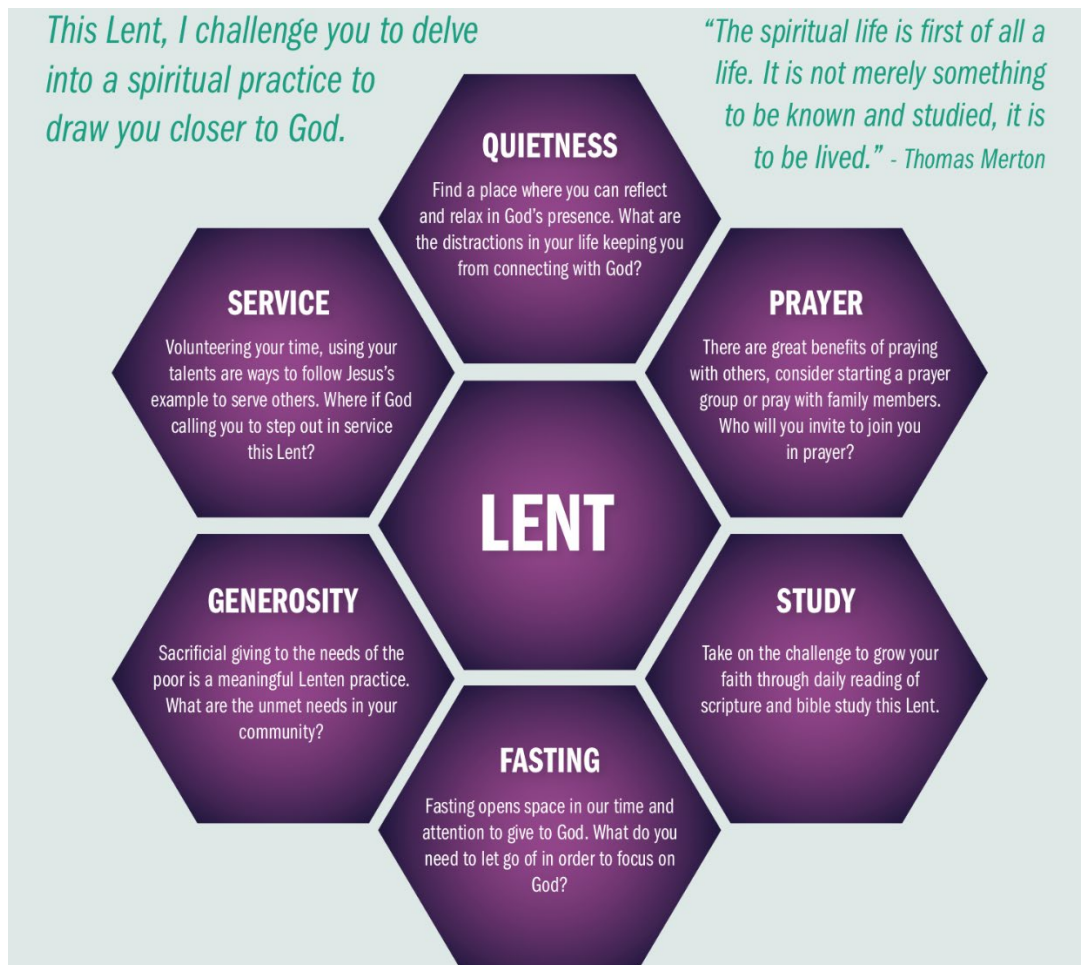


Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual Disciplines, I always hated how that sounded, disciplines. It sounds like rules and something in me naturally bristles against rules. However, it is that part of me that doesn't like the rules that most needs spiritual disciplines. You see these "disciplines" help me stay connected to God. Without the practices – prayer, meditation, fasting, worship, study – I will find myself drifting – doing my own thing and losing my centering in God.

For the next 6 weeks we will be speaking about the Spiritual Disciplines of quietness, prayer, service, generosity, study and fasting. Not every practice will be something that you fully embrace, however this is an opportunity to consider new rituals to draw you closer to God.

