

PATHWAYS

DISCIPLESHIP FOR
SMALL GROUPS

Prayer

Bible Study

Service

STUDY GUIDE

PATHWAYS

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DISCIPLESHIP FOR SMALL GROUPS

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. -Colossians 2:6-7

Welcome to Pathways, a small group guide for growing as disciples of Jesus Christ. Pathways is designed to help individuals in the context of small groups become more dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship is about deepening your relationship with Jesus through spiritual disciplines. While worship is of course one of the primary elements of discipleship, it is far more involved than one hour once a week. Discipleship is a way of being and relating not only to the divine, but to one another. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is about being changed by God's love into the person God has called you to be. It involves immersing ourselves in God's Word, communicating with God through prayer, and serving our fellow human beings. Loving our neighbor is highlighted by both the Torah and Jesus as the primary way in which we also love God. Additionally, loving the stranger is mentioned over thirty-five times in scripture. In order to know how we are to love, though, we need to become intimately familiar with the will of God through both scripture and prayer. Our service to God then flows out of these disciplines. We consider these to be the basic disciplines of faith.

This study guide is meant to be used in conjunction with the Pathways For Small Groups video series on Prayer, Bible Study, and Service. These we feel are the primary elements for any worshipping community to continue to grow their faith throughout the week.

Setting Up Your Small Group

Groups should have at least four, but no more than twelve members. Ideally strive for eight to ten members. In our congregation, we simply assigned people to their groups, but others, depending on their culture and congregation dynamics, may choose other ways in which to form their groups.

Group Leaders: While it's helpful to assign a leader, leadership can also rotate from one member to another each time the group meets. If no one in your group wants the responsibility of leading all the time, the rotating method might work well. The primary responsibility of leaders is to simply organize the meeting time/place and facilitate the discussion. The video element takes care of the teaching for you so no one is expected to "teach" in this setting.

Determine where and when you will meet: Given many of the lessons require quiet, contemplative time, we do not recommend using a public setting such as a restaurant or coffee shop. (Now keep in mind, we recognize that some congregations have seasonal members. Don't rule out the idea of meeting virtually via zoom or through some other video conference software). Once you get past the introductory portion, you may choose to change that depending on the focus of your group, but initially finding somewhere quiet where you can easily talk, pray, and concentrate will be important. We recommend an hour and a half, but realize groups may need to make theirs longer or shorter depending on how they set their groups up. Perhaps your group would like to meet for dinner prior to or after the lesson. Maybe rotate from one home to another each time you meet. Will it be weekly or monthly? Perhaps you are activity focused and your group all likes to go kayaking before or after your meet. These are all things you can determine as a group.

Finding Your Purpose: At the end of the sixteen sessions our hope is that your group can find a common interest or passion within your group to focus on: Prayer group, study group, service group, fellowship group, etc. While the introductory lessons will be the same for all group types, as you become more focused on what you hope to accomplish with your group, you can tailor the types of lessons or activities you want to “specialize” in.

Now it’s quite possible that through this process, your group may decide that you’re not all united in a vision and will want to break off and form a separate group. That’s absolutely fine. The primary point is to find out where you connect with the congregation as a whole. At the end, you will meet with your pastor and may discover you fit better with another small group that shares your passions that may have been previously unknown.

Be committed. Part of becoming a disciple of Jesus is committing yourself to the discipline. If you haven’t quite been able to commit to a daily spiritual practice, start by at least committing to making meeting with your group at the appointed time a priority rather than an afterthought or if you have nothing better to do that day. We’ve included a covenant that may be printed out that you and the members of your group can sign as a symbol of your commitment to each other as a group to learn and grow together in faith. Now your group may not choose to meet indefinitely and will only be set up for a specific amount of time. That’s fine as well.

How to Use This Guide

Each lesson will have a similar format:

- centering moment (you may adapt as necessary for your particular small group);
- scripture reading
- reflection on the reading
- an opening prayer & if desired singing of a hymn
- a review of the previous week and discussion about the individual work (where appropriate);
- a video lesson;
- a group exercise;
- closing prayer;
- exercises to work on individually throughout the week.

You may work at your own pace. Some groups may work faster, others slower, depending on how frequently you choose to meet.

We recommend watching the videos together as a group, but if your group does not have a lot of time together, they may also be watched individually prior to your group meeting if you wish to use your time together solely to discuss the week’s lesson. We recommend an hour and a half for each meeting, but if you can only find time for one hour at each meeting, then perhaps watching the videos on your own time before you meet would work best for your group. You can decide that at your first meeting together.

If you are not participating in a small group and would still like to use this resource on your own, you of course are welcome to do so, though we strongly encourage the group dynamic as others tend to give us insights into areas we might not necessarily go on our own. Everyone’s faith journey is their own that is shaped by their life experiences and encounters with the divine. These experiences are of course unique, and yet many times we find that our own experiences have shared elements and commonalities with the experiences of others.

Jesus reminds us that wherever two or more are gathered in His name, He is present and group settings offer us an encounter with the Holy Spirit that helps open up and broaden our views and perspectives that we might not otherwise contemplate individually.

Preparing for Your First Small Group Meeting:

It might also be helpful to have a journal that you keep throughout your journey. Some exercises will require writing, drawing, and jotting down thoughts both during the videos and discussions. If you are the assigned leader, perhaps

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Introductory Session

This is the first session in our introductory series of videos that will focus on the three basic elements of discipleship: Prayer, Bible Study and Service. The goal of this introductory session is primarily to get the group to familiarize themselves with one another. Relationship is a key component to becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. Relationship with Jesus - and one another.

Leader Prep Before You Meet:

If playing an icebreaker game like “Diversity Bingo” prepare your Bingo cards ahead of time, or whatever supplies you may need for getting to know each other. Peruse the list of ice-breaker activities to decide which one you want to utilize. These are just suggestions. If you have other ideas, feel free to use them.

Worship Supplies: A candle

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God’s presence among us.



Psalm 27:1, 4

*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid.
One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
To live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.*



Reflect

What is the one thing you seek most from the Lord? What are you seeking or hoping for by participating in this small group? Take a few moments of silence to sit and reflect on that thought. Share with others if you feel comfortable doing so.



Opening Prayer:

God of hospitality, we come before you today seeking both a deeper relationship with you and with one another. Open our hearts and minds to where you are leading us - to hear challenging words with thoughtfulness, and alternative perspectives with compassion. Guide us always in your paths. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Getting to Know Each Other

Introduce yourselves to one another. Take some time to learn a little bit about each other. Some icebreaker games/ideas for getting to know each other:

- Play Two Truths and a Lie (Participants share two things about themselves that are true, one that is a lie and the rest of the group has to guess which is the lie.)
- Play “Whose Story Is It?” Start this ice breaker game by writing your funniest or weirdest story on a small piece of paper. (It has to be a true one!) Then fold the paper up and drop it into a bowl or other container. The facilitator randomly reads every story & the group has to guess who the writer is. This is a great way to get to know each other and find out new things.
- Diversity Bingo. This game helps participants to get information on each other in a fun, competitive way. First, create a bingo card containing a grid of squares with a statement or question in each square that will apply to some members of your group and is in line with the objectives of your class, workshop, or event. (Sample ones provided at the end of this lesson) After each player gets a bingo card, they mingle around introducing themselves and finding other participants who can sign their cards indicating that a statement applies to him/her. To avoid having people only talk to one or two people and filling up their card, limit the signatures they can give to 1 or 2 per card. When everyone has reached bingo or is super close, you can share something you’ve learned about each other, yourself and the experience of this ice breaker activity.
- Where are you from? Ask group members to share one local custom and internal value they got from that place, and why is that important for them. Encourage people to share a short story if they want. Sharing customs and values from your childhood can create more understanding and help form stronger bonds.



Share

Share your religious background. Are you new to the faith? A lifelong Christian, Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, etc? What brought you to the congregation you are currently attending?



Watch: Pathways Introduction Video



Discuss

How open are you to change and hearing new ideas? What are some of the obstacles you have encountered in your life when presented with changing ideas or culture? Do you embrace them or push back against them? Why? What are some of the fears you have associated with changing ideas, interpretations, and understandings?



Closing Prayer

Creator God, we know we are like clay being constantly shaped and molded by your hands. Thank you for bringing us together as the body of Christ to continue to learn and grow in our faith. Change our hearts and minds to be more in accordance with your will for our lives. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.



Weekly Exercises To Do At Home

1. In your journal, write down something you learned at some point in your life that changed your perspective on scripture or an issue.
2. In your journal, describe the things you are convinced you'll never have your mind changed about. Why are these convictions so important to you?
3. Throughout the week, jot down anything that challenges you.

PATHWAYS

PART 1

Prayer



"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

- Martin Luther -

PRAYER

Session 1

Why We Pray

This is the first of six sessions on prayer. In this session we will explore what the point and purpose of prayer is and how it can enhance your spiritual life and your relationship with God. Prayer is the means through which we are able to communicate with God - whether it's to lay bare our poverty and need in petition, giving thanks, or simply stopping and listening to what God is saying to us.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Luke 11:1-2

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."



Reflect

Share in a word or phrase what this prayer means to you. What does "your Kingdom come" mean to you? How well do we live out "we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us"?



Opening Prayer:

Holy God, as the apostle Paul states, we know we do not always pray as we ought, so we thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit that intercedes on our behalf with sighs too deep for words. Help us as we embark on this journey of prayer to become closer to you. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to the Lord's Prayer as a hymn.



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Why We Pray



Discuss

- Pastor Rebecca mentions that how we view God affects our prayer life - and our relationship with God. How do you view God? Parent? Friend? Judge? Something else?
- There are many different postures one can use when praying. Standing, kneeling, lying prostrate, bowing, lifting up ones arms/hands, sitting, etc. What is the most common way in which you tend to pray? What prayer postures have you tried?
- Read Psalm 18:1-2. The psalmist employs more than ten images to praise God and name who God is. What images mentioned do you most resonate with? Which images would you add that are missing?
- Read 1 Samuel 3:1-14: What are some of your earliest memories and experiences of prayer? Have you ever experienced God's voice speaking to you and been confused by it?



Closing Prayer

God of relationship, you desire for us to know you deeper. Help guide us as we continue to open the doors of communication with you. Amen.



Weekly Exercises To Do At Home

1. **Practicing Prayer:** Take fifteen minutes each day to be quietly present to God in whatever way you feel led (sitting, walking, observing nature, drawing, shaping playdough/clay, journaling, play meditative music/sounds, etc)
2. **Journaling:** In your journal write down your experience of being present to God. What helps you? What interrupts you?

PRAYER

Session 2

Impediments to Prayer

This is the second of six sessions on prayer. In this session we will explore what impediments or struggles we have with prayer. For some it comes easy - others, not so much. Whether it's time, fear, or not feeling you know how to pray, many things tend to get in the way of having an open and consistent prayer life with God.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Mark 9:2-8

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.



Reflect

Peter interrupts the experience of Jesus' transfiguration with ideas of how to improve it, preserve it, or do something useful with it rather than simply being present with God. What interrupts or impedes you from simply being present with God?



Opening Prayer:

Dear God, help us to perceive our blocks and excuses that get in the way of our relationship with you, that keep us from a deeper, more meaningful prayer life. Give us the courage, hope, persistence and willingness to enter into daily conversation with you. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms"



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Impediments to Prayer



Discuss

- The video listed off a variety of ways that our prayer life can be impeded. Time, not knowing what to pray for, etc. What are some of your impediments to prayer? What are the things that tend to get in the way of you having a robust prayer life with God?
- Read Matthew 26:36-46. What do you think might have caused the disciples to have trouble staying awake and available to Jesus?
- What contributes most to your difficulty staying awake spiritually?



Closing Prayer

Patient God, we make so many excuses and justify why we don't have time to work on our relationship with you. Help us to set our excuses aside and learn to be more present and intentional about our time with You. Amen.



