



Lifelong Discipleship Formation

Opening Prayer

God of steadfast love,
The earth and all that is within it proclaim your wondrous works. The mystery of your splendor, the hope of your redemption, the truth of your salvation is daily made manifest throughout your beloved creation. You are, indeed, a living God who longs to reveal in wisdom and in truth. You long for relationships of righteousness. You desire for your people to marvel at your majesty and be transformed by your grace. Lord, we admit we do not always perceive it. We fear to follow; we ignore our discipleship. In Christ, help us to have courage and conviction to walk in faith that seeks wisdom and righteousness all of our days. Make us a people whose lives proclaim your story, and witness to your love. Form us as your disciples, so that we might be instruments of your will and grow ever closer to you. For this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Scripture: Acts 2: 42-47

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Acts 2: 42-47 is Luke's depiction of the primitive communal life together. It focuses on four key ideas: 1.) The apostolic teaching 2.) Fellowship "koinonia" – a group of companions who shared in a common life 3.) Breaking of bread in their homes – central pledge and symbol of common life and common faith; table fellowship. "In their homes" is differentiated from the "apostolic teaching" to not that discipleship formation happens inside and outside the "temple" life together. 4.) Devoted themselves to prayer – devotional life finds expression in family gatherings and daily community.

vv. 43 depicts the communal life together and the assurance of God's presence through "many wonders and signs." Notice the idea that "awe came upon everyone." The notion of "awe" or "fear" is a testament to miracles within the O.T. It is characteristic of the reverence attributed to God's power. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom." Psalm 111:10. This communal gathering, the revelation attributed in apostolic teaching, prayer, breaking bread together, and fellowship, are all attributed to the fact that God shows up in Spirit and in truth. God reveals God's self in relationship to God and to one another. This communal life seeks wisdom and understanding, and God is present there. Thus, "All who believed were together and had all things in common" (vv. 44).

Luke emphasizes the daily routine of the community, whereby, daily needs were being met, people gathered in the temple, broke bread in homes, and praised God with glad and generous hearts. And daily God was there, adding to those whom God gathered.

"As one views modern congregations, many with their hectic round of activities – yoga, ceramics, daycare – one suspects that socialization is being substituted for the gospel, warm-hearted busyness is being offered in lieu of Spirit-empowered community. One wonders if the church needs to reflect again that when all is said and done 'one thing is needful', namely to embody, in the church's unique way, the peculiarity of the call to devote ourselves 'to the apostles' teaching' and fellowship, to breaking of the bread and the prayers."

William H. Willimon

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
1. What is necessary for Lifelong Discipleship Formation to take root?
 2. What leaves us skeptical, fearful, unwilling?
 3. What would need to change in our communal life? Our home life? Our daily life?
 4. Name how your church community helps to nurture and equip you for Lifelong Discipleship.
 5. Name a pivotal time when you grew or were challenged as a disciple in your church.

Closing Prayer

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Lifelong Discipleship Formation.*

Additional Resources

- James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978).
- Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).
- Parker J. Palmer, *To Know AS We Are Known: Education As A Spiritual Journey* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1993).
- Richard Robert Osmer, *Teaching For Faith: A Guide For Teachers of Adult Classes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).
- Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007).
- Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).

Additional Videos

- Theocademy – Update Your Faith System (Foundations series)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=42&v=4OAK17hxRz8
- Bible Studies for Life – Discipleship Doesn't Happy by Accident
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ooSmpG0HRg>
- Bellevue Christian Church – Discipleship
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTBbUirYxNo>
- Bernie Dunlap – The Life-long Learner (TED talk)
https://www.ted.com/talks/ben_dunlap_talks_about_a_passionate_life

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis

For children, pay special attention to the word “awe” verse 43. Children might be better at understanding some aspects of awe than we are, but they will need some help at first understanding the word. Ask for examples. Take a walk and look around. Be in awe together. Then make sure to spend some time connecting “awe” with our awesome God.

For youth, explore the connection between “awe” and curiosity. Talk about how these can create a foundation for some joyful exploration of their faith throughout their entire lives. Perhaps, bring in a more seasoned adult to talk about why they still go to Sunday School and how studying the stories of scripture continue to mold them into who they are.

