

# LIVING THE QUESTIONS



## LIVING THE QUESTIONS 2.0

### III. CALL TO COVENANT





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## 15. A KINGDOM WITHOUT WALLS



**FOCUS:** The good news of the gospel tells of a radical hospitality where boundaries, barriers, and walls are overcome by a grace that knows no bounds.

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### “I DIDN’T KNOW SO MANY PEOPLE WERE JEWISH!”

It was the Schnitzers’ second Hanukkah in Billings, Montana, and five-year-old Isaac wanted the menorah to be in his bedroom window. But as Isaac and his sister, Rachel, prepared for bed, a brick hurled from the street sent shards of glass flying through the room.

The day after the incident, an FBI agent advised the family to get bullet-proof glass in their windows and to take down the menorahs. Instead, they decided to put the menorah back in the window and call the local newspaper.

The next morning, a member of the local Congregational church read the story and phoned her pastor. Echoing the World War II legend from Denmark where Nazi occupiers were thwarted by King Christian and thousands of other non-Jews who donned yellow Star of David armbands in solidarity with their Jewish neighbors, a plan was hatched.

Within days, the word was out and paper menorahs were distributed for display in windows throughout town. The Target store had some plastic menorahs but soon sold out. An antique store in Billings reported a Christian woman buying a very expensive, antique menorah to place in her window. The marquee at the Catholic High School read, “Happy Hanukkah to our Jewish friends.”

Soon, hundreds of homes in Billings had menorahs in their windows. Some were shot out by bullets, some shattered by bricks. Hate calls were made to Christian families. Margaret MacDonald, whose idea it was to put up the paper menorahs, said she thought it would be a simple thing for people to do. But when she went to put the menorah in her own window, she hesitated: “With two young children, I had to think hard about it myself. We put our menorah in a living room window, and made sure nobody sat in front of it.” The community would not be intimidated. Each night of Hanukkah, more and more menorahs were placed in windows. The local paper printed a brightly colored full-page menorah, urging its 56,000 subscribers to place them in their windows.

On the last night of Hanukkah, hundreds of homes had menorahs in them. As the Schnitzers drove around town that night, Isaac saw all of the houses with menorahs in their windows and exclaimed, “I didn’t know so many people were Jewish!”

## EMBRACING THE STRANGER

As Nikos Kazantzakis walked along a dusty path in his native Crete, an elderly woman was passing by, carrying a basket of figs. She paused, picked out two figs, and presented them to the author. "Do you know me, old lady?" Kazantzakis asked. She glanced at him in amazement, "No, my boy. Do I have to know you to give you something? You are a human being, aren't you? So am I. Isn't that enough?"

Over and over, Hebrew Scripture lists three groups of people as worthy of special kindness, extra thoughtfulness, and intentional consideration: strangers, widows, and orphans (c.f. Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29). The legal mandates in the Old Testament are unique among the other known judicial systems in the Ancient Near East in their consistent and outspoken advocacy of the weakest, least protected, and disadvantaged members of the society.

"Strangers" are listed with "widows and orphans" because strangers were alone – they lacked any kinship-connection that would otherwise protect and support them. Jesus ate with the outcast and the stranger, and preached that "whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do to me." Paul defines the mark of the true Christian as one who extends hospitality to strangers (Romans 12:13).

Ephesians 2:11-22 takes it even further. They used to be "aliens," strangers, they had "no hope." But "in Christ Jesus" these strangers become part of a common humanity with believers. The dividing walls have been "broken down." The anonymous author of Ephesians says, "Don't exclude people because they aren't the way you want them to be. Remember, not too long ago, *you* were the strangers and some wanted you to be circumcised to be part of the fellowship. Remember that?"

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, spent many years reaching out to the poor and needy on the streets of London. An apocryphal story from the day captures the essence of his work: every Christmas, London churches sent out representatives to the streets to invite the poor to Christmas celebrations. Huge crowds would gather to take advantage of this annual outpouring of generosity. The Anglicans began by announcing, "All of you who are Anglicans, come with us." The Roman Catholics followed: "All who are Catholic, come with us." Then the Methodists, the Lutherans, and all the other denominations announced, "Whoever is one of us, come with us." Finally, when all of the church representatives had made their invitations and left, a large crowd of people remained milling about. At that point, William Booth would step out of the crowd and shout out to the people, "All of you who belong to no one, come with me!"

## “LET LOVE BE DANGEROUS”

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

– Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy & Leviticus

God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh. Instead of facing his prejudice against the Assyrians, he ran away. After a deep sea detour of some repute, he finally made it to the Assyrian capital. Much to his self-righteous chagrin, they embraced God’s love and forgiveness with such fervor and humility that even the cattle were wearing sack-cloth and ashes. When the books to be included in the Bible were being debated and negotiated, the book of Jonah was included in direct opposition to earlier sources that suggested that God was some sort of exclusive tribal deity. Instead, the story of Jonah trumpets the conviction that God’s grace is extended to all peoples, even the ones for whom we might hold human hatred and prejudice.

If God can love even the Ninevites, there must be something bigger going on here. It goes beyond just *tolerating* people. It goes on to acceptance and affirmation of people– not despite their differences, but because of their differences.

As part of the Center for Progressive Christianity’s Eight Points by which Progressive Christianity is defined ([www.tpc.org](http://www.tpc.org)), a list is suggested of those who are called to be in a community without walls:

*believers and agnostics,  
conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,  
homosexuals and heterosexuals,  
females and males,  
the despairing and the hopeful,  
those of all races and cultures, and  
those of all classes and abilities, those of all ages.*

They don’t have to *be* like one another or *become* like one another – but are still all together in fellowship. Embracing such diversity serves as an antidote to those who would claim to be the sole arbiters of a holiness based in conformity of both belief and behavior. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, “Can you think of a type of person who might make you uncomfortable if they sat next to you? May that person come into your life soon!” That’s where true discipleship is tested.

Jesus repeatedly shattered the rules of ritual purity and cultural expectations of separation from “the other.” The stories of Jesus healing people in Matthew 9 are a perfect example of Jesus’ willingness to break down the walls separating people: the paralyzed man, the blind and mute man – all people whom the

“righteous” would have labeled as sinners and thus deserving of their fate. Some of the others to whom Jesus showed compassion were:

A tax collector who was cheating the people:

He was a “traitor,” hated by fellow Jews for helping the occupying forces of Rome bleed the country dry and line his own pockets.

The woman with the hemorrhage:

Ritual cleanliness laws conspired to exclude women from religious life. Some women would never be ritually “clean.” By even *touching* the woman with the flow of blood (or being touched by her), Jesus was made “unclean” – but his response was one of love.

The synagogue leader:

A respected leader with a sick daughter who came to see this radical rabbi only after he had exhausted every other avenue to save his daughter. Despite his daughter’s having died, Jesus was gracious and went with him, healing her.

We’re called to love our neighbor as we do our own self. Not just a “Hi, how are you?” either. It involves cost, risk, and vulnerability to provide a safe place for people who are lonely, rejected by society, or beat up by others or the circumstances of life. Observing Mother Teresa’s work with India’s “untouchables,” Poet Sydney Carter was moved to reflect: *“Let love be dangerous.”*

## HOSPITALITY OR HOSTILITY?

Hospitality has long been a core value in the Jewish tradition. One story of Abraham’s hospitality even has him *running* to greet the strangers at his camp. In ancient days, the practice protected people from the dangers of traveling alone. There were no safe and cheap shelters for travelers. Along the way people could be brutalized, robbed, wounded, or lost. As once practiced, it was expected that food offered to a stranger had to be as abundant as possible, even if it meant, as it often did, that the family had to do without in the coming days.

Jesus radicalized any romantic notion of hospitality into the care and love for those with no social standing, those of limited resources and questionable credibility. In the judgment scene in Matthew 25, the king says to those being given the kingdom: *I was naked and you clothed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...* Essentially, followers of Jesus are challenged to overcome fear of the stranger and give attention to the lonely, the excluded, the unfamiliar.

In Greek, the word “hospitality,” *philonexia*, has at its root the same word that gives us the English word xenophobia. Our treatment of the “alien” or “foreigner” reveals our core values of hospitality or hostility toward those who are different. Seeing the face of Christ in the stranger at our door is often a challenge. But the

spirit of hospitality found in the Bible recognizes the child of God in everyone and obliges us to treat one another accordingly.

Ancient literature and fairytales are full of stories in which gods and other supernatural beings disguise themselves as mortals, sometimes as the lowest of the low, and roam throughout the world to see how people will treat them. As the epistle to the Hebrews says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Jesus says, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me.”

Jim Wallis tells of how on Saturdays the Sojourners Community opens a food line to the hungry and homeless of Washington who live within sight of the White House. Before they open the doors, they gather around the food, hold hands, and are led in prayer by Mary Glover, the best pray-er of the community - someone who herself stood in that food line a few years earlier. She prays: "Lord, we know you'll be coming through this line today. So help us to treat you well."

The significance of a shared meal in Jesus' day has been somewhat lost to our 21<sup>st</sup> century way of thinking. Many of the people with whom Jesus dealt never had a full stomach. Naturally, “heaven” for them was imagined as a banquet. One of the clearest ways Jesus showed his openness and acceptance of all types of people was in sharing meals with them. Ironically, the shared meal of communion is today one of the principle tools used to exclude people from Christian fellowship. In direct contradiction to Jesus' own practice, many denominations enforce elaborate rules clarifying who can receive communion and who cannot.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, began his career as an Anglican priest and a rigid legalist. But over the years his understanding of communion is only one of his views that changed significantly. Deeming communion a “means of grace,” Wesley left a legacy in which the United Methodist church now practices “open communion.” As a witness to the free gift of grace and the open table fellowship practiced by Jesus, no one is turned away from the table, not even the unbaptized.

## NO EARTHLY GOOD

*“Jesus loves everybody – get over it.”*

– Jerry Barlow

Story after story of Jesus portrays him as hanging out and eating with the wrong people at the wrong time, touching people he shouldn't touch, and going against the expectations of the “proper” and pious religious folks. The Pharisees are used by Matthew as a gross caricature of people who are more concerned with their own appearance of holiness than they were with really helping people.

*“I don't like religious people. They tend to be territorial, cliquish, exclusive, not hospitable. They're so heavenly-minded, they're no earthly good – so*

*fixed on doing what they think God would have them do or say that they're not authentically present to the person right in front of them..."*

– Bishop John Shelby Spong

The woman who interrupted dinner in Luke 7:36-50 was “known” – folks in the community had labeled her as living an immoral life. Yet here she was at a party where she wasn’t welcome, hadn’t been included, clearly wasn’t wanted and was, in fact, condemned for attending.

She begins to wet Jesus’ feet with her tears and shocks Middle-Eastern sensibilities by “letting down her hair” to dry his feet. As she anoints Jesus’ feet with ointment, the pious host, Simon, declares, “No self-respecting or true prophet would allow this sinner-woman to touch him.”

Jesus asks Simon, “Do you see this woman?” Far from being an ophthalmological question, Jesus is asking, “How long are you, a decent, God-fearing man, going to be blinded by your rigidity?” More interested in the notoriety of having the famous rabbi at dinner than anything else, Simon had neglected the basic courtesies of washing the feet of one’s guests – an act of hospitality extended here by the “outcast” and not the host himself.

Simon’s condition was what might be called “hard-heartedness.” Marcus Borg writes, “Throughout the Bible, the heart is a metaphor for a deep level of the self” – below even thinking and feeling. “Closed hearts” are described in the Bible as hard hearts, shut hearts, and stony hearts. With this malady come blindness, lack of understanding, darkened minds, lack of gratitude, insensitivity to wonder and awe, and a lack of compassion.

## TEAR DOWN THAT WALL

*“Christ has broken down the dividing walls!” – Ephesians 2*

The Apostle Paul uses the imagery of the human body to illustrate the idea that Christians of diverse gifts and abilities can nonetheless be unified – often for the benefit of all the individual “parts.” Uniformity is not the ideal; unity in love and respect for one another is the goal.

*“The bond that links our human family is not one of blood . . . doesn’t have to do with color . . . doesn’t have to do with gender . . . doesn’t have to do with sexual orientation . . . the true bond that links our human family ... is one of respect and joy for all people everywhere, regardless of blood, color, creed, gender, even those of your own family you’d like to forget about ...”*

– Richard Bach

The church is rife with walls of every conceivable type: language, actions, beliefs, liturgy, music, requirements, expectations, education, rigidity, race, class, sex,

and orientation. Without giving a second thought to what it says to the outsider, these walls are clung to by some as reassuring comfort that what they know and are familiar with will not change. For others, these walls are the final proof that what Christianity has to offer is primarily hypocrisy and selfishness. And yet there is something deep inside us that, if given a chance, revels in experiencing moments of unity and reconciliation.

*“Tear down this wall!”*

– Ronald Reagan, *Berlin*, 1987

To that end, the gospel makes an appeal to us to tear down the walls, to reach out to those who are strangers, those who are far off, those against whom we harbor prejudice – even our enemies. The gospel engenders a radical hospitality that requires boundaries be crossed, barriers be dismantled, and walls be torn down.

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

How are our prejudices and insecurities intertwined?

Describe the “humanity beyond our prejudices” to which we are called.

How do the ministries of Creech and Phelps conflict or sync with Jesus’ message of radical equality and grace?

