



hope

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

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WELCOME

We are living in a wildly divided time. Hate-filled discourse has become the wallpaper of our modern lives. All it takes is one minor gaffe by a politician, a slogan chanted on the street, or an angry “hot take” on Twitter, and our world seems to devolve into tribalism, mud-slinging, and rage. Meanwhile, our communities are becoming increasingly isolated from one another as we “herd” into like-minded, demographically-identical enclaves. It’s discouraging! The Broken Place of Hatred is alive and well.

And yet, we are the Church, aren’t we? We are called to bring healing to this broken place! Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, we are to become a new kind of community on this earth – one defined not by our differences, but by our self-giving love.

Well, guess what? I’ve got good news: this is actually possible! Even today. Even in our divided world. We can walk The Path of Self-Giving Love. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, we can overcome hatred with humility, unity, and compassion. Because we are one in Christ, we can become a community which reflects the diversity, beauty, and justice of God’s kingdom.

So, let’s dive in together, friends, and dream as a community of what it would look like to show our world a different way to live.

Barry Rodriguez



PHILIPPIANS 2: 1-11

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:1 - 11

When we begin looking into Paul's letter to the Philippian church, it's important that we put his words into the context of all that had happened to Paul when he visited Philippi a few years earlier.

Philippi wasn't just any city. It was an ancient city, even in the first century. Philippi had a long, proud, and important history that set it apart from other locations. It is even referred to in the Book of Acts as a 'leading city in Macedonia' meaning that it was a place of importance. Most significantly, Philippi had been designated as an official retirement city for Roman soldiers. Archaeology reveals that Rome had put a lot of money into the city to make it a desirable place for living out one's life after decades of serving in the Roman army. This made Philippi a pro-Rome, military town. Philippi had also been awarded the distinction of being a city where all its natural-born citizens were granted the highest level of Roman citizenship. If you were born in Philippi, Rome had declared that it was as if you were born in Rome. In fact, to be on the ground in Philippi was legally considered the same as being in Rome. It is easy to understand why the citizens of Philippi were extremely proud of these honors.

Philippi had very few Jewish inhabitants. The book of Acts also tells us that when Paul first went to Philippi he found that there wasn't a synagogue in the city. This means that there were fewer than the 10 Jewish men over the age of 13 needed in Philippi to form a synagogue. Jews were generally misunderstood in cities like Philippi and often thought to be odd troublemakers due to their strict religious convictions and habits.

It makes perfect sense that in Acts we read that Paul was accused of causing ‘civic unrest’ in Philippi. The charge against Paul and his companion Silas was that they were advocating customs which were unlawful for Romans to practice. This false accusation led to a riot during which Paul and Silas were stripped in public, severely beaten, thrown in jail, chained, and put in stocks. This terrible moment changed dramatically when Paul and Silas revealed to the Philippian officials that they, too, were full-fledged Roman citizens and everyone knew that the treatment they had received had violated the rights guaranteed to Roman citizens.

It is important to recognize that years later, when Paul wrote his letter to the church he had started in Philippi, the events of those terrible days and the rights, privileges, and expectations of citizenship were still on his mind. What Paul says in multiple ways to the Philippian Christians, and what we believe he is still saying to us, is this: “Now that you have followed Jesus, you are citizens of a much greater kingdom, a greater empire with a greater King than Rome. You may have Roman citizenship, but your deepest allegiance is to the ultimate king, King Jesus. You need to live as citizens of Jesus’ Kingdom.”

Paul’s message comes across most clearly in the first eleven verses of Philippians chapter 2. This passage will serve as a foundation and a guide for the topics we’re addressing during Hope Month. We’ll consider the implications of Paul’s plea for the Philippians to live in a manner that honors Jesus. As we do, we will learn to follow Him down The Path of Self-Giving Love.

Paul makes two points at the end of chapter one. First, he says that one privilege guaranteed to citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven is suffering. Second, he confirms that they are in the struggle together. Paul was suffering along with the Philippian Christians at the hands of local non-Christians accusing them of being bad Roman citizens and traitors to the Empire. This dangerous allegation painted them as people whose allegiance did not belong first and foremost to the Emperor.

Paul’s readers are suffering for following Jesus as their king. With this in mind, he asks them to reflect on His kingdom reality. In chapter two, Paul lists four more privileges of being citizens of God’s kingdom. He then states the expectations that accompany this citizenship. Finally, Paul writes a poem of praise to our kingdom’s emperor: Jesus.

The way that Paul begins this eleven-verse section in Philippians 2 is reminiscent of Jewish teachers of the day. He poses rhetorical questions in order to prompt thinking, create conversation, and lead them to reflect on their own lives. The obvious answer to each question he asks is a strong Yes. Yes, they had encouragement in difficult, disorienting times. Yes, they had comfort when their hearts were lonely and broken. Yes, they had brothers and sisters with whom to share the burdens of life. These questions are designed to lead to his conclusion: If this is so, then live like citizens who have been given these benefits of the kingdom of Jesus! In Christ, we gain all these benefits as well.

As citizens of the kingdom of God, we receive great privileges and significant benefits as we follow Jesus. Yes, we will suffer. Yet I am confident of this: if we pay attention and reflect, we will find evidence of God at work.

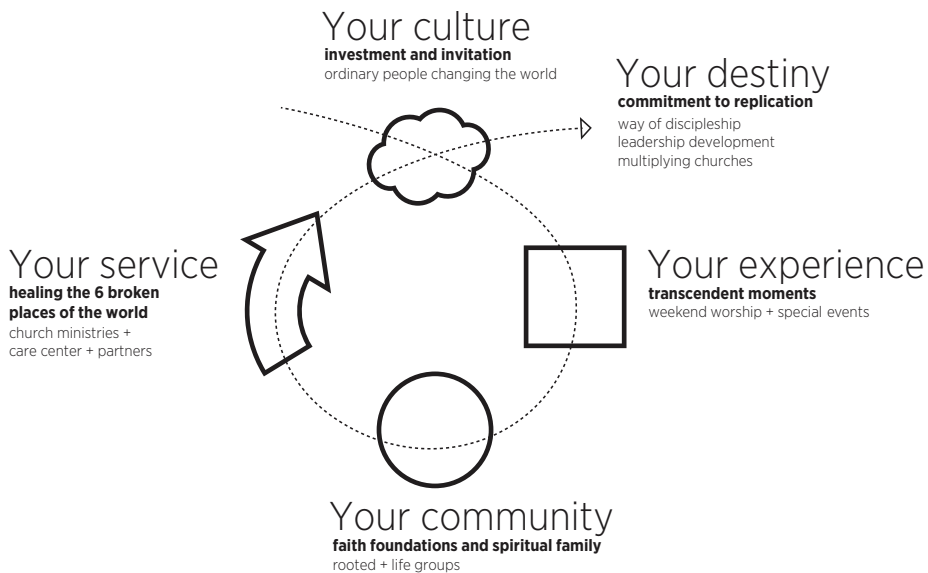
It's important for us to reflect together on the effects these benefits have had in our lives and to share stories about times we've been encouraged or comforted. It is important for us to talk about our experiences of fellowship within the family of God and to tell one another about the shifts we've felt in our own hearts. As we do, I believe we will find both hope and courage to live as fellow citizens in the kingdom of God.

Tim Ayers

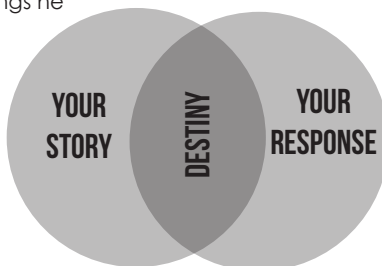
THE LOOP

At Grace Church, we believe every person was born with a God-given destiny: to partner with God to heal this broken world. Finding your destiny begins with following Jesus. This happens when you're invited from culture to experience transcendent experiences with God, find deep spiritual family, serve in tangible ways and, ultimately, multiply yourself by inviting others along the journey. The Loop is our strategy for helping you do that. With concrete next steps and church-wide integration, the Loop is Grace's approach to help you discover that **you were made for more.**

Life Groups are a continuation of the community that began in Rooted. Though diverse in many ways, group members are united in their desire to understand the depth of God's love, their identity in Him, and the purpose for which they've been created. The spiritual family found in a Life Group offers support along this journey.