For younger adults, spend time with the notion of indoctrination. Many young adults stay away from church because they do not want to be told what to believe. How should lifelong discipleship formation be different from indoctrination? Are we simply meant to keep the tradition alive or are we meant to further the tradition of the church? What's the difference?

For seasoned adults, ask for stories or examples of how they have seen (or have not seen) the vision of church laid out for them in these verses. Encourage honest reflection and look for shared experiences. In what ways might the practices of the early church help form (or reform) the church today.

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore

- sign up for an in-depth bible study
- read the bible in 90 days
- visit a Sunday School class at another church
- start a home group in which you can break bread, share prayers, and “devote” yourselves
- take an online course at a seminary or through a community lifelong learning program
- begin a “spiritual formation” journal in which you chronicle your development as a disciple
- commit to making church attendance a priority whether at home or during travel
- read a “Christian book” that may be outside of your comfort zone and discuss with a trusted friend

Intentional Authentic Evangelism

Opening Prayer

Living God,

In Jesus Christ, we have been given Good News of saving and sacrificial love. This news is the very breath that offers us life. It is the unmerited salvation, the gift of grace, and the hope of an eternal home in your kingdom. In times of suffering or sorrow, in times of rejoicing and rest, this is indeed the Good News of our entire being. But, we forget that sometimes, Lord. We separate it from daily news. We hide it away so we don't offend. Lord, make your will, our will; your intent, our intentionality. Make Intentional Authentic Evangelism who we are, unapologetically. Make it so that we cannot help but to share this good news in authentic relationship with others. Lord, this we pray to the one who gave life, so that we might live, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: John 4: 1-41

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Jesus is leaving Judea for Galilee, because the Pharisees are jealous of Jesus' success in those who were coming to believe. In order to get to Galilee, Jesus goes through Samaria. The hatred and violence between the Jews and the Samaritans, were heightened during this time, as Jews were being attacked traveling to and from Jerusalem for the temple feasts. In fact, the violence made travelers take a different, more popular route, but Jesus went with his disciples into Samaria.

Jesus, who is tired, comes upon this Samaritan woman, drawing water in the midday heat. Here the themes unfold: the living water (vv. 7-15); spiritual worship (vv. 16-24); and Jesus' self-disclosure as the Messiah (vv. 25-26)

Note that Christ first comes close; he draws people into conversation and relationship. He meets them for who they are, right where they are, and genuinely talks with them. No pamphlet, no immediate call to repentance, no hell fire scare tactics, just a real conversation.

This story identifies two basic necessities to humanity: water and food. John give glimpse of a tired Christ in human flesh who sits in the heat of the day and asks for water. As Jesus enters a relationship with this woman, she experiences God offering a drink of water that will satisfy her thirst forever. There is nothing, not the threat of violence amid these two peoples, not the story of this woman's life, not the heat of day or the fact Jesus has not eaten, nothing – will stop Christ from meeting this woman with Good News. In fact, when the disciples try to get him to eat, Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together" (vv. 34-36). Meanwhile, many in the city of Samaria came to believe, because of what the woman shared with them.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
1. Recall the first-time Christ became Good News for your life? Who told or shared with you?
 2. What does Intentional Authentic Evangelism require of us? What does it look like in our daily lives?
 3. What stops us from sharing the Good News with people we are in relationship with?
 4. Think of the daily needs of people you are in relationship with. How could they benefit from the Good News?
 5. How does your church community equip and empower you to practice Authentic Evangelism?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*

- Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of *Intentional Authentic Evangelism*.

Additional Resources

- Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000)
- Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2013)
- Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015)
- Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of A New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012)
- Rebecca Wilson, James Naughton, *Speaking Faithfully: Communications as Evangelism in a Noisy World* (Morehouse Publishing, 2012)

Additional Videos

- TED Talks
https://www.ted.com/talks/manoush_zomorodi_how_boredom_can_lead_to_your_most_brilliant_ideas (can our boredom on evangelism spark new ideas?)
- Adam Hamilton, CATCH: A Churchwide Program for Invitational Evangelism (series)
- Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxKGGven9_U Skit Guys (*humorous*)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nT70cA-7qMk&t=64s> John Crist (*humorous*)