Exercises To Do At Home

1. **Practice Breath Prayer:** Breath Prayer is an ancient form of prayer and it is easily adaptable. They can be phrases from tradition, scripture or a hymn/song. We repeat them with our lips, carry them in our hearts, and whisper them under our breath. (Steps taken from "The Breath of Life: A Workbook" by Ron DelBene.)
 Step 1: Sit in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and remind yourself that God loves you and you are in God's loving presence. Recall a passage of scripture that puts you in a prayerful frame of mind such as the 23rd Psalm or "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46)
 Step 2: With eyes closed, imagine God calling you by name and asking "What do you want?"
 Step 3: Answer with whatever comes from your heart. (Answers can be simple, single words like "hlep, peace, guidance, love, forgiveness, or a phrase - "Grant me peace and serenity." This is personal so it will rise out of your concerns.
 Step 4: Choose your favorite name or image for God. (God, Jesus, Creator, Teacher, Prince of Peace, Light, Lord, etc.)
 Step 5: Combine your name for God with your answer to God's question, "What do you want?" Pray your breath prayer for three minutes.
 Repeat daily.
2. **Read Isaiah 44:6-11.** What are common idols today? Identify a popular image of God with which you struggle or which makes prayer difficult for you. Draw or write about this image. Now consider what image of God opens you to the divine presence and facilitates prayer.

PRAYER

Session 3

Spiritual Types

This is the third of six sessions on prayer. In this session we will explore what “spiritual type” you are. Spirituality is the “inner dimension” of faith. That place within yourselves where your soul can find a sense of peace. It’s liberated from any rules, institutions or hierarchy and it’s dedicated to the human soul.

Leader Prep Before You Meet:

Make copies of the Spiritual Type Test on page X for each member of your small group to be used during the Group Discussion time.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God’s presence among us.



2 Corinthians 3:18

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.



Reflect

What do you think it means to be transformed into the same image “from one degree of glory to another”?



Opening Prayer:

Holy God, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayers of your servants. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “My Faith Looks Up To Thee”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Spiritual Types



Discuss

- Which Spirituality type do you think you might be?



Group Exercise - Spirituality Test

Take the Spirituality Test (by Corinne Ware) on the next page

- What did you discover about yourself? What strengths do you have and does the group agree? What's your area for growth/improvement?
- In what ways are you a good fit for the congregation? In what ways is the congregation different? What are the strengths of this congregation? Is your spiritual type accepted and used by the congregation? What are ways you might use them if they are not currently a congregational strength?
- Make a copy of your test and turn it into your group or session leader. They will turn these into your pastors to evaluate. You do not need to put your name anywhere on the test as this is just an anonymous collection of information for them to see where the congregation perceives itself and where each individual sees themselves within the congregation. At the end of these sessions your pastor(s) will meet with your group and discuss your individual results with you.



Closing Prayer

Gracious Lord, you bring together many unique and different types of people to be part of your body. Help us to celebrate and lift up those who are different than ourselves. Amen.



Exercises To Do At Home

1. **Read John 3:16:** Read the text once a week, using one the four different spiritual types each week.
Head: Paraphrase the verse in a sentence that captures its essence.
Heart: List several people you love and those you have difficulty loving. Read the verse slowly for each person on your list by personalizing it: "For God so loved _____" Include yourself. Pause and add a prayer of your own for what you need in order to love that person. Notice any changes in you as you affirm God's love for that person and decide how you are going to express God's love and your love to the people on your list. Write your experience down in your journal.
Mystic: Repeat the verse prayerfully as a way of focusing on God. Carry some part of John 3:16 with you in your daily activities.
Activist: Be a living prayer today, an expression of God's sacrificial love rather than trying to understand the verse. Bless everyone and everything you see with the words "For God so loved the world..." Where do you see a need for God's love?
2. **Practice your breath prayer daily.**

SPIRITUAL TYPE TEST

This spirituality type indicator is similar to personality tests such as Myers-Briggs. It works with two continuums (Head & Heart and Knowledge & Mystery) to give you a general idea of how you experience God. It is drawn from "Discover your Spiritual Type" by Corrine Ware. You will take the test twice - once for the congregation type, once for your own personal type.

Congregational Style

Read through the first set of statements and select the one(s) that describe what you do in your worshipping group. You may select none or more than one if you wish. Notice the number that goes with your chosen statement.

On the top wheel on the last page of the test, find the numbered quadrant that matches the number of your chosen statement. In that quadrant draw a line (a spoke going from the center to the outside edge of the circle). If you've chosen two statements, draw two spokes, each in a different quadrant. Before you go on to the next set of statements, fill in the "personal style" wheel for the first set.

Personal Style

Read through the first set of statements a second time. Now choose the statement or statements that describe what you personally prefer as part of your spiritual experience. You may select one statement or more than one. Match the chosen statement number with the quadrant number in the lower circle. In that quadrant draw a spoke-line. If you've chosen two statements, draw two spokes, each in a different quadrant. The result is a portrait of your personal style, which you can compare with the experience you have in your worship group.

THE ORDER OF WORSHIP

1. A carefully planned and orderly worship program is a glory to God.
2. A deeply moving and spontaneous meeting is a glory to God.
3. Simplicity and some silence are important elements needed for worship.
4. It is not a service, but ordering ourselves to God's service that is important.

TIME

1. Stick to announced beginning and ending times of worship services.
2. It is important to extend the meeting time if one feels led to do so.
3. All time is God's time. A sense of timelessness is important.
4. Gather whenever and as long as you need to in order to accomplish the task.

PRAYER

1. Words express poetic praise; we ask for knowledge and guidance.
2. Let words and feelings evoke God's presence in this moment.
3. Empty the mind of distractions and simply BE in the presence of the Holy.
4. My life and my work are my prayer.

MUSIC

1. Music and lyrics express praise to God and belief about God.
2. Singing warms and unites us and expresses the soul's deepest heart.
3. Chant and tone bring the soul to quietness and union with God.
4. Songs can mobilize and inspire to greater effort and dedication.

PREACHING

1. The Word of God, rightly proclaimed, is the centerpiece of worship.
2. The gospel movingly preached is the power of God to change lives.
3. Proclamation is heard when the Spirit of God speaks to the inward heart.
4. What we do is our “preaching” and speaks louder than anything we say.

EMPHASIS

1. A central purpose is that we fulfill our vocation (calling) in the world.
2. A central purpose is that we learn to walk in holiness with the Lord.
3. A central purpose is that we be one with the Creator.
4. A central purpose is that we obey God’s will completely.

SUPPORT OF CAUSES *(If necessary, circle the words that apply and select categories with the most circles.)*

1. Support seminaries, publishing houses, scholarship, preaching to others.
2. Support evangelism, missions, spreading the word on television and radio.
3. Support places of retreat, spiritual direction, liturgical reform.
4. Support political action to establish justice in society and its institutions.

CRITICISM

1. Sometimes we (I) are said to be too intellectual, dogmatic, and “dry.”
2. Sometimes we (I) are said to be too emotional, dogmatic, anti-intellectual.
3. Sometimes we (I) are said to be escaping from the world and are not realistic.
4. Sometimes we (I) are said to have tunnel vision and are too moralistic.

DOMINATING THEMES *(If necessary, circle the words that apply and select categories with the most circles.)*

1. Discernment, discipline, knowledge, order, grace, justification.
2. Love, conversion, witness, spontaneity, sanctification.
3. Poverty, humility, wisdom, letting go, transcendence.
4. Simplicity, purity of heart, action, temperance, obedience, martyrdom.

MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA *(What the congregation believes is necessary; what you believe is necessary.)*

1. Assent to doctrine, baptism, endorsement by group.
2. A personal inward experience of God, baptism, public declaration.
3. All who face Godward are incorporated in the Holy.
4. Solidarity with humankind is membership in God’s kingdom.

RITUAL AND LITURGY

1. Ritual and liturgy evoke memory and presence, teaching traditional truths.
2. Liturgy and ritual ceremonies are not of great importance.
3. Ritual and liturgy are ways in which God becomes present to us.
4. Ritual and liturgy are one way we make statements about inner conviction.

CONCEPT OF GOD

1. God is revealed in scripture, sacrament, and in Jesus Christ and his cross.
2. I can feel that God is real and that Christ lives in my heart.
3. God is mystery and can be grasped for but not completely known.
4. We participate in the mystery of God when we become co-creators with God in the world.

Tally up the number of 1's, 2's, 3's and 4's and draw a spoke for each question in the quadrant it corresponds with. Example:

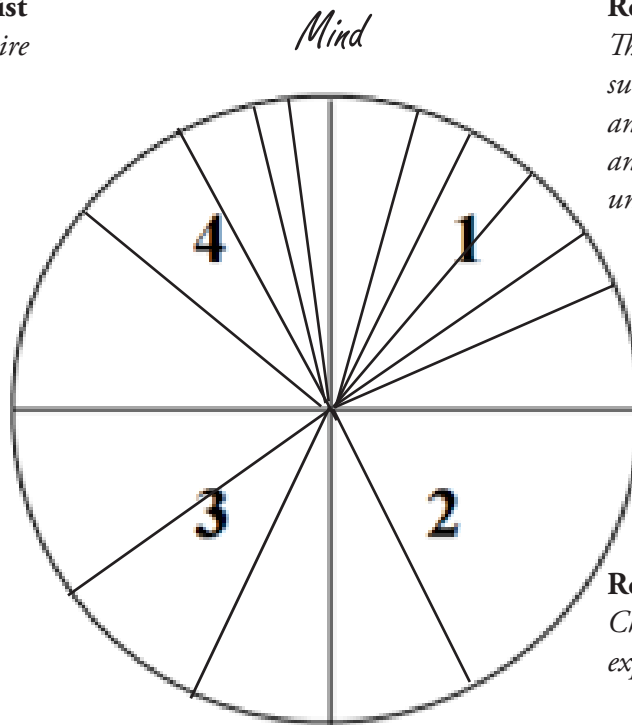
Mystery/Mind: Moralist/Activist

Social action, loving neighbor, desire to witness to God's reign, want to transform society, idealistic

Revelation/Mind: Rationalism

Theological reflection on concepts such as the incarnation, God's love, and ethical issues. Study groups and concrete ways to deepen and understand faith

Mystery



Revelation

Mystery/Heart: Mystic

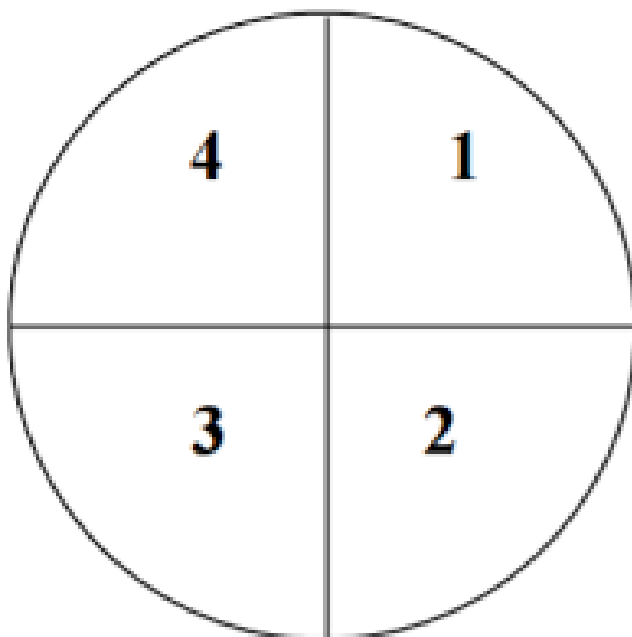
Desire union with God, contemplation, radical denial

Revelation/Heart: Pietism

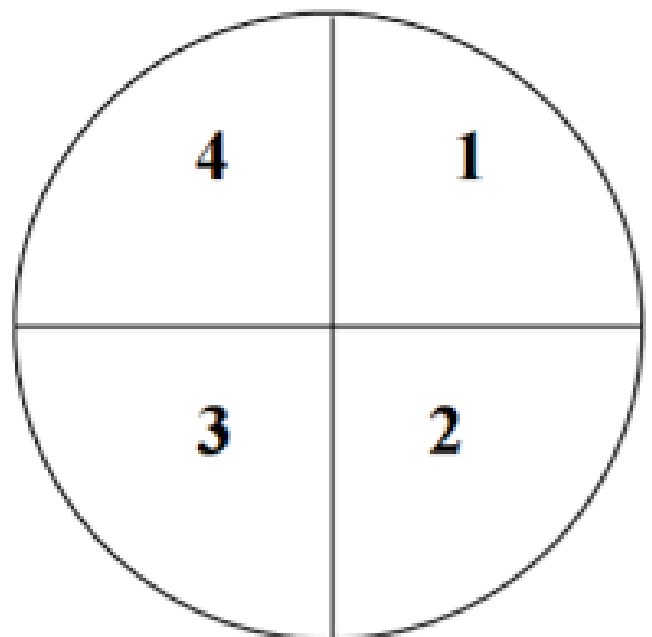
Charismatic spirituality, rely on the experience of their hearts, purity

Heart

Congregation



Personal



PRAYER

Session 4

Prayers of Petition and Intercession

This is the fourth of six sessions on prayer. In this session we will look at the type of prayer many of us are most familiar with - prayers of petition and intercession. Petitioning God on behalf of ourselves, or others, is one of the ways we live out our relationship with God, recognizing our total dependency upon God.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.



