



Come, Follow Me

Moving from
membership to
discipleship

Adult Small-Group Discussion Guide

Introduction

Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey of going wider and deeper. We move wider by our ministry and service. We move deeper by our study and learning. "Come, Follow Me" offers opportunity to delve into Christian discipleship by looking at stages of growth in Simon Peter.

The study begins with Jesus' invitation to Peter, then explores a number of events in Peter's life as a disciple of Christ. This guide, a companion to the discipleship sermon series "Come, Follow Me," offers adult groups guidance for those episodes in the life of Peter. Each session includes a spiritual practice that is intended to move us deeper and wider in our discipleship.

Our writers assumed that each group would meet for 45-60 minutes. You may wish to use the first half for prayer and reflection on the session. Use the second half to examine the spiritual practice and to make connections with the ministry and mission of the congregation.

Before each session, read the session objectives. Read and make notes about the sermon and background material. Begin each session with a prayer for guidance. Discuss the session and note the session takeaways. As a leader, you will help develop the group conversation about discipleship. Realize that the conversation should focus less on Peter and far more on the ways that the members of your group live as disciples of Christ.

Keep this question before the group: **How does the life of Peter connect with your experience as a disciple of Christ?** Invite group members to share concerns, and close your time together with prayer.

In each session, describe and discuss the spiritual practice. You may wish to begin this portion of your group time by reading the material from the study guide. Some practices, such as lectio divina, lend themselves to use by the group in the session. Other, such as fasting, will call for conversation and an agreement to explore the discipline and perhaps give a report later on the practice.

Note that you may need to adapt the plan to meet the needs of your group. Years ago I described teaching as similar to playing jazz. To play jazz, three things are necessary: knowing the melody, understanding the chord structure, and being ready to improvise. Substitute lesson theme for melody, biblical background and other material as the chord structure, and be ready still to improvise to deal with the interests and needs of your group.

Together, we travel and grow as a community of disciples. May God encourage us on the journey.

For the team,

Rev. George Donigian

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Week 1: Following

Writer: Rev. Angela Ford Nelson

Scripture: Mark 1:16-20 (NRSV)

"As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him."

Key Verse

"'Come, follow me,' he said, 'and I'll show you how to fish for people.'" (CEB)

Takeaways

- Jesus invites people to follow him.
- Radical social reorientation (radical discipleship).
- Following Jesus changes our perspective on life.
- Answering Jesus' invitation gives us purpose.

Objectives

- Introduce the participants to the series.

We follow Peter's journey in discipleship as a way of learning how we might learn to follow Jesus and become His disciples. The Rev. E. Rossiter Chellis, one of the authors of this discussion guide, puts it this way: "Our sermon series is an exploration of discipleship. It utilizes moments in the life of Peter to make general observations about the life of discipleship for all followers of Jesus. Jesus' call to discipleship is a grace-filled invitation to authentic community in which we become participants in the continued life and ministry of Jesus."
- The seven-part series includes:
 - Following (Mark 1:16-20)
 - Confessing (Matthew 16:13-20)
 - Faltering (Luke 22:54-62)
 - Transforming (John 21:1-14)
 - Serving (John 21:15-19)

- Proclaiming (Acts 2:29-39)
- Crossing (Acts 10:34-38)
- Personal recollection of their decision to follow Jesus.
- What would it mean to drop everything and follow Jesus?
- What would Jesus ask you to do?
- How do you see growth as a disciple since you decided to follow Jesus?
- What reminds you to follow Jesus each day?

Spiritual Discipline of the Week

Silence and Contemplative Prayer

Prayer has many dimensions. We thank God for our food and for rest. We thank God for the fresh awareness of God's love each morning. We praise and thank God, sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly. We pray for the needs of others, perhaps most often for those who deal with disease. We intercede for others in our prayers. We pray for our own needs. We petition God.

These are the prayers with words. Sometimes we use many words.

But we can experience other forms of prayer that deepen our relationship with God. One of those forms of prayer is called contemplative prayer.

