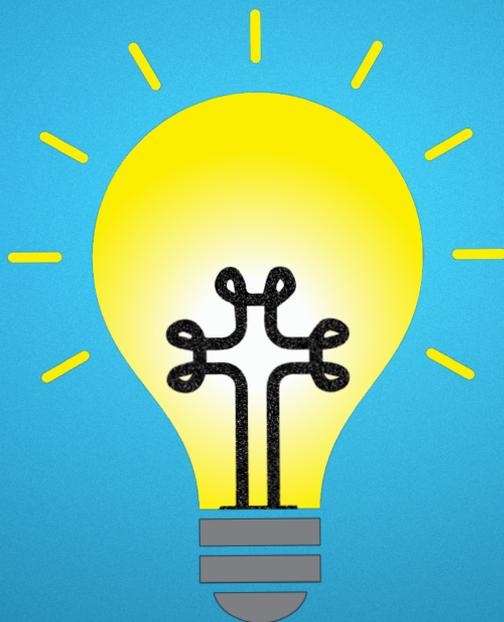


EPIPHANY

THE WONDERFUL DISCOVERY



winter 2022

e·piph·a·ny

/əˈpɪfənē/

1. the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12)
2. a moment of sudden revelation or insight
3. the liturgical (church) season between Christmastime and Lent



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THE

WONDERFUL

DISCOVERY

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How to Use This Guide

An epiphany can be defined as a great idea, flash of inspiration, or new realization. The liturgical (church) season of Epiphany is the time between Christmas and Lent when we focus on how God revealed himself to us in Christ.

Before the time of Jesus, God guided his people in many different ways--with a pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness in Exodus, through temple worship, and through the witness of the prophets, to name just a few.

But then Jesus came, and after he died, rose, and ascended to the Father, God sent the Holy Spirit to guide us. The deeper we go with God, the more our hearts and lives will be transformed by this leading.

This guide is written for adults and youth, with new options for children and families, too. Look for the cross (†) for activities and invitations for families to do together.

Are you ready for an epiphany this Epiphany?

Read on, friends. Read on.

1

a lightbulb moment

LUKE 3:15-22

MEMORY VERSE†

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels but do not have love,
I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:1

AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *MEMORIZATION*

During the eight weeks of this study, we will seek to learn a chapter of Scripture together by memory. While an entire chapter might seem daunting, we will take it verse by verse and week by week in small pieces. And we'll do it together!

People memorize in different ways. Experiment with what works for you and/or your group. A few ideas include repetition (saying the verse aloud multiple times), journaling, flash cards, or setting it to a rhythm or music. Each week, repeat the previous verse(s) and then add the next one.

We've chosen 1 Corinthians 13 to learn together as a church body. While this passage is often read at weddings, it isn't primarily about romantic love. It speaks first of the love of God for us--the same love God calls and equips us to show to one another.

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Luke 3:15-18 aloud.*

John the Baptist knew his life's purpose: to point others to Jesus. Anytime anyone tried to glorify John--asking him if he was the Messiah sent to save them, for example--he quickly reminded them that it was all about Jesus.

Feet were considered very unclean in John's day (and they often were, since people walked long distances on dusty roads filled with animals!).

†**Q1:** What does John tell the people he is “not worthy” to do? Why do you think he considered himself unworthy to do such a task? What might a modern equivalent to taking off someone's sandals be?

John “exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them” (v.18). To exhort is to strongly encourage someone to do or believe something. To proclaim the good news is to tell the truth about Jesus--that he has come to bring God's kingdom, set us free, and give eternal hope.

Q2: What is something apart from Jesus that you believe in so passionately that you exhort others to try it, too? (For example, Pastor Jackson loves mountain biking and both

Pastor Courtney and Jeff Given will talk your ear off about their love for John Steinbeck's book *East of Eden!*) How might you channel this type of passionate exhortation into telling others about Jesus's love for them?

Read Luke 3:19-20 aloud.

