

WALKING
WITH JESUS

*Daily Steps of
the Christian Life*

L E N T E N

S T U D Y G U I D E



WALKING WITH JESUS Daily Steps of the Christian Life

Discipleship for Dogs

The monastery of New Skete, New York is just like any other monastery where monks pray and worship. And like other monasteries, these brothers have a business that sustains their operations. What makes this Eastern Orthodox order unique is their business: dog breeding and training. When the monastery was founded in 1966 they had a pet German Shepherd. When the dog died, they got a pair of German Shepherds and started breeding them for financial support and companionship. Over the years the monastery has become famous for its dog obedience program, which has been written about in two books. Brother Christopher is the head trainer who supervises the other monks and their appointed canines in four week sessions before the dogs are sold.

If someone looked at your faith, what kind of dog would you be? An eager puppy ready to learn but needing maturity? A faithful companion who is willing to obey commands? Or an old dog that refuses to do anything?

Critics of Christianity say that the church has gone to the dogs, and on one point they are right. Like dogs we need to be trained. No one is automatically transformed into a disciple. We need to be nurtured and trained over a long period of time in order to become obedient to Jesus Christ.

Throughout Lent the Holy Spirit will put us through our paces. We will explore five spiritual practices of the Christian faith: prayer, scripture reading, worship, fellowship and service. These basic disciplines have

always been regular channels through which the Spirit of Christ enters our lives. Jesus practiced them during his lifetime and in turn he uses them to grow our faith.

Most of us do them but many of us have never been intentional about them. The key to spiritual development is intentionality. Like dog obedience, the more we exercise our spirits the more receptive we become to following the Spirit's lead. These 'religious' practices can, of course, become routine and legalistic, which over time stunts our spiritual growth. Yet, without them our faith will never develop. As with any training, there are times when we do not feel like doing it, but it is in those moments that our faith actually grows strongest.

This study is a companion guide to the Lenten sermon series at North Church. You may want to read the study guide in preparation for a deeper appreciation of the worship service, or you may want to study the material after each Sunday as a way to apply the message to your weekly walk with Christ. This study guide can be used by small groups, couples or individuals.

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Week 1: WALKING WITH JESUS in Prayer

Introduction: Walking Holiday

St. Cuthbert's Path is a seventy-plus mile trail that winds from Melrose, Scotland to Holy Island, England. A few years ago I walked the path one sunny week in June. I had a 'walking holiday' company book my lodging and take my luggage from point to point. They gave me a Xeroxed copy of a guidebook with directions for each day's journey, but at times the book was rather vague. One afternoon I crossed the Scottish-English border in the middle of a sheep pasture and headed down to the next village only to discover that it was the wrong town. I had overshot my walk by six miles and my luggage was at an inn in the previous town on the other side of the border.

As I headed back across the pastures I heard an ATV rumbling behind me. It was the shepherd who had come out with his two border collies, Joe and Gyp, to check the herds before nightfall. He gave me a ride—a very bumpy short cut—back to the border. Along the way the dogs ran in front and to the side of him looking for injured or dead sheep. Over the loud din of the motor he guided their directions by whistling. The dogs knew exactly what each whistle meant and kept pace with him.

Henri Nouwen wrote that true prayer is 'being all ear for God, the core of all prayer is indeed listening, obediently standing in the presence of God.' We can learn a lesson from Joe and Gyp. It took a lot of training and practice to hear and discern the shepherd's whistles over the roar of the engine. It takes time and practice for us to learn how to stand obediently in

the presence of God. This week we will explore how prayer and meditation help us hear God's will and way for our lives. While some make a distinction between prayer and meditation, for this study, meditation is defined as a form of prayer.

If you compared your prayer life to a trail, what kind of terrain have you traveled across?

Read: Luke 11:1-13

¹Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."²He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.³Give us each day our daily bread.⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."⁵And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'⁷And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs."⁹"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts

to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Commentary:

Jesus is doing nothing new when he instructed his disciples to pray, ‘Our Father....’ It was customary for rabbis who had a following to give their pupils a standard prayer, and the fact that John the Baptist had done it for his disciples prompted Jesus’ followers to ask for their own. They had seen him slip away to pray before major events and, more than any other Gospel, Luke portrays Jesus as a person of prayer (see for example 3:21-2; 5:16; 6:12-13; 9:18, 28-29; 22:40-42; 23:34, 46).