What has Mel White learned along his Spiritual Journey?

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

What other practices or characteristics of the human condition might be included in the “natural” vs. “un-natural” conversation?

The “body of Christ” is just one New Testament image in which difference is honored. Explain.

What’s the common denominator?

What does “being a weed in the midst of a garden that does not want a weed” mean to you personally?

## **SPIRITPRACTICE:**

“Walking in Another’s Shoes” with Dr. John Cobb

### **Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

### **Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Use the words to Farquharson and Klusmeier's *Walls that Divide* for personal devotions or in formulating a responsive prayer for use in worship.

"Walls that Divide"

Tho' ancient walls may still stand proud and racial strife be fact,  
tho' bound'ries may be lines of hate, proclaim God's saving act!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!  
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty!

When vested pow'r stands firm entrenched and breaks another's back,  
when waste and want live side by side, it's gospel that we lack!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!  
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

The truth we seek in varied scheme, the life that we pursue,  
unites us in a common quest for self and world made new!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!  
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

The church divided seeks that grace, that newness we proclaim;  
a unity of serving love that lives praise to God's name!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!  
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

This broken world seeks lasting health and vital unity-  
God's people in the Christ made new cast off all slavery!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!  
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

*Words © 1974 by Walter Farquharson; used by permission of the author.*

*Music © 1974 by Ron Klusmeier. WorshipArts 250 Dundas Street S., Suite 125 Cambridge, Ontario N1R8A8 Canada.*

*Available as "Though Ancient Walls" (#691) in Voices United, the hymnal of the United Church of Canada (tune name: KARR) URL: <http://www.united-church.ca/voicesunited/>*

# LIVING IT OUT

## SESSION 15 THE KIN\_DOM OF GOD

### **Kin\_dom Without Walls**

Imagine a place  
Where mercy resides,  
Love forms each heart,  
Compassion lived out with grit and determination.  
A place where lavish signs  
Mark each path barrier free.

Imagine a place  
Where skin tones are celebrated  
Like the hues of tulips in springtime.  
Where languages inspire  
With symphonies of diversity.  
Where Respect schools us  
In custom and history  
And every conversation  
Begins with a bow of reverence.

Imagine a place where each person wears glasses,  
Clarity of vision for all.  
Recognizing each one, everything  
Made in the image of God.

Imagine a place  
Where carrots and pasta  
Doctor's skills and medications  
Are not chained behind barbed wire -  
Food, shelter, health care available for all.

Imagine a place where  
Every key of oppression  
Was melted down to form public art  
Huge fish, doves, lions and lambs  
On which children could play.

Imagine a place where  
People no longer kept watch  
Through the front window  
To determine whether the welcome mat  
Would remain on the porch.

Such is the work  
The journey  
The destination  
In the kin\_dom of God.

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As you spend time in reflection, take the time to write two lists: 1) the ways and places you have witnessed or been a part of any wall being dismantled and 2) any barrier around the globe that you believe needs to be dismantled.

In his book *Conspiracy of Goodness*, Donald Messer tells of a young Quaker missionary who contracted typhus and died suddenly. All cemeteries at that time were Catholic and unavailable for burials of people of other beliefs. The only option was to bury this beloved missionary outside the cemetery. The following day when people visited the grave, they discovered the fence had been moved to include the missionary's grave!

Spend some quiet time in prayer. Ask God how you can be a fence mover.

– Cynthia Langston Kirk

Messer, Donald E., *Conspiracy of Goodness*, (Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 127.

## 16. SOCIAL JUSTICE: REALIZING GOD'S VISION

**FOCUS:** Being a person of faith demands balancing spiritual pursuits with *action*. In a society which is often unjust, inequitable, and whose very structures are responsible for generating untold suffering and poverty, we are compelled to pursue social justice as an expression of hope in realizing a better world.

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### THE CALL TO “MEDDLE”

*“Talk about justice? Hush this!  
We’re not supposed to discuss this – we gotta hide it in a song.  
Gotta keep things quiet – they don’t want us to write about it.  
Gotta make like nothing’s wrong...”*

– Victor Wooten, “Justice”

Speaking an authoritative word from Yahweh, the prophets of Hebrew scripture stood in judgment over the political and religious leaders of the people. Today, the popular notion of a prophet has been gutted of any suggestion of spiritual or moral insight in favor of the image of a prognosticator of sensational and superficial coming events.

But the call to pursue social justice has deep roots in the Biblical tradition and has been at the heart of efforts to address social, environmental, and moral injustices around the world. Theodore Parker, the great Unitarian preacher and activist, believed that the significance of religion in the first place was in its active “meddling” in public issues and “everything that affects the welfare of [humanity].” In a society which is often unjust, inequitable, and whose very structures are responsible for generating untold suffering and poverty, we are right to wonder, “Is there any word from the Lord?”

### THE PROPHETS OF HEBREW SCRIPTURE

*“Everybody cryin’ mercy,  
when they don’t know the meanin’ of the word.  
Everybody cryin’ justice,  
so long as it’s business first.”*

– Mose Allison

Some 750 years before the birth of Jesus, things seemed to be going fairly well in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Yet God called a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees named Amos to preach harsh words to a comfortable people. Amos denounced Israel and its neighbors for their reliance on military might, for

grave injustice in social dealings, for their abhorrent immorality, and their shallow, meaningless piety. Needless to say, he was unpopular with religious and political leaders – and anyone else whose status, wealth, and security relied on maintaining the status quo.

Sadly, today's popular understanding of "prophecy" has essentially been gutted of its distinguished Biblical heritage in favor of divination of the future, clairvoyance, and a scandalous misuse of the Bible to predict sensational and superficial notions of apocalypse. Wallowing in angst-ridden conjectures of divine retribution and "we told you sos," somber predictors of doom string together unrelated Biblical texts in order to stuff their coffers by scaring the masses.

Far from foretelling some inescapable future, the prophets of Hebrew scripture stood in judgment over the political and religious leaders of the people and proclaimed a conditional future: what happens next is directly contingent upon how the religious, ethical, and political corruption of the day was dealt with.

While different in style, tone and context, each of the Hebrew prophets had the same concern about justice and community – about being the people of God, together. They were not solitary figures, isolated from the experiences of the real world, but members of the community living in the midst of life and all its struggles. Be it the three "major" prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, or the twelve shorter works known as the "minor" prophets, their dominant concern was the relationship of a people to their God.

Incidentally, the term "minor" refers to the work's length, not importance. They also may have been grouped together because they all fit nicely on one scroll. They are:

Hosea	Obadiah	Nahum	Haggai
Joel	Jonah	Habakkuk	Zechariah
Amos	Micah	Zephaniah	Malachi

With the exception of Jonah (who's remembered more for his actions than his words), these short books are comprised mostly of what the prophets *said* as spokespersons for God. What they said has less to do with foretelling the future than telling what God's will is for the people of God.

It's important to remember that the judgment they predict isn't an unavoidable divine punishment but an effort to call people back into a relationship with God. No matter how dire the circumstances, their words were tempered with the simple expectation that is at the heart of Biblical faith: hope for the future.

## A DIFFERENT GOD

In his book, *The Source*, James Michener tells the story of a Canaanite village in pre-biblical days. The time was 2,200 years before Christ, and the Canaanites in that village worshiped numerous gods of the earth. It was a fertility religion, and

among the numerous gods was the goddess Astarte. In every home there were voluptuous clay figurines of Astarte and her male companions. These people, sad to say, practiced human sacrifice to the god Malek, in the belief that if they sacrificed the lives of their first-born sons, the gods would be so pleased that they would make the people more fertile. Temple prostitutes were provided by the priests to the men of the village as part of their fertility rites.

Timna, the protagonist in Michener's story, could not accept the sacrifice of her first-born son, nor could she accept the behavior of her husband with a particularly young and erotic temple prostitute. Michener writes: "Timna, still grieving for her son, watched the performance dispassionately and muttered, 'What folly! The fertility is in the soil. It is in me'." And while others celebrated she walked slowly homeward, seeing life in new and painful clarity; with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man, and she went into his godroom, looked with abhorrence at the four Astartes, and methodically smashed [them] along with their phallic companions.

With a different god, he would have been a different man.

According to John Dominic Crossan, one of the most pressing questions for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians is, "What is the Character of Your God?" The character of the God in whom we place our allegiance shapes our character as people of faith. The prophets remind us of God's character. Although Crossan is quick to point out that we can't generalize the message of the prophets as, for example, non-violence (the first two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, were extremely violent), a recurrent, pronounced theme on the prophets' lips is divine justice. The God of the Bible is a just God. Although God's justice is often misunderstood as a retributive justice, it instead a justice about *distribution*, says Crossan. In other words, God is concerned about fairness and equality, not vengeance and retribution. A violent god begets a violent people, a god who seeks fairness and equality begets a people who seek fairness and equality.

## TAKE THIS HEART...

*"For many years of my life I detested the text of Isaiah 53:10 'It has pleased the Lord to bruise the servant.' So I decided to go to the Jerusalem Bible to see if the Catholics could help me out. They read it, 'It has pleased the Lord to crush the servant!' But then I've lived long enough to discover that the only people who have really made any difference in my life are the people who God has taken and sand-papered the cockles of their hearts until they could not walk by a hungry child, a crying woman, or a hardened man. It has pleased the Lord to bruise the servant. And I thank God for what is, in many ways, the ultimate maturity of the spiritual life. It's no accident that the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah and the song of the suffering servant is more quoted in the New Testament than any other single chapter of the Old – and is half the text of Handel's*

Messiah. *Can you hear me? Submission – that submission which understands that the gospel is bad news before it can really be good news.*"

– Harrell Beck, May 13, 1986  
Preaching Conference, Arrowhead Springs, California

Jesus calls would-be followers to "Repent, and believe in the good news!" (Mark 1:15) This repentance leaves behind destructive, violent, unjust beliefs and practices in favor of becoming collaborators with God in seeking justice. Benedictine Sister Dawn Annette Mills suggests that the word *repent* carries with it the call "to crumble." In modern-day vernacular, she suggests repentance is something like the *roto-tilling* of the heart. Time and again the Bible speaks of hardened hearts as a metaphor for ignorance or acceptance of suffering and injustice. Repentance leads to the softening of one's heart. Likewise, hardened soil also needs water for softening. Mills suggests tears as an effective strategy for softening hearts. Concern for justice can then take root.

The last song on U2's *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* is really a psalm – a sung prayer entitled "Yahweh." The song closes with the line, "Take this heart and make it break." A hardened heart is of no use to God. God desires our hearts to crumble and break on account of injustice – thus prompting us to rise up impassioned in God's name to do something about it.

Mills points out that the Latin behind the word *compunction* means "punctured; a punctured heart." The role of the prophets is to pierce our hearts, to make them crumble and break on account of injustice.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote,

*"A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the Prophets take us to the slums. Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. . . . But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?"*

– The Prophets

Psalm 51 declares "a broken and contrite heart God will not despise." When nursing a bruise or a hurt, all it takes is for someone to brush up against it and you twinge from the sharp pain. Such sensitivity is a prime characteristic of a person of faith. Hearts are softened by tears shed in the face of injustice. Hearts are broken from confronting an "abysmal indifference" to suffering and evil. What

breaks your heart? What brings tears to your eyes? Poverty? Abuse? Disease? Inadequate housing? Capital punishment? War? Illiteracy? Greed? Perhaps God is inviting you to do something about it. "Repent, and believe in the good news."

## DOING JUSTICE, LOVING KINDNESS, AND WALKING HUMBLLY WITH GOD

*"As a people of faith we must live our lives not always comforted by the holy but haunted by God's call to live a prophetic life."*

– Emilie Townes

The author of James asks, "What does it profit someone if they say they have faith but have not works? Can their faith save them? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace and be warmed and filled . . ." [That is, you say to them just some pious platitude.] Without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Being a disciple is not only a matter of receiving, but doing. Upon closer investigation, it seems that what passes for Christianity today is really *two* different religions. One encourages people to ask, "What can God do for me?" (save me, give me victory, make me prosperous and successful) while the other asks, "What can I do for God?" (What gifts have I been given to serve the less fortunate and change the world for the better?) When someone asks you, "Are you saved?" what they mean is, "Have you had a personal experience of God's grace in your life so that you can accept Jesus as your personal Savior?" What they don't ask is: "Have you been in relationship with the poor in this world? Have you fed the hungry? Are you seeking justice for the oppressed?"

For many, the thought of seeking social justice is an intimidating proposition. Yet God's vision for the world can only be realized as each one of us sets ourselves to practicing even the smallest task toward the goal.

*"The prophetic life is one in which you live your faithfulness out of a steadiness, and that is often hard for us to do. We do really good with these rushes of faithfulness (but) the mortal life is the life of the mundane. It is doing the right thing day after day after day and moment after moment. It is not these big movements. It is not these big statements of great profound eloquence. It really is doing it every day. I cannot say it often enough: treating people fairly, decently – respecting them for who they are – knowing that none of us is perfect."*

– Emilie Townes, *Living the Questions*

In 1966, thirty long years before the fall of Apartheid, South African students heard Robert Kennedy proclaim:

“Some believe there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills. Yet many of the world’s great movements of thought and action have flowed from the work of a single person... It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. And crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

The prophets appealed to the people of God to wake up to the injustices being perpetrated right in their midst. Each person standing up, striking out against injustice – even in the midst of the mundane – sends out a ripple of hope.