Grace and Peace,
Gina





Week 1: Quiet Before God, Meditative Reflection

Read the Reflection in preparation for group.

So why meditation?

When I say meditation what comes to mind? Often, we think of yoga or chanting. Meditation however is a biblical practice, Psalm 1 – Blessed is he who meditates on God’s law. Hebrew 3- fix your thoughts on Jesus. Christian meditation is a time to let go of our own thoughts and concerns, instead reflecting on the things of God.

Meditation is a way to focus and quiet th mind and activities and concentrate on God. It is a time to listen – to consider how God’s spirit is working in and through our life. Time spent in meditation is well spent no matter how busy we are. If we are willing to give into the process, we will leave feeling a sense of serenity, being refocused and centered.

Meditation is also a way to break through when stuck, when in a place where we know change needs to take place yet can’t quite get there. In the practice of meditation, letting go of things requires the will of God, and often offers us new perspectives.

There are many ways to meditate. Yoga can be one of them. For many, listening to music can connect us to God. Contemplative Prayer, which is more about resting in God than asking or talking to God. Focusing on a scripture even a single word in a scripture, some people light candles or use prayer beads.

We are all wired in different ways, for this reason meditation is not a one size fits all practice. For some meditation through writing and journaling is a useful practice, while for others this would be torturous.

For those who are introverts – they likely seek out quiet introspective time with God, so may be the most comfortable with silent prayer in a quiet space. An extrovert might find meditation most fulfilling when combined with an activity, such as painting, coloring, taking a walk, maybe even a sport like fishing. It’s more about letting yourself go than what you are doing.

I have at times practiced meditation in the midst of busy spaces, however ideally find a place that is free from interruptions. If need be – disconnect - turn off the phone, close down your computer. Nature is a place where people often feel connected to God, the beach, the woods, on a walk.

Get comfortable, but not so comfortable that you fall asleep

Sometimes a posture helps us connect to God, kneeling, looking at the sky, walking a path or a labyrinth.

The essential element to meditation is a love for God, and for this reason you desire to draw closer to God. St. Teresa describes it this way, “Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”

Pray this week that your spirit will be opened to the practice of Christian meditation.



Small Groups: Christian meditation is a time to let go of our own thoughts and concerns and instead reflect on the things of God.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, as we enter this first week of our Lenten journey, guide us on the path that leads to you. Fill our hearts with gratitude, patience, strength, and peace. Help us to grow closer to you this Lent through meditating, praying, studying, fasting, almsgiving, and serving. In your name we pray, Amen.

Breaking the Ice:

Have you ever meditated? If so, what was your experience.
Does meditation sound inviting, or does it make you anxious?

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7(GNT)

Wrestling with The Word:

Today I invite you into a conversation and then into a time of guided meditation. In our time we will intentionally set our thoughts on connecting with God in a quiet, introspective way. For some this will be natural and easy, for others uncomfortable and out of character. But for all I ask that you give your trust over to this process for this time.

With this in mind let us begin for you will learn about meditation by meditating...
Therefore, today we will begin.

Invite someone to read the scripture passage again. As you read along see if a word or phrase jumps out at you. Just hold on to that word.

Now just repeat the word over a few times. Do not over think it just allow your thoughts to move freely.
Begin to connect this word to yourself. If the word is overwhelming, what am I overwhelmed by at this time? How is that affecting my life, my family, my job, and my faith. What is challenging about this word? Comforting? What don't you understand?

Pause for about 3-5 minutes

Now what will you do with these thoughts? How will you move forward? Can you feel encouragement? Direction? Is there a challenge? How does this affect your priorities?

Make yourself comfortable. Sit straight, your feet on the floor, your hands relaxed in your lap, and breath normally.

Pause for about 3-5 minutes

Breathe in through your nose to the count of 4, and then breathe out through you mouth to the count of 6.

As we enter into this time I invite you to pray a simple prayer, either silently or quietly. Just a word or a phrase to invite God into your thoughts - for me it is simply saying, "Jesus" or "Come Holy Spirit". If thoughts enter, hold them for a moment then let them go, repeat this phrase.

