

Lenten Study 2019

Exploring Faith



Workshop #2

Who is God?

Soulful Small Group Practices

(Adapted from Parker Palmer)

Presume welcome and extend welcome. We all lead busy lives, which is why our time together is precious. Know that you are welcome, that you belong, and extend this welcome by your words and actions toward others in the group.

Assume good intention. Each of us has come to this place because we care about our community, its past, its present and its future. Let us join with one another in that common intention.

Come to this work with 100% of yourself. This means three things: to attend as faithfully as possible, to be as present as possible to the other members of the group, and to bring all of who you are – your joys and successes, your fears and failings.

Speak for Self. A helpful practice is to use “I” statements. Share from your own unique story. No individual speaks for an entire group, or a whole profession. This is a space to set aside competition and to celebrate the different ways God works in each of our lives.

Share the air. Pay attention to how much of the group time you take. Every voice is important and no single voice ought to dominate. Make sure everyone has spoken once on a topic before you speak a second time.

Listen to Silence. Silence is rare gift in our busy world. Allow silence to be another member of the group.

If the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you find yourself feeling uncomfortable with the perspective shared by another, try not to allow judgment to set in. Instead, become intrigued. Ask for more information, and be open to the experience of others. Differences offer us an opportunity to learn from one another.

Observe confidentiality. This is especially important in creating safety and building trust. Faith can be a deeply personal topic, and we hold one another’s stories as sacred.

No fixing. Offer advice or reflection when invited to do so, but otherwise avoid the temptation to fix, set-straight, or counsel another group member.

Pray for one another in meetings and between meetings. Lift each other’s lives and stories to God in prayer as you leave your time together and through the week until you meet again. This is one of the greatest gifts we can give to one another.

Believe that it is possible to emerge from our time refreshed, surprised and less burdened than when you came. Expect that our time together can provide for renewal, refreshment and helpful perspectives as we explore our faith together.

Workshop #2: Who is God to you?

Open with short prayer (you may use this prayer or your own)

Loving God, in this time together, we ask that you help us to explore what it means to express our faith and to see our journeys with fresh eyes.

Where there are easy answers, grant us questions.

Where there are tired stories, grant us imagination.

Where there is smug certainty, grant us holy doubt.

Help us listen for you and listen to one another, that we may expand our souls and deepen our understanding, and that we might find rest in you. Amen.

Review

Gather again. Ask people to reintroduce themselves around the room and perhaps a question: why they have come or what they hope for in this study.

Review the small-group practices -- first phrases only.

What have been your take-away thoughts from last week's session or work in the workbook on "What is Faith?"

This can be paired, in small groups or as a large group. Be aware if some people are new to the study.

Who is God?

Who first taught you about God?

What was your understanding?

What were your first images of God? *Feel free to draw or write.*

How have these images and understanding been helpful? How have they been unhelpful?

How would you describe God today? *Draw or write*

Different scripture phrases describing God

The Bible describes God in many different ways. Here are just a few.

God as Creator (Genesis 1 & 2)

Friend of the Family (stories of the families in Genesis)

Liberator and Lawgiver (Exodus)

Savior, Ethicist, Healer, one Great Love (Gospels)

A Spirit that connects us all (John 3, Acts 2)

As light

This is the message we have heard from him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

As love

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:16)

God as mother

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

(Isaiah 66:13)

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49:15)

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me." (Psalm 131:2)

God as a mother bear

Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and tear them asunder... (Hosea 13:8)

a mother eagle

Like the eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, God spreads wings to catch you, and carries you on pinions. (Deuteronomy 32:11-12)

a mother hen

Jesus: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34)

Your evolving notion of God

What events, influences, or people helped shape and re-shape your perception of who God is?

What key moments or experiences throughout your life have helped to broaden your understanding and deepen your relationship with God?

and/or

How would you like to expand or deepen your image of God?

from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982)

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.

It? I ast.

Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It...

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.

Meditation about God can be led by facilitator -- take time for each phrase and idea.