Reflect

"What do you want me to do for you?" What do you want Jesus to do for you right now? What need or desire of your heart do you have that makes you cry out something like "Have mercy on me!"?



Opening Prayer:

Dear God, hear our need and our poverty before you. Help us to relinquish control and lay our fears, doubts and needs at your feet. Take on our burdens as we hand ourselves over to your loving care. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to "Change My Heart O God"



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Prayers of Petition & Intercession



Discuss

- Read Matthew 7:7-11. Jesus tells us if we ask, we will receive. Yet our reality is that not everything we ask for is granted in the way in which we are expecting or wanting. How do you reconcile this passage with your personal experience of petitioning God?
- For what do you typically pray?
- Read John 15:7. When you ask God for something, is your attitude one of willfulness or willingness? How are you challenged? In what ways does your prayer change when you pray for willingness rather than willfulness?



Closing Prayer

Offer up whatever petitions of your hearts you need lifted up to God.



Exercises To Do At Home

1. **Read Matthew 6:31-33.** In order to reflect on what it means to focus on the kingdom of God, draw a large circle on a page in your journal. Around the circumference, name "all these things" about which you are anxious. Consider Jesus' words "strive first for the kingdom of God" and what they mean for you. As you gain clarity, write the priority in the center of the circle. Reflect on how this priority could change your life over time.
2. **Devote a few moments to your breath prayer.** Note any insights about the relationship of your breath prayer.
3. **Read Colossians 1:9-12.** Write a letter to people in your family, Church or workplace expressing your prayer for them. In doing so, give the love of Christ in you full rein to express your highest hopes and passion for their spiritual well-being

PRAYER

Session 5

Praying the Psalms

This is the fifth of six sessions on prayer. In this session we will look at the Psalms, the Bible's book of prayer and song. The Psalms cover a period of more than six hundred years in the history of the people of Israel. These 150 songs praise the God of creation and depict the struggles of God's people through the period of the patriarchs to the time after the Babylonian exile ended. The oldest psalms were prayed by the communities in which they originated and they were later adapted and used in different situations the people faced. The psalms were set to the accompaniment of musical instruments, usually stringed instruments such as the lyre or zither. The original collection of the Psalms in Hebrew was completed by the third century BCE, though the individual psalms are much older. The greek translation from third century is the version Jesus and the early church would have been familiar with and utilizing. Jesus frequently quoted the Psalms, and prayed them even on the cross as he was dying.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Psalm 133 (read it together as a group or have each member read a verse or line. If you want, have every member read the entire Psalm out loud individually)

*How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.*



Where are the places in your life you feel a sense of unity? Disunity?



Opening Prayer:

God of the universe, the whole of creation sings of your glory. Help us to reflect and immerse ourselves in these ancient words that transcend space and time. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “On Eagle’s Wings” (Based on Psalm 91)



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks’ exercises or session.



Watch: Praying the Psalms



Discuss

- What Psalms or portions of psalms best reflect where you are in your lives of faith? Take a few minutes to think about this or skim through the Psalms.



Group Exercise - Writing a Reverse Psalm

Write a “reverse paraphrase” of Psalm 23. A reverse paraphrase is writing lines that represent the opposite of what each verse or stanza means to you. (Example: “The Lord is my shepherd” would become “There is no one to guide me.”) The point is to discover the power of familiar words in fresh ways.

- Read your reverse paraphrases to one another. Now, re-read the Psalm as it was written and let the words guide you in a period of prayer.



Closing Prayer

Pick a psalm and offer it up as your closing prayer.



Exercises To Do At Home

1. **Find a Psalm** that gives voice to how you feel at this time about your life and your relationship with God. Write a paraphrase of the psalm that captures the prayer of your heart. What do you imagine was happening to the psalmist when he wrote the original words?
2. **Write your own Psalm** - whether it be a Psalm of Thanksgiving, Praise, or Lament. If you’re willing, share with the group at your next meeting during your reflection time of the previous week.

PRAYER

Session 6

Contemplative Prayer

This is the sixth of six sessions on prayer. In this session we will look at Centering and Contemplative Prayer. Contemplative prayer is about making oneself aware of the presence of God who is always there. Our relationship with God takes time - just like our relationships with people take time. We must devote time to those we love - including God. Through Contemplative Prayer we are able to shed our judgements and fears and open ourselves to love just as we are. At the same time, we must face not just God, but the reality of ourselves. Denial is our enemy. God sees us as we truly are so we cannot come before him with phoniness.

Leader Prep Before You Meet:

This week will explore some creativity. Bring play-dough, crayons/markers, pencils - or other art supplies as you see appropriate for the Group Exercise.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."



Reflect

Why do you think Jesus calls what Mary is doing "the better part"? In what ways does Christ enter your awareness of life? How are you welcoming Christ in daily life and what practices do you find most helpful? What interrupts your presence to God in prayer or in daily life?



Opening Prayer:

For your opening prayer today, simply sit in silence for a minute or two, listening for God in the silence and stillness. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “How Great Thou Art.”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks’ exercises or session.



Watch: Contemplative Prayer



Discuss

Do you consider yourself a “contemplative” person? Why or why not?



Group Exercise - Contemplative Prayer

Choose a sacred word as a symbol that expresses our intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. (Love, God, Jesus, Guidance, etc)

Sit quietly, and when your mind begins to wander, the sacred word is said and helps us come back to an awareness of God’s presence with us. It is not to be used repetitively. It is to be spoken quietly within to gently turn us towards God.

Close your eyes as a symbol of letting go of what is going on around and within you. Legs and arms need to be set comfortably as straight as possible to rest for the full 20 minutes.

Introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.

Avoid analyzing your experience, holding expectations, or aiming at any goal such as: having no thoughts, making the mind a blank, feeling peaceful, repeating the sacred word continuously, or achieving a spiritual experience.

You may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in parts of our body, or a generalized restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body. You may notice heaviness or lightness in your extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness. When you realize you are noticing these, gently return to the sacred word and to focus on God.

When the 20 minutes is up, return to the group.

Today’s leader should distribute the play dough, etc. For the next fifteen minutes shape a representation of what you feel is the promise of God’s presence in you and how you feel about receiving it. Draw it, write it, shape it with the play dough.

Share with the group what you made and set it in the center of the table or area you are meeting as an offering to God.



Closing Prayer

This week sing the doxology, (Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow)



Exercises To Do At Home

1. SOLITARY PRAYER *(Each of these you should spend about 15 minutes on)*

Read Luke 1:26-38

In this story, Mary is utterly receptive to God. She joins Moses, Isaiah, and later, Ananias in placing herself totally at the disposal of God in receptivity and love. Note that Mary still has questions and hesitations, but in faith ventures to trust God.

Find a quiet place where you can be receptive to God.

Start by saying “Here I am, doing nothing” for about 5 minutes. Notice your own bodily presence.

Then, “Here I am in the presence of _____” (wherever you are at.) Be aware of the furniture, walls, and anything else present in the room or area with you. Relax more. (5 mins)

Now say to yourself, “Here I am in the presence of God. Let it be with me according to your word.” Repeat this over and over for five more minutes.

Now fill out the provided reflection sheet on the next page.

2. PRAYER OF REPETITION:

Read Philippians 2:12-13 Reflect on your role and God’s role in your ongoing transformation in Christ. Devote several minutes to praying the phrase “For it is God who is at work in you.” Record expressions of your awareness in your journal.

3. JESUS PRAYER

Repeat: “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.” When you feel your mind wandering, repeat this phrase.

4. VISUAL FOCUS

Use an image or icon of some sort to focus your attention. This can be a painting, an object (like the cross), a stained glass window, etc. Gaze upon the visual focus without analyzing or evaluating what you see. Reach for God through your eyes and let God reach for you through the “eyes” of the visual focus. Seek to be seen and known by God, rather than seeking insights about God. When distracted, return your attention to the visual focus.

5. Record your experience in your journal, and remember that you can also see the image of God in the people around you as you go about your day.

Reflection Sheet following Solitary Prayer Exercise

BASED ON LUKE 1:26-38

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. . . . And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” *How are you noticing God’s presence in you? What do you feel is the promise in God’s presence or prompting?*

“But she was much perplexed . . . and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. . . . ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’” *What hesitations, fears, questions prevent you from being utterly receptive to God’s presence and promise?*

What assurance do you need?

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”
When you say, “Here am I,” what are you saying yes to or accepting? What are you saying no to or giving up?

What do you need in order to live your “Here am I” and give yourself in joy to the promise of Christ in you?

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PATHWAYS

PART 2

Bible Study



"The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me."

- Martin Luther -

BIBLE STUDY

Session 1

Introduction to Bible Study

This is the introductory session on different approaches to reading scripture. When we approach scripture, we many times forget that the Bible is not actually a book - it's a library and a collection of different voices, different styles, and different time periods throughout history that all have unique ways in which they talk about their encounter with the Divine. How we approach scripture deeply shapes the way in which we understand it. The Bible is a complex collection of writing and even with good translations, the language and imagery are often unfamiliar to us thousands of years later. Thus much care and attention should always go into how we engage with God's living word. The interpretive guide of others, who may or may not be experts, is an imperative part of the process. The Bible is given to the whole church and therefore we must open ourselves up to the wisdom and experiences of others.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Psalm 119:97-105

Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

*Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.*

*I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.*

*I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.*

*I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.*

*I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.*

*How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

*Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.*

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.*



How have you typically approached reading scripture? Are you a “just open it and see what it has to say that day” type of scripture reader? Do you read it cover to cover or chronologically? What is your favorite Bible story or passage? Reflect on why and how you came to cherish it. What role has it played in your life and how has God spoken to you through it?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, you give us your Word as a gift. In particular, you have given us your Word in the person of Jesus Christ. It is your divine revelation to us so that we may better understand and know you and your will for our lives. Help us to approach it always with an open heart and an open mind to hear what you are saying to us today. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “Thy Word”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks’ exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study Introduction



Discuss

- Pastor Rebecca may have introduced some concepts and ideas you had not heard or considered before regarding approaching scripture. What, if anything, surprised you?
- In what ways can (has) scripture be (been) used for harmful purposes?
- Pastor Rebecca utilizes the image of scripture being like a “rainbow” of meaning. How might this help you when you encounter different understandings of scripture?
- Read John 1:1-18. “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” What does it mean to you that Christ is God’s “living word” or “Word made flesh”?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

1. **Read Psalm 1.** This psalm was placed at the beginning of the Psalter to be a preface and to convey a promise: those who study God's law and live by God's Word will be "like trees planted by streams of water." Sketch a picture of two trees, one on each side of a page. Make one tree a depiction of your life as it is. Make the second a tree a depiction of your life as it could be. Beneath and between the trees, list or write out two or three passages of scripture that have been for you streams of nourishment and growth. Reflect on what God is saying to you.
2. **Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-6.** Paul calls his faithful disciples, "a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God...on tablets of human hearts." What word from Christ would the Spirit like to write on the tablet of your heart for all to read?
3. **Read Hebrews 4:12.** What does it mean for God's Word to be "alive and active" in your life? In your journal, write about how God's Word has been "alive and active" in your life.
4. **Read James 1:22-25.** How would you describe your spiritual life right now? What do you think it means to be only "hearers of the word" vs "doers of the word"? How are you a doer and not just a mere hearer?

BIBLE STUDY

Session 2

Historical

This is the second session on Bible Study that will focus on one of the informational ways to approach scripture: the historical method. Historical methods are the most common form of Bible Study, getting at the “who, what, why, when” questions. Knowing the culture, history and contextual world out of which scripture was written is an important part of understanding scripture. Knowing who the intended audience was and what situation may have been the catalyst for why that particular part of scripture was written gives us a deeper and broader understanding. For instance, knowing that at Caesarea Philippi there is a pagan shrine to the Greek god Pan at the mouth of the Jordan River where both Pan and the Canaanite god Baal were believed to emerge from every spring helps us better understand what “rock” Jesus was perhaps referring to when he says, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” Knowing that fortresses and gates were typically meant to keep invaders out, using the image of “the gates of Hades will not prevail” helps us envision the Church knocking down the gates of Hades. Also knowing what significance Hades had in the Greek world as the “realm of the dead,” speaks to Jesus’ own foreshadowing of his resurrection.

