



WM

PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

communitygroups

Engaging Faith & Friendship

WHY COMMUNITY GROUPS?

The Triune God who loved you into being dwells in a community of love.

When we look to the divine community of God, we see the model for all human relationships. Donald McKim puts it this way, “If the divine trinity shows a community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bonded by love, then humans created in God’s image find their truest life and fulfillment in human community and not in isolation.”¹

In other words, humans are hardwired for relationships.

While relationships are essential, *they do not happen by accident*. Creating a community in which people feel truly seen and known requires consistency and intentionality.

Perhaps this is why you have decided to join a Community Group. You are longing for a group of people with whom to grow in faith and friendship, sharing life’s joys and challenges. You have taken a brave and essential first step by saying “yes” to this invitation.

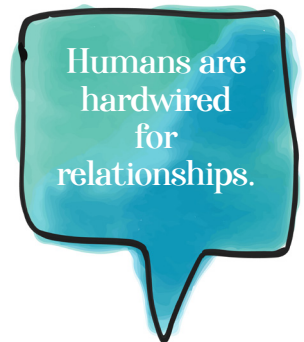
You have made sacrifices to be here. In the words of Ronald Rolheiser, “Every choice is a thousand renunciations.”² By God’s grace, I believe the time you invest in this group will bear the good fruits of connection and spiritual growth.

Now your journey begins. May you approach this journey with curiosity, vulnerability, and openness to the Spirit of God moving in your midst. In your Community Group, may you find fellow travelers who are committed to walking alongside one another in love and growing in Christ’s likeness.

Onward together,

Anne Galliher

Associate Pastor for Congregational Engagement



¹ Donald K. McKim, *Introducing the Reformed Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 32.
² Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Random House, 2014), 9.

GETTING STARTED

Each session with your Community Group will follow the same pattern, moving through three sections:

welcome

Welcome provides suggested questions to help you get to know your group members. You can consider these “ice breaker” questions; you will not be asked to share any information that is overly personal in nature. As always, sharing is by invitation and is not a requirement for any group member.

word

Each session is centered around a word – a theme that is meant to help group members consider what it looks like to follow Christ in their lives. A lesson is provided along with a scripture to reference. Community Groups intentionally focus less on competency in Christian education and more on community and spiritual formation – you will find this reflected in the content of this booklet. **You will read the lessons aloud during your meetings to avoid any prior preparation.**

witness

Witness provides an opportunity for group members to share their responses to the lesson and the scripture using discussion questions.

A GUIDE TO RESPECTFUL PARTICIPATION

Have you ever had any of these experiences?

- You walk into a room of people you don't know (or don't know well) and no one greets you or welcomes you into the group.
- You join a new group, and the intimacy feels forced – the questions are too deep too fast.
- You are in a group where it feels like one person is dominating the conversation, there's no space for anyone else to get a word in.
- You go into a group expecting to talk about a certain topic, but the conversation goes off the rails. You leave feeling like your time was wasted.

It's likely that you have had one or more of these experiences whether at work, church, or in another setting. These kinds of experiences make the already-challenging undertaking of meeting new people and creating community even more difficult. Your Community Group Leaders (CGLs) have gone through training to help your group minimize or work through issues like these. You can feel free to approach your CGL at any time if you have concerns about the group dynamic or your experience.

While your CGL is acting as the “host” of your group, each member plays an important role in creating an environment that allows everyone to feel seen, heard, and celebrated. As a member of a Community Group, we ask that you commit to the following values, which are borrowed from the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City.³

³Small Group Member Agreement, Church of the Resurrection.
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1. Acceptance.

We will cultivate an environment that encourages honesty and openness about our lives, and we will not judge other members for the things they share.

2. Confidentiality.

We will not share outside the group what was shared inside the group except when absolutely necessary for personal safety.

3. Support.

We will root for the other members of this group, whether that be the development of their spiritual life, professional life, or personal life. Even – especially – when our opinions differ.

4. Contribution.

We will contribute to the group. This means allowing our participation to be a priority, thoughtfully listening and responding to our fellow group members. If we have ideas, we will share them. When opportunities for engagement arise, we will try to engage.

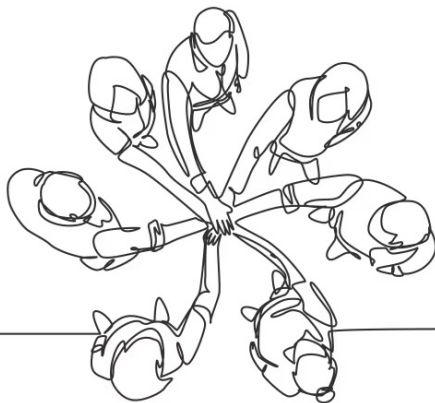
5. Respect.

We will listen to each other, be mindful of the impact of our words, limit the use of our devices while others speak, and share the metaphorical “microphone” so that all can speak.

6. Spiritual Growth.

Our involvement is about more than fun or socialization. Those things are great! But we will strive to grow spiritually through our time together.

A group builds trust
when people get to
know each other.



A group builds trust when it feels safe for everyone to have a chance to talk, and when people get to know each other. Likewise,

- a sense of belonging happens when everyone feels like their words matter;
- comments that are thoughtful but brief can encourage others to talk;
- balanced participation is a goal, but not mandatory - some participants rely on other group members to keep the conversation going;
- early on as a group forms, sometimes waiting to speak a second time until everyone has had a chance to talk is helpful.

Maybe your concern is, “What if I don’t want to speak about this particular topic?” You always have permission to take a pass! Sharing is not required or forced. Never feel embarrassed to take a pass, and give grace to those who do so.⁴

⁴“Guidance for Participation,” Church of the Resurrection

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SESSION 1:

ENGAGEMENT

welcome

During this first session, spend time filling out the Group Member Profiles starting on page 41. Have each person share their responses to the questions with the group. It may feel a bit juvenile to write down their responses, but this can go a long way in helping you to remember who is in your group!

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

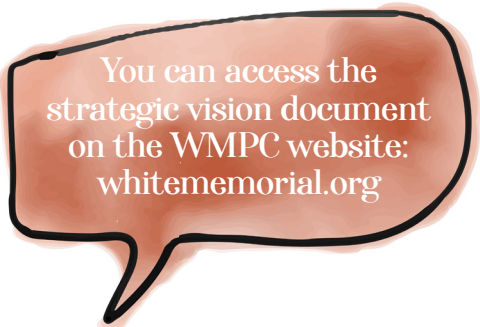
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.

As we have left behind our roles and responsibilities to spend this time together, help us to remain present.

Bless our conversation and assure each of the people gathered here of your great love and care for them. Amen.

Lesson: In October 2022, White Memorial published *Be Thou My Vision*, a strategic vision document created to provide direction for the church's future. A primary aspiration outlined in the document is to see deeper engagement in the life of our church for a broader number of people who call this church home.

A necessary first step in deepening and broadening engagement at White Memorial is defining what engagement looks like. The framework we have come up with for defining engagement is called **Worship + 3**.