At its core, Biblical faith has a sense of expectation called hope. The prophets clung to the conviction that judgment proclaimed out of hope for a renewed relationship with the Divine would yield a better, more just and peaceful future. Far from being hateful or “unpatriotic,” today’s prophets engage in social criticism out of that same hope, a conviction that “doing justice” is essential to expressing both a vital faith and building a world at peace.

*“I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found out how to serve.”*

– Albert Schweitzer

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

What are some of the characteristics of justice as “God’s own will for us as we live together?”

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

How might the ideas of caring and “being comfortable” conflict?

List the characteristics of “prophetic theology:”

**DVD Chapter 4:**

How does fixating on the “virtue of individuals” legitimate the social structure?

Compare and contrast “procedural justice” with a “justice of the common good.”

What are the implications of people of faith being aware of the notion of “systemic justice?”

“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you’ll be saved.” What did this mean to those living under Caesar’s empire? What does it mean to you today?

**DVD Chapter 5:**

How did the writing of the creeds change the fundamental tenets of Christianity?

How does Jesus’ call to liberation and justice conflict with the values of the dominant culture then and now?

How was Jesus’ strategy different from that of the prophets of Hebrew scripture?

Sr. Prejean suggests that the justice Jesus demanded is expressed in a “preferential love for poor people, for prisoners, for battered women, for children who are in poverty.” Explain.

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

## SPIRITPRACTICE

A song over food with John Bell:

Every nation has a different gift with different insights to offer. Worship songs of the Southern Hemisphere tend to be much more upfront about social justice than those from the Northern Hemisphere.

*“God bless to us our bread,  
and give food to all those who are hungry,  
And hunger for justice to those who are fed.  
God bless to us our bread.” \**

This grace from Argentina and other Southern Hemisphere songs are available on CD and in book form in the collection, *“Love and Anger: Songs of lively faith and social justice sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group”* by John L Bell and Graham Maule. Available from: [www.ionabooks.com/bookshop](http://www.ionabooks.com/bookshop). The Songbook is ISBN#: 094798898X

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# LIVING IT OUT

## SESSION 16 LAS MADRES

Read and meditate on Deuteronomy 10:17-19 and Matthew 25:35-40.

The many issues of immigration and border crossings into the United States are complex and extremely divisive. It reflects issues of land, borders, refugees, laws, abundance vs. scarcity beliefs, ownership, desperation, hospitality and search for hope and improved quality of life, not unlike other geography and people around the world.

No matter your political view, the harsh and tragic reality of the deaths border crossers grows in the desert. Groups such as No More Deaths (featured in Session 9's SpiritPractice) are diligently working to provide water stations and transportation to medical attention.

If you haven't already been to their website, read about their work on [www.nomoredeaths.org](http://www.nomoredeaths.org). Consider becoming involved in No More Deaths as part of your spiritual practices.

Artist Valarie James, working with friends and colleagues, created a trio of women made from desert plants and from the clothing, bags and cloth items left by those making the hazardous journey through the desert in hopes of a better life. The women, known as *Las Madres* (The Mothers) stand vigil in the desert grass and represent over 1,000 deaths of women, children and men who have tried to cross the desert. These three life-size figures can be seen at Pima Community College East in Tucson, Arizona. Pictures and background information can be viewed at [www.lasmadresproject.org](http://www.lasmadresproject.org).

Re-read the Deuteronomy and Matthew passages. Spend time in prayer for those who live in desperate situations and for those who would risk their lives for a better way of life for themselves and their families.

– Cynthia Langston Kirk

## 17. INCARNATION: DIVINELY HUMAN



**FOCUS:** The meaning of the incarnation has been debated since the beginning of Christianity. Although often associated with Jesus alone, the notion of incarnation can be understood most fully when it also includes Jesus' followers, called, like Jesus, to en flesh the Spirit in divinely human ways.

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### IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR?

*"The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."*

– Thomas Jefferson, 1823

We really don't know the what, where, or how of Jesus' birth. Maybe April? That's when Luke's shepherds would likely have been out on the hillsides. Certainly not on December 25<sup>th</sup> – that's the birthday of Mithra, patron god of the Roman Legions whose birthday was adopted by Christians some four hundred years later. For Luke, the family lived in Nazareth and traveled to Bethlehem where there was no room at the Inn. Shepherds and angels were in attendance. For Matthew, the family already lived in a house in Bethlehem. Herod, the wise men, and a wandering star played the big parts.

Our earliest witnesses to Jesus' life, Paul and Mark, are evidently unaware of anything miraculous about his birth – in fact, Paul says just the opposite. As Paul introduced himself and his message to the Romans, he described Jesus as having been "made of the seed of David according to the flesh." He mentions no virgin birth or any of the elements most people have come to associate with the Christmas story. To Paul's mind, Jesus was only declared to be the "Son of God" by having been resurrected from the dead (Romans 1:3-4), a decidedly "adoptionist" – and according to later church councils, heretical – interpretation of the data.

The gospel of Mark skips all of Jesus' evidently unremarkable early life and jumps straight to the beginning of his ministry – while John goes the other direction and places Jesus at the beginning of time, participating in the very act of Creation.

So what will it be?

We haven't even begun to consider the multitude of other gospels that didn't "make the cut" into the canon of scripture. Some were left out for theological

reasons, some for political, but most were dropped when the church was trying to develop an identity and, in modern terms, “spin” the story of Jesus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. A dip into *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* or *The Infancy Gospel of James* will net the reader strange and wonderful details of Jesus’ birth, most of which, while not the “official” story, have nonetheless taken root in our psyches through their representation in historic art, oral tradition – and Christmas cards!

## JUST ANOTHER VIRGIN BIRTH

*“The two men who contributed most to the Church’s thought of the divine meaning of the Christ were Paul and John, who never even distantly allude to the virgin birth.”*

– Harry Emerson Fosdick in *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?* (1922)

From Roman Emperors to the Buddha to the Greek Adonis to the Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl, virgin and extraordinary births are commonplace in cultures around the world. Be it Zoroaster of Persia or Krishna of India, Mithra, Prometheus, Indra, or Horus born to the virgin Isis, Jesus is in not-so-rare company when it comes to his conception and birth.

*[Virgin Birth stories are] “recounted everywhere; and with such striking uniformity of the main contours, that the early Christian missionaries were forced to think that the devil himself must be throwing up mockeries of their teaching wherever they set their hand.”*

– Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* p. 309

Toward the end of the first century, the regions in which the gospels were developing were undergoing culturally disruptive and often violent change. The year 70 saw the Roman Legion obliterating Jerusalem and its Temple and scattering Jewish refugees throughout the Mediterranean. As the teachings of Jesus spread throughout the Empire and as his credibility came into direct competition with other religious figures, stories developed about his birth that sounded strangely similar to the births of the pagan deities that dominated the known world. The stories of such figures were essentially formulaic:

*“...whether Christian or pagan: ancient readers, before they even opened the biography of a hero, could expect to find a story about his divine begetting.”*

– Robert J. Miller, *Born Divine, The Births of Jesus & Other Sons of God*, p. 134

By the 90s, various versions of Jesus’ miraculous birth were widespread and Matthew and Luke incorporated two of these versions into their gospels.

*“The virgin birth story was an honest mistake. Most liberal theologians believe that the author of the Gospel of Matthew (or someone who supplied the writer with source material) scanned an unknown ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. He found what he believed to be a reference to Jesus’ birth. It was in Isaiah 7:14. This has since*

*become a famous passage often recited at Christmas time. He simply copied it into Matthew (1:23) as a method of showing that prophecies in the Hebrew Testament were fulfilled in Jesus' life. As it happens, the Greek translators had made a mistake. When they were translating the Hebrew writings into the Greek Septuagint and similar translations, they converted the Hebrew word almah as the Greek equivalent of our English word for virgin. Almah appears nine other times in the Hebrew Scriptures. In each case it means "young woman." When the scriptures referred to a virgin (and they do over 50 times) they always used the Hebrew word betulah. So, Isaiah appears to have referred to a young woman becoming pregnant (a rather ordinary event)."*

– Culver "Bill" Nelson, in LtQ's *Saving Jesus*

Whether it is from the study of comparative religions or a thoughtful understanding of the Judeo/Christian texts themselves, Jesus' birth to a virgin takes its place among the almost countless extraordinary births meant to engender divinity and importance to political and religious figures across time. While unquestioning belief in the historical fact of the virgin birth remains a litmus test for many "true" Christians, this literal interpretation of the notion of incarnation limits the presence of the Spirit to one time, one place, and one unique person.

This claim to Jesus' unique and holy nature has been the focal point of debate and rancor for nearly two thousand years.

## MAKING SENSE OF ESSENCE

Foreshadowing elements of Jesus' birth and life, *The Wisdom of Solomon* was but one document circulating in the years prior to Jesus' appearance that likely contributed to his later legend.

*"I also am mortal, like everyone else, a descendant of the first-formed child of earth; and in the womb of a mother I was molded into flesh, within the period of ten months, compacted with blood, from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage. And when I was born, I began to breathe the common air, and fell upon the kindred earth; my first sound was a cry, as is true of all. I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. For no king has had a different beginning of existence; there is for all one entrance into life, and one way out. Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me."*

– *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:1-7 (NRSV) late 1<sup>st</sup> century, B.C.E.

But the story of an unassuming human who called on God and to whom the spirit of wisdom came was not always an impressive sell in the shadow of the pantheon and mystery religions of the day. Yet it was enough for many followers in the early centuries of Christianity: although eventually declared a heretic by

later councils, the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Bishop of Samosata was not alone in his belief that Jesus was the “Son of God” simply on account of his holy life and good deeds.

Was Jesus simply a man whose remarkable life could only be spoken of in terms of divinity? Was he God incarnate, only pretending to be a human being? Was he something in-between? Did he somehow possess the same or similar “essence” of the Divine? These and other questions of Christology, or the nature of Christ, became the central debate among Christians in the fourth century. The in-fighting became so acrimonious, with gangs of hoodlums fighting on behalf of one bishop or the other in the streets of Alexandria, that Constantine saw it as a threat to his unification of the East and West into the new Roman Empire.

After several failed diplomatic attempts to negotiate an agreement between the bishops, the Emperor called the first ecumenical council to order in Nicea to try to reach consensus on issues of Christology. Meeting in 325, the approximately 300 bishops set to arguing over the essence of divinity – while Constantine called it “a fight over trifling and foolish verbal differences.” At issue was what has come to be called the Arian Controversy. The Arians from the East believed that Jesus was not born divine but made divine in life. Their leader, Arius, was eventually voted down, exiled by Constantine, and his writings burned.

Although the Council of Nicea produced what we now call the “Nicene Creed,” it was not adopted as the official position of the church for over a hundred years. Subsequent councils continued to argue over the definition of incarnation itself, with arguments raging over Jesus’ “nature,” whether he was “begotten or made,” or whether Jesus was of the same or similar “essence” as God.

Today, countless Christians blithely recite the creeds without any sense of their original intent, the manner in which they came into being, or any thought that their original meaning could have ceased to have any relevance to contemporary life. Many Christians simply assume that it is and always has been a fact that Jesus is God – without thinking about any of the theological implications of such an idea for a so-called monotheistic religion.

The humble mortal we call Jesus would likely be horrified at his deification by generations of well-meaning followers. The sage teacher and rabbi who pointed beyond himself to the Kingdom of God is unlikely to have elevated himself to the second member of the Trinity, let alone “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” Yet for many Christians, this is the perplexing nature of incarnation – despite options for more practical interpretations.

## INCARNATION FOR THE REST OF US

*“The virgin birth story is no longer taken literally. But the fact is that in the life of Jesus we still believe that there was a literal experience of a living God. Maybe that forces you to rethink God and if we can stop thinking of*

*God as a great big parent figure up in the sky – a supernatural being who is external to life – and begin to think of God as the life power itself, the power of love itself, the “Ground of Being” as Paul Tillich described it; which is always emerging in you and me and which emerged in Jesus of Nazareth in some remarkable kind of way.”*

– John Shelby Spong, *Saving Jesus*

17<sup>th</sup> century English poet, John Donne, tells the story of one man’s search for God. When told that God lived at the top of a mountain at the end of the earth, he makes the journey there and begins to climb. At the same time, God thinks, “What can I do to show my people I love them?” So, God decides to travel down from the mountain and live among the people as one of them. As God goes down the opposite side of the mountain from the man climbing up, they miss one another. At the summit, the man discovers an empty mountaintop. Heartbroken, he concludes that God must not exist.

Despite speculation to the contrary, God doesn’t live on mountaintops, at the ends of the earth, or even in “some heaven, light years away” – God dwells within human beings, the true “essence” of incarnation.

At the heart of Christianity is a Divinity who is incarnational. In some incomprehensible way, the Mystery of God was perceived to be incarnate in Jesus. The Spirit of Life was present in him in a way that made his presence transformational for people. Although Gospel writers tried to explain it with virgin births and Councils tried to define it with formulas and creeds, we are finally left with what Jesus evidently had – the call to make the love of God real in the world.

For John Cobb and other Process Theologians, we are not affected by an external deity manipulating and coercing our lives from on high. Instead, the Divine is expressed indirectly through gentle persuasion. God is “in process” with humanity, constantly changing and evolving with us.