Leader Prep Before You Meet:

Some advance research will need to be done by this week’s leader to help facilitate this Bible Study. Read through the questions and do some advance research on the questions related to the historical elements. You do not need to be an expert - your role is simply to make room for the questions and encourage discussion and invite others to share their knowledge and experience.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God’s presence among us.



Job 8:8-10

For inquire, please, of bygone ages, and consider what the fathers have searched out. For we are but of yesterday and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding?



Scripture was written by humans “out of their understanding.” What are some ways our “understandings” of the world around us has changed and shaped our interpretations?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, you have spoken to us throughout all times and places. While we know our understanding of your word can be obscured by time, we know that same word is capable of speaking anew to us today in our time and place. Help us to hear your word with fresh ears and open hearts. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks’ exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study - Historical



Group Bible Study - Historical

Exodus 3:1-15 (Study by Dr. Diane Jacobson, “Opening the Book of Faith”)

The Book of Exodus tells the story of God saving Israel, the people God has personally claimed and promised to be with. In Exodus, God frees the people from slavery in Egypt through the leadership of Moses (aided by his brother Aaron and sister Miriam) God leads the people across the sea to Mount Sinai where God makes a covenant with Israel and gives them the Ten Commandments and other laws. In this covenant, Israel is asked to respond to God’s gift of saving them by becoming a nation dedicated to God, obeying God’s voice and serving their neighbor.

Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush comes toward the beginning of the book of Exodus. Through this encounter, God calls forth the leader who was needed for the task of delivering the Hebrew people out of slavery. This story is one of the first stories from the Bible many of us learn. We picture Moses in the desert, minding his own business, when suddenly faced with this dramatic sight, God calls to him and shakes up his world.

It may be helpful to set the stage for this story just a bit by looking at the historical context of the story. Start by noticing many of the names and places mentioned in the text.

- Who are the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites?
- Who are the Egyptians and Israelites?
- What were the connections between the Egyptians and these other tribes?

- Why is Moses living in Midian? Who are the Midianites? Is that at all significant?
- To which Pharaoh does this story likely refer?
- Why are the Israelites living as slaves in Egypt?
- Where is Mt. Horeb and what is its significance?
- Why did Moses remove his sandals?
- What was it about the land of Canaan that God possibly found important and would have wanted the Israelites to live there instead of somewhere else?
- The Bible itself does not give us much of this information. For instance, we have no idea aside from speculation which Pharaohs that are mentioned were ruling during this time exactly. The reality is there is no Egyptian record of the Israelites being slaves in Egypt - so the story of the Exodus exists outside other historical sources.
- What other questions about the setting or context of the story do you have?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Possible resources: Bible dictionaries; Bible Atlas (“The Historical Atlas of the Bible” by Dr. Ian Barnes), Historical Perspectives: “Palestine in the Time of Jesus” by K.C. Hanson & Douglas E. Oakman, “The World that Shaped the New Testament,” by Calvin J. Roetzel; Bible commentaries; Bible Concordances; Google.

Some recommended Bible commentaries: the “Interpretation” series, New Interpreter’s Bible series, “The Prophets” by Abraham Heschel, “The Prophetic Imagination,” Walter Brueggeman. Online commentaries: workingpreacher.org/bible-index

Jeremiah 1:4-19 (Commentary by Paul Lutz), “Opening the Book of Faith”

In these verses, we hear three visions placed before Jeremiah during a time of vast historical changes, not just in Judah but realignment of power among the empires adjacent to Jeremiah’s small kingdom of Judah.

The first vision is of an almond branch from the first of the trees that flower in the spring. This was a sign the lord was watching to ensure that as spring comes forth, so will God’s word come forth.

The vision of the boiling pot tilted away from the north declares the impending destruction on Jerusalem and summarized the divine message that would dominate Jeremiah’s preaching: the coming judgment of God against the wickedness of the people of Judah who were forsaking God by sacrificing “to strange gods.” (1:16)

The last vision concerned Jeremiah’s own person: God would make him “a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land” (v. 18), even if the people of Judah should fight him, for the Lord solemnly promised that “they shall not prevail against you, for I am with, says the Lord, to deliver you.” (v. 19)

- Describe the historical situation.
- When did Jeremiah live? Under which Kings did he serve?
- What was going on in Israel at this time? What other countries are involved?
- How difficult would it have been to be a prophet during this time period?
- Who is speaking? Who is the audience?
- What is the intention of the passage?

- Who are the tribes of the kingdoms of the north?
- How does knowing something of the historical situation influence our understanding of these verses from Jeremiah?

John 8:31-36 (*Commentary by Kathryn Kleinhans, "Opening the Book of Faith"; additional possible resource: "John" by Karoline Lewis*)

John's Gospel is the last of the four canonical Gospels to be written. It was most likely written in the 90's AD since it reflects growing tensions (and eventual separation) between Jewish Christians and the rest of the Jewish community following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

New testament scholars think that the Gospel of John, the three letters of John, and Revelation were not written by the beloved disciple himself but by members of the "Johannine community" of Christians, perhaps founded by the beloved disciple, located in Asia Minor near Ephesus. The Gospel's witness to Jesus is shaped by the context of this particular late first-century Christian community. In addition to the tensions with the Jewish community, the Gospel reflects internal concerns about the authority and leadership within the Johannine community as the generation of those who knew Jesus and his disciples firsthand dies out.

Being attentive to the differences between the historical context of the Gospel writer and our historical context will help us both understand the text in its own right and apply it to our lives today.

In this text, the Jews say that they "have never been slaves to anyone," and yet their own founding is rooted in their enslavement to the Egyptians before the Exodus. Later, in the sixth century BCE many of the Jewish people were captured and deported to Babylon. In Jesus' own time, Palestine had been under Roman rule for a century.

Why do you think they say that they have never been in bondage? Have they forgotten their history? Are they in a state of denial? Are they implying that they have maintained their spiritual freedom despite physical and political bondage?

What difference does it make, if any, in how you understand their conversation with Jesus?

The Gospel of John reflects first-century tensions between Jewish Christians (Jews who accepted Jesus as God's Messiah) and the Jewish community as a whole. There are many passages that express the concern that Jewish Christians will be expelled from the synagogues. This is one example of how the situation of the later Johannine community is projected into the Gospel narrative of Jesus' earthly ministry.

John 7-8 shows Jesus teaching in the Jerusalem temple. In this passage, Jesus raises the question of whether or not the Jews had come to believe in him would "continue" in his word.

- What factors might have kept them from continuing in Jesus' word?
- What are today's challenges for us to continue in the word?
- There is a long history of Christian anti-Semitism, in which Christians blamed--and persecuted--Jewish people as "Christ killers." Some Christian groups, including the ELCA, have apologized for this history.
- How might our sensitivity to this injustice shape the way we read this text today?
- While those of us who live in North America enjoy political freedoms that come with democracy, what captivities might Jesus challenge us to recognize in ourselves? What freedom struggles are more recent and ongoing in the world?

Romans 7:15-25a (*Commentary by R. Guy Erwin, "Opening the Book of Faith"*)

If we go back to the previous chapter (6), we would find that Paul began with a general discussion of what it means to "live in Christ" through God's grace. Then at the end of the chapter 6 and into chapter 7, Paul turns to the question most on his mind: if salvation comes to us by grace through faith, how should we now regard God's law? What does it mean to be a believer? This was a particularly important question for those whose whole understanding of religious faithfulness and meaning came from obedience to divine laws. How were they now suddenly reinterpreting what it meant to be a believer, when the principal way of being one was to be a follower of the law?

But the question is even broad than that, and still relevant to us about two millennia later: How does our salvation by

God's mercy and grace relate to our struggle to live good and moral lives? How are these things connected? This is the framework within which our text selection fits.

In 7:1-14, Paul explains that the law that regulates the lives of humans pertains only to their bodies, so that to live in Christ (which Paul calls having "died to the law" through Christ) is to live in freedom from the law. But what does Paul mean by "law" here? He makes a distinction between our living "in the flesh"--by which he means in a way ruled by our feelings and desires--and living the "new life of the Spirit." The purpose the law serves is to awaken in a person the sense of sinfulness. As Paul sees it, humans will always resist the law, and so the law will provoke rebellion in them. The result is that where there is knowledge of the law there is knowledge of sin, which Paul understands as the beginning of a person's understanding of the need for God's grace and mercy. The law is good because it "lays bare human rebelliousness." And it is good because knowing one's sin then leads to depending on God. So far, so good (or not good, as the case may be).

Now in verse 15, Paul changes gears a bit, and talks about himself as a living example of this complicated and paradoxical truth about humankind. Again and again in this section, Paul uses the pronoun "I," something he has not done before in regard to sin and grace--earlier it was always "we" and "us" -- but now it's getting personal, both for Paul and for his audience. He wants his readers and listeners to know that he understands this truth about sin and law not as something theoretical or abstract, but right there in his own heart and mind and life. But what does it have to do with us and our experience?

Paul is writing to a far away group of believers to help them understand what it means to believe in Jesus, and what implications that believing has for their religious life. Whether Jews or Gentiles, much of what they have understood up to now about God's expectations for them has revolved around two things: correct worship and moral behavior. How might this text challenge them?

- What is Paul writing about?
- What kind of message is Paul sending in this text?
- Is it teaching, preaching, correcting, or consoling? Or something else?
- Who is Paul's audience? What do we know about the Christian church in Rome during this time period?
- What does he want them to think?
- Do the words sound the same to you as you think they would have sounded to first century Romans?
- How might these words have sounded to Christians who had been brought up in the Jewish faith and its observance of law as a faithful response to God?

BIBLE STUDY

Session 3

Literary

This is the third session on Bible Study that will focus in on the literary perspective in Bible Study. What are the significant forms or styles of the Biblical texts? Knowing what we're reading regarding genre, form, and style impact our understanding and interpretation of the Biblical texts in a variety of ways. Hearing HOW a story is told is just as important as the story itself. Is it a letter? A prophecy? A narrative? History? Poetry? A parable? Is it employing the use of similes, metaphors, merisms, puns, or idioms? How does an English translation affect our understanding when it perhaps only made sense in the original Hebrew or Greek? Names as well had specific meaning in the original languages that would many times result in a play on words that gets lost in English. Since very few of us are fluent in the original Greek and/or Hebrew used in the Bible, these issues can easily be missed. This is one of the many ways in which are constantly humbled when it comes to our understanding of scripture.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Psalm 18:1-3

I love you, O Lord, my strength.

*The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,*

my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

*I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,
so I shall be saved from my enemies.*



Reflect

What "literary" style are the psalms written in? What does the imagery utilized in these passages reveal about God? Why use these images when we know God is not a literal "rock" or "fortress"?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, your servants have always been individuals with their own unique personalities and talents. Help us to remember that how the authors of scripture chose to reveal their experiences of you matters and that we may be come to know you more deeply as a result. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “I Will Call Upon the Lord”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks’ exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study - Literary



Discuss

- A literary reading of scripture can be a new concept for many. How do you react when told that stories like Jonah might not have been written as historical fact, but were likely more of a parable or folk tale never intended to be taken literally? Does this change anything for you regarding how you understand God? Does its historical accuracy (or lack thereof) ultimately matter?
- Read John 3:3. Take note of the footnote regarding the two different ways to translate this text as either “born again” or “born from above.” How do the different translations change the meaning for you?
- A “merism” is a rhetorical device (or figure of speech) in which a combination of two contrasting parts of the whole refer to the whole. For example, in order to say that someone “searched everywhere,” one could use the merism “searched high and low.” The implied meaning is that one searched high, low, and everywhere in between.

Now read the creation account in Genesis 1. How might understanding this passage as utilizing “merisms” alter our understanding? (ie: light and dark - and everything in between. Male and female - and everything in between.)



Group Bible Study - Literary

Exodus 3:1-15 (Study by Dr. Diane Jacobson, “Opening the Book of Faith”)

In the stories leading up to chapter 3, we find out many things about Moses--how he was born to a Hebrew family and put in a basket in the Nile River, where he was discovered and adopted by an Egyptian princess. Even though he grew up as part of the Egyptian royal family, Moses still identified with his enslaved people. He burdened a cruel Egyptian overseer and became an exile, marrying the daughter of a Midianite priest.

