

# *discipling*



a six-week study guide on walking in the way of  
jesus, for beginners and life-long christians

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the christian churches of northern california-nevada

# an introduction to this study guide

## I. What is this?

**DISCIPLING** comes from pastors of six of the region's churches. These pastors all have a deep passion for the people of their church and for the people of the Church. This study comes from a desire to help the people they love grow in faith and understanding. This study is about asking questions and seeking answers. Each person in the study is likely to have different questions; that is good. Each one can learn something from the questions and answers others bring.

Here are a few basics so you can get the most out of **DISCIPLING**.

- ☼ **DISCIPLING** is a study about how we talk about things of faith. The writers of the study recognize that how we talk about things reflects what we think; what we think reflects what we believe. This is a study of and about words and the power of those words.
- ☼ **DISCIPLING** can be used by long-time Christians to re-connect with their faith or connect with their faith in new ways. It is also designed to help new Christians ask some key questions about their life of faith. Most importantly, it's designed to help people in your church talk about important issues of faith together. As a result, this bible study might be a great new members' program, especially if your church works at having new members and longtime members do things together.
- ☼ This study is designed using a Christian vocabulary. This might sound "churchy" at times. Words you will find in the glossary are in italics.
- ☼ For that reason, there will be a glossary. This glossary will be available in this study but also online. The online version will be interactive so you, the participant, may add your definitions and understandings to the glossary.
- ☼ The glossary is necessary because we must have some basic understanding and agreement of what words mean if we are going to use them with one another. As an example, in the second sentence above, the word church is used in 2 ways. The pastors care about the people of their churches; this small "c" church is the local congregation the pastor serves. The pastors care about the people of the Church, as well; the big "C" church is the universal church, the one body of Christ in the world, the one to which all believers belong.
- ☼ The questions of this study are meant to solicit answers but also more questions.
- ☼ Questions are good!

## II. What are we going to do?

The study has six chapters, each with a different topic/question. These questions tackle some of the basic *theology* of Christianity. These are hard questions that many people have struggled with over the past 2000 years. Hopefully, we will each find some answers. We will certainly find more questions. If we are particularly blessed, we will find peace with both the answers and the questions.

The chapters are:

- ⊗ Wonderful words of life!?
- ⊗ Why bother?
- ⊗ Where do I belong?
- ⊗ Meeting Jesus, part one: What does it mean to be fully human?
- ⊗ Meeting Jesus, part two: What does it mean to be divine?
- ⊗ So what now?!

## III. How does all this fit together?

Each of these chapters represent encounters with Jesus and the *gospel* message, and they are basically in the order that one might encounter them on one's own faith journey. What is the message? What does it mean to me? If I accept the message, where do I fit in the 2000 year history of this message? Who exactly was/is Jesus? If I get to this point, what do I do next?

Our hope is that each question will help everyone to think about the issues involved. For some, the question will be new. For others, the questions might have been answered long ago. With some careful listening and eager expectation, we can all find something of value in the answers, the questions and in our partners on the journey.

## IV. How do I teach this?!

In some ways, this study guide is designed for people who are new to the faith. In other ways, it's designed for people who have grown up with it and deserve the chance to ask old questions in new ways (our faith evolves, and it's a good idea to check in on the why's and how's every so often!) Each lesson has a slightly different flow, and while they connect to each other, they can be taught by different people, or all by the same person.

Here's an option to consider: If you have a lot of new Christians in your church (or new folks who haven't had the chance to talk about faith issues together before), this might be the perfect opportunity to make sure they're in conversation with the more mature Christians. (The benefits of those connections *definitely* go both ways.) It might be a neat idea to invite six longtime members of the church be a part of this bible study the whole way through, with each one of them in charge of leading one week, so that no one feels excessive pressure to lead the whole thing!

However you set it up, definitely feel free to read all of the written portions out loud or use them as a rough guide (making sure you get the key points across).

*Helpful hint:* Sometimes people who have grown up in the church get anxious at how blunt the questions of new Christians can be. In fact, sometimes they try to answer those very real questions by saying, “All you need to do is have faith.” This can be a VERY scary thing for a new (or “seeking”) Christian to hear...how do we know if we have enough faith?! If you are encouraging longtime Christians to be a part of a study with new Christians, spend a little time letting them know (and letting everyone know from the get-go) that during this study, it’s not our job to answer each other’s questions directly. Maybe our stories and experiences will touch one another’s hearts and help them with their questions, but our objective is to create space where it’s okay to ask questions and learn how to answer them for ourselves.

## V. How do we allow the group to go deep?

If the group has a mixture of people in it, consider one of several options:

- Ask the whole group to abide by ***Holy Manners***, a guide for communicating in ways that honor all the participants.
- Ask the group to commit to “***double confidentiality***,” anything that is discussed in the class cannot be discussed with people outside the class AND I am not allowed to discuss anything from class outside of class unless the person who said it brings it up with me.
- To make sure everyone is allowed to share however much they want to, try the practice of ***mutual invitation***: I ask someone to share, and then they invite another person to share, until everyone has had the chance to share. (You are allowed to pass, but you still choose the next person to speak.) This can help make sure everyone shares and everyone is aware that they’re sharing their time with others—the challenge can be that if you’ve spoken and someone else says something that makes you want to share more, you can’t. It takes discipline!

# week 1

## wonderful words of life

### SUPPLIES FOR TODAY'S LESSON

- ✿ Chalice Hymnal or Chalice Praise (optional)
- ✿ scrabble tiles (optional)
- ✿ flip chart
- ✿ 3x5 cards
- ✿ Clay/play-doh
- ✿ Colored paper
- ✿ Copies of the homework sheet from page 10
- ✿ Bookmarks from page 11
- ✿ Copies of the glossary from page 12

### OPTIONS FOR OPENING TIME

#### *Introduction:*

Have everyone say, "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and my favorite word is \_\_\_\_\_!"

#### *Opening song:*

Feel free to start with a song, such as "Wonderful Words of Life," #323 in the Chalice Hymnal. Any of the selections in the Chalice Hymnal, numbers 321-328 would also work. A couple of possibilities from Chalice Praise are #131, "Where Do I Go?" and #148, "I Don't Know Why."

#### *Activity 1:*

Have a bag of Scrabble tiles ready. Let each group member choose one tile. See how many words the group can form. Each person is a living tile and can be used only once. Have the "words" (people) line up for each word. See which word is worth the most points.

#### *Activity 2:*

Write the word SCRIPTURE on a white board or flip chart. Give everyone 2 minutes to find as many words as they can, using the letters of "Scripture." If you want to take the time, you might list all the words that were found. See who has the most words listed and what the longest word is that anyone was able to find.

### LESSON

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light. (Genesis 1:1-3)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, NRSV)

The history of God and God's people is one of *words*, words spoken and words heard. The gospel of John refers to Jesus as the Word. Words are as much a part of faith as God and people are. Yet words are often treacherous; the one speaking the word and the one hearing it may understand the word differently. When we listen in on those words that we find in the Bible, we can understand them differently, too.

**What words are we talking about and what makes them wonderful?**

(Give time for some answers and some speculation.)