Suggestions for Age Appropriate Axis

- For children: have them role play normal childhood scenarios (on the playground, in the lunchroom, sleeping over a friend's house) where being a Christian is important. What do you do when someone is bullied, or sits alone, etc. can evangelism look like doing the right thing?
- For youth: have them role play a similar scenario—maybe one that involves social media, snap chat, Instagram—how can they share their faith with their peers? Are there situations that seem inauthentic—prayers before sports games, etc. How do they see the adults around them sharing their faith—is it working? Have them offer their critique of how the church currently does evangelism (*often youth are keen to offer really good and constructive criticism*)
- For younger adults: sharing our faith can lead to sweaty palms and dry throats. Where are the places you go most often? The gym? The coffee house? Your favorite Friday night restaurant? Start with the people you have a relationship with; does our good news have something to offer them? Start by listening—chances are, sharing our faith is as simple as listening and realizing you can offer advice, direction and guidance. And sometimes, listening is the absolute best. How can faith be shared in those situations?
- For seasoned adults: as with younger adults, sharing our faith can lead to sweaty palms and dry throats. What does it look like to invite the people closest to us—neighbors, co-workers, the people we serve on boards with—what would it take to invite them to church? To worship? To a bible study class? Or a prayer meeting? A church mid-week dinner? Starting with the people around us, the people we have relationships with is the best place to start evangelizing—telling others the very good news!

Suggestions for Engagement Opportunities

- Read scripture outside of the church! Go to the grocery store/ Salvation Army/town square/ local Target, Walmart, etc and read this scripture in your car, or some comfortable place. How do you hear the Word differently?
- What are you passionate about? Sports? Your grandkids? Crafting? Find a way to strengthen those relationship and challenge yourself to invite someone who shares that passion with you, to church or to be a prayer partner.
- Maybe it is time you started a book club or took up a hobby or even took a class at the local community college. Evangelism starts most importantly with relationship. Can you think of places where relationships would flourish with opportunities for us to show up for each other?

Outward Incarnational Focus

Opening Prayer

Lord, make us a reflection of your love. Call us into new places of service and growth. Fill us with courage to open doors a bit wider and reach out still further than we are comfortable. Strengthen our communities to bear love into difficult situations and find common concern with those we often overlook. Teach our hearts to seek out those who we push to the margins of our lives, our congregations, and our communities. Help us become more Christ-like this day, Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

In Matthew 25: 31-46 we find the Apocalyptic Parable of sheep and goats. This portion comes at the end of Matthew's eschatological movement and one of the last of Jesus' great sermons. In this reading the Son of Man answers the people who wonder what actions in their lives have given glory to God while others are shown where they let opportunities pass by them. The feature that both groups share is unawareness. Neither the sheep nor the goats are aware that "the least of these" in need or distress is a proxy for the Son of Man. In both instances, the Son of Man does not identify with the groups but with the one needing care. The sheep are not rewarded for being nice to the sheep nor are the goats punished for their inattention to the other goats. The praise or condemnation is only in response to their approach with the "other."

The "other" is given as one who needs. The hungry need food, thirsty need water, the stranger needs welcome, the naked needs clothing, the sick need care, and the imprisoned need visiting. (vv.35&36) Jesus invites us to imagine his presence in these needs and enables us to be the one who meets these needs. And the list does not end here. Our communities have their own many and varied needs. Jesus is wrapped intimately in those needs as well. The congregation not only has the gifts needed to meet these need but it must use them if we are to glimpse Christ in our community.

"Disciples who engage this story honestly are likely to find themselves caught somewhere between the sheep and the goats. This parable is not meant to grant certainty to any of Jesus' disciples, but to make us watchful, attending carefully, faithfully, and creatively to Christ's presence among the least of our brothers and sisters. Anything other than this ambivalent, risky, and uncertain existence is likely to yield something other than the full realization of God's empire of the heavens. God's empire belongs not to the self-proclaimed righteous ones, but to those who continually hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, which leads not to certainty but to the cross."

—Stan Saunders

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
1. How does this reading inform our discussion on Outward Incarnation?
 2. In what practices have we extended care for the other?
 3. In what ways are we blind to or ignore the needs of others?
 4. What needs would we add to the list that Jesus gives in the parable?
 5. What practices can your congregation put in place to keep awareness and attentive to the needs around you?