Contemplative prayer is more than prayers of intercession and petition. It is moving beyond asking toward listening. Contemplative prayer is putting yourself into a place where you not only enter into the presence of God but you assume a posture to hear a word from God. In his book "Celebration of Discipline," (Harper & Row, 1978), Richard Foster wrote, "Christian meditation is an attempt to empty the mind in order to fill it up."

In one sense, the purpose of contemplative prayer is twofold. The first purpose is to have an encounter with God through contemplative prayer. Ruth Haley Barton – founder of The Transforming Center in Wheaton, Illinois, and formerly of Willow Creek Church – described contemplative prayer in her book "Sacred Rhythms" (InterVarsity Press, 2006) as, "a movement beyond words to an intimacy that requires no words."

A second purpose is to hear from God. In his book "The Life You've Always Wanted" (Zondervan, 2009), John Ortberg wrote, "It is one thing to speak to God. It is another thing to listen. When we listen to God, we receive guidance from the Holy Spirit."

To practice contemplative prayer, you have to believe that God speaks directly to us. Too often we do not hear God speak because we are not listening very attentively. Richard Foster wrote of listening for this voice: "I am not speaking of an audible voice, though it is certainly possible. I am speaking of an

inward whisper, a deep speaking into the heart, an interior knowing.” (“Celebration of Discipline”) For Foster, prayer is letting go of distraction until we are truly in the presence of God.

Prayer, John Wesley said, is “chief” among the means of grace. Contemplative prayer is both liberating and transformational. In the process, we give ourselves to God.

As you begin contemplative prayer, recognize that it may feel strange at first. Find a quiet place and sit comfortably and still. In the beginning you may wish to set a timer for one or two minutes. Try to focus on God, but realize that many other thoughts will pop up as distractions. You may wish to repeat a word or phrase – perhaps one of the descriptive or evocative names for God (for example, Holy God, Love Eternal, Eternal Light) – that helps you focus on God.

The deeper your prayer, the greater the distractions. It may help to say, “Distraction, I’ll get back to you when the timer goes off.” Simply focus on God and let go all else. When your time of silence ends, thank God for the opportunity and then care for whatever distractions arrived.

Contemplative prayer feels awkward at first. Contemporary life wants to fill our spaces with noise. Soon you will feel comfortable with the silence. In all your practice of this discipline, notice how God may be speaking to you. Follow through on these holy nudges.

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United Methodist Church in Camden, South Carolina.*

Week 2: Confessing

Writer: Rev. E. Rossiter Chellis

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20 (NRSV)

"Now when Jesus came to the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah."

Key Verse

"Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'"

Takeaways

- Encourage your congregants to acknowledge the value of their relationship with Jesus.
- Following Jesus can sometimes feel like a struggle.
- Being a follower of Jesus does not mean we have all of the answers.
- We experience Jesus when we participate in his continued ministry in this world.
- Peter's confession was born out of his life with Jesus and his following Jesus. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" how do you confess, experience Jesus?
- Confession is essential and commitment is necessary and only the beginning of a lifelong journey with God.
- We make a mistake as disciples if we believe our responsibility ends once we accept the invitation to follow Jesus.

Objectives

- How do you encounter Jesus in your life?
- How can we confess Jesus is Messiah with the confidence of Peter?
- Discipleship is an ongoing process of growing closer to Jesus Christ. How are you growing closer to Jesus Christ? (bible study, small groups, worship, practicing spiritual disciplines)
- How do actions affirm the words of our faith?

Spiritual Discipline of the Week

Praying the Bible

Lectio divina, a Latin term meaning “divine reading,” is an ancient and treasured spiritual practice of praying with the Bible as guide. Tradition identifies this practice in a formal way with the sixth-century Christian leader Benedict of Nursia, but praying Bible passages goes back much further than Benedict. We remember Benedict because of the process that he taught. While lectio divina is usually thought of as a group practice, this approach to praying scripture serves an individual well.

The steps of the lectio divina process are simple, and they lead to a deeper awareness of the riches of scripture and the depth of God’s love.

Begin by choosing a Bible passage that is relatively short and understandable. The passage should include strong images or strong action verbs, such as Luke 5:4-7 or Psalm 23:2. Other passages to begin the practice include Matthew 5:13, Mark 4:26-28, Colossians 3:14-16, Philippians 4:5-7, Psalm 46:10-11, Psalm 127:1-2, Proverbs 4:3-4 and 1 Samuel 3:9.

Here is the process for a group. An individual may put into practice lectio by recording responses in a journal and eliminating the sharing in the process:

1. Read the passage aloud simply for the group to become familiar with the text.
2. Read the passage aloud a second time and remain silent for one minute. Before reading the passage, ask the group to listen and notice any word or words that seem to call out to them during the reading. After the reading and the silence, invite group participants to share the word or words that attracted their attention.
3. Ask another person to read the passage aloud for the third time. Before this reading, ask group participants to listen and to reflect in silence on how the passage touches their lives. Plan to spend one to two minutes in silent reflection and then invite each group member to respond to the question, “How does this passage touch my life?” (If you are using this process alone, you may wish to write your response.)
4. Read the passage aloud a fourth time. Before this reading, ask the participants to listen with this question in mind: “Is this passage inviting me to do something in the next day or so?” Plan to spend one to two minutes in silent reflection. Allow each participant to share his or her response. End by inviting group participants to pray for one another’s concerns.

When you have completed the process, offer prayers of gratitude and commitment to God.

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Week 3: Faltering

Writer: Rev. Brad Gray

Scripture: Luke 22:54-62 (NRSV)

"Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!'

"Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly."

Key Verse

"Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed."

Takeaways

- Everyone experiences failure, struggles and doubt.
- In the midst of failure, we are not alone. God walks with us.
- The path of discipleship has ups and downs, pain and suffering.
- We all have moments of weakness where we struggle, have doubt and despair.
- When Peter denied Jesus, he experienced "spiritual amnesia." It is a time when we forget where we have been with Jesus. It is a time when we forget the good times of the faith.
- We all have a need of redemption.
- When we deny Jesus, we move further and further away from who we are.
- Even with failure, we don't stop being a disciple.

Objectives

- What difference has faith made in your life?
- Think of a time in your spiritual walk that you denied Jesus.
- When was a time when you followed Jesus, but from a distance?
- How has community helped bring you back, bring redemption?
- How have you experienced discipleship as a lifelong process of discovery with its ups and downs?
- Have you ever experienced “spiritual amnesia”? How did it make you feel? How did you recover?

Spiritual Discipline of the Week

Fasting

When the season of Lent approaches, many people choose to give up something for the season. They practice a form of self-denial in which they abstain from something they enjoy, such as tea or coffee or chocolate. Their form of self-denial is a way to follow Christ in a deeper devotion.

Fasting is a larger spiritual discipline than the seasonal practice of Lent. Jesus spoke of fasting in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18), and we know that fasting was well established in his time. Isaiah 58:6-8 describes false and true worship, including these words:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?” (NRSV)

John Wesley first fasted two days a week, and then began to fast from Thursday tea until Friday tea. He also fasted, however, before receiving Holy Communion to focus his attention on God, and he asked other Methodists to follow this example.

Simply put, fasting is a twofold act of abstaining from food for a designated period and increasing time in prayer. Traditional practice in Christianity has set that period as one day, often understood as one day a week. Tradition calls us to follow the teaching of Jesus and not call attention to ourselves during any time of fasting.

This ancient understanding of fasting includes prayer as a guard against gluttony and impure words, thoughts and deeds. Eastern Orthodox church tradition also calls for an increase of almsgiving and acts of compassion or mercy to those who are poor. Simply giving up food alone does not make a fast.

Fasting without prayer may lead to the spiritual sin of pride. So when you fast, focus on God and repent, as well as pray for others and act in charity and kindness toward others.

Think of engaging in fasting as a spiritual practice. If you are in good health, commit to fasting one day a week for a month. Pray during the time that you would spend in meals and use the extra time to minister to those in need.

If you have health considerations that keep you from abstaining from food for a day, offer an alternative fast to God. Consider fasting from social networks, such as Twitter or Facebook, for one day a week. Or abstain from apathy and engage in ministries for others. Plan to fast from talking and go without speaking for a day, using the time for prayer and devotion.

Remember that fasting and prayer go together. Fasting is not an easy practice and demands prayer. As with other spiritual practices, especially contemplative prayer, many distractions will come and try to change your resolve. Deal with the distractions by saying, "Yes, I do need to XYZ, and I will do that when I am finished with this fast (or this time of prayer)." Note the distraction and continue with your disciplined practice of fasting.

May you enjoy a humble fast and produce fruit for the sake of Christ.

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United Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Week 4: Transforming

Writer: Rev. Wendy Hudson-Jacoby

Scripture: John 21:1-14 (NRSV)

"After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

"Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'

"When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

"Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead."

Key Verse

"That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake."

Takeaways

- When we encounter Jesus it brings a shift (transformation) – a shift from duty and obligation to overflowing joy and delight.
- The encounter between Jesus and Peter shows us that when we see Christ's mercy all around us – in our ordinary, daily lives where people know us and we are known – we are changed. Christ's mercy transforms us.
- When we recognize Jesus and follow him, our eyes are open and our lives are transformed; a shift happens in our lives.

- A shift from despondency to delight.
- A shift from mere follower to transformed disciple.
- When we follow Jesus he leads us to abundance.
- When we encounter Jesus and follow Jesus we are transformed. We respond with joy and celebration.
- Jesus nourishes his disciples. He gives us power to transform. Will we accept it?

Objectives

- Where in your own journey have you experienced a shift from obligatory discipleship to joyful discipleship?
- When have you needed an abundant or overflowing experience of God's grace and forgiveness and hope?
- Place yourself in John Wesley's shoes during his Aldersgate experience.
- Have you had an experience with Jesus like that?
- How can your lived experience inform your sermon and what your community needs to move them along the path toward discipleship?

Spiritual Discipline of the Week

Journaling

John Wesley kept a journal. Daily he would record in his journal a record of his experiences and conversations. (Wesley used many abbreviations and wrote in a secret or private code that was deciphered by the Rev. Nehemiah Curnock in the early 20th century.) Wesley also kept a daily diary to list how he spent each hour of his time and the different temptations he faced. He regularly reviewed both his journal and diary to see where he needed to grow.

While journals and diaries are both written in daily, they differ slightly in purpose. Diaries primarily serve to note events, people and places. Journals record our feelings, senses, hopes, fears, dreams and more. In general, we record our life in faith in a journal.

The journal is for personal edification and instruction, so it does not have to be formal or written in a fancy book. It is, however, helpful to have a journal that is easily accessible so that you can write in it and refer to regularly. You may want to keep a journal on your computer or notebook.

Why do we keep a spiritual journal? "A spiritual journal is an ordinary, honest record of what is going on in your life, how you feel about it and your awareness of where God is in it all." (David Lawrence, "Keeping A Spiritual Journal", inspire-network.org.uk). Lawrence notes three important characteristic actions of journals: recording, reflecting and responding:

Recording – Note the main events of your life and how you reacted to them. Note your feelings and attitudes, and your heart-responses to daily events.

Reflecting – Ask yourself questions such as these to lead your reflection: How have I been aware of God today? When and where have I experienced the love of God? How have I heard God speak to me today? Has God felt absent or present today?

Responding – Your actions in writing and reflecting on your life are one way that you can respond to God. As you look over past journal pages or events from two days earlier, you may also think and write about other ways in which you could have responded to these events.

You may also use the journal in a similar way to reflect on Bible passages. You may, for example, read the daily passages in “The Upper Room Disciplines” (annual publication) or in “The Upper Room Daily Devotional Guide” (magazine), and then write your reflections and/or response to these passages.

While the journal is private, there is value in choosing a trusted group of friends with whom to share. “Keeping a journal in company with others allows you to learn from one another’s experiences and support one another in developing the practice.” (Lawrence) Some couples also take time to read to each other selections from journals written 10 years earlier.

Keeping a journal is a spiritual practice to cultivate. Here are some tips to remember:

- 1) The journal is for you to use. You set the format. You choose the size and type of book in which you wish to write, or you create a format for recording on your computer. You set the rules for recording that fits the rhythm of your life. Some people write in a journal every morning. Others write at a set time each evening. Still others write during their lunch breaks.
- 2) Buy a book or set up a file on your computer or digital device. Find what seems most suitable and comfortable for you. One friend tried to use a theme notebook with 8 ½” x 11” paper and found himself unable to use it. When he shifted to a smaller notebook, he found the daily rhythm more manageable.
- 3) Get to know your rhythm. Are you most comfortable doing daily journaling? Every other day? Weekly?
- 4) Set a time for writing. If you choose to journal on a weekly basis, decide on a regular day and time when you can be most attentive.
- 5) Choose a medium that is best for you. Do you write poems? Draw? Sing? Write or play music? Use these gifts to reflect on your life in God. You may look back and see a journal that contains words, sketches, musical notation and more.
- 6) Use your journal as a platform for prayer. That is the primary reason to keep a journal: reflection on happenings in life and our prayerful response to what has happened and what is before us.

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Week 5: Serving

Writer: Rev. Neal Woods

Scripture: John 21:15-19 (NRSV)

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'

"And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'"

Key Verse

"He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'"

Takeaways

- This is the question asked of all of us who claim to be followers of this Messiah, this crucified and resurrected one, this God with us. Do we love Jesus? Are we committed to him above all else? Will we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him?
- Jesus is reminding Peter that disciples are called to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength and to express that love by loving their neighbors as themselves. He reminds him of what he told the disciples in the upper room when he washed their feet: Love one another. Disciples are to love one another as Jesus has loved them.
- Faith = Discipleship; being in relationship with the ONE who:
 - Created us
 - Redeemed us
 - Sustains us
 - Loves us beyond imagination

- "We are all called to join in the healing work of the kingdom. Living into this call is part of living out the eternal life we long for." (Sermon)
- "When we are faithless, God remains faithful." (Good news)
- When we stumble God picks us up. (Good news)
- God does not give up on us. (Good news)
- "This grace allows us to live a renewed life in service to God."

Objectives

- What does it mean to love Jesus "more than these"?
- Who are Jesus' "lambs"?
- How do we live out Jesus' call to "feed my lambs"?
- What does it mean when Jesus commands "follow me"?
- What good news do you have to share with your friends, relatives and neighbors? How can you share this good news?

Spiritual Discipline of the Week

Serving Others

- Delivering Meals on Wheels weekly while praying silently for each recipient.
- Visiting nursing home residents every two weeks while praying for them.
- Tutoring third-graders each week in an after-school program while praying for the students and their teachers.
- Helping to sort and distribute clothing and food at a mission center.
- Helping to build ramps for those who need them to function in their homes but cannot afford to hire a contractor and praying for those in need.
- Teaching children basic life skills, such as sewing a button or reading and understanding a nutrition label, while praying for those you teach.

These examples show ways of serving others for the sake of Christ. Serving others is the ministry of all Christians. We do not often think of serving as one of our spiritual practices, but service to others is one more way to see Christ in others and to become open to God. As we serve others, we may notice nudges from the Holy Spirit to act in ways we had not planned. Our attitude and awareness can make a difference in our perception of service. We may simply do something in service to others, or we may see our service as a ministry that engages both the giver and the recipient in faith.

Serving is a way of living and modeling what we believe as followers of Jesus Christ. God wants us to use our gifts in the ministry and mission of the Kingdom. Our service to others begins with our study of the Bible. In the miracles of Jesus, such as feeding the 5,000 and healing the sick, we see models for our own work.

As we serve others, we also help them to understand what it means to live a life of service. Our service guides others to use their gifts and talents to serve others. Such service may lead to developing relationships necessary to helping others receive the good news of Jesus Christ. It is essential to our prayer life as we pray for others and for ourselves.

Our acts of service reach all communities, regardless of race, color, origin, creed or any other distinctions identified as barriers. We remember that Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), an especially poignant reminder of the barrier of hatred that existed between Jews and Samaritans; and yet, Jesus showed a way to cross that barrier. We may easily identify some places and situations where the need is obvious. As we listen to other voices in the community around us, we may become more aware of hidden needs.

Where do we begin to serve? What ministries in your community are similar to those listed above? How do your friends find opportunities for service? Ask them or your pastor about areas of service and ministry in the community.

What needs do you see in your community? Who is not being served? What issues on the world stage matter to you? Are there ministries serving these needs? Start there. Pray and study and act with the compassion of Christ.

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Week 6: Proclaiming

Writer: Rev. Ken Nelson

Scripture: Acts 2:29-39 (NRSV)

"Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

"Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.'

"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'"

Key Verse

"Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Takeaways

- Peter was a different disciple after receiving the power of the Holy Spirit. The messenger and message were transformed. He went from uncertain and unsteady to a daring and dynamic disciple.
- How different the life of a disciple can be when empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit can make a difference in the life of a disciple and the corporate community of believers.
- The Holy Spirit brings formation and equipment of disciples.
- The same invitation to live in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is offered to us today:

"My friends, I am confident that there are times when God gives us a dream so great, a vision so large, that it will take nothing less than the power of God to achieve it! That's Peter's story! That's our story! That's God's story. It is the story of a gracious and loving God who invites us to do great things for the Kingdom, and then equips us with the very power and gifts that we need to do the work to which we are called."

"In the Resurrected Christ, there is a power unleashed in the world for you and me. Not only is there greatness in us, but there is power to achieve greatness! The gift of God's empowerment through the Holy Spirit is offered to all. We are not left to our own devices. We are not asked to live our lives in our own strength, but in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit."

"Not only does God have work for us to do, God equips us to do that work through the power of the Holy Spirit."

Objectives

- When and how have you seen or experienced the ebbs and flows of Christian discipleship in your own life?
- What has kept you on the road of discipleship?
- What has enabled you to get back up and continue moving forward when you have faltered?
- What difference has the power and presence of the Holy Spirit made in your life as a disciple? What has enabled you to do the things that God has asked of you?
- Have you ever felt a desire to do something great, but were hesitant to do so because you felt inadequate, unqualified or unprepared for the task at hand?
- How does your life bear witness to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit?
- How do others see the power and presence of the Holy Spirit at work within your life?
- How can they see that you too have undergone a spiritual makeover?
- What great vision has God given you?
- As a congregation, what great things might God be inviting us to do in life, this community, as we lean and depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit?

Spiritual Discipline of the Week

Acts of Justice

Christians serve others as a matter of fact. Acts of service are something we do for and with others. Acts of justice are less understood or practiced. Some people believe that Christians should avoid any issue that seems to have a political basis. That opinion misunderstands the rationale for Christian acts of justice.

Christianity has a long history of acting for justice in the world. That history begins in our biblical roots. The Torah prescribed many actions on behalf of the poor; read, for example, Exodus 22:22, Leviticus 19:10, Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Deuteronomy 24:17-18 and Deuteronomy 27:19. Passages such as Isaiah 1:16-17, Micah 6:8, Amos 5: 21-24 and Proverbs 21:15 address justice and injustice in the world.

Jesus spoke of the presence of the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), and Jesus addressed even more pointed words concerning justice when he denounced the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:23-24). We also sense Jesus' concern for justice when we read Matthew 25:31-46.

Methodism's tradition of acting for justice includes work to end slavery, to change inhumane prison conditions, to end practices of child labor, and to deal with alcohol abuse. Methodism's Sunday school movement began as an act of justice to educate all children – a task not embraced by society in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Writing in the Summer 2010 issue of "Leadership Journal," Paul Louis Metzger offered this understanding as a basis for acts of justice:

"Biblical justice involves making individuals, communities and the cosmos whole, by upholding both goodness and impartiality. It stands at the center of true religion, according to James, who says that the kind of 'religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world' (James 1:27). ...The kind of religion the Bible advocates is rooted in justice that flows from the heart of God. It seeks to bring all things into the wholeness of God."

Justice expresses the impartial love of God for all people. To act for justice means that we seek healing and wholeness and fairness for all.

What do we do? The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church offer guidance and a starting point. Here is a link that introduces the Social Principles: umc.org/what-we-believe/social-principles-social-creed. From it you will be able to explore the fullness of our denomination's statement, which includes nature, economics, politics and more.

Where do you see injustice in your community? Where do you see oppression or abuse taking place? To lead your discovery, here are a few questions:

- What is the impact of opioid addiction on your community?
- What impact on your community does the increase in sex trafficking and pornography have?
- Look around to discover places where homeless persons congregate and live. How close is this area to your church? What is your church doing for these people? What changes can you bring about in the system to create deeper awareness and concern for the many problems of homelessness?
- How are children being cared for? Do you need to act for change in children's education or health policies?
- What is happening among and for elderly adults? Are systems in place to meet their needs for transportation or housing or elder care?
- Are people being excluded in any way? How can you work for full inclusion?
- Are there industries in your community that are lax in their treatment of the environment? What can you do to bring attention to this matter as an act of justice?

No matter what you do, act on behalf of Christ to bring the light of justice to the world. And as in all acts of ministry, pray before, during and after. Such prayer supports everything we do.

The Rev. Ken Nelson is the coordinator of clergy services and conference secretary for the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Week 7: Crossing

Writer: Rev. Paul W. Harmon

Scripture: Acts 10:34-38 (NRSV)

"Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.'"

Key Verse

"Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'"

Takeaways

- Being a disciple of Jesus Christ will change you.
- As disciples, we go through life discovering that much of what we thought we knew about how to live is recast in the light of God's claim on us.
- We want to illustrate the exciting and sometimes scary diverse ways in which discipleship draws us into situations where we can introduce others to Jesus Christ.
- As part of our lifelong journey as disciples, we are called to step outside our comfort zone to places where God calls us.
- I would almost be willing to bet that Peter and Andrew and the other disciples never dreamed they'd be fishing for anything but Jewish people.
- I wonder if Christians these days are guilty of the same narrow view. When Jesus told us to "make disciples of all nations," do you think he was picturing today's church in the world?
- The passage we're looking at today provides some insight into our understanding of discipleship.
- Being a disciple of Jesus means being willing to step outside our comfort zones. Jesus wants us to fish for people, and in this passage from Acts 10 we learn that "people" means whatever people the Holy Spirit leads us to, and the Holy Spirit has absolutely no respect for the barriers we human beings invent to separate ourselves from each other.

Objectives

- For the Jew sharing your faith with a Gentile carried cultural, religious and social barriers. Who are the “Gentiles” you are called to witness?
- Besides sharing your faith, what are other ways God is calling you to live out your faith?
- In Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, the Holy Spirit led him through a dream to think differently and change his course. Good preparation was an essential element of following Jesus as a disciple. So is our willingness to follow. In what ways have you gained a new willingness to follow Jesus during this sermon series?
- What have you learned about discipleship from the life of Peter?
- One of our aims for this series is for you to formulate a plan for continuing your journey as a disciple of Jesus. What are some new items you want to include in your discipleship plan?