A minister preached a funeral sermon and she started by saying, "For some people, a single word seems to sum up their being. For others, it takes volumes to even get a glimmer of who they are. Mrs. X was both kinds of people." This statement is strange but probably true of most people.

(Hand out the 3x5 cards.)

**On the card you have been given, write the answer to the following questions, one answer on each side.**

- What word would you use to describe yourself? Recognizing that you could use volumes of words, pick just one.
- What word would you use to describe God?

**Share with the group your name. If you are comfortable doing so, share your word for yourself and why you chose that word.**

Throughout the Bible we find stories of people who asked things of God. Often the questions were asked because the one asking did not understand.

- Abraham asked God if God would destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if there were righteous people living there.
- Moses asked God if he, Moses, could see God's glory.
- Hannah poured out her heart to God, asking for a child.
- Samuel asked God which son of Jesse was to be king.
- Job asked God why God allows evil to befall good people while the wicked prosper.
- The prophets ask many questions including, why me?
- The letters of the New Testament are answers to questions posed by the churches of the first century.

Probably the most poignant question in the Bible is spoken by Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You will find the details that brought Jesus to the point of asking this question in Matthew 27, which is below, or in Mark 15:22ff.

**33** And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), **34** they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. **35** And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; **36** then they sat down there and kept watch over him. **37** Over his head they put the charge against him, which read,



"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." 38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.' " 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. 45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."

50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" 55 Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Jesus, by his question, has given us permission to question. We each have questions that we would like to have answered.

*I grew up in a very small town. I went to school in a two room school house until I was in sixth grade. Then I went to school at the "town" school twelve miles away in the county seat. I remember the day, place and even the people around at that moment when I first questioned God and recognized that there many ways to look at the world around us.*

*We were studying Earth Science and the topic of how long it took the earth to form came up. In my young life, I had never encountered any opinion other than the one found in Genesis 1. I don't recall ever discussing this with anyone but I believed that story explicitly. For me to get my head around the idea that it took the earth thousands, let alone millions, of years to form, was pretty near impossible.*

*I did what any 12 year old with a bent for science and math would do; I read my Bible and my science books and tried to figure out which one was reasonable. Neither my Bible nor my Science books could answer my questions to the extent that I could ignore*

*the other. When I was completely baffled, I went to the only person I knew who might be able to help.*

*I asked my science teacher how he decided that science had the right answer. He gave me a very wise answer that I have still not completely sorted through; I still have questions that neither my science nor my seminary training have answered. He said something like, “I didn’t choose. Science and the Bible are both right; they answer different questions.”*

*I didn’t understand so I continued to read both subjects and I started praying about it regularly. Some things have been answered but I have found peace with the questions that still need answering. Those questions relate both to the Bible but to science, as well. (Natalie Chamberlain, United Christian Church Fresno)*

Sometimes we’re given the message that it’s wrong to ask questions of God, because questions are a sign that we don’t have enough faith. But if Jesus asked questions, and if many of the important figures in the Bible asked God questions—and hard questions!—then maybe that’s an okay part of our journey of faith.

**Do you recall any big question you have had for God? Are you willing to share it with the group?**

(Let people know we’re not looking for ANSWERS, just QUESTIONS, and it’s okay for people not to have answers today at all.)

## SMALL GROUP TIME

(Divide into 3 or 6 small groups, depending on the size of your group, so that each group can rotate from station to station. If 3 groups, 3 stations; if 6 groups, set up 2 sets of each station.)

**What is something in your life (this could be in your personal life, family life, in the community or in the world) that causes you to question?** The questions may be directed toward others but they may also be directed toward God.

Set up at least three stations.

- ☼ **Hands On:** Make clay or Play Doh available to each group member. Ask them to make a depiction of the thing that is at the root of their question. After a few minutes, give each member of the group the opportunity to share. Be sure to allow the opportunity to not share, as well.
  
- ☼ **Story Telling:** Ask the members of this group to use the cards they wrote in the opening to talk about how the word they chose for themselves or the word they chose for God relates to a question in their life. Limit the time each is given and allow the speaker to speak without interruption. If time allows, group members can ask one another questions about the sharing.



- ☼ **Visual Representations:** In this group you will need a flip chart, white board or similar means of making input visible to the group. Give each person some paper; you may want to have a variety of colors available. Ask each person to consider the question they would like to ask of God. Then present that question in form of a shape, a drawing, words, words made into a shape, anything that conveys the question for the person presenting it. Give each member a chance to put their question up and when all have done so, give the group a chance to discuss the exercise and/or the questions.

## CLOSING

(Gather everyone together.)

Questions are the product of an active mind. We have been created in the image of God and the questioning mind is part of our created being. Be grateful for the questions as well as the answers.

There is a homework assignment for next week. **Using this week's *Scripture*, especially verses 50-56 or others not listed, think about how Jesus' question was answered. Does the answer or lack of answer matter to your understanding of Christianity?** Bring your insights to the group next week.

Closing Prayer:

Before starting the prayer, ask everyone to take their card from the opening exercise and turn it to the side that has the word they have used to describe God. Tell the group that there will be a few seconds of silence and then they will have the chance to speak their word for God as a word of prayer.

- ☼ Silence
- ☼ Leader speak her/his word
- ☼ Give time for any who wish to speak their word to do so
- ☼ When there has been a couple of seconds of silence close with:  
    "Gracious God. We thank you for your presence and your answers to our questions. We thank you also for the questions and for the faith to seek their answers. Guide us now and always in this process. Amen."  
OR use a prayer of your own.

Gift for the week: Offer everyone a bookmark from copies made from page 11. Invite people to read it before praying each evening this week.

Hand out copies of glossary. Invite people to adjust definitions and add words they'd like to define during this series.

*discipling homework, week one:*

*Matthew 27*

46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"... 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

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**Does the answer or lack of answer matter to your understanding of Christianity?**

Have patience with  
everything that  
remains unsolved in  
your heart. Try to love  
the questions  
themselves, like locked  
rooms and like books  
written in a foreign  
language. Do not now  
look for the answers.  
They cannot now be  
given to you because  
you could not live  
them. It is a question  
of experiencing  
everything. At present  
you need to live the  
question. Perhaps you  
will gradually, without  
even noticing it, find  
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the answer, some  
distant day.

Rainer Maria Rilke,  
Letters to a Young Poet

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## Glossary

Faith (noun): According to Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”; belief that requires a lived response

Gospel (noun): Good news; in the New Testament the first four books are called Gospels and are the stories of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as told with the intent of fostering faith; the offer of life in Jesus

Scripture (proper noun): any sacred writing that holds authority for those adhering to it; in Christianity, the Bible is Scripture;

Theology (noun): literally means God talk, the study of God and religious ideas; simply how we talk and think about God

Word (noun): (1) proper noun used to refer to Jesus, (2) proper noun used to refer to the Bible, (3) used, especially in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) to refer to prophecy.

## week two

# why bother with christianity?

### Supplies:

- TV and DVD player
- Copy of the film “Unbreakable,” “City Slickers,” or “The Jerk” (preview the film to determine which clip you’d like to use)
- Big sheets of paper and a large number of markers (enough for several colors for small groups to use)
- Ziplock bags with one mustard seed in each—enough for the whole group (you can find mustard seeds in the spice section of the grocery store). You can take a magic marker and write on each bag: Matthew 13: 31-32.
- Copies of the homework at the end of this lesson.

### Optional opening:

- Invite people to share their reflections about last week’s homework: Did they think Jesus’ question got answered? Is that important to their faith or their relationship with God? Or did the quote on the bookmark help them reflect on their faith journey? Allow 5 minutes for sharing.
- Ask if people altered the definitions from the glossary last week. Invite them to pull it out and write down any words they hear today to add definitions. (For example, the “churchy” word sin shows up.)
- Light a candle. Ask people what that light symbolizes to them, if anything. Ask them where they would like to see light in their lives, this church, this community or the world this day.

### MESSAGE

*[Ask people how long they’ve been Christian, reminding people it’s okay to be in this group and have been a Christian for 100 years or not to consider themselves a Christian at all right now.]*

This may be a shock to some of us who have grown up in the church, and it may seem really obvious to others of us: you don’t have to be a Christian. Most people aren’t, and they seem to be doing OK. Many people have been deeply wounded by Christianity, and the very thought of going to church makes them (or us) uncomfortable. Throughout history millions have been oppressed and killed in the name of Christ. Some people even say that the sun is setting on Christianity as a religion. We live in a new age, and new spiritualities are emerging to fit a new era in human history.

So why in the world would anyone want to be a Christian? In the old days you didn’t really have a choice, it was either become a Christian or risk burning in hell! Today, three-fourths of Americans do not believe that you have to be Christian to be saved, and that includes a majority

of conservative evangelical Christians.<sup>1</sup> A song by folk singer Iris Dement sums up the attitude of many:

Some say they're goin' to a place called Glory and I ain't saying it ain't a fact.  
But I've heard that I'm on the road to purgatory and I don't like the sound of that.  
Well, I believe in love and I live my life accordingly.  
But I choose to let the mystery be.<sup>2</sup>

### Discussion Questions (choose just a few)

- ☼ Think of some Christians you know. Why do think they choose to be Christians?
- ☼ Have you been wounded by the church? Can you talk about it? (You don't have to, but sometimes it helps.)
- ☼ Do you think Christianity is the only true religion?
- ☼ Do you practice some spiritual traditions other than Christian?
- ☼ Do you worry about what will happen when you die?
- ☼ What do you worry about?
- ☼ Why are you here at this meeting? Really?
- ☼ What do you think Christian faith might have to offer you?

*There's a hole in the world tonight,  
There's a cloud of fear and sorrow,  
There's a hole in the world tonight,  
Don't let there be a hole in the world tomorrow.  
(The Eagles)*

[Show a clip from the film *Unbreakable*:

*Unbreakable has a number of excellent scenes dealing with how empty one feels without "meaning and purpose". This emptiness (or "sadness" in the film) could also come from sin and separation from God. On the DVD, you can trace this theme of sadness Bruce Willis' character feels (and how, after he does what he's "supposed to be doing", it goes away) in the following scenes (I've also included the time into the movie):*

*ch. 7 (0.31.40-0.32.10)*

*ch. 17 (1.02.50-1.03.35)*

*ch. 22 (1.17.33-1.18.30)*

*ch. 23 (1.22.15-1.33.34)*

*ch. 27 (1.37.44-1.38.44)<sup>3</sup>*

or *City Slickers*: Billy Crystal speaks at son's school. Disillusioned with life.

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<sup>1</sup> Neela Banerjee, "Survey Shows U.S. Religious Tolerance", *NY Times*, June 24, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/us/24religion.html?\\_r=1&scp=9&sq=&st=nyt](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/us/24religion.html?_r=1&scp=9&sq=&st=nyt)

<sup>2</sup> Iris Dement, "Let the Mystery Be" from the album *Infamous Angel*,

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.textweek.com/movies/disillusionment.htm>



*Start cue: "As Danny said..."*

*End cue: "Any questions?"*

*or The Jerk: Toward the end of the movie the main character has lost everything that is important to him. He feels a failure and is in his home announcing that "I don't need you!" and preparing to leave. But before he leaves he starts a litany of sorts. "I don't need anything ... except this ashtray (picks up ashtray). I don't need anything except this ashtray and this remote (adds the remote)." He continues like this until his arms are full of useless things. It is a vision of utter hopelessness and he is reaching for something to hold onto and finding all the wrong things. I will often ask people, "what would you pick up if you lost all hope?" It leads into some more meaningful reflections.<sup>4</sup>*

*Have a few moments to discuss the film clip, whether people know what it feels like to experience that emptiness, whether they've experienced it in the past or are experiencing it now.]*

In the Christian way of talking about it, humankind lives in a fallen state. We call it sin. But sin means more than that we do dumb things – though we all do. Sin is a broken relationship with God, and that is part of the reality within which we live our lives. It's sort of like the difference between a disease and it's symptoms; we may not be sneezing right now, but we may still have a cold. In a similar way, our world exists in a state of sin, whether or not we are committing a sin right now. Something is wrong, there is a hole in our souls.

Of course, life is also beautiful. The laughter of a child, the heart stopping beauty of the sun setting over the ocean, and the kindness of a stranger all remind us that there are many, many moments when life is good, and sweet, and well worth living. Still, it's hard to avoid the reality of suffering and pain. Something inside of us cries out with Simon, "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this...Everything is supposed to be different than the way it is."

### Discussion Questions

- Is there is a hole in the world?
- What sense do you make of the suffering of life?
- Have you ever thought of "sin" as "a broken relationship with God?" Does that change the way you approach the idea of sin at all? Does it make sense with your lived experience?
- Is there a hole in your world that you would like to share?

### "But What About Jesus?"

Maybe Christianity has its problems, but what are you going to do about Jesus? Who was this guy really? Do you sometimes suspect that if you could just understand Jesus a little bit better, it might make a big difference in your life? What was Jesus really up to? The next two weeks will really delve into this question, but as a brief introduction, you might say that the title and the subject of all Jesus' sermons was, "The Kingdom of Heaven Has Come Near." Matthew says,

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.textweek.com/movies/disillusionment.htm>

“From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”<sup>5</sup> Jesus brought the same message to every city, to every town, to every mountainside where he spoke. In fact he used the word “kingdom” over 100 times in the four gospels.

*[Pull out the paper and markers and have the group break into smaller groups. Have them draw actual images of things they imagine when they hear the phrase “Kingdom of heaven.” Have them come back together and share the images, and where those images come from.]*

The meaning of the word “kingdom” is often misunderstood. For some people the word “kingdom” brings to mind the image of a strong man (never a woman) who ruthlessly craves power and rules over others with a sword and the constant threat of violence. But in Jesus’ kingdom, the least and the poorest are the aristocrats, women are treated as equals, leaders wash the feet of those they lead, violence is met with grace and forgiveness. Jesus, the King of God’s Kingdom, does not rule over us with threats of violence, he endures all the violence of humanity and forgives us for it. His throne is the cross.

If the word “kingdom” bothers you, feel free to substitute Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s phrase “the beloved community”, or Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s image of “God’s Dream.” Or just say “God’s world” wherever you see the word kingdom and you’re getting the idea.

For most of my life I thought that heaven meant that place where you hope to go when you die, if you’re lucky. Heaven was someday, far away. But that’s not what Jesus meant. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”<sup>6</sup> Some good translators think Jesus even said, “the kingdom of God is within you.”<sup>7</sup> To be fair, the kingdom is not *fully* here, not yet. There is still plenty of suffering, plenty of injustice. There is still a hole in the world. We still wait for that day when God “...will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”<sup>8</sup> But the kingdom was planted in our world two thousand years ago, and it has been silently growing ever since. It is both now, and not yet. To follow Jesus is to live in the kingdom now, and wait eagerly for its full realization in glory.

B.B. King sings, “There must be a better world somewhere.” What if the kingdom of Jesus is really here, right now, all around us, sort of like a science-fiction movie about a parallel universe? What if heaven is hiding in plain view? Jesus described it like this:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”<sup>9</sup>

Imagine a world where the hungry are fed, the poor have enough, the homeless are given shelter. Imagine a world where everyone who is sick can find healing, and everyone who grieves finds comfort. Imagine a world where all God’s children are given compassion, forgiveness, and respect, where everyone is treated fairly and all wrongs are righted. Imagine a world at peace.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says it this way:

“I have a dream,” God says. “Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 4.17 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 10.7 NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Luke 17.21 NIV among others

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 21.4 NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 13.31-32 NRSV

ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family."<sup>10</sup>

Wow! Don't you want to be a part of that dream? Don't you want to live in that world? Don't you want to be friends with that Jesus? Haven't you always been homesick for a home you've never really seen? What if...just what if...that world really exists? What if you could go there right now?

*[Draw the picture of the kingdom of heaven again, this time as a large group. Have people shout out things that should show up in the picture, and have someone draw those things up there—this time, they might include a hospital or a food pantry or people of different races together, people taking care of the earth, etc. etc.]*

In this study, in this series of conversations, I invite you to be fearlessly honest. Be honest with yourself. Be honest with those around you. Be honest with God. You don't have to be a Christian. It's your choice. I just want to invite you to consider this guy Jesus. Spend a few weeks getting to know him. Be honest with him, and listen to him, see what he has to say. Take the teachings of Jesus for a test drive. Take this weird idea of the kingdom for a test drive. You don't have to buy the whole thing. Just check it out. And let God know what you think.

## Discussion Questions

- Do you think there is a better world somewhere else?
- Do you connect with the idea of being homesick for a home you've never really seen?
- Do you think the world could be better? What would it take?

### Closing

Give each person a baggie with a mustard seed in it as their take-home gift to reflect on during their prayers each night this week. Invite them to look at it and wonder what kind of kingdom can grow out of a little bit of effort together.

Hand them their homework assignment for next week.

Join hands—have each person mention something they're struggling with and then have the person to their left pray for God's presence in the midst of that struggle.

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<sup>10</sup> Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams, *God Has a Dream*, NY, Doubleday: 2004, pp. 19-20.

discipling week two homework:

“I have a dream,” God says. “Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God’s family, My family.”

--Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Look around for places where you see this kind of world. Look for places you see people creating this world. How does it make you feel? Does it make you feel less “homesick” for meaning? Does it make you want to be a part of something bigger? Does it have any connection to your idea of “the kingdom of God” or being Christian?

discipling week two homework:

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# week three

## where do i belong?

### Supplies:

- 3x5 cards
- Flip chart
- **Copies of “talk about where you belong” (page 21)**
- **Copies of homework (page 23)**
- **Two large containers, one labeled “God Jar” and one labeled “Bank.”**
- **Scraps of paper for people to write on.**
- **Small plastic containers (two for each participant, one labeled “God Jar,” and one labeled “Bank.”) (Hand these out at the end)**

### Opening conversation

Invite people to share definitions of words from last week in their expanding glossary.

Ask people if they noticed elements of “the kingdom of God” around them over the course of the week, and whether there were any ways they saw themselves building up the kingdom of heaven around them.

Ask if there are any ways people see this church community building up the kingdom of God, or if there are ways they would *like* to see this church community do that.

### Introduction

In the book of Genesis God creates a human being, stands back and takes a look and says, “It is not good for this person to be alone. I think I’ll create someone to keep him company!”

The creation story is not just about mating! It is a story about the intrinsic human need to be in relationship with others.

We often come to church bringing this longing with us. We hope to meet people who will be good company for us. Some people are looking for a place to discuss, work out and express their beliefs. Some are looking for a place to heal their hurts. Others are looking for a healthy place to teach their children about God’s love. Different things bring people to church, but the desire to come to a church is inevitably a social thing. We are saying we don’t want to make our spiritual journey alone. We want to share it with others. We want to belong.

### Opening Exercise

#### **Share an Experience of Belonging to a Supportive and Helpful Group of People**

Take a 3x5 card and write down the names or a description of some of the groups you have belonged to. It can be an official organization with a name or a simple group of people that spontaneously came together. It doesn’t matter how many, just write.

Now sit back for a minute and look at that card. Choose one of the groups in which you felt very much “at home.” In this group you could be yourself, you felt a solid connection with others in it, and you believe the group helped you grow in some way.

Take a moment to share with others here today a little about that group:

- What it was about this group that allowed you to connect with them?
- In what way was the group helpful to you?

Note: Leader may want to write on a Board or newsprint: “**Characteristics of a Supportive Group**” and underneath highlight some of the qualities of the groups discussed.

## Discussion

### **The Church as a Place of Spiritual Belonging**

A church is to be a place of spiritual belonging. This often means different things for different people. Some come to church to make friends. They believe the church is a good place to find the right kind of friends. Others come to have a place for their kids to grow up and learn the Christian story and to be around generous and loving people. Others may show up at church while they are in the midst of a painful time in their life and they are looking for a place that will help them to heal. Others come to learn. They have questions about God, Jesus, and human nature and want to be in a place where they can freely discuss their questions and learn more about how our beliefs shape the way we live. Sometimes, it’s a combination of these things that leads someone to be part of a church.

It helps if you can be honest about why you are there and what you expect. This will help the congregation to be able to relate to you better. If you’re not sure why you still want to relate to the church perhaps some reflection will help you understand what “belonging” means to you. Let’s look at a few Scripture passages and see what “belonging” to a church meant for the earliest Christians. Even back then, people had lots of reasons for belonging....

#### **Read Acts 2:44-47**

<sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

#### **Read Galatians 2:2**

<sup>2</sup>Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

#### **Read Romans 12:10-18**

<sup>10</sup>Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.



### **Talk About Why you Belong**

*In the section below put a check mark in front of the values that are strongest for you about belonging and discuss your reasons with the group. All these things are important to most people, but check the ones that matter the very most to you.*

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Sharing Stuff** – I belong because I have real needs or like to give to provide for real needs, or both.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Sharing Experiences** – I belong because I get a lot of satisfaction from sharing experiences with people, like communion, stories, testimonials, etc.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Learning – Studying and Discussing Christian teachings** - I belong because I enjoy studying and discussing the Bible and books that help me grow spiritually.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Giving and Receiving Support, Encouragement and Insight** – I belong because I'm looking for a place where people build each other up and experience trust and respect.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Serving and Getting Things Done Together** – I belong because we can get more done together than separately. I believe in the things the church is doing and it gives me the opportunity to use my abilities to work alongside others who are doing good things.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Praying and Meditating Together** - I belong because worship is about opening up to God and the church is one of the few places where I can share spiritual practices with others.

Discussion

### **Healing the Past**

#### **Baggage about Belonging**

Belonging is risky. It's sometimes hard to get to know people. You feel awkward and don't know how to get acquainted or involved. You may be hesitant because you've had a bad experience in the past.

Clearing out old experiences so you can be open to a new one is important. If you've had a bad experience related to a being part of a spiritual community, write it down on a piece of paper and take a moment to turn that over to God for the time you are in this group. Place what you've written in the God Jar. We're not going to talk about these things in the group now, but you may want to seek out someone you trust if you have unresolved things that make it difficult to connect with a new group of people.

Sometimes we have to put things in the God Jar over and over again!

Discussion

### **Moving Forward**

#### **Invest in Belonging**

Take a moment to look back at the different ways people get involved in belonging.

Sharing Stuff

Learning

Serving

Sharing Experiences

Support/ Encouragement

Praying

Write one of these down and put it in the little bank next to the God Jar. Stuff your paper into the bank. This represents your investment in belonging. This is the way you hang in there with keeping a real connection with others.

### **Closing Prayer**

Invite everyone to hold hands, with their left hand facing up and their right hand facing down. Remind them that this symbolizes how they receive from this community (hand facing up) and how they also contribute (hand facing down). Invite people to lift up prayers about experiencing God through this community.

Gift to take home: give everyone a "God Jar" and a "Bank." Pass out the homework.

discipling week three homework:

**Galatians 2:2**

<sup>2</sup>*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

Each night, write down something from the day you need to let go of, and put it in the God Jar. (It may be the same thing every night, or it may be a different thing each day that you're carrying.) Pray that God will carry that thing so you are more free.

Also read the scripture from Galatians, and write down something you're investing in this community of faith.

Finally, begin to write a list of things you receive from this community of faith, one each night.

discipling week three homework:

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Finally, begin to write a list of things you receive from this community of faith, one each night.

## week four truly human

### Supplies:

Copies of the three stories found on pages 25-27 and the two stories found on pages 29-30, with enough copies for everyone to have one of each story.

Scrabble tiles (enough to spell out “confusion” plus enough additional tiles so that everyone in the group has one)

Rough crosses, made out of two sticks tied together with string. Enough for the whole group. Feel free to make them very small—small enough for people to carry them in their pockets.

### Opening

Ask if anyone has definitions for their glossary from last week.

Ask if people look at the church a little differently after this week’s homework—was it hard coming up with something for each of the three assignments each night? What were some of the things we think the community offers? That we offer the community?

Ask if Jesus’ name came up in anyone’s reflections about this community over the past week. Why or why not?

### Message

Jesus was a human being. For centuries, Christians have said that God was in this human being. We can join them and say that in Jesus we can see God and God’s will toward us. God was in Jesus, or, in the language of the Christian creeds, Jesus was “truly divine”. But, at the same time, Jesus was a human being; he was also “truly human”. And we have much to learn about ourselves as human beings from what the New Testament has to say about people’s encounters with Jesus; we can see ourselves in those who encountered him. We also have much to learn about God from these encounters.

God was in Jesus, and a leper responds to him saying, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” God was in Jesus, and several friends of a paralyzed man respond by tearing a hole in the roof of a house and lowering their friend’s pallet through it to Jesus. God was in Jesus, and blind Bartimaeus shouts to him, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Like the leper, like the friends of the paralyzed man, and like Bartimaeus, we hope for the best. It is what we human beings do. It does not matter who we are or where we find ourselves or what station in life we hold, we all hope for the best. We cannot help ourselves. It is how we have been made. Even though we may fear the worst, we still hope the best for ourselves, for the people we love, for our neighbors, even for the world and all people. We hope for the best and believe. We believe that good will be done to us at some point. We believe that some good will come our way somewhere along the line.

Divide into three groups, each looking at one of these stories. (Let them know they’ll get to take the other stories home to think about on their own.) Come back together and share a 3-4 sentence summary of your group’s story and reflection.



**Mark 1:40-42**

**A leper came to him, begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.**

Why would this leper think that Jesus could make him clean? What do you think he saw in Jesus?

Jesus did what no one else would think of doing: He stretched out his hand and touched the leper. Lepers were considered to be unclean and leprosy was thought to be contagious by touch. This leper was completely isolated from other human beings. Have you ever felt isolated? Can you think of others who are isolated and alone? Why do you think these are “untouchable”? Pray for these isolated people. Would you be willing to pray that God might touch and restore them through you? How might that happen?

What was the good the leper wanted? For what did he hope? Do you think he found it?



## Mark 2:1-12

**When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”**

Apparently, the friends of the paralytic saw something in Jesus that the scribes could not see. This is why they brought their friend to Jesus and went to great lengths to do so. The scribes, however, thought it was blasphemy for Jesus to forgive the paralytic’s sins; only God could do that. Apparently, the paralytic’s friends could see God in Jesus. Do you think so? But the scribes could not. What do you think prevented the scribes from seeing that God was in Jesus?

The Gospel of Mark doesn’t say, but do you think the reason for the man’s paralysis could’ve been his sins or maybe his guilt? Are there ways sin and guilt paralyze people?

The good for which the paralytic’s friends hoped was not for themselves, but for the paralytic. Great was their faith, their belief that something good would be done for their friend; they went to great lengths to bring their friend to Jesus. Are there people for whom you especially want something good? What do you hope for people, people you know personally? You may have hopes for people you do not know personally. Pray for them all. Sometimes praying is all there is for us to do, but sometimes we can do more. What more could you do for someone?

## Mark 10:46-52

**They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.**

You kind of get the idea that people didn't think much of Bartimaeus. He and his begging and his yelling were annoying to people. And he was told, in so many words, to shut up when he cried out to Jesus. He was a man of little worth in the eyes of others. But he was still a human being; like you and everyone else, he hoped for the best. And he believed some good would come his way. Jesus came his way and he cried out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Told to shut up, he cried out even louder. Great was his faith. In what ways are some people told to “shut up”? In what ways are people's hope and faith frustrated and damaged by those around them? In what ways do human beings respond when this happens to them? Pray for all people of “little worth” and pray that we will not be the ones to frustrate or damage their hope and faith.

In these three stories and in many others recorded in the gospels we see human beings responding to Jesus with faith and hope. We can see ourselves; we can see ourselves hoping for the very best and believing that good will come our way. In these three stories, people were responding to a human being, for Jesus truly was a human being, but they were also responding to God. They saw God in Jesus; they saw who God is and God's will toward them. Who would you say this God they saw is and what is this God like? What is the will of this God toward human beings?

### Confusion

Pass out the scrabble tiles. Let them know there's one 9-letter word and some extra tiles. See how long it takes for them to find the word.

All of us hope for the best and believe that good will be done to us. It is certainly possible for that hope and faith to be frustrated and damaged by other people and by circumstances beyond a person's control to the point where a person despairs and even to the point that a person wishes that harm would be done to those who have harmed him or her. But there is another danger. We can become confused or mistaken about just what the good for which we hope really is and can choose to love a lesser good. We can see this in the way a rich man responds to Jesus and in James' and Zebedee's request that they be seated with Jesus in power and glory. Perhaps we can see a little bit of our all-too-human selves in these encounters, as well. But perhaps we can also come to a better understanding of the good that we want, can better understand the God that was in Jesus. At the least perhaps we can understand what this good is not and what this God is not.

Divide into two groups to discuss these stories (one group discussing the first story, one group discussing the other). There are copies of both stories for everyone. Come back together at the end and share three to four sentences about the story you read and your reflections.

## Mark 10:17-22

**As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.**

We would say this fellow kneeling before Jesus was certainly living right. He had kept all of the commandments since he was young; he was a good person, even righteous. Not only that, he had many possessions; he was successful and prosperous. What more could you want or expect of a person? Indeed, it says that Jesus, looking at him, loved him. But this man wondered if there weren't something more; he wondered what he must do to inherit eternal life. Why do you think such a person would so wonder? What do you think he meant when he used the words “eternal life”? Do you think he wanted to keep what he had attained—his possessions and his reputation as a righteous person—for eternity? Is this eternal life or is it something else?

The man addressed Jesus as “Good Teacher”. And certainly Jesus was good. So was this man; he kept the commandments and was therefore righteous. Why would Jesus respond to him by saying, “No one is good but God alone”? Do you think this man saw God in Jesus or only a good teacher?

Jesus said he “lacked one thing” and instructed this fellow to sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. Why do you think Jesus would have this man do this? Do you think Jesus had in mind the welfare of the poor or the welfare of this man? What do you think Jesus meant by the phrase “treasure in heaven”? Can a person have treasure on earth and, at the same time, treasure in heaven?

The story ends on a sad note: Shocked, the man went away grieving. He was unwilling to part with his many possessions, his treasure here on earth. Why do you suppose this man was “shocked” that he would have to part with his possessions? Why do you think he was unwilling to part with them? And why do you think he grieved as he went away?

What does this man's encounter with Jesus tell us about the good for which we hope, what it is and what it is not? Could this good be God and “God alone”?

## Mark 10:35-45

**James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but is for those for whom it has been prepared.” When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and the great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”**

James and John wanted what is good. They wanted what is good and hoped to find themselves seated with Jesus in glory, to find themselves in positions of power and glory, one of them on Jesus’ right and the other on his left. That would be good, wouldn’t it? Well, wouldn’t it?

Jesus’ response to James and John and the other ten disciples forces us to think about power and glory. To James and John, Jesus said, “You do not know what you are asking.” They didn’t know what power and glory, or what the power and glory of God, are. Maybe we don’t know, either. In response to the anger of the other ten disciples, Jesus pointed out that those people normally recognized as rulers—those in possession of power and glory—“lord it over them” and “are tyrants over them”. “But it is not so among you,” said Jesus. Notice he did not say, “it *will* not be so among you,” or, “it *should* not be so among you.” Jesus said, “But it *is* not so among you.” And he was talking about himself; the greatest among them was their servant and the first among them was their slave. Both, Jesus’ response to James and John and his response to the angry ten, point to his cross. In Jesus and on his cross are we to see God; we are to see there the power and glory of God. But what do we see on the cross? We see powerlessness and shame, the opposites of power and glory. Maybe we do not have a clue what power and glory really are.

The Good that every human being wants and for which every one of us hopes is not to be confused with lesser goods. There are good things in the world, things worthy of our love and our care. But we must not allow our hearts and minds to confuse these lesser goods with the highest Good. We must not fall into idolatry. In all of our hoping and in all of our wanting we must remember that God, alone, is good. And maybe this is what it truly is to be a human being.

### Closing

Hand out the small crosses to everyone. Remind them that a mark of how very human Jesus was was that he died knowing pain and suffering, so that he understands what our suffering feels like. Invite people to share the cross they're bearing right now (if the group is safe for that kind of offering) and pray for all of those things. Then let people know that over the course of the week, they're invited to either carry these crosses all week or to put them by their bedside so that each night, they can pray for the crosses that the other members of the group are carrying, as well as their own struggles.

For homework this week, take all five of the bible stories and reflections with you. Read one of them each day and write notes about what it means in that story for Jesus to be truly human. Each day, also write about what it might mean for your faith to follow someone who is truly human in the ways Jesus was.



## week five

### truly divine

#### Supplies

Chalice hymnals (or copies of the Nicene Creed)

#### Opening

Take five minutes at the beginning to discuss whether people had any reflections on what it means to them that Jesus is fully human. Ask them how it felt to pray for one another's burdens this week, and to know that the rest of the group was praying for their burdens.

#### The True Nature of Jesus

For thousands of years Christians have found meaning in the idea that while Jesus of Nazareth was a man who inhabited Roman-occupied Palestine at the beginning of the first century, he was also Immanuel, "God with Us." The idea that God would come to us, and inhabit our world through the person of Jesus of Nazareth is the primary gift of the Gospels and also the primary theological tension in Christianity. This inherent dual nature, Jesus as fully human and yet fully God, has been a subject that Christian thinkers across centuries have struggled with in each generation. In the earliest years of Christianity, this was far from a settled issue. Differing schools of thought fought each other - sometimes with words, sometimes with violence - to assert their views. These struggles culminated in the first council of Nicaea in 325 and its follow-up effort the second council of Nicaea in 381. These two groups of Bishops from all over the Roman Empire gave rise to the first universal statement of Christian beliefs, the Nicene Creed, a document that was to define Christian orthodoxy until the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's. The Disciples of Christ movement in the 1800's put aside the ancient creeds of the church, in search of a more historic Christianity, based on the reading of scripture - not man-made statements of faith. The question then becomes how do we as Christians in the Disciples tradition at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century address this basic tension in our faith?

#### *Discussion – What is your Christology?*

1. Image a line with two ends. At one end there is a statement "Fully Human" and at the other end there is written "Fully Divine." Based on your own reading of scripture where would you place yourself on this line? Explain to the group where you are and why.
2. Imagine that you are teaching Sunday School for a very bright group of 6<sup>th</sup> graders. They come to you and say "We are confused. Is Jesus God? How does that work? When he died on the cross did that mean that God died too?" Assign a member of the group to be the inquisitive child. As a group, attempt to come to a consensus regarding the question, and explain it to the "child."

#### The Nicene Creed or Affirmation of Faith

Early on in the Disciples movement there was a common rallying cry "No Book but the Bible, no Creed but Christ." This statement meant that the early Disciples movement would not rely on a creed as a "test of faith." To this day, Disciples do not require that we believe in any particular ideas in order to join the church. A new member does not have to go to catechism or a pastor's class to join the church, but simply needs to affirm that they believe that Jesus Christ is the son

of God, and that we take him as a personal Savior. This has led to a peculiar fact of life in Disciples churches - many of us hold very different ideas about who Jesus is and was, and what our relationship with God is based on.

*Discussion – What is your Theology?*

1. Find a copy of the Chalice Hymnal and open it to #358, the Nicene Affirmation of Faith (if you don't have a Chalice Hymnal handy, there is a copy in Appendix A). Select a member of the group to read it aloud. At any point in the reading if any member of the Group is confused by a statement or disagrees with a statement in the creed, interrupt the reader and pose a question to the group. Limit the discussion to 5 minutes total for both the reading and the questions. It's okay if you don't make it all the way through.

### **A Little Background on the Nicene Creed or “When in Rome, er, Constantinople...”**

In an era of almost unending war it was a time bloodier than most. The Roman empire was divided between East and West. One of the Western Caesars, a man named Constantius, had a son named Constantine. While fighting the savage hordes of Britannia, Constantius died, requesting with his last breath that his son be made Ceasar. The legions agreed and Britain, Gaul and Iberia came under the rule of Constantine. The other Caesars disagreed and civil war ensued. By the early part of the Fourth Century, through a series of battles, Constantine won the war and began to rule a newly reunited Roman Empire based in Istanbul (or is that Constantinople?). Perhaps as a way of consolidating his hold over the Eastern part of his new Empire which was largely Christian, or perhaps to secure a new independent power base for himself among the people of the empire (many of whom were Christian), or perhaps as a way to honor his mother who was Christian, Constantine essentially made Christianity the de facto religion of the Empire. This new alliance with the Christian minority in the eastern Empire presented somewhat of a problem for Constantine. His plan included spreading Christianity throughout the Empire, for political reasons, but almost immediately ran into a snag. There was no “official” version of Christianity to spread. There were factions. It was so bad that two prominent Bishops in Egypt were fighting, literally, in the streets of Alexandria. There were street protests, riots and violence. So Constantine called a council at Nicaea made up of bishops from all over the empire, and told them essentially under pain of death to solve their differences. And after many false starts and stops over many years, the council eventually produced the Nicene Creed.

What happens is that each line of the Nicene Creed is a specific response, not only to the articles of a Christian faith, but to specific ideological clashes within the council. Some 60 years later a finalized version was produced at the Second Nicene Council. This finalized version incorporated an idea that formulates the concept of Trinity – God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one in substance, substance being an idea important to Greek philosophers of the day. The Nicene Creed also produced many theological winners and losers. The winners are celebrated as saints of the Church and the losers were ruthlessly suppressed.

*Discussion – What now?*

1. Now that you have heard how the Nicene Creed was put together, does it change, in any way, how you view the ideas in the Creed?

## So What Does The Bible Have to Say?

The Nicene Creed asks and answers some crucial Biblical questions, while creating some more of its own. For instance: the Hebrew Scriptures say there's only one God. If there's a Father and a Son, wouldn't that be two Gods? What about the Holy Spirit? Does that make three? Or even more interestingly (echoing our precious child from above) if Jesus is God, and Jesus dies on a cross, does this mean that God dies too? If so, how can that be?

The last few sentences of Matthew's Gospel read: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...(Matthew 28:19-20 NRSV)" Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the church at Corinth, which was most likely written before Matthew's Gospel, closes with this passage – "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of\* the Holy Spirit be with all of you.(2 Cor. 13:14 NRSV)" The book of John starts - "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh.(John 1:1,14a NRSV)" Which would seem to indicate that "the Word" here meaning Jesus, was always with God, expressing Jesus' divinity. And again in verse 18 "The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him." The Holy Spirit makes an appearance at Jesus Baptism in Mark, Luke and Matthew, and again in Acts on the day of Pentecost. This idea of the God head having more than one expression, as found in the classic Trinity formula would seem, then, to have some biblical support.

### *Discussion – Biblical Trinity?*

1. Read the following passage from John 1:1-18 and discuss in the group what it tells us about the nature of Jesus

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.\*

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own,\* and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') 16From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

### **Relational Divinity – A Modern Response to Tradition**

If the classic ways of understanding our faith, like the Nicene Creed, are a response to the problems and concerns of their era, how are we to respond to the problems and concerns of our own day and age? If we follow the logical train of thought that says Father = Jesus = Spirit =

God; how are we to make sense of other kinds of biblical witness? For instance in the garden at Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-37, Matthew 26:36-41), where Jesus is praying for guidance from God. The Bible also records that when Jesus is on the cross He cries out asking why God has forsaken him? (Mark 15:33-39) And perhaps the biggest question of all, the one that most people of faith ask every now and then is this: How do I even relate with a God so mighty as to be responsible for all that has been created? If we are human, mortal, fallible how do we get into a relationship with a God that is perfect, eternal and divine? How can we get to know this Jesus, if he is, at his very essence, something that is so very different from us as to be entire and wholly *other*?

Perhaps one way of reaching an understanding regarding this theological and biblical question is reexamining our concept of God. The classic theologies of the past were created within the framework of Greek philosophy. Not a bad thing, but not necessarily in tune with our own lives. The Greek worldview thought of creation as unchanged and unchanging. But we know that that the world is in constant motion, changing all of the time. Perhaps it would be appropriate to alter our conception of God from being a static “unmoved mover” in the classic Greek sense and begin to see God as radically involved in the world around us. This concept of God would begin to see the divine hand in each moment of time, calling to each of us, asking us to reach out for God’s purest intention for each of us in each moment. It would be as if God was, in every moment of every day, a partner in the ongoing work of creation. God calls to us, we respond, and God calls to us again, urging us closer with every step. Jesus then becomes a person so aligned with God’s every intention, so perfectly in tune with God’s will, that Jesus become indistinguishable from God. This preserves both Jesus’ humanity and his divinity and ultimately what we know of him from the Biblical witness.

So our job as people of faith then becomes one of listening for God’s perfect intention for each of us in each moment, and then beginning to find a way, like Jesus, of following that intention to the best of our ability. This is our true Lenten Call, this is our Easter promise. We have been given a true Son of the Father, a perfect witness to God’s presence in our lives, if only we would have the will and the courage to follow.

#### *Discussion – Relational Divinity?*

1. How do you listen for God’s call in your life?
2. Find a Chalice hymnal and sing “I Have decided to Follow Jesus” #344
3. How might we begin a prayer and discernment group that will pray for the life of your church.

#### Homework

Begin a new prayer discipline, like Lectio Divina (Appendix B), trying to practice it every day this week.

#### Closing

Invite everyone to pray for one person or group of people who are “other” than themselves. (If you’re young, it may be the senior members of the church; if you were born into the church, it may be the people in the neighborhood who have never been involved with church.) Thank God for introducing Godself to you through that “other” person or people.

## Appendix A

### *The Nicene Creed*

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## Appendix B

### *Lectio Divina*

(from <http://www.marshall.org/pdf/hc/practices/LectioDivinaINDGROUP.pdf>)

#### *Lectio Divina*

Lectio Divina is an ancient spiritual practice from the Christian monastic tradition. In Lectio Divina, we seek to experience the presence of God through reading and listening, prayer, meditation and contemplation.