*“Through Process thought every event is constituted by other events – and the relationship to God is part of what makes every moment of human experience what it is. It’s not something incidental or external. So, God is incarnate in everything.”*

– John Cobb, *Living the Questions*

Each of us is a clumsy mix of good and bad – assumptions, prejudices, actions, and intentions – yet sometimes God is able to have God’s way with us. If there is any truth to the Christmas affirmation, “God is with us,” then the Divine is involved in our affairs, gets dirty with us, and sometimes effects beauty in and through us, because the Spirit is incarnate in us.

While firmly in the “Random Acts of Kindness” category, Sylvia Slaton’s story is nonetheless a story of incarnation. The 63-year-old grandmother of 10 was

convicted of obstructing official business. After feeding expired parking meters in downtown Cincinnati so the parked cars would not be ticketed, she was given a \$500 fine. A life-long Sunday School teacher in her Presbyterian church, she stood up to the city, became a local folk hero, and inspired a generation of guerilla parking meter feeders. Having resolved their differences, when Sylvia died recently, the city honored her with a memorial parking meter.

*“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger, and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of these, the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me.’”*

– Matthew 25:37-40

What we *do*, for better or for worse, is the measure of the incarnation in the world. Approaching life incarnationally can have consequences. One needs to be prepared for situations that take risk, that can be messy, that include speaking out or standing up for people; that might even mean making a personal sacrifice for someone else’s sake.

The incarnation is finally not just about Jesus alone, but about us. Wherever we find ourselves, the Mystery of Life dwells within us, not limited to a time or place, but a part of every aspect of our lives.

*“Where love and caring are, there is God.”*

– Taizé chant

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

As the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke can’t possibly be historical, what is their purpose?

With whom does Jesus share the claim of miraculous birth? Why?

According to Levine, what is Matthew up to in his telling of the birth of Jesus?

According to Brueggemann, what is Luke up to in his telling of the birth of Jesus?

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

What are the implications of “doing Christology all over again?”

Spong describes at least five different Biblical explanations of how “God got into Jesus”: Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Explain.

How would re-imagining “God as the life power itself, the power of love itself” change our understanding of incarnation?

Why does Meyers believe the incarnation is so important for Christians to “hang on to”?

### **DVD Chapter 4:**

What is “doing Christology from below?”

How does Athanasius’ thought fit in with the “continuum” suggested by Spong?

### **DVD Chapter 5:**

Explain Towne’s understanding of incarnation as “presence.”

Butler Bass shares an example of “a moment of God being incarnate in our midst.” What experiences have you encountered of God being incarnate in your midst?

## **SPIRITPRACTICE:**

“Body Prayer” with Dr. Marcus Borg.

### **Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

### **Consider the following questions as a group:**

*What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?*

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

Put on the Christmas pageant, “Matt & Lucy’s Version Births.” A clever musical utilizing all the traditional trappings of a standard children’s Christmas pageant, “Version Births” exposes the performers and the audience to the different birth narratives in Matthew and Luke.

The play opens as Matt & Lucy volunteer to help with the pageant. Little do they know that the Director will give them each a different script and leave them to work out how to put on a play with conflicting story lines, characters, and settings. As the play ends, the Director explains how having two stories gives us an appreciation of the diversity of ways early Christians expressed their understanding of who Jesus was.

“Matt & Lucy’s Version Births” is available at [www.livingthequestions.com](http://www.livingthequestions.com).

# LIVING IT OUT

## SESSION 17 EMMANUEL

God was made visible in the life of Jesus in such a powerful way that Emmanuel (“God with us”) is a fitting name for this son of God.

Begin your time of meditation by singing a song frequently saved for Advent and Christmas, “Emmanuel” by Bob McGee.

*Emmanuel, Emmanuel  
His name is called Emmanuel  
God with us, revealed in us  
His name is called, Emmanuel*

Emmanuel, written by Bob McGee. © 1976 Copyright C. A. Music (div. of C. A. Records, Inc.) All Rights Reserved. ASCAP. Used By Permission.

With a beautiful melody and succinct lyrics, this chorus depicts the heart of incarnation. The words and phrases not only express who Jesus was, but also who we can be because of him. Jesus brought the Holy One close to us and out of that relationship God can be revealed in and through our lives.

### **For Your Spiritual Journal**

#### **Communion of Saints**

Name one person, now deceased, whose life embodied the teachings of Jesus. You may have read about the person, read their writings, or known the person. What was it about that person that reflected God’s love in such a way?

Think of a person who is alive who lives incarnational love. Write their name in your journal and describe what Christ-like qualities the world witnesses through their lives.

#### **Prayer**

*Come close, Living God, come close. Overwhelm me with your tenderness. Breathe on me; fill me. Fill me to overflowing that the world cannot help but experience you through me. Use my life, my resources, my gifts for the transformation of the world. Teach me to live the song of my childhood so that this little light will shine your grace. In surrender and confidence I pray. Amen.*

– Cynthia Langston Kirk

## 18. PRAYER: INTIMACY WITH GOD

**FOCUS:** The idea of prayer as the primary method of interaction with God is best thought of as a way of life rather than an activity reserved for specific times, places, and formulas.

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### RELATING TO “THE MORE”

"When Bad Things Happen to Good People" author Rabbi Harold Kushner thinks he knows God's favorite book of the Bible. It's the Psalms. In the rest of the Bible, God is said to speak to us—"through seers, sages, and prophets, through the history of the Israelite people. But in the Psalms, we speak to God. We tell God of our love, our needs, our gratitude." But more than that – it shows enough confidence in the relationship to shake our fist in anger. The Psalms show the nature of covenant relationships to be conversation, familiarity – and the confidence to express anger, lament, and dissatisfaction with the way things are. What we think of as prayer – along with other concepts of intimacy with the Divine – are testimony to humanity's striving toward relating to that unknowable yet inescapable sense of “the more.”

### THE PROBLEM WITH PRAYER

*“When St. Paul said that we are to pray without ceasing, he surely did not mean we ought to say prayers without ceasing. When people envision the kingdom of heaven as a place where people are praying all the time, I just assume not go if that is the reality that you have got to deal with.”*

– Jack Spong, from *Living the Questions*

Prayer is in dire need of a makeover. Tired clichés and rote childhood memories are the extent of many people's prayer repertoire. Prayers that have been taught to children in good faith can verge on the downright creepy when considering their potential for theological and psychological distress:

*“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep,  
if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”*

Many people approach prayer in a way that makes God into a cosmic vending machine: insert prayer into slot, make your selection, and if you're good, voila! The outcome you had in mind. The proof texts quoted regarding prayer would seem to support such an understanding:

*Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive. (Matthew 21:22)  
Ask, and it will be given you. (Luke 11:9)*

In Matthew 7, Jesus seems to say that whatever we ask will be given to us. In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable about persistence in prayer: pray, pray, pray and

God will eventually give in. Matthew 18:19 has Jesus saying that, “If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

The problem lies in taking all of these verses out of context. Far from being willy-nilly guarantees of whatever you want, they are instead about making the Reign of God real on earth through acts of healing, reconciliation, and justice. When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, the “Lord’s Prayer” they are taught is an appeal to be sustained in doing whatever work is necessary in bringing about the kingdom.

## PRAYER ABUSE

Truth be told, most people are “foxhole pray-ers,” crying out in the midst of disaster: “Lord, if only you’d get me out of \_\_\_\_\_, I promise to do \_\_\_\_\_!” And if we’re not making deals with God, we’re treating the Divine like some sort of Santa Claus for adults: “I want, I want, I want...” Oftentimes, prayer is confused with magic – passionately stringing together the proper words into incantations in hope of conjuring up the power to realize our desires.

The type of prayers where we ask for things on behalf of others is called “intercessory” prayer. Prayers for one’s self – heal my cancer, end my loneliness, solve my problems – are called “petitionary” prayers. Although they’re the type of prayers people pray all the time, they’re dangerous. As many people still perceive the Divine to be in the reward and punishment business, when the prayers aren’t answered, people beat themselves up with guilt because they’re obviously not good enough or faithful enough for God to answer in the affirmative. Such an attitude is easy to understand when one reads James 5:16: “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” If my prayer is not effective, I must not be righteous enough. Taken to its logical outcome, this type of prayer assumes the existence of a malleable deity obliged to change the direction of the whole world just to please the desires of a supposedly righteous person or two.

In the film “Bruce Almighty,” Jim Carrey’s character, Bruce, is imbued with the power of God. After several miserable attempts to respond to every individual prayer being lifted up to God, he finally succumbs and answers, “Yes,” to everything. In the pandemonium that ensues, it becomes clear that a good deal of what people pray for is not healthy, reasonable, or legal.

As 1985’s hurricane Gloria bore down on the East coast of the United States, televangelist Pat Robertson prayed for God to change the storm’s course to avoid hitting his Virginia headquarters. When the hurricane did indeed veer to the North, Robertson claimed that the phenomenon was proof of God’s love for and approval of his ministry. Too bad for the folks on Long Island whose homes were destroyed and lives devastated.

## “IF ONLY I PRAY HARD ENOUGH, GOD WILL DO WHAT I WANT”

Faithful people continue to lift up the scripture passages that seem to suggest, “Just pray enough and God will provide.” Yet personal experience and common sense tell us that such claims are simply not so. In the American Civil War, both World Wars, and countless other conflicts, opposing forces prayed to the same God for victory. Meanwhile, concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel asks, “How can I still pray to God after the holocaust?”

Imagine the victims of a horrible plane crash arriving at the pearly gates only to be informed by God, “Sorry, I would have loved to intervene but there weren’t enough of you praying for it.” Or the alternative: God reaching down to catch the plane and lightly setting it down upon the earth. (“Whew, good thing you all prayed!”) Neither scenario makes sense.

On the other hand, there’s a whole new branch of neuroscience devoted to uncovering the connections between one’s mind and body. Called “psychoneuroimmunology,” it explores the effect that one’s emotional and spiritual well-being have on your immune system. Double-blind studies have indicated that people who pray and are prayed for recover more quickly than those not prayed for.

So, pray for healing – not because you will always get well, but so that you can connect with the still mysterious and natural power of healing. Pray for safe travel – not because God will necessarily catch your plane, but so that you can be prepared for whatever happens. Pray for the end to a drought, for a job, for a “fill in the blank” – not because prayer is going to control the weather, a future employer, or anything else, but so you can avoid the temptation to despair of God’s goodness in time of difficulty.

Isn’t that defeatist? Darkly existentialist? No, it’s acknowledging the reality that life is what it is. “There is a time for everything under heaven” gives a rhythm to being human. Personal experience confirms that the rain falls on both the good and the bad. And for many, prayer helps in raising an awareness of the divine who shares in both the joys and sorrows of life.

*There is something that we don’t yet understand about how love connects us, how life is bound together, how we are far more interdependent than we think. God is the very relationship that binds us together and somehow we open ourselves to that and that can be an effective way of losing God’s power in the world. I believe God’s power, which is love and life, is always beneficial, always enhancing, and even therapeutic.*

– Jack Spong, from *Living the Questions*

## TOW TRUCK THEOLOGY

Episcopal priest Fr. Robert Farrar Capon was once asked about the efficacy of prayer. He responded that many people simply have the wrong idea about prayer. God is not in the business of prioritizing who will be protected or saved based on whoever is more worthy than someone else. Imagine the situation: You get to work to pull a double shift, but a blizzard is coming. There'll be no customers, so the boss sends you home. Traffic is already tied up on the Interstate, so you decide to take a back road short cut. The storm comes on faster than you expect, the conditions deteriorate rapidly and you skid off into a ditch and are knocked unconscious. When you come to, the snow is piled up around your car and you can't open the doors. You have no cell phone. Your family is not expecting you for hours, they have no idea about your shortcut, and you begin to realize that things are not looking good.

"Tow Truck theology" says that at this point, you say a prayer for God to rescue you. As you're a pretty good person, God responds by tickling the ear of a gas station attendant on the Interstate. He gets a funny feeling that he should put some hot chicken soup in a thermos, grab the keys to the tow truck and drive down a deserted back road in a blizzard for reasons that are unclear. Miraculously, he manages to make out your car buried in the snow, digs in, pulls you out, warms you up with chicken soup and has you home in time for dinner. Although this may be the way many people understand prayer, it's not the way it works.

The faith we claim as Christians is not an insurance policy against tragedy and loss. Capon continues to explain that the Divine has a covenant of presence with us. God will be with us, no matter what. As hard as it is to fathom, when we find ourselves stuck in that blizzard with very little likelihood that a tow truck is miraculously on its way, God is with us, and stays with us – until we die.

It is a common temptation among faithful Christians of all stripes to believe – deep down – that if we're good, God will protect us and rescue us from life's difficulties. But being in relationship with God does not create some sort of divine forcefield protecting us from harm. Being in relationship with God strengthens us for living life, come what may. In difficult times when our most heartfelt petitions seem to go unanswered and we feel abandoned by the Divine, people often wonder what they've done to deserve such a fate. Even Jesus is said to have cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" The experience of faithful people over the ages suggests that God is not, in fact, in charge of dispatching tow trucks. Instead, the Spirit that gives us life longs to be recognized as an intimate companion on our life's journey. We are in covenant with the Spirit that remains with us whatever happens along life's journey.