You can access the strategic vision document on the WMPC website: whitememorial.org

Worship + 3 refers to the 4 commitments that we make as engaged members:

Engagement = Worship + (1) Inhale (2) Exhale (3) Give

Worship: Commit to regularly attending worship in-person or online. (When we speak of “regular attendance,” we envision worshipping three out of four Sundays per month.)

Inhale: A ministry or program of the church that offers restoration, vitality, and nourishment for your spiritual life.

Exhale: A ministry or program of the church that enables you to serve or lead in ways that honor the unique gifts God has given you (your skills, talents, interests, etc.).

Give: Participate in the life and ministry of our church through financial giving.

Engagement at WMPC looks like a commitment to worshipping regularly, participating in a ministry of the church that renews and restores you, serving in an area of the church where your unique gifts and skills are utilized, and giving of your financial resources to God through the mission and ministry of this church.

In the same way humans need to inhale and exhale to have life and vitality, our spiritual lives need a balance of inhalation and exhalation to be well-rounded and vital. As Worship + 3 becomes an increasingly central part of our community’s culture, we believe that discipleship at WMPC will deepen and grow.

Scripture: Romans 12:1-7

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Why is White Memorial the church home that you have chosen?
2. What are you hoping to get from your experience in this Community Group?
3. What are your responses to the Worship + 3 framework?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

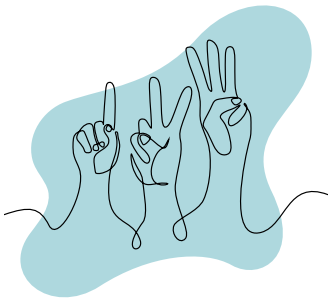
Gracious God, we thank you for this church family and for this new Community Group. Bless us with the bonds of friendship and community and help us to grow in faith. Amen.

SESSION 2:

WORSHIP

welcome

This week, we'll introduce the 3x3x3 activity. Start by having each group member pair up with someone. The CGL should set a timer for three minutes. Spend three minutes having each person in the pair answer the three questions listed below. At the end of the three minutes, each person should find a new person and complete the same activity. Then, find another partner and complete the activity for a third time. This should take about 10 minutes total with time for transitions.



3x3x3 Questions:

1. What was your first job?
2. What is your favorite way to spend a Saturday morning?
3. Have you read a book in the past year that you are still thinking about?
(If not a book, perhaps a movie or television show?)

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

*Loving God, open our ears to hear, open our hearts to receive, and open our mouths to sing your praise.
Amen.*

Lesson: “Christians are called by God to worship, to do so with one another and in the company of Jesus Christ. It is in worship that our theology is shaped, our discipleship encouraged, and our spirits fed by the good food of word and sacrament. **It is from worship that we are sent out into the world** to continue to live the patterns of life we have begun to learn and practice in worship. Worship is, for Christians, both ‘primary school’ and ‘graduate school’ – a place where we are always learning the basics of how to be in true relationship to God and yet also reaching for the advanced skills we need for obedient and faithful Christian lives.” – Leanne Van Dyk, *A More Profound Alleluia*

“In worship we rehearse salvation history. In worship, the community of faith assembles in God’s name, God’s word is proclaimed, **the people give thanks to God and go out into the world** in God’s name. Worship is marked by praise, proclamation, remembrance, and prayer. It is our most essential human activity.”

– Donald McKim, *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*

In each of these reflections on Christian worship, we see a similar movement from receiving to response. We come to worship both to offer our praise and thanksgiving to God and to receive God’s grace and love through the Word and the sacraments. For many people, attending worship “fills their cup;” it offers them spiritual nourishment. This is a gift from God. However, this spiritual nourishment is not meant to be bottled up and kept to oneself.

In worship we reorient ourselves toward God’s sovereignty, remembering that God is God and we are not God. We “rehearse” things like confession and forgiveness so that we will be equipped to practice them outside of the walls of the church. We hear God’s word proclaimed and we are fed at Christ’s table. All of worship leads toward sending – returning to the world having received God’s love and grace anew, now ready to respond through our words and our actions.

We include both a “charge” and a “benediction” at the conclusion of worship. A benediction offers us a blessing; a charge demands something of us. A charge tells us that we have work to do as we go back out into the world.

Scripture: Psalm 100:1-5

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Which worship style resonates with you most, OnPoint or the Sanctuary service?
2. What has been your experience with worshipping virtually?
3. What are your favorite parts of worship?
4. Have you ever thought about worship as being a “rehearsal” for life?
5. Do you think about worship as being an important part of your life of faith?
6. Given all the reasons prioritizing worship can be challenging, how might you recommit to worshipping regularly?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

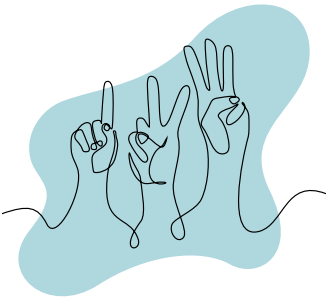
Creator God, we give you thanks for the gifts of worship – for the songs that lift our spirits, for the prayers that touch our hearts, for the Word proclaimed that gives us hope. Having received your grace, help us to live all of our lives in response to your love. Amen.

SESSION 3:

DISCERNMENT

welcome

Start by having each group member pair up with someone. The CGL should set a timer for three minutes. Spend three minutes having each person in the pair answer the three questions listed below. At the end of the three minutes, each person should find a new person and complete the same activity. Then, find another partner and complete the activity for a third time. This should take about 10 minutes total with time for transitions.



3x3x3 Questions:

1. If you could live anywhere in the country, where would you choose to live?
2. Who was your favorite teacher in school?
3. Are you a morning person or a night owl?

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Gracious God, awaken us to your presence. Open our ears to hear one another and open our mouths to respond with words of grace. Amen.

Lesson:

“We listen for guidance everywhere except from within... The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions.” – Parker Palmer

“Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is knowing the difference between right and almost right.” – Charles Spurgeon

“Once you’ve learned to say a fundamental yes, later nos can be helpful and even necessary: without them, you have no protected boundaries or identity. Our world has coined a term for people who cannot say no: codependents. No one taught them how and when to protect themselves with a necessary no and that a no can be just as sacred as a yes.” – Richard Rohr

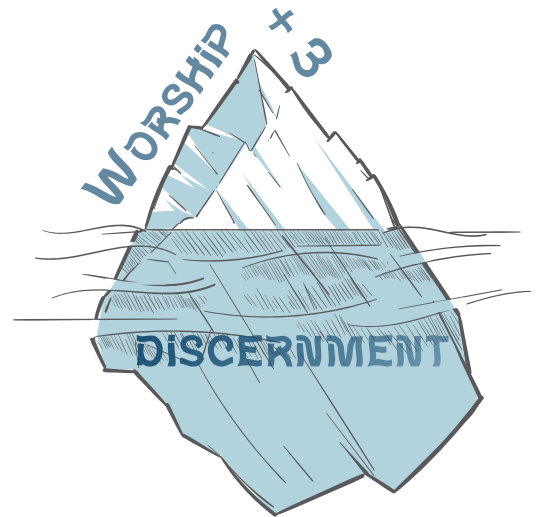
We live in a world that is constantly vying for something of ours that is in short supply – time, money, attention. Often, we find that we are choosing not between good and bad but good and good. We are choosing between two (or more) good and worthy ways of spending our time, our money, and our attention. We have a finite supply of these precious resources. How are we to steward them?