Closing Prayer

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of serving and caring for others in Outward Incarnational Formation.*

Additional Resources

- Pohl, Christine. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.
- Pohl, Christine. *Living Into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.
- Koenig, John. *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Gerrish, B. A. *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Jones, Gregory L. "Eucharistic Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger into the Household of God," *The Reformed Journal* 39 no 3 (March 1989): 12-17

Additional Videos

- Hospitality dreams: Ben Justus at TEDxCornellU
<https://youtu.be/QkUQkn7dS0>
- Radical Hospitality for the REST of Us
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fj-ztamQa5Q>
- Embrace Radical Hospitality | Grace Rodriguez | TEDxSantoDomingo
<https://youtu.be/BoIrb7CdPgQ>
- Amy Oden - Hospitality in the Christian Tradition
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkEnqgF6oFo>

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis

For children, ask the children about what they need to feel safe and part of the family. In an age appropriate way, you can discuss Maslow's pyramid. For children, the distinction between want and need can be loose. Help children to see that we need food to strengthen our bodies, clothing to keep us warm, and welcoming care to make us feel like part of the church family.

For youth, explore the idea that Jesus is represented as the one needing care. Jesus is telling us that we can be the answer to another person's prayer. This might be a total role reversal for a young person. What is Jesus saying about us in this parable? In what ways are we able to be the one that cares for others?

For younger adults, Focus on the idea of being a people intentionally outwardly Incarnational. In what ways do you feel emboldened by this text? What about this text gives you concern? How does our congregation make space for the needs of others? Who are the most vulnerable that are not being served?

For seasoned adults, spend time talking about what this parable has to say about salvation. What about this text is "Good News" and what about this text gives us pause? What are some of the excuses we use to stay blind to the needs of others? How have the needs of others changed over our lifetime? And how might the church learn from those changes?

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore

- Serve at a local soup kitchen
- Invite police officers to join groups for coffee or a meal to find where they see need.
- Walk the communities around the church building (never know what you will see).
- Have conversation with local shelters, finding out their needs.
- Encourage a Sunday school class to study scriptures on Hospitality.
- Begin a letter writing group for people that are home bound or lonely.

Empower Servant Leadership

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

By the work of your hands, you created all that is good. You formed us in Christ's image, and you fashioned us with spiritual gifts according to your will. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:4-5). Created in your image, Lord, we have been made to serve and glorify you. Lord, help us to strengthen our gifts, and live empowered by your Spirit. Help us to find strength in serving one another, for we can accomplish far greater things in your name. And may we be your disciples, who help nurture and encourage the gifts of all others, without envy or strife. God, we know the harvest is plentiful, so make us to laborer together in the grace and love of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: John 13: 1-20

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

Jesus, knowing that His hour to "depart out of this world to the Father," gathers with the disciples around table fellowship in this ultimate act of love. This narrative of Jesus begins "the Book of Glory" (chps. 13-21) leading to the crucifixion. Christ, as teacher and Savior, leads by example in this symbolic act of washing the feet of his beloved disciples. This memorable act of service is one of equality, one where there is no social status among the company, and our Savior is humbled in service. Gerard Sloyan writes, "Being bathed by Jesus means being symbolically taken into the event of the cross. It is likewise a model of service for the disciples." In this event, we see that we must be washed clean by our Savior, and in turn, we are sent out to do the very same.

This is the call for the people of God to practice Empowering Servant Leadership. Yet it is a rite of those who believe, who witness and testify to the final hours of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Notice, John begins this "Book of Glory" by stating that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (vv. 1). Jesus showed great love to the end, to the ultimate expression of washing the feet of the disciples whom Christ loved. We remember that the table was prepared and the invitation extended to the Savior who bids us come, but John's gospel message reminds us that the Savior is also the servant, leading by this ultimate example of love. For all who are in Christ, who have been created in the image of Christ and cleansed by the blood of our Savior, we are empowered and gifted by the same Spirit that was in Jesus to be Servant Leaders. It is not just in some, but all who are beloved disciples to the very end.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
1. What does it mean that Jesus washed the disciples' feet, even Judas and Peter, as one of His final hours?
 2. Can you name your spiritual gifts? How do you use them for servant leadership to the glory of Christ?
 3. Recall a time when someone exercised servant leadership in a way that inspired you?
 4. How does your church cultivate, nurture, and support servant leadership?
 5. What gets in the way of all disciples using their spiritual gifts for servant leadership?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Empowering Servant Leadership.*

Additional Resources:

- Janet O. Hagberg, *Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in Organizations* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2003).
- Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: a Journey Into The Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1991).
- James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: a Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).
- N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005).
- Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).

