

1

Lifelong Discipleship Formation

Opening Prayer

God of steadfast love,

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

Scripture: Acts 2:42–47

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

Background

Acts 2:42–47 is Luke’s depiction of the primitive communal life together. It focuses on four key ideas:

- 1) The apostolic teaching
- 2) Fellowship “koinonia”—a group of companions who shared in a common life
- 3) Breaking of bread in their homes—central pledge and symbol of common life and common faith; table fellowship. “In their homes” is differentiated from the “apostolic teaching” to note that discipleship formation happens inside and outside the “temple” life together.
- 4) They devoted themselves to prayer—devotional life finds expression in family gatherings and daily community.

v. 43 depicts the communal life together and the assurance of God’s presence through “many wonders and signs.” Notice the idea that “awe came upon everyone.” The notion of “awe” or “fear” is a testament to miracles within the Old Testament. It is characteristic of the reverence attributed to God’s power. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.” Psalm 111:10. This communal gathering, the revelation attributed in apostolic teaching, prayer, breaking bread together and fellowship, are all attributed to the fact that God shows up in Spirit and in truth. God reveals God’s self in relationship to God and to one another. This communal life seeks wisdom and understanding, and God is present there. Thus, “All who believed were together and had all things in common” (v. 44).

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

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

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. What is necessary for Lifelong Discipleship Formation to take root?
2. What leaves us skeptical, fearful, unwilling?
3. What would need to change in our communal life? Our home life? Our daily life?
4. Name how your church community helps to nurture and equip you for lifelong discipleship.
5. Name a pivotal time when you grew or were challenged as a disciple in your church.

Closing Prayer

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

2

Intentional Authentic Evangelism

Opening Prayer

Living God,

In Jesus Christ, we have been given Good News of saving and sacrificial love. This news is the very breath that offers us life. It is the unmerited salvation, the gift of grace, and the hope of an eternal home in your kingdom.

In times of suffering or sorrow, in times of rejoicing and rest, this is indeed the Good News of our entire being. But, we forget that sometimes, Lord. We separate it from daily news. We hide it away so we don't offend.

Lord, make your will our will, your intent our intentionality. Make intentional authentic evangelism who we are, unapologetically. Make it so that we cannot help but share this good news in authentic relationship with others.

Lord, this we pray to the one who gave life so that we might live, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: John 4:1–41

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

Background

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

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

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

This story identifies two basic necessities to humanity: water and food. John gives a glimpse of a tired Christ in human flesh who sits in the heat of the day and asks for water. From drawing near in relationship with the Samaritan woman, then God begins to offer her a drink in which she will never thirst. There is nothing, not the threat of violence amid these two peoples, not the story of this woman's life, not the heat of day or the fact Jesus has not eaten, nothing—that will stop Christ from meeting this woman with Good News. In fact, when the disciples try to get him to eat, Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest?' But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together" (vv. 34-36). Meanwhile, many in the city of Samaria came to believe, because of what the woman shared with them.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Recall the first time Christ became Good News for your life? Who told you?
2. What does intentional authentic evangelism require of us? What does it look like in our daily lives?
3. What stops us from sharing the Good News with people we are in relationship with?
4. Think of the daily needs of people you are in relationship with. How could they benefit from the Good News?
5. How does your church community equip and empower you to practice authentic evangelism?

Closing Prayer

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

3

Outward Incarnational Focus

Opening Prayer

Christ, you took on human flesh, so that we might see and believe, so that we might live a life surrendered to ourselves and steadfast upon the salvation you bring. You took on flesh, and you entered this world, this community, this congregation, so that we might follow you in faithful paths of redemption. But, Lord, you know we fear what we do not know; we sit unwilling to follow you out. It is not that we don't care about an outward focus of you in meeting the needs of a broken and fearful world crying out for salvation, but we get busy. We get overwhelmed by the weight of it all. Lord, fill us with your emboldened Spirit of courage and strength, so that we might be led out to join our living God. Make us the community you long for us to be: a beacon of light, a vessel of hope, a glimpse of eternal love for all people to witness. For we pray to the One who is fully God and fully human, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: Romans 12:1–21

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

Background

Paul writes to the church in Rome outlining the ethical principles to the mercies of God. It is a call to frame our lives as “living sacrifices” according, not to our will, but to the will of God. Paul Achtemeier writes, “The fundamental response to the gracious lordship of God displayed in his Son is to allow oneself to be shaped totally by the new lordship, rather than by the lordship of sin that operates in ‘this world.’ Beginning with the Christian community (12:3-13), Paul moves to the wider society (vv. 14-21) in his discussion of the impact of God’s structuring grace on human relationships.”