Don't worry about silencing your mind, but instead just let disruptive thoughts go, rather than following them.

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We end this time of meditation by reflecting on God’s faithful, unconditional love for each of us. We consider who we are most fundamentally—or rather, whose we are. Each one of us is God’s beloved son or daughter: this is the core of our identity.

Pause for about 3-5 minutes

Next Steps:

Will you make space in your life for a regular time of meditation? When? Where?

In closing pray for the following graces:
to be more aware of how God is near;
to trust in God’s personal care and love for one another.

Week 2: Contemplative Prayer

Conversation with God

Welcome to our 2nd lesson focusing on the Spiritual Disciplines. Last week we considered the practice of meditation, of centering ourselves in God. Today we will explore the practice of prayer, specifically intercessory prayer. How do we go before God for others? Like meditation this gives us a way to pause in our busy lives and focus on our relationship with God.

Read the Reflection in preparation for group.

One of my favorite feel good movie clips that lifts my spirits even on a tough day comes from the 1997 movie My Best Friend’s Wedding. You might know that scene...

“The moment I wake up, before I put on my makeup I say a little pray for you”

A beautiful blend a prayer and love.

Nearly sixteen centuries ago, great theologian Augustine declared “God loves each of us as if we were the only person on earth, yet God loves all as God loves each. There’s no one on earth today that God loves any more than God loves you, nor is there anyone God loves any less.”

While we are grateful for the complete love of God for ourselves, how does this consider lead us to consider the love of God for others?

Where is the love in our troubled world, our national situation, our neighborhoods, our church, the workplace and even family relations? How do we cope with the struggle to love and understanding one another?

One of the ways we can act in love is to recognize the pain in the lives of those around us is through prayer. Reaching out to God on another’s behalf is called intercessory prayer. It is the act of stepping into the gap and bringing before God another’s need.

In Richard Foster’s book Prayer, he introduces the topic of intercession by saying, “Intercession is a way of loving others.” In praying for someone else’s well being we join our spirits with their spirits, our hearts with their hearts. We

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are in solidarity with them, sharing their suffering, their longings, their needs. We are expressing the truth of their value and worth. We are desiring their well being. We are loving them.

Intercessory praying is lifting up someone else's need with the hope and the conviction that there will be a change. Intercession is not a desperate attempt to convince God to do something. Instead it is asking God to allow us to participate in the divine work by holding another in love while the Holy Spirit works. We are not changing anything, but instead are being changed.

Intercession is not easy. Intercessors believe in the life-changing power of Jesus. They persist in prayer. There will be times when people will mock your efforts and question your sanity, yet we are not called to answer their unbelief, instead an intercessor keeps their eyes Jesus. It's an acting of holding firm to the one we are interceding for in love.

Praying for another is one of the most beautiful things that we can do. In many cases when we intercede it is because we already care for the person we are praying for.

Are we willing move beyond prayer for those we like? Can the prayers that you lift up for one who you might be angry with or hold a grudge make a difference. How might we place them before God in love – not for God to change them, but for God to transform the situation. Could that be healing? Why do you think Jesus told us to intercede for our enemies – because Jesus knew that in praying for others leads to love.

There was a season when I had come to place of struggle, with life's course, with some individuals, with ministry and even with God. What made this season unique was unlike other challenging times, this time I was just plain tired of praying for myself. But in that time of hopelessness, it was the prayers of others, intercessory prayers changed the course.

The turning point in that season of struggle was not because my circumstances had changed but instead because my hope was restored through the power of intercessory prayer. In a beautiful act of love my husband gathered a group to specifically pray for me – in some ways this was very humbling, but it was a powerful gift.

At the same time, I was stirred to pray the beatitudes. To pray deeply and intentionally for the blessing of those who were in need of hope too. In the past I always was looking for myself among those who mourn, the meek, the merciful or the clean of heart, or I self identified as the righteous or the persecuted or the peacemaker. I was looking for the blessing. But this time I began to pray earnestly for others to be blessed.

I believe that prayers will bring about change in others as well as ourselves. In the pursuit to become more like Jesus, nothing will make us more like him than looking for image of God in someone else.

