



Central Lutheran
MINNEAPOLIS

**Spiritual Life Group
Conversation Guide
2019**

Welcome

Thank you for signing up to be a part of a Spiritual Life Small Group, for using this material as a part of your Circle's study or for using this material with your family or in other settings.

An awareness of God deepens when we gather for worship, in conversation in small groups and in our own personal, daily life of prayer and devotion. We need all three opportunities as we live by faith, open to God's call and empowered to bring God's love into all aspects of our daily lives.

The material for this group conversation guide was written by Pastor Peter Nycklemoe and Pastor Kathie Nycklemoe. They are both available to come to one of your small group conversations. In addition, Pastor C, Pastor Stephanie and Pastor Melissa are available to come to one of your small group conversations. All stand by to support you in this year of listening for God, growing in faith and deepening relationships.

How this material works, the invitation

There are ten sessions included in this guide, one for each time you gather. There is somewhat of a natural order to the lessons. Each lesson ends with an invitation for you to personally engage with a contemplative prayer practice. You may choose to explore this practice each day, or at your own pace. The key is, when you regather for the next month's spiritual life group, small group or circle, you will spend some time reflecting on the practice, your awareness of God and how the practice opens you to the core faith word as a lens for God's presence.

The pattern

There is a pattern that you are invited to follow for the small group time together, and then for your own personal time between gatherings.

- **First**, begin with a time of welcome and Christ Care, or checking in.
 - Many folks like to talk about this as a time to share highs and lows of the past month. Have someone note the highs and the lows, and then offer it all to God in prayer. It is when we care for one another, all in Christ Jesus' name.
 - The welcome and check in time can take as long as you like, but if your groups plans to meet for 60-75 minutes, have someone serve as the timekeeper to be sure all have a chance to share and that you are finished with highs and lows in 15 minutes or so.

- Please note that this is not the time to problem solve or fix anyone or any situation. It is simply a time to listen and care for one another.
- **Second**, reflect on the contemplative prayer practice that you were invited to explore between gatherings.
 - The good news with contemplative prayer is that one size does not fit all. Some of the practices will resonate with you and others may be interesting to explore but may not be your first choice.
 - Take time to let everyone reflect on the contemplative prayer practice.
 - What did you appreciate about it?
 - How did it open you to an awareness of God?
 - What did you hear or experience?
 - Did you experience any resistance to the practice? Why may that be so?
 - How might the practice have opened you to the core word and scripture passage that you discussed? How did the core word and scripture come to life this month? How has your experience of God deepened through the word or scripture passage?
 - Once again, it is helpful for someone to serve as a timekeeper. This is the center of the time together, listening for God in our own and one another's lives. Perhaps give 30 minutes to this time, but you may decide to set aside more time, based on how long you covenant to meet.
- **Third**, take a moment to look at the core word and scripture passage for the next month.
 - At the first gathering you may have a bit more time because you will not be arriving from a month already in a contemplative prayer practice and will have the time to reflect on the core word and scripture passage. For the remainder of your gatherings, begin by reading the word and the scripture passage/s.
 - Reflect on the word through the questions, these may prompt your initial reflections together.
 - As time allows, share your initial reflections on the core word.
- **Fourth**, review the contemplative prayer practice invitation for the month.
 - As a group, review the invitation for the practice that you will enter into for the next month. It is a practice to deepen your awareness of God and open up nuances within the core word and scripture passage.
 - If you have questions, or you need support with one of the practices, please check in with Pastor Peter and he can offer support.
 - If you would like Pastor Kathie Nycklemoe to visit one of your gatherings this year, she is delighted to come and reflect with you on the practices. Pastor Peter can help schedule that connection.
 - As we move along this year, there will be short, on line videos that the Pastors will offer related to the core word, scripture or prayer practice.

- **Finally**, close your time in prayer
 - Gratitude is an ancient and one of the deepest expressions of faith. Perhaps close with everyone sharing a short word of gratitude. What are you thankful for from your time together? Where has God been present and opened you to gratitude?