This question is especially relevant when it comes to our involvement at church. At a large, vibrant church like ours, there are endless opportunities that you *could* pursue to get involved and serve; this does not mean that you *should* pursue every opportunity. The task then becomes discerning which opportunities, from the multitude of good and worthy options, are the right ones for you in this season. We should not confuse busyness with faithfulness.

If we were to think about engagement at White Memorial as an iceberg, Worship + 3 would be the tip that peeks out above the water. Discernment is the bottom of the iceberg that exists under the surface. While Worship + 3 is a visible expression of our discipleship, discernment is the invisible work that happens in our hearts, minds, and prayer life to support our discipleship.

To put it plainly, you do not have to say “yes” to every invitation to volunteer at church. (Yes, a pastor really wrote that!) Your responsibility is to say “yes” to the right things, the things to which God is calling you through your giftedness, your season of life, and your passions. You are called to steward the time, attention, and talents that God has entrusted to you in ways that glorify God and further God’s kingdom here on earth.

If we are to discern where it is that God is calling us, we must give ourselves the gift of quiet solitude. If we move through life at breakneck speed or fill our lives with deafening noise, we may struggle to hear that still small voice of God (1 Kings 19:12-13 KJV) that leads and guides us.



Scripture: Proverbs 2:1-11

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?



witness

1. Who are the people you call when you need advice or wisdom?
2. Is “quiet solitude” something that you have in your life right now? If not, how can you create space for it?
3. In your current season of life, who or what is vying most for your time, money, or attention?
4. What is your reaction or response to the claim “We should not confuse busyness with faithfulness”?
5. Have you ever had an experience of feeling “called” to say or do something? What was that experience like?

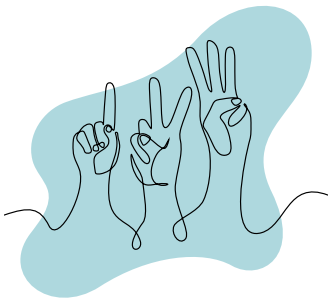
Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God who calls each of us to new life, give us wisdom and discernment so that we might know where you are calling us to go and what you are calling us to do. Amen.

SESSION 4

INHALE

welcome



3x3x3 Questions:

1. What makes you lose track of time?
2. If money wasn't an issue, what would you do for a living?
3. What's your favorite way to unwind after a hectic day?

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Loving God, help us to grow in faith and friendship as we offer our lives in gratitude as a response to your grace. Amen.

Lesson:

“When you read the four biographies of Jesus in the New Testament, one thing is painfully clear: Jesus’ life template was based on a rhythm of retreat and return, like breathing in and then out. Jesus would retreat: He would slip away from the noise and press of the crowd and find a place where he could pray, alone or sometimes with a very few close friends. He would inhale. Then he would exhale, or return: He would come back to preach and teach and heal and deliver and offer love.” – John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way: Be With Jesus, Become Like Him, Do as He Did*

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit [*ruach*] of God was hovering over the waters.” – Genesis 1:1-2 (NIV)

“The wind [*pneuma*] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit [*pneuma*].” – John 3:8

In his book *Fresh Air*, Jack Levison writes, “The original Hebrew and Greek words for ‘spirit’ were used to convey concepts as diverse as a breath, a breeze, a powerful gale, an angel, a demon, the heart and soul of a human being, and the divine presence itself. That is a remarkable range of meanings, and it is absolutely essential to keep in mind that only one word in Hebrew [*ruach*] and one in Greek [*pneuma*] conveys all of these meanings. [These ancient words] are much richer and more resonant than the English words breath, spirit, or wind. English simply cannot shoulder the breadth of meaning that the original languages can.”

This feature of language reinforces what we find in our lived experience as humans, that there is a connection between breath and spirit. In Genesis 2:7, “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” From the moment we enter the world, breath is the animating spirit within us, it is what makes us alive.

Our spiritual lives need “the breath of life” in the same way that our physical bodies need to inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. We need experiences, practices, and routines that are living-giving to our faith – things that fill us up and allow us to connect more deeply with the God who daily calls us into being.

As we live into the Worship + 3 framework at White Memorial, we have intentionally made the choice not to label certain ministries or opportunities as areas of “inhale” or “exhale.” This choice reflects our understanding that what is experienced as an inhale for one person may be experienced as an exhale (or act of service) to another person. It is up to the *individual* to discern, with God’s help, what would be life-giving and spiritually nurturing in his or her season of life.

It is likely that what feels life-giving will change as an individual’s circumstances change. What is nourishing in one season may not fit in another season; your “inhale” may need to be adjusted or completely replaced based on your stress levels, responsibilities, and time constraints in any given period of time.



Scripture: Genesis 2:4b-7

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. As part of your engagement with White Memorial, are you currently able to identify an area of “inhale?” If so, how is it life-giving to you?
2. What is life-giving for you outside of your church involvement?
3. What impedes your ability to “inhale”?
4. Have you been encouraged to prioritize “inhaling” in your spiritual life?
5. Discuss within your group the parallels you see between breath in your physical body and this concept of spiritual inhale and exhale.

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Creator God, fill us with your Spirit and breathe new life into our weariness. Help us inhale your grace and love and exhale our fears and anxieties. Amen.

SESSION 5:

EXHALE

welcome

Everyone is invited to share two words to describe how you are doing in this moment. For example, you might share “tired” and “grateful.” You are welcome to expand upon why you’ve chosen these two words, or simply share and allow the group to receive them.

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Gracious God, be with us now. Invite us into a deeper knowing of ourselves, our neighbors, and you. Amen.

Lesson:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” – Teresa of Avila

“That we ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.” – Brother Lawrence



The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a confessional tradition, meaning we have creeds and confessions that have been adopted as part of our theological identity – they remind us who we are, what we believe, and what we are to do. The Confession of 1967 was written in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and reflects a commitment to the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18). Within this confession is a section that outlines the mission of the church.

It reads, “The church disperses to serve God wherever its members are, at work or play, in private or in the life of society... Their daily action in the world is the church in mission to the world. The quality of their relations with other persons is the measure of the church’s fidelity. Each member is the church in the world, endowed by the Spirit with some gift of ministry and is responsible for the integrity of his witness in his own particular situation.”

You are responsible for the integrity of your witness in your own particular situation. Meaning, within the contours of your current life – your roles and responsibilities, your capabilities, and your constraints – you are responsible for witnessing to the love and grace of God.

To follow Jesus is to be a servant (Mark 10:42-45). No matter your age, your profession, or your net worth, you are called to serve in ways that honor your gifts and give glory to God. This is what is meant by areas of “exhale.” To “exhale” is to respond to God’s grace by offering up our time and our talents to further the work of God’s kingdom of love, justice, and peace.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:4-7;12-18

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Do you currently have an area of “exhale” as part of your engagement with White Memorial?
2. In your life, how have you witnessed others using their gifts to further God’s kingdom?
3. What areas of need are you passionate about addressing (ex. food insecurity, homelessness, etc.)?
4. What gifts/skills/passions do you have that you could share with your community?
5. Has faith tended to be more about “inhale” or “exhale” in your life?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Loving God, help us to discern the gifts that you have given us and steer us towards opportunities to utilize those gifts for your glory. Amen

SESSION 6

GIVE

welcome

Everyone is invited to share a high and a low that has occurred since the last Community Group gathering and their response to the question: What season of life have you most enjoyed? (Childhood, teen years, young adulthood, middle age, etc.)

