I’m going to start with telling a story of me growing up, hopefully you all can follow where I’m going. When I was young I used to watch a tv show called Family Ties. Michael J. Fox played a teenage republican that had a dream of being rich. He was my hero. My dream was to be rich and to have a big house. That’s all I wanted.

Fast forward several years, when I first went to college, I was planning on becoming a financial advisor - dream still in tact. One problem, however, stood in my way - I couldn’t wake up for my 8am Business Calc class, so I dropped it. I was pretty lazy in college.

I had a psychology class that I enjoyed so I thought “I’ll be a therapist” However, with a degree in psychology, I had to take 4 semesters of a foreign language. Not a strength of mine - and remember, I was lazy. An ill-advised guidance counselor told me to take Greek - stating that I would just have to learn the culture and not the language. Right. The first day I had to learn a new alphabet and 5 words. Even with a tutor that didn’t work out well.

After a couple more changes in majors, I ended up going into Social Work - I could do therapy and not take a foreign language. I remember talking to different people when I finally thought I had chosen my degree. I was excited - I finally knew what I wanted to do when I grew up. Others, however, didn’t share my enthusiasm. Several warned that I wouldn’t make much money. Dream blown.

After graduation, I moved out here and met some interesting people which caused me to have what I called a 1/4 life crisis, I was about 24. I felt I hadn’t accomplished enough and kept wondering what I wanted to do for a career.
Now, I feel like I’m having - maybe a one-third life crisis? The same questions that I had when I was 24 are coming back.

Currently, with my full time job I work with adults who have severe and persistent mental illnesses, several have co-occurring substance use disorders and most also have chronic health conditions. We have started a new program that also focuses on physical health. There was a study that found that just the mere fact of having a severe and persistent mental illness such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder or major depression, decreases life expectancy by an average of 25 years. 25 years. The few contributing factors are that many people with SPMIs are also living in poverty, have small support groups which usually also of people living in poverty and aren’t able to meet their basic needs in order to take care of their health. How do you eat properly if you don’t have a kitchen to cook food? Or enough money to buy healthy foods? Or the education to know what foods to eat.

This new program has started, we are still transitioning and I love change and I love starting programs - so I should be excited about this new program and about my job. But, I keep questioning if this is what I want to do. So I have been looking for another job. But, when I look for other jobs, I keep looking for a job with increased power and more money. I continuously look over jobs if I think that I won’t make more than I make now.

In order to get more experience, I recently joined a practice to start doing independent therapy part time. A few of my coworkers also work there, so I was comfortable going in. I would finally do “therapy” what I thought I wanted to do when going to school. When I was told what I should charge by the owner of the practice for a 45-50 minute session, I was amazed. My dream was maybe still in tact. Immediately I had a million thoughts in my head, the predominate thought process was me trying to quickly do the math of how few hours I would have to work if I could build up the clientele to make the same, or more money than I am now. Then the other side came - the crash. Is this moral? Is this what I’m supposed to do? Is this what I’m here for?

These thoughts are still constantly in my mind, going back and forth - but I could take time to water my plants, build a garden in the spring and work out every day if I didn’t have to work so many hours. But, on the other hand - do I really want to
only work with people who can afford to pay that much? Is this what I’m supposed to do with my life?

With all these thoughts in my head, I was driving to work one morning. It was cold outside, but I was nice and warm in my car. Drinking coffee. Bumper to bumper traffic on the bridge. A plane flying over to land at DCA. In that moment, instead of thinking of the horrible traffic, I started to think - the infrastructure that it takes to make these roads all intertwine and work together is amazing. This is a privilege, not everybody has this. We have trains, planes, and automobiles to get us hundreds, even thousands of miles in just a few hours. These are all privileges. Possibly an odd thought for 8 in the morning.

The thought kept going, however. I started thinking about the clients my organization works with. Most of them have never had the privilege of the ability to work. Disorganized thoughts, auditory and visual hallucinations and several significant traumas leave them without the ability to work as you and I work. Since they can’t work, or work full time, at least, several are on SSI, which is currently $733 a month. $733 to pay their rent - which if they are lucky enough to have a subsidy for housing is usually 30% of their income, leaving them with $513. Take out money for gas and electric, transportation, and food, since food stamps don’t usually cover a full month’s supply, that doesn’t leave much left.

That led me to think about other countries, developing countries. People living without electricity, without heat in their home. Obviously no heat happens here - living off of the $513 left after rent doesn’t leave a lot of room for a high gas bill in the winter. How about people living in houses with no air conditioner, in hot and humid climates?

Some people have to eat only what they can grow, or what is grown within a walkable distance from their house. I currently have 3 grocery stores within 6 blocks of my house, all of which I can get foods from almost every country at any time of the year. I can get almost any food all year round. And, I can afford to buy it. These are privileges.

The scripture today was about Jesus, after 40 days of not eating, the Devil tempts him with bread. And then with land and power. He tempted Jesus with privileges. But Jesus turns them down.
Could you turn down bread after 40 days? I’m not sure I could turn down bread after 1 day of not eating.

Jesus turned down power. The ultimate privilege.

Let’s think about some of the privileges we may have:

Easily accessible food
An Intricate transportation systems to get us anywhere quickly
An abundance of electricity
Houses to keep us safe during storms, cool during summer and warm during the winter
A huge support network - look at everyone here
Access to health care
Access to education
The ability to work
The ability to give time to help others

With thinking about my life of privilege - white privilege, growing up upper middle class and about the privileges we don’t always realize we have. I’ve really never had to want for anything, I’ve always had more than my basic needs met. I started wondering what it would be like “without.” I started thinking, maybe I should challenge myself. See what it’s like to live without, even if only for a month. Live off of $733, taking $220 out for “rent” so really living off of $513 for a whole month. No eating out, no happy hours. Or a challenge of living without a car. I live a mile away from the metro, so it’s doable, but would take a lot more time to get everywhere. I would need to depend on someone to bring me here, or get my bike fixed so that I could ride it from the metro. How about living a month of only eating food grown within 100 miles of my house? No coffee for a month?! That’s a scary thought.

Over the past few months I have been thinking almost non-stop about these challenges. Hyping myself up to start one. At the same time acknowledging that it’s not 100% like someone who always lives without - if I don’t drive my car, I do have a support system that could help me get around. If I go without this month, I can have it next month. But, it’s a good idea. I even thought about making a blog
about it. Talk about how hard it is, the physiological and psychological effects. My problem, however, is that I fear that I won't succeed. My life of privilege will make it too hard to live 1 month without as other people live their whole lives without.

This is the first Sunday of Lent. A time when several people try to give something up until Easter. I challenge you to think about your privileges. The privileges that maybe you don't think about every day. Try to live without one. Share it with the church, I gave some examples, but what else am I not thinking about? And don’t stop with Lent. Challenge yourself throughout the year. We may not succeed, we may not go as long as we were hoping, but at least we can try to understand. Understanding might help us realize what we do have. Be content with what we do have, instead of looking for greener pastures. It may teach us empathy for those without. I’m hoping with challenging myself I will ultimately be happier with what I have, especially work-wise and realize that it’s not always about the money or the power, but what work is being done. About what I’m doing with my privileges to help others without the same. To realize, that my house is fantastic, warm and perfect for me. That no matter my title at work, as long as the work that is being done is helping others and it’s a positive work environment, then it’s a good thing. I can look for other jobs, but maybe not focus just on the salary. Hopefully I will realize that the dream of being rich and having a big house has actually already come true. My house accommodates my family with room to spare for guests. And being “rich” maybe isn’t about money, but about privilege, and that, we all have plenty of. Now, what can we do with them?