

SESSION ONE:
An Invitation to Discover

Invitation & Prayer

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:28b-33

The hearing ear and the seeing eye—
the Lord has made them both.

Proverbs 20:12

The Christian life is the practice of living in what God has done and is doing.¹

Eugene Peterson

The God who has always been a part of our stories invites us to become much more a part of God's story, and to see what will happen.²

Tom Sine

Overview

This session will introduce *A Way of Life* by (1) inviting reflection and conversation around some overarching themes/elements of the process, and (2) introducing the spiritual practice of prayerfully reviewing one's day or week.

- I. An Invitation to Discover
- II. The Structure: A Life of Discipleship
- III. Practice: Prayer of Examen

Focusing Question

- Why did you say “yes” to *A Way of Life*? What are your hopes for the process?

Instruction & Reflection

I. An Invitation to Discover

There is a story of a five-year-old who was put to bed every night by his mom. And every night she would come into his room to talk and to tuck him in and to pray with him. On some nights she would even sing with him. Songs like “Jesus Loves Me” or “The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me” or “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” or any other of those early songs that he never remembered actually learning, but kind of always knew. On one of those nights they were singing together when his mom began to harmonize with the melody of the song. As the boy stuck to the familiar tune he could hear and feel her part weave beautifully with his. Her voice added depth and breadth and beauty to this simple song. The song “felt” larger and more beautiful.

“What are you doing?” he asked his mom.

“I am singing the harmony,” she replied.

Harmony. He had never heard that word before. The bedtime singing continued. One or two more songs, his mom adding to the familiar tunes with her harmonizing voice. It was beautiful.

Then she said, "Now you try! You be the harmony."

So the mom sang the melody, and the boy tried with everything he had to respond and meet her voice as she had met his. The child's voice hunted for the harmony. His voice collided and strained and clashed with hers. The resulting sound was many things, but not beautiful. How frustrating it was for the boy!

But the mom encouraged her son over and over again that night, "Keep on trying," until seemingly by accident, his voice met hers and added for a moment something very beautiful. If only for a brief time that evening, she was the melody, he was the harmony. And it was wonderful. That night initiated the boy's harmonizing history. For night after night he would learn, through much frustration and disharmony and sometimes wonder, to be the harmony in the song.



In so many ways we are like the boy of this story. We are learning to harmonize in this life of faith. And it requires much persistence, thought, encouragement, and practice. The Scriptures offer us quite a melody line of creation and redemption, of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, of love and truth and mercy, which runs through history. The Scriptures also provide us quite a few lessons in harmonizing with this melody line. Through the biblical witness of Israel and the Church we find portraits of men and women who sought to align and realign their lives with God's way in the world. They learned to "hear the melody" and "be the harmony."

But when one steps back from this witness of Scripture and from the testimonies of church history, one has to wonder today, in North America, whether so much of our growth has been stunted as individuals and as communities by seeing our part as

the melody rather than the harmony. Could it be that we have been offered too many models and admonitions to be solo artists when it is a harmonizing chorus we have been invited and designed to join? Have we insisted on singing the melody when we are created to sing the harmony?

Throughout *The Journey* we sought to discover more deeply what God was up to in this world, in our communities, and in our unique lives. We looked through the Scriptures; we explored our life stories and our many relationships for the shaping work of God's Spirit in us, with us, through us, and among us. In short, *The Journey* was an extended exercise in listening to the Melody and in learning our harmony. In *A Way of Life* this exercise continues. Such listening and learning must become *our way of life* if we are to mature and sustain a harmonizing presence to God's melody in this world.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us that prophets in the Scriptures offered an alternative portrait of life that critiqued the way people were living as well as energized them to a new way of living.³ In this regard, Jesus prophetically ministered in the first century. His vision of reality both *critiqued* the prevailing visions of the day and *energized* his followers toward a new way of life. Jesus' life marked those that walked with him in Judea and Galilee. We know their stories from Scripture (Peter, John, and the rest of the twelve; Mary, Martha, Lazarus and the many other disciples like them; even Paul). Wherever Jesus invested his attention, lives of compassion, service, humility, and sacrifice began covering the landscape. But Jesus' prophetic presence was not limited to these stories from the first century. Many have sought to walk with him throughout the centuries; and in those many lives one also finds something akin to "a family resemblance" to Jesus. Their way of living took on the character of his way of life. By God's Spirit, Jesus life of prayer and community and mission has spread throughout history.

