

Tension

Real faith in a real world



May 12 - June 2, 2024

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Week 1: Living with Doubt and Uncertainty

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything which made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. How does the word "doubt" make you feel? Are you someone who likes to "land" in terms of your beliefs, or are you more comfortable with uncertainty? Has your attitude changed over time?
3. What do you view as the benefits of doubt? What are the problems with doubt?
4. Read Hebrews 11:1 in the New International Version and in the 21st Century King James Version of the Bible (below). How are they similar? How are they different? Is this difference significant?
 - Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (NIV)
 - Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (KJ21)
5. Is there anything in your faith life that you would describe as "bedrock"—something that is foundational for you that you do not (generally) doubt? To what extent is faith a choice?
6. Read Genesis 32.
 - How does Jacob react to the news of Esau's approach, and what does this say about him?
 - What does Jacob's prayer reveal about his faith in God?
 - How do you understand Jacob wrestling with the man?
 - What is significant about Jacob's name being changed?
 - What can we learn from this chapter?
7. Are there specific areas where you feel you need more certainty? Why do you think you feel that way? Are you "wrestling with God" over anything? Take some time to share, and then pray for one another.

Practice for the week: Centering Prayer

Sometimes it is beneficial to take a break from all of the questions and doubts and simply rest for a few moments in God's presence.

Find a comfortable position in a place where you will be undisturbed for a few minutes.

Choose a simple word such as love, Jesus, peace, or any word at all that is not a distraction to you. Do not focus on the word but use it to indicate that you welcome God's presence, and consent to God working within you.

Say your chosen word a few times slowly in your mind to signify your intent to surrender your whole self to God. Then quieten your mind.

As thoughts come into your mind, as they inevitably will, just gently say your word, and let the thoughts drift away.

Stay in this attitude of surrender to God for a few minutes, and then thank God for being with you and giving to you this moment of rest.

Week 2: Handling Conflict and Disagreement

1. Was there anything in the message on Sunday that stood out to you? What was most helpful for you? In what ways did it stretch your thinking?
2. During the message, the speaker emphasized that Jesus is our paradigm for peace. In what ways do you see Jesus exemplifying peacemaking throughout his ministry? How can we follow his example in our daily lives?
3. The message underscored the importance of interfaith dialogue. How do you feel about engaging in religious conversations with people of other faith traditions? What principles or practices have you learned from other religious traditions that have enriched your understanding of peacemaking?
4. Read Matthew 10:34-36. Jesus states that he came not to bring peace but a sword. How do you reconcile this seemingly contradictory message with the broader theme of Jesus being our paradigm for peace? What do you think Jesus meant by this statement, and how does it challenge your understanding of peace?
5. The speaker on Sunday said that peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of wholeness, justice, and reconciliation. Sometimes the pursuit of peace causes conflict. Reflect on a time when the pursuit of justice caused conflict or disagreement in your relationships. How did you navigate it, and what did you learn from the experience?
6. In what ways can nurturing inner peace enhance our ability to promote peace in the world? Reflect on how spiritual practices have aided you in developing empathy, compassion, and love for individuals with whom you hold differing viewpoints or opinions.
7. If you are meeting in a group, take a moment to share a specific opportunity you have to be a peacemaker. Then spend some time praying for wisdom in navigating conflicts, humility in seeking reconciliation, and courage to stand for justice.

Practice for the week: The Peacemaker's Meditation

Find a comfortable and quiet space where you can sit or lie down in a relaxed posture. Take a few deep breaths to center yourself and clear your mind.

Begin by silently reciting Matthew 5:9 several times: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Allow these words to sink in, pondering their meaning and relevance in your life.

Next, bring to mind a recent conflict or disagreement you've experienced, whether it be with a friend, family member, colleague, or even within yourself. Reflect on how you responded to the situation and how it aligns with the idea of being a peacemaker.

Now, imagine yourself revisiting that conflict. Visualize yourself approaching the situation with empathy, understanding, and a genuine desire for reconciliation. Picture the conversation unfolding in a way that fosters mutual respect and understanding, leading to wholeness, justice, and reconciliation.

As you continue to meditate, explore any insights or revelations that arise. Consider how you can apply the principles of peacemaking to other areas of your life.

Finally, offer a prayer of gratitude for the opportunity to be a peacemaker in a world filled with conflict, disagreement, and division. Ask for guidance and strength to embody the qualities of a peacemaker in your thoughts, words, and actions each day.

When you feel ready, slowly bring your awareness back to the present moment. Take a moment to ground yourself before resuming your day, carrying the intention of being a peacemaker with you wherever you go.