Session One: Getting Started

Welcome

What a gift that you are all together. You may know each other well, or you may be starting out by trying to connect names and faces. This first gathering is the time to get acquainted. It is also the time to review the pattern for these small group times, and for the invitation between meetings. There are ten sessions, and you have until January 2020, to gather. It is intentional that you will not meet one or two months this year, perhaps in the summer or you may find next December too complicated to meet. That is up to you and your group.

Christ Care time - checking in with our highs and lows

It is helpful to begin with Christ Care time, the time to check in with your highs and lows in life. Remember that these highs and lows are always shared in complete confidence. What you share does not leave the room. It is helpful to remember that confidentiality when you see each other at Central. If you are wanting to support one another after worship, be sure no one else is around when you check in on that person's current high or recent low.

Take time now to go around and share your highs and lows. Have someone offer it all to God in prayer. If a prayer guide is helpful, here is one suggestion you can use:

Dear Lord, thank you for always knowing what we need even before we ask. We ask now for you to be at work in all that we have shared. Be with each dear person in any lows that have been shared, that you may be their healer, help and guide. Be with each dear person in their highs, celebrate with them in these joys and connect them to gratitude amid life's blessings. We ask all this in your holy name. Amen.

You did not arrive after spending time in a contemplative prayer practice for this month to reflect on, so you can use this time to get acquainted. Perhaps each person can take 5 minutes to tell their basic story, where they grew up, where they work/or worked, what you enjoy in your free time, and what brought you to Central?

Core word and scripture passage

Each month there will be a core word that opens us to God and deepens our awareness of God's presence in our lives and the world. There will also be a scripture passage that can help open up the word for our reflection. As you enter into the contemplative prayer practice for the next month, it is intended to deepen your sense of this core word, opening you to God. You may know of other scripture passages that open up the

core word for you. Please bring these passages along next month to share as a part of your holy conversation.

Next month's core word: Faith.

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word faith?
2. Has your sense or insight into faith changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that faith is a gift. How has faith come as a gift to you? Who are some of the people that have gifted faith to you?

Scripture passages for reflection:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
Hebrews 11:1

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 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: 8-10

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Faith: *Take time for daily prayer & silence.* Find a time each day to be alone and in silence. Begin with small amounts of time, and increase this amount as you are able. Even three minutes of silence can make a difference. Here are some suggestions: Pay attention to your breathing. Appreciate your breathing as a gift of life from God.

Listen.

So often prayer involves only our side of the conversation. Spend time just listening, just "being" in God's presence. Light a candle if it helps you be more aware of the presence of Christ, the light of the world. If possible, find a regular time to pause and listen and breathe. Set a timer if that helps you let go of the need to keep track of time. If this is new to you start with a small amount of time, and as you get more comfortable increase the time as allowed. There is no agenda, just pausing to be present to the presence of God.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say “thank you” for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Two: Faith

Welcome and Christ Care Time

After a time of welcome, begin with Christ Care time, the time to check in with your highs and lows in life. Remember that these highs and lows are always shared in complete confidence. What you share does not leave the room. It is helpful to remember that confidentiality when you see each other at Central. If you are wanting to support one another after worship, be sure no one else is around when you check in on that person's current high or recent low.

Take time now to go around and share your highs and lows. Have someone offer it all to God in prayer. If a prayer guide is helpful, here is one suggestion you can use:

Dear Lord, thank you for always knowing what we need even before we ask. We ask now for you to be at work in all that we have shared. Be with each dear person in the lows that they shared, be their healer, their help and guide. Be with each dear person in their highs, celebrate with them in these joys and connect them to gratitude in the midst of life's blessings. We ask all this in your holy name. Amen.

Reflecting on the Contemplative Prayer Practice

The good news with contemplative prayer is that one size does not fit all. Some of the practices will ring true for you and others will be interesting to explore but may not be your first choice.

- Take time to let all reflect on the contemplative prayer practice.
 - What did you appreciate about it?
 - How did it open you to an awareness of God?
 - What did you hear or experience?
 - Was it easy to practice or difficult? Why?
- How did the practice open you to the core word and scripture passage that you discussed? How did the core word and scripture come to life this month? How has your experience of God deepened through the word or scripture passage?