Small Groups: Intercessory praying is lifting up someone else's need with the hope and the conviction that there will be a change.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, as we enter this first week of our Lenten journey, guide us on the path that leads to you. Fill our hearts with gratitude, patience, strength, and peace. Help us to grow closer to you this Lent through meditating, praying, studying, fasting, almsgiving, and serving. In your name we pray, Amen.

Breaking the Ice:

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Today you will hear a familiar passage, however, I would ask you to listen as if you are sitting on the hillside listening to the beatitudes for the first time. How does each effect you? Is it peace, or confusion? Is there joy or sorrow. Are you looking for yourself, or are you turning to see the other?

Scripture: Matthew 5: 1-12 New International Reader's Version (NIRV)

Wrestling with the Word:

What keeps you from praying with hope and confidence?

When has your faith been stretched when lifting others in prayer?

Will you make space in your life for a regular time of intercessory prayer? When? Where?

We are going to take a few minutes and pray through the beatitudes together. We will lift up each one then pause for a moment to intercede for both individuals as well as groups.

Today we pray for the poor in spirit to receive the kingdom of heaven.

Today we pray for those who mourn to be comforted.

Today we pray for the meek to inherit the earth.

Today we pray for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness to be filled.

Today we pray for the merciful to receive mercy.

Today we pray for the pure in heart to see God.

Today we pray for the peacemakers to be called children of God.

Today we pray for those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake to receive the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. Amen

Give each person 6 post-its. Make available additional post-it notes if needed. Invite each person in silence to write at least one prayer for the needs or concerns of people in each of the beatitudes. Play some quiet instrumental music in the background while participants write their prayers.

Invite participants to read their prayers. Pause to give time to reflect after each prayer is lifted.

Next Steps:

Share with the group something in your life that is currently weighing on you.

Commit to pray for each person's request daily in the next week.

End your time together with prayers of thanksgiving for the work God has done.

Week 3: Fasting

Abstaining from Injustice

Welcome to our third week of Lent. This week we will be reflect on the spiritual discipline of fasting. The biblical practice of fasting goes beyond "giving something up", instead it requires sacrificial giving. Jesus' death and resurrection are to offer a new hope for all people. Yet, there are still people suffering from the holds of injustice. This Lent consider the spiritual discipline of fasting, not only as an act of personal piety, but as a communal act of hope.

Read the Reflection in preparation for group.

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Fasting is a spiritual practice that we are all encouraged to participate in as a means of strengthening our relationship with God and hearing more closely how and where God speaks to us. Admittedly, fasting is not the easiest of the spiritual discipline as it requires us to deny ourselves that which is a fundamental component of our survival. Food is more than a luxury...it is a necessity. When we fast, we are giving up a need rather than a want.

In the bible, people often choose fasting as a church or as an individual in time of making decisions or in need of miracles. In the Old Testament Daniel fasted when he prepared himself to come to God. When Jesus started his ministry, the first thing he did was to go into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days to prepare for ministry. The Church of Antioch fasted before sending off Barnabas and Saul.

When we fast, we often times desire to hear a revelatory word from God that will instruct us on how to live life or make an important decision. We fast because we want to show ourselves and God how pious we are or can be, and we definitely fast because we want to feel the very real, tangible presence of God in our lives.

As we can see, in spite of the difficulty that comes with fasting there are some real benefits.

What is far too often neglected about the significance of fasting is that fasting calls us to be socially responsible for one another. Fasting is an act of not only piety but reciprocity. In other words, if our fasting is only about being able to pull from God what we need and want without being concerned about the needs and wants of the community that surrounds us, then our fast is just vain grandstanding.

As Isaiah 58 shows us, the fasting that God desires is much more rooted in our ability to advocate for the poor and powerless among us and less about our ability to give up eating expensive meals we do not need. Isaiah 58 confronts us with a hard lesson. His proclamation is one of integrity and truly being a people who are less concerned with our own images than we are with ensuring the well-being of our fellow created beings.