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God, we praise you for the highs that we have experienced, and we thank you for companioning us through the lows. Help us to bear witness to one another's joys and sorrows. Amen.

Lesson:

"I understand stewardship to be a lived theology founded on the claim that all resources begin with and belong to God. Practicing stewardship reshapes how Christians manage all resources including 'our' money, materials, and relationships. Stewardship is a lived concept, most often resulting in sharing that surprises, compassion that complicates, and love that inspires." – Adam J. Copeland, *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*

Psalm 24:1 reads, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

As Christians, we believe all we have belongs to God and we are each given the opportunity, and the responsibility, to steward that which is entrusted to our care. This includes all our resources, material and otherwise.

For many people, perhaps most, talking about money is uncomfortable in any setting but especially in church. Many of us were raised to believe that it is impolite to talk about our finances. We may have a sense that our spiritual lives (the "sacred") have no bearing on our financial decisions (the "secular").

Yet Jesus does not shy away from talking about our financial resources. He famously says, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24b) and "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25).

David P. King is the Director of the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving and Indiana University. In *Beyond the Offering Plate*, he writes:

“Stewardship concerns more than money, but too often in broadening the conversation, money is the main topic we are seeking to avoid. Could it be easier to discuss a stewardship of time, technology, or talents? At one level, those of us formed within faith communities feel that the stewardship of money is routine... Yet at another level, it is not the pervasive money talk in the church that is the problem; rather, it is the fear of discussing finances at all. Money remains the taboo topic for American Christians... As we manufacture natural buffers to avoid discussing money directly, we also know that our relationship with money is perhaps one of the best windows into the practices of the Christian life.”⁵

While it is helpful and right for our understanding of stewardship to expand beyond financial resources, we cannot neglect the stewardship of our finances as a way we live out our faith as disciples of Jesus. To open our hands – to share and give – is to live in the upside-down kingdom of God.

Our culture often encourages us to grasp tightly to what we have and to live in a mindset of scarcity. Our faith encourages us to live with a spirit of abundance.

With a spirit of abundance, we can learn the gift of sufficiency. Lynne Twist writes in her book *The Soul of Money*, “Once we let go of scarcity, we discover the surprising truth of sufficiency. By sufficiency, I don’t mean a quantity of anything. Sufficiency isn’t two steps up from poverty or one stop short of abundance. It isn’t a measure of barely enough or more than enough. Sufficiency isn’t an amount at all. It is an experience, a context we generate, a declaration, a knowing that there is enough, and that we are enough.”⁶



Scripture: Leviticus 19:9-10

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Why do you think money remains a “taboo topic” for many American Christians?
2. What are some of the “stories” about money that you have learned throughout your life?
3. What is your earliest memory related to giving or serving?
4. Who have been some of your heroes and role models that reflect a generous life?
5. What is your reaction to Jesus saying, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for some one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Generous God, help us to open our hands and share the resources you have entrusted to our care. Transform our hearts so that giving might be experienced as joy. Amen.

⁵David P. King, “Stewardship of Money and Finances: Practicing Generosity as a Way of Life,” in *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*, ed. Adam J. Copeland (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 32-33.

⁶Lynne Twist, *The Soul of Money: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 44.

SESSION 7:

ATTENTION

welcome

Everyone is invited to share two words that describe how you are doing in this moment. You are welcome to expand upon why you've chosen these two words, or simply share and allow the group to receive them.

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God who sees and knows us completely, still our racing thoughts and ease our anxious hearts so this time might be set apart for our nourishment. Amen.

Lesson:

“We reveal our goals through action but our values through attention. To find out what people value, pay attention to their attention...” – Adam Grant

“For anyone trying to discern what to do with their life: pay attention to what you pay attention to. That’s pretty much all the info you need.” – Amy Krouse Rosenthal

“Attention is the beginning of devotion.” – Mary Oliver

Herbert Simon was a Nobel-prize winning social scientist whose work influenced the fields of computer science, economics, and cognitive psychology. In the late 1960s, he coined the term “attention economy” to describe the problem of information overload in economic terms. He pointed out the ways in which a wealth of information leads to a poverty of attention.

Half a century later, our access to information has skyrocketed and a “poverty of attention” has become widespread. Between smart phones, access to entertainment content, social media, and the demands of our everyday lives, there are innumerable demands on our attention at any given time. The avenues of distraction available to us are as varied as they are addictive.

This constant tug-of-war on our attention can leave us feeling perpetually distracted and tired with little space for things like silence or solitude; it also leaves its mark on our spirituality. The Catholic theologian Ronald Rolheiser once wrote, “Pathological busyness, distraction, and restlessness are major blocks today within our spiritual lives.”⁷

Our attention is one of the most valuable resources we have. If we do not steward it with intention, we may find that we give this precious resource away to that which is not worthy of the investment. When we become aware of the things we are paying attention to, we can ask ourselves if they reflect our values. If they do not, we can ask for God’s help in redirecting our attention towards that which matters to us and to God.

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-23

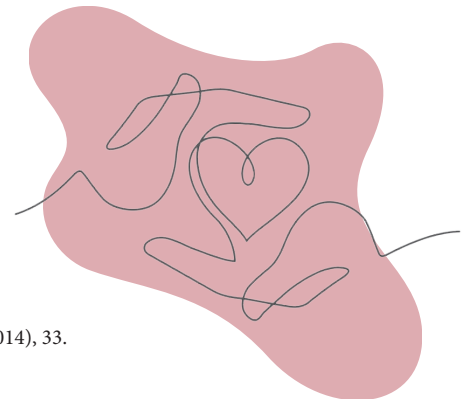
How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Discuss Adam Grant’s assessment that “We reveal our goals through action but our values through attention. To find out what people value, pay attention to their attention...”
2. What practices help you focus or reorient yourself to your values?
3. Do you find yourself trying to multitask and give your attention to more than one thing at a time? What does this feel like?
4. What are some sources of distraction in your life?
5. Discuss Ronald Rolheiser’s claim, “Pathological busyness, distraction, and restlessness are major blocks today within our spiritual lives.”

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

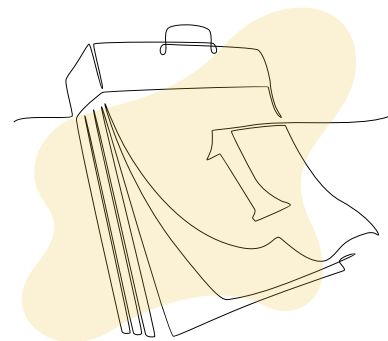
God of wisdom, direct our attention toward that which is worthy of our investment. Mold our hearts and our actions so that we are formed more and more in Christ’s likeness. Amen.



⁷Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Random House, 2014), 33.