Luke is a good editor and the way he works with Jesus’ prayer gives us special insight into the nature of prayer. Matthew also has the Lord’s Prayer but puts it in a different context in which Jesus urges the disciples to avoid hypocrisy (see Matthew 6:1-15). Luke’s version is more concise. There are five terse petitions—‘Holy be your name,’ ‘your kingdom come,’ ‘Give us bread,’ ‘forgive our sins,’ and ‘do not test us’—which outline the basic themes of prayer and meditation. The bread, like the Israelite’s manna in the wilderness, is the essentials needed each day. Forgiveness is a major theme for Luke, and the ‘time of trial’ is a portent of what Jesus will face in his own hour of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (22:40-46).

The most basic definition of prayer is talking with God. Thankfully Jesus gave us some basic words to help organize our thoughts and express our needs. Our prayers do not annoy God. When Jesus prayed he represented all of us while at the same time, being fully divine, infused those human needs with the will of God. ‘For as in Christ the divinity and humanity of Christ were united in one person,’ wrote Karl Rahner, ‘so human prayer and divine prayer were united in the prayer of Christ.’ No matter how trivial you may think your prayer is, Jesus gives it dignity and invites you

to talk with God who is very willing to listen. First Peter said it best, ‘Cast all your cares on him because he cares for you’ (5:7).

Prayer does not stop with our words and thoughts. If it did, then prayer is nothing more than an exercise in human articulation. But prayer is more than words. It is a disposition, an attitude of seeking God. This pursuit goes beyond those moments we spend in private devotion and it saturates everything we do if we do it with a desire to obey God. Without this, prayer degenerates into a cold ritual or a very frustrating bargaining session.

Only Luke’s Gospel elaborates on this meaning of prayer with the parable about the persistent friend (v. 5-8). Like the friend who won’t stop banging on the door at midnight, we must keep praying even when we do not see any results. Prayer becomes a disciplined practice that we do even when we do not feel like it.

Over time, this spiritual practice pays off because of the kind of God to which we pray. ‘At least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.’ In this verse the Greek word ‘persistence’ in this verse could also be translated ‘shameless.’ But who is being shameless in the story, the friend who was disturbing the peace at midnight? Or the friend who was reluctant to demonstrate hospitality? If we are supposed to imitate the begging neighbor, then Jesus is encouraging us to be ‘shameless’ in our pursuit of God by being completely honest and broken in prayer.

And God is also ‘shameless’ in answering our prayers. In Jesus’ day, it was seen as unbecoming for an omnipotent deity to attend to human needs. Jesus shows us a very different God. In Christ, God is not too proud to come down to our level because what makes God divine is not eternal honor but fathomless love.

‘So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you.’ Jesus concludes his teaching with an extraordinary promise that God will answer prayer. God goes beyond addressing our immediate needs and gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit (v. 13). Again, Luke’s Gospel is unique on this point. The Spirit is the gift of God’s own presence to guide and renew, reassure and challenge us.

The gift of the Spirit indicates a third and deeper level: prayer is listening and being open to God. If prayer is only our words and thoughts then it is simply a human activity. If prayer is only our persistent attitude then we will never find peace through prayer. But if the deepest form of prayer is ‘being all ear for God’ then prayer is God speaking to us. It is the gift that renews us. If prayer is listening to God then there is a rhythm to prayer. Prayer is both our speaking to God and our moments of silence in the presence of God. Prayer happens when we spend time reflecting and it happens throughout our day when God is speaking to us through others and our circumstances.

Reflection Questions:

Which of the following statements about prayer best expresses how you feel about prayer? Which one challenges you?

- “Prayer should take up and turn towards the spiritual order all the powers of our mental, emotional, and volitional life...It should, as it were, lift us to the top of our condition, and represent the fullest flowering of our consciousness.” –Evelyn Underhill
- “Prayer is friendship with God. Friendship is not formal, but it is not formless.” –George Buttrick
- “The posture of our body and the words we use have no significance in themselves and are only pleasing to God as they express the feelings of the heart. For it is the heart that prays, it is the voice of the heart that God listens, and it is heart that [God] answers.” –Jean-Nicholas Grou
- “I make it my business only to persevere in God’s holy presence wherein I keep myself by a simple attention and a general fond regard to God, which I refer to as an *actual presence* of God. Or, to put it another way, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul

with God.” –Brother Lawrence

Do you have specific habits or practices of prayer and meditation?