Herod was a wicked ruler in a long line of wicked rulers. When his father (also named Herod - it's confusing!) learned of the birth of Jesus--the king of the Jews--he murdered all babies under age 2 in an attempt to protect his throne. Mary and Joseph escaped with Jesus to Egypt, living as refugees until God told them it was safe to return.

†**Q3:** John is living wholeheartedly for Jesus, and now he is thrown in prison. Why doesn't following Jesus mean we will always experience comfort and ease?

Read Luke 3:21-22 aloud.

Q4: If Jesus was God incarnate (God-in-a-body), and

baptism is a sign and seal of our forgiveness of sin, what might be some reasons Jesus is baptized? What might Jesus's baptism teach us about God's love for us?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION: *This is where it gets personal. Use the following white space to journal your responses, or take notes as you reflect together as a group.*

†Put yourself in the crowd with Jesus on the day of his baptism. Lots of people are being baptized, and then it's Jesus's turn. Heaven opens, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and you hear a voice from heaven. What would it be like to stand there on that day? What emotions might you feel?

†What questions would you have for John? For Jesus?

†Have you been baptized? If so, what do you remember about the experience (if you were an infant, what stories have you heard or photos have you seen of that day)? If not, why not?

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION: *Every action section will offer a few possibilities. Not every one will work for every person, so on a given week you may wish to choose one, two, or all.*

† **1) Remember your baptism.** Tell the story of your baptism this week to a friend, someone in your group, or in your journal. How old were you, who performed it, and who was there as a witness? If you don't remember, see if you can ask someone who was there what they remember. How has God been faithful to you in the years since?

2) Practice exhortation. Tell someone you love about something you love. It may open a door to tell them about Jesus's love for them, too!

3) Serve. As St. Francis of Assisi once put it, people of faith should "preach by their deeds." While this doesn't mean we should stop telling people about Jesus, it helps remind us that our actions speak loudly as well. Ask God to help you notice someone this week who is outside your regular circle of family and friends. Then, seek to love that person as Jesus would--perhaps by stepping in to do a chore, bring a meal, or offering help with no strings attached.

2 gifted for a purpose

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-11

†MEMORY VERSE

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:2

AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *CONTEMPLATION*

To practice contemplation is to focus deeply on an object of interest or love. In our age of distraction, training our minds to focus may take time, so it can help to start small.

Today, set a timer for three minutes. Sit comfortably with your feet flat on the floor and your hands resting gently on your thighs, palms up. Take a deep breath and prepare to focus on the presence of Jesus around and within you. Then, start the timer, close your eyes, continue to breathe deeply, and contemplate (think about) Jesus.

After your practice, go around the circle in your group and share one thing that you noticed about God or yourself.

•••

AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read 1 Cor. 12:4-11 aloud.*

1 Corinthians is written by the apostle Paul, a scholarly man who once lived as God's enemy, actively seeking to kill and imprison Christians. God transformed his life (you can read the amazing story in Acts 9!) and he spent the rest of his days proclaiming the love of God to the world. 1 Corinthians is the first letter Paul wrote to the brand new church in Corinth (modern-day Greece).

Q1: Paul mentions three things in v.4-6 - "gifts," "service," and what else? What do these three things have in common? How do they differ?

Over and over in Scripture God makes it clear that his love is offered to the whole world. Blessings given out are never ours to hoard. In Genesis 26, God tells Abraham he is blessed in order to be a blessing. In Jeremiah 29 God tells the people to "seek the peace of the city," even though they were living there as exiles in enemy territory! Christians are called to work for the flourishing of our neighbors and our communities--never just ourselves.

†Q2: How would you define "the common good"(v.7)? How is your good connected to the good of your neighbor?

Q3: What gifts does Paul list in verses 8-11? Are any of them confusing or unfamiliar? If so, which ones?

In the early church, certain spiritual gifts--words of knowledge (wisdom received in prayer from God, often about another person or a difficult decision), speaking in tongues (proclaiming God's goodness in an unknown language), prophecy (foretelling what was to come), and interpreting tongues (translating what someone said when they spoke in tongues)--were much more common than they are today. Some scholars believe this was because the church was just newly starting out and wouldn't have had access to the full Bible like we do now. Therefore, early churches were much more dependent upon the immediate guidance

of the Holy Spirit. Others believe these gifts were more common because Jesus had only recently sent the Holy Spirit. Still others hold to the teaching that these spiritual gifts continue to this day and if we ask God, he will guide us in greater understanding and practice of them.

†Q4: Can faithful, well-meaning Christians disagree on things like speaking in tongues? How can this passage help us figure out what is essential and non-negotiable to our faith (Jesus is Lord!) and what is secondary (worshiping with a pipe organ or an electric guitar)?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

†What is one tangible blessing (something you can experience with one or more of your five senses) that God has given you? What do you enjoy most about it?

What is one spiritual gift you admire in someone else?
What do you admire about it?

What is one spiritual gift God has given you? Has it changed or grown over the years? How might that gift be a blessing to others through you?

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

†1) Journal a list of blessings. Set a timer for five minutes and write down every blessing you can think of that God has given you. Reflect upon your list. How might you enjoy those blessings? Share them? Thank God for them?

2) Connect. Reach out to someone who attends a different church than you do. Ask them about their understanding of spiritual gifts. What similarities do you find? How do your beliefs differ? In what ways can your differences help you learn more about each other and your own beliefs?

3) Study. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 again and then Romans 12:3-8. How do Paul's two letters inform one another? Why do you think he emphasized what he does for the Romans? What about the church in Corinth?

3

you, doing that thing you do

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31A

†MEMORY VERSE

If I give all I possess to the poor and give my body over to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:3

†AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *PRAY A PSALM*

The Psalms are the ancient prayer book of the Bible and can help us learn to bring our full, messy selves to God. For today's practice, we'll begin with Psalm 23.

Choose a reader (if you are in a group). Read the Psalm aloud, pausing after each verse. During those pauses, the group is invited to respond by praying out loud their own version of the words. For example, Psalm 23 begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I will want for nothing." A group member might say, "Dear God, thank you for leading me," while another might respond "But God, I want so many things! How can this verse be true?" After a short period of silence, continue to the next verse.

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read 1 Cor. 12:12-19 aloud.*

Here Paul continues on in his teaching on spiritual gifts. There are many different gifts because there are many different kinds of people in the family of God! Paul describes the church as a body with many parts. In Christ there is unity in diversity and diversity in unity, with the whole body strengthened and made complete because of the differences in its parts.

†Q1: What body parts does Paul mention?

Q2: Why might one part of the body be tempted to say it does not belong (v.15-16)?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:20-31a aloud.

Q3: Have you ever seen an example of one part of the body of Christ telling another part it was unimportant, unwanted, or not valuable? Share the story, if you are comfortable

doing so. How does Paul caution against this type of division (v.21-25)?

†Q4: Paul teaches that suffering and joy are both shared within the body of Christ. How do we see this in action at our particular church? At the local, national, and international church level?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

Many of us tend to struggle with one of two unhealthy paths: either we pridefully believe ourselves to be indispensable in the body of Christ (no one could get on without us!) or we believe ourselves to be so unimportant we don't matter at all (I'm worthless! I just drag down the

body!). The truth is, each of us is essential to the body of Christ, dearly loved by God, and chosen to participate in the work of the kingdom, *and* we are *also* each just one part of the body. How does it feel to know you are essential to Christ's body? How does it feel to know that you are simply one part of a bigger body?

Have you ever had the church share in your suffering with you? If so, how?

Have you ever shared in the joy of another within the body? If so, how?

...

AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

†1) Eliminate a body part. If all your body parts work well, spend at least ten minutes with one hand tied behind your back, a blindfold on, or noise-cancelling headphones. What does this simple exercise bring home about Paul's illustration? If you are experiencing an injury, illness, or disability that makes it difficult to use a part of your body, share with your group or journal about what this might teach you about Paul's metaphor.

†2) Watch a video of a favorite song performed by a band, ensemble, or choir. Watch the musicians perform together. How do they rely upon one another? What difference does it make that the piece is not a solo? What might this teach us about the body of Christ?

† 3) Pray for the persecuted church. We experience great freedom to worship Jesus here in America. Many places in the world are not offered this opportunity. Check out Christianity Today's info page (<https://tinyurl.com/u78ds3sw>) about the Persecuted Church and commit to praying for a specific country or group this week as way to support the international body of Christ.

4 isn't it romantic?

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

†MEMORY VERSE

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it
is not proud.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *PRAYER WALK*

Sometimes remaining still while we pray can be difficult. When we're feeling restless, anxious, or just filled with energy, adding motion to prayer can help us connect more deeply with God.

Get up and head outside (weather permitting - if it's icky out, feel free to walk indoors!). As you walk, talk to God about whatever is on your mind, thank God for beautiful things you see, and pray for healing, justice, or provision when you notice needs.

How did praying in motion affect your prayers? How did you experience God while on your walk?

...

AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read 1 Cor. 13:1-3 aloud.*

In the original language of the New Testament (Koine Greek) there are several different words for love. The one used in this passage is the Greek word *agape* (*a-gahp-ay*), which means “divine, all-encompassing, unconditional love.” It’s different than the word for natural affection (*storge*) or the one for the love found in friendship (*phileo*).

Though this passage is often read at weddings, it is not primarily referring to romantic love, but instead to the charitable, tremendous love of God for us. In fact, the Greek word for romantic love (*eros*) is not found anywhere in the New Testament! It is the deep, abiding *agape* love of God that Paul invites us to practice with one another, with our neighbors, and even with our enemies. It’s a big task indeed, and one we will struggle with without God’s help.

†Q1: Paul writes of five tasks that are very impressive on the surface but mean nothing without love. What are they?

Read 1 Cor. 13:4-7 aloud.

†Q2: It can be easy to read this passage and think how we fall so short of its ideal. Yet it is first a passage about God’s great love for each of us! Which element of God’s love

(patient, kind, keeps no record of wrongs, etc.) do you find most heartening or hopeful and why?

Q3: Paul writes that “when completeness comes, what is in part disappears” (v.10). How does Jesus bring completeness to God’s story? In what ways are we still awaiting the full completeness of God’s story?

Q4: Paul concludes with the three major virtues: faith, hope, and love. Why do you think love is the greatest?



AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

†Who in your life has shown you a taste of what the generous love of God is truly like?

†How might you practice *agape* love with your friends this week? What about with your enemies?

In v. 12, Paul writes of knowing fully and being fully known. So much of our lives are dedicated to putting on a good front so no one will know about our sin or shame or fear or flaws. What impact does it have to know that God knows you fully and loves you fully? How might you share a deeper glimpse of who you are with your group this week?

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

†1) Put love in action. As the band DC Talk once put it, “Love is a verb!” Put feet on your faith this week and love an actual neighbor. Offer to clean up their yard, pick up their groceries, cook them a meal, or brainstorm another creative way to love those who live right beside you.

2) Confess your lack of love. In Paul’s list of love’s attributes (patient, kind, not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, etc.), one or two may stick out to you as areas where you fall short. Confess these to the Lord (and perhaps to a trusted friend or pastor, if you’re willing). How might accepting God’s deep love for you give you the freedom to address and grow in this area?

3) Make an accomplishments list. Write down things you are proud of in your life in one column. Maybe you don’t “speak in the tongues of men and of angels,” but you have a high GPA, a great salary, or a wonderful garden. List all you can think of, and then, in a column next to those things, write down how God might be inviting you into deeper love. For example, can you share those flowers with a neighbor? Is there a mission partner that would be transformed if you were more financially generous? Are you studying with love?

5

a new catch

LUKE 5:1-11

†MEMORY VERSE

It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *HOSPITALITY*

Christian hospitality is welcoming another person as Jesus welcomes us. It is not about having a beautiful home or a perfect meal (both of which can be opportunities for pride or stress), but about creating a space of rest and enjoyment for another. Scripture emphasizes showing hospitality to newcomers (whether immigrants, refugees, or other new arrivals), orphans, widows, and outsiders. There are times we are called to give hospitality, and times we are called to receive it. It is as much a spiritual practice to accept the gift of hospitality as to offer it.

Plan to show hospitality to someone this week over food. If you're meeting with a group, brainstorm a plan together. If you're doing this study alone, journal your plan. Maybe you want to invite a neighbor to coffee, open your lunch table to a new student, or have a coworker over for dinner. Seek to listen, love, and welcome them well--as Jesus does us!



AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Luke 5:1-3 aloud.*

Jesus was a very popular speaker. Often the crowds who came to hear him were so densely packed that they created problems (see Mark 2:1-5, for example). Here, Jesus goes out into a boat so he can be seen and heard more easily by the massive group gathered to listen.

†Q1: Is Jesus sitting or standing? Is he alone in the boat? What type of boat is it? What sensory clues (sight, sound, smell, etc.) are there, and how might that help you imagine the scene?

Read Luke 5:4-5 aloud.

Simon fished all through the night to no avail. With empty nets (and thus, empty pockets!) he was exhausted and ready to go home and rest. He may have felt annoyed when Jesus invited himself into the fishing boat and asked Simon to put out from the shore! Simon first expressed his exasperation to Jesus, but then decided to listen and obey the request.

†Q2: How does Simon express his frustration? What might this teach us about how Jesus invites us to bring our full selves--including our messier emotions--to him?

Read Luke 5:6-11 aloud.

Simon listens to Jesus, does what he asks, and is then blessed with a miraculous catch of fish. His nets go from empty to bursting! Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder writes, “After seeing the great haul of fish, a repentant Simon confesses himself a sinner.”

Q3: How does this miracle wake Simon up to the reality of God? What is his response to this new knowledge of who Jesus is and what he can do?

†Q4: In what ways does blessing follow obedience in this story? In what way might blessing follow obedience in our own lives?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

Simon is a fisherman--a biblical blue collar, working man. Jesus's call to him is a reminder that we don't need an advanced degree, seminary education, or any other worldly qualification to be used by God. We need willingness, courage, and love. Missionary Elisabeth Johnson asks, "What might it mean for us to go deep-sea fishing with Jesus--to trust and follow him outside our comfort zones, to let go of our certainties, to have our lives radically reoriented?"

Can you think of any areas of your life where God is inviting you to "put out into deep water" rather than staying safely on shore? (For groups: how might this group help hold you accountable to accepting this invitation from God?)

...

AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

†1) Journal about a fear. Jesus tells Simon “don’t be afraid!” This is not criticism but rather invitation. Take a moment and reflect upon a fear of yours. What is it, where does the fear stem from, how does it feel? Then spend a few moments journaling or doodling a prayer about this fear. How might you respond to God’s faithful presence in light of your fear?

2) Worship in song. There are many worship songs that reference following Jesus into deep waters. “Oceans” by Hillsong is one. “O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus,” by S. Trevor Francis is another. Find a recording and sing along, or play the song on an instrument and join in singing. How might this song help knit Jesus’s message to Simon - “Don’t be afraid!” - into your heart in a deeper way?

†3) Go fishing. Jesus invites Simon to “fish for people.” The metaphor will give us more to think about if we are familiar with actual fishing! Head out to a body of water and give it a try. Perhaps you know someone who has the gear and could show you the ropes. As you fish, ponder this illustration and how it might help us understand how to share the good news of Jesus with people.

6

an upside down kingdom

LUKE 6:17-26

†MEMORY VERSE

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:6

INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *ACCOUNTABILITY*

Author Alex Haley kept a photo of a turtle on a fencepost in his office. When people asked him about it, he'd tell them he kept it there because it reminded him the turtle could never get up there by himself--and neither could he have achieved what he did as a writer without help.

God sets us in community for our good, knowing we are stronger together. Accountability is the Christian practice of reminding one another of God's call for us to live lives of goodness, holiness, and mission, and of our desires to live into that calling. Put more simply: accountability is someone asking if you followed through on what you intended.

This week, connect with a partner (if you're in a group) or reach out to a trusted friend (if you're doing this study on your own).

Ask the friend to hold you accountable to a task or two that you wish to accomplish for your spiritual, emotional, or physical health this week. Ask if you can help hold them accountable in return.

When the week is over, check in. How did things go? Did knowing someone would ask you about your practices make you any more likely to follow through on them?

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Luke 6:17-19 aloud.*

Jesus is with his twelve disciples (listed in v.14-16), teaching them and the visiting crowds. Many scholars refer to this passage as the “Sermon on the Plain,” since Jesus is standing “on a level place” (v.17).

†Q1: Who is in the crowd? Name a few things the people in the crowd are hoping to see, experience, or obtain from Jesus. If you were in the crowd, what would you hope for?

Read Luke 6:20-26 aloud.

Unlike the beatitudes in Matthew 5, which speak only of blessings, Luke lists corresponding woes. They are also

beautifully symmetrical - each connecting to another in the form of an opposite. Blessing to the poor, woe to the rich; blessing to the weeping, woe to those who laugh. Jesus was a master storyteller, and his storytelling skill is in full force here. While he is not saying we should never laugh or eat our fill, he is pointing to the deeper reality of God's kingdom--that it works very differently than our empires.

†Q2: What are the blessings listed? What woes does Luke describe?

The word here for “blessed” can also be translated “happy.” Yet this can seem--at first--to make the passage even more confusing! “Happy are you who weep”? Really? Luke alludes to a deeper, more lasting blessing than a fleeting emotion. There is a more powerful reality at work.

Q3: In what ways do Jesus's words overturn the common themes of our contemporary culture? (For example: While Jesus says, “Woe to you who are rich,” Instagram shows us the über-wealthy living the high life!) Can you think of an example where you saw one of these blessings in action, in your own life or the life of another person?

We can risk overspiritualizing this passage, making it all about those who are poor “in spirit” or hungry “for God.” Certainly we may infer those meanings in the text, but Jesus is also talking about a present, physical, tangible reality. The financially poor will experience the depths of God’s blessings, while those who are rich are put on notice. Those who are physically hungry are attuned to happiness in a way the full and sated may never be.

Q4: What challenges do you find for yourself in the verses of woe? What is one thing Jesus be asking you to change? What encouragements do you find the verses of blessing? How might Jesus be speaking encouragement over you?

...

AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

These verses have been occasionally misused to explain away bad behavior by Christians. (“Scripture says we will be persecuted!” or “Jesus says people shouldn’t speak well of us!”) Yet the verses we read today are followed immediately about verses describing the essential task of loving our enemies. How do we understand v. 22-23 in light of these next verses? Why were the prophets mistreated?

What is the danger in everyone speaking well of you (v.26)? Are there any ways God is calling you to be bolder in your witness? Gentler?

...

AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

†1) Practice your memorized passage. We're all the way through 1 Cor. 13:6 this week! Review the entire passage until it's settled well in your memory. What have you noticed about the passage working on you as you learn it?

†2) Pray in a crowd. Jesus teaches a large crowd here. Find a place to people watch (maybe a park, mall, or school sports event) and pray for each person you see. How does holding them in prayer change your perception of them? Your compassion for them?

3) Study. Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-33. How does extending this passage fill out Paul's teaching on the resurrection? What is the last enemy to be destroyed? Where does our ultimate hope reside, and how might we lay hold of it? Read the passage through three times and then journal your response.

7

even *those* people?

LUKE 6:27-38

†MEMORY VERSE

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always
perseveres.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:7

†INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *ENCOURAGEMENT*

To encourage someone is to speak kind truth over them. You may be pointing to a future hope (“Hold on, you can do it!”), raising up a spiritual virtue you see in them (“God is at work in your life, and I see you becoming more patient.”), or reminding them of how loved they are.

If you are in a group, pair up and take a few moments to speak words of encouragement to one another. Remember: these aren’t simply compliments, and shouldn’t focus on physical appearance (“I like your shoes,” is a lovely sentiment, but not a spiritual encouragement). Go back and forth and share at least three things.

For individuals, call a trusted friend or mentor and offer them words of encouragement. How have they impacted your life?

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Luke 6:27-31 aloud.*

Q1: Jesus gives nine sets of instructions in these few short verses. What are they? Which one feels most challenging to you and why?

In his book *Love Over Fear*, Dan White writes, “We are to be known by love. Nothing less than the credibility of God’s character is at stake if we are stingy and picky and selective with it. At this point, most conservatives love conservatives. Most progressives love progressives. And the two throw verbal grenades at each other from a distance over the fence. We are being invited into the way of Jesus that transcends these half measures of love.”

†Q2: Most of us have a “yes, but...” in our minds when it comes to Scripture passages like these. What hesitations come to your mind when you read Jesus’s instructions? What is at risk for you?

Read John 6:32-38 aloud.

Here Jesus describes the distinction between “sinners” and “children of the Most High.” The first group behaves as expected--they love those who love them back. They do good to those who do good to them. The second group loves and gives without expectation of receiving the same treatment in return. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder writes, “The oppressed must not become the oppressor. Love must not be limited or confined to those who would return love. Help must be extended to all and not taken by force, as in the Roman way of conscription or forced hospitality.”

In Shusaku Endo’ novel *Silence*, one of the priest characters reflects on the sacrifice of Jesus: “It is easy enough to die for the good and beautiful; the hard thing is to die for the miserable and corrupt.”

Q3: Left on our own, this love might feel impossible. What help does God offer us?

V.37-38 seem to suggest a 1-for-1 trade. If we forgive, we will be forgiven the same amount. If we give, we will be given an equal measure. Yet Jesus is hinting at a deeper truth: It isn’t that God weighs our good deeds to determine

how good to be to us in return, but that through the coming Kingdom of God there is a whole new reality at play. In God's Kingdom the greatest is a servant to all, power is shown through self-giving love, and the meek will inherit the earth. It's not a trade; it's an entire paradigm shift.

Q4: How might doing the opposite of some of the things Jesus asks of us (not forgiving, for example, or judging others harshly) affect our spiritual growth?

...

AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

Jesus was a master of offering simple teachings that would completely upend our lives if we followed them completely. Yet most of us are in danger of not taking these instructions seriously enough rather than taking them too seriously.

Is there any area of your heart that's been awakened, excited, or challenged by Jesus's teachings in Luke 6?

What might God be inviting you to do as a result?

...

AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

†1) Identify an enemy and pray for them. Who do you struggle to love the most? Take time this week and pray for that person. Be honest with God about your feelings and ask him to teach you more about his divine love.

2) Forgive. Failing to forgive can keep us prisoner to bitterness. While forgiveness doesn't mean we forget the offense, it does mean we no longer stay captive to it. In cases of abuse or neglect, we may need to forgive from a distance (and perhaps even without communicating with the person in question). If there is someone you are struggling to forgive, spend time in prayer this week asking God for help and guidance. If you're ready, bring the situation to a trusted friend or mentor and make a plan in how to continue following God's call to forgive.

3) Give freely. Give your best to someone who may never repay you. (Not an old sofa to Goodwill, but a thoughtful, meaningful gift of time, talent, or treasure that the person would truly benefit from.)