Sit in a quiet, relaxed and grounded position.

Focus on your breath. Take several intentional, deep breaths, connecting with your lungs, your body as it receives this life-giving breath. Imagine how this breath helps feed your whole body.

Take your focus out of this room, up out of the building, above the town and out into the sky.

Continue taking your awareness out away from the planet Earth.

What do you notice? Keep returning to your breath.

Look at the sun, that all-powerful source of light that sustains life on our planet.

Look at the planets, stars and moons.

Look at Earth, with all of its humanity, good, bad, happy, sad, energizing, moving, struggling.
Express your compassion and love for the Earth and its people.

Where do you imagine God in all of this?

How does God feel, hope about all of this? (Keep returning to your breath.)

What is God saying to you?

How does God want to live in you? Through you?

Is there a word or phrase that comes to mind? Can you write it down in your mind?

Gradually, when you're ready, start to return here to the room. Remember the word or phrase, the feeling or awareness you had while taking more of a God's-eye view. What is it? How will you keep it in mind?

Once you have brought your awareness completely back to your seat, take some centering breaths.
Re-connect with your breath and lungs and the life-giving force running through them.

When you're ready, open your eyes and return to the room.

Allow a few moments for people to recollect their thoughts, to write any words or images that come to mind.

Leave room for discussion if people want.

Talking about God

A recent New York *Times* article by discussed our discomfort in with God-talk.

(“It’s Getting Harder to Talk about God” by Jonathan Merritt, *NYTimes*, October 13, 2018)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/13/opinion/sunday/talk-god-spirituality-christian.html>

The author commissioned a Barna Group survey of 1,000 people that revealed that more than 75% did not have religious conversations.

The author noted that “a range of internal conflicts is driving Americans from God-talk.

Some said these types of conversations create tension or arguments (28 percent);

others feel put off by how religion has been politicized (17 percent);

others still report not wanting to appear religious (7 percent),

sound weird (6 percent) or seem extremist (5 percent).

Whatever the reason, for most of us in this majority-Christian nation, our conversations almost never address the spirituality we claim is important.

He goes on to write:

There is also a practical reason we need a revival in God-talk, specifically at this time in American history. Many people now avoid religious and spiritual language because they don’t like the way it has been used, misused and abused by others. But when people stop speaking God because they don’t like what these words have come to mean and the way they’ve been used, those who are causing the problem get to hog the microphone.

That toothy televangelist keeps using spiritual language to call for donations to buy a second jet. The politician keeps using spiritual language to push unjust legislation. The street preacher keeps using spiritual language to peddle the fear of a fiery hell. They can dominate the conversation because we’ve stopped speaking God. In our effort to avoid contributing to the problem, we can actually worsen it.

Where do you feel uncomfortable when you talk/think about God?

Do you feel uncomfortable using the word God? Why or why not?

What other words or phrases to people use instead of “God”?

Concluding time

Write a paragraph, doodle, sing or write a melody or draw an image based on your concluding thoughts from today's session.

Take-home questions

If you were going to teach a child or an alien being to planet Earth about God, how would you do it? What would you include? What would you exclude? What questions would you ask them?

God moments

What would be the qualities of a "God moment" for you?

At the end of each day, record 1-3 times when you noticed God at work in your daily life. Try talking to God every day, as honestly and directly as possible.

Write a letter to God expressing any doubts, worries, fears, hopes, joys. Then write a letter back to yourself, imagining how God would respond to you.

Closing Prayer

You may also ask each person to contribute to the prayer by saying out loud in a word or simple phrase whatever they are thankful for, have concerns about or have hopes for.

Multi-faceted God, we give thanks for this time together.

We ask that you might help us expand our imaginations and be open to all the good ways you work in the world, in the universe and in our own lives.

We say aloud any concerns or celebrations we have in this room....

Time for any spoken concerns or celebrations

Help us to be your messengers of peace, your angels of compassion.

Send us home safely and guide our safe return to one another.

In your holy name, in your many names we pray. Amen.