SESSION 8

MARGIN



welcome

Everyone is invited to share one thing that is currently life-giving and one thing that is draining in their daily life.

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God of all times and places, we thank you for this time to be together. We have each prioritized this gathering, putting it onto our calendars in place of other activities vying for our time. Use this time to nourish our spirits and send us home refreshed. Amen.

Lesson:

“Maintaining margin is a discipline of restraint that does not come easily to over-achievers who struggle with self-care. We have to restrain our impulse to say yes to everything and to fill every available space with obligation. We have to restrain our internal pressure to be all things to all people. It’s setting a boundary around our time... We cannot create time, but with diligence, we can create margin.” – Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Sacred Self-Care*

“We achieve inner peace when our schedule aligns with our values.” – Stephen Covey

Maryann McKibben Dana posits that our calendars are “theological documents.”⁸ In the same way that our bank statements communicate something about who we are and what we believe based on what we give our money to, our calendars communicate something about who we are and what we believe based on how we spend our time.

Of course, there are some constraints on our time that are beyond our control; we all have responsibilities that must be fulfilled and tasks that must be accomplished. However, many of us have greater influence over how we spend our time than we give ourselves credit for. No matter what our age or our stage of life, we often find ourselves overscheduled, with calendars bursting at the seams.

⁸ Maryann McKibben Dana, “Stewardship of Time: Clocks, Calendars, and Cathedrals,” in *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*, ed. Adam J. Copeland (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 11.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us all to empty our calendars of the “extras,” and this gave many people ample margin for simple pleasures like being outside and enjoying God’s creation, reading, resting, and spending time with family.⁹ Being forced to empty our calendars helped many people to see just how over-scheduled they had become. This emptying gave us an opportunity to reflect on how we spend our time and whether it reflects our values and our discipleship to Jesus.

John Mark Comer writes, “Jesus made sure to inject a healthy dose of margin into his life. It’s been said that margin is ‘the space between our load and our limits.’ For many of us, there is no space between our loads and our limits. We’re not at 80 percent with room to breathe; we’re at 100 all the time. Jesus’ weekly schedule was a prophetic act against the hurried rhythms of our world... [Jesus] put on display an unhurried life, where space for God and love for people were the top priorities, and because he said yes to the Father and his kingdom, he constantly said no to other invitations.”¹⁰

To follow in the way of Jesus in our restless and hurried world is counter cultural. When we leave space in our calendars for margin, we open up the possibility for connection – with God, with our true selves, and with our neighbors.

Scripture: Mark 1:35-39

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Chanequa Walker-Barnes says, “We have to restrain our impulse to say yes to everything and to fill every available space with obligation.” Does this come naturally to you or do you struggle to restrain those impulses?
2. Stephen Covey says, “We achieve inner peace when our schedule aligns with our values.” Are there any changes you might make to help you get just 1% closer to aligning your schedule with your values?
3. Discuss Maryann McKibben Dana’s idea that calendars are theological documents.
4. In your current season of life, do you feel like you have space between your load and your limits? Why or why not?
5. How might you follow in the way of Jesus and act against the “hurried rhythms of our world”?

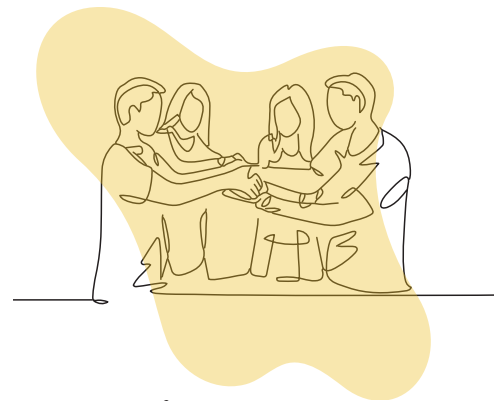
Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God of peace, meet us in the hustle and bustle and grant us opportunities to examine how we spend our time. Give us the courage to make changes to our calendars that will bear good fruit in our lives. Amen.

⁹ It’s important to remember that the ability to stay home during the pandemic was not a privilege afforded to all people. Essential workers, medical personnel, and many others were required to continue working outside of their homes and did not experience the same sense of respite that some folks found during the shutdown.

¹⁰ John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019), 93.

SESSION 9: COMMUNITY



welcome

Everyone is invited to share one thing they are grateful for and one thing they are praying for. Take note of the prayers of your group members and commit to praying on their behalf.

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Triune God, you have created us for community and bless us richly through friendship. We thank you for the community that has formed here, and we pray that we would be marked by our time together. Amen.

Lesson:

“The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer... It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

“We come to community to find the core of life and share it with others. Community is the commitment to carry others through their periods of darkness as they carry us through ours. It is about sustaining others and being sustained ourselves when we have gone as far as we can go alone.”

– Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practices for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life*

“When we examine Jesus’ relationships, we see that his life and ministry are deeply rooted in love – loving God and loving one’s neighbor. He surrounds himself with people who share his values and vision for a more just world. God’s divine plan to share God’s love with the world in the embodied humanity of Jesus is manifested in Jesus’ friendships and relationships.” – Victoria Atkinson White, *Holy Friendships*

When we look to the example of Jesus, we see that he lived his life and did his work in community. He had the 12 disciples who accompanied him through his ministry, and within that group he seemed to have special friendships with Peter, James, and John. Mary Magdalene also seems to be part of his inner circle. In chapter 11 of the gospel of John, we also see a close relationship between Jesus and Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. When Jesus begins to weep over the death of Lazarus, those gathered comment, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:36).

Jesus Christ, the savior of the world, was not so caught up in his mission that he neglected to live in relationship with others. Jesus Christ, who was tasked with the critically important work of healing and proclaiming God’s good news, did not operate in a vacuum. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, moved through the world in community.

Now we, as his followers, are called to continue Jesus’ legacy.

John Mark Comer writes, “You can’t follow Jesus alone. Not ‘shouldn’t’; can’t. It’s not even an option. Jesus didn’t have a disciple; he had *disciples*, plural. He called people to apprentice under him in community.”¹¹

When we follow Jesus in community, we find not only support and fulfillment but also the opportunity to be challenged and to work out our faith through conversation with people who think differently than we do.

Scripture: John 15:1-17

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. How have you experienced God’s love through community?
2. Has community been an important part of your experience of faith?
3. What gets in the way of prioritizing community in your life?
4. Often, we find ourselves members of not just one community but communities, plural.
What are the communities that you occupy currently? What gifts does each one give you?
5. Have you ever been part of a community for just a season? (For example, parents of your children’s friends at one school that didn’t carry over to another.) If so, how did that community shape you?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God of joy, we praise you for the relationships that draw us nearer to you. Help us to cultivate holy friendships in which we are both those who are carried and those who carry. Amen.

¹¹John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2024), 108.

SESSION 10

VOCATION

welcome

Everyone is invited to share what you wanted to be when you grew up. Do you still find yourself drawn to that profession?

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God who calls us into being each day, silence the voices within us that deafen the sound of your voice. Help us to hear your call and to respond in faith. Amen.