Rate the following obstacles to a more fulfilling experience of prayer
(1=smallest obstacle; 5=greatest obstacle):

___ lack of time

___ do not know what to say or think about

___ my mind wanders

___ skeptical about whether it makes a difference

___ feel uncomfortable asking God for help

Have you or someone you know ever seen an answer to prayer?

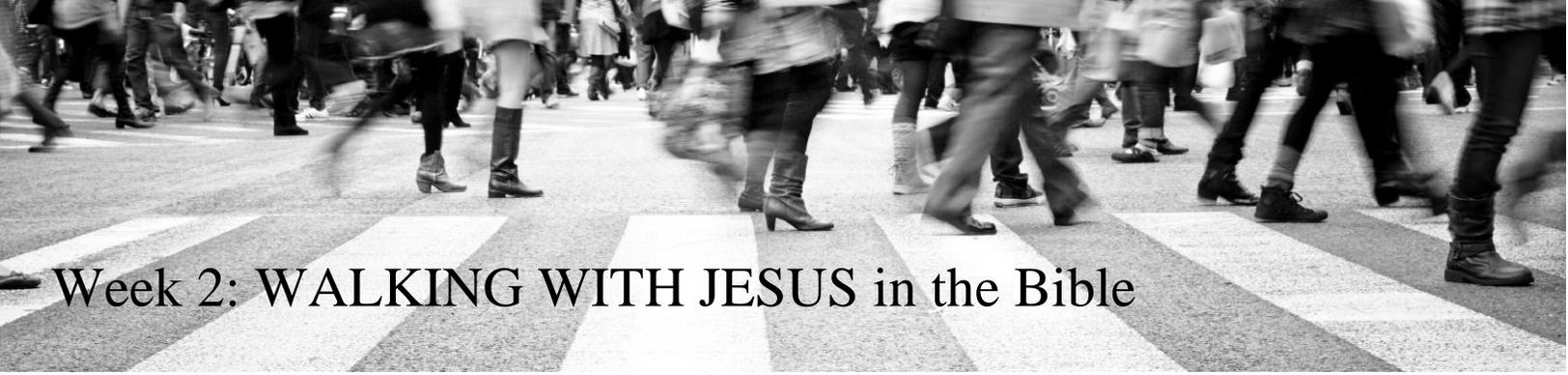
When or under what circumstances do you feel the presence of God?

What prevents you from being persistent in prayer?

How often do you pray for others? Do your prayers include people and events beyond your personal relationships?

This Week:

One day this week meditate on the Lord's Prayer. Think about it periodically throughout the day. When you are doing a simple task, such as folding laundry, recite it in your head. Then at the end of the day, write down your version of the Lord's Prayer. Put it in your words and as you begin the next day prayer your version.



Week 2: WALKING WITH JESUS in the Bible

Introduction: Esther and Dr. Perkins

I grew up in a conservative Methodist church which revered the Bible and instilled in their young folk a fear of 'liberal' biblical scholarship. When I started exploring whether to attend the University of Evansville I called the religion department and spoke with Dr. Wayne Perkins who was the head of the department. He took a polite grilling from this high school senior about his view of scripture. 'Do you believe the Bible is inspired?' I asked. He said, 'Well, I have never thought much of the book of Esther because it never mentions God.' I was shocked that he would question holy writ. And as soon as I hung up I read Esther for the very first time!

Jim Castelli and George Gallup were right, 'Americans revere the Bible but, by and large, they don't read it.' According to a recent Time Magazine survey, only one out of four Americans could name all four Gospels. Many people have a negative view of scripture because they have witnessed the intolerance and bigotry of 'Bible-believing' Christians.

This week we will explore how the study of scripture is a spiritual discipline. There is an old Jewish proverb that says, 'to study is to pray.' We miss the spiritual benefits of studying the Bible because we become preoccupied by the controversies and quandaries the Bible raises. Too often discussions about the Bible degenerate into swapping ignorance or using the Bible to justify what we already believe. If we can allow the Bible to be the Bible--in all its strangeness and with all the questions it raises--and approach it with a prayerful and playful attitude, then God can

use it as an instrument to deepen our faith.

Our faith is in God, not the Bible. Scripture is a means to the greater end of helping become more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Thus, the primary nature of scripture is relational, not propositional. Think of the Bible as a travel log. It tells the story of a people on a literal and spiritual journey. Scripture invites us to join their journey.

Because our study of scripture is devoted to improving our walk with Jesus, we need to read it on a regular basis. The exploration of scripture must become a regular habit so that over time we are reshaped by what we read. We co-opt the Bible in our image when we give it only a passing glance to find a favorite verse that justifies what we already believe.