## IT'S A MATTER OF SEEING

Seldom, if ever, do two people have the same experience and perceive it in exactly the same way. On the journey of life, we accumulate filters through which we see the world. By changing the filter on the lens of a camera, the photographer doesn't change the scene but the interpretation of the scene. So it is with the spiritual life – it's a matter of seeing.

Simply paying attention is the foundation of all spiritual practices. The poet and doctor William Carlos Williams used to carry a notepad around with him in which he listed "Things I noticed today that I've missed until today." Buddhist monk and author, Thich Nat Han, advocates pursuing "mindfulness," a practice that includes paying attention to even the most mundane of activities. Instead of rushing through life to get to something else, try concentrating intently on every aspect of brushing your teeth, climbing stairs, or washing dishes. Each activity has the potential to center a person "in the moment" and overcome the tendency to let the self-chatter of the mind drown out an awareness of the "now." In Frederick and Mary Ann Brussats' guidebook, *Spiritual Literacy*, people are encouraged to recognize the presence of the sacred in everyday experiences. Even the two sacraments of the Protestant tradition, both deeply rooted in Jewish practice, are about taking the simplest stuff of life – bread, water, grapes – and seeing in them a blessing. In their simplicity they serve as bearers of what Marcus Borg calls, "the more."

Spiritual director and author, William Martin (*A Path and a Practice: Using Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching as a Guide to an Awakened Spiritual Life*), tells the story of how we came to be so distracted:

Once upon a time, the heavenly host gathered in the celestial boardroom and Yahweh (Chair of the Board), asked what they thought of the whole "heaven and earth" project. The heavenly host sang out, "Holy, Holy, Holy, God. Heaven and Earth are full of your Glory!" Hasatan, however, was heard to mutter, "Kiss-ups."

As Yahweh made a fuss over how grand the creation of male and female were, Hasatan could not help but call attention to their tendency to disobey. Yahweh admitted that to be true and promptly began praising their capacity for compassion. Aggravated, Hasatan called attention to subparagraph 288 of the Cosmic Charter stating that disobedience must be punished. Yahweh agreed but pointed out that it also stated that compassion must be blessed.

Yahweh was so overwhelmed with the potential of male and female, the Creator poured out a spontaneous blessing on them that was unique among all the other inhabitants of heaven and earth. They alone would possess a distinctive capacity for memory that enabled them to recall and learn from the past. They would also be gifted with an unrivaled imagination that enabled them to envision the future and create wondrous things.

Following the pronouncement of the blessings, Yahweh began to dismiss the board. Hasatan protested loudly, “I object to your having blessed the male and female when the regulations clearly state that you must punish them as well as bless them!” Yahweh replied, “I did.”

Although blessed with the gifts to remember the past and imagine the future, the same capacities also torment us. We wallow in despair, dwelling on the wounds of the past or cowering in anxiety over potential disasters concocted by our fertile imaginations. In so doing, we essentially spend the majority of our conscious time “in” the past or “in” the future – not present to the reality of the here and now.

It’s been said that there really are only two questions that really matter. The first is: “Where am I?” the second is: “What time is it?” The only correct answers to these questions are “Here” and “Now.” The only time and place one can encounter the Divine is here and now – not in the past or in the future.

## THE FUTURE OF PRAYER?

*“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” – Romans 12*

Perhaps the future of prayer rests in our ability to liberate it from simply being an exercise in begging, asking, or informing God of anything. In an apocryphal story, Mother Teresa is asked by a reporter: “When you pray, what do you say?” She replies, “Nothing; I listen.” “What do you hear?” asks the reporter. “Nothing. God listens.” Seeing the puzzled look on the reporter’s face, she assures him, “If I have to explain it to you, you won’t understand.” Deeper than a “conversation” with the Divine, perhaps prayer is best understood as simply being *open* to the Divine.

Being open to the Divine takes work and is not simply a matter of being trained in “five easy steps to intimacy with God.” Those who seem to have the most profound relationships with the Spirit tend to practice what most people would call meditation. Disciplines like Tai Chi, Yoga, and Buddhist meditation practices have proven to be helpful for those seeking a deeper connection with the Divine.

Paul claims that the purpose of prayer is not to let God know what we need or want (Romans 8:26). The purpose of prayer is to intentionally be in God’s presence, to live lavishly in a relationship that Philosopher-Theologian Martin Buber called an “I-Thou” relationship. “I-Thou” relationships do not objectify other people (or the Divine) into “I-it” connections to be used for one’s own selfish purposes. An “I-Thou” attitude acknowledges that where we are most clearly going to meet God is in the dynamic of relationships with other people. Maybe it’s in a relationship that has been strained or broken. In even a brief shimmer of possible reconciliation, the awareness of the mystery of grace can be intoxicating. What is that other than the Holy?

To transform God's image from some sort of list-checking, gift-giving Santa Claus for adults is a tall order – and part of the change will come in redefining the purpose and practice of prayer. Prayer is not magic. Praying harder is not going to get you what you want or even what you think would be good for the world. Much of prayer's real power is in changing us. When we are changed, we may be able to see things in a new way or find the strength to live faithfully with what we cannot change.

When Paul tells the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), he's not advocating that they constantly pray for more stuff. Nor are they to pray to change the “mind” and the behavior of a controlling “theistic” deity. Instead, they and we are to seek an attitude toward life in which prayer is seamlessly integrated into our very being, where we can give thanks no matter what happens.

Like any pursuit of intimacy, prayer is intensely personal. In all its many forms, prayer defies analysis and superficial systems for implementation and success. Sometimes reduced to rummaging around for whatever gets us through the day, prayer is a life-long courtship – testimony to humanity's striving toward a relationship with that unknowable yet inescapable sense of “the more.”

*Pray as if everything depended on God,  
Live as if everything depended on you.*

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

How did Spong's experience with Cornelia start to change his understanding of prayer?

How does Process Thought “make sense” of petitionary or intercessory prayer?

How might the idea of prayer as “letting God loose in the world” be helpful? Unhelpful?

**DVD Chapter 3:**

What place do words have when trying to “authentically listen” or achieve the silence of “deep knowing?”

Describe how patience and humor enhance Hauerwas’ understanding of prayer.

Spong relates a story regarding prayer for his wife. What stands out for you in this story?

How does the idea of prayer being legitimately different for people and changing over time resonate with your experience?

## **SPIRITPRACTICE:**

### **Singing** (with John Bell)

“What we sing shapes our faith: do we sing about God’s creation, the equality of men and women, about God’s love for justice, about our concern for other people, or do we just sing about me? Ultimately, what we sing repeatedly shapes our belief, our discipleship, and our faith.”

“Know that God is good” (Mungu ni mwema) from Psalm 100 is available from Wild Goose publications in the song book: *One Is the Body: Songs of Unity & Diversity* by John L. Bell (see [www.ionabooks.com/bookshop](http://www.ionabooks.com/bookshop)) ISBN#: 1901557359.

### **Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

### **Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

### **“Yah-weh” breathing exercise**

The common name for God in much of Hebrew scripture is represented in English as “Yahweh,” derived from the four Hebrew letters, YHWH. It has been suggested that this name may have primal origins in the sound of one’s breathing. When breathing in, the natural sound of the breath is similar to “Yah.” When breathing out it sounds like “weh.” Rabbi Arthur Waskow suggests:

*“Try pronouncing those letters (YHWH) with no vowels between, not “Yahweh,” just “Yyyyyhhhhwwwwhhhh,” so that it becomes just a rough-breathing. God as the Breath of Life...what we breathe in is what the trees breathe out, what the trees breathe in is what we breathe out. The Name that exists in all languages, all species.”*

— [www.shalomctr.org](http://www.shalomctr.org)

Sit quietly in a comfortable position. With eyes closed quietly listen to your breathing and the sound that is made by breathing through your mouth. In a practical expression of centering and prayer, the ancient name of God and the idea of the Divine becomes integrated with your breath and life.

*“So in prayer we address God not as King (Melech ha-Olam), but as “Breath of Life, Ruach ha-Olam.”*

— [www.shalomctr.org](http://www.shalomctr.org)

I learned a tremendous amount about prayer when our house was full of children and company, even though I was only mildly aware at the time. Two of those prayer practices occurred while cooking or doing laundry.

When I prepared pasta or rice for a family meal or family plus invited guests, I used my hand for the measuring device. Over time, I came to know approximately how many scoops each person might eat; then, perhaps with a heart hopeful for Elijah's visit or just knowing that company was frequently a possibility, I added two or three more handfuls. I prayed for each person, known and unknown, as I measured his or her portion and added it to the pot.

Laundry resurfaced almost as often as the need to cook. For a time, my attitude was not one of gratitude, but somehow that changed. I began to pray for each member of the family as I folded or hung his or her undies or shirts. I prayed for the people who would use or might use the towels as those rectangular pieces of terrycloth were folded one more time.

I am not certain exactly what effect my prayers had upon the persons for whom I prayed, but I know that over time, those prayers made me more grateful for family, company and home. I know that those times of prayer made me more mindful of people in my life and formed my heart to be more loving. In time, I learned that it was not the pasta or towels that were the crucial vehicles, but it was praying with the daily routines and chores of my life that mattered. They were steps along the continued journey of praying with my life and opening to a deeper relationship with God.

### **Invitations for prayer this month:**

1) Consider activities in your life where conversation or computation is not necessary. It may be in your home, or at a copy machine, or on your morning walk. Give thanks to God for the loved ones and guests in your life. Ask that your heart be formed into a more loving and patient sanctuary for each of them.

During these prayer times, you might try addressing God with a name different than you normally use for the Holy One.

2) Search a current newspaper or news magazine and find two articles about issues that are troubling to you. Choose one article about a local issue and one about a global issue.

Cut out the two articles and secure them in an area where you will see them often or near where you can carve out time for prayer.

Each day for the next month, when praying with this news, pray only these two questions:

God of love, what would you have me learn?

Merciful God, how can I offer your compassion?

You might close each time of prayer with singing “Spirit of the Living God” by Daniel Iverson.

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

*Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.*

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

Spirit Of The Living God, written by Daniel Iverson © 1935, Renewed 1963 BIRDWING MUSIC (admin. by EMI CHRISTIAN MUSIC PUBLISHING c/o: MUSIC SERVICES). All Rights Reserved. Used By Permission.

– Cynthia Langston Kirk

## 19. COMPASSION: THE HEART OF JESUS' MINISTRY

**Focus:** Jesus was not primarily a teacher of correct beliefs or right morals. He was a teacher of a way that transforms people from legalistic rule-followers into compassionate disciples who put people first.

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### COMPASSION ABOVE ALL THINGS

Considering the witness of the gospels, you wouldn't be thought strange to claim that the essence of Jesus' ministry might be distilled down into one word: *compassion*. The three synoptic gospels record Jesus identifying the most important commandment – and he was not the only one in his time to quote Deuteronomy in lifting up the priorities of loving “God with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Jesus made it clear throughout his ministry that the standard of behavior he expected of his followers was not only love of neighbor, but love of outcasts and enemies, as well – genuine love, acted upon even at a cost and risk to oneself.

To understand Jesus' commitment to the practice of compassion, it helps to know a little about the world into which he was born. Roman annexation of Palestine in 63 B.C.E. created an unsettling mix of religious, political, and economic conflict. With the Roman presence affecting almost every aspect of life, the task of remaining a faithful Jew became increasingly challenging. The response of some Jews in Jesus' time was to commit themselves to the Torah's holiness code and submit to God's mandate to “...be holy as I the Lord your God am holy.” (*Leviticus 19.2*)

Unfortunately, the concept of holiness carried with it the notion of achievable perfection. As a result, this particular group of Jews emphasized the portions of the Law that stressed separateness. Jewish life was polarized into clean and unclean, pure and defiling, sacred and profane. People, too, were divided into categories of clean or unclean, righteous or sinner.

Jewish movements like the Essenes, copyists and creators of the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” are thought to be an extreme example of this philosophy. They formed an isolated, monastic-like community in the desert, completely separating themselves from others. Perhaps most familiar to readers of the New Testament as practitioners of the holiness code were the Pharisees. Although they are represented as his main opposition in the Gospels, Jesus identified with the

Pharisees more than with the Sadducees. While the Sadducees were the literalist Priests bound to the temple, the Pharisees were out in the countryside doing their best to make Judaism “doable” for the people of the land. Jesus, however, pushed beyond even their comfort level in making Jewish practice and principles accessible. The stress on adherence to purity laws and refusing table fellowship with sinners by some Pharisees evidently created a large group of outcasts and set the stage for the Gospel writers to portray them as Jesus’ villainous opposition.

Into what was a rigid, legalistic environment for many stepped Jesus, flying in the face of the Pharisees’ prime directive: separation from anything unclean. Although Jesus identified with the Pharisees who were trying to humanize the law, he still parted company with them on their interpretation of holiness and their strict adherence to separation. Jesus’ “M.O.” was healing on the Sabbath and dining with sinners and outcasts. He invited his disciples to look beyond the conventional attitudes of his day and see how the way we treat one another is more important than the way we adhere to a set of rigid rules.

Far from ignoring the law or possessing a “lack of moral standards,” such behavior would include giving up things like oppression, exploitation, coercion, and greed – not to mention the tyranny of having to believe what is “correct.” By putting behavior ahead of belief in a hierarchy of values, Jesus’ disciples are held to a standard that transcends the rules. Followers of Jesus are duty-bound to treat their fellow human beings with kindness, respect, and mercy – no matter the circumstance. Our actions of love are more important than the expression of our beliefs or keeping of the law.