Lesson:

“[Vocation] is the longer, deeper story of someone’s life, our longings and our choices and our passions that run through life like a deep river; [occupation] is what we do day by day, the relationships and responsibilities we occupy along the way of our lives, more like the currents in a river that give it visible form.” – Steve Garber, *The Seamless Life*

If you were to turn to the dictionary and look up vocation, one definition reads, “the work in which a person is employed.” We could substitute the word “occupation” here, and perhaps this conjures an image of a firefighter or a lawyer, a teacher or a doctor. Another definition says, “a divine call to the religious life; an entry into the priesthood or a religious order.” Both definitions, while true, reflect our tendency to think about vocation in a very narrow sense as either primarily our occupation or as particular to church professionals. Even more unhelpfully, we may tend to relegate a sense of “true vocation” to people whose work is overtly spiritual or humanitarian in nature, like pastors and teachers and doctors.

But what about grocery store clerks and people who work at the DMV? What about accountants and sales representatives? How are these folks to understand their vocation if their day jobs are not so obviously laden with meaning or a deep, existential sense of purpose? The reality is that this is the case for so many of us. We live in a world where much of what we do throughout the day is pragmatic.

While it is true many people feel a sense of call to the kind of work they do, we will have an impoverished understanding of vocation if we conflate it entirely with occupation. Vocation is not only what we do in the day to day or how we earn a paycheck. As Christians, vocation is concerned with who we are, as children of God, made in God's image.

Prior to the Reformation, it was only people who dedicated their lives to becoming priests, monks, or nuns who were considered to have a "vocation" or calling from God. But the Reformers, like John Calvin who was the father of Presbyterianism, they believed that all disciples of Jesus have a calling to serve God through who they are and what they do.

As Donald McKim writes, "What we do during a week is not irrelevant or unimportant. It is our vocation, our calling, and the way we live out our discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ. God calls us, and we respond in faith and service."¹² As Christians, our vocation is to live out our discipleship as parents, siblings, friends, co-workers, bosses, and any other roles we may occupy. Whether you are a mail carrier or a teacher or a surgeon, your vocation at its most basic level is the same: to emulate Christ's example of love and service in your daily life.

Scripture: Galatians 6:4-5 (MSG)

"Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life."

How does this scripture relate to today's theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Have you tended to think about vocation and occupation as distinct or overlapping?
2. How can you emulate Christ's example of love and service in your daily life?
3. Have you ever felt a sense of call to a particular type of work or service?
4. Who have been your teachers when it comes to living out Christian vocation in all aspects of life?
5. Are there any ways you'd like to grow in your vocation as a disciple of Jesus?

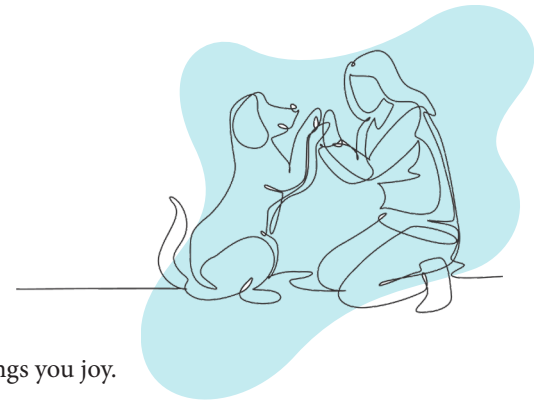
Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Creator God, you have knit each of us together with particular gifts and talents and called us to your service. Teach us to follow Christ in the lives that you have given us. Amen.

¹² Donald K. McKim. *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 95.

SESSION 11:

JOY



welcome

Everyone is invited to describe a snapshot from your ordinary life that brings you joy.

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God who is the author of all joy, we give you thanks for the people, places, pets, and practices that bring us joy. Help us to be persistent in our pursuit of joy even when it feels hard to come by. Amen.

Lesson:

“What happens if joy is not separate from pain? What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other through those things? What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks?” – Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy: Essays*

Joy can seem rather flimsy a word when life takes unexpected turns toward hardship. Even amid our times of pain, we cannot escape the cultural directive to “Choose joy!” printed on water bottles and colorful tank tops. To be asked to choose joy when our circumstances are anything but joyful can feel rather cruel, as if we are being asked not only to endure hardship but to do so while maintaining a positive attitude and smile.

Gary Haugen is the CEO of International Justice Mission (IJM), an organization whose mission is to protect people in poverty from violence and to combat trafficking and slavery, violence against women and children, and police abuse of power. In his work with IJM, Haugen encounters some of the worst of humanity's abuses and is made painfully aware of the hardships experienced by vulnerable people around the globe. It would be easy for someone like him to become so acquainted with darkness that joy would seem trivial or even out of reach. Yet he argues that joy is the oxygen for doing hard things.

In a podcast episode with Kate Bowler, Haugen says, "Yes, there is suffering and darkness in the world, but there is absolutely beauty and goodness...People who are suffering and hurting in the world do not need our spasms of passion. What they need is a long faithfulness in the same direction, and that's sustained only by a discipline of joy."

Haugen reminds us not only that joy can co-exist with suffering but that it is a necessary, even critical source of sustenance to carry us through difficult times. Even in our darkest moments, joy can break through in ways that surprise and sustain us.

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-13

How does this scripture relate to today's theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Have you had experiences of joy amid difficulty?
2. What is your response to the idea that "joy is the oxygen for doing hard things"?
3. How can you have a "discipline of joy"?
4. Is joy different from happiness? If so, how?
5. What brought you joy as a child? Is that thing still part of your life?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Loving God, send us out into your world to shine light where there is darkness and to find joy in unexpected places. Amen.

SESSION 12

PRAYER

welcome

Everyone is invited to share the most recent time or the most poignant time they have felt connected to God.

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God who hears us when we pray, always ready to listen, we thank you for the gift of prayer. Embolden us to bring our full selves before you and to be renewed in your love. Amen.

Lesson:

“The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives – altruistic *and* selfish, merciful *and* hateful, loving *and* bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.” – Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*

By all accounts, Barbara Brown Taylor is a spiritual giant. She is an ordained Episcopal priest, Yale Divinity School graduate, professor of religion, popular preacher, and widely known author. Her books are bestsellers, and her speaking engagements are always packed. And yet, in a chapter about prayer in her book *An Alter in the World*, she writes this:

“I am a failure at prayer. When people ask me about my prayer life, I feel like a bulimic must feel when people ask about her favorite dish. My mind starts scrambling for ways to hide my problem. I start talking about other things I do that I hope will make me sound like a godly person. I try to say admiring things about prayer so there can be no doubt about how important I think it is...I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs than talk about my prayer life.”¹³

¹³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Alter in the World* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 176.

It's rather refreshing to hear someone like Brown Taylor admit to feeling like a failure when it comes to prayer. If academic prowess or professional success were indicators of proficiency in prayer, she would be considered an expert. Alas, prayer is not a skill to be mastered, it is a gift to be embraced, in all its many forms.

Brown Taylor goes on to share how her understanding of prayer was changed through the insights of an ancient monk, Brother David. "Prayer, according to Brother David, is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing."¹⁴

Sometimes prayer happens on bended knees or on crowded church pews, other times prayer happens through music or taking a long walk. Sometimes prayer looks like reading the Psalms or meditative spiritual practices, other times prayer looks like staring out the window or holding a baby, getting lost in the goodness of the gift and the love of the Giver.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Romans 8:26-27

How do these scriptures relate to today's theme word?