What was the first Bible you owned? If it was a gift, who gave it and was it given on a special occasion?

Read: Luke 4:16-30

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.²¹ Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’²² All spoke

well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’²³ He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”’²⁴ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.’²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Commentary:

Preaching was so much more comfortable for the rabbi in Jesus’ day than it is today because the rabbi got to sit instead of stand. Jesus read the scriptures, took his seat, and said: ‘Today the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’ Everyone was impressed with his diction and brevity. They thought the hometown boy was going to say something nice so they could share in his rising popularity. Not so. But the sermon was not over and the more he talked the congregation’s impression turned sour. What began as a homecoming nearly ended in a lynching.

What did Jesus say that ticked everyone off? Expectations were high. His

ministry had just started and his reputation was on the rise because he backed his words with miracles (4:14-15, 38-41). The synagogue was the place where it was happening. After this incident, he showed up in another synagogue and healed a man of an unclean spirit (4:31-37) and he used the neighboring synagogues as a platform for spreading his message (4:44).

The message he shared in his hometown synagogue was a programmatic overview of his ministry. He quoted Isaiah as a keystone text. It was a ministry of liberation, both spiritual and material. The long anticipated era of God's reign had commenced with him, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (v. 21).

They liked this part, but it was what followed that offended them. Unlike Matthew's version, Luke's Gospel spells out the details of Jesus' reflections that sparked opposition. Jesus equated them with the folks whom the ancient prophets Elijah and Elisha ignored because they were thickheaded. Instead of being allowed to share in his limelight, he knew that they would never understand who he really was or what his true mission would be.

It was a clarifying moment for his identity. Prior to his homecoming, Jesus had wrestled with his identity as the Son of God while in the desert (4:1-13). For forty days he was tested: 'If you are the Son of God,' asked the adversary over and over again. He came through it with his identity as the Son of God intact, but then he went back home they could only see him as Joseph's and Mary's boy. When he walked away from the mob, he was walking away from being simply a carpenter's son and walked into his new role as the Messiah.

He had made the scriptures relevant, but in a way that was too challenging for them. His interpretation did not fit with their preconceived notions of who he was and who they were. Sometimes that is what happens to us when we read the Bible. It does not seem relevant, and when it does

become relevant, then it challenges us. Will we get it or not?

Reflection Questions:

What is your favorite book or story in the Bible? Which is your least favorite?

How often do you read the Bible?

Daily

Weekly

Sporadically

Never

'Most of the time, when I read the Bible, I am....

Perplexed by it.

Bored with it.

Challenged by it.

Comforted by it.

2 Ways to Read Luke 4:16-30

The First Way: Reading with your Heart

Step 1: Get comfortable and take several deep, slow breaths as you ask the Spirit to open your heart and mind to hearing the scriptures.

Step 2: Read Luke 4:16-30

Step 3: Be silent and let the words you have just read sink into your mind.

Step 4: Read Luke 4:16-30 again. As it is being read, imagine that you are there (if you are doing this exercise with a small group do not discuss the questions between readings):

- Pause after verse 17. What does the synagogue look like? What sounds do you hear? What do the people look like?
- Read v. 18-22. Pause. How did you feel when Jesus read from Isaiah? What is the mood in the synagogue?
- Read v. 23-27. Pause. How did you feel when Jesus spoke? What are other people doing and saying around you?
- Read v. 28-30. Pause. What do you hear and see? What do you do as the crowd is moving from the synagogue to the edge of town? How do you feel in the aftermath?

Step 5: If you are doing this exercise with a small group, discuss your impressions from the guided reading.

The Second Way: Reading with your Mind

Step 1: Circle the words or phrases that you think are significant. Do not try to define or analyze them, just circle them and you will come back to it later.

Step 2: Read all of Luke chapter 4. How does the context help us understand the story in v. 16-30? What is Jesus struggling with before v. 14? What reputation does he have? Did the surrounding stories mention other synagogues and what took place in them?

Step 3: Read the story in Matthew 13:53-58 and Mark 6:1-6. What is different about Luke's version? What is the special emphasis in Luke's version of the story?

Step 4: Go back to the words you circled in step 1. Did steps 2 and 3 provide clarity about those key words and phrases? If not, you might want to consult a Bible dictionary, such as the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (which is available in the church library).