Although the Gospel of John is clearly not a literal recounting of Jesus’ life, the emphasis of John’s interpretation offers us a picture of discipleship that centers around experience of God, not information about God. It’s not about faith (the word doesn’t even appear in the book) or right beliefs, but about “knowing” God. Throughout Hebrew scripture, to “know” God is to have an intimate experience of the Divine. Adam “knew” his wife and she conceived. Likewise, from John’s perspective, to know God is to enter into intimacy with God.

Similarly, our word “compassion” comes from the Latin and literally means “to bear or feel the suffering” of another – not just intellectually, but viscerally. Language scholars point out that the Hebrew and Aramaic root word for compassion (*racham*) is a plural form of the singular noun “womb.” From the singular noun “womb” you move to the plural “compassion.” Jesus makes the abstract notion of a plural womb concrete by modeling and teaching the nourishing, life-giving, all-embracing practice of compassion above all things. If laws, rules or customs get in the way of acting with compassion, then away with them.

## NOT GUILTY BY REASON OF COMPASSION

On a certain Sabbath Jesus and his disciples were hungry. Since they happened to be passing through grain fields at the time, they plucked some heads of grain to eat along the way. Evidently, some Pharisees saw this and accused them of breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12). Although work on the Sabbath was strictly prohibited by the holiness code, Jesus appealed to a familiar story in Jewish history, illustrating how even David did what was unlawful when he and his companions were hungry (1 Samuel 21). “You just don’t get it, do you?” Jesus continued. “God wants compassion, (*e/eos* in Greek), not sacrifice. If you understood that you wouldn’t be condemning the guiltless.”

Jesus continued on his way and came to a synagogue. The Pharisees followed him inside where the text says there was a man with a deformed hand. The cynical have suggested that the Pharisees brought the hapless man with them in yet another effort to catch Jesus out. When the Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal the man on the Sabbath, Jesus replied, “What if one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; wouldn’t you lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep? Of course it’s lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

Jesus’ subsequent healing of the man on the Sabbath was another example of his transcending the holiness code with a higher law, the law of compassion. In effect, Jesus said to the self-righteous religious busybodies, “You can take your holiness codes, your strict observance of the law, your sense of righteousness and you can, well, you know what you can do with them!”

Although the Pharisees were quick to pronounce Jesus’ guilt, a jury of Jesus’ peers would likely have rendered a different verdict: “not guilty by reason of compassion.” The point of the law is not the law, but people. The law is a human attempt to express an orderliness in life – without which human life in community would be impossible. If the rules get in the way of a single healing, life-giving, compassionate act, they’re not to be followed.

Does that mean you’re only being compassionate if you’re breaking some law or code? No, but it does mean wrestling with what’s really important in life – and to know that putting people first is not without cost. Jesus’ overturning of the tables in the temple was a passionate criticism of the Sadducees’ legalistic temple operations. That along with his regular flaunting of the holiness codes were in no small part a contributing factor in his eventual arrest and execution.

## THE FIRST SIGN OF CIVILIZATION

Jesus called the disciples to see beyond the conventional attitudes of his day that they might “be compassionate as God in heaven is compassionate.” (Luke 6:36) He was not primarily a teacher of either correct beliefs or right morals but of

authentic human relationships. Instead, Jesus demonstrated a way or path that lead to the transformation of those whom he encountered.

Compassion is the way of transformation – for both the one suffering and for the oppressor. To be compassionate is to recognize our utter interdependence in God’s world and to see another person, be they stranger or outcast, as sister or brother.

*“Every time you meet another human being you have the opportunity. It’s a chance at [compassion.] For you will do one of two things, then. Either you will build them up, or you will tear them down. Either you will acknowledge that they are, or you will make him sorry that they are — sorry, at least, that they are there, in front of you. You will create, or you will destroy. And the things you dignify or deny are God’s own property. They are made, each one of them, in God’s own image. Turn your face truly to the human before you and let her, for one pure moment, shine. Think her important, and then she will suspect that she is fashioned of God.”*

– Walter Wangerin, Jr.

*Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1984) pp. 129-130.

Perhaps voicing Ezekiel’s sentiment: “O God, give us hearts of flesh to replace our hearts of stone” (Ezekiel 36:26) is an apt reminder to go beyond being open *even* to those who seem unlovable to being open *especially* to those who seem unlovable, needful, or who are excluded for whatever reason.

A student of anthropologist Margaret Mead once asked her to describe the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. The young student expected the noted student of cultures to say that clay pots or crude axes or grinding stones were the first clues of civilization. Dr. Mead’s answer was “a healed femur,” the human thighbone. She went on to explain that a healed femur indicated that someone cared. Someone had to do the injured person’s hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

## CHANGED IN AN INSTANT

The Bible is mostly suspicious of people with resources and power – because the tendency is that once one has wealth and power, it’s easy to forget and become insulated from people who are in need.

*Albert Schweitzer said, “Concern for people is the beginning of hope.” And when I find somebody hopeless I conclude that they are not very much concerned about anybody. Isn’t it funny that the great harbingers of hope in our time have been the Teresas, and the Kings, and the Romeros, and the Gandhis? Good heavens of all the people who had a right to*

*resign from hope, maybe Schweitzer was right, "Concern for other people is the beginning of hope."*

– Harrell Beck in an unpublished sermon, *The Joys of Liberation Preaching*

Stephen Covey, author of the best seller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, relates an encounter on a subway in New York one morning. People were sitting quietly, reading newspapers, lost in thought, or resting with their eyes closed. At the next station, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed. The man sat down next to Covey and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people's papers. It was very disturbing – and yet the man next to Covey did nothing. It was difficult not to feel irritated. How could this man be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all? It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too.

Finally, with as much patience and restraint as he could muster, Covey turned to the man and said, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a little more?" The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, "Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either." Covey was stunned.

*"Can you image how I felt at that moment?" he asks. His understanding shifted. He relates, "Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently. My irritation vanished. My heart was filled with the man's pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely." "Your wife just died? I'm so sorry. Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?" Everything changed in an instant.*

– adapted from Stephen Covey

*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, (Fireside, NY: 1989) p.30-31

All of this is about the virtue that Marcus Borg says is the acid test for our faith – the virtue of compassion. The way of Christ – the way of compassion – is creative, healing, and life-giving. To be compassionate is to recognize our utter interdependence in God's world. As T.S. Elliot put it,

*"There is always something we're ignorant of about another person. And often it turns out that the one thing we're ignorant of about another person was the most important."*

To see another person, even a stranger, as a sister or brother, is the beginning of compassion and the embracing of what Jesus preached and practiced as the primary quality of a life centered in God.

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

Prejean talks about the compassion of Jesus and being touched by the story of Jesus and the leper. Is there a story of Jesus' compassion that has made a lasting impression on you?

What does the story of the woman with the flow of blood and the power "going out of" Jesus say about our call to compassion?

How would you describe the call to compassion as a "Summons?"

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

According to Jesus' message to John the Baptist, what are some of the practical expressions of compassion being practiced?

McClaren discusses broader meaning behind Jesus' miracles. Can you think of other examples?

Jesus a law-breaker?! Explain.

What does the story of the woman with the flow of blood say about Jesus' opinion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish purity laws?

Spong says that, according to Jesus, the Sabbath was created for a particular purpose. Explain.

#### **DVD Chapter 4:**

What is the secret name of God?

When Brueggemann says, "When that kind of body and that kind of presence walks into pain, it has transformative power," what are the implications for us?

Compare the two kinds of compassion that Carcaño describes.

What are some of the ways in which a society is put together that might "profoundly affect the lives of people?"

How might Jesus' "Family Values" be an expression of compassion?

#### **DVD Chapter 5:**

How does compassion "evolve?"

# SPIRITPRACTICE:

“Workteams” with Dr. Marcus Borg and Habitat for Humanity

## Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

## Consider the following questions as a group:

*What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?*

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Make the John Bell song “The Summons” part of your devotional and worship repertoire:

1. Will you come and follow me  
If I but call your name?  
Will you go where you don't know  
And never be the same?  
Will you let my love be shown,  
Will you let my name be known,  
Will you let my life be grown In you  
and you in me?

2. Will you leave yourself behind  
If I but call your name?  
Will you care for cruel and kind  
And never be the same?  
Will you risk the hostile stare  
Should your life attract or scare?  
Will you let me answer prayer In you  
and you in me?

3. Will you let the blinded see  
If I but call your name?  
Will you set the pris'ners free  
And never be the same?  
Will you kiss the leper clean,  
And do such as this unseen,  
And admit to what I mean In you  
and you in me?

4. Will you love the 'you' you hide  
If I but call your name?  
Will you quell the fear inside  
And never be the same?  
Will you use the faith you've found  
To reshape the world around,  
Through my sight and touch and sound In you  
and you in me?

5. Lord, your summons echoes true  
When you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you  
And never be the same.  
In your company I'll go  
Where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I'll move and live and grow In you  
and you in me.

Lyrics by John Bell and Graham Moule, © 1987, The Iona Community. All rights reserved. Used with permission of GIA Publications, Inc., exclusive North American agent. Words and music are available from the Wild Goose Resource Group (<http://www.iona.org.uk>) and is #2130 in the United Methodist hymnal supplement, "The Faith We Sing" ([www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com)) It can be heard on Barb Catlin's CD, "The Summons," available at [www.livingthequestions.com](http://www.livingthequestions.com).

### Jesus: Holy Compassion

Cumulus lover of all souls  
Moved by agony's mountain  
And those who live in the valley of despair.

Cloudlike drifter, grief stricken at a friend's tomb  
Tear puddle in ancient sand.

Mindful of hidden potential, long concealed by choices and isolation,  
Showering living water upon a life-parched woman.

Mist of restoration and hope  
Even through the crowd's fear-induced fog,  
Connecting with a woman's faith filled touch.

Weeping, raising wing formations over Jerusalem  
Inviting fledglings to find their home.

Sprinkling mercy on thieves, cowards, the hard-hearted,  
And those who execute an Empire agenda.

Bursting with care and prodding over Beth-zatha  
Spraying a man poolside with healing invitation.

Sweet Jesus, rain on me  
Drench my soul with your heart of compassion.

### For Your Spiritual Journal:

Spend time with one or more of the following questions:

If and when during any suffering, have you been willing to share your authentic emotions, even to the point of crying?

When have you looked past a person's outward persona and seen the potential within them? How did you offer living water and how did they respond?

When have you given tremendous power and energy – even sacrificially – to another person or group of people?

Whose situations around the world move you not only to lament, but also to seek ways of providing protection and nurture?

In what circumstance have you been able to forgive a person who wronged you or someone you love?

In what instances would you choose working for the sake of healing, liberation, and reconciliation, even if your actions seemed in opposition to the letter of the spiritual law or in opposition of your church doctrine?

(The scripture passages alluded to in the poem are: John 11:1-44, John 4:1-42; Matthew 9:18-26; Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 23:13-48; John 5:1-18)

### **Breath Prayer**

A breath prayer is a short prayer that can form a person and their actions. Often one phrase is said (silently and slowly) during inhalation. The second phrase is said (silently and slowly) during exhalation.

*God of Love  
Fill me with compassion*

*Living Bread  
Teach me to share*

*Prince of Peace  
Help me live your shalom*

Choose one breath prayer and pray it for a month. You can practice it at stoplights, in a check out line, at the doctor's office, in the early morning stillness or at the copy machine at work. Pray it at least three times a day for one minute each time. Increase the length to five minutes and the number of times per day as you feel inspired to do.

Do not be surprised if your breath prayer begins to come to you. You may find yourself beginning to pray it in between your scheduled times.

– Cynthia Langston Kirk

## 20. CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

**Focus:** The essence of human nature is to take part in the dynamic and imaginative process of creation; transforming us, our relationships, our institutions, and our world.

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### R.I.P. JESUS

*“No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that caused it.”*

– Albert Einstein

Creativity and innovation are valued and sought after qualities in virtually every human endeavor – except religion. In many faith traditions, it is tradition itself that is worshipped, held up as the whole purpose of the religious enterprise. Be it infatuation with “smells and bells” or resistance to the use of inclusive language, many faithful people have confused defense of their understanding of right practice and right thinking with what they call “faith.” They insulate themselves from the unpredictable, demanding, transforming nature of the Spirit with a fierce, pious, unbending commitment to the Church. They practice what Fr. Richard Rohr has called a “cosmetic piety” intended to look good on the surface, but lacking any real depth or complexity. Defense of the changeless nature of their revealed “truth” becomes a virtue to be aspired to, regardless of how lifeless and rote the practice itself becomes.

*“We’d rather have a controlled dead God than a lively chaotic God – we have a funeral for Jesus every Sunday.”*

– Yvette Flunder

*“OutFront Arizona: Blessing All Our Families” Conference, Phoenix, 2007*

To say that the purpose of many churches is the maintenance of the institution is perhaps too noble a sentiment. Many churches have more in common with hospice units, clergy more in common with chaplains, than outposts and practitioners of the Kingdom of God. It’s not just comforting the human patients as they all slowly die off. It is clinging to the threadbare and dying theologies of the past that is at issue. The message itself is on life-support. Some are convinced that if we only preached the “true Gospel” with more vigor, there would be a great revival. Others have warped the message into an individualistic prosperity-oriented, victory-focused, self-help Kool-Aid. Many have found success by dressing up the message with catchy music, engaging videos, and light-hearted messages. But what needs creativity – what needs to be transformed – is not just the medium, but also the core message.