We are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago...
Ephesians 2:10



...For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.
Romans 8:22

THE 7 RHYTHMS OF COMMUNITY

During the Rooted experience you were introduced to 7 rhythms that when practiced in community, can significantly impact both personal and Kingdom growth. These rhythms have been incorporated into the Life Groups' curriculum and are meant to become lifetime habits.

ONE: GOD'S WORD

- Daily Devotion: Routinely read the Word to deepen your understanding of God and His direction for your life

TWO: PRAYER

- Personal prayer that develops into an ongoing conversation with God
- Prayer with Life Group
- Prayer Experience during every Life Group season

THREE: SERVE THE COMMUNITY

- Continue to discover the talents, gifts and passions that God has given you and consider how you might express them
- Participate in a Serve Experience with Life Group members
- Regularly serve in a ministry of Grace Church or one of our partner ministries

FOUR: FREEDOM FROM STRONGHOLDS

- Continue taking steps towards freedom and healing from your stronghold
- Give and receive encouragement from Life Group members as all strive to grow in freedom

FIVE: SACRIFICIAL GENEROSITY

- Give as God leads you, maintaining a palms-up posture
- Continue the discussion of your journey towards generosity with your Life Group

SIX: SHARE YOUR STORY

- Look for the story God is writing in your life
- Share your story with people in your sphere of influence as prompted by the Holy Spirit

SEVEN: CELEBRATION

- Celebrate with your Life Group, church, and family how God is working in your life
- Attend weekend services regularly to worship and celebrate with other followers of Jesus

WEEK ONE:

THE PATH OF SELF-GIVING LOVE

SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF THE OTHER

Cara Howard

We settled into the plastic waiting room chairs and listened for his name to be called. I looked over at his fifteen-year-old mother, bouncing him up and down to try and make him smile. Though I was only seven years her senior, I was a group care worker in the residential facility where Ana lived. Her own mother's rights had been terminated, and now she was a mother herself. I wasn't yet a mother, but my job made me Ana's guardian.

"How long are they gonna make us wait?" she shot at me every few minutes. "Can't you go ask again? I don't want to be here all day," she complained.

In the emergency room, first come doesn't always equal first served. Caleb was only fifteen months old, but we didn't know how many other people were in line or how urgent their needs were. There was nothing we could do but wait.

Balling up his hands into fists, Caleb wiggled and squirmed until he almost slid off her lap. His momma spoke to him in baby talk, trying to soothe him. When his fussing turned to wailing, she balked. Defensive, Ana hissed, "Cut it out!" The words escaped her lips in a sharper tone and louder volume than she intended. Strangers around the room turned to look at her. Her face reddened. She shoved his little body into my arms. "Your turn," she informed me.

His belly was swollen. His cheeks were flushed. His coffee-colored skin, warm to the touch. His black curls were matted due to sleep and fever. I pulled him onto my hip, stood up, and walked back and forth, hoping to distract him with movement. Just when the ache in my back persuaded me to sit back down, I heard the call. "Caleb Johnson?"

Grabbing the diaper bag, I pulled the paper Medicaid card out of its pocket. We rose and hurried toward the nurse whose eyes were scanning the room. "Follow me," she ordered us. She led us down the long hallway into the cold, sterile examination room.

In a monotone voice, she ran through the list of questions on the intake form. Ana sat ramrod straight with her eyes glued to the linoleum. She responded using only one or two-word answers. Finally, the nurse closed the file and headed toward the door. She informed us the doctor would be in to see us soon.

When he entered the room a few minutes later, I looked him in the eye and stood. He extended his hand to shake mine. "Who have we got here?" His eyes turned and fell upon baby Caleb, whimpering in his mother's arms. She shushed her son but didn't look up.

Turning back toward me, he released an audible sigh and raised his eyebrows. He looked down at the file, then asked Ana directly, "So, mom, how long has he been in pain? Do you remember?"

She mumbled an answer. “Two days. His belly is swollen. He won’t eat.”

“What’s that?” he said, more loudly than necessary. “He can’t tell me what’s wrong, mom, so I need you to tell me.” The doctor threw a sideways glance my way and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, *What do we expect? She’s a teenage mom.*

Using oversimplified language, the doctor talked to Ana about her son’s condition. My blood pressure rose as I witnessed his condescending attitude toward her. His body language revealed the assumptions he was making. That her brown skin, young age, economic status, and lack of education made her a bad mom. That she should have never gotten pregnant in the first place. That this baby didn’t have a chance. And that because of the color of my skin, I was like him. She was the *other*: a mere inconvenience forced upon us in our professional roles.

This older, white man, as the professional, held all the power. Ana had brought her baby to him for diagnosis and treatment. She had no choice but to endure his scorn. Her baby’s health mattered more, so she sucked up her anger and did what she was told.

When he saw Ana, this man saw a number, a problem, a statistic: just another poor, brown, teenage mother. But I knew she was scared and alone, that she felt small and powerless in a big world that had been unkind. For the first time, I saw the world through the eyes of the other. The injustice shocked and infuriated me.

When he left the room, I let out a big breath I didn’t know I had been holding. I turned to her and said, “Ana, I’m so sorry. That doctor was so rude. You don’t deserve to be treated that way.” I assured her we would make sure her baby boy got the treatment he needed. I promised that I would insist that we both got to stay with Caleb during whatever tests they needed to give him.

She stared at me with red, puffy eyes. Her pent-up tears had welled up as soon as the door closed behind him. I could see she was mad, but unlike me, she wasn’t surprised.

This was her reality; I was just a visitor. Seeing the world through Ana’s eyes opened mine.

DAY ONE

God loves with perfect love

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

John 13:34

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.

1 John 4:16-19

We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first.

Matthew 5: 43-48

You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different than anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.'

Notes

REFLECT

Love each other. Sounds simple, doesn't it? We'd probably be hard-pressed to find someone to disagree with this teaching. But if we follow Jesus, this is more than good advice. It's a command. That means we need to look closer, to draw near and listen, and to learn what he means by *love*.

Jesus said, *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.* (John 14:9) God the Father is love. Love forms his very essence. Jesus came to reflect God's love to us. His words and life flesh out love's definition. And he commands us to love others **as he has loved us.**

God shows love to all. His love is unconditional, not transactional. It defies our practical and logical sensibilities; it is lavish, extravagant, and indiscriminate. God's love is perfect.

Jesus tells us plainly: *Love each other.* After considering God's definition of love, this command doesn't sound so simple anymore. It might even feel impossible when we consider that the *other* might look, sound, think, or act in ways we don't understand or like. The *other* might be our enemy.

When we encounter the *other*, our response will lead us down one of two paths: The Path of Hate, or The Path of Self-Giving Love. Our knee-jerk impulse to encountering difference is often fear.

So how do we take the first step down the Path of Love?

When we absorb the truth of God's love for us, we are ready to begin. Love transforms the one beloved. We assume a posture of humility and gain the courage to walk the Path of Love. Those who have been loved well learn to love well.

When we surrender our lives to Jesus and embrace his love, we receive the indwelling Holy Spirit. Empowered by the Spirit, we gain the ability to love others. As God lives in us, we are continually being transformed. As we live in God, our love will grow more perfect.

The Path of Love is the journey of a lifetime. As our love for one another increasingly reflects God's perfect love, we show the world an alternative to the hatred we see around us. God works in and through us to love others. Together, we advance his mission of healing the Broken Place of Hatred.

DAY TWO

As God's love transforms us, we love our neighbors

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Mark 12:28-34

One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength'. The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

The teacher of religious law replied, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law."

Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Luke 10:25-29

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?"

The man answered, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. And, Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!"

The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

To be continued...

Notes

REFLECT

Math was never my favorite subject. But throughout my education, I managed to ace my classes, even algebra and geometry, for one reason: I possessed the ability to memorize. That skill saved me. Within a given semester, I absorbed the formulas and applied them to find the correct answers on tests. But because the subject never really interested me, much of that knowledge never took up permanent residence in my brain. Now, as an adult, I confess that my math skills are weak. Thank goodness for the calculator function on the smartphone that fits in my pocket!