#### *Practicing Lectio Divina*

Begin by choosing a section of scripture that you would like to read and pray. You can choose the text randomly or use a liturgical book like the Book of Common Prayer. Try not to set a goal for how much content you will cover. The goal is to listen for God and experience his presence.

#### *Preparation*

Next, do what you must to quiet and prepare yourself to hear from God. If you need to find a quiet room, or sit in silence for several minutes, or sit in a comfortable chair, take whatever posture will help you prepare to receive and experience God's presence.

#### *Reading/Listening*

When you sense that your heart is prepared, begin by slowly reading the passage of scripture that you have selected. Don't move quickly through any sentence or phrase. As you read, pay attention to what word or phrase or idea catches your attention.

#### *Meditation*

Next, begin to meditate on the word, phrase, or idea that captured your attention. Repeat it again and again. What thoughts come to mind as you meditate on this word, phrase or idea? What are you reminded of in your life? What does it make you hope for? Meditation is no easy task. As you try to concentrate, don't be disappointed if random thoughts enter your head. As they do, offer them to God.

#### *Prayer*

Now begin to speak to God. Tell God what word, phrase or idea captured your attention and what came to mind as you meditated upon it. How is God using this word, phrase or idea to bless and transform you? Tell God what you have been thinking and feeling as you've listened and meditated. Tell God how you hope this word, phrase or idea will change your heart to be more like his.

#### *Contemplation*

Finish by focusing your attention on the fact that God's presence is with you. If as you try to focus on God's presence you sense a need to read the text again, or continue meditating, or to simply continue talking with God, allow yourself to do so. As you do, know that you are in the presence of God.

## week six so what now?!

### Supplies

Copies of form on page 41

Flipchart and markers

OPTIONAL: Make a “certificate of completion” for all of the participants to hand out at the end.

### Opening

Begin the session by practicing Lectio Divina together. Use the passage Psalm 119: 33-40. (Have someone read it aloud, slowly. Give people time to focus on what they’re drawn to. Invite them to pair up and share with each other what spoke to them.) Ask if it felt different to do it in a group than by themselves.

### Message

During this series, we’ve covered a lot of ground. Today, we’re going to revisit each of our previous sessions and see if there are areas where we want to go deeper. We might even create a plan for how to go deeper either as a group or individually. (This conversation will have some points that invite lots of discussion and some points that invite little discussion. Overall, leave ½ hour to do this overview conversation. Hand out copies of form, letting them know you’ll discuss it as a group and then fill it out individually. Write down group responses to each of these bullet points.)

Let’s check in one more time on what we’ve talked about:

- Wonderful Words of Life: We started by acknowledging that in asking good questions, we might come up with some answers, but we’d also come up with a LOT more questions, too. And some questions might have multiple answers. Do you remember what questions you started with? Are they still the same?
- Why bother with Christianity: We asked deep questions about why we would want to mess around with Christianity at all—do you have an answer for that question? Is it the same answer as at the beginning of the study? Do we need as a group to pursue that question more deeply? (Should we do a study on what is Christianity? or comparative faiths? Should we visit other churches or houses of worship together and reflect on different ways of approaching Christianity? Should we have a study on the role of Christianity in an era where few people actively practice their faith?)
- Where do we belong: We asked some serious questions about belonging. Are there places in the church you feel like you belong? What can we do together as a group to create more spaces of belonging? Are there any deeper issues in the church that we might want to seek healing around so that it is a welcoming place for all? (How might we do that?)
- Jesus as truly human: We wondered what it meant to worship a God who was truly human. Is Jesus’ humanity important in your own faith life? Does it make you look at your humanity differently?
- Jesus as truly divine: We asked what it means to be truly divine. Does Jesus’ divinity



make him feel distant or safe or something else to you? Do you think there's any divine in you? If God is completely other, does that change the way I try to relate to a person who is very different from me, too? Are there ways in which we need to dig deeper into how Jesus was both human and divine? Are we comfortable with the mystery? Do we know how to talk about it with others?

- OVERALL: Do you have any better sense of what Christianity means to you than at the beginning of this series? Do you have a sense of which questions you want to delve into for your personal growth? Do you have a better sense of what your role is in creating the kingdom of heaven in this particular church?

Now that we've had a refresher on the subjects over these past five weeks, take a moment to fill out this form:

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Here are “faith” or “church words I want to know more about:

Mark the following with a 1-5 rating (1: disagree completely, 5: agree totally)

- I still have questions about why Christianity should matter to me.
- I have a story about why Christianity is important to me, and I’d like the chance to share it if it will help someone.
- I don’t want to talk about why Christianity matters.
  
- I’d like to learn more about Christianity and belonging.
- I’d like to help create more of a sense of belonging here.
- I think our church is fine the way it is when it comes to belonging.
  
- I still think the idea of God being human is confusing and would like to go deeper.
- I still think the idea of God being divine is confusing and would like to go deeper.
- I would like to help other people have these conversations.
  
- I found this series meaningful and would like to help lead it for another group at church.
  
- Here’s a question that really came up for me. If others were asking the same question, I’d love to have a small group focused on this.
  
- I’d like to do more spiritual practices in my community or be a part of a group that meets and prays regularly for the church.

I think the church would get a lot out of a study on this theme: \_\_\_\_\_

(Collect these forms so that there can be follow-up on any issues where you saw overlap.)

We've been talking for six weeks about some faith basics. In some ways, this has been a Christianity 101. The form you filled out was to jog your memory about what you want to go deeper with, and maybe what you'd like to help others in the church go deeper with. What are some of the things YOU'D be willing to help with?

Some of the things we talked about seem really abstract, but a lot of what goes on in the church (and in our lives) is really concrete. Are there any ways you see the notion of Jesus' divinity and humanity affecting the way we approach the roles we take on in the church? Are there ways in which active prayer might change our day-to-day lives? Have you had an experience like that?

There are a lot of things going on in the church already: visiting the sick and shut-ins, preparing communion, coordinating fellowship meals, (create your own list). As we finish up this series, do you see any of those jobs differently than you did at the beginning of the series? Can you picture yourself serving in one of those roles? What more would you want to learn to become comfortable with filling that type of role?

As this series wraps up, we've hopefully gone a little deeper in our faith life. As a final act, let's take a moment to name one thing we want to work on to become better Christians, whether that be taking on a new form of ministry in the church, creating a study group to go deeper into one of these themes (or a different one), starting or participating in a prayer group, or finding a way to do outreach (which is how Jesus the man spent his whole life).

(Put everyone's name on a flip chart with the thing they're committing to. Find ways to follow up on this in a week or so, maybe by e-mailing everyone a reminder of their commitments or something to that effect. Consider inviting all the participants to covenant with each other to pray for each others' ministries over the next six weeks and then check in with each other.)

As our closing prayer, let's form a circle. One more time, name the thing that you're going to go deeper with in your life of faith. When we've all said it a final time, we'll have a circle prayer where each of us prays for God to help the person to our left with their particular task.