Week 3: Dealing with Fear and Anxiety

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything which made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. Would you say you are an anxious person? Share a little about what makes you anxious in life. How does anxiety affect your relationship with God? Does your relationship with God ever make you feel anxious?
3. Read Mark 14:32-36 and Mark 15:33-34. In these passages, what differences and similarities do you see in Jesus' responses to anxious stimuli? How do you relate to Jesus in each story and how do you feel challenged?
4. Read Matthew 6:25-34. Why do you think Jesus uses the examples of birds and flowers when talking about how much God cares for us? What does this reveal about God? How might this help us worry less?
5. Read Romans 8:14-16. Jesus would have used the Aramaic word "abba" for father in his teaching about anxiety in Matthew 6 as well. Why do you think the early Christian writers (like Paul) retained this Aramaic word when they were writing in Greek? How do you relate to this intimate metaphorical imagery of being unconditionally and absolutely loved as a child of God? How might growing in an experience of this kind of love affect how you worry about your faults and failures, your struggles in life, your relationships, your past, or your future?
6. When Jesus says "you of little faith" in Matthew 6, the original language could be interpreted that he compassionately understands our struggles with anxiety rather than condemning us. How might this reality empower us to "seek first the kingdom of God" and center our lives on what really matters?
7. Spend some time praying for one another and the various situations that are making us anxious at the moment. Break into smaller groups if that feel more appropriate.

Practice for the week: The Welcoming Prayer

The Welcoming Prayer is a prayer practice that helps us let go of unhealthy responses to certain emotions we are experiencing, while helping us to embrace more of God's love.

Think of a situation or relationship that is currently making you anxious in a negative way.

Step 1: Awareness

Sit quietly and reflect on the situation for a moment. Notice how you are feeling. Focus and sink into your anxiety. Go toward it rather than suppress or resist it. Stay with this step of noticing and sinking in until you really experience a connection to the anxiety. You may feel it in your body, and it can help to place your hand there as a way of connecting with the emotion more deeply.

Step 2: Welcome

Welcome the anxiety as a friend that is going to help you discover something about yourself, rather than as an enemy to be defeated. Don't judge yourself, but simply accept how you are feeling right now. Say, "Welcome anxiety." Repeat it and sit with the feeling until you experience a genuine sense of owning and accepting it in this moment. Then allow yourself to honestly discern where the anxiety is coming from. Usually this is from a thwarted desire for one or more normal and basic human needs:

- Safety and security
- Esteem and affection
- Power and control

Step 3: Let Go

When you have allowed yourself to accept the anxiety, and identified its source, let it go by saying, "God, I give You my anxiety." Consciously let go of:

- Your demand for safety and security in this situation.
- Your demand for esteem and affection in this situation.
- Your demand for power and control in this situation.

Then rest for a while in God's loving, affirming and totally accepting presence.

Week 4: Hope when everything seems dark and despairing

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything that made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. How do you define hope? Do you think of yourself as a hopeful person? Why or why not? What are some things you feel hopeful about right now?
3. The speaker on Sunday said that hope was powerful. Can you think of a time you have seen hope make a difference in your life? In what ways do you think hope needs to be active rather than passive?
4. Read Psalm 130. How would you characterize the psalmist's emotions throughout the psalm? What is the basis for the psalmist's hope? What might "waiting" for God mean for us in our fast-paced society?
5. Job experienced personal tragedy, and the writer of Lamentations (traditionally, the prophet Jeremiah) wrote in the aftermath of a horrific war. Both had much to say about being heartbroken, angry, and confused. Yet both insert declarations of hope. Read Job 19: 25-27 and Lamentations 3:19-26. What can we learn from these verses about hope?
6. Read Romans 5:1-5 written by the apostle Paul to the church in Rome.
 - What does Paul hope for?
 - How does knowing that we are "at peace with God," "standing in grace," and looking forward to "God's glory" impact how we view difficult times in our life?
 - In what way can suffering produce hope?
 - Why is Paul so confident that this hope will not disappoint us or "put us to shame"?
7. Are there specific areas in your life that feel somewhat hopeless? Are there steps you can take to put hope into action? Take some time to share, and then pray for one another.

Practice for the week: *Lectio Divina*, Romans 5:1-5 (Message)

The object of our hope as followers of Jesus is described in Scripture through metaphor, poetry, and parables. The Message translation of Romans 5:1-5 reflects the evocative language of Scripture with regards to hope. Make time during this week with reflect on the following passage using the practice of *Lectio Divina*.

By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in

turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

Romans 5:1-5 (Message)

Read the passage above twice through, slowly and gently. Let the words flow over you. Savor each phrase, believing that God is present and has something for you. No need to search, simply listen for a word or phrase that somehow speaks to you or touches you. Spend some time in silence with the word or phrase, just resting in it and allowing it to sink into your heart. Then read the passage slowly again.

Reflect or meditate on the word or phrase that stood out. How might it be speaking to you or challenging you? Allow memories, thoughts or situations evoked by the word to rise up gently. Allow God to reveal to you how the word or phrase applies to your life. Ask, "What meaning does this have for me here and now? What does God want me to know or to see?" Spend time in silence, reflecting on the phrase and allowing it to interact with your life. Now read the passage again.

Respond to God. Open your heart to God and openly and honestly share how you feel about your experience with the passage. These may be questions or doubts, or prayers of thanksgiving, petition, confession, lament, or praise.

Rest in God's presence. Allow your prayers to gently fade away and move into a time of simply resting in God's arms. Allow yourself freedom from thoughts, both mundane and holy. Open your mind, heart and soul to the fullness of God's love and peace. Rest.