- Moses’ job is to lead his father-in-law’s flock into the wilderness to the mountain of God. How is this similar to what God will call him to do later in the story? What is the significance of the symbolism of Moses being a shepherd here?
- Notice how Mount Horeb described. It is called “the mountain of God.” So something about the place Moses is leading the flock is holy or sacred. How does this story seem to foreshadow what God is calling him to do for the Israelites?
- When looking at the original Hebrew of this text, the word of Horeb (which also gets called Sinai elsewhere), we discover that the word for “bush” is “sineh” which sounds a lot like “Sinai.” Moses’ encounter with God at the flaming bush invites us to think about Israel’s

Things To Consider...

These things are helpful to keep in mind when you approach scripture from a literary perspective:

- Choose a text with a logical beginning and ending--for example a parable, a psalm, a set of instructions, a scene, or a whole story.
- Identifying the type of literature your chosen text is: Is it a parable, a psalm, prophetic, a letter, an “apocalypse”?
- Read different versions of the text to help discover the important choices translators make. How do different translations express details in different ways? How do they alter or bring a different perspective to a word or phrase?
- Know the general theme and purpose of the book. If you have a Bible that has an introduction, that can usually help with this step.

When reading a narrative, things to look for:

- **What is the literary context?** What is the overall plot of the story and how does this text fit into that plot? Does it have a structure like other stories? Are there details that remind us of other details either elsewhere in the same book or in another book? (For example, when reading the plagues of Revelation, what other Biblical story might come to mind? Where else were plagues used? How does knowing this help shape our understanding then of what Revelation might be doing?)
- **Who are the characters?** Who are the major and minor characters? Who is named, who isn't? What do we know about these characters? Do they appear elsewhere in scripture? Do we learn something about them from the narrator, from another character, or do we just have to intuit something from a detail in the text?
- **What is the setting?** Settings can be spacial, temporal, or social. Spacially: inside, outside, a doorway, a temple, a palace, a city, a desert, a river? Temporally: time of day, seasons, festivals, etc. Socially: banquet, city gates, wells.
- **What is the theme?** What themes are highlighted? Does this deal with violence, power, election, or morality? What is being commanded? What is being promised? What is it trying to tell you about God and our relationship with God?
- **Whose Point of View** is the story told from? What's the narrator's POV? The Character's? God's?
- **Rhetorical considerations:** how does this text persuade? Who is it meant to persuade? Who is the speaker or audience? How does this text work on us? (This is obviously interrelated with the historical method discussed in the last session, and related to the theological method - which will be discussed in the next session)

upcoming encounter with God at the fiery mountain. “Horeb” also means “glowing heat.” The call of the leader is closely tied to the call of the people.

- This is frequently seen as a “prophetic call” narrative. Compare it to the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1) or even Ananias (Acts 9). (Just for fun, compare it with Jonah and note the distinct differences between these “prophetic call” stories.) Note how they all express their feelings of inadequacy. Moses brings all his faults to the encounter with God. God's sign to Moses will be in the future, not the present. Moses must take on his task by depending entirely on the promise of God.
- How does hearing about or reading about how God has called others help you recognize your own call narrative/story?

- Notice the relationship of seeing vs. hearing. Moses sees the burning bush so he might “hear” the call of God. Seeing serves hearing. God hears the cry of the people so that God might act. Hearing serves action. What other seeing and hearing is going on in this text? What do you make of these observations?
- Note how God’s sacred name is revealed. Names are extremely important in the Bible as they almost always have some kind of symbolic meaning attached to them. YHWH (Yahweh) is frequently translated as “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” The meaning is not necessarily as important as the reality.
- Why does Moses want to know God’s name? How is this revelation of God’s name related to what God intends to do for the people of Israel? What does God’s name mean for us in the here and now?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Jeremiah 1:4-19 (by Paul Lutz, “Opening the Book of Faith”)

- Identify the type of writing
- What is the literary form of this story?
- Is this story to be taken literally or figuratively? Why do you think so?
- If you were to use a phrase to explain what is happening in this text, what would it be?
- Compare what is happening in this text to Jeremiah to what happened to Moses. How are these stories similar or different?
- Search the original meaning. Study the words, symbols and images to understand what the writer may have intended.
- How do you think the first hearers understood the story? How might they have understood the two symbolic visions?
- What would they have made of the fact that in Hebrew the words for watching and almond sound similar?

John 8:31-36

(Study selections from Kathryn Kleinhans, “Opening the Book of Faith.” For further reading on the literary motifs of John’s Gospel, see “Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel” by Craig R. Koester)

John’s Gospel differs dramatically from the other three “synoptic” Gospels. John’s Gospel is highly symbolic and many scholars argue it shares striking similarities stylistically to a Greek drama/tragedy. Symbolic imagery such as light/dark, water, lambs, bread, and symbolic actions and figures are strewn throughout the entire text. The symbols of John’s Gospel are conveyed in language that was an integral part of a cultural context, and understanding the symbolism means entering into that context. It was written in Greek for a Greek speaking audience, and the symbols used evoke a cluster of connotations and associations depending on life experiences, ethnic or religious heritage, as well as other Biblical associations with the imagery. “Word” and “truth” are two particular literary motifs. If you have time, sit down and read the entire Gospel of John and take note of some of the other repeated words and images.

- Read John 1:1-18 & John 14:1-17. Rather than a birth narrative like in Luke or Matthew, John's Gospel begins with a far more sweeping and cosmic poetic-style narrative that brings to mind Genesis 1, describing how this cosmic and creative "Word of God" became "flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." In John 14:6, Jesus identified himself as "the way, the truth and the life."
- Consider for a moment the word "dwelt" or another translation, "tabernacled." What connotations and associations does this evoke for you?
- How might these two passages deepen your understanding of Jesus' words in John 8:31-32?
- Read John 14:15-21; 15:26-27; 16:12-15. John 14:1-16:33 is called "Jesus' Farewell discourse, spoken at his last meal with his disciples. In the selected verses, Jesus describes the role of the "Spirit of truth" whom he will send to them. What is the relationship between Jesus who is the truth (John 14:6) and "the Spirit of truth"? Does thinking about the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth" add new insight to your understanding of John 8:31-36?
- In a courtroom, witnesses take an oath to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Read John 18:37-38. How does your understanding of "truth" in John's Gospel shape your own self-understanding as one called to witness to Jesus Christ? How would you respond to the people you encounter today who ask, "What is truth?" Passages such as John 19:35; 20:30-31; and 21:24-25 highlight the evangelist as a trustworthy witness to Jesus, so that others may come to believe in him. What would your congregation need to do to be recognized by non-members as a trustworthy witness to Jesus?
- Usually we think of truth as an object, grammatically speaking. We find out the truth. We tell the truth. But in John 8:32, truth also functions as the subject of the verb: "the truth will make you free." How can the truth make us free? Is there a difference between verse 32 (the truth will make you free) and verse 36 (the Son makes you free)?

Romans 7:15-25a (by R. Guy Erwin, *"Opening the Book of Faith"*)

- What type of literature is Romans?
- How does that affect the way we read Romans compared to other scripture passages we have studied thus far?
- Is there something significant about the particular form or style of this piece of text? Look at how Paul has changed so dramatically to the first person singular "I." Is this just his vivid description of his personal experience? Probably not. He may well think that the "I" of the writer will speak directly to the heart of the "I" of the reader--who is in fact, you.
- When Paul writes "I" can you also identify with what he is saying? Is it possible that you could even say the same thing about your own experiences?
- Paul's admission of confusion may be reassuring for some. If even Paul can be confused, maybe it's OK if I'm confused sometimes, too. That seems to be what Paul wants us to think--that the experience he describes is one that we will understand and be able to empathize with because, in fact, we probably share it.
- How do you feel about the gap between what you want and what you think you ought to want?
- Do you sort your "wants" into categories of "good" and "bad"? Do you feel a tension here? How does this tension affect the way you feel about God?
- Is it not so much a case of wanting things you think you shouldn't want as it is a gap between what you want and what you can have? Do your desires always greatly outstrip your abilities or opportunities? There is tension in that as well--the gap between what "is" and what you "wish there was." How does this tension feel? How does it make you feel about God?

Both of these are situations of frustration and longing and guilt, whether you desire what you think or know is wrong, or simply want more than you reasonably have or need. Such desire, as Paul understands it, draws the heart away from God and makes it rebellious and defiant. And the case he knows best is his very own.

Paul describes a situation that is not as it should be: "i do this, but I should do that." "But" is the key word here--things are not as they should be. What Paul does is contrary to his desires on one level, but he does it anyway. There is tension in this:

something is that shouldn't be. How can this tension be resolved? Clearly, Paul is uncomfortable with it.

- What is the “shape” of this passage?
- Is it complete in itself, or does it seem fragmentary?
- What is the form of address? Who is speaking and who is spoken to?
- What words recur again and again?
- What patterns are visible in Paul's choice of language?
- Does the text lead up to a specific ending? If so, what is the conclusion or climax of this section of Paul's letter?

BIBLE STUDY

Session 4

Theological

This is the fourth session on Bible Study that will focus in on the distinctly Lutheran theological perspective in Bible Study. As Lutherans we come to our study with certain convictions, insights, and expectations. We expect not only to learn about who God and Christ are, but we expect to hear God and Christ speak to us directly. We expect to hear Law and Gospel, what shows forth Christ,.

As we study certain passages, we may hear God's Judgments for the world and us. This is called the law. We experience the law when we are confronted with our sin. This is a necessary step in order for us to hear the gospel: where we hear God's love, grace, and promises for the world and us. We experience the gospel when we are overwhelmed by God's grace.

We also study the Bible with the Bible - we let scripture interpret scripture. A panoramic view of the entire Biblical story helps provide balance for the more difficult passages, stories and themes. If we ignore the entire arc of scripture, we run the risk of taking passages so out of context that we reduce the Bible to a collection of moral laws or a holy rule book.

We study the Bible in light of the knowledge that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Not by how we feel or what we experience or accomplish. The central message of scripture is both simple and grand. Because of Christ, we are all accepted into the community of God's people because God loves us, forgives us and makes us the church.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Luke 16:19-31

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

“No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”



In what ways is this story “law and gospel”? (What is convicting and what is comforting about this story?) In what ways does this text point us to Jesus?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, your word both convicts and comforts. It reveals to us your heart and intention for us in Christ. Help us to hear and internalize this word in our daily lives. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “I Love to Tell the Story”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks’ exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study - Theological



Discuss

- Theological questions refer to questions that help us think about God and our relationship with God. What assumptions and expectations do you tend to bring to scripture?
- Many people often think that “the Gospel” can only be found in the four Gospels of the New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and that “the Law” is only found in the Old Testament scriptures. How does it reshape your understanding of scripture to recognize that all of scripture - both Old and New Testaments - contain Law and Gospel?



Group Bible Study - Theological

Exodus 3:1-15 (Study by Dr. Diane Jacobson, "Opening the Book of Faith")

- What makes a place holy? What happens to Moses, to us, in sacred space?
- Do we hear God's call as a demand or a promise? As law or gospel? Or both? Do we feel inadequate? Empowered? Fearful? Energized? Scared? Upheld? What demands and promises do you hear in this passage?
- What is the relationship between the call of Moses in the text and God's mission to the world as a whole?
- How does this passage, despite being "Old Testament," show forth Christ?
- How is the vocation of the leader (Moses) tied to the vocation of the whole people of God?

The holiness in this text is not simply about some abstract standing on holy ground. It provides a context and a sign. The holy ground is a sign of God's presence, and it provides a context for the holy word to be spoken. Holy ground, sacred space, is where one pauses to find assurance, to give thanks, to worship and to learn - but it is a sending place, not an ending place. From the burning bush Moses looks out to the journey: to feeling before Pharaoh, to crossing the sea, to arriving at the mountains, to the people finally being brought into the Promised Land.

As Lutherans, we define the Word of God in three ways: Jesus, the living Word; Scripture, the written Word; Preaching, the spoken or proclaimed word.

- Where do we hear holy words spoken?
- Why is such hearing and speaking so important?
- How are worship, baptism, or even Bible study "sending places" and not simply "ending places? How is God present in these places?

Moses' call is not his own. He is being called into God's mission to the world. God has seen Israel's suffering in slavery and intends to do something about it. God's character as a God who looks on suffering and is moved to respond, as one who keeps promises and acts to save, points us towards God's ultimate incarnation, death and resurrection in Christ. Moses cannot alter God's character nor God's promise of freedom, but Moses can take up his call to become part of God's promise in action.