Much like me, the religious experts in today's passages liked knowing the right answers. They wondered which of God's commands Jesus considered to be most important. They must have felt proud when their answers matched the one Jesus gave: whole-hearted, all-consuming love for God and for their neighbors.

Jesus was quick to praise their understanding. He tells the teacher of religious law, *"You are not far from the Kingdom of God."* With this response, Jesus affirmed that the man was on The Path of Love, but he needed to go further. The text says, *"And after that, no one else dared to ask him any more questions."* Perhaps they were afraid of what Jesus would say. Maybe they were worried about what that kind of love would entail.

His response to the expert of the law was also telling: *"Right! Do this and you will live!"* The man got the correct answer but needed to apply it. Head knowledge needed to find its way to his heart, so it could be lived out through his actions.

In Luke 6:45, Jesus says, *"A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart."* The fruit of our lives reveals the truth of what is growing inside us.

Jesus' life reflected that love was His priority. When we observe His interactions with people in the gospels, we see that Jesus often surprised the religious leaders. He was willing and ready to break rules in order to show mercy to someone in need. If we believe Jesus was God, and God is love, we trust that His actions were Spirit-led and always motivated by love. But the religious worldview of the Jewish leaders centered on righteousness and rules, which put up barriers to love.

The type and scope of love that defined Jesus' life offended many. Especially those who believed that they knew the right answers. Pious Jews believed that they alone were acceptable to God. They reacted with disgust and disdain when Jesus healed on the Sabbath, welcomed children, and talked with women. While they were busy with religious duties, they neglected the more important work of loving people.

It's important to read and know what the Bible says, but if this knowledge doesn't result in a changed heart, our fruit will be rotten. When we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, we are transformed.

DAY THREE

Love starts with empathy and leads to compassion

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Luke 10: 25-37

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?”

The man answered, “You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. And, Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!”

The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied with a story: “A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’

Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked.

The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.”

Notes

REFLECT

“*And who is my neighbor?*” This question, from the lips of a religious expert, exposed his heart.

He asks Jesus for clarification. On the surface, it might appear as if he wants to learn. But the commandment he just recited has far-reaching implications. That kind of all-consuming love comes at great cost. His follow-up question shows that he’s looking to minimize his risk, to narrow down just what is expected. Perhaps he can meet the letter of the law without going overboard.

Jesus, the master teacher, responds to this question with a story. He presents a hypothetical situation with strategic elements to drive his point home.

By using a story, Jesus gives the questioner the space to observe and reflect. If Jesus had directly challenged his motives, the man’s defenses would have gone up. But this parable about the actions of fictional characters increased his receptivity by allowing him to keep his dignity. Instead of feeling threatened, the man could consider Jesus’ message. In doing so, he could learn without being publicly shamed.

The priest and the temple assistant in the story walked away from a fellow Jew in need. They went on with their lives, unaffected. Meanwhile, the victim laid dying on the side of the road. Why did those who served and represented God not help him?

We’re left to wonder about their reasons, but all of us can relate to the temptation. Getting involved with others can be messy. It disrupts our plans and causes us to step outside of our comfort zones. Choosing to love our neighbors comes with a cost.

The great surprise of the parable is who does stop to help. The hero, “a despised Samaritan,” would have been considered the *other* by Jews. He could have walked on by and minded his own business, assuming someone else would help, just like the two religious leaders did. It’s possible no one would have known. Given the animosity between these two groups of people, it’s probable that no one would have blamed him if they did know! But this least likely person was willing to stop and attend to the needs of the victim.

The Samaritan man interrupted his own schedule and rearranged his priorities. He risked physical danger from other bandits and possible rejection from the victim himself because of his ethnicity. He spent his time, energy, and his own money caring for this stranger. Why?

We don’t know for sure what his reasons were, but we do know this: he chose not to look away from the man’s pain. His empathy led him to compassion.

Perhaps this unlikely hero was familiar with suffering. Maybe he knew firsthand what it felt like to be mistreated and ignored. When we have suffered ourselves, we are able to identify with others in pain. We remember how it feels, and we don’t want anyone else to suffer alone.

After telling the story, Jesus asks the religious expert a question. “Which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus chose not to give him the answer to his original question. Instead, Jesus lets the man answer it for himself.

The religious expert knows the answer: “The one who showed him mercy.” He isn’t yet able to speak aloud the man’s ethnicity, but he gets the point. Love for our neighbors is displayed through our actions.

Love doesn’t mind its own business or hide behind its privileges. Philippians 2:6-8 says this about Jesus: “Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.”

Privilege is the freedom to avoid or ignore the suffering of others. It allows us to choose to divert our attention, to walk away, and to not get involved because the problem doesn’t affect us directly.

Jesus surrendered his privilege to express the heart of God through what he said and did. He is our model for God’s self-giving, sacrificial love. In this parable, Jesus shows us that religious status does not make us good neighbors. Right action does. Love risks involvement for the benefit of the other. Compassion shows kindness to others when it’s within our power to ignore, judge, or harm.

Love moves toward the one in need. Loving our neighbors as ourselves means choosing not to distance ourselves. As we draw near, we empathize with their pain and show compassion. The word compassion means to *suffer* with. Our lives begin to reflect the golden rule (Matthew 7:12.) We do to others as we would want them to do to us.

We, too, need to ask ourselves the question: “Who is my neighbor?” Reflecting on this story, we learn that our neighbors are not always the people we would choose.

As Fred Rogers said, “Your neighbor is anyone you happen to be with at any time in your life.” God picks our neighbors. Our job is to love them.

DAY FOUR

When God adjusts our vision, we change paths

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them - both men and women - back to Jerusalem in chains.

As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.

Notes

REFLECT

I used to be legally blind. In second grade, I failed a routine eye exam and my parents were alerted to the problem. My first pair of glasses snapped my world into sharp focus. I could read the blackboard from my desk without squinting!

However, like many kids, I didn't like the way I looked wearing the frames. As a result, I often misplaced or "forgot" to wear them. Over the years, my prescription worsened. I realized that I needed glasses or contacts in order to function. I resigned myself to wearing corrective lenses.

By the time I became an adult, Lasik surgery had been developed. I discovered that I was a good candidate and decided to try it. My eyes were reshaped by a laser to correct my vision to 20/20. The results were life-changing. No more glasses weighing heavy on the bridge of my nose. No more dry and irritated eyes after a long day behind contact lenses. I was free to see clearly because my sight had been restored.

What does it look like to move from The Path of Hate to The Path of Love? God knows in order to choose our steps wisely, we need to improve our vision. We need to see ourselves, the world, and other people from God's perspective.

Jesus got Saul's attention by calling his name and blinding him with his light. Saul's response was telling: "*Who are you, lord?*" Jesus interrupted his plans on the road to Damascus, which for him was a few steps down the road to hate. Jesus takes how we treat others personally, as if we're wounding him directly.

Saul was engaged in a religious quest, to wipe out a group of people he saw as heretics. He assumed his motives were pure and showed that he loved God. He had been claiming authority and was heading to Damascus to tell people what to do and what not to do. Jesus flipped that idea on its head and told Saul what to do instead. He humbled Saul in order to stop his murderous mission. Jesus allowed him to experience physical blindness so that he might become aware of his spiritual blindness. After three long days in darkness, he was ready to change.

If I had never had my vision corrected, my view of the world would have remained blurry. I might have never known I wasn't seeing things as they really were. Saul was blind long before he experienced Jesus on the road to Damascus: he just didn't know it yet. His fear-based zeal blinded him to love and prevented him from recognizing Jesus.

Our spiritual vision needs adjustment as well. We need to be open to God's correction so we can continue on The Path of Love.

DAY FIVE

Trusting God moves us toward our enemies

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 9:10-20

Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, Ananias!

Yes, Lord! he replied.

The Lord said, Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.

But Lord, exclaimed Ananias, I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.

But the Lord said, Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.

So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"

Notes

REFLECT

Yes, *but* ... There's nothing as powerful as fear to prevent us from doing what we're called to do. Fear of the unknown, fear of danger, fear of rejection. In Ananias' story, it threatened to keep him from trusting God.

Ananias recognized God's voice when He called him by name. He responded immediately, "Yes, Lord!" and listened to what God had to say. But then God asked him to do the impossible. It was crazy, insanely dangerous, illogical, and unexpected: God told him to seek out and heal the very man who was seeking to kill him.