Our sense today is that we need to be reminded again of Jesus prophetic way with us as well. Too many people around us seem to have uncritically settled for “just enough Jesus” so that their lives are not too affected or altered. We wonder how well we are listening to how the gospel may be challenging our dominant understandings and practices of life in the twenty-first century? Jesus’ way of life remains critical and energizing to us today, but are we really awake and attuned to it?

Throughout *A Way of Life* we want to offer conversations and relationships and practices that thoughtfully encourage and frame Christian faithfulness. Our hope in all of this is that we might each (1) grow in our capacity to hear how Jesus continues to lovingly speak into our lives (*hear the melody*) and (2) grow in our capacity and courage to faithfully respond to and live out Jesus’ way in the world (*sing our harmonizing part*). For out of a growing attentiveness to God’s presence and activity we will always find ourselves being invited by the Spirit to cooperate and align our lives with God’s work. This is who we are. “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be *our way of life*” (Ephesians 2:10, italics added). By Jesus’ life and power, and by the Spirit’s guidance, we will continue to learn to live our lives as the harmony amidst a culture that is demanding we master our own melodies.

REFLECT & RESPOND

- What jumped out to you from this *invitation to discover*?

II. The Structure: A Life of Discipleship

“The Christian faith is a way of life lived in response to Jesus’ invitation to ‘follow me’ (Mark 8:34).”⁴

Christian Scharen

Henri Nouwen began his 1995 *Leadership Journal* article “Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry” with the observation that the words “discipleship” and “discipline” come from the same root word. He writes,

Once you have made the choice to say, “Yes, I want to follow Jesus,” the question is, “What disciplines will help me remain faithful to that choice?” If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we have to live a disciplined life.

By discipline I do not mean control. If I know the discipline of psychology or of economics, I have a certain control over a body of knowledge. If I discipline my children, I want to have a little control over them.

But in the spiritual life, the word discipline means “the effort to create some space in which God can act.” Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere your not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn’t planned or counted on.⁵

Nouwen is fundamentally concerned with the sort of life it will take to connect a good start on the journey with a good finish. How does one develop and sustain a way of life that is faithful to Jesus? Nouwen goes on to unpack three overarching disciplines of solitude, community, and ministry. He points out that the gospel writer records in Luke 6:12-19 (1) Jesus spending the night in prayer on the mountain (the discipline of solitude), (2) Jesus choosing at dawn the twelve apostles from among his many disciples (the discipline of community), and then (3) Jesus coming down with the twelve apostles to minister to the crowd (the discipline of ministry). He encourages the reader to take note of Jesus’ order here—from solitude to community to ministry. He underscores the significance of the order by way of confession.

So often in ministry, I have wanted to do it by myself. If it didn’t work, I went to others and said, “Please!” searching for a community to help me. If that didn’t work, maybe I’d start praying.

But the order that Jesus teaches us is the reverse. It begins by being with God in solitude; then it creates a fellowship, a community of people with whom the mission is being lived; and finally this community goes out together to heal and to proclaim good news.”⁶

So many of us resonate with Nouwen’s confession. We know what it is like to become deeply concerned about some need we notice in our community. We know what it is like to attack that need with our strength and resources. We also know what it is like to feel ‘in over our head’ in addressing the need and, consequently, to rally others around our concern through some sort of concerted effort. And we know what it is like to become so frustrated and fatigued in our efforts that we are at our wit’s end, ready to throw in the towel. In the end, we remember what it is like to end up on our knees in these moments, really praying as if for the first time—“God, help!” Too frequently we, like Nouwen, move from ministry to community to prayer. And most often this rhythm stems from an “I’ll do it by myself-lone ranger” set of impulses that violate Jesus’ overall way of life.

Now we don’t want to impose this template too rigidly, but we do think that Jesus’ movement of solitude to community to ministry will provide a helpful framework for our learning this year. While we are going to slightly deviate from Nouwen’s naming of these three disciplines, their overarching concerns and flow will structure our reflections, practices, and conversations around Jesus’ way of life in the world. *Stage 1: Friendship with God* will invite us to pay attention to a life of growing intimacy or communion with God. *Stage 2: Community with Others* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being with others as God’s people. *Stage 3: Mission on the Way* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being sent by God into the world. Unfolded in these stages are sets of disciplines or practices by which we learn to turn toward God and others, and thereby participate with God’s compassionate and reconciling way in the world.