How do they relate to your life?

witness

1. Who taught you to pray?
2. What is your current relationship with prayer?
3. What kinds of prayer resonate most with you (written, sung, spoken, etc.)?
4. What is your response to Brother David's definition of prayer as "waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing"?
5. What gets in the way of prayer being part of your daily life?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Loving God, help us to wake up to your presence no matter where we are or what we are doing. In all of life, help us to pray without ceasing. Amen

¹⁴ Ibid. 178

SESSION 13

REST

welcome

Everyone is invited to share their favorite way to find rest.

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Restoring God, in a world the drains us, you seek to give us rest. Help us to open ourselves to our need for rest and to embrace our limits so that we might experience true rest. Amen.

Lesson:

“What if Christians were known as a countercultural community of the well-rested – people who embrace our limits with zest and even joy? As believers we can relish sleep as not only necessary but as an embodied response to the truth of Scripture: we are finite, weak creatures who are abundantly cared for by our and strong and loving Creator. In our workaholic, image-barraged, overcaffeinated, entertainment-addicted, and supercharged culture, submission to our creatureliness is a necessary and often overlooked part of discipleship.” – Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*

On the sixth day of the creation account found in Genesis 1, God created humans in God’s image (v. 26). The theological concept known as *imago dei* (Latin for “image of God”) finds its roots in this passage and is foundational to both Christian and Jewish faith. Our belief in the *imago dei* is the basis for our conviction that every human life has dignity and value and is worthy of love.

In the previous five days of this creation story, God stays quite busy. God creates light and dark, day and night, dry land and seas, animals and sea creatures, plants and vegetation of all kinds. The pinnacle of God’s handiwork, the finishing touch of creation is humanity.

This creation accounts ends with, “On the sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done” (Gen 2:2).

The God of the Universe who just spoke the world and everything in it into existence stops to rest. Humans come onto the scene on the sixth day, and the first thing they see God do is rest. They don't first see God display power or might or creative energy – they see God resting after six days of work.

Humans, made in the *imago dei*, are made in the image of a God who rests.

We 21st century, workaholic, productivity-driven humans, made in the *imago dei*, are made in the image of a God who rests. We were not created for seven days of work with no time to stop. We were created with the need for rest. When we make time to rest, not only do we honor the needs of our bodies, but we also recognize that we are the creatures not the Creator. When we shut our eyes and rest, the world continues to turn. We honor our place in the created order of things – God is God, and we are not.

Scripture: Luke 8:22-25

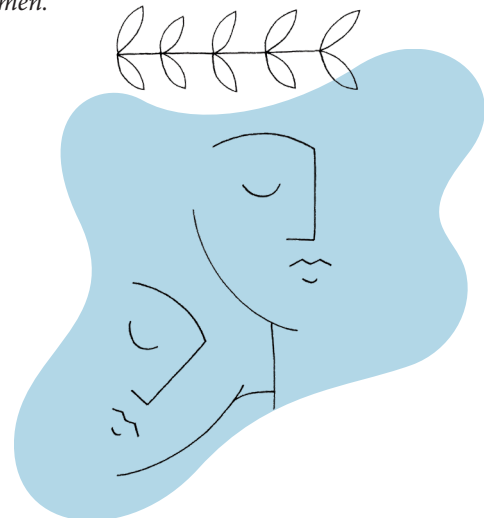
How does this scripture relate to today's theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Do you feel well-rested in your current season of life? Why or why not?
2. What kinds of messages do we receive in our culture about rest?
3. Is rest at odds with productivity?
4. What is your reaction to the notion that we are made in the image of a God who rests?
5. Given the current constraints on your life, how can you pursue a life that prioritizes rest?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God of the Universe, so often we wrongly assume that we are in charge, that everything depends on us. Help us to embrace rest as a reminder of our creatureliness and our dependence on you. Amen.



SESSION 14:

RECONCILIATION

welcome

Everyone is invited to fill in the blank, “Conflict to me feels _____.”

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Redeeming God, you are making all things new. Invite us anew into your ministry of reconciliation and help us be ambassadors for Christ’s love. Amen.

Lesson:

“We believe that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another... We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.” – PC(USA)’s Confession of Belhar

Whenever we come across the word “reconciliation” in the New Testament, it’s most often used by the apostle Paul who is deeply committed to the transformative power of reconciliation. When Paul writes about reconciliation in his letters, he is referring to either the relationship between humans and God or the relationships among humans. And when it comes to the relationship between humans and God, it is always God who is the initiator or originator of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is God’s good gift and humans are simply the recipients, those who become reconciled to God. But this is not meant to be a passive acceptance, we don’t receive reconciliation and then spend our days resting in the comfort of a right relationship with our Maker. Rather, “to be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God’s reconciling community.”¹⁵

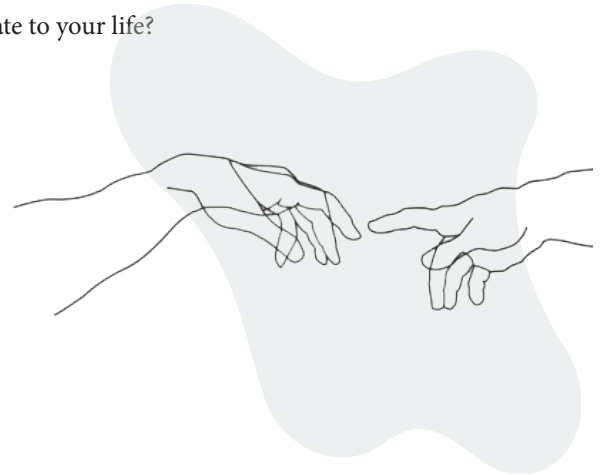
¹⁵ PC(USA) Confession of 1967

In other words, reconciliation with God is both a gift of grace to be received with gratitude and a commissioning that elicits our response. Paul describes this commissioning as becoming “ambassadors for Christ.” Just as a diplomatic ambassador is a representative of the country from which they come, as followers of Jesus we are called to be representatives of God’s love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness in every corner of the globe. As Christ’s ambassadors, we are called to partner with God and to actively participate in the Spirit’s work of reconciliation and healing.

Amazed by grace, we look at others through the waters of baptism, recognizing that Christ’s loving act of reconciliation extends to *everyone* because no one is out of the reach of God’s mercy. Compelled by the love of Christ and the grace of God, we are sent into the world to engage in the ministry of reconciliation in big and small ways, striving to become more like what Isaiah calls “repairers of the breach” (Isaiah 58:12).

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

How does this scripture relate to today’s theme word? How does it relate to your life?



witness

1. What do you imagine when you hear the word “reconciliation”?
2. In your life, what does it look like to engage in the ministry of reconciliation?
3. Where have you witnessed or experienced reconciliation?
4. Who are “repairers of the breach” that inspire you?
5. What does it mean that we are “reconciled” to God?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Holy God, embolden us to be repairers of the breach in our lives and in the world. Give us courage to speak the truth in love when necessary and keep our eyes fixed on the Prince of Peace. Amen.