Step 5: In one or two sentences, summarize the central message of Luke 4:16-30

This Week:

Read one psalm every day. Choose freely from the 150 psalms in the Bible. Every day, underline or copy one verse from the psalm of the day that speaks to you. Throughout the day reread that verse and use it as your prayer for the day.



Week 3: WALKING WITH JESUS in Worship

Introduction: Worshipping with Slovaks

Four years ago I spent time with United Methodists in Slovakia. Methodism has been in that Central European country since the 1920s when Czech immigrants returned home from Texas with their new found faith. It quickly spread across Czechoslovakia until the outbreak of World War Two. After the war Methodism never recovered and continued to dwindle throughout the communist period. By the time of the Velvet Revolution and Divorce there were only three congregations left in Slovakia (Today, there is one annual conference that encompasses both nations with each country is its own district).

Since the early nineties the United Methodist Church has been planting new congregations in Slovakia, but accommodations are meager. In the eastern city of Kosice I worshipped with young adults in a tiny communist-era apartment. In a nearby village, I worshipped with Roma teenagers in an old house. On Sunday I sang and prayed with United Methodists in a wedding banquet hall called Zic Zac.

What they lacked in facilities, they made up for with their enthusiasm and sincerity. When they prayed, everyone prayed, not just the pastor. When they sang it was passionate and their testimonies were witnesses of genuine transformation. They worshipped ‘in spirit and truth.’

This week we examine worship as a spiritual practice for deepening our faith. To be sure, every time an individual praises God it is an act of worship. But for the purposes of this study, worship refers to the public

and communal act of celebrating the faith. The German mystic and composer

Hildegard of Bingen said that worship should ‘bring our inner devotion to the praise of the Creator and give it full expression.’ Worshipping together is a fuller expression than private acts of devotion because others help us express our praise through music and liturgy. The Holy Spirit uses our communal celebrations to draw each of us into a richer experience of God’s grace. This is what John Wesley meant by the phrase ‘social holiness.’ Through our common life as believers the Spirit works to make each of us holy.

Worship has a positive effect on our faith only when we are not the center of attention. Jesus Christ is the center of Christian worship and the only purpose of worship is to honor God through Jesus Christ. In contrast to our American pragmatism that values what things can do for us, worship has no purpose beyond its focus on the divine. It does not ‘do’ anything. And yet, this is what makes worship useful for us. The act of worship reminds us that we are not at the center of it all. This is not a denigration of human beings, just a reminder that we are not in control. Indeed, we celebrate the One who is in control and makes ‘all things work together for good for those who love God’ (Rom. 8:28).

Even though worship happens in a crowd, it does not matter where they gather or how many are present. Authentic is when we worship ‘in spirit and truth.’ That can happen in a gothic cathedral or a banquet hall as long as the Spirit of Christ is present and we are receptive.

Where is the most unusual place you have worshipped?

Read: John 4:16-26

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’¹⁷ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”;¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’¹⁹ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet.’²⁰ Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’²¹ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.’²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.’²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.’²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’²⁵ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’²⁶ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

Commentary:

‘Give me something to drink,’ seems like a simple request, but Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, is violating a cultural norm by asking a Samaritan woman. It raises contentious issues of religious identity. Samaritans were an ethno-religious group who held to a strict adherence of the Law of Moses and traced their heritage through a different lineage than their Jewish cousins. The most important issue that divided the two groups was the proper location for worship. Samaritans claimed that Mt. Gerezim, not Jerusalem,

was the one and only spot.

Issues of worship always involve the question of identity because what we do and say in worship expresses who we are in relationship to God. Jesus pushes the issue of the woman's identity when he asked about her husband. He knew that she was living in a dubious situation with a man to whom she was not married. She is not condemned by him, only exposed. A real encounter with Christ in worship has a way of leaving us vulnerable and exposed.

Yet, she is courageous enough to raise the issue of his identity. 'Who is it that you a Jew should talk with me?' and 'Sir, I see you are a prophet.' She hangs in there and pushes him to reveal himself. Besides, what was a Jew doing in Samaritan territory? Jesus was taking a detour in order to avoid the Pharisees who were questioning his identity. She discovers what they were denying, that he is their Messiah. She is willing to risk leaving the comfort of her tradition to understand this prophet and what he may have to offer.

He offers a new way to worship that destroys the old barriers and divisions. 'The true worshippers,' he explains, 'will worship the Father in spirit and truth.' The reference to God as Father is a term of inclusion because it implies that she too is a child of God. He shifts the focus of worship from the place to the person who celebrates 'in spirit and truth.' What makes us God's children is the Holy Spirit who unites us and the truth of Christ that makes us ready to worship. The act of worship marks a new understanding of who we are.