Being holy and being called are not private matters. Being made holy is not the equivalent of being more "spiritual." Moses' experience at the burning bush is not a private, spiritual cleansing. Seeing the miraculous creates space for hearing the call. Hearing then leads to action. The holy word given on holy ground is a vocational word, inviting us to take up our various calls in God's world and for God's world. This vocation calling is relational, invitational, and has outward purpose and direction. The word was not just for Moses; it was for Israel. And not just for Israel, but for the world.

The call of God is particular and personal. In the case of the burning bush, the word was particular to the context of Israel's enslavement and to the narrative of Moses' role within that context. The word is not an abstract, unchanging word given for all time. This is good news for us. This means that each encounter with the divine is new and personal with its own mission and content. We are not Moses, but our calling is also inescapably tied to God's mission in the world.

- To what mission are you called? To what mission is your congregation or institution called? How can this happen?

Finally God's call to Moses is rooted in the promise of God's continuing presence. This promise is dynamic, rather than static; it is particular rather than abstract. God promises to be present with us even to the end of the ages. The Exodus encounter Moses and God comes in the form of a flame. Like God's promise of continuing presence, this flame is available at all times. One encounters the flame when reading scripture,

when gathering in community, when struggling with vocational direction. But be careful: fire can burn. Our encounters with God will not always be only comforting or inviting. We will all have objections and feelings of inadequacy or sin. In fact, that is how law functions--to reveal our sin, to show us that we are not whole without God. Fire burns and purifies. The encounter with the divine presence is likely to change our lives forever. But God will be present with us, lighting our way. This is God's gospel promise.

- How is God's word like a flame? How does it function to burn and purify? How can "shedding light" on a subject function in both a positive and negative way?
- As you consider your own "call story," what promise or good news do you hear in this story of Moses and burning bush?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Jeremiah 1:4-19 (by Paul Lutz, "Opening the Book of Faith")

- How do these insights help you interpret this passage?
- What similarities could you list between God's calling and sending of Jeremiah and God's calling and sending of you?
- What is law in this text? What is gospel?
- So what? What difference does it make that God spoke and acted in that situation with Jeremiah? What does it have to do with you (us) or say to you (us) today?
- Where do you see Christ?

John 8:31-36 (by Kathryn Kleinhans, "Opening the Book of Faith.")

John's Gospel was Luther's favorite Gospel because of its strong focus on Christ as God incarnate.

We might think of the medical profession as being an equivalent to the Law/Gospel relationship: diagnoses and prognosis.

- What is the diagnosis of the human condition (and the church) in this text?
- What is the prognosis?
- Jesus' diagnoses the human problem as bondage, not just physical and political bondage, but bondage to sin itself. Given this diagnosis, what's the prognosis? When the Son makes us free and gives us a place in the household, what, concretely, does that look like for Christians and Christian communities today?
- Will those who initially believed in Jesus continue in his word? Or will they run away from the household of faith? What are some of the causes for why some may run away from the faith?
- What does belief look like and how does it bear fruit?
- The Christian calling is to serve the neighbor for Christ's sake. What does this passage suggest we are freed FOR?

Romans 7:15-25a (by R. Guy Erwin)

Paul's understanding of "the law" in this passage takes on the form of "the flesh," or how his bodily existence and the way his body governs even his mind. Paul understands that this is not a simple dualism of body vs mind or spirit, but that the two are always intimately connected as we live in and with both at the same time. Thus we both delight in the law of the Lord, while simultaneously despair as we see ourselves captive to sin. "Flesh" and "Spirit" are metaphors for what draw us away from God and toward God respectively. Luther referred to this as being simultaneously saint and sinner. It explains the complexity of human reactions to not only each other but also to God. That sense of being suspended between God and sin.

This is not a comfortable place to be and is frequently why we tend to try and run away from being confronted with "the law" in our lives. Yet, we have no choice. We must confront these competing impulses. Our wills, by themselves, are not enough to break us free from our human limitations no matter how much we may try.

- How does this text help make sense of the notions of "saint and sinner" and "law and gospel"?
- How do these categories help you make sense of your life and your experience of other humans?
- How do these categories help hope up this text to new understandings?

BIBLE STUDY

Session 5

Formational

This is the fifth session on Bible Study. Up to this point we have been looking at primarily “informational” ways of doing Bible Study. Now we will turn our attention to “formational” Bible Study. With formational study, we are seeking scripture to help transform our lives and our relationship with God at a much deeper level. We read it formatively with the intention of being changed. We still may utilize informational methods, but we move from the information about the text to the “so what” moment of how it applies to our current lives and struggles.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God’s presence among us.



Romans 12:2

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”



Reflect

Paul exhorts us to not only present our bodies unto holiness as a spiritual act of service to God in the previous verse (Rom 12:1), but our behavior should reflect that by not following the world’s system of thinking, values and beliefs. How adapted are we to the world? How attached are we to the teachings and ways of Christ? What changes do we see in our own lives that have happened or still need to happen?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, this world pulls us into its ways. We forget to love our neighbor and instead demonize and scapegoat those whom we are called to love. Transform our hearts and minds so that we may love the stranger as you have called us to do. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “Take My Life and Let it Be”



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study - Formational



Discuss

- Which type of Bible Study are you most comfortable with? Information or formational? How can you see informational being able to inform your formational study?



Group Bible Study - Informational vs Formational

Luke 4:14-30

Informational study questions. What information will help us hear the story as Luke tells it?

- What was Jesus' point saying "the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me..."
- What did Jesus mean by "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?"
- What did Luke want readers to understand about Jesus and his mission by telling this story?

Historical/Contextual notes: (*Notes from the New Oxford Annotated Bible*)

- Jesus not only worshiped in the synagogue but he preached/presented his message there.
- Procedure in the synagogue was for a scroll to be handed to the preacher by the attendant of the synagogue. The preacher typically sat in what was known as the "Moses" seat. They would stand to read, but would sit to preach.
- Jesus is quoting and defining his mission according to Isaiah 61:1-2 with some variations. (why do you think Jesus added the restoration of sight to the blind and omitted "and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn")
- The people become hostile toward Jesus (Why does he antagonize them?)
- The widow and Naaman were not Jews, and yet they knew God's help when Israel did not.

Formational Questions:

- How is God speaking to you in this passage?
- What message does God have for you?
- What is God calling you to do and be through this passage?
- How am I called to change or respond by this passage?
- Where does this passage invite us to go deeper?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Acts 8:26-40

Informational Study (*you may need to google the answers*)

- What was a eunuch?
- Why were court officials to queens typically eunuchs?
- What is the relationship between Israel and Ethiopia?
- What rules applied to Eunuchs (Deuteronomy 23:1) in relation to the temple?
- How would the Eunuch have seen Isaiah 56:3-5 as a word of hope?

Formational Study:

- Read this as you would ponder a letter from a friend. What is God seeking to say to you through this story?
- How do you feel about what is being said in this passage?
- Why are you feeling the way you do? Why are you having the response you are having? What's going on inside you?
- Reflect on what your reactions tell you about yourself--your attitudes, habits, perspectives, and relationship with God.
- Record your reflections down in your journal.

Genesis 3:1-13

This is a story about the challenges of paying attention to God.

- Consider what the story reveals about the qualities of relationship that God desires or blocks that we experience in listening to God.
- What words or images speak to you?
- How has God been walking in the garden of your life?
- How do you respond to God's call, "Where are you?" - especially when you feel ashamed?
- What gets stirred up within you when God asks, "What have you done?"
- Record your reflections down in your journal.

Psalm 81

Informational questions: Who is speaking? Who is being spoken to? What's the situation in Israel at the time of this writing? What is this Psalm about? What does this Psalm reveal about the heart of God vs. the heart of his people?

Formational questions: Pause to listen to the voice of your own heart. What is the character of your heart when it is stubborn, and what have been the consequences? What is the character of your heart when it is listening, and what difference would a listening heart make in your life?

Read Genesis 32:22-32

This story is about Jacob's going to the river where he wrestles with God and is changed.

Informational: Why is Jacob going to the river? What is Jacob's struggle in this story?

Formational: How are you able to find alone time with God? In what ways do you relate to Jacob? What struggles do you have with God? How are you changed by your struggles?

Read Mark 10:17-22

This is a story about a man who wanted to know what he had to do to obtain eternal life.

Informational: What limited this man from becoming a follower of Jesus? How did he view Jesus in general? Does Jesus seem angry about the man's response of walking away? What does this tell us about Jesus?

Formational: What keeps you from fully living your life as a follower of Jesus? What's the one thing you lack? What is Jesus saying about the one thing you lack? (*Be sure to remember - Jesus loves you, nonetheless.*)

BIBLE STUDY

Session 6

Meditative

This is the sixth session on Bible Study that will focus on using meditative practices to study scripture. Meditating on scripture is as old as scripture itself. The practices of meditating on God's Word an integral part of how we listen to God and ruminate on the Word in order to probe, ponder, and explore so that the words of scripture become God's Word in our lives.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Psalm 49:3

"Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."



Reflect

Reflect on what "meditation of my heart" means for you.



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.



Music (optional)

Listen to "The Meditations of My Heart" by Elaine Hagenberg
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3j9BcIzI0k>



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study - Meditative



Group Bible Study - Meditation (Lectio Divina)

Prepare with a moment of silence.

The Leader will instruct the participants to think as they listen to what catches their attention, what words, phrases or images they hear as though for the first time.

Read Philippians 2:1-11 out loud, slowly, and participants will listen silently.

Sit in silence for 1-2 minutes.

Invite participants to share words, phrases, or images (don't worry about meaning or interpretation at this juncture)

Read it a second time, asking participants to focus on any phrase or image to which they feel drawn. Contemplate: Why do you feel drawn to it? What does it remind you of? What meaning does it hold for you? What could God be saying to you?

After 2-3 minutes, share responses to the questions with the group.

Read the passage a third time. Shift from conversing with yourself to conversing with God. Tell God what the passage evokes in you, then listen and respond to what god has to say.

After three minutes of silence, participate in a time of shared prayer, lifting to God the thanksgiving, concerns, and intercessions that meditation on the text has called forth.

Rest: Take time to silently rest in God's loving presence. Release yourselves and your prayers to God in trust. Allow several minutes of quiet.



Discuss

- What was this experience like for you? What did you receive? What did you find helpful? What did you find obtrusive or unnatural?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Practicing Meditative Bible Study

- **Step 1:** Choose a text from the Scriptures that you wish to pray. When choosing scripture, length of text can depend on what God is calling you to do – it can be a verse or an entire chapter. (Some suggestions: Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd...”); Mark 4:35-41 (Jesus calms the storm); Luke 22:39-44 (agony in the garden) John 15:1-17 (the vine and the branches); Philippians 2:1-13 (“have among yourselves the same attitude as Christ Jesus...”))
- **Step 2:** Place yourself in a comfortable position and allow yourself to become silent. Focus for a few moments on their breathing or use a beloved “prayer word” or “prayer phrase” you gently recite. (This is putting “centering prayer” to use). Use whatever method is best for you, and allow yourself to enjoy silence for a few moments.
- **Step 3:** Turn to the text and read it slowly, peacefully. Take in each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the “still, small voice” of one word or phrase that somehow says, “I am for you today.” Realize that the phrase or word may not jump out at you, but reveal itself slowly. Choose that word or phrase and repeat it out loud.
- **Step 4:** Read the text again; however, this time place yourself in the Bible scene or in a situation where you are speaking to God. In your journal write out the scene or situation you (we) envisioned while rereading the passage.
- **Step 5:** Read the text for a third time and this time contemplate what God is inviting you to do. What do you think is being communicated, what is God trying to tell you, what is revealing itself through scripture? If you wish to reread the text again, feel free, there are unlimited amounts of time one can reflect on a passage.

BIBLE STUDY

Session 7

Directing Imagination

This is the final session on Bible Study. This session will focus on practicing using our imagination when listening to Biblical stories. The benefits of using directing imagination when you approach scripture is that it helps you deal with scripture at both a conscious and subconscious level. The more vividly you are able to imagine these scenes, the more deeply the story will imbed itself into your memory. Unlike other sessions, Pastor Rebecca will actually guide participants through a Directing Imagination exercise in the video segment. Be prepared to pause the video where prompted.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Luke 1:24-25

After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."



Reflect

Imagine you're an elderly woman like Elizabeth. What are your thoughts when you discover you are pregnant at your age? Why do you go into seclusion? What are you pondering and praying about during these five months? Can you relate with Elizabeth in any way?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, we forget sometimes that the people we read about in scripture were human beings just like us - having the same emotions, thoughts, and fears. As we read the stories of your people, help us to recognize how you are speaking to us through them. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to "My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness" (The Magnificat)



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Bible Study - Directing Imagination



Discuss

- What was this experience like for you? Have you ever read scripture this way before? What new insights did it possibly open up for you?