Saul's reputation had preceded him. The believers in Damascus, including Ananias, were terrified of him. Ananias was baffled by the request. God wanted him to bless the very man who was coming to destroy them? Maybe as he wrestled with his fear, he remembered: that's what Jesus himself did. (*"He humbled himself in obedience to God, and died a criminal's death on a cross."* Philippians 2:8) Jesus never promised His followers a life free of danger. To follow Jesus meant trusting God. So Ananias obeyed.

The Holy Spirit was at work in the lives of the men in this story, unbeknownst to each other. God reached out to them both, got their attention, and told them what to do. God worked behind the scenes as only he could to prepare their hearts for a reconciliation that would change the course of history.

Saul sat in darkness and waited for God to answer his prayers. His vulnerability made him willing to accept help from one who was his enemy: Ananias, a follower of "the Way" that he had come to arrest and kill.

God assured Ananias that he had big plans for Saul, that Saul would be used to further, not to squash, the good news. Ananias trusted God despite his fear and believed in God's vision for his enemy. In response, he took the risk and extended undeserved kindness to Saul. In his prayer, he referred to his enemy as his brother and welcomed Saul into the family of believers in Jesus.

After being healed by love, Saul began to see more clearly. He believed, regained his strength, and his entire life turned around. He stepped off The Path of Hate and spent the rest of his life on The Path of Love.

Ananias' act of courageous love not only changed Saul's life, but made possible the spread of the good news of Jesus throughout the ancient world through Saul's preaching. Not only that, but the letters Saul (soon to be known as Paul) later wrote were preserved and compose a large chunk of the New Testament that we have today!

God sees beyond our behavior and loves us into the fullness of who he created us to be. He leads us toward our enemies so that we can walk together down The Path of Love.

WEEK TWO

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

SPIT

Tasha Burgoyne

I was only eight years old. My family was visiting South Korea for summer break. One afternoon, I watched my mom in awe as she led our family through a crowded street market alongside Pusan's beachfront. The stories she'd told my dad, sister, and me over the years, fell into place as I took in the sounds and scents surrounding us. Even at that young age, I remember the way being in South Korea made me feel as if parts of me were waking up and coming home.

I didn't notice the teenage boys staring or gesturing towards my sister and me as we walked ahead of our parents. And even after they came close to us, and I watched them spit on us, I still didn't understand what was happening. I tried to wipe the dripping saliva off of my calf with the sock folded around my other ankle. I felt heat rise from my gut to my cheeks. I wanted to hide. Later, through conversations with my parents, I learned that we were singled out and spit on because we were *honyol*: mixed race Koreans.

Maybe those teenage boys were just being immature, and they didn't really know the weight of what they were doing. But those actions, likely built upon social constructs that were put in place long before they were born, irrevocably impacted the way I saw myself. After that incident I began noticing my freckles, the way the shape of my eyes differed from those we saw in South Korea *and* those I knew back at home: my face was *honyol* and I couldn't hide it. And everywhere I went from then on, whether abroad or in my home country, I wondered when the next person, stranger or friend, would decide to tell me that I didn't belong.

The Broken Place of Hatred is everywhere. It's a global evil from which none of us are exempt. On this side of the pond, I grew up hearing derogatory comments about fellow Americans: Asian American, African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Middle Eastern American, because of our skin color or ethnic heritage.

The silent but ever-present expectation to assimilate to majority white culture was everywhere. Growing up, I rarely saw anyone like me represented in leadership, on stage, on doll shelves, or on screens, unless they were being mocked. And way beyond that lack of representation, more than one African American friend has told me that leaving their home and getting into a vehicle is scary every single day. One of my Hispanic friends told me that many of her family and friends have changed or discarded their maiden names after divorce rather than risk unwelcome prejudice. As

an Asian American woman in the Midwest, more often than not, I've felt welcome and included only as long as I am not too Asian, or as long as I leave the Asian parts of me that stretch past what happens to be trendy at the moment, at home.

Avoidance of these issues isn't an option for those of us walking The Path of Love with Jesus. Claiming colorblindness makes those who suffer from racism feel unseen and unsafe. Most of us haven't chosen or demanded to be given privileges, but our society is built on a foundation of racial injustice. History books gloss over the horrors of colonialism, genocide, internment and slavery. The privilege that's come already built into the system includes the freedom to ignore the problem completely and move on with our lives.

As a biracial Korean American woman, who has felt like I've been asked to choose a side, as if I could cut myself in half, I've struggled with the way God has intended for my ethnicity to play into my purpose. Through years of healing, I've come to understand instead, that I purposefully hold two worlds, and that I am 100% both.

What is your ethnic story? Despite history and hurt, your ethnic story isn't a mistake. God has purposed each of us to be the colors we are. Seeing our colors through Jesus' eyes is where we all need to begin in this Path of Love and healing.

When we look to the gospels, we find a world and culture different from ours. However, we find the same kinds of prejudices there, and Jesus, our brown-skinned, dark-haired, Middle Eastern Savior and Lord, walked right into the middle of it all. What a Savior we all have in Jesus! He led his followers far beyond mere civility. He leads all of us towards true restoration and redemption. In Him, we find hope and healing for every effect of hatred and racism.

DAY ONE

Unity requires intentional proximity

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

John 4:1-26

Jesus knew the Pharisees had heard that he was baptizing and making more disciples than John (though Jesus himself didn't baptize them—his disciples did). So he left Judea and returned to Galilee.

He had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.

The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

"But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket, she said, and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?"

Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life."

"Please, sir," the woman said, "give me this water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and I won't have to come here to get water."

"Go and get your husband," Jesus told her.

"I don't have a husband," the woman replied.

Notes

Jesus said, “You’re right! You don’t have a husband—for you have had five husbands, and you aren’t even married to the man you’re living with now. You certainly spoke the truth!”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you must be a prophet. So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?”

Jesus replied, “Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews. But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus told her, “I am the Messiah!”

REFLECT

I moved overseas after graduating from college. The early days of living in a new culture were exciting and filled me with a sense of adventure. But after time, those “honeymoon” feelings wore off. The reality of my new foreign neighborhood hit me hard. A collection of brown banana peels overstayed their welcome in my kitchen because I couldn’t figure out how the trash system worked. I began to lose sight of the fact that this new place and people might have something to offer that I needed. I wondered if Jesus really could bridge the distance between such different cultures and people. It took many months of frustration and tear-filled bike rides home at the end of the day, for me to realize that seeing the beauty of where I was required my humility. For me to give and receive in this new city and culture, I would have to learn to bend down low like Jesus.

In the time of Jesus, Jews didn’t travel through Samaria. Even if it was the quicker route, Jews were known to avoid it altogether. In fact, Jews and Samaritans were deeply divided ethnic groups. The Samaritans were a mixed-race ethnic group. They were half Jewish and half Gentile. The Jews hated and avoided them because they saw them as unclean. It was risky for a lone traveler to cross the dividing lines between these groups.

This bold move to interact with the woman at the well would have been seen as outrageous. Even more stunning, though He knows what He wants to offer this woman, He puts himself in a place of need before her. John said Jesus was tired and Jesus tells the woman He is thirsty. He doesn’t begin their interaction lording His knowledge over her and He doesn’t judge her. He doesn’t snap his fingers and create a water jar so he can get water for himself. The God of the Universe allows Himself to be in a position of need and asks her for water. Jesus’ humility is evident in every part of this intimate interaction.

RESPOND

- How do you think Jesus’ vulnerability and humility impacted the way the woman responded to Him?
- What groups of people or neighborhoods do you avoid and why?
- Write a prayer and ask God to show you your own need when it comes to those who are ethnically different from you.

NOTES

DAY TWO

Jesus Built His Church on Diversity

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

John 3:16-17

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

John 4:29-42

Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked to find him talking to a woman, but none of them had the nerve to ask, "What do you want with her? or Why are you talking to her?" The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" So the people came streaming from the village to see him. Meanwhile, the disciples were urging Jesus, "Rabbi, eat something."

But Jesus replied, "I have a kind of food you know nothing about."

"Did someone bring him food while we were gone?" the disciples asked each other.