Reflecting on the core word and scripture

How did time with this core word open you to God? Do you have new insights into the core word? Do you have a deeper meaning of the core word? Has your understanding of the word changed over the month? Where did you see the core word in your life or in the world?

Next month's core word: Blessing

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word blessing?
2. Has your sense or insight into blessing changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that we are blessed to be a blessing. How has blessing shaped your life? Who are some of the people that have blessed you?

Scripture passages for reflection

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Genesis 12: 1-3

They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

Luke 6: 18-21

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

Ephesians 1: 3-4

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.

1 Peter 3: 8-9

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Blessing: *Pray the Bible.* Spend time with God's Word not to know it, but to be known. Here are some suggestions for Divine Reading (Lectio Divina):

- + Read a passage from the Bible, your own choice or perhaps center on one from page 9. Expect that God will address you with a direct and personal message. It may be comforting, challenging, painful, exciting. Try to suspend judgment as to what you will hear, or what you "should" hear.
- + Meditate on what you have just read. What speaks to you?
- + What is your response to God's Word? Express this to God.
- + Rest in God's Word. Allow yourself to simply "be" in God's divine presence.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say "thank you" for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Three: Blessing

Welcome and Christ Care Time

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Reflecting on the core word and scripture

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Next month's core word: joy

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word joy?
2. Has your sense or insight into joy changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that joy has the capacity to hold life's paradoxes together, both the happy and the sad. How have you experienced joy in your life? Who are some of the people that have taught you about joy?

Scripture passage for reflection:

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Isaiah 55: 12-13

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Luke 2: 10-14

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Joy: Journaling: Writing our feelings, experiences, observations and responses can be a way to observe the movements of God in our lives. Again, be gentle with yourself, and write from your heart. Some questions to begin may be:

- + Where did I experience God today?
- + For what do I hope?
- + What do I fear?
- + What do I need to ask of God?

+ For what do I need to give God thanks?

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say “thank you” for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Four: Joy

Welcome and Christ Care Time

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Reflecting on the core word and scripture

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Next month's core word: Love.

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word love?
2. Has your sense or insight into love changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that love is revealed in the life, death and new life of Jesus. How have you experienced love? Who are some of the people that have taught you about love?

Scripture passage for reflection:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:16-17

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-13

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Love: *Celebrate the Sabbath.* Woven into the divine design of creation is the rhythm of activity and rest. One may take “mini-Sabbaths” throughout the day or extended periods of rest, but the primary purpose to step out of our frantic pace of life is to worship our Creator. Sabbath suggestions during the week:

- + Take time each day (or at least a few times during the week) to rest and take note of the pace of the day. Are you too busy to notice God? Too distracted to see the wonder of creation around you?

- + Pause each day to notice God's presence in creation (5 minutes?). Look out a window or go outside to look closely at something that captures your attention. Offer a prayer of thanks to God for God's gift of beauty and sustenance.

Sabbath suggestions for corporate worship:

When we gather for worship we do so with the body of Christ. Faith is a gift from God and is fed and nourished when we gather as a family to participate in the Word and Sacraments. Some ways to deepen the worship experience include:

- + Arrive early and pray for all people who gather for worship around the world.
- + Be fully present in the service of worship. Listen with your heart as well as your ears.
- + Expect God to speak to you through some portion of the service.
- + Look for ways to serve and encourage others as you gather with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say "thank you" for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Five: Love

Welcome and Christ Care Time

After a time of welcome, begin with Christ Care time, the time to check in with your highs and lows in life. Remember that these highs and lows are always shared in complete confidence. What you share does not leave the room. It is helpful to remember that confidentiality when you see each other at Central. If you are wanting to support one another after worship, be sure no one else is around when you check in on that person's current high or recent low.

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Reflecting on the Contemplative Prayer Practice

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Reflecting on the core word and scripture

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Next month's core word: Grace.

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word grace?
2. Has your sense or insight into grace changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that grace is God's free gift of life for us. How has grace come as a gift to you? Who are some of the people that have been God's grace for you?