Group Bible Study - Directing Imagination

Read all the way through Luke 18:35-42

As he [Jesus] approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Then he shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

Now read it verse by verse, pausing to ask questions:

As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.

Imagine you are the blind man sitting by the side of the road. Close your eyes to feel the darkness of being sightless. Feel the heat of the sun on the rocks beneath you. Why are you begging? Where is your family? What caused you to lose your sight? In the distance you hear a crowd of people approaching. What are they saying? What grabs your attention?

When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

What do you know about Jesus? Do you stay seated or try to stand?

If you're in the crowd, what are your thoughts about the blind man on the side of the road? About Jesus?

Then he shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

You're a crowd member telling the man to be quiet. Why? How do you feel about this blind man who is yelling? Do you know him? Is he a stranger?

Imagine again you are the blind man. What would cause you to yell out to Jesus? How do you feel when the people tell you to be quiet? Why do you yell louder? Do recognize any of the voices trying to silence you?

Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Imagine you are Jesus. You hear the sound of someone calling your name in the midst of the crowd. How do you feel about the crowd? When you come near the blind man, what are your initial thoughts? Why do you ask him what he wants?

He said, “Lord, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

Imagine what it would be like to suddenly have sight again after years of being blind. Is it painful at first? Imagine how it feels when you walk out of a dark theater into bright sunlight. What does praising God look like for you?

If you're a person in the crowd - especially one who told the man to be quiet - what are your thoughts as you witness this?



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Practicing Directing Imagination Techniques

Imaginative readings are best suited to the Gospels. Visualize the event as if you were making a movie. Pay attention to the details: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event. Lose yourself in the story; don't worry if your imagination is running too wild. At some point, place yourself in the scene and meet Jesus there.

John 4:1-42 Samaritan Woman at the Well

Read the story through once, then go through the story again more slowly and begin asking yourself these questions:

- *Imagine for a moment you are the woman. You've had five husbands. Why? What has happened in your life that has caused this? Were you discarded time after time for being barren? Were you widowed five times? What is life like for you in a society where women have few options and limited resources? Why are you going at noon instead of in the evening or morning when the other women go? What are you feeling as you approach Jesus? A man, sitting at a well where women typically gather? A Jewish man - remembering Jews and Samaritans don't typically get along all that well.*
- *What are your thoughts when Jesus - a Jewish man - asks you to draw water for him?*
- *Now imagine that you are Jesus. You are regarding this Samaritan woman who you know likely is skeptical of your motivations. What is the real issue that you see as she approaches and talks with you?*
- *You are the woman again. Jesus has just told you that he can give you water from a well that never runs dry. What are you thinking? What are you feeling?*
- *What do you feel when Jesus states he knows you have no husband and in fact have had five husbands?*
- *Jesus tells the woman: "believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will*

worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

- *How would you respond, as a Samaritan, to Jesus saying “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”*
- *What does it mean to you, as a Samaritan, to hear that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah?*
- *Now imagine you are the disciples. You see Jesus hanging out at the well where women typically go, talking with... a Samaritan woman. What are you thinking? Why do you not question what Jesus is doing?*
- *Imagine you are the townspeople. What is your relationship to this woman? How do you view her? What are your thoughts when she tells you about Jesus?*

Additional scripture passage suggestions to contemplate using directing imagination:

- *Luke 19:1-10 - Jesus and Zacchaeus*
- *Mark 5:25-34 - Jesus and the woman with a hemorrhage*
- *Luke 10:25-37 - Good Samaritan*
- *Luke 15:11-32 - Prodigal Son*

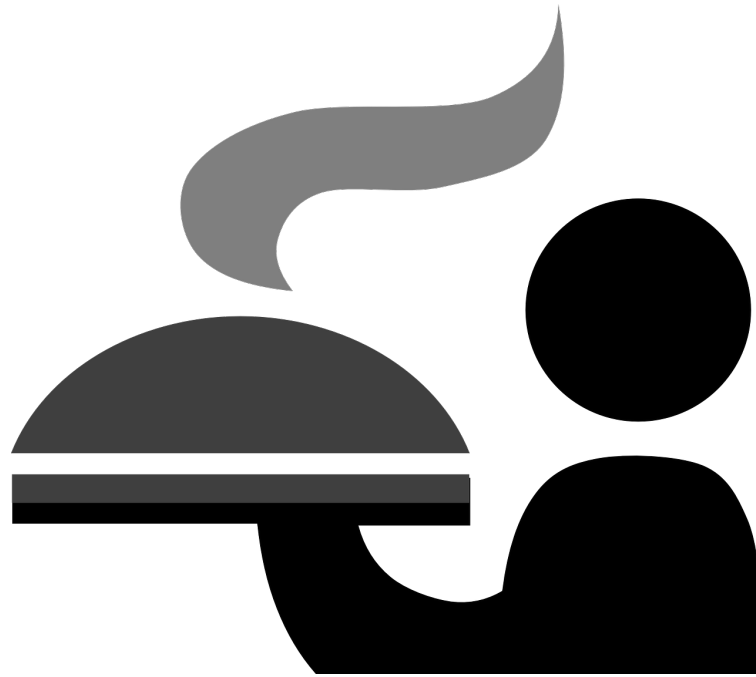
As you read:

1. *Focus your heart and mind. God is present and your desire is to encounter God through your reading.*
2. *Read the passage twice, becoming familiar with the story and its details.*
3. *Sit quietly and close your eyes. Picture the scene. Where is it taking place? Who is there? What are the characters doing? What are the sights, sounds, smells? Are you observing the scene as an outsider, are you one of the characters? How do you feel? What do you think?*
4. *The scene may come to life for you in vivid detail. Or you may enter into it through verbally describing what you see, contemplating people’s words or actions. Engage with the scene and gain a more personal knowledge of Jesus.*
5. *As you conclude, take time to talk directly to Jesus. Speak whatever comes to your heart.*

PATHWAYS

PART 3

Service



“A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”

- Martin Luther -

SERVICE

Session 1

Discerning Your Gifts

This is the first session on service. Determining your gifts can be both an internal and external process. What you see in yourself is not always the same as what others see in you. Discernment is not a simple knowing, or awareness. It requires placing personal awareness within the context of life experience in relationship with others and with God. Discernment is complex, challenging, and hugely rewarding ongoing life task. Discernment, however, is necessary for the ongoing and future life of the church. In this session we will spend some time discerning what our spiritual gifts are by having all members of the group help with the process of identifying these gifts in each other. This process may help you not only figure out how to serve in your church and community, it may open the doors for discovering your vocation. A vocation is that which you are passionate about doing and what the world needs done. When you combine these two, you have discovered what your vocation in life is.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



1 Corinthians 12:4-6

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone



Reflect

What's been one of the most fulfilling jobs or things you've done in your life? Do you continue to do it? Why or why not?



Opening Prayer:

Spirit of the living God, We only want to hear Your voice, we want to know You more and more. Come and speak to us, oh Lord. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to "Christ Be Our Light"



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session.



Watch: Service - Discerning Your Gifts



Discuss

- Pastor Chad points out in the video that “Christianity isn’t a spectator sport.” How often do you think Christians tend to leave their faith solely in the realm of spiritual belief and don’t put that belief/faith into action?



Group Exercise - Discerning Your Gifts

We are going to begin to name the gifts that you have observed in each person in your small group throughout these past several weeks. Take a card for each person and write the name of a group member on the top of each card.

1. Think about each person’s unique contribution as a group member since the beginning of your time together.
2. Recall what he/she has communicated during the past several sessions about things they’ve enjoyed, their dreams, and potentials for love latent in wounds and weakness.
3. Record your insights and affirmations in your journal.
4. When you have gathered your affirmations and insights about each person, read over the list of New Testament gifts (list and definitions at the end of this chapter). Interpret these gifts broadly and creatively, and if you see gifts not listed, feel free to write them down, too (though try to find one of the suggested gifts from scripture if at all possible).
5. Take your card for each person and write down the gifts you clearly see in each person. Beside or beneath each gift add a few words describing how and where you have seen these gifts.
6. Now write down the gifts you see as potentials in each person. Describe briefly how or where you have seen these potentials.
7. When finished with each person, gather together to share with one another your insights.
8. Keep responses brief - you’ll spend more time talking about these gifts next week after you’ve had time to digest them.



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-31

Meditate on the mystery of our relationship in Christ and our dependence on one another for building up the full ministry of Christ. In light of Paul's encouragement to consider your own call, reflect on your own gifts that the group highlighted in your time together. What gifts confirmed what you knew, which ones surprised you? Which ones challenge you? In your journal, sketch out a picture of a body. Where would you locate yourself and your gifts on that body? (ie: Teacher might be the head; Healer might be hands, etc)

Read Ephesians 4:7-13

Meditate on the hope of growing together "to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." Consider the gifts you identified in the others in your group and what it would mean for each of them to grow to maturity. Pray for their maturity in using the gifts God has given them, and to be able to speak in truth about their gifts so they may see them more clearly.

Read Romans 12:1-8

Meditate on Paul's counsel that we think about our gifts with "sober judgment." Identify attitudes that might limit your ability to appreciate the gifts of others or value your own gifts. Offer these attitudes to God and ask to appreciate both your own gifts and the gifts of your group.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Reflect on people who have kindled your gifts and helped you build them up. What qualities in them helped you to be yourself? Pray for the grace to be likewise to your group members.

List of Spiritual Gifts

Administration: the gift of organizing human and material resources for the work of Christ, including the ability to plan and work with people to delegate responsibilities, track progress, and evaluate the effectiveness of procedures. Administrators attend to details, communicate effectively, and take as much pleasure in working behind the scenes as they do in standing in the spotlight.

Apostleship/Evangelism: the gift of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have not heard, whether at home or in other cultures and foreign lands. This is the missionary zeal that moves us from the familiar into uncharted territory. Apostles embrace opportunities to learn foreign languages, visit other cultures, and go where people are who have not heard the Christian message (Note: this no longer means going across the ocean or even into another country. The language you may need to learn to speak is possibly a generational language. Your mission field might be right outside your door.) This usually calls for you to enter into a personal relationship with someone that requires sharing your personal faith and a call for a response to faith.

Compassion: the gift of exceptional empathy that moves us to action. More than just concern, compassion demands that we share the suffering of others in order to connect the gospel truth with other realities of life. Compassion moves us beyond our comfort zones to offer practical, tangible aid to all God's children, regardless of the perceived worthiness of the recipients or the response we receive.

Discernment: the gift of separating truth from erroneous teachings and to rely on spiritual intuition to know what God is calling us to do. Discernment allows us to focus on what is truly important and to ignore that which deflects us from faithful obedience to God. Discernment aids us in knowing whom to listen to and whom to avoid.

Exhortation: This is the gift of exceptional encouragement. Exhorters see the silver lining in every cloud, offer deep and inspiring hope to the fellowship, and look for and commend the best in everyone. Exhorters empower the community of faith to feel good about itself and to feel hopeful for the future. Exhorters are not concerned by appearances; they hold fast to what they know to be true and right and good.

Giving: Beyond the regular response of gratitude to God that all believers make, giving as a gift is the ability to use the resource of money to support the work of the body of Christ. Giving is the ability to manage money to the honor and glory of God. Givers can discern the best ways to put money to work, can understand the validity and practicality of appeals for funds, and can guide in the most faithful methods for managing the congregation's financial concerns.

Healing: the gift of channeling God's healing powers into the lives of God's people. Physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological healing are all ways that healers manifest this gift. Healers are prayerful and they help people understand that healing is in the hands of God, that healing is often more than just erasing negative symptoms. Some of the most powerful healers display some of the most heartbreaking afflictions.

Helping: This is the gift of making sure that everything is ready for the work of Christ to occur. Helpers assist others to accomplish the mission and ministry of the church. These "unsung heroes" work behind the scenes and attend to details that others would rather not be bothered with. Helpers function faithfully, regardless of the credit or attention they receive. Helpers provide the framework upon which the ministry of the church is built.

Interpretation of Tongues: This gift has two very different understandings: 1) the ability to interpret foreign languages without the necessity of formal study to communicate with those who have not heard the Christian message or 2) the ability to interpret the gift of tongues as a secret prayer language that communicates with God at a deep spiritual level. Both understandings are communal in nature: the first extends the good news into the world; the second strengthens the faith within the fellowship.