Then Jesus explained: "My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work. You know the saying, 'Four months between planting and harvest.' But I say, wake up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. What joy awaits both the planter and the harvester alike! You know the saying, 'One plants and another harvests.' And it's true. I sent you to harvest where you didn't plant; others had already done the work, and now you will get to gather the harvest."

Many Samaritans from the village believed in Jesus because the woman had said, "He told me everything I ever did!" When they came out to see him, they begged him to stay in their village. So he stayed for two days, long enough for many more to hear his message and believe. Then they said to the woman, "Now

Notes

we believe, not just because of what you told us, but because we have heard him ourselves. Now we know that he is indeed the Savior of the world.”

REFLECT

Put yourself in the place of the disciples. Like Jesus, they had been traveling on foot for six hours. They showed up with food, knowing Jesus must be hungry, and found him having an intimate conversation with a Samaritan woman. Some of them may have never talked to a Samaritan before, let alone a Samaritan woman.

Days before this interaction, Jesus was approached by Nicodemus, a Jewish leader who had a lot of religious knowledge but couldn't wrap his mind around Jesus' explanation of being spiritually born again. With the disciples nearby, Jesus told him, "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 Do you think the disciples thought this really meant everyone, Samaritans included? What stereotypes and biases do you think the disciples already had in mind as they approached Jesus and the woman?

Put yourself in the place of the Samaritan woman. Can you imagine the surprise and fear she might've felt as she scurried to the well mid-day, alone, her forehead likely wet with sweat? Imagine what she thought when she saw a Jewish man at the well who then asked for her help. What stereotypes, biases and possible fear for her well-being do you think she may have already had in mind before they even began talking?

Imagine being Jesus, *the Savior of the world*, who is tired and hungry. He is leading the way across a deep rift of ethnic division. He sat alone by the well so He could have this encounter, for the sake of this woman, her entire village and the disciples to whom He will leave the task of building his Church.

Jesus took an unexpected route to intentionally build up his Church with worshippers from deeply divided ethnic groups. He set the tone for his followers. He came because he sees and loves all colors and cultures and offers each one Living Water.

RESPOND

- Who do you find yourself relating to most in this passage?
- How do you think this woman's ethnicity impacted the way she responded to Jesus?

Look at the list of recommended resources at the end of this chapter. Pick a book to read. Start reading it with the intention to listen, learn and approach the words on the page thirsty – humbly asking for a drink that brings a new perspective. Pray the following liturgical prayer from *Every Moment Holy* by Doug McKelvey before you begin:

Author of Life and Author of My Life,
As I begin the reading of this book,
give me sensitivity to listen,
not just to the story told,
but to the responses of my own heart
to what I encounter in these pages.
What does it draw out of me?
What joy?
What longing?
What fears?
What temptations?
What hope?
What mirth?
What love of beauty?
What awe?
What wonder?
What doubt?
What faith?
What resolve?
What unfinished grief?
What untended wound?

Give me ears to hear, O Spirit of God,
what notes the reading of this story would strike
and what melody it would draw forth,
from the tuned strings of my own soul.

Waste no moment in my brief years, O Lord.
let all things, and this book as well,
be as tools in your hands,
to shape me and make me more truly your own,
more fitly a child of the hope
of the restoration of all things in Christ
whose fullness dwells within them.

So let the honest responses
of my heart to this reading
grant new insight into the story
your grace is already telling in my own life
that I might be a more willing co-laborer
in that process. Amen.”¹

DAY THREE

A unified body sees, celebrates, and values differences

READ

Re-read John's account of Jesus and the woman at the well. Pay close attention to the words and responses of Jesus, the woman, the disciples and the villagers as you read.

John 4:1-39

Jesus knew the Pharisees had heard that he was baptizing and making more disciples than John (though Jesus himself didn't baptize them—his disciples did). So he left Judea and returned to Galilee.

He had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.

The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.

But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket, she said, and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?

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"Go and get your husband," Jesus told her.

"I don't have a husband," the woman replied.

Notes

Jesus said, “You’re right! You don’t have a husband—for you have had five husbands, and you aren’t even married to the man you’re living with now. You certainly spoke the truth!”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you must be a prophet. So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?”

Jesus replied, “Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews. But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us. Then Jesus told her, I am the Messiah!”

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Meanwhile, the disciples were urging Jesus, “Rabbi, eat something.”

But Jesus replied, “I have a kind of food you know nothing about.”

Did someone bring him food while we were gone? the disciples asked each other.

Then Jesus explained: “My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work. You know the saying, ‘Four months between planting and harvest.’ But I say, wake up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. What joy awaits both

the planter and the harvester alike! You know the saying, 'One plants and another harvests.' And it's true. I sent you to harvest where you didn't plant; others had already done the work, and now you will get to gather the harvest."

Many Samaritans from the village believed in Jesus because the woman had said, "He told me everything I ever did!"

1 Corinthians 12: 12-13

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

REFLECT

On warm afternoons, he stood outside the building where my classes were held. He held a large sign with a message in bold letters: SINNERS GO TO HELL. His angry proclamation revealed his belief in an angry, distant God who was out to get everyone. One day, I walked by to find him in his usual spot with a group of students engaging with him out of amusement, mocking his every word. Another group of students argued with him, trying to convince him and everyone else around him that his approach to the Bible was wrong. They were all yelling. While watching the commotion, I heard another student say to a friend, "If this arguing is what Christianity is all about, I don't want to have anything to do with it."

One of the major sources of division between the Jews and the Samaritans was their disagreement over where God was to be worshipped. The Samaritans believed it was to be Mt. Gerizim and the Jews believed it was to be Jerusalem. This entire disagreement was tied up in their understanding of one verse in Deuteronomy.

This disagreement was the reason for years of violence and injustice. Just 100 years prior to the encounter at the well, a Jewish leader, John Hyrcanus, had destroyed the Samaritans' temple and enslaved the Samaritans, forcing them to adopt Jewish customs. By the time Jesus and the woman at the well met, there were many layers of hatred, misunderstanding, hurt, violence, and pride between her people and the Jews.

When the Samaritan woman brings up this well-known disagreement between her people and the Jews, she is asking about much more than that argument.

It may sound silly to us, but, are we that different? Think of the division among Christians today. How has division among churches and denominations distracted from the message of Jesus? How have years of injustice, misunderstanding, silence and deep hurt segregated racial and ethnic people groups from one another within the church?

Jesus tells her that he is doing something new. He tells her that his church is to be filled with worshipers who will “worship him in spirit and truth.” This kind of worship crosses dividing lines, breaks down barriers, and brings distinctly different ethnic groups together to form one body.

Jesus didn’t expect these groups to forget history and pretend like they were blind to one another’s differences. Jesus also doesn’t ask the woman to leave her village and people and assimilate to Jewish culture. After their interaction, He goes into her village and stays there for two days so that the whole village will know him. He eats, sleeps, and spends time with the Samaritans and brings His disciples with him.

I don't think any minds were changed or punches exchanged during the yelling matches on my college campus. While we might find the man's approach to be harsh or the students' reactions extreme, are our responses to those with whom we disagree much different? Some of us enter conversations with our fists drawn and our guard up, hiding behind our beliefs like that man behind his accusatory poster board. Others go on the offensive, making fun of opposing views and the people who hold them, forgetting that they, too, are made in the image of God. Still others argue their case as if their beliefs are on trial and they have to win. Meanwhile, we all forget that Jesus said we are all made to be part of the same body.

RESPOND

- How did Jesus give this woman a voice?
- Where have you seen the Church reflect the diverse community Jesus modeled and desires for us?
- What do you think the disciples were thinking and feeling as they ate and slept in Samaritan homes?

NOTES

DAY FOUR

The Holy Spirit reveals our personal biases

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 10:1-20

In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who was a captain of the Italian Regiment. He was a devout, God-fearing man, as was everyone in his household. He gave generously to the poor and prayed regularly to God. One afternoon about three o'clock, he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming toward him. "Cornelius!" the angel said.

Cornelius stared at him in terror. "What is it, sir?" he asked the angel.

And the angel replied, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have been received by God as an offering! Now send some men to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore."

As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, one of his personal attendants. He told them what had happened and sent them off to Joppa.