What is of supreme importance in this text is the understanding that God is not only confronting the community's misplaced and selfish fasting as a demonstration of piety. God is calling the people out in reminding them that as the covenant people of God that they are to uphold an ethic that prioritizes the well-being of everyone they were in community with. Isaiah is offering up a prophetic message that seeks to remind the people that it is their moral imperative that in everything they do, their holy rituals, their familial relationships, and yes, even their fasting, the health of the entire community must be attended to. This means not only acknowledging the other, but also being willing to affirm the full humanity of the other. *Gerard Jameson*

Small Groups: God is less concerned about our personal and independent fasting and piety and more concerned about our ability to care for one another.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, as we enter this first week of our Lenten journey, guide us on the path that leads to you. Fill our hearts with gratitude, patience, strength, and peace. Help us to grow closer to you this Lent through meditating, praying, studying, fasting, almsgiving, and serving. In your name we pray, Amen.

Breaking the Ice:

What things distract or draw you away from Jesus?

What things become excuses for not participating in community or serving others?

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Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9

Wrestling with the Word:

These verses suggest that they are doing what they are doing not for God, or for others, but for themselves. In what ways do we do that today?

How is fasting tied into the quest for justice for all people?

Is there hope for justice in this life now? In our lives, in our world today?

Next Steps:

The prophet proclaims that their personal piety is not pleasing to God because of how they treat others. The Pharisees of Jesus' day have the same problem. They have fasted and humbled themselves yet wonder why God has not seen it or noticed them. What are the ways we need to let go of going through the motions and instead actively commit to attending to the needs of others?

Week 4: Generosity

Almsgiving in Lent

Welcome to our 4th week of exploring spiritual disciplines. This week we will look at generosity through the lens of the ancient practice of almsgiving. Almsgiving is the practice of giving sacrificially. It is through the practice of giving that we will grow in our discipleship.

Read the Reflection in preparation for group.

"I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver." Maya Angelou

As United Methodists we often turn to Wesley's Quadrilateral, (scripture, tradition, reason, and experience) when approaching something new in our faith life, the practice of Almsgiving might be one such thing for many people.

Almsgiving in Scripture

Almsgiving in the scripture is an act of righteousness and not charity as it is often understood today. Almsgiving was regarded as an act of justice, a just debt owing to the needy. Read the following scriptures through this lens.

"If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother" Deuteronomy 15:7

"Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives. Isaiah 58:7 GNT

Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." Mat 19:21

"Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. Luke 12:33

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And he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Acts 10:31

Tradition

Almsgiving is a long-standing practice within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Almsgiving means giving money, goods or time to the special service of God. In the ancient agrarian society, people gave their first harvest to God, they also gave to the poor directly through practices such as gleaning leaving some of the crop for the poor to harvest. Wesley placed a great emphasis on solidarity with the poor. This included giving money and goods, as well as supporting advocacy programs that created schools, health clinic and employment opportunities. The United Methodist church intentionally focusing on ministry with the poor, by partnering with, and empowering, those in need.

Reason

Reason enables us to interpret scripture and tradition in light of our current circumstances. Lent is a time for us to turn intentionally to God. Almsgiving recognizes everything we have is a gift from God, we give because God gave generously to us.

Experience

Actively giving is the experiential aspect of almsgiving. There are countless ways you can give above your regular offering to the church. Mission offerings, giving goods to food pantries and clothing drives, disaster relief, and gifts to Miracles Everywhere are some things to consider. You will explore more ways of giving in small group. No matter what you choose, your giving should be done in a way that honors the receiver and does not draw attention to yourself (Mat 6:1-4).

Small Groups: Almsgiving recognizes everything we have is a gift from God, we give because God gave generously to us.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, as we enter this first week of our Lenten journey, guide us on the path that leads to you. Fill our hearts with gratitude, patience, strength, and peace. Help us to grow closer to you this Lent through meditating, praying, studying, fasting, almsgiving, and serving. In your name we pray, Amen.

Breaking the Ice:

Who in your life is someone that you would consider a generous person? What traits or values do you notice as they serve others? How would you like to grow in being generous to others?

Scripture: Isaiah 58:7 GNT

Wrestling with the Word:

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are often coupled together as foundational practices during Lent. How do you see them fitting together?

Does the way I give reflect my deepest values? In what areas is my giving not well aligned with what is most important to me?

What might you need to change in your life so you can be as generous as you wish?

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We've all been given resources of time, money, and giftedness. In what area would you most like to grow in being more generous to others?

Consider doing something together as a family or a group. It could be giving something up like candy, sweets, trips to Starbucks or ordering in pizza, then use the money saved to give to a ministry agreed on by the group.

The sacrificial nature of almsgiving means denying oneself for another, donating ones birthday money or directing that birthday gifts go to a ministry the local church supports.

Take on a fundraising project during Lent and give the profits to ministry. The family or group makes jam together, potholders, jewelry, or handmade cards.

Initiate a special offering for Miracles Everywhere that supports youth, ministry in Africa, and rebuilding of lives effected by disaster. Ask members to sacrifice one luxury – dining out, music or video game purchases and donate a week's worth (or a month's worth!) to the special offering. For more information on Miracles Everywhere: <https://www.gnjumc.org/miracleseverywhere/> .

Each day of Lent count one blessing and make one sacrifice (it could be the same sacrifice every day or a different one each day). Record both on a piece of paper every day and put them in a jar or vase. At the end of the season, it was eye opening to read each gratitude and recall each sacrifice. Likely you will see how your blessings added up and how small your sacrifices are in comparison to your abundance.

Week 5: Study

For four weeks we have been exploring various spiritual practices. This week we will focus on the practice of study. As a disciple of Jesus, we are to be life long learners. This week we will explore the practice Lectio Divina, a way of reading that slows you down – allowing for meditation, contemplation, and growth in awareness.

Read the Reflection in preparation for group.

The discipline of study is an important means to align our lives with the things that are important to God. Through the study our understanding expands our faith and our thinking to grows and changes us. *"It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it."* Isaiah 55:11

The Apostle Paul offers a guide to things that are important to study: *"whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.* Phil 4:8 " Through the study of scriptures and engagement with other disciples in small groups that we discover glimpses of the Divine.

The New Testament describes the early church as a group of people who spoke often to one another about the things of God. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings. They enjoyed what they learned and talked about their joy. Christians often gather together in small groups that meet for the specific purpose of praying together, discussing Scripture, and helping one another.



For John Wesley scripture as a means of grace. It opened up our hearts and minds to a deeper love with God. While Wesley promoted studying the bible privately each day, he also gathered people in societies to grow their intellect.

There are many ways to study, including coming together as you are as a small group. You can engage in daily readings of the bible and devotions, listen to teaching on podcasts and sermons, read books by Christian leaders, examine church history. Study however, is not always formal learning.

Study is the spiritual discipline of continual discovery. Richard Foster considers study in this way in *Celebration of Discipline*: "perhaps the most important field of study: the observation of reality in things, events, and actions." We can study a book, but we can also study nature, institutions, culture, events and people. *"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."* Romans 12:2

This week write down the different ways you have engaged in studying your faith, both presently and in the past. Consider, is it time to add a new practice? Might you do something more creative, or perhaps you would benefit from developing a learning plan.

Small Groups: Study aligns our lives with the things that are important to God.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, as we enter this first week of our Lenten journey, guide us on the path that leads to you. Fill our hearts with gratitude, patience, strength, and peace. Help us to grow closer to you this Lent through meditating, praying, studying, fasting, almsgiving, and serving. In your name we pray, Amen.

Breaking the Ice:

Do you read? What do you like to read? Why do you like those sorts of books?
When's the last time you were pleasantly surprised by something you read? What was it?

Scripture: Philippians 1:9-11

Wrestling with the Word:

How do you like to read Scripture? Full of questions? Armed with a study bible? For devotional purposes? As the basis of prayers?
In what ways can you stimulate your mind to new ways of thinking?