Knowledge: This is the gift of knowing the truth through faithful study of scripture and the human situation. Knowledge provides the information necessary for the transformation of the world and formation of the body of Christ. Those possessing this gift challenge the fellowship to improve itself through study, scripture, discussions, and prayer.

Leadership: this is the gift of orchestrating the gifts and resources of others to achieve the mission and ministry of the church. Leaders move the community of faith toward a God-given vision of service, and they enable others to use their gifts to the very best of the abilities. Leaders are capable of creating synergy, whereby the community of faith accomplishes much more than its individual members could achieve on their own.

Prophecy: This is the gift of speaking God's word clearly and faithfully. Prophets allow God to speak through them to communicate the message the people most need to hear. While often unpopular, prophets are able to say what needs to be said because of the spiritual empowerment they receive. Prophets do not foretell the future, but proclaim God's future by revealing God's perspective on our current reality.

Servanthood: This is the gift of serving the spiritual and material needs of other people. Servants understand their place in the body of Christ as giving comfort and aid to all who are in need. Servants look to the needs of others rather than focus on their own needs. To serve is to put faith into action; it is to treat others as if they were indeed Jesus Christ himself. The gift of service extends our Christian love into the world.

Teaching: this is the gift of bringing scriptural and spiritual truths to others. More than just teaching church school, teachers witness to the truth of Jesus Christ in a variety of ways and they help others to understand the complex realities of the Christian faith. Teachers are revealers. They shine the light of understanding into the darkness of doubt and ignorance. They open people to new truths, and they challenge people to be more in the future than they have been in the past.

Tongues: this gift has two popular interpretations: 1) the ability to communicate the gospel to other people in a foreign language without the benefit of having studied said language (see Acts 2:4) or 2) the ability to speak to God in a secret, unknown prayer language that can only be understood by a person possessing the gift of interpretation. The gift of speaking in the language of another culture makes the gift of tongues valuable for spreading the gospel throughout the world, while the gift of speaking a secret prayer language offers the opportunity to build faithfulness within a community of faith.

Wisdom: this is the gift of translating life experience into spiritual truth and of seeing the application of scriptural truth to daily living. The wise in our fellowships offer balance and understanding that transcend reason. Wisdom applies a God-given common sense to our understanding of God's plan for the church. Wisdom helps the community of faith remain focused on the important work of the church and it enables younger, less mature Christian to benefit from those who have been blessed by God to share deep truths.

SERVICE

Session 2

Being Christ in the World

This is the second session on service. In this session we will more deeply explore and cultivate how we can utilize the gifts God has given us in our church, community, and world. Our gifts are meant to draw us more deeply into community with one another. And, like all bodies, the body of Christ is meant to grow and change. So while we always remain centered on Jesus, our community is not static but rather a dynamic and ever-changing community of faith. Through the use of our spiritual gifts the church grows and adapts in new ways. We serve one another by being connected to one another.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



John 15:15-17

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."



Reflect

When we hear the term "advocate," what word associations or images come to mind? What does "Spirit of truth" mean to you?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, we are called to act, love and serve one another in your name. Open our hearts, show us your mercy, and help us to give hope to the hopeless. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to "The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve"



Share

Share with one another any thoughts from last weeks' exercises or session. Spend some time discussing the exercise on 1 Corinthians 12 from last session regarding where you feel you fit on the body and what gifts surprised you.



Watch: Service - Being Christ in the World



Discuss

- Spend a few moments thinking about the following:

Where are you hearing God's call? What are you hearing God calling you to be and do? God is calling us all in a particular way in the here and now to take up a task, assume a responsibility, or devote our lives to meeting a real need in the service of Christ. This is how we align our lives with God's will in the world - "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

- **Read Exodus 3:1-14 and 4:1, 10**

Pay attention to the words or phrases that speak to you most clearly. Briefly name them. What does the story mirror about the nature of a call or about discovering one's calling?

- The story of Moses' call reflects at least two movements in discovering OUR call:
 1. It reminds us to pay attention to the burning bushes that illumine the way and call us forward. We do this by noticing people, situations, and human needs that call us to turn aside and look--that give us a glimpse of God's purpose at work among us and the purpose for which God is empowering us to live. Burning bushes may be outside us, but they reflect something of God's presence, promise and power at work in us.
 2. Name our human fears and reservations about accepting God's call and can receive God's assurance. Fears always accompany an awareness of God's calling because God calls us to go beyond where we already are. But a sense of God's assurance and empowerment also accompanies a genuine awareness of God's call.
- Solitary Reflection: Spend about 15 minutes contemplating these questions and writing down your thoughts.
 - *"I must turn aside and look at this great sight."*
 - *Spend a few moments turning aside to look at the burning bushes in your life. Recall one to three moments of penetrating insights, persistent concerns, or compelling encounters with human need that continue to speak of your calling in Christ. What is the common theme that you see or calling that you hear?*
 - *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?*
 - *What are your fears about heeding the call that you hear? List your "Who am I that I should..." feelings: reservations, objections, feelings of inadequacies, doubts or obstacles.*
- Come back together and allow each person to share what their burning bushes were and what their fears and objections are.



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Read Mark 11:15-19

Meditate on the picture of Jesus in the Temple. Picture Jesus in your church today. What would Jesus see, hear, feel, affirm, and question? What would he recognize and not recognize as an expression of his life and mission? What does it mean to be “a house of prayer for all nations”? Listen in prayer for the ways you can use your gifts to help make that happen.

Read Acts 13:1-3

Paul and Barnabas are sent out on a shared mission to participate in a common work. With whom in your group or your church are you sensing a shared mission? Toward whom is the Holy Spirit leading you for the purpose of responding to a need? Pray about your call with openness to the Holy Spirit’s enabling guidance.

Read Matthew 25:31-46

Meditate on the call to the church to see and respond to “the least of these” with whom Christ has united himself. Who are the people in our world today that fit this description? What prevents you from seeing the people that Jesus names? What practices would enable you to better see them as beloved by Christ? What would help you and your church to see those Jesus saw, be present to those for whom Jesus was present? Pray for eyes to see and the heart to respond.

SERVICE

Session 3

Your Calling

This is the third and final session on service. In this session we will more deeply explore how to finally discern our calling individually and as a group - what ministries are we called to participate in or start. What strengths and weaknesses does our congregation have and where are feeling called to either fill a gap or strengthen an already existing ministry? As Christians, we need to be rooted in church communities that genuinely turn our attention to God. One danger in seeking spiritual community is that we will be forever floating from one spiritual high to another, looking for the perfect faith community that will do it for us. Staying with a church, either a denomination or congregation, even when things are not going according to our preferences or when conflicts arise, is part of growing in love and faithfulness. We need the deep wisdom of the church, its rhythms and seasons, Word and sacrament, the gathered community. Our individual journeys, when isolated, can only be as broad and wide as our personal limits. With one another - past and present - we begin to taste the unlimited possibilities in God.

Opening Activities



Centering Moment

Light a candle and observe 30 seconds of silence as a reminder of God's presence among us.



Philippians 1:6

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."



Reflect

What work do you feel God is calling you to be part of?



Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, we are called to live in the light of your glory and your kingdom. Help us now as we discern your will for us in this group, this congregation, and this community. Amen.



Music (optional)

Sing or listen to “We Give Thee But Thine Own.”



Watch: Service - Your Calling



Group Exercise - Deepening our Walk With Christ

Every group in the church has a call and a mission. Let us now listen for where God might be calling us to move farther in this journey. No one is expected to commit - this is just an exploration. As you read through the questions, keep your responses as brief as possible.

- **Using Lectio Divina, read Mark 6:30-44.** The disciples are on a type of retreat when they get “called out” to serve. Listen for where God is calling us to serve.

Read the passage three times using the steps for lectio divina.

Listen with your hearts for God’s call beneath the surface to the whole group. Remember: God may speak to you through the least likely, most unexpected thought or voice. When you are invited to respond, don’t give lengthy answers or commentary.

First reading: Notice images, words and phrases that catch your attention, linger in the mind, or words that you seem to be hearing for the first time. Share briefly with one another what you noticed from the first reading.

Second reading: Read slowly verse by verse as we contemplate questions following each verse:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

- *In what ways have your meetings been for you a gathering around Jesus, a deserted place all by yourselves, a time to rest for a while, apart from the comings and goings of your busy lives?*

Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

- *Who are these people in the story and what are they looking for? Who are the people in your community who are searching and hungering, and what are they looking for?*

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

- *What did Jesus see in the people that moved him? What do you see in the people in your community that moves you to compassion?*

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.”

- *How did the disciples want to respond to the need they saw? How do you and your church respond to the hungers or needs that you see in your community?*

But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.”

- *What is your reaction to Jesus’ command here?*

They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.”

- *What assumptions shaped the disciples’ view of the resources that were available to them and where they would find them? What resources do you find are available for the need at hand? Invite brief responses.*

Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

- *What did Jesus have the disciples do with what meager resources they had?*
- *What is Jesus calling you to do with the resources you have to help people find bread for the hungers of their hearts? What ways can we fill people’s lives? Invite brief responses.*

Third Reading: *Read through entire scripture again in its entirety and then sit in silence for 1-2 minutes. Invite the participants to speak about how they heard God speaking to their hearts during the silence.*



Group Exercise - Congregational Call & Direction

This is an exercise in beginning to seek God’s call and direction for our congregation. The exercise involves some assessing of current reality, some envisioning of possibilities, and listening for the voice of God’s truth and guidance for us.



The outer circle:

“General Guidance: What the Church is and does”

This is the whole structure of worship, music, sacraments, and teachings by which the church directs the attention of her children toward God.

The second circle: “Group Guidance”

Groups & ministries that enable people to grow in faith and take greater advantage of the richness of the church’s general spiritual direction. (Organized retreats, support groups, scripture-based groups, covenant groups, etc.)

The third circle: “One on One”

Someone who provides intentional listening and direction for you during a crucial time. (ie: a Stephen Ministry)

Fourth Circle: “Hidden Guidance”

Guides come to us in many guises. These are people that may not be leaders within the church but are the people you encounter that have believed in you. Sometimes all we need to draw us closer to God is the listening ear, the shared prayer, or the faithful support of another person. There is often that unobtrusive person who graces you with wisdom and experience who will share their faith with you. (Just be careful this relationship does not turn into harmful gossip or an elitist sensibility like “we’re the only holy ones in this church.” No relationship should cut itself off from the larger church.)

1. Name the current reality.

Write down the name of each active ministry setting from each of the circles within the congregation that you know about. Identify the one that has been most important in your life. (Worship, small group, bible study, one-on-one, etc)

2. See the promise.

Note other possibilities that you believe people need in order to continue to mature in the Christian life. Identify the one you feel most strongly about and why.

3. Reflect on what both is current and what is the potential.

Look at the many settings for ministry represented. How would you characterize the different kinds of ministries represented here? What does this say about what kinds of ministries are most and least available, most and least needed at this time?

4. Listen.

Listen again in your mind to the concerns, hopes and testimonies that you have heard and listen for how God may be speaking to us through these words. What word, insight or image continues to reverberate within you regarding the promise of our church as a community of grace and guidance?

Let's continue to ponder the promise, listen for God's call, and ask ourselves what all this means about the way we participate and lead in the congregation.

Next step will be to take these insights into group conversation with your pastor.



Closing Prayer

Choose a prayer style that you have learned about to close.



Exercises To Do At Home

Read Matthew 5:1-12

Meditate on the Beatitudes as a stairway of growth in God's blessing. The Beatitudes are stages in the experience of those who are "poor in spirit." Where do you find yourself? What do you have to lay down or take up in order to go the next step? What would you need for that to happen? Spend time listening to what God wants to say to you about these things.

Read Colossians 1:24-2:7

In this passage Paul articulates his personal passion and pastoral goal that motivates all he does: "That we may present everyone mature in Christ." For what do you and your church "toil and struggle?" Notice phrases and images that illumine what it means to mature in Christ. Rewrite them in your own words. Pay special attention to whether you see the "you" that Paul addresses as individuals, the faith community, or both; and what difference that distinction makes.

Read Hebrews 5:11-6:2

These verses liken someone believers to infants who have not yet progressed beyond a diet of milk, even though by now they should be teachers. What kind of spiritual nurture do milk and solid food consist of? Which is YOUR usual spiritual diet?

Now imagine your church as a spiritual nutrition center. Design a balanced spiritual diet for persons in your church who want to be “mature.” What are the main food groups? Reflect on what it would take for you and other people in the church to represent and provide such a diet.