The next day as Cornelius's messengers were nearing the town, Peter went up on the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, and he was hungry. But while a meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them."

"No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean."

But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven.

Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean? Just then the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. Standing outside the gate, they asked if a man named Simon Peter was staying there.

Notes

Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, “Three men have come looking for you. Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don’t worry, for I have sent them.”

REFLECT

While visiting family in South Korea one summer, my parents left me with my aunt and cousins for a sleepover. I was excited about being there and playing with my cousins. By that point, we’d moved beyond our language barriers and figured out how to communicate with hand motions and random words in both languages that we understood. But before my mom left that day, she pulled me aside and said, “Whatever your aunt feeds you for breakfast, you EAT it. They won’t eat cereal here.”

I was a notoriously picky eater as a child. I often hid suspicious vegetables in napkins, hated all meat and fish and carried a Ziplock baggie of Cheerios around with me wherever I went. The next morning at the table, my aunt put a bowl of rice in front of me with a recognizable fish on top, and then cracked a raw egg over that. I swallowed. There was nowhere to hide the food and my mom’s stern face and warning were fresh in my mind. I ate the contents of the bowl as fast as I could, realizing that there was no other way. To be with my family and to know them, I had to eat with them too.

Cornelius was a Roman man who lived in Caesarea, the Roman capital city of Judea. He had power, wealth and influence, and he and his family were known as those who lived according to many of the high ethical standards of Judaism but weren’t ready to fully convert. Jesus saw this man’s heart, heard his prayers and knew that he was ready to “worship Jesus in spirit and truth”.

Meanwhile, Peter had already realized that Jesus wanted His gospel to spread beyond the Jews. He had followed Jesus across dividing lines more than once already. He’d seen the power of the Holy Spirit at work and not only witnessed miracles but performed them as well. When Cornelius receives this vision from God, Peter is living with Simon the tanner. Tanning was considered an unclean business in Jewish eyes, but we find that Peter is staying with Simon anyway, which directly speaks against the prejudices that still existed among the Jews. Peter’s worldview had been stretched throughout the years he spent with Jesus. But God is still at work: the Holy Spirit is about to

DAY FIVE

Love Breaks Down Barriers

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 10:21-47

So Peter went down and said, "I'm the man you are looking for. Why have you come?"

They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to summon you to his house so that he can hear your message." So Peter invited the men to stay for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa.

They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter pulled him up and said, "Stand up! I'm a human being just like you!" So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled.

Peter told them, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me."

Cornelius replied, "Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. He told me, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.' So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you."

Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea,

Notes

beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.”

Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?”

REFLECT

Many of us are okay with a certain amount of difference, but what happens if the Holy Spirit prompts us to move beyond our comfort? Maybe we feel that we treat everyone the same way and would never consider ourselves judgmental. Peter probably felt this way, or perhaps he felt like he had come a long way, but God had more in store for him, Cornelius and the Church.

What if the future of the Church and our world is directly impacted by the way we choose to engage or ignore the Broken Place of Hatred?

Obedience to Jesus involves doing the hard and humbling work of turning around and walking down The Path of Love. Turning around means facing a broken place for what it is, lamenting the brokenness and repenting of any part we've had in it, both individually and collectively. Through this process, we can begin to surrender our minds to be stretched, our hearts transformed and our bodies to be led into peacemaking action by Jesus. This is what Jesus called his disciples and followers to do. This kind of obedience from Jesus' early disciples and followers opened the door to many who had not had the chance to hear the gospel. Jesus moved the gospel forward by moving his disciples into the Broken Place of Hatred. They learned that Jesus' offer of Living Water was for everyone. They learned that everyone was imago Dei - made in the very image of God.

Lament recognizes struggles and suffering, that the world is not as it ought to be. Lament challenges the status quo and cries out for justice against existing injustices.
Soong-Chan Rah – Prophetic Lament

It's always been God's will to break down the barriers between us. Will we listen to the work he's already doing and join him? There's redemption and restoration ahead.

WEEK THREE

A MERCIFUL COMMUNITY

ADOPTION STORY

By Tim Mauriello

In 1972, my family was living a typical middle-class life in the suburbs of New York City. A mom, a dad, three kids and a cat. At some point, my parents made the wonderful decision to adopt a child from South Korea. They identified a young girl. After learning she had a brother and sister, they decided to adopt all three. As they began preparing for all the changes that would come with doubling the number of kids in the house, my mom found out she was pregnant with twins (my brother Tom and me)! My family went from three kids to eight in a matter of months. And none of the newest five family members spoke English!

From that time forward, there was never anything typical about my family. Money got a lot tighter and every meal was an adventure. My mom was first diagnosed with skin cancer right after I was born. My father passed away when I was four. The adopted siblings had to adjust to life in America, including getting used to having plenty of food and three meals a day, because that hadn't been the case in their orphanage. Because we siblings are spread out in age over 14 years, I've lived most of my life with brothers and sisters moving and living away from the family. Our various lives have had twists and turns, ups and downs. We've been far from perfect, but through it all, we've discovered what it means and takes to be a family.

A loving family re-orient itself for the sake of the most vulnerable. We changed what we did and how we did it for each other.

A loving family takes care of each other. Our family was too big for Mom and Dad to take care of everyone and everything. When Dad was gone, we only survived because the older siblings helped care for the younger.

A loving family is more concerned with participation than contribution. There is always too much food at a Mauriello gathering. Everyone eats, and eats some more, and enjoys it all, regardless of what they may have brought to the table. We love to share and care for each other and want everyone to be included.

Everything changes and the family re-orient itself when a new baby is brought home from the hospital. No sibling is worthy of more than the other. Regardless of birth order, age, profession, or personality, healthy families love and take care of each other, simply because they share the deep bond of family.

DAY ONE *Daily Devotions by Julie Meiners*

The Path of Love is a Family Matter

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Romans 8:14-17a

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, Abba, Father. For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory.

Galatians 3:26-29

For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.

Galatians 4: 1-7

Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves an inheritance for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set. And that's the way it was with us before Christ came. We were like children; we were slaves to the basic spiritual principles of this world. But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father". Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.

Notes

*“For people in Rome, ‘adoption’ meant a cancellation of old legal relationships, establishing a new relationship as an heir.
Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, p. 1962*

*Abba. A respectful but intimate way to address one’s father. Although a few parables in much later sources compare God with an ‘abba’, it does not appear in Jewish prayers. To our knowledge, this way of directly addressing God seems to have been unique to Jesus (until adopted by his followers).
Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, p. 1962*

*“... one of the primary things the Spirit says, with which we find our own spirit in full agreement, is that we are indeed God’s children, God’s adopted sons and daughters.”
NT Wright, Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 1, p. 146-147*

REFLECT

According to a United Way report published in 2016, 14% of the households in Indiana fall below the Federal Poverty level and another 25% can’t afford basic needs, including housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare, or technology.*

In other words, nearly half of the people in our area are struggling. Daily.

Caught up in a company layoff, a 50-year-old is unable to find a job that even comes close to the one he had to leave. A single parent works two jobs, neither of which provides healthcare, paid time off, or any kind of retirement plan. A family is unable to afford a space to hold a funeral for their recently passed uncle. Another faces sure eviction if they are late on their rent payment again.

In Biblical days, the term poor implied true victimization and left people vulnerable, isolated, and powerless.

Not much has changed.

In addition to fighting for a manageable life for themselves and their families, economically challenged people endure various degrees of shunning. A middle-school kid with oversized sneakers is teased about his clown shoes. The woman unable to afford a muffler repair tries to ignore disapproving glares coming from the cars alongside her. The staff at a restaurant or hotel is regularly treated with impatience, often the brunt of criticism by those they serve.

Some are better than others at hiding their disdain. They offer a smile and engage in friendly conversation with an economical other.

But are the lines still drawn?

Do they invite them into their homes? To a movie? To join their small group?

The Path of Love reminds us that Jesus doesn't pay attention to bank account balances. Position, appearance, and economic status are irrelevant. Those who follow Him have something much more important in common. They are family. They have the same Father, and they share the same inheritance. *And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father". Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.* Galatians 4:7

*"God, it seems, has drawn the blueprint for his world-wide family right from the beginning."
NT Wright, Paul, the Prison Letters for Everyone, p. 33*

Instead of classifying each other according to economic levels, Jesus challenges us to widen our view. May we see every person we meet, no matter the size of their shoes or the sound of their muffler, as family, made in the image of our Father, and heirs together of His glory.