Additional Videos:

- Simon Sinek – Why good leaders make you feel safe (TED talk)
https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_why_good_leaders_make_you_feel_safe
- Orkidstudio – EMPOWERMENT (Nakuru Project in Kenya)
<https://vimeo.com/113384190>
- Ken Blanchard – Servant Leadership (London Business Forum)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctZHSa4Qhd4>
- Theocademy – Being Leaders (Ordered Ministry series)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=275&v=VICZ4qownvI

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis:

For children, emphasize that foot washing was one of the dirtiest jobs back in Jesus' day. Talk about "dirty jobs" today (i.e. scrub toilets, mop floors, pick up trash, clean dishes, etc.) and ask them what it would look like if they saw Jesus doing those jobs. Talk about examples of how Jesus leads, but also serves.

For youth, focus on Jesus' question (v. 12) "Do you know what I have done for you?" How can we learn about servant leadership from Jesus' actions in the room that night? How can we about servant leadership learn from what Jesus has already done so far in his ministry? How can we learn about servant leadership from what Jesus is about to do?

For younger adults, look for examples of servant leaders (past and present) who have impacted the world. Talk about what made them a servant leader and question how their impact might have been different if they had not been. Discuss qualities of servant leaders they have seen in mentors and they might see in each other.

For seasoned adults, discuss servant leadership alongside of Jesus' statement (v. 17) "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." Ask for examples of how servant leadership not only is beneficial for the world, but beneficial for the servant leader as well. How can servant leadership change over a lifetime (teen, working years, retirement, etc.)?

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore:

- sit around the outside of a children's swimming pool and take turns washing each other's feet
- look for opportunities to volunteer "behind the scenes" in an attempt to embody service
- read your congregational mission statement and ask what leadership might be helpful
- begin a collection of soaps, shampoos, and towels to give away
- plan a church-wide supper before your next Maundy Thursday service to break bread together
- identify and name servant leaders you know – write them a thank you letter

Spirit-Inspired Worship

Opening Prayer

God of all praise and glory – you call us to rejoice in you, to praise your name, to find comfort in your presence, to stand in awe, to bow in confession, to come and worship. And in your worship, you meet us in ways we understand and do not understand. You meet us there. Your Spirit proclaims truth, your Word anoints us with wisdom, and your roots grow deeper in our soul. Lord, you deserve our worship each day. So, please forgive us when we forget what it is about; when we think ourselves too busy. Forgive us when we make it about what we desire or what entertains us. This sacred gift of wonder and love was meant to be so much more than we often make it. Yet we long to experience you, God. We need you. So, inspire our worship with your Spirit, so that our hearts and our lives are transformed by your wonder. This we pray to the living God who encounters us in worship. Amen.

Scripture: Hebrews 4:9 – 5:10

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

The writer of Hebrews uses thematic language in order to inform the reader that we have “a great high priest,” one who is sympathetic, in whom we find rest on the Holy Day of Sabbath. The writer wants believers to hold fast to confession, because Jesus, himself, was tempted in every way and yet was sinless. This affirmation of the priestly nature of Christ, explains why we, who are sinners, can approach the throne of our Savior. Christ fully understands the nature of our humanity, and in loving sympathy Christ bids us to come and worship. It is an active call to obedience, just as Christ was obedient to the will of God in suffering death on a cross. “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (vv. 16).

Too often our worship can become about us; our wants, our preference of style, our comfort in not being exposed, our way of going through the motions with little thought to the traditions. Yet, Spirit-inspired worship calls us into the presence of the “great high priest;” the one who suffered in obedience, so that we might find rest, receive mercy, and cling to grace. Spirit-Inspired worship holds fast to the truth that when we come into God’s presence, “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (vv. 13). Spirit-Inspired worship exposes us, brings us to our knees in confession, and offers us freedom and rest in the Savior’s arms. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (vv. 7-9). It is Jesus Christ who lives and allows us the freedom to come into God’s presence in Spirit-Inspired worship.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
1. Describe a time when you encountered the wondrous presence of Christ in worship.
 2. What does your church do to faithfully engage in Spirit-Inspired Worship?
 3. What things stand in the way and distract your church from Spirit-Inspired Worship?
 4. What prevents us from obedience in worshiping in spirit and in truth; in full exposure before the Savior?
 5. What does it mean for your life that we have “a great high priest” who has granted us Sabbath?
 6. How do you experience God’s presence in daily worship? Does your church equip you to worship daily?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*

- Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Spirit-Inspired Worship.