It also reveals who Jesus is. She began to see that he is the Messiah and he confirms it, 'I am here, the one who is speaking to you' (v.26). The earlier conversation about Jesus being the 'living water' begins to make sense (v. 7-15). Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus will repeat 'I am'—the bread of

life, the light of the world, good shepherd, the resurrection and the life (6:35; 8:12; 10:11; 11:25). He is the embodiment of God's life-giving love. Ultimately, worship is not about us but about Christ, and the Spirit makes Christ more real, more accessible, to us through worship.

Reflection Questions

Which parts of our worship service do you find most meaningful? Which parts are less significant or troublesome for you (why)?

What prevents people from regular worship attendance?

What does it mean to worship in

‘spirit’:

‘truth’:

What is the opposite of worshipping in ‘spirit and truth’?

In John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit is often referred to as the 'Spirit of truth.' How have you experienced the Spirit of God through worship?

How does public worship help you in your personal times of prayer and scripture reading? How might your personal devotional time contribute to your experience on Sunday morning?

How does worship help shape our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ?

This Week:

Attend worship on Sunday morning and/or Thursday evening. Prepare yourself for Sunday morning worship by doing one of the following:

- Praying: Great and Loving God, you pour out your Spirit of grace and supplication on all who desire it. Deliver us from cold hearts and wandering thoughts, that with steady minds and burning zeal we may worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus the Christ. Amen.
- Read the hymns that we will sing and have sung on Sunday:
 - March 3:
 - Lift High the Cross
 - Fill My Cup, Lord
 - Let Us Break Bread



Week 4: WALKING WITH JESUS in Fellowship

Introduction: Bowling Alone

Robert Putman's *Bowling Alone* traces the decline of community and social organizations in contemporary American society. Specifically, he summarizes this trend in religion:

‘While the fraction of the population that is entirely disconnected from organized religion has increased, the fraction that is intensely involved has been relatively stable. In other words, religious dropouts have come at the expense of those whose religious involvement was modest but conventional. The result is that the country is becoming ever more clearly divided into two groups—the devoutly observant and the entirely unchurched.’

Church life does not make it easy for the ‘devoutly observant’ to stay with it. Petty bickering and annoying differences make the option of being ‘unchurched’ appealing. In the words of a Doonesbury cartoon, ‘We’ve chosen to home-church our children.’

Just as you cannot choose your family, you cannot pick who gets adopted into the family of God. God calls all sorts of people into the church. The diversity and differences are a part of the grace of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained, ‘Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.’ This means that the Spirit of Christ, who is in the heart of every believer, connects us to one another in a spiritual union. The Spirit works through our relationships of mutual support and

accountability to deepen our faith.

This week we explore how fellowship plays a vital role in the cultivation of our faith. ‘Fellowship’ has been watered down over time to mean little more than a pitchin dinner. The New Testament word for fellowship is *koinonia*, but *koinonia* is also translated ‘partner’ and ‘companion.’ We experience this spiritual partnership when we support one another emotionally and even financially (see 2 Cor. 8:1-15). *Koinonia* also involves holding one another accountable and challenging one another to pursue a deeper commitment to Christ.

In this week’s reading, Matthew outlines the rules for the maintenance of our fellowship. Matthew is the only Gospel that uses the term *ekklesia*—‘assembly’ or ‘church’ (16:18 and 18:17). When believers assemble, whether in the first century or today, they need practical guidelines to help organize their fellowship for the integrity of the church and the well-being of each member.

Do you have a favorite board game that brings you closer together with others or do you end up arguing over the rules?

Read: Matthew 18:10-22

¹⁰ ‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.’¹² What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.¹⁴ So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one

of these little ones should be lost.

¹⁵ ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.’¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’²² Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

Commentary:

In chapter 18, Matthew portrays Jesus as the founder of a new community who is establishing new rules for their life together. It is a counter-cultural community whose life together will be as much a witness as their proclamation and miraculous deeds. Chapter 18 is the fourth of five discourses (sometimes called ‘sermons’) which began with the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 (the others include chapter 10—the mission of the disciples—chapter 13—parables of the Reign of God—and chapters 24-5—the future hope). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is the new Moses who fulfills and radicalizes the Torah. In this chapter, the presence of Christ replaces the Torah as the center of the faith community.