*ALICE: A Study of Financial Hardship in Indiana United Way Report

RESPOND

- What impacted you as you considered the definition of God's family in today's Bible passages?
- Who in your life have you seen as other due to your economic differences? How have these differences impacted the depth of your relationship?
- Write a prayer to God, asking him to show you how to practically respond to a member of God's family with a financial status different than yours.

NOTES

DAY TWO

God is a Gracious Host

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Luke 14:15-24

Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, “What a blessing it will be to attend a banquet in the Kingdom of God!”

Jesus replied with this story: “A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, ‘Come, the banquet is ready.’ But they all began making excuses. One said, ‘I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

The servant returned and told his master what they had said.

His master was furious and said, ‘Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. After the servant had done this, he reported, ‘There is still room for more.’

So his master said, ‘Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.’”

Notes

REFLECT

Whether or not we intend to go to an event, it's always nice to be invited.

Jesus' parable addresses a crowd who understood that the degree of honor extended to a host was based on who came to the party. The more respectable the guests, the greater the honor. An enviable list was sure to include the popular, prestigious, wealthy, and important.

The first string of invitees in Jesus' story snubbed their invitations, coming up with all kinds of excuses.

Undaunted, the host told his servant to search the streets, alleys, and hedges (referring to the places where the compromised and vulnerable of His day could be found) to fill his banquet halls. The actual Greek meaning of the word Jesus uses for *invite* is '*compel*', or, '*work hard to convince*'. These people would need to be convinced that they were really invited to the banquet.

Jesus is no ordinary host. His guest list isn't restrictive. All are invited to join Him. Economic level and social stature couldn't be more irrelevant. The Path of Love shows the highest King searching hard for all of us, shaking the hedges and looking in the alleys, hoping we will set aside our excuses and join Him at the table. And His gracious invitation inspires us to look for and welcome unexpected guests into our lives.

RESPOND

- Who are YOU in the parable?
 - The first guests, who find excuses why now just isn't a good time to step fully into fellowship with God?
 - The second guests, dragged in from unlikely places, who can't imagine being invited by the King of Kings into his banquet?
 - The host, looking high and low for anyone who might join you in fellowship and faith?
- Describe a time when you took the time to get to know someone who is different than you.
- Write a prayer to God, asking for eyes to see someone in your life who is longing to be invited to church, and ask for the courage to invite them.

NOTES

DAY THREE

Generosity is a Well-Kept Secret

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Matthew 6:1-4

Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

REFLECT

Our culture has a way of edifying the generous. Give so much to a cause and receive a thank-you letter. Give more and someone's name goes on a plaque. Exorbitant givers have buildings and streets named after them.

Publicly honoring the giver has a sneaky way of accentuating The Path of Hate when it comes to economic diversity. As the giver is lifted up, the chasm that separates them from the recipient of the gift seems to grow. A ceremony is held for major donors toward an important cause. Elegantly dressed givers are recognized and politely applauded. Those being served by their gifts are conspicuously absent, save the one or two giving testimony toward the value of the gift. At the end of the evening, the givers and gifted return to their homes, likely located in different parts of town.

Almsgiving was a pillar of Jewish practice. Romans and Greeks did not generally believe in private charity; they believed in giving money toward civic works projects, and they also felt that people who gave in this way should be recognized publicly and become popular. Their giving was for recognition – to be held in high esteem by the public. Judaism felt that reward might come on the Day of Judgment. Reward was mostly considered to be escape from death; but, even as we think today, reward was some sort of hierarchical recognition of a job well done – honor, crown, royal robe; possibly repayment with interest!

Notes

Jesus didn't mince words when He taught how to give. He made clear that if the giving is meant to be seen by others, the only reward is having been seen.

God Himself provides us with the purest example of giving. He has given each of us countless, unsolicited gifts. We couldn't begin to name them all.

Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, Who created all the lights in the heavens. James 1:17

God's giving doesn't include any fanfare. It is subtle. Pertinent. And generous. It is inspired by a heart so filled with love that no gift is too large. Not even the gift of His Son.

The Path of Love demonstrates God's covert, unimaginable generosity toward us. As we recognize and receive His limitless gifts, our giving becomes an organic outworking of our gratitude, and a deep desire to emulate His selfless care for others.

RESPOND

- Have you ever received an anonymous gift?
- Have you ever given a gift to someone secretly? What was the result?
- Write a prayer asking God to help you list some of the many gifts He has given you. Then ask Him to show you a way this week to give to someone in secret. Do the giving, then keep it a secret, thanking God for the opportunity.

NOTES _____

DAY FOUR

Love Puts the Last, First

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Matthew 20:1-16

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.

At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?'

They replied, 'Because no one hired us.'

The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.'

He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?'

So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.

Notes

REFLECT

We all know *go-getters*.

They exude energy, ideas, and ambition, and everyone takes notice. The spirited order-taker at McDonald's will be a manager in no time. The young lawyer already at her desk when the rest of the firm arrives is headed for Partner. The ambitious parent, always first in line to volunteer, is known and respected by the school faculty.

No doubt about it, *go-getters* are going places.

Then there are those who keep to themselves and contribute when they can. Like the last group of workers in our parable who showed up at the eleventh hour. Exhibiting fewer signs of ambition than their colleagues, they went all but unnoticed until it was time to receive a paycheck.

Those who had put in a full day's work weren't happy. They were convinced that only those with eight hours of sweat on their brow deserved full payment.

But the vineyard owner saw it differently.

He wondered about the latecomers, asking them, "*Why haven't you been working today?*" There was plenty of work, so many grapes to harvest.

The Greek wording, Argos means workless, not lazy.

This is not a pejorative.

These people would have needed the work. Without it they would likely go hungry - for without work they couldn't buy food.

Why hadn't they been working? Nobody had given them a job.

"Nobody, in other words, wanted them. They were, perhaps, the sort of people everybody tried not to hire."

NT Wright, Matthew for Everyone, p. 56

Not everyone has been given the opportunity to work hard.

Maybe as a child, no one encouraged us to do our homework. Maybe we never took to math because our parents couldn't afford a scientific calculator. Maybe we run late because we can't break away from our second job. Maybe we miss work occasionally because we can't afford the gas to get there. Maybe we yawn at our desk because the couch we sleep on is lumpy. Maybe we can't afford a haircut or new clothes for our interview next week.

The perspective of the go-getting vineyard workers it is common; *the hardest worker*

DAY FIVE

Love Puts the Last, First

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Matthew 19:16-26

Someone came to Jesus with this question: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

“Why ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. But to answer your question—if you want to receive eternal life, keep the commandments.”

“Which ones?” the man asked.

And Jesus replied: “You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“I’ve obeyed all these commandments,” the young man replied. “What else must I do?”

Jesus told him, “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I’ll say it again—it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”

The disciples were astounded. “Then who in the world can be saved?” they asked.

Jesus looked at them intently and said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible.”

Notes

REFLECT

The rich young ruler's question seems to be sincere, but fraught with a sense of fear. He is asking Jesus, "What good thing 'agathos' – what act – can I do to secure things for myself eternally?"

Wealth was a sign of God's blessing in 1st century Judaism. The average Jew would have considered this young man to have been blessed with wealth because he had been good and righteous.

Despite his reputation, the rich young ruler is afraid he hasn't done enough. Jesus reminds him of some commandments, but the man remains conflicted, worried that following the Law might not be enough to ensure eternal life.

Jesus offers more. *"If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."*

Surrendering everything is the first step in a life of following Jesus.

Jesus adds, *"Then come, follow me."*

Giving and following are connected. When the rich young ruler wanted to do something to secure his position in eternity, Jesus asked for a lifestyle change. A complete reorientation of the direction of his life.

To say that this man went away sad is an understatement. He went away – *lupoumenos* (Greek word)– grieving, aware of a great loss. He had been asked to let loose of everything that he believed gave his life position, meaning, status, and stability.

