OCCURANCES

Sanctuary Worship (9am)

- Every Sunday

Sunday School (10:20am)

- Every Sunday

Adult Forum (10:20am)

- Every Sunday

Confirmation Class (10:30am)

- Every Sunday (*except during Lent*)

Choir Rehearsal (2pm)

- Every Tuesday

Centering Prayer (2pm)

- Every Thursday

Bible Study (10am)

- 1st and 3rd Thursday

Women's Fellowship (12:30 – 2pm)

- 2nd Tuesday

Men's Breakfast (8:30am)

- 3rd Saturday

UPCOMING EVENTS

MARCH

Saturday, March 22

- 4pm: Music at Greenwood: Bach's Birthday Bash

Sunday, March 23 & 30

- Following Worship: Grief Support Group

APRIL

Sunday, April 6

- Following Worship: Grief Support Group
- Easter Lily Dedication Deadline

Saturday, April 12

- 10am: Easter Egg Hunt

Sunday, April 13

- Following Worship: Palm Sunday Breakfast

Thursday, April 17

- 7pm: Maundy Thursday Service

Friday, April 18

- 7pm: Good Friday Service

Sunday, April 20

- 9am: Easter Sunday Service
- 11am: Easter Sunday Service

MAY

Sunday, May 11

- First Communion Sunday

Saturday, May 17

- 4pm: Music at Greenwood: Elliott Davis

LOOKING BACK

Recapping the Winter at St. Matthew

Youth-FULL Winter



Taking a look back at December, we had quite a full and fun month here at St. Matthew. We kicked the month off with an intergenerational event packing over 100 boxes with gifts for people all around the world! We packed these boxes as part of Operation Christmas Child, a program of the nonprofit Samaritan's Purse which serves impoverished communities around the world.

Sunday Schoolers and Confirmation kids worked together to make Advent Wreaths using real greens from the yards of several members. We learned about the four-week season of Advent. This is a season of waiting and watching for the coming of Jesus Christ, Emanuel, our Messiah, and we use our Advent Wreaths to help us count down to Christmas Day on December 25th.

High School Youth Group members studied what it means to give thanks and to wait for the arrival of Christ. At one of our meetings, we had a gelatinized cranberry sauce carving competition. Then as we came closer to Christmas, the High School Youth put up our parish Christmas tree in the Gathering Space which was decorated with over 250 ornaments and was topped with a star (and a little Santa doll) to guide us to the side of Christ's manger on Christmas morning.

The Sunday School class prepared music and dressed up to create a living tableau of the Christmas story as our Christmas Pageant on Sunday December 22. We give thanks for the ways our kids shared the Gospel message of Jesus's birth.

The week before Christmas, the Confirmation students traveled from Farmington, to Unionville, to Avon and to Simsbury to sing Christmas carols at several St Matthew member's homes. Then the High School Youth Group threw a Youth Christmas Party at St. Matthew for all middle and high schoolers. We overloaded on pizza, sugar and had a contentious Yankee Swap game!

On Christmas Eve, Pastor Brian shared about the gift that is the baby Jesus with a crowd of children at the Family Service. The kids unwrapped box, after box, after box, to discover the gift that was within – the little boy Jesus who then completed the Christmas Manger scene for our worship services.

Then in January we gathered intergenerationally for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. intergenerational event which focused on MLK's time spent in Connecticut as a teenager. The ferocity of God's creation was on display in February with two big snow storms. We only had two Sundays of youth programming due to weather cancellations! But that didn't stop the kids from enjoying the snow (well, ice) in the back yard when we were able to come together again.

2025 CONGREGATION COUNCIL

Following January's annual meeting, our 2025 church council met together in February for the first time. The following council officers were elected:

President: Meg Kraft

Vice President: Rick Hanson

Secretary: Ellen Ericson

The rest of the 2025 church council includes:

Will Abbott	Paula Garza	Jack Pietrick
Greg Boyd	Perry Hasson	George Reider
Erica Connors	Gary Kurtich	Ben Wright

Gather CT – A New Young Adult Ministry in CT



Rev. Ryan has partnered with two other local pastors to kick-off a brand new Young Adult ministry in Connecticut called Gather CT. This group is connected with the ELCA's national network of young adult Lutherans. The purpose is to connect young adults across congregations in local areas to build networks of mutual support and friendship.