This new community is marked by two concerns. One, it is a community of believers who care for ‘the little ones’ (v. 1-14). Jesus’ explanation of the rules for the believers begins with an alternative definition of greatness that

eliminates the rank and protocol of society. ‘The little ones’ are those who are new to the faith and they are weaker than the mature members. Instead of taking a back seat to mature members, their needs come first.

This concern includes a passion for reaching out to those who have drifted away from the church. The parable of the lost sheep illustrates God’s priorities for the church (v. 12-14). This parable is so familiar to most readers that it does not sound radical until you compare it with a version of it in the Gospel of Thomas (which did not make it into holy canon). In contrast to Matthew, in the Gospel of Thomas, the ‘biggest sheep’ of the flock is lost and when the shepherd finds the sheep he says, ‘I love you more than the ninety-nine.’ For Thomas, the value of the lost sheep is simply in being the ‘biggest’ and thus most important. Whereas in Matthew, the parable challenges the church to reach out to those who are often overlooked and discarded.

Two, Jesus’ counter-cultural community is marked by honesty, accountability and forgiveness (v. 15-22). He outlines a process for handling church conflicts (v. 15-17) and gives spiritual authority to the entire membership (v. 18-20). Just in case they abuse this power with a judgmental attitude, he commands them to practice radical forgiveness as a counterbalance (v. 21-22). If practiced, it might even mean that the church is a revolving door for those who leave and come back. This will take a lot of time and energy for the believers, but the depth of commitment is necessary for the maintenance of a church with this depth of integrity.

This is quite a contrast with society, then and now. It seems like our

society is marked by one of two extremes. We practice tolerance but it never leads to a true embrace of others, and at times the tolerance is an excuse for apathy. Or we see intolerance and a lack of support for others. In Matthew 18 the extremes are a paradox. On the one hand, the church must engage in an aggressive outreach and radical acceptance of the lost one and the

little ones. On the other hand, the church practices a depth of accountability which we find foreign to our experiences of church life. This paradox is a manifestation of a community founded on grace. Only the presence of the Spirit of Christ can help us maintain this fellowship.

Reflection Questions:

When have you felt supported by a church or by members of a church?

How do you react when another church member offends you. Do you—

ignore it

talk to them

talk about them

pray about it

nothing, but it colors my opinion of them

Who are the 'little ones' in our churches today? How do we treat them?

In what ways do churches today overlook or hurt 'the little ones' and make it harder for people to believe in Christ?

Think of a time when you have seen conflict in a church. How was it handled? How did it compare with Jesus' advice in v. 15-18?

What does v. 18-20 mean today? How might these words be abused?

When someone joins the United Methodist Church they are asked, 'As a member of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness? Of those five, which ones do you practice? Which ones do you need to improve?'

When a person joins the church, the pastor asks the congregation to take a vow to that individual: 'Members of the household of God, I commend this person to your love and care. Do all in your power to increase their

faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.’ In what ways do we (a) increase the faith, (b) confirm the hope, and (c) perfect the love of new members?

This Week:

Write a note or send a message to another member thanking them for their participation and/or leadership in our congregation. Write another note or send a message to a member you have not seen in a while telling them that they are missed.



Week 5: WALKING WITH JESUS in Service

Introduction: Isabelle

I was walking into the East Tenth Street United Methodist Church when a pastor from another church was quickly leaving. She told me that she would never return because of the lewd behavior that was being allowed to go on in the fellowship hall. Well, that raised my curiosity about what she had just seen at the youth talent show which the Children and Youth Center had sponsored. The lights were dimmed, the rap music was blaring, and the performances were rowdy—typical teenagers. In the midst of all the chaos was Isabelle MacKinnon serving refreshments.

Isabelle fit the stereotype of the little old white church lady, but she reflected the true image of Christ the Servant. Unlike the uppity pastor, she was nonplussed by the youth's behavior. She had been teaching Sunday School since FDR was President. Long after many of her friends had moved to the suburbs, she continued to teach the neighborhood children. She took Vacation Bible School to the park and she visited children in their homes. It was her visionary leadership that led to the creation of the East Tenth Street Children and Youth Center which serves over 100 children every day. Isabelle died a few years ago, but she will always be one of my role models of Christian servanthood.

Serving others is an essential part of being a disciple. As the followers of Jesus—who 'came not to be served but to serve,'—we cannot claim to be a Christian and not serve others. Service in the name of Jesus requires acts of mercy and acts of justice. Acts of mercy are familiar to us: feeding the

hungry, helping the poor, visiting the sick. Acts of justice may be less familiar but are no less essential: advocating for equality, speaking out against injustice, working for peace.