Additional Resources

- Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of A New Spiritual Awakening* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012)
- Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis, MN: sparkhouse, 2010)
- Kimberly Braken Long, *The Worshiping Body: The Art of Leading Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster JohnKnox Press, 2009)
- Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worshp: Living God's Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007)

Additional Videos

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56ysMeLUApI> (John Crist, humorous)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvVz-YtEpr8> (Skit Guys, *The Skinny on Worship*, humorous)
- https://www.ted.com/talks/nabila_alibhai_why_people_of_different_faiths_are_painting_their_houses_of_worship_yellow (worship goes beyond the Sunday morning hour)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_WZUNfIobQ (Porter's Gate worship songs and collaborations) and <https://www.portersgateworship.com/> (website information on Porter's Gate)

Suggestions for Age Appropriate Axis

- For children, have them walk the through your worship space and let them explore. Let them get behind the pulpit and pray or read scripture. Ask them questions about what happens in this space, let them answer and ask them what they would do for the different parts.
- For youth encourage them to be active leaders in the worship space; not just ushers and greeters, but liturgists. If your church doesn't already, consider having a youth led Sunday morning, let them preach and sing and lead worship. Have them write the prayers and re-frame the creeds. Ask them to think about different places where worship could be held; Fellowship Hall, outdoor on the lawn, in a prayer room, etc.
- For younger adults, dig deeper asking them where they connect in the worship service. Do they find rest during worship, is so, elaborate. If not, how could they find it? Consider that young adults are a generation that champions authenticity and relevance. How does or does that not play into our worship?
- For seasoned adults, is there un resolved grief over worship? Are there emotions that need some air, need to be heard to continue to move forward? What are our adults missing in worship and what would excite them? How can they be the leaders that say, "Listen, the Spirit is doing something new!"

Suggestions for Engagement Opportunities

- Try to employ the sense during worship: we are good are hearing and speaking; what about touch and smell or seeing using visuals?
- Do a pulpit exchange with a minister of a different denomination. Invite them to observe how the worship of your church is Spirit-filled and challenge yourself to see the Spirit in their worship. Then exchange ideas!
- Form an Arts Committee for your worship space—how can the arts enrich our worship?
- Get outside your four walls! Change up your worship setting to explore how space speaks to our worship.
- Encourage your worship committee to watch other worship services that might be online. Encourage your youth and young people to bring back worship ideas from Montreat and youth retreats, camps, conferences, etc.
- DON'T BE AFRAID TO TRY NEW THINGS!

Caring Relationships

Opening Prayer

God of perfect love – we are cleansed and claimed by the love of Jesus Christ, our Savior. We are redeemed and restored by the self-emptying, sacrificial love poured out. And we are called to love you and all whom you call beloved children. Open our hearts to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Help us to love as Christ loves: reconciling conflict, supporting all people in tragedy and triumph, and daily surrendering our will for the sake of walking with others. We know that in our own accord, we will be imperfect at this. We will fall short. We will disappoint others and miss opportunities. Yet, Lord, help us to show up, to share Christ, and to be a beacon of hope, justice, love, and joy to all whom you call us to care for in our lives. For this we pray in the name of the one whose perfect love casts out all fear, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: Galatians 6: 1-10

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (vv. 2). “If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (vv. 8). “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (vv. 10).

He never felt as if he had a place to belong, a place where he was accepted. For twenty years, life circumstances had left him homeless. Yet life had not left Steven bitter. On the contrary, Steven quoted the Word of God in all things. He walked through the breakfast line in the basement of the church every single morning, and would greet you with a resounding testimony to the glory of God, and the blessed assurance of a new day now dawning. Every day, as he came in off of the streets, he testified to the new day’s opportunity to praise God.