Scripture passages for reflection:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 1: 14-17

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2: 4-9

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Grace: Fasting. Traditionally, fasting was for personal or national repentance for sin, and to prepare one's self for receiving strength and purpose. Fasting today can take many forms and can help us become aware of our limitations and dependence on God. No matter what type of fast you choose the question is "what does God want to accomplish through this practice?" Fasting is not a discipline through which I gain greater control over my body or surroundings, but one way through which God gains access to redirect and heal me to be freer to care for others. Some suggestions for fasting:

- + Food fasting: perhaps skip a meal each day or a few times during the week and listen for what this practice may teach you.
- + Choose something, maybe the same thing all month or a new thing each week that you think may be getting in the way of your listening for God. Fast perhaps

from the media? Mindless shopping? Not caring for the environment? The need to be busy?

- + Fast from anxiety and fear. Choose a day each week, or an entire week where you will consciously take a break from being anxious or afraid. Every time you experience such things, offer a prayer to God of release and gratitude, knowing that God is present even in our deepest fears.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say “thank you” for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Six: Grace

Welcome and Christ Care Time

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Next month's core word: Wonder.

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word wonder?
2. Has your sense or insight into wonder changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that wonder is one response to God's grace. How has wonder come as a gift to you? Who are some of the people that have taught you about wonder?

Scripture passage for reflection:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2: 42-47

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Wonder: Examen. Examen is a type of mini-Sabbath that one can enjoy during the course of the day. (5-10 minutes?) It is a brief time of gentle reflection of God's activity in the day and your response. Don't try too hard to find God's activity, just relax in God's presence and listen to what God may show you. God is always actively creating in our lives and in the world around us. This simple interior glance can help our awareness of God's presence and activity.

Some questions may include:

- + Where did I experience God's presence today?
- + Through whom?
- + How did I respond?
- + Commend your responses into God's care.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say "thank you" for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Seven: Wonder

Welcome and Christ Care Time

After a time of welcome, begin with Christ Care time, the time to check in with your highs and lows in life. Remember that these highs and lows are always shared in complete confidence. What you share does not leave the room. It is helpful to remember that confidentiality when you see each other at Central. If you are wanting to support one another after worship, be sure no one else is around when you check in on that person's current high or recent low.

Take time now to go around and share your highs and lows. Have someone offer it all to God in prayer. If a prayer guide is helpful, here is one suggestion you can use:

Dear Lord, thank you for always knowing what we need even before we ask. We ask now for you to be at work in all that we have shared. Be with each dear person in the lows that they shared, be their healer, their help and guide. Be with each dear person in their highs, celebrate with them in these joys and connect them to gratitude in the midst of life's blessings. We ask all this in your holy name. Amen.

Reflecting on the Contemplative Prayer Practice

The good news with contemplative prayer is that one size does not fit all. Some of the practices will ring true for you and others will be interesting to explore but may not be your first choice.

- Take time to let all reflect on the contemplative prayer practice.
 - What did you appreciate about it?
 - How did it open you to an awareness of God?
 - What did you hear or experience?
 - Was it easy to practice or difficult? Why?
- How did the practice open you to the core word and scripture passage that you discussed? How did the core word and scripture come to life this month? How has your experience of God deepened through the word or scripture passage?

Reflecting on the core word and scripture

How did time with this core word open you to God? Do you have new insights into the core word? Do you have a deeper meaning of the core word? Has your understanding of the word changed over the month? Where did you see the core word in your life or in the world?

Next month's core word: Discipleship.

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word discipleship?
2. Has your sense or insight into discipleship changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that discipleship shapes all aspects of our lives. How has discipleship shaped your life of faith? Who are some of the people that have taught you about discipleship?