A rapidly growing segment of the population is not involved in organized religion of any sort – and they are *not* just waiting to be invited to attend. According to Christian pollster George Barna, they are “passionately disinterested” in the church. Add to that the growing media presence of vocal and articulate atheists, and the prospects for Christianity as we know it are looking grim. People are simply no longer moved by the notion that they are horrible sinners from birth, redeemed only by the sacrifice of an impossibly perfect man at the hands of a bloodthirsty, tribal God. People no longer see the church as the sole keeper of what has been called “salvation.” Seekers of spiritual integrity and members of what Jack Spong calls the “Church Alumni/ae Association” are finding their own creative ways to fulfill the deepest longings of their souls – free from the perceived (and often very real) hypocrisy of the Church.

## DATING THE DATING SERVICE

*“The great tragedy of our age is the fact that (if one dares to say it) there are so many godless Christians. Christians, that is, whose religion is a matter of pure conformity and expediency. Their “faith” is little more than a permanent evasion of reality; a compromise with their deepest life in order to avoid admitting the uncomfortable truth that they no longer have any real need for God or any real vital love for God. They conform to the outward conduct of others just like themselves, and they call this the Church. And these “believers” cling together offering one another an apparent justification for their lives that are essentially the same as their materialistic neighbors whose horizons are purely those of the world and its transient values.”*

–Trappist Monk Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread* (1956)

For many in our fast-paced, uncertain world, experiencing a sense of belonging and acceptance is the primary benefit of a faith community. Meaning, too, is often a motivating factor – as is forgiveness, healing, or the arrival of young adults’ first children. In this era of “church shopping,” many a church is rejected before the browsing spiritual consumers discover one that supports their beliefs and perpetuates their preferences and prejudices most closely.

For the majority of Western Christians, a close second to the priority of acceptance is that of community. As social beings, people long for community and fellowship along life’s journey. More often than not, as Merton asserts, community is used by many as insulation from the real world or any potential encounters with the Divine in favor of the ease of conformation and the justification of one’s comfortable lifestyle.

*“Belonging systems do not necessarily lead to transformation and in fact, they often become an inoculation against transformation – or a total substitute for it. Just the fact that I am accepted or “belong” according to*

*the church rules, I can assume that I know God or have met God. I think we've confused the dating service with the date."*

– Richard Rohr lecture,  
*Authentic Religion: Membership or Transformation?* Anaheim, 2001

In the short-term, simply “belonging” often fulfills the need for which people are yearning. Otherwise thoughtful people tolerate remarkably bad theology and shallow spirituality because the belonging system itself is perceived as having more value than what the belonging system stands for or practices. People keep paying their dues to the dating service that not only doesn't connect them with their true love, but actively works against revealing just how much love and grace is available to them. Women serve faithfully in churches that deny their authority to be in leadership. Parents of Gays and Lesbians silently tolerate hate speech from the pulpit that condemns their children. Progressively minded individuals endure clichéd prayers and liturgies that shore up spiritual ideas they have long-since abandoned. While the criteria for choosing a faith community rarely include “a catalyst for personal and societal transformation,” such criteria are precisely what are needed. Individuals, faith communities, relationships, dogmas, doctrines, conventional wisdom – the world itself – are all in need of transformation.

## METAMORPHOSIS

*“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

– Paul, *Romans 12:2*

When Paul appeals to Christians in Rome to resist conformation with the world, he challenges them to first renew their minds. In so doing they will be so changed that they will be virtually unrecognizable. Paul uses the Greek word from which we also get the word “metamorphosis,” a term more likely found in science books referring to caterpillars and butterflies, tadpoles and frogs. Yet for many in our culture, the idea of transformation has been wed to simplistic ideas of being “born again” or being “saved.”

The Greek text of John 3 has Jesus say that you have to be born “from above” (*anōthen* in Greek), implying a journey, a process, or a Way of life. When Jesus informs Nicodemus of this requirement, the literalist Nicodemus balks and asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” In order to have Nicodemus' response make sense to readers, well-intentioned translators changed the Greek word attributed to Jesus that means “from above” into the English word “again.” In so doing, the idea of being “born again” entered the Christian lexicon, suggesting that what Jesus was looking for was a one-time event rather than a life-long relationship with the Spirit of Life. As important a concept as “born again” has become, it not only isn't in the text, it likely misrepresents the original intention of the storyteller.

Likewise, the requirement of being “saved,” as it has come to be understood, is, at best, dubious. In light of studies of the origins of Christianity, theologians are rethinking the narrowness of the “savior” language popular among Christians today. The Greek word from which “save” comes is also the root of words meaning to heal, preserve, do well, or be made whole. According to gospels that have been discovered in only the last century, a number of early Christian communities thrived without “savior” language at all. The communities associated with the Gospel of Thomas and “Q” (from which Matthew and Luke get many of their stories) don’t even have crucifixion and resurrection stories. The doctrinal “savior” language was really only brought to flower in the fourth century creeds.

Both being “born again” and being “saved” suggest static achievements. But the first disciples were called the people on “the Way,” suggesting just the opposite: transformation, transition, and change – a dynamic way of life. By understanding the broader definitions of what these concepts can mean, we open ourselves to deeper understandings of life and the possibility of metamorphosis.

*“Yesterday’s faith and discipleship seem to have become threadbare and impotent. There is an urgent need for a fresh infusion of faith, new visions of redemptive grace, and conceptions of discipleship equal to the deep needs confronting us.”*

– Lloyd M. Conyers, *The Relevance of Revelation*

## RE-EXPERIENCING REALITY

Transformative spirituality is about the positive transformation of our lives, our relationships, and our way of being in the world. With life always moving and recreating itself around us, our need to handle change is unavoidable. Despite our efforts to limit unpleasant upheavals, the normalcy of life prevails. When people are wrenched out of the relationships or situations with which they’ve grown comfortable, people often wonder if they will be up to the task of putting their world back together again. Robert McAfee Brown calls these times moments of “creative dislocation.” He writes how, in retrospect, the times with the most significant growth in his life were times of great upheaval, or creative dislocation. The very brokenness can transform us to be more than we ever thought we could be.

*“Transformative spirituality, authentic spirituality, is revolutionary. It does not legitimate the world, it breaks the world; it does not console the world, it shatters it. And it does not render the self content, it renders it undone.”*

– Ken Wilbur, *One Taste* pg. 28

For most people, it’s only when they’ve been “undone” that there is an opportunity for the mystery of grace to work its magic. Jesus was gifted at “undoing” people in order to transform their lives and their thinking. His use of parables leveraged his own experience of the presence of the Divine in such a way that it caused the hearers to creatively experience a new reality. Bernard

Brandon Scott has said, “A parable is meant to allow you to imaginatively re-experience reality.” The story transports the hearer to a place of exposure to a previously unimagined alternative view of life.

Jesus’ creative use of parables to bring people to moments of disequilibrium is not a unique teaching method. Be it Nathan exposing King David’s murder of Uriah in 2 Samuel or the Koans of Zen Masters, story has been employed from time immemorial to transform people’s self-perception, thoughts, and actions.

Music, dance, poetry, and the visual arts are likewise creative channels of transformation. Hildegard of Bingen declared that “Wisdom is found in all creative works” – and she hadn’t even heard Mahler’s 2<sup>nd</sup> *Symphony* or John Coltrane playing *Naima!* Today, film has become perhaps the most profound medium ever available to storytellers. As modern-day parables, movies help us delve deep into the most stirring, disturbing, and inspiring aspects of life.

*“Movies and television shows are our modern myths; through them we work out who we are and negotiate the problems of modern life.”*

– Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams & Biblical Stories*

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat speak of “Befriending” films and suggest the viewing of movies as part of one’s spiritual practice. The moment when the lights go down can be a “sacred interlude” of preparation. Being fully attentive to what is on the screen can offer an experience of “mindfulness.” Along with a number of other practical suggestions, the Brussats urge moviegoers to:

*“Explore the mythical overtones of drama that transcend the confines of our personal worlds and introduce us to the universality of human experience. Think of the film as a passport that gives you access to other cultures. Celebrate stories that take you to new places and break down the walls that all too often separate us from other peoples.”*

– Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat  
[www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films)

## CHANGED AND TRANSFORMED

*“... the Christian life is not primarily about believing the right things or even being good. The Christian life is about being in relationship with God which transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, ‘into the likeness of Christ.’”*

– Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

As people expend their energies arguing over the vicissitudes of “conservative” or “liberal” principles, the spirituality many are seeking is not to the left or to the right, but deeper. Christianity is not about things we should or shouldn’t do and about just being nice. It is about reveling in the beauty of creation – about taking

part in the wonderment of it all by living, loving, and “being” fully. It’s about embracing the pain and suffering of the world and transforming it into new life. It’s about harnessing the creative Spirit that is so much a part of defining what it means to be human – and using that creativity to “preserve things in the good.” (Aquinas) The path toward transformation is different for every traveler, but the need for transformation is an integral part of the human experience. In the words of that great theologian, Bob Dylan, "If you’re not busy being born, you’re busy dying."

As we pursue the growth we’re called to seek in order to reach our full potential, it may be helpful to remember what Taoism teaches its adherents: so long as bamboo is alive and growing it is pliable and flexible. Once it dies, however, it becomes brittle and is easily snapped. Creativity and transformation are principles that stave off our tendency to become hard and brittle, and open us instead to the transformative power of God’s unconditional love and grace.

*“O God, make me discontented with things the way they are in the world,  
and in my own life.*

*Make me notice the stains when people get spilled on.*

*Make me care about the slum child downtown, the misfit at work,  
the people crammed into the mental hospital,  
the men, women and youth behind bars.*

*Jar my complacency, expose my excuses,  
get me involved in the life of my city and world.*

*Give me integrity once more, O God,*

*as we seek to be changed and transformed,  
with a new understanding and awareness of our common humanity.”*

– Robert Raines, *Creative Brooding*

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

Name some of the ways creative works and creativity itself are tied to Wisdom.

How does our identity as “creative bipeds” lead to our propensity for evil?

**DVD Chapter 3:**

McKenna describes how storytelling is not for the conveying of information, for confirmation of what you know, or comfort in what you believe, but for “unlearning” and transformation. Explain.

According to Brueggemann, why is “You don’t get it, do you?” one of the saddest lines of scripture?

Why is determining what is “so important that we are willing to give up everything” so critical for understanding the message of Jesus?

**DVD Chapter 4:**

For John Bell, there are “no reserved areas” in his following Jesus. Explain.

Why are the true marks of discipleship best understood as being whole, real, loving, and inclusive?

Meyers talks about grace, giving an example of “the beginning of the redemption of the human race.” In addition to grace, what other virtues can lead to redemption and transformation?

According to Carcaño, what are some of the goals to be achieved in transforming the world?

## **SPIRITPRACTICE:**

“Art as Meditation” with potter Roger Strom

### **Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

### **Consider the following questions as a group:**

*What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?*

**Ponder one or both of the following:**

Revisit the affirmation of faith that you wrote the third week of *Living the Questions*. If there is anything you would like to express differently, please rewrite that portion. How does this new affirmation (or reaffirmed affirmation) reflect growth or transformation for you? How does it reflect growth and change in your worldview?

How, if any, has your understanding of “loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and loving your neighbor as yourself” changed?

**For Response:**

*Read all the section below; then answer the questions.*

How has your life experienced transformation during your participation in *Living the Questions*?

What is one faith question with which you now live?

**Watercolor your response to these questions.**

Use watercolor paper or whatever paper you have on hand. You may use artists' watercolors and brushes or something as simple as a child's watercolor set.

This painting is not intended for a gallery or a teacher's critique. This is simply considering, in part, a question of faith in a different manner.

Prepare an area for painting, including paper, watercolors, brushes, cup(s) of water, rags, salt (for great effect when sprinkled on wet paint).

When you have everything set, sit near the table and spend time in prayer and meditation. Spend time remembering, being grateful, and asking for openness.

You may use the following prayer or you own followed by a time of silence for listening.

**Prayer**

*O God, so much has transpired since we began this part of our faith journey – your loved fleshed out, spiritual friends developed, and more questions emerged. In the quiet times, we have known your teaching and felt your nudging. In the questions, we have grown to realize the certainty of your love. In the midst of service, we have been the ones blessed. You've touched our hearts, O God, and we are grateful. Continue to transform our hearts that we might help transform the world by your love. We pray, grateful for the invitation to travel with you. Amen.*

Prayerfully, begin to paint.

– Cynthia Langston Kirk

# 21. EMBRACING MYSTERY



## FOCUS:

Christian practice is being re-visioned, re-tooled, and re-claimed by those who are living the questions of their faith. They're attentive to ancient ways, comfortable with ambiguity, and open to the unknowable and indescribable mystery of the Divine.