8

transfiguration

LUKE 9:28-36

†MEMORY VERSE

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease;
where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is
knowledge, it will pass away.

--1 CORINTHIANS 13:8

INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *FIXED-HOUR PRAYER*

St. Benedict encouraged the monks in his charge to pray at certain hours of the day (and night!). Many monastic orders continue to practice this spiritual discipline to this day.

Set an alarm for three specific times (perhaps 9am, noon, and 3pm or 7am, noon, and 7pm) every day this week. When your alarm goes off, spend five minutes reading a Psalm and praying.

How does this spiritual practice change the regular rhythm of your day? How does it alter your habits of thought?

...

AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Luke 9:28-36 aloud.*

†Q1: Who appears with Jesus on the mountain? These two men had died hundreds (or in the case of one, thousands!) of years earlier--how was this meeting possible?

Peter is scripture's foot-in-mouth guy. He says what he thinks and he often gets in a bit of trouble for his impulsivity. Even Luke notes that Peter doesn't know what he is saying! Overcome with emotion, he talks about building shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

†Q2: Do you relate to Peter? Why or why not? What does it teach us about who Jesus is that he called Peter as one of his first disciples?

Q3: Peter and John were sleepy, but the appearance of Jesus's glory--and Moses and Elijah!--woke them right up. How does encountering God transform them in the moment? Long term? How might it affect us in a similar way?

The cloud of God's glory--his majesty, power, authority, and tremendous love--echoes other places in Scripture where God appears in a cloud--when the people of Israel follow it through the wilderness (Exodus 16), it descends on the Tabernacle (Exodus 40), it fills the temple (1 Kings 8), and it will be a sign of Christ's return (Matthew 24).

The glory of God is so profoundly beautiful and powerful God protects people in Scripture from looking directly at it for their own protection--hence the cloud!

In 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul writes, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face."

Q4: How does the cloud of God's glory serve as protection for Peter and John? Can you think of any other instances in Scripture where the cloud of God's glory is mentioned?

...

AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

†Have you ever experienced something so beautiful, powerful, or amazing you were overwhelmed? What was it? Can you describe the feelings it brought up in you?

Has God ever woken you up from your regular routine?
What happened, and what was your response?

How might God be inviting you out of your sleepy routine
this week?

...

AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

†1) Meditate on art & poetry. The back page spread (pages 44-45) of this Epiphany guide feature a poem by Christiana Rosetti about the Holy Spirit and original art by Robert R. Fike. Read the poem as a prayer and meditate on it while spending some time with the artwork.

2) Listen well. As the Gospel stories progress, we see Peter slowly transformed according to his deepening connection to Jesus. Where he once was brash and impulsive, he grows into greater Christian maturity. Practice listening well this week. Instead of preparing what you plan to say, really take in what other people are saying, and respond to them with an additional question. (“Tell me more about that,” or “That sounds [hard/exciting/interesting]! What happened next?” are good places to start!) Listening is hard work! How might it change your prayer life to imagine God listening attentively to you?

†3) Memorize the rest of 1 Corinthians 13. We’ve nearly finished the chapter together, so take on the last few verses and finish strong! Once you’ve memorized it, share it with your group or a friend--maybe they’d like to learn it, too! Then, reflect on the meaning of these verses. How has committing them to memory shaped your understanding of God’s love?

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Dan White, *Love Over Fear*

A Prayer to the Holy Spirit

by Christina Rossetti

O God the Holy Ghost
Who art light unto thine elect
Evermore enlighten us.
Thou who art fire of love
Evermore enkindle us.
Thou who art Lord and Giver of Life,
Evermore live in us.
Thou who bestowest sevenfold grace,
Evermore replenish us.
As the wind is thy symbol,
So forward our goings.
As the dove, so launch us heavenwards.
As water, so purify our spirits.
As a cloud, so abate our temptations.
As dew, so revive our languor.
As fire, so purge our dross



a grow resource
from
Presbyterian Church of the Master

