Week 1 Small Group: In Times of Grief

**Opening Prayer:**

God of us all, we love to get straight to the Good News. We love to hear about your triumph over death. We love the hope that our faith has to offer. In our small group conversation help us to slow down and pause for a moment at the tomb as we face the reality of our human existence. Open our hearts to face the moments when we are faced with death, trauma and sorrow. As we face those deep, painful moments, we run to you able to more fully appreciate the gift of Resurrection hope. Amen.

**Breaking the Ice:**

* As you are comfortable, share a time when you were faced with a traumatic event or death of someone or something you loved. How did you react physically?
* Did this difficult time affect your faith? In what way?
* How did the presence of others help you or hinder you during this difficult season?

**Wrestling with the Word:**

Read John 20:1-10

* What did Mary experience? The other two disciples?
* How did they face their grief and trauma similarly? Differently?
* When did they stop running to catch their breath?

Read John 20:11-18

* Mary is in the midst of weeping, grieving and distress. It is in this state that she powerfully encounters the Risen Christ. What words of hope is Jesus giving to her in the midst of her sorrow?
* Why doesn’t Jesus want her to hold on to him?
* What is Mary’s response to encountering Christ?

**Next Steps:**

* What is the message of hope for you this week?
* How can you continue cultivating Christian relationships so that you have a community to run to in times of need?
* Who is God calling you to go and tell about the Good News?

**Closing Prayer:**

God of Resurrection Hope, we are grateful that we face all of life and death with the faith that you prepare an eternal place for us where we live on forever, with you. In all that we face, help us remember to stop running, to catch our breath, and to put our trust and faith in you. Amen.

Week 2 Small Group: In Times of Fear

**Opening Prayer:**

Gracious and most loving God, we may try to keep you out of our deepest places of fear for we have locked the doors to our hearts and to others. Yet, you persistently appear in our most vulnerable places and offer us peace and the gift of Spirit. As we explore your Word for our lives, appear to us once more that we might unlock the door and leave the rooms of our fears. In faith we pray, Amen.

**Breaking the Ice:**

* Share a time in your life when you were afraid for your life, for your future or for a loved one.
* Knowing that fear is a God given gift to keep us safe in times of fight or flight, how has fear benefited you? Has it ever been unhealthy and turned into anxiety?
* How have you seen others face fear in a healthy, courageous, or peaceful way?

**Wrestling with the Word:**

Read John 20:19-22

* What word, phrase or image stood out to you?
* Where in your life is Christ saying “Peace be with you”?
* What is God inviting you to change, do or be as you live out the words of this Scripture passage?

**Next Steps:**

* This week you are encouraged to practice mindfulness. Be mindful of those times when you feel fear. Be aware of what that feels like, where it is located in your body, what does it do to your thoughts? Then, aware of your fears, take in three deep breaths. With each inhale hear Christ say to you “Peace be with you”. With each exhale imagine your Christ removing your fears.

**Closing Prayer:**

Thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit! Thank you for coming into the places of our fears and offering us peace! Thank you for the life-changing, hope-giving words of the Bible. As we close our time we ask that you continue to show up in our lives and find peace in you, Lord Jesus. Say the Lord’s Prayer together.

Week 3 Small Group: In Times of Exhaustion

**Opening Prayer:**

We come from different places, O Lord. Some of us have been going and going and going and are here exhausted, worn out and depleted. Remind us that this is a time to catch our breath and be fed by you. Others of us have been enjoying slow days where we just bask in your presence and goodness. Remind us that this is a time to catch our breath and be reminded of the work you have for us to do. Amen.

**Breaking the Ice:**

* Share a time when your life was overwhelming, or you were exhausted by the demands of life.
* Share a time when you were able to get away and just be with Jesus (perhaps a retreat or prayer time).
* Which is easier for you: to do or to be?

**Wrestling with the Word:**

Read John 21:1-8

* What is it like to work and work and get nowhere?
* What is it like to work and have everything just come together easily and in a bountiful way?
* Why do you think that we experience both?

Read John 21:9-14

* When have you had breakfast with Jesus?
* What do you need in your life right now to be fed by Jesus?
* How does intentional time with Christ help strengthen your walk as a disciple?

Read John 21:15-19

* Just as we are comfortably fed, Jesus sends us out with more work to do. What work is Christ calling you to do?
* What happens when you try to feed Jesus’ sheep without being fed yourself?

**Next Steps:**

* What one spiritual practice could you commit to this week to be fed by Jesus?
* What one way can you feed others this week?

**Closing Prayer:**

Lord, we give you thanks for this time to sit with you. It is a mighty responsibility to be your workers in the world. Remind us daily of the times we need to be fed. Remind us daily of the feeding you have asked us to do. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Week 4 Small Group: In Times of Doubt

**Opening Prayer:**

Loving God, we want to please you. We want to be faithful and trusting in your goodness. Yet, there are times in our lives when we experience doubt, when we have questions we can’t wrap our minds around and we are unsure where to turn. Help us to turn to you knowing that you welcome our struggles and that you will faithfully love us through our doubts. We thank you for your gracious presence in all the moments of our journey. Amen.

**Breaking the Ice:**

* Share a time when you knew you were being a faithful follower of Christ, that you were believing God’s Word and could testify to what Christ was doing in your life.
* Share a time when you were more like the religious leaders who had questions and doubts and maybe even anger toward Jesus.
* Is it ok for you to have doubts? Is it ok for you to be angry with God at times?

**Wrestling with the Word:**

Read John 10:22-32

* What strikes you about this passage?
* Why do you think John chose to include this story of Jesus’ ministry?
* If you were in Jesus’ shoes and were being questioned, doubted and threatened, how would you react? What you do?
* How is your reaction different from Jesus’? How is it similar? What does that say about God? What does that say about you?

**Next Steps:**

* How is God calling you to be in relationship with those who you disagree with?
* How is God inviting you to authentically wrestle with your questions and doubts?
* Where is it safe for you to wrestle? How can you provide that safe space for others?

**Closing Prayer:**

Lord, we want to all believe and get along and live in peace and harmony. We know the wrong Facebook post, the wrong look, the wrong reaction drives us to places of breaking apart relationships. Challenge us this week to not only wrestle faithfully with you but to wrestle with one another with your spirit of love and grace. We ask all this in the name of Jesus the Christ, the one who is our Risen Savior. Amen.

Week 5 Small Group: In Times of Loneliness

**Opening Prayer:**

God of Resurrection and New Life, we are grateful for the hope your Resurrection has provided us. We only wish you could have walked beside us longer. So often we wish you were tangibly present with us as we journey through this life. Knowing you would be with us only a short while, you called us to love one another. When we feel lonely, let the love of your people become your love for us. When we love others, let them know it is your love being poured out. Amen.

**Breaking the Ice:**

* Share a time when the Body of Christ, the church, was able to radically love you, lift you up and/or offer you encouragement.
* Share a time when God used you to be the love of Christ to someone else.

**Wrestling with the Word**

Read John 13:31-35

* Through Christ’s earthly ministry he fully understood the human condition of grief, sorrow and loneliness. Share some examples of when Christ experienced these emotions. (Lazarus’ death, seeing people in need of healing, praying that the cup would be passed from him).
* Think about the larger context of our focus Scripture-the Last Supper, the looming danger for Jesus, his facing a painful death. In many ways, this is the beginning of his earthly goodbye to the disciples. What is Jesus lifting up as most important? What does that say about God? What does that say about us?

Read John 17:20-23

* Love and unity seem to be Jesus’ focus as his earthly life ends. How has the Church succeeded in living out his prayer? Where does the church need to do more work?

**Next Steps:**

* If you knew your earthly days were going to end soon, what parting words would you want to leave those you love the most?
* It is not always easy to love one another. Are Jesus’ words challenging you in any way?
* This passage is Jesus acknowledging that there are times when grief and loneliness overwhelm us. Jesus is asking us to hold one another up in those times. What kind of grief support can you or your congregation offer not only to church members but to the larger community?

**Closing Prayer:**

God of us all, your love never ends. Even when we feel alone in the world, you remind us that you left us with the gift of community and the call to love and be loved. Open our hearts to you and to one another. Give us strength to reach out to others in our times of need and use us to be there for others in their times of need. We humbly ask this in the precious name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Week 6 Small Group: In Times of Suffering

**Opening Prayer:**

God of all creation, you see everything from the tops of the highest mountain to the depths of the deepest sea. You see the events happening in every corner of the world and still, you make time to see us. And not only do you see us but you know our deepest needs, our deepest struggles. Thank you, God, for seeing us just as we are and for loving us for who we are. In our time together, help us to see one another with your eyes of love. Amen.

**Breaking the Ice:**

* Begin by watching Brene Brown’s Ted Talk about the power of vulnerability.
* After the Ted Talk invite the group to share their reactions to the talk. What makes vulnerability difficult? How does our willingness to be vulnerable help others?

**Wrestling with the Word:**

Read John 5:1-9.

* The blind man had no choice but to let the world see his place of vulnerability but many of us can mask our deepest sufferings. The world likes us to keep those masks on. Share ways that our work places, social clubs, culture, etc. encourage us to shy away from being truly vulnerable with one another.
* Jesus sees beyond our masks and limitations and goes right to the places of our deepest longings, fears and insecurities. And then Jesus speaks a word of healing into those places. Share, as the group is comfortable, how they have seen Christ invite people to get up and walk.

**Next Steps:**

* Give everyone a piece of blank printer paper. Invite everyone to see the paper as their “mat”. The mat is something they have carried with them day in and day out while hoping to make it to the healing waters, while waiting for someone, anyone to help them get to the pool and not cut in front of him. The mat symbolizes the pain and suffering and isolation that the man has been carrying for all of these years. Now, Jesus is inviting us to pick up that mat and walk away completely healed.
* Invite the group to spend the closing time journaling, drawing, coloring or just praying about what is on their spiritual mat. What are the things that they need Jesus to heal? What are the things that cause shame? No one will see their mat. It is between them and God. Play some contemplative music and give everyone time with their mat.
* Invite everyone to roll up their mat and seal it shut with tape.

**Closing Prayer:**

Invite everyone to look at one another and their rolled-up mats and remind the group that everyone carries their own baggage. No one is exempt. We all need to see and be seen. Invite participants to pray for each other in pairs or in small groups for whatever needs they want to share with one another.

Week 7 Small Group: In Times of Division

**Opening Prayer:**

Father, Son, and Holy Spirt-you are three and yet one. We are many and yet as your children, we become one, one with you, one with each other and one in ministry to all the world. Help us to realize that our unity is in you. Even when we do not see eye to eye with one another, we can still be one. Help us to realize the unity that you prayed for and worked toward. In Christ’s holy name we pray. Amen.

**Breaking the Ice:**

* We are going to play a game to help us see where we are united and where we are divided. Invite everyone to stand up and imagine a continuum line down the center of the room. Say that one end of the line loves summer. A little further down the line loves spring. Then fall. And the opposite side of summer loves winter. Ask the group to go and stand where their favorite season is.
* Have them talk to the people nearest to them and why they chose that spot. Then have them share in groupings (the summer people, spring people, etc) why they are where they are. Ask, “can we all still be united even if we don’t agree on which season is best?”
* Now we are going to go a little deeper. Choose a topic that will be controversial for your people without being completely divisive. Perhaps which version of the Bible is best, what direction should go with a new program, etc. Invite people to stand on an imaginary continuum to represent where they stand. Again, have them share why they chose that spot with those who are closest to them. Then share with the larger group. Ask, “can we all still be united even if we don’t all stand in the same spot?”
* Do this activity a third time with an issue that is even more controversial but still not entirely divisive for your people. Perhaps the authority of Scripture (a collection of wise sayings, middle is inspired by the Holy Spirit, other end is inerrant Word of God). Perhaps a topic like Climate change or universal health care is more appropriate. Again, have them share why they chose that location with those who are closest to them. Then share with the larger group. Ask, “can we still be united even if we don’t all stand in the same spot?”
* Independent of how this question is answered, move into wrestling with the Word.

**Wrestling with the Word:**

* Christ lived in a divided time. Just within Judaism there was division as to how to respond to the Roman Empire. Some felt they should dutifully be obedient. Others wanted a full rebellion. Jesus invited people from varying perspectives to the same table and called them all his disciples. In this context Jesus prays for unity and says that our unity will have a profound purpose.

When we use the phrase “so that” it is revealing a powerful purpose statement. Jesus uses three “so that” statements about our unity in this passage.

1. So that the world may believe that you (Father) have sent me
2. So that they may be one as we (Father and Jesus) are one.
3. So that the world may know that you (Father) have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

After reviewing these three statements discuss how our unity makes each one of these “so that” statements happen. (how does our unity make the world believe that you have sent me, etc.)

Jesus has a fourth “so that” statement in this prayer. It is in vs. 26-that Jesus has made God known to us so that the love which the Father has loved Jesus may be in us, and that Jesus will be in us.

How has Jesus made God’s love be known in you? Share a story of how the teachings or presence of Christ has helped make you aware of the depths of how much God loves you.

**Next Steps:**

* We can love others and work toward unity because God has first loved us. Where in your life is God inviting you, or perhaps challenging you to work toward unity?
* How could working toward that kind of reconciliation and how could it result in the “so that” statements Jesus prayed for?

**Closing Prayer:**

Lord it is easy for us to divide over personal hurts, controversial issues, just about anything. But, reconciliation is oh, so hard for us. To break the ice, make the apology, disagree with the other, Lord it is so hard for us. Just as you prayed for our unity so long ago, continue to pray for our unity. Break our hearts of stone and create in us hearts for love alone. Help us to see all that unites us and to let go of those things that divide us. This we desperately pray in the unifying, healing name of Jesus. Amen.