One of the most ancient ways to experience the Bible comes through a practice called *lectio divina* (Latin for "divine reading"). The practice moves through four phases with an underlying confidence that God speaks to us whenever we read the Bible.

Next Steps:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces



perseverance;⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Hebrew 5:1-5

The first step is to read the passage over and over, savoring each word and waiting for one to rise above the rest. Once a single word or phrase sticks in your mind, you begin to explore the word.

What feelings, emotions or memories does it evoke?

After a time of experiencing the word, it's time to ask and listen to God for the answer to what this word is meant to say to you.

Why this word? What is God saying?

Finally, use the word as a focus point to let go of every distracting thought so that you can rest in the presence of God. (umc.org)

How does this passage speak to you right now?

Week 6: Service

Honoring God

For the past few weeks we have been speaking about the practice of Spiritual Disciplines. So far, we have considered the practice of meditation, of centering ourselves in God. We explored the practice of prayer, specifically intercessory prayer. We contemplated the practice of fasting, generosity and study. Today we will look at the discipline of service as a way to go deeper in our journey of faith.

Read the Reflection in preparation for group.

It was before Passover, and Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and to return to the Father. He had always loved his followers in this world, and he loved them to the very end.

Even before the evening meal started, the devil had made Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, decide to betray Jesus.

Jesus knew that he had come from God and would go back to God. He also knew that the Father had given him complete power. So during the meal Jesus got up, removed his outer garment, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He put some water into a large bowl. Then he began washing his disciples' feet and drying them with the towel he was wearing.

But when he came to Simon Peter, that disciple asked, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus answered, "You don't really know what I am doing, but later you will understand." John 13:1-7 CEV

When I think of foot washing so many images swirl in my head, from the days when I was a child and the Holy Thursday Service where the young priest in the parish would wash the feet of the elderly priest that they would bring in from the retirement home. As these men lifted their robes and pulled up the hems of their trousers there was this moment of vulnerability as they exposed gnarly, weathered feet. The scene was a bit awkward and uncomfortable.

Then there was that Holy Thursday when we had carefully crafted a meaningful hand washing ceremony. We had lovingly washed the hands of a church full of worshippers. As the line came to an end an older woman, a leader in the church – most boldly took off her shoes and demanded the surprised pastor to instead wash her feet. The scene was a bit awkward and uncomfortable.



Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" The scene was a bit awkward and uncomfortable.

Now I don't know about you, but I pretty much try to avoid things that are awkward and uncomfortable. Funny thing is that most often that is the place where God wants me to be. I am called to set aside personal comfort for the sake of the gospel. This is not always easy.

I have also come to recognize that even when I am trying hard to be a faithful disciple there is that part of me that defaults to – well I hate to say it but being self-centered. This even trips me up in the practice of spiritual disciplines. When I pray – I often pray for my own needs first, when I read the bible its for my edification and when I fast, I am wondering if this might just help me drop a few pounds. But how is it when I serve that I can do so out of self?

When we speak about the spiritual discipline of service often, we equate service to mission work. Mission trips, working at the food pantry, a Habitat for Humanity build are all good and worthy ways to serve. However, we can unknowingly use service as a means to meet our own emotional needs and desires. We are going out to help people who are less fortunate than us, but do our actions make them feel like they are less than us? Mission can get turned upside down if we make the focus on what we are doing, and how much satisfaction we get from this. Instead how can we serve in a way that leads us to grow in our love for God and for one another?

On the night that he would make the ultimate sacrifice of giving his life in love, Jesus first takes on the awkward and uncomfortable act of foot washing. He did this not only to demonstrate humble servanthood, but he used that moment to manifest his deep love for them. Jesus points us to discipleship that calls us to get messy; it requires our sacrifice – of our time, resources and our heart. Often not by choice, but out of love of God.

Life is not easy, we would like to step in and help. It is our best intentions that draw us to serve.

I am a doer; I like to be busy and productive. In business this can serve me well. You can count on me to get things done. However, I have come to learn that serving in the name of Jesus is more about care than productivity. Mission was not to get things done, but to instead it was a response to a calling to love God.

