

# Lenten Study 2019

## Exploring Faith



## Workshop #5

# The Church & the World

## 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 is 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.

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

*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.*

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 sinful 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.

*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. Allow time for any comments or questions*

What have been your take-away thoughts, “aha!” moments or insights from our previous sessions:

1. What is Faith?
2. Who is God?
3. Who is Jesus?
4. Who is the Holy Spirit?

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

## The Church

Take turns reading aloud the following passages.

*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. Matthew 18:20*

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.*

*All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47*

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.*

*And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:15-17*

How do these instructions and depictions of the early church resonate with your experience of church today?

Why do you come to church?

What do you receive from it?

How do you know when or if it is helpful or beneficial for you?

How does your experience in church inform the rest of your life?

## Our Faith out in the World

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 28:16-20

If someone asked you to describe your faith life and what's important to you, what would you say? What would be the main points?

*Remember how we spoke the first week of faith being a mixture of beliefs, ultimate loyalty, ultimate trust and worldview. We have also talked about our various understandings of God the Creator, Jesus and the Holy Spirit as the grounding of our Christian faith.*

How does your faith inform how you are and what you do in your life (e.g., at work, home, in relationships, your politics, your money)?

Do the verses above make you uncomfortable or do they inspire you? Why?

What are ways you might be willing to make your faith more visible in the world?

Why or why not?

## **The life of faith takes practice**

Maya Angelou had it right: we can only *try* to be Christian.

by Peter W. Marty, publisher

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Living a life aligned with Jesus is extremely difficult. We practice and practice, trying to get even a few basics right. It's mostly unglamorous work, as unglamorous as brushing teeth at the bookends of the day, or playing scales and arpeggios in endless fashion while learning the piano. I'm thoroughly convinced that nothing resembling expertise exists in the Christian life. How can you become an expert at receiving the totally undeserved mercy of God on a daily basis? What difference would brilliance make for allowing your heart to break more frequently for people who suffer? Exactly what kind of mastery would be necessary to live consistently in un-self-serving ways? There's a reason we speak meaningfully of *practicing* the faith. It's all practice.

"I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business," Maya Angelou once remarked. "It's not something where you think, 'Oh, I've got it done. I did it all day—hot diggity.' The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad.' I'm trying to be a Christian."

When Martin Luther challenged the censure of his teachings by Pope Leo X, he leaned into the idea that life is a process of becoming. "This life is not righteous, but growth in righteousness; is not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise; we are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but it is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road; all does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified." Luther's contention that the Christian life is forever an unfinished product didn't sit well with the powers that be. He was excommunicated from the church within months.

In a culture that prizes results, it's not surprising that we celebrate speed and proficiency. But I'll let Maya Angelou have this column's last word: "I'm always amazed . . . when [people] walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.'"

### 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 question

Next week, we will work together to craft our own individual expressions of faith. This can be a drawing, something written, something musical, however your creativity compels you.

Please look over your packets from our previous workshops, to review some of your ideas about: What is faith, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and today's session on the Church and the World. You may want to bring your packets with you to next week's session.

### Close in Prayer (*you may use this prayer or your own*)

Loving God, we have come together to explore our faith and to draw closer to you.

Bless us in our Lenten journeys, and help us find time for soulful moments in our week. Remind us of your presence, we pray, that we may sense your constant place in our lives. Turn our eyes and hearts toward the kind of world you imagine.

In gratitude, we say, Amen.