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## MYSTERY

*"We may find a certain security in believing that 'our' way is the only way. This is a natural part of any cultic religious experience. Far greater faith is required, however, to seek and trust that which you accept as infinite, beyond your comprehension, and subject to change. Today, this just may be the challenge of an educated and thinking Christian — to retain a faith "in face of the mystery."*

— Gordon D. Kaufman,  
Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard Divinity School

Many seekers today are discovering ancient spiritual insights for the first time – not through blind faith and certitude, but through a commitment to openness and flexibility. Those who leave room for spiritual uncertainty discover what mystics have always known: that ambiguity is not something to be feared but recognized as an integral part of any spirituality that continues to develop and evolve. To acknowledge the wisdom of the unknowable. To celebrate the importance of the experiential. These are at the heart of the long-established spiritual practice re-emerging in our day: that of embracing mystery.

The idea of mystery itself refers to that which is unexplainable or beyond comprehension. Its Greek root implies the closing of eyes and lips, suggesting that which is beyond our ability to see or even comprehend. Antiquity is rife with "mystery cults" and other rites, the meaning of which was known only to the initiated. Even in the early Christian movement, there were carefully guarded teachings referred to as "the mysteries."

Rudolph Otto is just one in a long line of thinkers who have tried to categorize the non-rational reaction experienced by those who are "awestruck" or full of wonder. When he published *The Idea of the Holy*, he described the source of that indescribable and awe-inspiring sacredness with the Latin words "*numen*" and "*numinous*" (literally meaning divine power or spirit). Otto's intent was to offer vocabulary that suggests that "presence" which is just beyond our ability to grasp or describe. But his efforts to describe the indescribable come up against the same challenge of anyone trying to quantify or categorize mystery: that the truly

holy is not something grasped in the intellectual realm, but firmly rooted in the experiential.

Ironically, while mystery has always been the source and core of what we call “religion,” those who fully embrace mystery are usually relegated to the fringes of religious systems. For the sake of institutional stability and corporate identity, right belief and certainty have been emphasized instead.

*“Religion has always been about honoring mystery. [But] we have created people who’ve been afraid of ambiguity, mystery.”*

–Fr. Richard Rohr lecture “The Edge of Christianity” September 13, 2007

People have been programmed to be suspicious of ambiguity and are, in fact, expected to adopt pre-determined belief systems – never mind the stifling spiritual effects it has on adherents.

*“When you think about it, faith as belief is relatively impotent. You can believe all the right things and still be a jerk. And to soften that: you can believe all the right things and still be miserable, or still be in bondage, still be untransformed. So the emphasis upon belief is, I think, modern and mistaken. It’s also very divisive – once people start thinking that being a Christian is about believing the right things, then anybody’s list of what the right things are to believe becomes a kind of litmus test as to who’s really a good Christian and who’s not. And in my own work (and I think this is very ancient) I emphasize that being a Christian is really about one’s relationship with God. And that relationship with God can go along with many different belief systems.”*

– Marcus Borg, in Living the Questions’, *Saving Jesus*

Whatever comes next for Christianity, it will have to teach people “how” to believe and live and not dwell simply on “what” to believe. Travelers with mystery will be grounded in the experiential that grows out of the seeker’s sense of inner authority. In the same way music, art, drama, and poetry defy any one interpretation, those who embrace mystery will bring to the table a variety of interpretations of the Divine. Concrete operational thinkers will find this line of pursuit maddeningly counter-productive, yet it is the disequilibrium created – the very indescribability of these insights – that give them their value. Poetry will often leave people open to mystery, each in their own way. The spirit fills in the rest.

## MYSTICS AMONG US

*“I am being driven forward  
Into an unknown land.  
The pass grows steeper,  
The air colder and sharper.  
A wind from my unknown goal*

*Stirs the strings  
Of expectation.*

*But still the question:  
Shall I ever get there?  
There where life resounds  
A clear pure note  
In the silence.”*

– Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*

He concealed it for over thirty years. The United Nations General-Secretary was a modern Mystic. Only after Dag Hammarskjöld was killed did it become widely known that his remarkable strength of will and passion for peace was driven by a closely guarded spiritual struggle and intense inner life. In his desk, friends discovered the manuscript of his journal and what was to become the spiritual classic, *Markings*.

Mystics can be found in every faith tradition – and no tradition at all. Christianity claims a number of the giants of mysticism over the centuries, including Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Merton, and Howard Thurman. But regardless of faith traditions or even cultural circumstances, mystics endeavor to experience the Divine in as direct a manner as possible. One of the common characteristics of a mystic is one who transcends any cultic or superficial constraints in experiencing the Divine. They have no need of any “mediation” from priests, books, or other interpreters. For more and more people, long-held ideas and seemingly core values of faith have simply out-lived their usefulness. This tack resonates with a growing number of seekers convinced that the “more” is quite accessible, if only given a chance.

*“Normal consciousness is a state of stupor, in which the sensibility to the wholly real and responsiveness to the stimuli of the spirit are reduced. The mystics...endeavor to awake from the drowsiness and apathy and to regain the state of wakefulness for their enchanted souls.”*

– Abraham Heschel

For those who acknowledge a comfort with ambiguity and aspire to the state of wakefulness, Heschel suggests, one requirement is universal: the need to break one’s dependency on mediated, rote, and authoritarian religious experiences. Culver “Bill” Nelson has suggested a helpful starting place from which to begin the detox program: “The image of God as a person has to give way to the image of God as a presence.” This essentially mystical idea is naturally going to be a challenge to people and institutions not inclined toward mysticism – which is just one of the reasons why the church has seen mystics as a threat.

*“The church has pretended to know more about the Ultimate Mystery than it does. Once again it has confronted people with premature answers when questions are both more appropriate and more inviting.”*

– Jack Good, *The Dishonest Church* (page 182)

Be it hard questions, nuanced insight, comfort with ambiguity, or a hunger for a direct experience of the Divine, those who embrace mystery as a spiritual discipline all have one more conviction in common: there is much to be learned. Whatever the mystery of the Divine is, the book is not closed. Another 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Quaker Rufus Jones, said it well in *Time* magazine in 1948:

*“Vital religion cannot be maintained and preserved on the theory that God dealt with our human race only in the far past ages, and that the Bible is the only evidence we have that our God is a living, revealing, communicating God. If God ever spoke, [God] is still speaking ... [God] is the Great I Am, not a Great I Was . . .”*

It requires a degree of unlearning of that which has come to be conventional wisdom. It entails honoring that which can be sensed but not described, felt but not quantified. That said, there can be no doubt that there are indeed mystics among us. When we embrace mystery, strive to emulate Jesus’ deep experience of the Divine, and live at peace with the unknowable, we may be among them.

## MYSTERIOUS WAYS

*“I who am Divine am truly in you. I can never be sundered from you: However far we be parted, never can we be separated. I am in you and you are in Me. We could not be any closer. We two are fused into one, poured into a single mould. Thus, unwearied, we shall remain forever.”*

– Mechtild of Magdeburg, 13<sup>th</sup> century Rhineland Mystic

Maybe it’s in a relationship that has been strained or alienated that a shimmer of reconciliation offers a sense of grace that can only be described as intoxicating. Perhaps it’s in a beautiful sunset, a newborn baby, or being struck by some other facet of creation – Hildegard of Bingen wrote, “Creation reveals the hidden God just as clothes hint at the shape of a person’s body...” And then there’s music, art, and poetry – the artist’s having captured a sliver of the Divine in imagery, on canvas, or in song.

While our culture tends to compartmentalize the sacred and the secular, reserving special places and times as “holy” and others as hopelessly secular, the Divine has a way of sneaking into peoples’ consciousness at the most unexpected times. There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart – but in the “thin places” the distance becomes even smaller. A thin place is where the veil that separates the sacred from the pedestrian is so thin that one is able to catch a glimpse of the mystery beyond. A thin place is

anywhere our hearts are more open to the “more” – when we feel the distance we often put between us and the Divine evaporating.

*“The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw all things in God and God in all things.”*

– Mechtild of Magdeburg, 13<sup>th</sup> century Rhineland Mystic

Most people have had experiences where the artificial boundary between the secular and the sacred becomes very thin, indeed. In one of these thin places there is an immediacy of experience where words alone become irrelevant. We feel like we are in the presence of something mysterious, of something Holy.

In many spiritualities, the simplest of life’s necessities are lifted up and permeated with something...“more.” For Christians, it involves even the most common of elements: bread, water, and wine. These everyday staples become the *sacra* (sacred) – the sacraments – the means of grace. Organized religion has always realized and taken advantage of how profoundly the Spirit can be at work in even the most mundane of circumstances.

And while there are those who seek to separate and isolate the sacred, there are others who have embraced the whole world and imbued it with Mystery. The Quakers and Franciscans are just two examples of worldviews striving to see all of life as sacred. Whether it is described as a spark of the Divine within each of us or a commitment to living all of life as a sacrament, their practices express the belief that all of life can be used by God – and who are we to declare some things holy or not holy?

## EMBRACING MYSTERY

*“The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He (or she) to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”*

– Albert Einstein

In today’s world of expanding universes, black holes, and multiple dimensions, it’s hard to believe that we can know much of anything about anything. And while poverty, racism, war, injustice and countless other issues continue to pose daunting challenges to the human race, the lure of mystery continues to haunt people. The possibility of the “more” offers people hope for a depth and breadth of life, not just for themselves, but also for all of creation, aching to be whole. The hunger for the holy, what Hildegard of Bingen called “the yearning for good,” is a part of who we are. Our longing to be connected to Mystery connects us to one another and the hope for a world renewed.

In her manifesto on mystery, “The Summer Day,” poet Mary Oliver confesses that she doesn’t know “exactly what prayer is,” but she does know “how to pay

attention.” Could it be that simple? By living the questions – and simply paying attention – we open ourselves to a perspective on life that prepares us to embrace mystery.

Harrell Beck used to tell the story of the oldest living alumnus of the seminary returning to Boston for homecoming. Much to the students’ chagrin, he was invited to speak at their weekly chapel. The day came and they draped him over the pulpit. He gazed out at the students and said, “I would like to thank my alma mater for setting me free without setting me adrift.” And he sat down.

Isn’t that what it’s all about? When mystery is embraced, freedom is embraced. Openness is embraced. The journey is embraced. Far from being cast adrift, those who embrace mystery are set on a lifelong path of discovery, growth, and gratitude for the wonder of it all.

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

“So, what the hell can we know about anything?”

What are the certainties that make you a heretic?

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

What are the implications of science and religion having gone in two different directions?

Nelson recounts Rabbi Heschel claiming that there’s no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Explain.

What is the “one reality?”

Borg calls God “Mystery” with a capital “M.” How does this counter our inclination toward embracing “tight maps of reality?”

List some of the negative consequences of giving in to our tendency toward excessive certitude.

**DVD Chapter 4:**

How would acknowledging that “we dwell in Mystery” affect one’s day-to-day outlook on the world?

Why is embracing uncertainty a virtue?

List some of the ways bringing back the sense of Mystery can call us beyond our knowing into an exploration of the Holy.

**DVD Chapter 5:**

Describe some of the characteristics of Jesus the Mystic.

Carcaño speaks of her mystical experience in a Texas cotton field. How does this story inform your understanding of Mystery?

What does Scott mean when he says that Jesus used parables to “eliminate the sacred?”

How does the Cosmic Christ or Cosmic Wisdom lead to mysticism?

How does embracing cosmic mysticism affect our relationship with the environment?

## **SPIRITPRACTICE:**

Discerning

### **Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

### **Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

### **Love Now Ascending**

("Holy, Holy, Holy" – tune: Nicaea)

Lyrics by Jim Burklo\*

Holy, holy, holy, love now ascending  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to you.  
Holy, holy, holy, joy that has no ending  
Giving, forgiving, breathing life anew.

Holy, holy, holy, love without a limit  
Care that binds creation in sacred unity,  
Holy, holy, holy, birthing every minute,  
Christ, Love's revealer, sets our spirits free.

Holy, holy, holy, infinite compassion,  
Makes a place for every soul in God's eternal reign,  
Holy, holy, holy, truth beyond religion,  
Love that endures should nothing else remain.

Holy, holy, holy, raise your voice in singing,  
Join the cosmic chorus in praise of Love divine,  
Holy, holy, holy, God beyond all naming,  
Echoes our song in harmony sublime.

*\*Words used by permission of the author. See Jim's website: [www.openchristianity.com](http://www.openchristianity.com).*

# LIVING IT OUT

## SESSION 21 HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

### Experiencing God

Grey haze of lover's lost in each other  
Horizon pressed to water  
In liquid embrace,  
Mimicking Eden's perfection  
And God's persistent passion.  
Awake, my Lover,  
The Holy One beckons.  
Feel me, know me  
Fully upon your body  
And your soul.  
Breathe in my Spirit  
Even as I inhale  
Your tears of joy and longing.  
Returning to ancient Oneness –  
Creation's sacred beginning –  
And the universe quivers with song  
Holy, Holy, Holy.

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk, June 2007

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Mystery refers to something unexplainable and beyond comprehension. It derives from the Greek word "myein" that refers to the eyes and lips and means "to close." In other words, it is beyond humankind's ability to see and define.

The most common use of mystery is linked to novels, murder, and plays, all of which come to a conclusion in a set amount of time or words. These applications delude us into a false sense that mystery is something to be solved instead of embraced. Often we transfer that approach onto our journey with the Divine.

Instead of writing as part of your spiritual discipline this week, would you try to be open to Mystery for 30 minutes or for a day? Each time your brain strives to define or see God, ask for openness to "know" there is more. Each time you want to describe God in human likeness, give thanks that Mystery is beyond our complete knowing.

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk