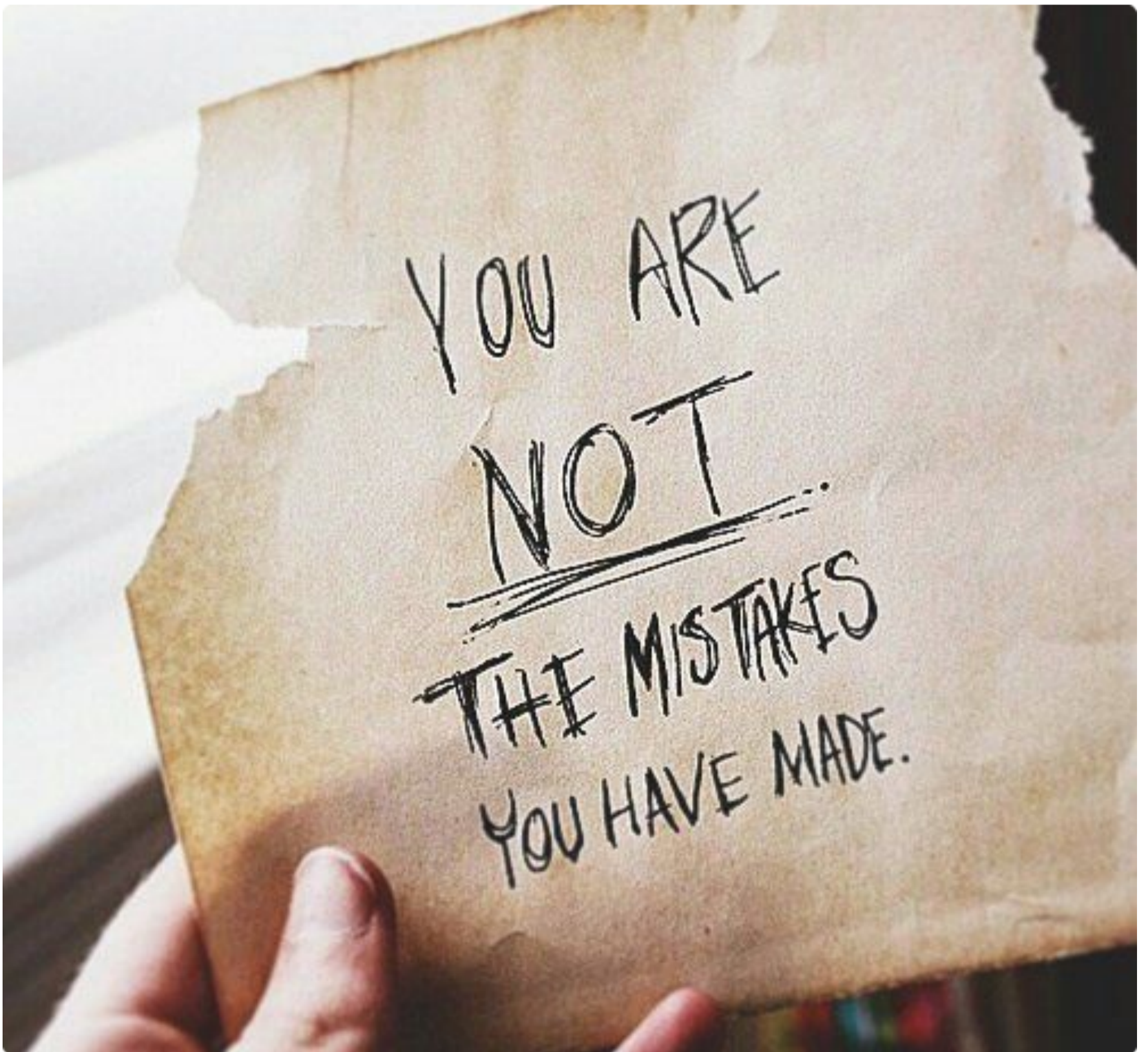


Defined by Grace



"Defined by Grace"

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Grace Episcopal Church

San Antonio, TX 78257

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Introduction

or how this book is supposed to work

Defined by Grace is an eight week sermon series and Story Group curriculum designed to help us understand what it means to be defined by God. The first week is an introduction where we examine what defines, the last week is a conclusion where discover who defines us. The six weeks in between each examine a different aspect of what it means to be defined by God.

Each week (or lesson) contains five parts:

- weekly reflection
- Bible reading
- group discussion
- going deeper
- praying together

Weekly Reflection - The weekly reflection is basically a short message about the topic for the week. It may be a story, or a teaching, or a collection of thoughts and ideas. It is designed to get you thinking.

Bible Reading - The Bible reading contains three sections. First, the Scripture passages from Sunday worship are listed. You should read them on your own, outside of your Story Group. Your group may choose to read them or not to read them during your group meeting. Second, the biblical commentary section is a series of notes taken directly from the Bible commentaries included in the bibliography. These are direct quotes; the work of scholars and theologians, not the work of Father Jay. Third, you will see the key verse for the week which encapsulates the main idea of the lesson.

Group Discussion - The group discussion also has three sections. The opening conversation is a single light, easy question that anyone can answer. I have provided an example answer in gray font. Discussing Scripture contains 3-5 questions about the Bible reading, and should help you engage the text. Finally, there is a "bonus passage" of scripture for you to read together in your group. These are shorter Bible stories with one question for your group to discuss.

Going Deeper - This is the section where things start to get personal. I have included a short, personal story from my life and experience that I'm calling "Grace Stories". Following the Grace Story, you will find 3-5 questions that will cause you to reflect on your own life and experience and invite you to share from them with the group. ***No one will ever be forced to share, but everyone is encouraged to share.***

Praying Together - This is one of the most important parts of your group's time together. You will be tempted to skip it because it's at the end. You will be tempted to shorten it because you're running out of time. ***Hear me, now: do not skip praying together and for one another.*** Don't do it. Shorten your discussion time if you need to, but don't shorten your prayer time. Several examples of how your group can pray together have been provided. These are merely suggestions; you are encouraged to develop your own methods and styles of praying together.

This is my first attempt at creating a small group curriculum. Be kind. Forgive any typos or mistakes. If a question doesn't make sense to you, just skip it. Allow "Defined by Grace" to guide you and your Story Group into a deeper understanding of your relationship with Jesus.

Wk 1 - What Defines You?

Weekly Reflection

What defines you...

your address, your paycheck, your vehicle?

What defines you...

your height, your weight, your bust size?

What defines you...

your age, your race, your gender?

What defines you...

your job, your education, your politics?

We define ourselves in so, so many ways. If we don't, then others will surely do it for us. And so much of this definition is based on externals, which means much of it is based on assumption. When I define you based on what I see, the definition has more to do with how I think than who you are.

When I was a youth minister, I worked at a very wealthy church. I remember a student receiving a really awesome truck for his sixteenth birthday. I remember this because I was jealous. It was exactly the truck I had dreamed of when I was in high school. I mentioned to his mom one day how blessed they were to be able to give their son such a gift. She snorted in derision. "Blessed? Blessed? We're just trying to keep up with everybody else. We can't afford that truck. We can barely afford our house payment. I'm going to have to go back to work just to keep our heads above water." I remember thinking, "Huh, they live paycheck to paycheck just like everyone else, only they have bigger paychecks so they have nicer stuff. Their stress and worry and financial difficulties are the same as mine." I had assumed they had paid for their son's new truck outright, probably with cash, and that they had no money problems because they had a significant income. I assumed this because of where they lived, and what they drove, and how they dressed, and what the father's job was. I assumed this. And I was wrong.

When I define others based on the externals, I will always be wrong.

When I allow others to define me based on the externals, they will always be wrong.

Worse, when I allow others to define me at all, we will both be wrong.

I am not who I allow others to believe I am. I am neither that good, nor that bad.

You are not who you allow others to tell you that you are. You are neither that good nor that bad.

You are not who the world defines you as. The world doesn't know you. Because the world can't know you. In fact, you probably don't even know yourself as well as you think you do.

Only God knows you completely. Only the One who created you knows fully and exactly who you are.

Everyone else, including you, is just guessing, based on limited experience and assumptions. And if only God can truly know you, then only God can accurately define you.

You are created in God's image. You are known. You are loved.

Yes, you are broken by sin and marred by the difficulties of this life.

But the Lord God Almighty, Creator of the Universe, the one true God who breathed life into your mortal body chooses to define you not by your failures, or your separation, or your pain.

No, the God who loves you chooses to define you by Grace.

Bible Reading

*Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,
that by testing you may discern what is the will of God,
what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

— Rom 12:2

- Read John 3:1-17
- Read Romans 12:1-21

Biblical Commentary

John 3:1-17

2 - "rabbi... teacher... signs..." - Nicodemus' use of formulaic language reveals a limited understanding of who Jesus really is, one that fits readily with his preconceived notions of Jesus as a man of God.

3- "again" - Jesus has used a word (*anōthen*) that has two meanings. One lies on a temporal-horizontal axis (again) and the other on a spatial-vertical axis (from above). Jesus' first words to Nicodemus on his initial approach can only be understood if the word *anōthen* be given *both meanings*.

6 - to be born of the flesh means to be content with what can observe and control... Birth in the Spirit leads into a different way of seeing and understanding.

14 - see Numbers 21:8-9 - "lifted up" = "*hypsōthēnai*" - It means both a physical lifting up, as Moses did with the serpent on the spear, and an exaltation... The first use of this double-meaning verb indicates that Jesus' crucifixion will also be his exaltation.

16-17 - The Son was sent that the world might be saved, not judged... Despite the gift of the Son for the salvation - and not the judgment - of the world, a judgment takes place. It flows from the acceptance or refusal of the revelation of God that takes place in the Son... Neither the Son nor the Father acts as judge. To refuse to believe brings self-condemnation, shown in evil deeds and presents of darkness.

Romans 12:1-21

1 - "sacrifice" connotes the sense that the believer's entire existence is now wholly given over to God, as in the case with something consecrated and sacrificed to God in Temple worship.

2 - "renewal of your mind" implies the liberation of the mind from the captivity to the old, sinful age and its transformation, through the Spirit, into an apt instrument for the discernment of God's will

3 - "not to think of himself more highly" do not overrate yourself, your sphere of influence, or your sphere of operation

4 - see I Cor 12

6-8 - The explanations given with each gift demonstrate that the gifts are only as valuable as they are rightly used to benefit the community and not the bearer of the gift.

9 - "genuine love" - love like the sacrificial love of Christ, grounded not in words but in actions, extending beyond the familiar and comfortable to include the alien and the enemy

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

Think about the many different roles you fill: child, parent, worker, student, and so on.

Include gender, geography, and race. Add in some of your likes and dislikes.

Now share this information with your Story Group.

Hi, I'm Jay, just another white dude from Texas. Married, father of 3, Episcopal priest and church planter, graduate of Texas Tech. Wreck 'Em! I love books, football, and Mexican food.

Discussing Scripture

1. In Jn 3:1-8, how does Nicodemus define Jesus? Why is that safer than defining Jesus as Messiah or Savior?
2. In Jn 3:1-8, how does Jesus define one who is able to see/enter the Kingdom of God?
3. In Rom 12:1-2, what might it look like for a follower of Jesus to offer himself or herself as "a living sacrifice"?
4. In Rom 12:9-21, what does Paul's vision of "genuine love" involve and include?
5. How is Zacchaeus defined by Luke in the passage below? How is he defined by Jesus?

BONUS PASSAGE - Lk 19:1-10 - Jesus and Zacchaeus

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. 4 So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. 5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. 7 And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." 8 And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." 9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Going Deeper

Grace Story - Mrs. Del Prado

I took algebra in 8th grade. In 1983, that's what smart kids did. And I was lucky enough to get the teacher everyone wanted: Mrs. Del Prado. She was young, beautiful, friendly, and funny. I loved being in her class. The only problem was the subject. Algebra? When did the alphabet get into math? X can't be a number, it's a letter. Algebra made absolutely 0 sense to me. So I faked it. I nodded my head and smiled in class. I got my best friend to help me with my homework. I sweated and struggled and barely scraped by... until the first test.

You know that feeling of complete and utter doom? You are faced with a problem that you absolutely know you cannot solve because it's impossible, like lifting 1000 pounds or running 10 miles in a minute. That was me walking into that first test. I didn't get it, couldn't do it, and knew it at the core of my being. So when the tests were passed out, I simply stared at my paper in total bafflement. It might as well have been written in Sanskrit. I couldn't even do the easy problems on the first page. Not only could I not do them, I couldn't even attempt them. Realizing that I was going to turn in a test without a single answer on it, earning my first ever F in school, I began to panic.

That's when I noticed that salvation was sitting three feet to my right. Molly Kipp. She was the brainy kind of girl who always knew the answers and dressed like Laura Ingalls. Molly understood Algebra. Molly was going to ace that test. And she was such a goody-goody that she never even considered the possibility of the darkness in my heart.

So I cheated (sorry, Mom & Dad). I copied all of the work and answers off Molly's test. I was sneaky. I was stealthy. And I got caught.

When I turned in my test, a crafty ten minutes after Molly, Mrs. Del Prado simply said, "Jay, please see me after class." Busted! Tears filled my eyes as I crawled back to my seat. What would happen to me? Detention? Suspension? Prison? I'd get kicked out of National Junior Honor Society and off the football team. My parents would find out! I was dead. Dead Jay walking.

When the bell rang and everyone filed out of the classroom, I stayed slumped in my seat. I couldn't even walk up to Mrs. Del Prado's desk. She came to me. Head down, tears dripping onto my desk, I couldn't even look at her. She asked me, "Jay, did you cheat on this test?" I nodded my head in shame. "Did Molly know you were copying off of her?" I shook my head no. "Do you know what you did was wrong?" "I do," I bawled, "I do know it's wrong. I know better. My parents taught me better. I'm so sorry." She asked gently, "Then why did you cheat?" And I blurted it all out, how I always made A's, and numbers can't be letters, and I couldn't even do one problem, and I just didn't understand it, not even a little bit, and..."

And she said, "You know, algebra is a different kind of thinking, even for a smart boy like you. Sometimes it takes awhile to understand it. But you when you do, it will just click into place and start making sense. I promise. How about instead of giving you a zero for cheating, we spend a couple more weeks working on this, and I give you a make-up test later on. With 20 points taken off, of course."

I felt like a condemned man escaping the gallows. Light shone in the darkness. I found hope and grace and mercy where I expected only punishment and shame. And you know what? She was right. A few weeks later, something clicked, and algebra started making sense. To this day, I remember that feeling of getting it. I ran up to her after class, practically shouting, "I understand it! I understand it!" She gave me the make-up test a few days later.

It was the best 80 I ever made.

6. Who has been a "Mrs. Del Prado" in your life?
7. Can you think of a time when you deserved judgment and received grace instead?
8. Has there been a time in your life when you were Mrs. Del Prado for someone?
9. If you can do so comfortably, share a time when God has shown you grace and mercy instead of judgment.

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

Faithful and gracious God, we know that you are not slow to fulfill your promises. We humbly come before you in agreement, asking you to bring us 50 new families in 50 weeks. Enable us, by the power of your Spirit, to invite and welcome new people into our community. Prepare our hearts, that we would receive your blessings with joy, giving you honor and glory and praise. Amen.

Group Prayer

There are many ways to pray together as a Story Group. Be encouraged to include everyone in the group in praying together. Some ideas of how to pray together are:

1. Invite everyone to share prayer concerns. Each person writes down all of the concerns. Then have each person choose one person to pray for, praying for the concerns shared by that person. Writing down all of the prayer concerns allows you to pray for each other during the week.
2. Ask each person to pray for the person to the right. Invite everyone to share prayer concerns. Go around the room praying for each other.
3. Choose one person to pray for the group. Then ask a different person to pray each week.

Add Prayer Concerns Here:

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God,
so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.¹

¹ Episcopal Church. Book of Common Prayer. New York: Seabury Press, 1979. p. 832

Use this page for notes, thoughts, drawings, or just whatever.

Wk 2 - Marred by doubt, Defined by Hope

Weekly Reflection

Our world is awash in despair and cynicism. Fake news, real news, Facebook rants, and terrible Tweets. People trust their own governments less and less, and other governments not at all. We see and hear report after report of abuse and brutality and scandal and corruption. The leaders we once presumed to trust – in our churches and our schools and our communities – have failed us time and again. Power, position, and profit seem to be the only goals that matter anymore. Sarcasm and posts have replaced humor and dialogue. We don't trust our neighbors or our police or our politicians.

In this midst of this maelstrom, hope seems fragile as a soap bubble. I'm not even sure hope is welcome anymore. It seems more like a bad joke than anything else. To be hopeful in today's world feels vain, and perhaps just a little bit silly, as though a hopeful person isn't smart enough to appreciate the gravity of the problems surrounding her.

The world of the apostle Paul was not much different. When he wrote his letter to the Church in Rome, in 57 AD, his beloved Israel existed under a state of military occupation by the most powerful country in the world. His government was corrupt, a puppet regime kept in place to exercise Roman will on the Jewish people. The economy was difficult for the common people because taxes were so high. There were factions and division and disagreement everywhere you looked. The Sadducees supported the status quo. The Pharisees called for religious change. The Zealots wanted a political uprising. The Essenes favored separation. Even Paul's religion was under persecution from both the Romans and the Jews. Paul himself lived in constant danger and was physically assaulted multiple times for his faith. In fact, looking back through the lens of history, we see that Paul was martyred in 66 AD, the same year in which the Jewish rebellion began, leading to Rome's destruction of Israel in 70 AD.

Into this storm of pain and suffering, Paul dares to speak words of hope. Paul's hope was not in political strength, or economic growth, or military might. Paul's hope was not placed in anything humans could do. No, Paul's hope was founded in his faith in Jesus Christ. Through Christ, and in Christ, and with Christ, Paul hopes for abundant and eternal life.

As followers of Jesus, with Paul, we are called to live in hope. We hope not because we are blind to reality but because we see the Light. We hope not that we will be spared from suffering but that God will transform our suffering into joy. We hope not that the world will change because we have faith in the world. We hope the world will change because we have faith in the One who made it.

Bible Reading

*...and hope does not put us to shame,
because God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
— Rom 5:5*

- Read Matthew 14:22-33
- Read Romans 5:1-11

Biblical Commentary

Matthew 14:22-33

22-27 - Jesus' command over nature demonstrates his divine nature. One commentator speaks of five Godlike acts in this story: walking on water, talking as God, extending his hand, saving from water, calming the storm.

25 - "fourth watch" - between 3:00 am and 6:00 am

28-32 - The faithlessness of the disciples is a common theme in Matthew. Here we see it carried out in Peter. Although many interpretations of this story see Peter as barely getting out of the boat, the Greek text suggests that he had walked all the way to where Jesus was before sinking.

31 - "doubt" - not so much a theological uncertainty or unbelief as a practical hesitation, wavering, being of two minds. Peter's problem was not a lack of conviction as much as a conflict between the evidence of his physical senses and the invitation of Jesus.

33 - This is the first time the phrase "Son of God" is used by the disciples.

Romans 5:1-11

1-2 - Stemming from Gen 1:26-28 and Ps 8:5-8, Paul uses the idea that "glory" denotes "likeness to God" based on bearing God's image... What is distinctive for Paul is that the "hope" for this glory rests not upon human achievement but upon God's saving action now being realized in Christ, who facilitates and models this glory.

3-4 - Paul's belief that suffering produces hope rests in the widely held belief of both the Jewish wisdom tradition and the Stoic philosophy that suffering is "disciplinary" toward testing and refining one's character. However, Paul adds his own christological twist to this idea in vv1-2.

6-11 - Paul builds a logical argument that basically says, "See, this is how much God loves us!"

9 - "justified" - accepted and declared to be in right relationship with God

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

What are some of the questions you want to ask God when you get to Heaven?

Hey God, so I've been wondering, what's up with mosquitoes?

Discussing Scripture

1. In the Nooma video "Rain," Pastor Rob Bell suggests that Peter sinks because he doubts his ability to be like Jesus, rather than doubting Jesus. What do you think?
2. Discuss the concept of doubt as noted in the Bible Commentary section for v31
3. Who do you think Paul means when he refers to "enemies" in v10?
4. How is the woman defined in the passage below? How is Jesus defined? By whom?

BONUS PASSAGE - Jn 4:7-30 - The Woman at the Well

7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 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 now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 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 worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people 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 (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." 27 Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" 28 So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 29 "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" 30 They went out of the town and were coming to him.

Going Deeper

Grace Story - Jimmy & Josey

I was eating lunch at a café in a small town north of Seguin when I noticed a young guy, around my age, crying with his head down on the table. I was wearing my clerical collar, so the waitress asked me, "Are you some kind of pastor?" When I told her I was, she asked, "Would you please talk to my friend over there, his two-year-old son was just killed in a car accident." Whoa. Not what I was expecting. To be honest, not what I wanted, either. I had just come back to work after being out for a week with my best friend whose five-year-old son had died due to complications with an illness. My heart was broken. "I don't think I can do this again," I told the Lord, "I'm not ready." The Lord said, "Go."

So I went and sat with the young man there in that café. And because I accepted God's invitation to step into the path of another person's pain, I witnessed the greatest sign of hope and redemption I have ever seen in my life.

The young man was Jimmy. His ex-wife had been an alcoholic. She had been driving drunk and got in a wreck. She had neglected to buckle their son into his car seat. She was uninjured, but their boy had been killed. To make matters worse, the local Catholic priest (Jimmy and his family were Roman Catholic) not only refused to preside at the funeral because the boy wasn't baptized, but he flat out told Jimmy that his son's death was God punishing him for the sin of divorce.

I told Jimmy that priest was an idiot and offered to do the funeral for his son. I spent the next several days crying with him, and praying with him, and showing him in Scripture that a loving God doesn't kill children to punish parents. Jimmy and his parents started attending worship at our Episcopal Church the following Sunday.

Already attending our church was a beautiful young mother of three named Josey. Josey attended worship with her daughters, but without her husband. Their marriage had been rocky for some time because he was a drug addict. By this time, he was in prison, after going on a drug-fueled rampage that ended with him driving his pick-up into the living room of the house where Josey and the girls were hiding.

Jimmy and his parents sat in the pew behind Josey and her girls.

Time passed, as it will, and eventually Jimmy noticed the pretty young woman sitting in front of him on Sundays. He asked her out on a date. They later told me their first conversation began with her saying, "Do you smoke meth, or use any kind of drugs?" "Nope," he said, "Do you start drinking wine at 10:00 in the morning?" "I don't drink at all," she replied. And things just got better from there.

The man who had lost his wife and son found a wife and three daughters (who adore him).

The woman who had lost her husband and her daughters' father found a husband and a father for her girls.

Everyone cried at the wedding.

1. If you can do so safely, share a time when you were disappointed or betrayed by the Church or a church leader.
2. What has God done with that disappointment and betrayal?
3. Can you think of a time when you were surprised by unexpected hope?
4. If you can do so safely, share a time when you were in a dark place in life. What has God done with that?
5. What are you hopeful for at this point in your life?

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

Faithful and gracious God, we know that you are not slow to fulfill your promises. We humbly come before you in agreement, asking you to bring us 50 new families in 50 weeks. Enable us, by the power of your Spirit, to invite and welcome new people into our community. Prepare our hearts, that we would receive your blessings with joy, giving you honor and glory and praise. Amen.

Group Prayer

There are many ways to pray together as a Story Group. Be encouraged to include everyone in the group in praying together. Some ideas of how to pray together are:

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Add Prayer Concerns Here:

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God,
so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Use this page for notes, thoughts, drawings, or just whatever.

Wk 3 - Marred by fear, Defined by Peace

Weekly Reflection

You remember that feeling, that sickening drop in your stomach, when you were called to the principal's office. That goody two shoes office helper kid rushed into the classroom, parading up to the teacher's desk. She leaned over and whispered into the teacher's ear, handing her a note and ostentatiously pointing to you. The teacher would stand and call you out, "Jay, you need to go to the principal's office." The class would go, "Oooooooooooooohhhhhhhhh." And you spent the long walk down the deserted hallway madly scrambling to figure what you had done to get in trouble. Or perhaps, like some of us, you tried to figure out which of the many things you had done they could possibly have found out about.

The closer you got to the office, the slower your footsteps. You eased through the doorway, hoping to avoid detection; maybe if you sat there long enough they would forget about you. But no, the hyper-vigilant secretary noticed you the second the door opened. "Ah, Jay, good. Your mother volunteered to create the fliers for the bake sale. She wanted to see what we sent out last year. Would you please take this home with you? And don't leave it in your backpack. Actually take it out and give it to her, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am, absolutely," you replied, your heart singing with joy. Reprieve! Pardon! Freedom! You skipped gleefully back to class, reveling in your escape from the clutches of certain doom.

That is the difference between fear and peace. Many people will tell you that courage is the opposite of fear. I disagree. We take courage in the midst of fear, but the fear is still present. Peace, on the other hand, peace can be found only in the absence of fear. But we spend so much time afraid that we've grown used to it and hardly dream of its absence.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you" (Jn 14:27). Jesus offers this parting gift to his followers. You need not fear, he says, for I give you my peace. The peace of God is not dependent upon what we have done or not done. The peace of God is not dependent upon us at all. The peace of God is a gift, a free gift, given by One who loves us simply because He loves us.

The peace of God drives out fear, pushing it out of our hearts the way a boat pushes water before it, slicing and sliding through it, dividing it and shoving it roughly aside. Can you imagine what it would be like to live in peace, to not be afraid anymore? Can you imagine not worrying about your finances, or fretting over your future, or fearing every possible failure?

We find the peace of God in His presence, like a pleasing aroma, like the smell of logs burning in the fireplace floating throughout the house. The more time we spend with God, the more peace infuses our being. It's a by-product, you see, a result of being with God. The more time we spend in prayer and Scripture and worship, the more we smell like God, the more we know His peace.

Weekly Bible Reading

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
Not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your hearts be troubled,
neither let them be afraid.
— Jn 14:27*

- Read John 14:18-31
- Read Romans 8:9-17

Biblical Commentary

John 14:18-31

21 - "has my commands" - To have commandments is an unusual expression.... The meaning appears to be to make the commandments one's own, to take home into one's inner being.

23 - "if anyone loves me" - It is more important to obey the commands in daily life than have a firm intellectual grasp of their content.... Jesus is saying that love for him is not only a matter of words; if it is real it is shown by deeds.

27 - "peace" - ... for the peace Jesus gives is the natural result of the presence within people of the Holy Spirit of whom Jesus has been speaking. Peace is Jesus' bequest to the disciples. He then differentiates the gift from anything the world can give. When the world uses "peace" in a greeting (it was a common expression at the time) it expresses a hope. It can do no more.... But Christ effectually gives people peace. Moreover, the peace of which he speaks is not dependent on outward circumstances, and any peace the world can give must necessarily be.... For the Greeks (as for us) peace was essentially negative, the absence of war. But for the Hebrews it meant positive blessing, especially through right relationship with God.

Romans 8:9-17

9 - "not in the flesh but in the spirit" - The contrast between being "in the flesh" and "in the Spirit" is a contrast between belonging to the old age of sin and death and belonging to the new age of righteousness and life

9-11 - Paul's use of the conditional "if" in these verses can be confusing. Precisely because the same Greek word for "if" could be translated "since" in these sentences, we see that Paul believes the Christian experience of the Roman Christians. He is not differentiating between Christians who have the Spirit and Christians who do not. For Paul, to be a Christian IS to have the Spirit, the gift of God received at conversion. Paul is differentiating between the old life before they became followers of Jesus and the new life they have in Jesus, as it is, between believers and non-believers.

14 - "sons" - as with the Spanish "niños" which means either "boys" or "children", in Greek the word "huios" means both "sons" and "children."

15 - "spirit of adoption" - works on two levels: one, in the legal sense of "adopting" a child into a family and giving him/her all the legal rights and privileges of a naturally born child; two, as an allusion to the "children of Israel." Paul again has taken a term that depicts Israel's unique status as God's people and transferred it to Christians.

15 - "Abba! Father!" - not, as many believe, a childish term for "daddy" that was not used for God. Scrolls found at Qumran have prayers to God using the word "abba." The term denotes closeness rather than childishness.

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

What are some of the things which wind up destroying your peace (dishes in the sink, difficulties at work, problems at home, car trouble)? What do you do to find peace again?

Open cabinets. My kids cannot seem to close a single dad-gum cabinet in the kitchen. Ever. Drives me crazy. And being rushed wears me out. I don't mind being busy, but rushing around from one thing to another absolutely leaves me frazzled.

Discussing Scripture

1. Where do we see the difference between what we say we believe and how we actually behave on a daily basis?
2. How is it different for you to think of peace as a positive blessing instead of just an absence of conflict?
3. As a follower of Jesus, you have received the Holy Spirit. What does that mean for you?
4. What would it look like, in your life, to be close enough to God to call him Abba?
5. How is the woman defined in the passage below? How is she defined by Jesus?

BONUS PASSAGE - Jn 8:1-11 - The Woman Caught in Adultery

1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" 6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Going Deeper

Grace Story - The Latin Final

I minored in Latin in college. This was a mistake. A BIG mistake. I did well my freshman year because the TA who taught the freshman courses was really cute, so I never missed a class. I did okay my sophomore year, mostly by faking my way through it. Then I got to the junior and senior level courses where there were only 8 people in a class and no room to fake it. I went from making A's to making, well, not A's. But hey, you only needed to make C's for a class to count toward your minor. I figured I had made it that far, might as well see it through.

My final senior level Latin course was on Virgil's Aeneid. Cool, I thought. This should be a fun class. Wrong. We had a visiting professor from Australia and he was tough. All we did, all class long, was translate Virgil. He expected us to be able to sight read Latin, reading in Latin and translating into English as we read. Did I mention that I pretty much faked my way through sophomore Latin? Well, I was not up to par when it came to Virgil. It didn't help that every time the prof opened his mouth all I heard was, "Fosters. Australian for beer."

So I started to study. I studied Latin like I hadn't studied since my first semester. And I improved. But not enough. The gap between what I was supposed to know and what I actually knew was simply too wide. As the semester wore on, this became more and more apparent. Then came the final.

I stayed up all night studying. About 4:00 am, I realized there was no way I was going to pass. It was impossible. So I closed my book, turned off my alarm, and decided just to skip it. I'd fail, but I could take it again next semester.

The final was scheduled for 10:00 am. My phone rang at 10:20. It was my Latin professor. What could I do? I couldn't tell him I'd decided to skip the final. So I pretended that I overslept. "Oh my gosh, I'll be there in 15 minutes," I gushed. He said, "No worries. Take your time. Eat breakfast. You can stay after and finish your exam in my office."

Oh great. Not only did I have to go take a final I was doomed to fail, but now I had to pretend to know what I was doing long enough to stay late and finish the exam in his office. And the professor was being incredibly kind and gracious, dang it. I jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes, and drove to campus as fast as I could.

As soon as I opened the test booklet, I knew the charade was over. I tried. I really did. But I might as well have been trying to translate ancient Etruscan. When time was up, everyone else turned in their exams, and the professor invited me up to his office. I sat at his coffee table, staring at my mostly blank answer sheet. Ten minutes crawled by. Then twenty. Then thirty. He could see my test from where he was sitting. He knew it was mostly empty. And he knew I wasn't adding anything more to it. So I decided to bite the bullet. I closed the booklet and said, "I doubt I passed, but I can't do anymore." I handed him my failure. "But before I go," I said, "I'd like to ask you one question. Can you explain the rules of Australian Rules Football to me?"

He was floored. "Aussie Football? You know Aussie Football?"

"Sure. Me and my roommates watch it every Thursday."

"What!" He shrieked. "Where? How? I've been trying to find out how to watch ever since I got here."

"Oh. It's on ESPN 2, channel 21, at midnight on Thursdays. It's awesome. We love it. We just don't understand it."

He proceeded to spend most of an hour telling me all about Aussie football. At the end of our sports-fueled male bonding, he asked, "You're a Latin minor, correct?"

"Yessir."

"So you need to make a C in my class?"

"Yessir."

He winked. "Don't worry about it."

1. How is this story an example of the peace the world gives?
2. How is this story an example of the peace God gives?
3. If you can do so safely, share a time when you felt peace flood your soul.

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

Faithful and gracious God, we know that you are not slow to fulfill your promises. We humbly come before you in agreement, asking you to bring us 50 new families in 50 weeks. Enable us, by the power of your Spirit, to invite and welcome new people into our community. Prepare our hearts, that we would receive your blessings with joy, giving you honor and glory and praise. Amen.

Group Prayer

There are many ways to pray together as a Story Group. Be encouraged to include everyone in the group in praying together. Some ideas of how to pray together are:

1. Invite everyone to share prayer concerns. Each person writes down all of the concerns. Then have each person choose one person to pray for, praying for the concerns shared by that person. Writing down all of the prayer concerns allows you to pray for each other during the week.
2. Ask each person to pray for the person to the right. Invite everyone to share prayer concerns. Go around the room praying for each other.
3. Choose one person to pray for the group. Then ask a different person to pray each week.

Add Prayer Concerns Here:

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God,
so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Use this page for notes, thoughts, drawings, or just whatever.

Wk 4 - Marred by pain, Defined by Joy

Weekly Reflection

In each of the Scripture readings this week, we find both joy and pain. In the gospel reading, the disciples are confronted with the coming loss of their friend and rabbi. He promises that joy will come through the loss. But they can't see it yet. We who live on the other side of Easter know what is going to happen because for us it already has happened. But the disciples don't. They have to move through the pain of Good Friday to find the joy of Easter morning.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we see the suffering of the Corinthians due to the chastisement they had received from Paul in a previous letter. Then we see Paul's suffering because he is upset that the Corinthians are upset! Yet even then, Paul says he was only sad for a little while because their suffering produced repentance, and that brought him joy.

Could it be that joy is the inevitable offspring of pain that has been redeemed by God? Or to come at it from the opposite direction, what if pain is ultimately the precursor to joy? Would we be so anxious to avoid the one if it meant losing the other? Maybe, just maybe, joy is the fruit from the tree of pain.

Perhaps I'm taking pain too lightly. You and I both know that joy doesn't always proceed from pain. Or rather, pain doesn't always lead to joy. Pain all too often leads to more pain, the pain of bitterness, anger, and hatred. Pain pushes people away from each other, and can even push us away from God. I once mentioned forgiving one's enemies in a lesson I taught at a church. An elderly woman came up to me afterwards and screeched, "Don't tell me about forgiveness. My son was a police officer killed in the line of duty thirty-five years ago. I will never forgive the monster who took him from me. Never!" And look what you have to show for it, I thought, thirty-five years of anguish and torment.

I do not intend that as judgement – who am I to judge her loss? – merely as description. I saw in her the results of a life lived with a profound absence of joy.

So what of this thing called joy? Where do we find it? How do we hold onto it? Can it be grasped, like a popsicle, or does it melt away in the heat of our sweaty hands? In the Scriptures, we see that joy is a gift of God, granted through the Holy Spirit, and most abundantly known in the Spirit's presence. Joy is closely tied with the peace of God, especially in John's gospel.

C.S. Lewis suggests both happiness and pleasure are but paltry substitutes for joy. He wrote, "I doubt whether anyone who has tasted [joy] would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is." ²

Perhaps we can best understand and appreciate joy as a product of redemption. We see but the shadow of joy in the redemptive experiences we have in relationships in the here and now. But to truly experience JOY, we must participate in the redemptive work of God. We receive redemption through Christ and find joy in the shadow of the cross. We share redemption with others through acts of mercy and forgiveness and find joy in the creative work of God. We experience redemption by the power of the Spirit in confession, worship, and prayer. Thus we find joy in the presence of the Spirit.

² Lewis, C.S. and Owen Barfield. 1955. *Surprised by joy: the shape of my early life*.

Weekly Bible Reading

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit
you may abound in hope.
— Rom 15:13*

- Read John 16:16-24
- Read 2 Corinthians 7:2-9

Biblical Commentary

John 16:16-24

17 - Notice the disciples ask each other what Jesus is talking about. They don't ask him.

20 & 23 - "Truly, truly I say to you" - This is the ESV translation's way of handling "Amen", which is the transliteration of an Aramaic or Hebrew word, the participle of the verb that means "to confirm"; it was used to indicate one's assent.... In the gospels it is used only by Jesus, and always as a prefix to significant statements. Presumably this is to mark them out as solemn and true and important.

20 - "your sorrow will turn into joy" - It may be significant that he does not speak of their sorrow as being replaced by joy, but of turning into it. The very same thing, the cross, would be to them first a cause of sorrow but later a source of joy.

21 - The background to these words is found in Old Testament passages (Isa 26:17, Hos 13:13-15, Isa 66:7-14) which combine the thoughts of childbirth and resurrection.

2 Corinthians 7:2-9

2 - "in your hearts" - this phrase does not appear in the Greek text

3 - Paul intends: I carry you in my heart, and this means we together will die and live; we are together, we are united so as to die together and to live together

7 - In this instance consolation and joy appear to be very close to each other in meaning.

9 - Paul does not rejoice in the Corinthians sadness. He rejoices that their sadness led to repentance.

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

There is a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is a by-product, a short-lived feeling dependent upon circumstance. Joy is an attitude, an experience, a deeply-rooted gift from God.

Happiness is a well-cooked steak, a weekend at the beach, the Cowboys winning a football game. Joy is having dinner with my family, a weekend retreat with God, teaching my son how to play football.

Discussing Scripture

1. What might be our modern equivalent to "Amen", which shows our assent to what the speaker is saying and indicates we have taken hold of his words and made them ours?
2. What does Jesus mean when he tells the disciples their sorrow will turn to joy?
3. What causes Paul to rejoice in 2 Cor 7:2-9?
4. When have you shared a difficult truth with someone which in the short-term caused you pain or sorrow, but later brought you joy?
5. How is Bartimaeus defined by Mark in this passage? How does Jesus define him?

BONUS PASSAGE - Mk 10:46-52 - Jesus Heals Blind Bartimaeus

46 And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. 47 And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." 50 And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." 52 And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.

Going Deeper

Grace Story - Our Second Child

In December of this year, Jamie and I will have been married for 25 years. It sounds crazy, even to us. We were married in the year that we graduated from college. I was 23; she was 22. We had no idea what we were getting into, but we were young and in love, and too dumb to know any better. So we blithely skipped down the aisle into the rest of our life together.

As soon as we were married, and I mean right away, like at the wedding reception, our mothers started asking us about grandkids. We hadn't even cut the cake yet, and all we heard was, "You know, I sure would like some grand kids.... It would be great having some grandkids running around.... I'm going to start getting your old baby stuff out of the attic so it will be ready, just in case...." The ink wasn't even dry on the marriage license and our moms were already planning weekend visits by the grandkids!

It's a good thing Jamie and I spent a lot of time talking about having children. Or rather, she spent a lot of time talking about having babies and I spent a lot of time nodding my head. I kind of figured it was like the wedding - it was going to happen sooner or later, I would be participating in the process, but I wasn't real worried about the details. I knew her dad came from a big family and that she wanted to have six children. Seemed a little excessive to me, I was thinking two or three would be plenty, but hey, we would just have to see how it all worked out.

A few years went by in newly-wed marital bliss. Then I started to notice mommy magazines and baby books making an appearance on our coffee table. I seemed to recall a similar spate of bridal magazines about the time we got engaged. Hmmmm. Perhaps something was going on here. Then I started to hear about how so-and-so was pregnant, and so-and-so was pregnant, and she started disappearing on Saturday afternoons for baby showers. I remember being surprised at how quickly life had shifted from, "Oh no! She got pregnant? Are they gonna' get married?" to "Awww. She's preggers! Do they have good insurance?"

So we decided to get into the baby-making business ourselves. Except things kept not working out. After about four years of things not working out, Jamie decided to talk with her lady doctor. That was not a good day. I came home to a darkened apartment and the sound of her sobbing in the bedroom. The doctor had told her that her uterus was so scarred with endometriosis that it was unlikely she would ever get pregnant, and if she did manage to get pregnant, it was even less likely that she would be able to carry a baby to term. So we cried together, and hugged each other, and cried some more, and began the process of moving on.

Then, just about the time we started talking about adoption, she got pregnant. Woohoo! We're pregnant! You're gonna' be a mom! You're gonna' be a mom! Wait, I'm gonna' be a dad? We were as excited as any young couple had ever been. That doctor didn't know what she was talking about. Except she did. Because a few months later our joy turned to ashes. Jamie had a miscarriage. We lost the baby. We cried some more, We prayed. We commended her soul to God (we somehow just knew it was a girl, no question). Should we try again? Could we try again? What if... Could I go through that pain again? Could she? Adoption seemed like a real possibility.

Until we got pregnant again. No cheers, this time. No phone calls. Just a quietly held hope, a bare breath of possibility. Then we made it to six weeks, then nine weeks, then thirteen. The doctor said this and that, and we had to keep an eye on things, but she thought we would be okay. And we were. Jamie carried that baby to a week past her due date. She was born on December 29, 1998.

We named her Adilyn Grace. The name Adilyn is a story for another day. But Grace? Grace was easy. She was a living embodiment of God's Grace in our lives. And she has been, ever since.

6. If you can do so safely, share an experience of pain or difficulty you have suffered in a meaningful relationship.
7. Now share an experience of joy you have held in a meaningful relationship. But you cannot use either your wedding day or the birth of your children. You have to think.
8. When do you find joy in your relationship with God?

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

Faithful and gracious God, we know that you are not slow to fulfill your promises. We humbly come before you in agreement, asking you to bring us 50 new families in 50 weeks. Enable us, by the power of your Spirit, to invite and welcome new people into our community. Prepare our hearts, that we would receive your blessings with joy, giving you honor and glory and praise. Amen.

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Add Prayer Concerns Here:

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God,
so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Use this page for notes, thoughts, drawings, or just whatever.

Wk 5 - Marred by greed, Defined by Generosity

Weekly Reflection

I wonder, do any of us actually think of ourselves as greedy? We've all seen the statistics about how much of the world's resources we in the Western, industrialized world consume. And yet, would any one of us be unwilling to pay a dollar more for a head of lettuce if we knew that dollar was going to the migrant worker who picked it, rather than into the stock dividends of some corporate agri-business? How do we even measure something like greed, anyway? Is it a comparison issue, how much I have versus how much you have? Is it a stewardship issue, how I use what I've been given?

The more reading I do on the subject, the more it seems that greed is best understood as an attitude, or maybe an affliction, of more. Of course, it is a type of rough materialism, but greed isn't limited to the material. We can be greedy for experience, for attention, for praise, for achievement. What is consistent within the different experiences of greed is the problem of never having enough. The greedy person always wants more.

This would seem to be of particular danger for we who live amidst the enormous wealth of the developed world. We live in a culture drowning in comfort. And we are so comfortable we scarcely notice the rising tide. None of us is immune to the influence of greed. But perhaps we can become aware of it.

Generosity is the antidote to greed. We cannot be generous and greedy at the same time (unless we are greedy for the approval of those who will think well of us for being generous, but let's not go there). You cannot keep hold of something and give it away. So in order to discover our greed, we should look toward our generosity.

Where are you generous? And where are you not?

Are you generous with your time? Do you make room in your calendar for others, or do you allow yourself to become so busy that you barely have time for yourself?

Are you generous with your talent? If you have a gift for cooking, don't keep it to yourself; invite people over for dinner. If you have a gift of hospitality, open your home to others. If you can sing, join the music team at Grace. If you are gifted at finance, help a non-profit with their bookkeeping. You are gifted. Share your gifts with others.

Are you generous with your money? I would encourage you to make a practice of over-tipping. If you just spent \$50 on a meal, don't skimp the server just to save a few bucks. A generous tip isn't just a monetary gift but a spiritual one as well. When I was waiting tables, a generous tip could change my whole attitude, especially if I knew I didn't deserve it.

Are you generous with your relationships? Don't be chintzy with love! Love extravagantly! Love ridiculously! Love without measuring the cost! A few years ago, a buddy of mine started saying, "I love you," at the end of phone calls. He decided life was too short not to tell people they mattered to him. It was kinda' weird, at first. But now I look forward to it and even say it back. It's always nice to hear that someone loves you.

As Bob Goff says in book *Love Does*, "... love is never stationary. In the end, love doesn't just keep thinking about it or keep planning for it. Simply put: love does."³ Now that is generosity.

³ Goff, Bob. *Love Does*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012.

Weekly Bible Reading

*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need,
yet closes his heart against him,
how does God's love abide in him?
— 1 Jn 3:17*

- Read Mark 12:41-44
- Read 1 John 3:11-24 (not the gospel, the 1st Letter of John)

Biblical Commentary

Mark 12:41-44

42 - "two small copper coins" - In Greek, two *lepta*, which equal a *kodrantes*, a small Roman copper coin about 1/64 of a *denarius*, which was a day's wage for a laborer. In the Hebrew world, the coins would have equalled 1/400 of a *shekel*, or about 1/8 of a US penny.

42 - The fact that the woman gave two coins was significant, she could easily have kept one for herself.

44 - The disciples undoubtedly felt that those who were wealthy had made the significant contribution, since so much more could be accomplished with the sizable gifts they brought.... What they failed to appreciate was the total commitment to God that the widow's gift represented.... It was this the disciples needed to understand, for the call to the gospel is a call for absolute surrender to God and total trust in Him.

1 John 3:11-24

11 - "love one another" - The use of "one another" instead of "brother" is a clear reference to the commandment of Jesus in John 13:34

13 - The point of the argument is to encourage the readers to love one another, and the command is supported by the argument that those who love the brothers are bon of God and know God.

17 - "world's goods" = wealth

17 - "in need" = having need, an ongoing need rather than a momentary crisis

18 - "little children" - ... the author addresses his readers directly, not now as "brothers" as in 3:13, but asserting his authority and addressing them endearingly, yet also subordinately, as "little children." This form of address is preliminary to the issuing of a strong exhortation with virtually the force of a command.

18 - Though the two pairs [of words] are joined by an adversative use "but" (*alla*), word and tongue are not rejected in themselves. They are unsatisfactory if they do not lead to action and embodiment in reality.

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

Of all the different types of need which exist in the world, which one(s) are you uniquely drawn to?

.....
I like feeding hungry people. Jesus says we should. That's good enough for me.
.....

Discussing Scripture

1. Why is the widow's gift more significant than the larger gifts of wealthier people?
2. What could be an equivalent of giving "the widow's mite" in your life?
3. What does loving God look like in the passage from 1 John?
4. How is the woman defined in this passage? By whom? How does Jesus define her?

BONUS PASSAGE - Lk 7:36-50 - A Sinful Woman Forgiveness

36 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." 41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Going Deeper

Grace Story - A Computer for Every Child

I have been going on a mission trip to Siguatepeque, Honduras, every May for over ten years. This is a mission that focuses on veterinary medicine and public health. And this mission has been going on in the same part of Central Honduras for over thirty years. The veterinary teams are made up of veterinarians, vet students, vet techs, people who love animals, and willing volunteers. I am one of the willing volunteers, with a specialty in pig wrestling. I catch 'em, the vets treat 'em, and the families have a healthy pig.

But we don't just treat pigs. We vaccinate horses, cows, pigs, goats, sheep, dogs, cats, chickens, and any other animal the local children can catch and bring to us – including monkeys, squirrels, and parrots! We treat about 6000 animals in four days of work. And year by year, decade by decade, the animals in the villages where we work have grown stronger and healthier.

This is a big deal for the families. The people who live in the mountains of Central Honduras still live in an agrarian economy. Their wealth is measured in land and animals. For many of them, a sow throwing a healthy litter is the difference between meat on the table and no meat on the table. Selling a calf pays for shoes, and medicine, and school uniforms. Eggs from chickens are a daily source of protein. Helping the animals isn't only about helping the animals; it's about helping the people.

We don't just work with animals, however. Half the team does the vet work. The other half works in public health. Over the years, this has included everything from basic hygiene and home safety to simple first aid. Lately, the public health team has invested in portable optometry machines so they can check the vision of school children and provide glasses for everyone who needs them. This team is made up of retired teachers, nurses, college students, and Honduran volunteers. And they are amazing.

And that's not all. This mission trip has also raised the funds to build an elementary school for a mountain village, and a birthing center in Siguatepeque. Children have a safe, beautiful new building to facilitate education. Mothers in labor no longer have to ride a bus four hours to San Pedro Sula to deliver their babies.

But the most amazing thing this mission has done in the last few years is to take on the challenge of providing an XO Computer for every elementary school student in the country. In the whole country! This is called the Owen Project. And it is a vision born from pain.

The parents who dreamed of this vision lost their son, Owen, to suicide. They are both teachers, so in his honor they have chosen to reach out to provide a future for other children. Their love for Owen and his memory live on as they work to bring education to children most people don't even notice.

All of these peoples, hundreds of them, understand what John was talking about when he implored his people to not love in word or talk but in deed and truth. This, my friends, is what the gospel looks like.

** for more information on the XO computer, see the One Laptop per Child initiative at <http://laptop.org/en/laptop/>*

1. Have you ever been on a mission trip? What was your experience? Have you ever considered going on a mission trip? How would you like to serve?
2. How could you "go on mission" in your local community?
3. In the Church, where do you see us choosing to love by word and talk rather than in deed and in truth?
4. What are you going to do about it?

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

Faithful and gracious God, we know that you are not slow to fulfill your promises. We humbly come before you in agreement, asking you to bring us 50 new families in 50 weeks. Enable us, by the power of your Spirit, to invite and welcome new people into our community. Prepare our hearts, that we would receive your blessings with joy, giving you honor and glory and praise. Amen.

Group Prayer

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Add Prayer Concerns Here:

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God,
so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Use this page for notes, thoughts, drawings, or just whatever.

Wk 6 - Marred by work, Defined by Worship

Weekly Reflection

You are made to worship. Whoa, easy big fella' – not made to be worshipped, made to worship. You are going to worship someone or something. The question is never, will you worship? The question is always, who or what will you worship.

When it comes to worship, there are two basic divisions, with a few options. The basic divisions are this: Creator or created. That's it. You can either worship the One who made everything that is. Or you can worship something or someone that has been created.

If you choose to worship that which has been created (not recommended, by the way), you pretty much have three options. You can worship something. You can worship someone. Or you can worship yourself. True, you are a someone, but self-worship is such a huge issue that it deserves its own category.

We don't bow down and worship golden idols much anymore, but we still worship the idol of gold. Think how much of our lives is spent acquiring more and better things. Consider how covetous we are of those things our neighbors have that we wish we did. It often seems like we work only in order to worship the idol of wealth.

"America has no more stars, now we call them idols."⁴ Come on, we even named a show after them! Remember this ad campaign? "I wanna' be like Mike, I wanna' be, I wanna' be like Mike." Our obsession with celebrities and athletes borders on the obscene. But it's not only people we watch from afar, we have a tendency to worship people right around the corner, as well. We see someone at the gym with the body we wish we had. We hear someone at work who says the things we wish we'd thought of. We know someone in our circle of friends whom we think is a better father, or a better wife, or more spiritual, or more put-together, and we place them on pedestal. It may be a small pedestal, but any pedestal is too high for humans.

Perhaps the most dangerous idol we worship is the idol of self. We have a long history, going all the way back to the garden, of trying to usurp God's rightful position as ruler and king. Even though this never works out well for us, we keep trying. "It's my life," we say. "I'm in charge here. I am the captain of my destiny." We are forever trying to assume authority over our lives. Yet, as Christ followers, we know that our lives are not our own. "... You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:19-20).

One could argue that idolatry, rather than pride, is the primary sin. Whenever we lift anyone, anyone or anything into the position reserved for God, we find ourselves guilty of idolatry. We can make idols of anything: work, politics, children, sexuality, education, even religion. What we cannot do is find abundant life there. No, we only experience the abundant life when we worship the only One who deserves it.

⁴ TobyMac "Lose My Soul", Portable Sounds, ForeFront Records, 2007.

Weekly Bible Reading

*God is spirit, and those who worship him
must worship in spirit and truth.
— Jn 4:24*

- Read John 4:7-29
- Read Hebrews 12:18-29

Biblical Commentary

John 4:7-29

7 - "a woman from Samaria" - From the point of view of the orthodox Jew there were three strikes against her: she was a Samaritan, a woman, and a sexual sinner. But this mattered not at all to Jesus.... Samaria had been the capital of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, before it was wiped out by Assyria. The country was also known as Samaria. When Assyria conquered Israel, they deported many Jews and imported many Assyrians. Thus, Samaritans were viewed by Jews as less pure, and their religious differences – though they worshipped the same God – were ugly and bitter.

20 - Samaritans worshipped in a temple they built on Mt. Gerizim, which they believed to be sacred. There was a long-standing and bitter contention between Samaritans and Jews over which place was the right place to worship God: Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem.

22 - Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch as Scripture. Thus, their knowledge of God was limited in comparison to the Jews who also held the Psalms, Prophets, and the historical books as Scripture.

23 - "in spirit and truth" - Jesus would inaugurate a new system of worship, not tied to any particular holy place.... One must worship, not simply outwardly by being in the right place and taking up the right attitude, but in one's spirit.... The combination "spirit and truth" points the need for complete sincerity and complete reality in our approach to God.

26 - This is the first place prior to his trial where Jesus affirms that he is the Messiah.

Hebrews 12:18-29

18-21 - The description of the terror of Sinai is based on the account in Ex 19:16-19, 20:18-21, and Deut. 4:11. The mountain was so charged with the holiness of the God who manifested himself there that for man or beast to touch it meant certain death.

22 - As the earthly Zion was the meeting point for the tribes of the old Israel, so the heavenly Zion is the meeting point for the new Israel.

23 - "the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" - the whole communion of saints... To this community believers have come – not merely into its presence (as they have come into the presence of angels innumerable), but into its membership. All the people of Christ are the "firstborn" children of God.

28 - To the grace of God the proper response is a grateful heart, and the words and actions which flow from a grateful heart are the sacrifices in which God takes delight. At the same time, such sacrificial worship must be offered with a due sense of the majesty and holiness of the God with whom we have to do: not only thankfulness, but humble reverence and awe must mark his people's approach to him; "for our God is a consuming fire."

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

What is your favorite kind of work? Do you get paid for it? What is your favorite way to worship?

My favorite kind of work involves words and Jesus. I love reading and writing and preaching and teaching. My favorite way to worship is by singing praise music.

Discussing Scripture

1. Why is it so amazing that Jesus dared to have this conversation in Jn 4:7-29?
2. Do we often worship “in spirit and in truth”? What does it look like when we do? What could we do in order to worship that way more often?
3. How do you see worship as a response to God’s grace?
4. What does it mean that God is a consuming fire? See Deut 4:23-24.
5. How does Luke define the one leper who returns? How does Jesus define him?

BONUS PASSAGE - Lk 17:11-19 - Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers

11 On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. 12 And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance 13 and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” 14 When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. 15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; 16 and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? 18 Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” 19 And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

Going Deeper

Grace Story - Worship in a Small Town

Worship in a small town is different from worship in a city. In a city, you can worship anonymously simply by going to another church. In a small town, there are not that many churches to choose from. In a city, you may not know the person sitting next to you. In a small town, you always know the person sitting next to you, and their kids, and their parents, and their in-laws. In a city, you can hide your flaws by pretending everything is fine, and no one knows the difference. In a small town, everyone knows your business, whether you want them to or not.

There was a halfway house for men in our small town. They literally took drug addicts in off the street, gave them a place to live, work to do, and hope for a future. It was truly an amazing ministry. I got to know the pastor there because we would go hunt deer or hogs and drop off fresh meat at their house. To thank us, the pastor asked if they could come worship with us one Sunday. He would preach and they would lead the singing. How could I pass that up?

Now, you need to understand. Episcopalians are, how should I say this, a fairly sedate group when it comes to worship. Not a lot of energy there. No clapping, no dancing, no "Amen!" or "Hallelujah!" shouted from the congregation. There's no "code of conduct" or anything, but there was definitely some unstated expectations that people should know how to behave properly in worship.

Into this buttoned-down group of Episcopalians marched the men from the halfway house. They were excited. They were loud. They were fired up to get to worship the God who had saved them. They brought energy and enthusiasm and the palpable presence of the Holy Spirit with them. They were not concerned at all with what other people thought about them. They were only concerned with Jesus.

Their pastor preached, and they responded. "Amen!" They shouted. "Hallelujah!" They cried. "Preach it, brother! C'mon! Bring it!" And get this – the Episcopalians loved it! Pretty soon they were shouting Amen! alongside their new friends. Then we prayed, and man oh man, those people could pray. It was fervent, it was desperate, it was beautiful.

And the singing? Unbelievable. The Holy Spirit descended upon us. People were clapping, they were swaying, a couple of people even raised their hands in praise. I had never imagined that group of Episcopalians had it in them to worship like that.

When the worship ended, person after person kept telling me how wonderful it had been. "We need to worship like that more often," they said. "I've been trying to get y'all to do that for years," I replied. "Well that was awesome," they responded, "Let's do it again."

So the next Sunday we tried. We tried to jazz up the music. We tried to liven up the prayers. I even asked for an "amen" or two in my sermon. And we failed miserably. On our own, we simply couldn't recapture whatever experience of the Spirit we'd had the week before. I think it was because we just couldn't, collectively, let go and get out of our own way. It's not like the Holy Spirit wasn't present. It was like we couldn't cross the room to reach Him.

But that one one Sunday? Now that was worship. Episcopalians dancing in the aisles. Hallelujah!

1. Share a time when you have experienced powerful worship.
2. How do you experience the presence of God in your regular Sunday worship? (ie/ in the singing, the sacrament, the prayers...)
3. What could you do to prepare yourself to worship God "in spirit and in truth?"

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

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Group Prayer

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Add Prayer Concerns Here:

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so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Use this page for notes, thoughts, drawings, or just whatever.

Wk 7 - Marred by control, Defined by Faith

Weekly Reflection

Who are the heroes of your faith? The Bible tells us stories from days of old: Abraham, Moses, David, Ruth, Esther, and Deborah. In the New Testament we find Peter, James, and Paul. These are all heroes of the faith of the people of God. But who are the heroes in your story, the people who have led you along the path of your spiritual journey?

I think of my parents, who forced me to go to church, even when I didn't want to. I think of Sunday school teachers, and youth leaders, and Father Phil, the priest at the church I grew up in.

I think of Dave Parks, the Campus Life leader in high school who introduced me to a new relationship with Christ and taught me to read my Bible.

Who are the heroes of your faith?

Then there was Mother Jo, the priest for Canterbury at Texas Tech. She showed me how compassion could temper belief, how intelligence could fire faith. If it weren't for her leadership, I'm not sure that Jamie would ever have agreed to marry me. While I worked as a youth minister at St. Christopher's during college, Betty Ann Houchins took me in and fed me, guided me, and taught me not to take church work too seriously.

I spent a year doing volunteer work through the National Cathedral in D.C. after college. Six of us lived as an intentional Christian community and worked for different non-profits around the district. The friends I made in that year showed me what faith looked like. They taught me that being a follower of Jesus required caring for the poor.

Who are the heroes of your faith?

As a full-time youth minister at Christ Church in San Antonio, other youth ministers like Clark Niles and John Hill exemplified leadership for me. I walked in the influence of a couple of priests who formed my evangelical convictions and gave me my love for Scripture.

In seminary, I found friends who challenged me and pushed me and loved me. And I found one professor who shaped my thought and theology more than any other person before or since.

Who are the heroes of your faith?

As a young priest, I fell under the tutelage of more experienced priests like Mary Earle, who showed me the Holy Spirit, and Mike Chalk, who taught me patience. I was guided by the strong leadership of Bishop Jim Folts.

Who are the heroes of your faith?

In Seguin, I met incredible lay people like Bill and Lynn Campaign who created and led a mission trip to Honduras, and Gill and Sue Merkle who exemplified a life of service daily.

Who are the heroes of your faith?

As a church planter, John Rayls was my coach and mentor. And my incredible wife, Jamie, is my partner in ministry and mission and life.

Who are the heroes of your faith?

These and countless others have shown me that faith is a relationship rather than a metric. They have shaped me and formed me and given me hope. They have taught me and guided me and loved me enough to be honest with me when I was wrong. These are the heroes of my faith.

Weekly Bible Reading

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.
— Heb 11:1*

- Read Matthew 17:14-21
- Read Hebrews 11:1-16

Biblical Commentary

Matthew 17:14-21

From the mountain of revelation (17:1-13) Jesus and the three disciples come down to a scene of demonic oppression and human weakness which evokes a remarkably strong emotional response from Jesus (v. 17). The parallel with Moses' experience at Sinai is suggestive; he came down from the mountain with the tablets of God's revelation and was faced by a scene of religious apostasy which caused him to break the tablets in his anger (Exodus 32:15-20).

17 - Jesus' complaint has been... provoked by the failure of his own disciples, who in their lack of faith represent the failing of the people as a whole; if even they, from their position of special privilege (13:11-17), do not have the faith to draw on God's saving power, what hope is there for the whole generation?

20 - But such results are not promised only to those who have great faith, but even to those with the smallest amount of faith. [A mustard seed is proverbially small]; faith compared to anything less than a mustard seed would be no faith at all. Faith is not a measurable commodity but a relationship, and what achieves results through prayer is not a superior "quantity" of faith but the unlimited power of God on which faith, any faith, can draw.

Hebrews 11:1-16

In Old Testament times, he points out, there were many men and women who had nothing but the promises of God to rest upon, without any visible evidence that these promises would ever be fulfilled; yet so much did these promises mean to them that they regulated the whole course of their lives in their light.... Their faith consisted simply in taking God at his word and directing their lives accordingly; things yet future as far as their experience went were thus present to faith, and things outwardly unseen were visible to the inward eye.

1 - "assurance" = "*hypostasis*" - It has the objective sense of "substance" or "real essence" (as opposed to what merely seems to be so)... It has the subjective sense of "confidence" or "assurance."

1 - Our author is making much the same point as Paul makes in Rom 8:24: "hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

If you were explaining the idea of faith to a non-believer, how would you describe it?

I would use a metaphor. Faith is like... repelling down a cliff. You have to trust the rope.

Discussing Scripture

1. Why do you think Jesus was so frustrated with his disciples in Jn 17:14-21?
(hint - see what happens in Jn 17:1-13)
2. Which disciples were NOT part of the group who failed to cast out the demon?
3. Who is your favorite Old Testament character of faith?
4. We often clamor for proof or certainty when God offers us faith instead. Why do you think God does that?
5. How is Saul defined in this passage? By whom? How is he defined by Jesus?

BONUS PASSAGE - Acts 9:1-19 - The Conversion of Saul

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. **3** Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. **4** And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" **5** And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. **6** But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." **7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. **8** Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. **9** And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." **11** And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, **12** and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." **13** But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. **14** And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." **15** But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. **16** For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." **17** So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." **18** And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; **19** and taking food, he was strengthened.

Going Deeper

Grace Story - The Seven Year Crash

Every married couple should go through marital counseling. We did. And it saved our marriage.

People call it the "seven year itch." It's a semi-documented phenomena that most marriages which end in divorce do so right around year seven. The folklore says that's when the sexual pizzazz runs out. The counselors says that's when you're finally convinced you can't change each other and you're stuck with whoever you are. I say that's when the hard work begins.

In every marriage, probably in every meaningful relationship, there comes a point when you have to make a choice. Either the good outweighs the bad, or vice versa. Either the history you have makes the future worthwhile, or it doesn't. You either stick it out or call it quits.

Jamie and I hit that wall during my first year of seminary, our seventh year of marriage. Things had been going downhill for a while. We had each hurt each other a fair bit. It looked like we couldn't have children. We didn't have any money and lived in an 800 square foot duplex with blue bathroom tile and no dishwasher. Things didn't look good.

One Saturday morning it all came crashing down. We were sitting on either end of the torn blue couch we'd inherited from Jamie's grandmother. We looked at each other and said, "I don't want to keep living this way. This feels like living with a roommate you don't particularly like. Either we need to fix this, or end it. Because what we have now isn't working."

I said, "I don't want to end it. I want to fix it."

She said, "Me, too. We made a promise to God and each other. I don't want to give up on that."

It was the "no dishwasher" that did it. That's what we told the marriage counselor. "Not having a dishwasher is killing us. We fight about doing the dishes all the time. If only we had a dishwasher, everything would be fine." She looked at us like we had lost our minds. She told us we weren't really fighting about the dishwasher. The dishwasher was just something safe for us to fight about because we were scared to deal with the real issues. She spent the next several months helping us discern the real issues, then helping us deal with them.

After more than a year of hard work, our relationship was better than it had ever been. We thanked the counselor for saving our marriage. "I didn't save your marriage," she said. "You did. It was your faith in each other, grounded in your faith in God that brought you through this."

Looking back, I can see it wasn't only our faith in each other and our faith in God. It was also God's faith in us.

1. Share a brief story of faithfulness from your own life or the life of someone you know .
2. Why do we so often think in terms of measurement instead of relationship when it comes to spirituality, faith, love, etc.?
3. When or how have you seen your faith tested?
4. Who are some of the saints in your life who have demonstrated faith to you?

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

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so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Wk 8 - Who Defines You?

Weekly Reflection

A friend of mine used to say, "I am not who I think I am. I am not who you think I am. I am who I think you think I am." At first, I thought that was just so much psycho-babble hooey. Then I thought about it some more, and I began to see the sad and frightening truth in it. We are so lost to reality that we don't even trust ourselves to be who we are. We are pushed and pulled and controlled by economics and marketing and geography and culture, by forces much larger than we are. We begin to wonder, "Am I really who I think I am? I mean, I think I'm a nice guy, but am I really?"

Do you think I'm a nice guy? Here's the catch-22: even if you do, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter for two reasons. One, I don't know if I can believe you are telling the truth. Do you really think I'm a nice guy, or are you just saying that so I'll think you're a nice guy? (BTW, "guy" should be considered a gender neutral term for the purpose of this writing.) Are you saying I'm nice because you want something from me? I know you, but I don't know you well enough to be absolutely sure you're being honest. So I discount your answer, no matter what.

Even if I do believe you. Even if I hook you up to a polygraph machine and know empirically, one hundred percent, that you are telling the truth: You do think I'm a nice guy. It still doesn't matter. Because you don't know me. Not the real me, the hidden me, the secret me. You only know the me I let you see. And you might like that me, you may think that me is a really nice guy. But that's not the whole me, the real me; and if you knew the real me, you might not like that guy at all.

So I'm left guessing in the dark. I don't trust me to tell me who I am. I don't trust you to tell me who I am. So what do I do? Do I find someone I do trust, and ask them? "Hey wife, hey friend, hey child – am I a nice guy?" OF COURSE NOT! If I ask someone whom I trust to be honest, they might honestly tell me the truth. And what if the truth is that I'm wrong, that I'm not much of a nice guy at all? Do I really want to know that about myself? No sir, no way, no how.

For the Christian, for the follower of Jesus, for we who are being made new, there is a better narrative. We are not who we think we are. We are neither that good nor that bad. We are not who others think we are. We are neither that good nor that bad. We are not who we think God thinks we are. We rarely know God well enough to know what God thinks. No, my friends, we are who God SAYS we are. And God says we are loved.

The world doesn't get to define me; I'm a follower of Jesus.

You don't get to define me; I'm a follower of Jesus.

I can't define me; I'm a follower of Jesus.

Jesus defines me.

Jesus tells me I was lost but now I'm found, I was gone but now I'm home, I was captive but now I'm free.

Jesus tells me I am beautifully and wonderfully made in the image of a creative, relational, loving God.

Jesus tells me I am broken, but he is making me whole; I am dirty, but he is bathing me clean; I am wounded, but he is making me well again, and not just better, but better than I was before, better than I ever dreamed possible.

Jesus tells me I was blind, but now I see. Now I can see the truth that God knows me fully and completely. Now I can see the truth that God alone has the vision and wisdom to pronounce an accurate judgement on me. Now I can see God's judgement in the shape of the cross. And I hear God say, "You are mine, my precious child, and my grace is sufficient for you. You are forgiven. You are known. You are loved."

Weekly Bible Reading

*Simon Peter replied,
“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”
— Mt 16:16*

- Read Matthew 16:13-20
- Read Romans 3:19-28

Biblical Commentary

Matthew 16:13-20

This passage, together with its unexpected sequel in vv. 21-23, forms the central turning point in Matthew's narrative.

13 - In Matthew, Jesus uses "Son of Man" as a self-designation, interchangeable with saying "I". ... As a title it invites the question "who?" The title alone does not provide the answer.

14 - The expectation of an eschatological return of Elijah, derived from Malachi 4:5-6, was widely cherished in first-century Judaism. Elijah, or a prophet, was expected to return as a forerunner of the Messiah's appearance.

16 - "Christ" = "Messiah" - in first-century Palestine [the Messiah's] primary connotation would be of a "son of David" who would restore the action to the glory and independence it had known under the first David. It was thus a nationalistic term, and one which was hard to separate for the political aspirations of a subject people.

The people (v 13) understand that Jesus is something more than a rabbi, thus they label him prophet. Peter understands, as do the other disciples, that Jesus is more than a prophet, so he names him Messiah. Even though vv 21-23 clearly reveal that Peter's and the disciples' understanding of what Messiah really is falls short of understanding the truth of Jesus' mission and the cross.

Romans 3:19-28

20 - The Jews' inability to keep the Law reveals their sinfulness, which places them in the same position of unrighteousness as the Gentiles.

23 - "all have sinned" - Jews and Gentiles alike.

24 - believers are being "made righteous," not simply "declared righteous" and this is being achieved, not by a legal fiction – which would in effect be immoral – but through a distinctive act of God's grace effective in the redemptive work of Christ.

24 - "redemption" = liberation from some captivity, as in slavery or war, without the connotation of a price being paid.

Group Discussion Questions

Opening Conversation

Thinking back to week one, how do other people define you?

I would be defined as a husband and a father, a brother and a son, an uncle and a son-in-law. I would be defined as a not-so-young white male. I would be defined as a priest.

Discussing Scripture

1. How does Jesus, the actual Messiah, differ from the expectations the Jewish people had for a Messiah who was a royal/political figure?
2. Who do people today say that Jesus is?
3. Who do you say Jesus is?
4. Why is it significant that we are saved by grace, rather than through the Law?
5. How would Peter be defined in the Lk passage? How does Jesus re-define him in Jn 21?

BONUS PASSAGE - Lk 22:54-62 - Peter Denies Jesus

54 Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. 55 And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. 56 Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him." 57 But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." 58 And a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not." 59 And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean." 60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. 61 And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." 62 And he went out and wept bitterly.

BONUS PASSAGE - Jn 21:15-19 - Jesus and Peter

15 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." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved 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. 18 Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." 19 (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

Going Deeper

Grace Story - Defined by Grace

I grew up in the Church. Not just on Sundays, either. My family was involved. Bible studies, and potluck dinners, and children's choir. My parents helped lead various teams and committees. Our family friends, friends we have to this day, came from church. It was normal. It was expected. It was our lifestyle. Growing up in Texas in the 80's, pretty much all my friends went to church. Those who did not were somehow suspect, as though they harbored seditious tendencies. If I spent the night on a Saturday with a friend whose family didn't go to church, my parents would come pick me up early Sunday morning so I could go to church with them. Church was important.

But that's all it was. It didn't mean anything. I'd been baptized and I was confirmed in sixth grade. I knew all the words. I said all the words. And I believed them, in a sense. I believed like I believed my parents loved me, and our house was safe, and there would be food on the table. I believed, not because I chose to believe, but because it never occurred to me not to.

By the time I got to high school, it was clear that what I said I believed only marginally impacted my life. I still gave time to Church, mainly because my parents didn't give me a choice. (*Incidentally, that was one of the best things my parents ever did for me, not giving me a choice about Church. You don't give your kids a choice about school, why would you give them a choice about Church?*) But my faith wasn't affecting the choices I was making. I was always what parents and teachers called "a good kid," but only by appearance.

Then I went to Campus Life (a para-Church organization with a mission of sharing the gospel with high school kids; a lot like Young Life) and met the leader, Dave Parks. Dave was a volunteer minister. He had a college degree but worked as a house painter so he would have extra time to serve God. He drove a beat up old car, lived in a dumpy apartment, and put his career on hold so he could pursue his mission. His mission was us.

Dave knew I went to church, because I'd told him. Dave knew it didn't much matter, because he watched me. In the Spring of 1986, he invited me to hang out after school. I remember it like it was yesterday. We went to a Burger King on Bandera Road. The building is still there, though it's a Chinese buffet now. I had a whopper and onion rings. We sat at a small two-top table in the front of the restaurant. We chatted while we ate. Then Dave dropped the hammer on me with grace and courage.

"Look," he said, "you say you're a Christian but you act like you're not. And that's a problem. For one, it makes the rest of us Christians look bad. For another, it means you haven't decided yet. And you've got to decide. Either Jesus isn't who he says he is and he isn't important at all. Or Jesus is who he says he is and he is the most important thing in the universe. What he can't be is just kind of important, important on Sunday morning but not on Friday night. Jesus is either the Son of God or a nobody. You have to choose."

So I did. I chose Jesus. And my life has not been the same since. I didn't magically become perfect. God didn't speak to me from a burning bush. But he spoke to me in a Burger King. He told me he loved me. He told me I was forgiven. He told me he had a better life for me. God told me who I was and I was His. God began to define me that day, as He has continued to define and re-define me my whole life. God defined me by Grace.

1. What are some of the voices you hear telling you who you are?
2. What does your inner voice tell you about who you are?
3. Is it easier for you to hear positive things about yourself or negative?
4. How do you hear the voice of God? (in worship, song, Scripture, etc.)
5. God says "I love you." Can you hear him? Do you believe him?

Praying Together

50/50 Prayer

Faithful and gracious God, we know that you are not slow to fulfill your promises. We humbly come before you in agreement, asking you to bring us 50 new families in 50 weeks. Enable us, by the power of your Spirit, to invite and welcome new people into our community. Prepare our hearts, that we would receive your blessings with joy, giving you honor and glory and praise. Amen.

Group Prayer

There are many ways to pray together as a Story Group. Be encouraged to include everyone in the group in praying together. Some ideas of how to pray together are:

1. Invite everyone to share prayer concerns. Each person writes down all of the concerns. Then have each person choose one person to pray for, praying for the concerns shared by that person. Writing down all of the prayer concerns allows you to pray for each other during the week.
2. Ask each person to pray for the person to the right. Invite everyone to share prayer concerns. Go around the room praying for each other.
3. Choose one person to pray for the group. Then ask a different person to pray each week.

Add Prayer Concerns Here:

A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God,
so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray, as you will,
and always to your glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Use this page for notes, thoughts, drawings, or just whatever.

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