Steven’s friendly demeanor and constant affirmation of the Lord, made him an easy relationship for the youth of the church. As the youth began to worship with the homeless community in the sanctuary on Sunday evenings and to dine around table fellowship afterwards, there was an evident shift, a sort of softening about Steven that began to intrigue me. After one Sunday evening worship service, Steven approached me to say a simple phrase: “You’ve done a good thing, Rev.” What initially threw me in this exchange was that Steven’s disposition was more somber and serious. “What’s going on with you,” I asked? “Rev,” he said shaking his head, struggling to collect words. “I’ve been coming into the basement of this church for twenty years for y’all to serve me breakfast. And I’ve been grateful. Lord knows I’ve been grateful. But you know this is the first time I’ve ever been invited and feel welcomed to come into God’s house, into the sanctuary of this building, and worship!?”

Caring Relationships. Whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith, because we reap what we sow. It is the most simple and significant of commands, “to love the Lord your God, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet it is, in truth, the most difficult thing to live into. Christ’s true and perfect agape-love, is when the Spirit of Christ dwelling within me, meets the Spirit of Christ in you; regardless of all else.

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
 1. How does your church sow and nurture Caring Relationships?
 2. How does the church equip and empower you to see opportunities for Caring Relationship in Christ?
 3. Name a time when you have experienced Christ’s Agape-love? Did it happen in the church?
 4. What prevents, hinders, blinds us from opportunities for true Caring Relationships?

Closing Prayer:

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Caring Relationships.*

Additional Resources

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, Publishers, 1954).
- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987).
- Pablo Polischuk. http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200703/200703_048_hlthchr.cfm. *The Healthy Church: A Commitment to Loving-Caring Relationships*. (Assemblies of God Journal)
- Sara Miles. *Take This Bread* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2007).

Additional Videos

- https://youtu.be/9pgTG5-C_qs
Different is Good. David Walker (TED Talk)
- https://youtu.be/cfW_2tzusyI
Amazing Physics Teacher
- <https://youtu.be/4z7gDsSKUmU>
How to Change The World (Kid President)
- <https://youtu.be/q0qD2K2RWkc>
I Am Not Black, You Are Not White
- <https://youtu.be/oACYWh5UKsQ>
Community Chaplain Training – Building Caring Relationships
- <https://youtu.be/zcruIov45bI>
Happiness Is Helping Others
- https://youtu.be/eL_ofpwicsc
Maya Angelou – Human Family

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis

For children, concrete thinking of what is “right” and “good” is instilled by trusted adults. Have children explore what is “right” and “good” when it comes to loving other people the way Christ commands in Caring Relationships. Allow them to name Caring Relationships in their life.

For youth, explore the characteristics of Caring Relationships, and the negative impacts when we do not sow Caring Relationships. Enable youth to explore how they determine “right” and “good” in Caring Relationships; pointing to Christ- the exemplar of all Caring Relationships. Lead youth in conversations of cause & effect to how they live out Caring Relationships in their everyday.

For younger adults, spend time in theology of the incarnation of Christ and the doctrine of atonement. How does Christ forgive? How does Christ command us to do “good” and “right” in Caring Relationships? How do we fall short of the glory of God? Expand conversations to civic responsibilities, engagement in our everyday lives, and the truth of our broken world and creation. Engage in more complicated biblical text where Christ’s Caring Relationships push socio-cultural norms and engage in today’s headline news stories.

For seasoned adults, ask them to reflect on the characteristics, gifts, stories of the Caring Relationships in their lives. Focus on how they might continue to extend Caring Relationships today. Let them name the challenges/changes of today’s Caring Relationships. Help them explore the biblical mandates of loving brothers and sisters in Christ, while determining “who is my brother & sister in Christ?”

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore

- Engage and expand in interracial, multicultural, intergenerational, and economic conversations
- Explore “good” and “right” in Caring Relationships in civic arenas: prisons, hospitals, schools
- Find ways to nurture Caring Relationships, for all ages, in the church, accountability, and a platform to air grievances and pray together.
- Have congregation sow neighborhood cells of Caring Relationships throughout the week.
- Create a prayer & response ministry where all ages can identify those in need of a Caring Relationship.