SESSION 15:

HOSPITALITY

welcome

Everyone is invited to share a memory of a favorite meal (the food, the setting, the people present, etc.).

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Loving God, your welcome is wide, and all are invited to your table. Help us to crowd our tables with friends and strangers alike, to reflect the image of your kingdom. Amen.

Lesson:

“Christians and Jews hold in common one theological basis for hospitality: Creation. Creation is the ultimate expression of God’s hospitality to his creatures... To invite people into our homes is to respond with gratitude to the God who made a home for us.... God’s creation gives us a model for making and sharing homes with people, but the reality of God’s Trinitarian life suggests that Christian hospitality goes further than that. We are not meant simply to invite people into our homes, but also to invite them into our lives.” – Lauren F. Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath*

“Hospitality begins with God. Because we have a supremely hospitable God, in whose image and likeness we are made, we are capable of reflecting hospitality back to God, to others, to the earth, and even to ourselves... Until we are deeply rooted in the experience of God’s grace, we have neither the living example nor the strength of commitment to live hospitably in a hostile world. Whatever forms our hospitality may take, it is already a response from God.” – Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*

Our modern understanding of hospitality largely centers around welcoming friends and family into our homes to share meals and fellowship. However, in the Ancient Near East, hospitality was a necessity not a luxury, an expectation not an option. Travel was often dangerous, and people relied upon the kindness of strangers to welcome them in when they needed food or shelter on their journeys. There was an expectation that any stranger who knocked upon another’s door seeking provisions would be greeted with safety and welcome.

Hospitality was not only a fixture of the culture, but a command from God in Scripture. More than once, God makes it clear that the Israelites are to welcome strangers into their midst and treat them fairly.

God makes a connection between the need to welcome the stranger and the experience the Hebrews had as slaves in Egypt. Leviticus 19:33-34 reads, “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

As people who have known what it feels like to be unwelcome and oppressed, the Hebrews understand what it is to be an outsider. Informed by their history of exclusion, they are to treat the stranger as one of their own. We continue to see this commitment to hospitality in the early church as hospitality functioned as evangelism in the growing Jesus movement. Hospitality was not one-sided for Jesus’ followers; they were called to be gracious hosts and gracious guests as they lived out their ministry. As Andrew Arterbury writes, “Hospitality establishes a truly interdependent and reciprocal relationship that requires disciples, whether they are hosts or guests, to view the stranger as a valuable child of God.”¹⁶

Scripture: Luke 10:1-9; Hebrews 13:1-2

How do these scriptures relate to today’s theme word? How do they relate to your life?

witness

1. When or where have you experienced true hospitality?
2. How does hospitality differ from entertaining?
3. Is hospitality a luxury or a necessity in our lives today?
4. What makes you feel welcome in a space or group of people?
5. How can you extend hospitality and welcome to the people you encounter in your daily life?

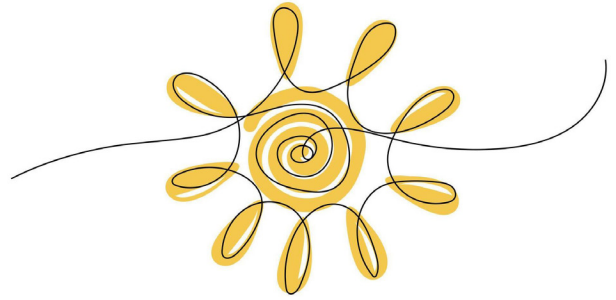
Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

Welcoming God, where we have felt excluded, you have welcomed us into the fold. Where we have felt like strangers, you have called us friends. Help us to extend to that same grace and hospitality to all the people we encounter. Amen.

¹⁶ Andrew Arterbury, “Entertaining Angels: Hospitality in Luke and Acts” from Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University (2007).

SESSION 16

WONDER



welcome

When was the last time that you felt awe? Where were you? What were you doing?

word

Opening Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God of Wonder, you have created a world with endless delights and pleasures. Help us to slow down for long enough to recognize these good gifts and to celebrate them with gratitude. Amen.

Lesson:

“When I speak of wonder, I mean the practice of beholding the beautiful. Beholding the majestic – the snow-capped Himalayas, the sun setting on the sea – but also the perfectly mundane – that soap bubble reflecting your kitchen, the oxidized underbelly of that stainless steel pan. More than the grand beauties of our lives, wonder is about having the presence to pay attention to the commonplace. It could be said that to find beauty in the ordinary is a deeper exercise than climbing to the mountaintop.” – Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*

“Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.” – Abraham Joshua Heschel

In an age like ours that never ceases to dazzle us with advancements in technology, medicine, science and the like, one would think that we would walk around in continuous radical amazement. Yet the scale of progress seems to have had the opposite effect, rendering us less inclined to be amazed.

When you hold a smart phone in your hand, you behold a machine capable beyond your great-great grandparent's wildest dreams that is now a commonplace object. This feat of human ingenuity is cause for wonder, sure. But what if you stopped for a moment to look beyond the phone at the hand that is holding it? The intricate design of your hand, with its muscles, tendons, and bones, the mechanics of your nervous system that allow you to pick up your phone and hold it, the scars from cuts that have healed – all of it, miraculous. A wonder to behold.

One does not have to spend much time around a child to realize that children are experts in the practice of wonder, following their curiosity and allowing their eyes and imaginations to linger on that which catches their attention. Wonder is often narrowly relegated to the folly of childhood, not something for grown-ups who have important work to do and important places to be. Wonder can easily be seen as a waste of time in our productivity obsessed world.

Why hang on to wonder? First, wonder is a form of praise as it opens our eyes to the presence of the divine. It allows us to relish in God's creativity. Second, wonder is often quickly followed by gratitude. When we take the time to be in awe of that which seems commonplace, everything from the hands that are holding this guide to the grass growing in the yard has the potential to invite gratitude and therefore shift our perspective away from what we lack and toward the goodness and generosity of God.

Scripture: Psalm 19

How does this scripture relate to today's theme word? How does it relate to your life?

witness

1. Does wonder strike you as childish or frivolous? Why or why not?
2. What is your response to Cole Arthur Reilly's claim that "wonder is about having the presence to pay attention to the commonplace"?
3. How have you experienced wonder through the eyes of children?
4. How does having a sense of wonder affect our faith?
5. What gets in the way of living life in "radical amazement"?

Closing Prayer: Invite someone to pray or read the printed prayer below.

God of Wonder, we give you thanks for all the ways you amaze us, through mountaintops and everyday valleys. Keep us attuned and awake so that we might not become immune to wonder and amazement. Help us to name our experiences of wonder and share them with others. Amen.

GROUP MEMBER PROFILES



Name: _____

Hometown: _____

Vocational Background: _____

Names of 2-3 Important People in My Life: _____

Favorite Snack: _____

One thing I love (hobby, sports team, travel, etc.): _____

Birth Month and Day: _____

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thoughts and reflections

thoughts and reflections



communitygroups

Engaging Faith & Friendship

White Memorial Presbyterian Church
1704 Oberlin Drive | Raleigh NC 27608
whitememorial.org