Spiritual Discipline of the Week

Christian Conferencing

“Holy or Christian Conferencing is a practice John Wesley included, along with prayer, scripture reading, fasting and the Lord’s Supper, as a way of experiencing God’s grace. The roots are biblical. Leaders assert that every Christian should practice it, within and beyond the walls of the church.” (“Holy Conferencing: Bringing Grace to Tough Conversation,” Interpreter Magazine, September/October 2012).

A cautionary note: John Wesley spoke and wrote about Christian Conferencing. He did not use the term “Holy Conferencing.” Holy Conferencing, a modern term, points toward civil conversations, a way to value and listen to the opinions of others – in other words, to be polite even though we disagree with each other. Holy Conferencing reminds us that all our actions and conversations are sacred because they point to God.

We use John Wesley’s understanding of Christian Conferencing in this study. We hope that you will want to begin Christian Conferencing with a small group of people for the purpose of continuing your journey of discipleship. Participation in a small group is the heart of Christian Conferencing.

Kevin Watson, author of “A Blueprint for Discipleship” (Discipleship Resources, 2009) and other books on Wesley’s understanding of discipleship, wrote: “John Wesley intended Christian Conferencing to show how Christians ought to converse with one another. It was to promote social holiness that is part of communal formation. ... Wesley’s idea was to spend one hour together (beginning and ending with prayer) to communicate the truth in love, edify each other, walk with justice, mercy and truth, and to glorify God.” (From “Holy Conferencing: What did Wesley mean?” on Watson’s blog: vitalpiety.com.)

John Wesley probably had in mind the Wesleyan class meetings and the select bands when he spoke of Christian Conferencing. Class meetings included 12-20 people who expected to grow deeper as

Christian disciples. The class meetings dealt with a basic question: How is it with your soul? The select bands were smaller groups – no more than six people – who met on a weekly basis to focus on several very specific questions written by John Wesley. These questions asked about temptations faced since the last meeting and how deliverance from those temptations.

Christian Conferencing is a spiritual practice that is communal. It is obviously intended as a practice for a group of people who walk the journey of Christian discipleship together. It was originally included in the class or band meetings.

Christian Conferencing today follows a model similar to that in Wesley's time. Small groups gather to talk about the state of each person's soul, to share struggles, to bear one another's burdens, and to care for group members. Those involved in such groups speak truth in love and seek further to enlighten one another in the practices of discipleship and ministry.

Wesleyan scholar Steve Harper, whose blog is titled "Oboedire," (oboedire.wordpress.com) says, "Wesleyan spirituality is about making disciples who are holy in heart and mind: men and women who live in formative community that is developmental in nature (personal holiness) and missional in purpose (social holiness)."

Christian Conferencing is known in many forms and by many names. Covenant Discipleship groups are one form of Christian Conferencing. Emmaus reunion groups offer similar possibilities for growth. Still other Christians follow the Wesleyan order for select bands.

We hope you will join a Christian Conferencing group to do what John Wesley intended. Meet together; build one another up in love; keep one another accountable; ask each other how you are walking in justice, mercy and truth; and glorify God.

Who are some disciples with whom you can walk such a journey? You may have participated in a *Companions in Christ* group or another long-term study group. Invite some of these participants to join a group. Plan for a one-hour block each week to meet with each other to support each other on your journey and hold one another accountable.

For additional help with small groups for discipleship, you may also contact Dr. Steven Manskar, Director of Wesleyan Leadership, Discipleship Ministries, The United Methodist Church, at smanskar@UMCdiscipleship.org.

You also may wish to listen to the podcast series "Small Groups in the Wesleyan Way," featuring Scott Hughes and Steve Manskar: soundcloud.com/discipleshipministries/episode-1-biblical-basis-for-small-groups.

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This "Come, Follow Me" Adult Discussion Guide was developed and written by a team from the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. It is intended for use with the "Come, Follow Me" Sermon Series, also produced by the South Carolina Conference.

We extend our appreciation to all involved for their work.