Gather CT had its first gathering on February 22 at Hops on the Hill Brewery in Glastonbury. There were 22 young Lutherans who showed up to this first-ever gathering! This was a strong showing of interest in this kind of connection among young adults in CT. The hope is to gather monthly. If you're recently out of college to about age 35ish, you're invited! You can learn more by reaching out to Rev Ryan at revryan@stmatthewavon.org.

Thank You!!! – From the Staff

The staff of St. Matthew would like to thank the congregation for your generous Christmas gift. We are so blessed to work with such a supportive and caring community! You give us so many reasons to be thankful all year long and your Christmas gift was especially gracious. Thank you for your generosity and thoughtfulness.

With gratitude,

Pastor Brian Rajcok
Rev. Ryan Heckman
Sarah Schiener-Redenz

Paul Maritn
Roy Zurell

MINISTRY MINUTE

An update from some of our many ministries

Adult Forum

Following our break Christmas and New Year's, Adult Forum began the new year with a forum led by Rev Ryan on the Christian tradition of Twelfth Night. The following Sunday Pastor Brian led a forum which offered an overview of the Old Testament prophets. The week after our annual meeting, Rev Ryan led an intergenerational forum about a modern day prophet, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and we learned about his ties to Simsbury, CT.

Our plan was to have a theme of Love throughout the month of February. Rev Ryan led the first week with a lesson on Biblical Romance. Unfortunately, the following two weeks' forums were canceled due to inclement weather, one of which was supposed to be an intergenerational Valentine's Day forum. On the final Sunday of the month, Anne Fenn led a forum on sacred love poetry.

Director of Music Sarah Schiener-Redenz led the first Adult Forum of March which focused on the music of Lent. The next week Pastor Brian led a forum about Rev. Howard Thurman and we watched a documentary about Thurman's life in preparation for the midweek Lenten book study which began the following Thursday. The third week of March, Pastor Brian was joined by former member Dan Smolnik who drove up from Hamden to help lead a forum on Lutheran charitable organizations and the impact of recent government decisions on their ministries.

Women's Fellowship

The St. Matthew Women's Fellowship group continues to meet on the **second Tuesday of every month from 12:30 - 2:00 pm**. Each meeting has a slightly different theme led by one of the group members. They also include snacks, coffee, and writing birthday cards for our members that have their special day in the coming month. If you have any questions, reach out to Anne Fenn at journeywriting8@gmail.com.

Men's Breakfast

The men's group has met regularly for breakfast at **8:30 am on the third Saturday of every month**. Rick Hanson has helped Pastor Brian coordinate and many men have volunteered to prepare and cook the breakfasts. The group has started to read *Awakened* by Caleb J. Lines, a progressive Christian devotional reading for the year.

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer group has continued to **meet on Zoom on Thursdays at 2:00 p.m.** This meeting includes 20 minutes time of silent contemplative prayer, followed by the practice of lectio divina with either a passage from scripture or spiritual devotional text. All are welcome to join at any time. Ask Pastor Brian any questions you may have or simply click the link in our weekly email blast to join!

Bible Study

St. Matthew's Bible Study group continues to meet faithfully **every first and third Thursday at 10:00 a.m.** in the conference room. All are welcome to attend. And if this time does not work for you but you're interested in a Bible Study please let one of the pastors know!

Healing Prayer

On the first Sunday of each month, healing prayer ministers will welcome anyone to request prayer during worship. During the distribution of Holy Communion, healing prayer ministers will be present at the back of the sanctuary to pray for you. We invite you approach one of them, share your prayer request, and join together in prayer.

St. Matthew Choir

To better meet the needs of both current choir members and new interested singers, **the St. Matthew Choir will continue rehearsing on Tuesdays from 2:00-3:00 p.m. until the end of the program year in June.** If you would like to start singing with us, please feel free to join us for a rehearsal!

LOOKING AHEAD

Previewing the next few months at SMLC

Lenten Worship Leadership

During the season of Lent, St. Matthew's Confirmation Class helps to lead mid-week and Sunday worship alongside our pastors. Our church's middle schoolers are encouraged to participate by being an usher, lector, live-streamer, assisting minister, acolyte or communion server.