Scripture passages for reflection:

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28: 18-20

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Discipleship: *Practice hospitality.* In a world filled with anxiety and fear, offering hospitality is a grace-filled opportunity. Offering our time, sharing who we are and what we have is an expression of God's love. It is a way to appreciate and participate in God's presence. Some suggestions include:

- + At the beginning of each day ask God to show you where you may offer hospitality to others. At the end of the day, consider what God has shown you and where you were able to be generous with your time and attention with others.
- + Listen to others. Try to be fully present with others, listening to their lives without judgment or a need to fix them. Provide space for them to listen to their own inner teacher.
- + Pay attention to how God offers hospitality to you. How is God generous to you? Is there any way for you to share that generosity with others?
- + Taking risks: Look up from your life to be more conscious of the needs of all – both friend and stranger. Ask God for courage to take even the smallest of steps out of your comfort zone.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say “thank you” for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Eight: Discipleship

Welcome and Christ Care Time

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Reflecting on the Contemplative Prayer Practice

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 - What did you appreciate about it?
 - How did it open you to an awareness of God?
 - What did you hear or experience?
 - Was it easy to practice or difficult? Why?
- How did the practice open you to the core word and scripture passage that you discussed? How did the core word and scripture come to life this month? How has your experience of God deepened through the word or scripture passage?

Reflecting on the core word and scripture

How did time with this core word open you to God? Do you have new insights into the core word? Do you have a deeper meaning of the core word? Has your understanding of the word changed over the month? Where did you see the core word in your life or in the world?

Next month's core word: Incarnation.

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word incarnation?
2. Has your sense or insight into incarnation changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that in Jesus, God became incarnate. God is a God who is with us, Emmanuel. How has the incarnation, the promise of God with us, shaped your faith and life? Who are some of the people that have opened you to the promise of God with us?

Scripture passages for reflection:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2: 1-8

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1: 1-5

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep.

John 11: 33-35

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Incarnation: *Mindfulness.* Try to leave enough space in the day to respond to God's abundant presence by being as present as you can be in the moment. Make a conscious effort to be present through:

- + Eating mindfully: Be present with the food you eat, taking the time to relax and pay attention to the sight and smell and taste of the food. No need to hurry. Be mindful of the farmers who grew the food, factory workers that processed the food, delivery folks and grocers who help get it to your table. Offer a prayer of thanks to God.
- + Mindful speech: How quick we can be to speak and judge and offer our words to others to fill the space. More often than not, people need our ears more than our words. Of course, there are consoling and loving words to offer, but more often others benefit from our listening more than our speaking. When we do speak, be mindful of the importance that we use our speech to build up and not tear down, to love and be gracious.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say “thank you” for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Nine: Incarnation

Welcome and Christ Care Time

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Reflecting on the Contemplative Prayer Practice

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Reflecting on the core word and scripture

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Next month's core word: Gratitude.

A few starter questions:

1. How might you define the word gratitude?
2. Has your sense or insight into gratitude changed over the years? How so and did someone or something help deepen your sense of the word?
3. One of the central insights of Lutheran Christians is that gratitude is one of the deepest expressions of faith. How has gratitude shaped your life of faith? Who are some of the people that have opened you to the way of gratitude?

Scripture passages for reflection:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3: 14-17

This is the day that the LORD has made;

let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!

O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.

We bless you from the house of the LORD.

⁷The LORD is God,

and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,

up to the horns of the altar.

⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;

you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,

for his steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 118: 24-29

Contemplative Prayer Practice Invitation for the next month (or your next gathering):

Gratitude: Give Thanks. In a world that encourages us to never be satisfied, the practice of gratitude can be a breath of fresh air. Pause throughout the day to give thanks to the One who provides for our every need. Even in times of stress and anxiety pausing to give thanks can aid in our need to possess and become more aware that we

are the ones possessed by our wonderful Creator. It can be helpful to keep a gratitude journal and note each day what gratitude is stirred in you. Like all spiritual practices, the more we practice gratitude, the more natural it will become.

Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

As you conclude your time together, what are your expressions of gratitude? Who are you grateful for today? What new insight do you say “thank you” for today? Go around and share your words of gratitude as your closing prayer.

Session Ten: Gratitude

Welcome and Christ Care Time

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Reflecting on the core word and scripture

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Closing Prayer: Expressions of Gratitude

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