Her name was Grace. When I sat with her on the front steps of the church in Africa, she seemed timid and quiet. As the custodian of the church grounds, she seemed to appreciate keeping to herself. Finishing up a long day, I sat beside Grace on the steps and asked, “How are you, Grace?” A common question of cordial conversation became for me, the moment that God’s grace manifested in this shy woman named Grace. She told me that tomorrow was her birthday, and this was a special birthday, because it marked the one-year anniversary of God’s telling her, “Grace, it’s not your time to die.” Grace had been robbed one night walking home after dark and received an injury on her leg that became infected. After several days unable to get the infection under control and her fever to break, the doctor told her family members to prepare for the worst. “Grace is probably not going to make it through the night. She is going to die.” In and out of awareness, Grace vaguely heard the words of the doctor and that of her family, but she said that night she prayed, and she asked God if she was going to die. And Grace told me, “I heard God answer: ‘No, Grace, it’s not your time to die.’” So, the following morning, all were amazed to see Grace sitting up, her fever broken. Although she carries the scars of that horrible day, she sat on those steps of the church sobbing in gratitude for the grace God poured out in her life. “I just want to spend my birthday giving thanks to God and surrounded by those I love.” The following day, we celebrated Grace’s birthday, and her life, exactly that way. Gathered together in love, we gave thanks to God for the grace and mercy shown to this beautiful woman, Grace.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Name a time when you encountered the living God in your daily life.
2. Think of those in your community who need a glimpse of God’s grace and love.
3. What prevents our church from focusing outward on joining the living Christ?
4. What would it require for us to share God’s grace to the lowly and “least of these,” the marginalized and the poor, the broken and the oppressed; the ones God calls “beloved,” and will not stop pursuing until the lost are found in Christ?

Closing Prayer

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



Empower Servant Leadership

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

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

Scripture: John 13:1–20

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

Background

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

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

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

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

Closing Prayer

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

5

Spirit-Inspired Worship

Opening Prayer

God of all praise and glory,
You call us to rejoice in you, to praise your name, to find comfort in your presence, to stand in awe, to bow in confession, to come and worship. And in your worship, you meet us there. Your Spirit proclaims truth, your Word anoints us with wisdom, and your roots grow deeper in our soul. Lord, you deserve our worship each day. So, please forgive us when we forget what it is about, when we think ourselves too busy. Forgive us when we make it about what we desire or what entertains us. This sacred gift of wonder and love was meant to be so much more than we often make it. Yet we long to experience you, God. We need you. So, inspire our worship with your Spirit, so that our hearts and our lives are transformed by your wonder. This we pray to the living God who encounters us in worship. Amen.

Scripture: Hebrews 4:9–5:10

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

Background

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

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

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Describe a time when you encountered the wondrous presence of Christ in worship.
2. What does your church do to faithfully engage in Spirit-inspired Worship?
3. What things stand in the way and distract your church from Spirit-inspired Worship?
4. What prevents us from obedience in worshipping in spirit and in truth; in full exposure before the Savior?
5. What does it mean for your life that we have “a great high priest” who has granted us Sabbath?
6. How do you experience God’s presence in daily worship? Does your church equip you to worship daily?

Closing Prayer

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

6

Caring Relationships

Opening Prayer

God of perfect love,

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

Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10

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

Background

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

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

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

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

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. How does your church sow and nurture caring relationships??
2. How does the church equip and empower you to see opportunities for caring relationship in Christ?
3. Name a time when you have experienced Christ’s Agape-love? Did it happen in the church?
4. What prevents, hinders, blinds us from opportunities for true caring relationships?

Closing Prayer

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

7

Ecclesial Health

Opening Prayer

Lord,

You are the cornerstone to the church you have gathered and built, a necessary foundation. You build and bind your people together, so that the whole is greater than the sum, so we can be greater and do far greater than if we were alone. In you, we have our breath, and vitality of life. In you, we are a small part of the kingdom of God's glory and the work of redemption for all creation. Yet we make ourselves small. We forget to dream. We lose sight and wander in this world. So, forgive us for losing sight of your mission, for letting go of passion, and for ignoring the gift of being your community—the church. Heal us in your Spirit's power that we might be a community of great faith and deep abiding love for all the world to see. We pray these things in the name of the one who is not finished with us yet, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:13

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

Background

“Those in Christ are a new creation. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us” (vv. 17-20).

Paul's address to the church in Corinth is a letter explaining his lack of boastfulness in the work he has done; an all-too-important message for the church sometimes. Paul instead wants people to know that he lives knowing that his life will be judged by Christ, and that Christ's love controls his whole life. The critics of Paul's work in Corinth saw the same power struggles, popularity and positions that still occur all too often in the church today. Paul is addressing the fact that none of this is what he's about or what church is about. What matters is the heart; that's what Christ will judge in all people. And Paul sees himself as an ambassador of Christ in the ministry of reconciliation. Ernest Best writes, “Ambassadors have full power to speak for the government they represent and can commit it to a course of action. Since they have also often to reconcile opposing views and people, it is an appropriate term to apply to those who represent Christ. If we think of ourselves in this way, then we also need to remember the responsibility that goes with being an ambassador. In what we say and do, we commit our principal, Jesus.”

Ecclesial health is about all people of God coming together in what we say and what we do, because we believe that we are ambassadors of God's message of reconciliation in a broken and fearful world. It is about how we are church, how we enact and live out being church together. There are going to be critics and unhealthy functions of the church, because we are flawed and sinful human beings. Yet we have a Savior who is not finished reconciling the church and the world to God, and we get to be ambassadors and witnesses in Christ.

Reflect

Take a few moments to respond to the questions below. Share with one another as partners or the whole group.

1. Do the mission and core values of your church reflect being ambassadors of reconciliation? How?
2. Do all members feel empowered to live as ambassadors of Christ? Give an example.
3. Where is there boasting and pride in your church?
4. What would critics say about your church? What message do you put forth for the world to see?
5. In what ways does your church show ecclesial health? In what ways is it unhealthy?

Closing Prayer

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