Jesus was suggesting an exchange for something greater. *"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind."* Matthew 22:37

"God wants his people to be complete, totally dedicated to his service, not half-and-half people, with one foot in the kingdom and the other in the world. In order to be complete, you must be empty. In order to have everything, you must have nothing. In order to be fully signed up to God's service, you must be signed off from everything else."

N T Wright, Matthew for Everyone, P. 50

Jesus forged The Path of Love for His followers when He gave up His divine privileges and eventually His life, demonstrating His complete allegiance to the Father and His good purposes.

Pursuing and clinging to *things* will disappoint. They can never secure or refuse us eternal life. They cannot offer lasting peace and joy. But as we replace our worship of them with complete surrender to Jesus, He does the impossible: He welcomes us into his Kingdom forever.

WEEK FOUR

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

TWO COUNTRIES. ONE GOD.

Maggie Johnson

The closest thing I've experienced to heaven is listening to 55 Rwandan women sing in their native tongue, "Who can stop us from praising our God? No one."

With echoes of perfect harmony reverberating off the walls of ALARM (African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries), we danced, clapped, and sang until everyone was out of breath. Completely uninhibited, women from two countries became undignified in the presence of God. As we began to take our seats and settle into a week of leadership training, I realized the truth: these Rwandan women didn't need me to save them. I had come on a mission trip to teach them how to be leaders, but they ended up leading me.

Shortly after arriving in Rwanda, I met a woman named Josianne. She was beautiful and bold with a bright smile to match, and unlike many of the others, she spoke English fluently. I was drawn to Josianne, and we spent many afternoons talking over tea. I shared with her that my husband and I had struggled with infertility, losing two babies in the short time we had been married. She shared her journey of infertility as well, and she prayed that God's power would fill both of us.

Josianne and I are from different countries, we have different experiences with church, our skin differs in color, but our stories are very much the same. The world tries to sell the idea that our differences are too great, and that love cannot possibly bridge the gap of our dissimilarities, but our God isn't bound by geographical or cultural boundaries.

My life was changed because I went to Rwanda. Not because they needed me, but because we needed each other. As we will find in this week's devotions, diversity is a treasure to be mined, not a weakness to be ignored.

DAY ONE

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is belonging

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 2:1-6

On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers

REFLECT

The book of Acts is an account written by the apostle Luke to show how the Gospel of Jesus Christ spread throughout the world, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, and Acts 2 is where the Gospel begins to spread like wildfire. Pentecost occurred about seven weeks after Passover during the Festival of Weeks (Leviticus 23:15). This festival acted as a sort of pilgrimage for many Jews who were living outside of Israel, which meant many foreigners were making their way into the capital city of Jerusalem. It is at this time in our reading when the Holy Spirit descended upon these Jewish believers, filling them to the brim with the power of God and causing an eruption of praise. The Spirit of God enabled believers to communicate cross-culturally just like Jesus said they would in Acts 1:8, proving that the power and presence of Jesus is not confined by geographical boundaries.

Notes

DAY TWO

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is diversity

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 2:5-13

At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.

They were completely amazed. “How can this be?” they exclaimed. “These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! Here we are— Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!”

They stood there amazed and perplexed. “What can this mean?” they asked each other.

But others in the crowd ridiculed them, saying, “They’re just drunk, that’s all!”

Notes

DAY THREE

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is power.

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 2:14-21

Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, “Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. These people are not drunk, as some of you are assuming. Nine o’clock in the morning is much too early for that. No, what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days,’ God says,
‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young men will see visions,
and your old men will dream dreams.
In those days I will pour out my Spirit
even on my servants—men and women alike—
and they will prophesy.

And I will cause wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below—
blood and fire and clouds of smoke.

The sun will become dark,
and the moon will turn blood red
before that great and glorious day of the Lord arrives.
But everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.’

REFLECT

Imagine if our worship services got so rowdy that surrounding neighbors thought we were drunk. The believers in Jerusalem weren’t just jabbering on in different, disorienting languages; they were praising God (Acts 2:11). Their praise was powerful, but it wasn’t your standard praise-and-worship session. It was prophecy being fulfilled.

In Joel 2:28-29, the prophet Joel said that the Holy Spirit would come and empower every believer without discrimination, and that is exactly what happened. No one had ever seen anything like this! God had performed miracles in the past, but this time He seemed to be directly infusing His power into ordinary, everyday people. Today’s reading shows us an important truth: the Holy Spirit gives power to those He inhabits.

Notes

DAY FOUR

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is unity

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Acts 2:42-47

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.

A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people.

And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

REFLECT

My mama always said, "You can have unity without uniformity." In other words, we can choose oneness even in the midst of our differences. Let's be honest: it's easy to be unified with people we understand, but it takes a lot more work to be unified with people who have different backgrounds, traditions, and values. That's why we have the Holy Spirit, because unity like that isn't possible without divine intervention.

When the Holy Spirit showed up, it resulted in unity. The unity described in Acts 2 is more than just agreement; it's modeled in sacrificial deference to each other. Unity is more than signing the same belief statement or joining a church's membership. It looks like sharing resources. It's seeking to understand just as often as we seek to be understood. It's saying, "You first. Me second."

This is the kind of unity that breaks bad habits and heals broken hearts. This is the kind of unity that makes Jesus famous. This is a radical kind of unity – a unity that won't happen unless the Spirit shows up.

Notes

DAY FIVE

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is reconciliation

READ

Read the passage(s) below. Underline any words or phrases that stand out to you. Make note of your questions and/or observations in the margins.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called uncircumcised heathens by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.

So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.

Notes

REFLECT

I grew up in a church that was stingy with the Gospel, and that's how I assume early Jewish Christians must have been too. They were wary of Gentiles and often worried how foreigners might contaminate their religion. The line they drew was clear: Jews are in and everyone else is out.

Imagine how offensive it must have been for Jesus to say He came for *everyone*. Many Jews found it reprehensible. Some of them even tried to make Gentiles adhere to cultural rules as if they were religious rules, making it even harder for Gentile believers to fit in. That's why the Apostle Paul spends so much time in the book of Ephesians talking about how Christ reconciled us to himself and therefore to each other.

We belong to one another. Whether you're a Midwestern suburbanite, a Venezuelan immigrant, a young city slicker, or a refugee from the Middle East, the Gospel is good news for you because Jesus Christ "broke down the wall of hostility that separated us" (Ephesians 2:14).

RESPOND

- Do you resonate more with the early Jewish Christians or with the Gentile believers? Why?
- How have you pursued reconciliation in the past? Which of your relationships still need reconciliation?
- The Gospel of Jesus is for everyone: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, U.S. Citizens and immigrants and refugees, Democrats and Republicans. That's good news! Which demographic would be difficult for you to accept as a fellow Christian?
- Spend time thanking Jesus for His death and resurrection that reconciled you to God. Ask him to fill you with a spirit of reconciliation for all people.

NOTES

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

WEEK ONE: THE PATH OF SELF-GIVING LOVE

Embracing the Love of God: The Path and Promise of Christian Life - by James Bryan Smith
Everybody Always - by Bob Goff
Daring Greatly - Brene Brown

WEEK TWO: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Beyond Colorblind - by Sarah Shin
I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness - by Austin Channing Brown
White Awake - by Daniel Hill

WEEK THREE: A MERCIFUL COMMUNITY

Justice in the Burbs: Being the Hands of Jesus Wherever You Live - by Will and Lisa Samson
The Irresistible Revolution - by Shane Claiborne
When Helping Hurts - By Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert

WEEK FOUR: THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Jesus Without Borders: What Planes, Trains, and Rickshaws Taught Me about Jesus - by Chad Gibbs

Disturb us, O Lord
when we are too well-pleased with ourselves when our dreams
have come true because we dreamed too little, because we sailed
too close to the shore.

Disturb us, O Lord
when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our
thirst for the water of life
when, having fallen in love with time, we have ceased to dream of
eternity and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our
vision of Heaven to grow dim.

Stir us, O Lord
to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas where storms show
Thy mastery, where losing sight
of land, we shall find the stars. In the name of Him who pushed back
the horizons of our hopes and invited the brave to follow.

www.annarborvineyard.org/getting-connected/spiritual-formation/other-prayers.

This prayer is often attributed to Desmond Tutu and considered by some to be
adapted from an original prayer by Sir Francis Drake.



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