This week we explore how our service is a spiritual discipline. Acts of mercy and justice deepen our faith through a process of imitating Jesus. Over time, the habit of serving slowly conforms our character to the image of Christ; his image is ‘impressed’ on our attitudes and outlook. Serving others cultivates the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) in us and gives us opportunities to express our spiritual gifts (e.g. I Cor. 12:4-11).

John Wesley referred to service as a means of grace. In his sermon, ‘On Visiting the Sick,’ he wrote, ‘Surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace....If you do not [serve] you lose an excellent means of increasing your thankfulness to God....as well as of increasing your sympathy with the afflicted, your benevolence, and all social affections.’ Just as God uses spiritual practices such as prayer and scripture reading to deepen our faith, so too does the Spirit use the work of mercy and justice to expand our faith. Thus, when we serve we get as much out of it as those whom we serve.

Who has been your role model of servanthood?

Read: Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’³⁶ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’³⁷ And they said to

him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’³⁸ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that

I am baptized with?’³⁹ They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

Commentary:

‘We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ You have to give the boys credit for thinking big. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, recognized Jesus’ divine power and authority and they want to be a part of his inner circle. Jesus was equally bold in his reply, even though they did not understand the radical implications of what it would mean ‘to drink from the cup’ and share in ‘the baptism that I am baptized with.’

It was a time of clarification. They were on the slow road from Galilee to Jerusalem and along the way Jesus was trying to teach the disciples the true meaning of his mission and the sacrifice they would have to make. Mark is a clever editor who compiled the stories in 8:22 to 10:52 as a

transitional period for learning who Christ really is and what it really means to be his follower. This section begins and ends with stories of the blind being healed to symbolize the spiritual illumination that (hopefully) the disciples will get (8:22-26; 10:46-52). In between, Jesus makes three predictions (8:31; 9:31; 33-34) about his death which are followed by instructions and stories on the cost of discipleship.

This week's passage comes on the heels of the last prediction. Given the brothers' request, they still do not understand his identity or mission (compare with 9:32). This is one last attempt to clarify who Jesus is before they enter Jerusalem for Passover. Others refer to him by a variety of titles. The people call him 'rabbi', the evil spirits call him 'Son of the Most High God' and a few see him as a 'prophet' or even the 'messiah.' But Jesus refers to himself as the 'Son of Man,' which can be translated as 'the human one.' It is a self-designation of humility and suffering. It echoes his baptism in which he entered into solidarity with the human dilemma.

'The Human One' needs further clarification lest it is abused by mistaken notions of leadership borrowed from society (v. 42). To be the One who stands in solidarity with humanity demands servanthood. 'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.' The Greek word for 'servant' is *diakonos* from which we get the title 'deacon.' The Son of Man and his followers must serve others. To drive the point home, these servants are not in control of their destiny just like a slave is required to serve a master.

How ironic, that Jesus' service in which he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' (Phil. 2:7) liberates humanity from sin and evil. The ransom is an image of liberation from slavery in which the liberator pays for the release of the captives (v.45). We are freed from the domination of sin and evil for a purpose. We are freed so that we can become 'slaves' to

God's work of mercy and justice in the world.

Even more ironic is the fulfillment we experience from our commitment to serve. Earlier in their journey to Jerusalem, Jesus offered another prediction about his death and then explained the cost and benefits of discipleship, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for

the sake of the gospel, will save it (8:34-35).' The more we serve in the name of Jesus, the more our lives are enriched and our faith is deepened.

Reflection Questions:

In your line of work, what are the criteria for being a successful leader? How does it compare with Jesus' definition?

When have you felt close to God by serving others?

When has serving others challenged your faith?

What prevents Christians in America from serving the poor through acts of mercy and acts of justice?

Since we are not the ‘saviors’ of other people, what does it mean for us to share in Jesus’ cup and baptism?

Can you think of a situation in which v. 43-44 could be misused to keep a person in a state of abuse or oppression?

The cup represents Jesus’ suffering but it also is the central image at the Last Supper (Mark 14:23, 36). How might communion inspire or challenge you to serve?

Over the past year, how have you practiced....

Acts of Mercy

Acts of Justice

What are the biggest challenges for you in doing....

Acts of Mercy

Acts of Justice

This Week:

Engage in an act of service. Look for the face of Christ in those you serve. After you have served, reread Mark 10:42-44. Reflect on how your experience redefines your sense of success.