Ecclesial Health

Opening Prayer

Loving God, we want to live faithfully. Teach us the joy that is living our faith in a community. Lead our churches into the deep reward of gratitude. Help us extend the same grace we are given. Make room in our hearts so that outreach and mission become part of our daily lives. In Christ's name, who calls and sends us all, Amen

Scripture: Matthew 15: 1-9

- *Have someone read scripture passages allowed.*
- *Allow time for silence to read on your own. Highlight key words, phrases, images that speak to you.*
- *Take a few moments to share those with a partner or with the entire group.*

Background

In Matthew 15: 1-9 Jesus is approached by the religious leaders of His day. These leaders are the “gate keepers” in religious society and they are not happy that Jesus’ disciples are blatantly cavalier with the rules. Jesus quickly subverts their intentions by turning the tables. It seems the religious establishment is at fault for their traditions. Congregational cultures and habits can be deeply ingrained and all but impossible to change. The Pharisees might have been the first to say “that’s how we have always done it.” Whatever “it” represents, the church can never rest on traditions that draw us away from our calling to discipleship. Ecclesial Health is a way for us to identify the “sacred cows” in congregational life that are not healthy or life giving.

In verse 6, Jesus states his primary opposition to the Pharisee’s leadership. They are keeping practices that do not serve God’s purpose. Jesus rightly identifies many of their practices as self-serving instead. The practice Jesus sights here is called “Korban”, a way the bend the rules. By using this custom of Korban, children could abandon their obligation to family to gain stature in the religious organization. The Pharisees concern over unwashed hands is wallpaper over traditions that do great harm to people.

In quoting the prophet Isaiah, he links his present age with that of their ancestors. In other words, this is nothing new. People (including us) have a propensity to circumventing rules or justifying traditions that help or serve our needs. Jesus calls on the religious establishment to look carefully at customs and traditions and make changes when they do not serve God’s purpose.

“The scribes’ and Pharisees’ piety is no doubt sincere, but also competitive, exclusive, self-serving, and ultimately destructive of relationships and community. Jesus, in contrast, emphasizes the relational character of true piety and devotion... Jesus does not disdain the Law or tradition. He is concerned, rather, with defining the criteria by which we evaluate the integrity of our interpretation of the Law and the legitimacy of our traditions. Tradition can be used to demarcate status and to build walls between people. –Stan Saunders

Reflect

- *Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.*
6. What does Ecclesial Health look like in our text?
 7. How often is change stifled by historical practice?
 8. How might we realign our practices to what we believe?
 9. Name the “Sacred Cows” in the congregational life.
 10. What is at stake when traditions of a congregation cause harm to the ministry of Christ?

Closing Prayer

- *Allow individuals to name joys and concerns in their daily discipleship*
- *Offer prayers for your particular faith community focusing on the challenges, the hopes, and the triumphs of Outward Incarnational Focus*

Additional Resources

- Heifetz, Ronald, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009.
- Gunderson, Gary. *Boundary Leaders: Leadership Skills for People of Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004
- Steinke, Peter L. *Healthy Congregations: A System Approach*. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 1996
- Steinke, Peter L. *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 1993
- Steinke, Peter L. *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006

Additional Videos

- [MidAmericaRegionUUA –Anxious Times](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPA8vSO71Bo)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPA8vSO71Bo>
- The rarest commodity is leadership without ego: Bob Davids at TEDxESCP
https://youtu.be/_QkUQkn7dS0?list=PLxd0jP3hpcyMxI6GC3hDBzDLM9NVFDQJs

Suggestions for Age-Appropriate Praxis

For children, rules can be confusing. Walk with children through the rules they have at their homes or schools. Ask them if they know why those rules are kept and why they are important to safety or community. Ask if they know what would happen if rules aren't kept. How would communities suffer if rules only benefited one group over another?

For youth, explore the idea Korban. You could talk about loopholes in rules and the ways they are used. Are rules put in place for some to take advantage of other? What are some rules in the church? Do they have a good and meaningful purpose in the congregation?

For younger adults, explore the idea of community through the lens of rule keeping. How are rules helpful and how do they prove harmful. How does the congregation evaluate traditions? In what ways are the congregational traditions helpful and in what ways do they harm? Take a look at all the places people say, "we have always done it that way."

For seasoned adults, have conversation about the traditions they are passing on to the next generations in the congregation. Why were traditions and practices put in place? Look carefully at those practices to see if they would be expressed in the same way today. What traditions have been harmful to the life of the congregation over the years? What new practices are needed in today's world?

Suggested Engagement Opportunities to Further Explore

- Multi-generational conversations about practices and culture of the congregation.
- Study the Great Ends of the Church in a sermon series or Bible Study
- Seek out other congregations to consider their best practices.
- Congregational conversation about what they value about the community.