Side window

As Jesus’ disciple, I am his apprentice in kingdom living. I am learning from him how to lead my life in the Kingdom of the Heavens as he would lead my life if he were I. It is my faith in him that led me to

become his disciple. My confidence in him simply means that I believe the he is right about everything; that all that he is and says shows what life is at its best, what it was intended by God to be. "In him was life and the life was the light of men." (John 1:4 NAS)⁷

Dallas Willard

III. Practice: Prayer of Examen

O Lord, you have searched me and known me....
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139: 1, 23-24

The practice of prayerfully reviewing one's day or week has been a prescription of development handed down to us throughout the centuries—and a good prescription at that. Ignatius of Loyola formalized the practice in his *Spiritual Exercises*—the prayer of examen. It involves a prayerful review of the events of the day in order to discern God's presence and leading in our lives, where the Spirit might be at work loving, affirming, convicting, revealing, instructing, nudging, and guiding amidst the ordinary stuff of our lives. In the book *Sleeping with Bread*, Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn underscore the importance of this prayerful review of the day by drawing a comparison.

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."⁸

The Linns suggest that this practice of examen can become the spiritual equivalent of the children holding the bread. They ask the reader to daily respond to two questions in prayerfully reviewing their day: 1. Where was I most grateful today?

(What gave me life?) 2. Where was I least grateful today? (What drained me?). For some this is best done as one goes to bed; for others it is engaged in first thing in the morning as one looks back on yesterday before praying for grace and guidance for the day ahead. For many this practice is integrated with a regular reading of the Scriptures.

The practice of examen in its many different varieties is not intended to be some sort of inventory or checklist we legalistically work through, but rather an invitation dialogue daily with God about the ordinary everydayness of our lives. The reflection and prayer associated with this practice are to be engaged in with the “spirit” of Psalm 139’s psalmist—*You who know me so well God, search me yet again and lead me in your way.*

Throughout all three stages of *A Way of Life* we would like to adopt a regular prayerful review of our week. We will include a page in each session to help us keep track of what we are discovering week-to-week. Our hope is that through this practice we might become more intentional and more skilled in paying attention with God to the everydayness of our lives, and thereby submit our whole lives into the trustworthy hands of God. Here is a simple structure to guide us.

Reviewing the week:

- 1. Where were you most grateful? (What is giving you life?)*
- 2. Where were you least grateful? (What is draining you?)*
- 3. What might God be inviting you to notice?*
- 4. Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.*

Perhaps our recollections of our day/week will lead to thankfulness or wonder. Perhaps it will lead to remorse or sorrow for something we did or didn’t do; something we need to confess to God. Sometimes it leads to confusion or dilemmas of which we were not aware, the sort of things that we seek God for guidance or confirmation. A key in recollecting one’s week is to bring all of it before God

sincerely, courageously, and patiently. Let us also be mindful of the opportunity to bless others with what we are noticing about God or ourselves or our kingdom responsibility as we prayerfully review our week. Each session will provide opportunity for us to share some of what we are learning through this practice.

REFLECT & PRAY

As we close this first session of *A Way of Life* spend some quiet time to prayerfully reflect upon these questions. Allow these questions to invite truthful conversation with God.

- What has been giving you life over the past month?

- What has been draining life out of you over the past month?

- What is God inviting you to notice?

- Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.

Side window

I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the ones I was living ...opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly...If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. ⁹

Frederick Buechner

Prayer

Lord,
I believe
my life is touched by you,
that you want something
for me, and of me.
Give me ears
to hear you,
eyes to see the tracing of your finger,
and a heart quickened
by the motions of your Spirit.¹⁰

Ted Loder

In Preparation for Session 2

Part 1 – Praying & Identifying a mentor

We are going to encourage you to again link up with a spiritual mentor during this process. Spend the next week praying that God might guide you to someone who might be a good fit for your mentoring relationship. You may want to resume your mentoring relationship from *The Journey*; or you may want to find a new mentor. Come next week with some possible names of people who could offer you this relationship throughout *A Way of Life*.

Part 2 – Read and Prepare for Session 2: Called to Friendship with God

Read and complete the questions in Session 2. Be prepared to share your discoveries with your group.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 54.

² Tom Sine, *The New Conspirators: Creating One Mustard Seed At A Time* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 23.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3. “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us...The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness...On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move.”

⁴ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 4.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, “Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry,” *Leadership* Vol. XVI, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 81.

⁶ Henri Nouwen, “Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry,” *Leadership* Vol. XVI, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 81.

⁷ Dallas Willard, “How Does the Disciple Live?” *Radix* Vol. 34:3 (Spring 2009).

⁸ Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 1.

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1983), 87.

¹⁰ Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 35.