How might we reframing service? Not about the doing but instead about the loving. Service as an act of love. Jesus encourages the disciples to live out relational servanthood. Not disconnected but helping one another, encouraging one another, walking alongside one another. Talking and eating and sharing life with one another.

Watching her kneeling down on arthritic knees to put together the same Legos for a little boy so he could just knock them down. Coming from behind the buffet to sit and eat with a guest at the dinner for the homeless. Taking on the work that is not big or important, because it matters to someone else. Walking the halls of the nursing home holding frail, boney hands. Being patted down and searched so you can visit a prisoner. All awkward and uncomfortable. All serving like Jesus.

What is the spiritual discipline of service and how do we who work for the church find ways to serve as an act of love outside our vocation?

When your calling is to serve the church, it can often be difficult to find unique ways to serve God outside your church role. Pastors and church staff have a tough time with this distinction, I think we can have the same struggle here at the

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conference level. This work on all levels is a calling. So how might you completely immerse yourself in some kind of servanthood that doesn't look like your work?

What does it look like to volunteer for Red Cross, read to children at the local library, help out at the local pet shelter, coach a baseball team? What might you do to meet the real needs of others? Where if God calling you to step out? A word of caution, when you open yourself to God's service being a servant means giving up control and allowing God to interrupt you whenever God needs to.

Finally, in your zest to serve remember to tread gently. We never really know the conditions of the hearts of those we are serving. An act of kindness goes far. It might be far less than what you want to give, but it might be exactly what people need. I love how one student on mission shared her attitude towards serving, "approaching another people by taking off your shoes... for the place you are approaching is holy... and do not forget that God was there before our arrival."

The scene was a bit awkward and uncomfortable. Actually, at that moment I perceived the request alone as irritating. This had been the most trying 2 weeks of my life. I was worn out and broken and now they were insisting I take part in this ritual of foot washing. This intended act of love was purely an act of torture to me. I was not prepared, I was wearing tights, I had no idea of the condition of my pedicure, and the condition of my heart was too fragile. At that moment I did not want anyone to touch me.

Then my sweet friend Kat whispered in my ear, it's not about our being comfortable it's about our being obedient. After years of ministry I came to know how right she was – the foot washing that night was about getting my heart right to serve. Serve with humility.

Small Groups: Service leads us to grow in our love for God and for one another.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, as we enter this first week of our Lenten journey, guide us on the path that leads to you. Fill our hearts with gratitude, patience, strength, and peace. Help us to grow closer to you this Lent through meditating, praying, studying, fasting, almsgiving, and serving. In your name we pray, Amen.

Breaking the Ice:

Take a minute to brag about yourself. What is one accomplishment, gift or talent people might not know about that makes you proud?

Scripture: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Wrestling with the Word:

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as a sign of love – a love they were called to share, but not until they have had their feet washed. In the same way Jesus called me to commit more deeply that night, to surrender to him in love – so that I could understand later what it feels like to broken and battered, people who are reluctant. I pray that reminder helps me to serve in humility.



This is no simple exercise to be repeated ritually, but to have your feet washed by Jesus means that you are ready to go where he goes, to act on his behalf as his agent, to love as he loves. To do so showing dignity and honor to each person we are called to serve in love.

How have you served in the past?

Have you prayerfully considered the direction God might be asking you to serve now?

Have you ever served in a place or way that was challenging?

Who are you bringing alongside you as you serve?

Next Steps:

Will you make space in your life for a regular time of service? When? Where?

Closing Prayer: God open our hearts to your call to service, allow me to share a message that bring glory to your kingdom. Amen.

I hope this small group exercise has helped you to discover a new spiritual discipline or see an old favorite in a new light. I am always open to your comments, feel free to contact me about this resource or any other input or requests about Small Groups.

Grace and Peace,

Rev Gina Yeske

Gina Yeske

Director of Small Groups

The United Methodist Church of Greater New Jersey

O: 732.359.1042

C: 732.740.0878

E: gyeske@gnjumc.org

Mission and Resource Center

205 Jumping Brook Rd., Neptune NJ 07753

732.359.1000 | www.gnjumc.org