These roles provide an important leadership opportunity for our middle schoolers and we are so proud of them for stepping up and leading! You are invited to extend your own gratitude to our middle schoolers for their leadership as we encourage them to deepen their faith through our worship practices at St Matthew!

As you can see, there are many ways for members and visitors of St. Matthew to get involved in our weekly worship service! If you are interested in participating in worship leadership yourself, email Pastor Brian (pastorbrian@stmatthewavon.org) or Rev Ryan (revryan@stmatthewavon.org) and they can connect you with the right person so you can give worship leadership a try!

Music at Greenwood Concert Series

The 2025 season of Music at Greenwood begins on March 22nd at 4:00 p.m. with a Bach Birthday Bash! In celebration of J.S. Bach's 340th birthday, various instruments and small ensembles will play a selection of the great composer's music. After the concert, we will continue the celebration with cake and light appetizers.

Next, on May 17th at 4:00 p.m., virtuoso violinist Elliott Davis will perform the cycle of Eugene Ysayë's 6 Sonatas for Solo Violin. You can learn more about Elliott and watch a promotional video for the music on his website at elliottdavismusic.com. We hope you will join us for these special events!

Easter Lily Dedications - \$22/each | Deadline: Sunday, April 6th

St. Matthew Altar Guild is starting to prepare the Easter lily order for this year. If you would like to purchase one in honor of a loved one, or for the glory of God, the cost will be \$22 each. Please contact the office by email, or phone: 860-673-3301. There will also be a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board in the Gathering Space.

SMLC Annual Easter Egg Hunt | Saturday, April 12th at 10am

St. Matthew Lutheran Church's Annual Easter Egg Hunt will be on Saturday April 12th at 10 AM! Elementary aged children from across the Farmington Valley are invited to participate.

This event takes place at the church - outside if the weather permits - and the whole Farmington Valley Community is invited, so bring your friends!

There will be flyers in the Gathering Space so please take some to post around your town. There will also be a sign-up sheet in the Gathering Space for anyone that can volunteer to either bring candy, help stuff the eggs for the event, or both!

We're looking forward to this fun event!

Palm Sunday Breakfast | Sunday, April 13th following worship

Mark your calendars for the annual Palm Sunday Brunch co-hosted by St Matthew's Fellowship Team and Confirmation Class! The whole congregation, your friends, and family are invited to join this time of good food and good community.

This year Palm Sunday is on April 13th and our annual brunch will immediately follow 9AM worship. You are encouraged to make a freewill offering as you come to brunch (suggested \$10 per person). Proceeds will go to St Matthew's Youth Fund.

There will be an RSVP form on the bulletin board in the Gathering Space (by the office) where you can indicate how many will join you. If you are inspired, you can also sign up to bring an egg bake or a pan of French toast! Recipes can be provided if you'd like one.

We hope you'll be a part of this festive time as we join the crowds in Jerusalem who triumphantly welcomed Jesus before we move into the rest of Holy Week.

First Communion

If you have a child in 3rd grade or higher and has not had their First Communion, save the below dates and reach out to Rev Ryan at revryan@stmatthewavon.org to let him know you are interested in having your child participate this year!

First Communion Class: Saturday May 3, 2025 9:30am-11:30am.

First Communion Sunday: Sunday May 11, 2025

Lenten Midweek Book Study | Thursday Evenings following worship

Throughout the 2025 Lenten season, Pastor Brian and Rev Ryan will lead a study of Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a short treatise on Jesus's ministry to the poor and oppressed. The book cover describes the book like this: "Thurman lifts Jesus up as a partner in the pain of the oppressed, and the gospel as a manual of resistance for the poor and disenfranchised. In this view, the example of [Jesus's] life shows us that hatred does not empower—it decays. Only by recognizing fear, deception, contempt, and love of one another can God's justice prevail."

We will meet Thursday evenings after our 6:00pm Lenten midweek prayer service with the songs of Taizé, continuing on 3/20, 3/27, 4/3, and 4/10.

Grief Support Group | Sundays, following worship for the next three weeks

Grief Support Group began meeting on Sunday, March 16 at 10:15am following the Service. If you have experienced loss and want to receive support or help others by sharing your experience, please join us. **We will meet in the Conference Room for the next three weeks: March 23, 30 and April 6.** This is support, not counseling. If you have any questions, please call or text Ellen Ericson at 860-305-4996, or eegregory3@sbcglobal.net.