

You Matter!

You Matter to God: Faith Study

Session 2: Your Life Matters to Your Neighbor

Opening Questions

- Who has been one of your favorite neighbors—in your neighborhood now or in another place where you lived, and why?
- Mr. Rogers would end his opening song with “won’t you be my neighbor?” It is a phrase that invites us in with warmth and curiosity. Who is someone who has shown you a warm sense of hospitality or a desire to get to know you?

Opening Prayer Practice

God, we come together today to be with you and with one another. In the silence, we give you all the things that filled our day, all the distractions that fill our minds, and all that is on our hearts – so that we might be present to listen to one another and to listen for you.

Spend 2-3 minutes in silence. If you’d like, try using a breath prayer...

Breathe in: Breath of God... Breathe out: Speak to my heart

Open our hearts, God to be filled with your love. Open our hearts with wonder, to see one another as your beloved creation. Open our hearts with love, to listen deeply. Open our hearts with imagination, to see your hopes and dreams for the world. Open our hearts, God, to be your love for the world. Amen.

Group Hopes & Expectations

Review the “Hopes and Expectations” section from session 1 and any suggestions from your group. Share logistical details (dates/times). Reflect for a moment on this question in silence or share together:

- How can you contribute to making this group a meaningful experience for yourself and for others?

What Does the Bible Say?

Romans 12: 1-3; 9-15 (NIV)

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you...

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Think About...

- What words or phrases stand out to you, as you read this Scripture text today?
- What does the text tell you about God's love for you? What does it tell you about God's love for your neighbor?

What Do Others Say?

Your life matters to your neighbor. Not just your life, but our lives together, the body of Christ, the Church, all of us matter *enormously* to our neighbors. You know this because you've witnessed it and you've been a part of it.

The season that we continue to face, with the pandemic ever-present in our consciousness and much of "normal" life in constant pivot, has brought into sharp focus our calling to be *A Church Without Walls*. You have responded in beautiful and profound ways. Whether it's through donating food and household items to mutual aid sites in underserved communities battered in the wake of George Floyd's death, or giving financially and most generously to the Ralph Reeder Food Shelf this summer, or bringing bags of new and slightly used winter wear to Incarnation for the Solid Ground community or making masks for those around you to keep them safe or a whole manner of other ways, your individual and collective lives and your gifts brought to bear, have made others' lives better. Much, much better. You might think it is small and not a big deal, but when we faithfully work together for the benefit of our neighbor, it's a very big deal. God notices. Others notice.

The needs continue to be great, there remains loss of jobs, health, recreation, certainty about tomorrow and even, life and it's all around us as a result of the pandemic. It can feel overwhelming and it's not always easy to see *how* we can serve together or even make another's life better while this pandemic continues to be a concern and personal safety for ourselves and those we encounter are in the front of our minds. However, God has given us abilities, gifts, creativity, wisdom, intelligence and agency to accomplish the good God desires, even in these uncertain times.

Where to start? Prayer, of course. Pastor Kai has given us a great tool over the last months which does well to calm our spirits and prepare us for some deeper reflection, thinking and exploration. It's the breath prayer: breathe in "Come Holy Spirit" or "Breath of God", breathe out "Speak to my heart".

Second, ask yourself some of these questions:

- What "*people group*" do you find your heart drawn to? Maybe you're acutely aware of what's happening in your neighborhood, in your friends' or coworkers' lives, those who live in troubled circumstances on the other side of town or across the world?
- Is there a demographic with whom you've enjoyed interacting whether they be little children, older kids, young adults or senior citizens?
- Are there particular causes or struggles you seem to be most attuned to...loneliness, lack of family support, racial injustice, food insecurity, mental health, or other struggles?

Pick one of the above bullets and start to pay attention to what's happening in your heart, where God might be calling you. Is there a small (or large) gesture of kindness which you could extend, making a difference in the life of another?

Third, what do those who know you say you are skilled at doing? What do you sense (or know!) are your gifts? Minnesota humility sometimes moves us into thinking "*I'm not so special or good at anything. Pretty much anyone can do what I do*" which could not be further from the truth. In fact, we each have gifts to share and what you do well is not the same as what I might do well. What we both bring to the table is needed if the Body of Christ is to be whole. And while we're on this subject, consider not only what your natural abilities might be but ways in which making contributions bring you joy. How have you extended yourself to another in a way that was particularly memorable and made you feel truly alive?

This sort of discernment may not come quickly or easily but the point is not perfection but to start somewhere out of recognition of yourself and your passions and deep love and care for the neighbor. We ALL have SOMETHING to give that will make other lives better.

I live in a small townhome development of 28 units. It's a young development and its developer changed hands a couple of times during the build, and as a consequence, it didn't launch into the homeowners' hands in very orderly fashion. This association and board does not have much in the coffer to work with and minimal services are provided (though snow removal is one, and that's very nice!). Several of the common areas have remained without tending or landscaping, until this spring when Kitty and Rose brought their gifts to bear. Day after day, I have watched them put in new plantings, weed and care for the front entry and surrounding areas, adding new flowers and greens according to the season. And, when I thank them, which I try to do often, they not only beam and say thank you, but also say "we LOVE doing it!"

While I'm not sure Kitty and Rose did any deep spiritual discernment to bring them to their decision this spring, what I do think they did was to recognize a need and choose to use their God-given gifts of talent, time and finances to create something beautiful that others are enjoying. Their lives certainly matter to their neighbors and your life certainly matters to your neighbors, whether your physical, geographical neighbors, your neighbors in Minneapolis/St Paul, in Minnesota, throughout the country and across the world.

"Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need." -Frederick Buechner

-Reflection by Becky Benson

A Moment for Individual Reflection

Spend 1-3 minutes in silent reflection on the writing or these questions:

What does it mean to say that not only do you matter to God, but you also matter to your neighbor, and that matters to God?

What does it mean to be a neighbor in a physically distant world and a time of uncertainty, loss, unrest and rapid change?

Think About...

1. As we think about being a neighbor to one another, when have you been the person who *received* an act of generosity or service? What was it like to be the person who *received* a gift or blessing?
2. Tell about something you observed or were involved with that started small and blossomed into something larger?
3. How has being a neighbor or serving others made a difference in your life or even shaped your life? When has serving others, in return, become a blessing for you?
4. What is something you've done for someone else or for a cause that was a real stretch for you? What prompted you to step in? What helped you make it through?
5. What obstacles get in the way of being a neighbor or living a generous life?

Being a Neighbor in 2020

1. How does the pandemic change how we are neighbors to others? What new ways have you found to express care for others in these challenging times?
2. What does the call for racial justice mean for being a neighbor to others? Have you taken any new steps or actions because of this time?
3. What does it mean to be a neighbor to others who are not right "next door" or geographically close, but live in another community, or across the nation or the world? What are the possibilities for being a neighbor from a distance?

4. What are some specific ways to walk alongside those impacted directly by the pandemic or racial justice issues (consider those experiencing job loss, hunger, racial injustice, caregivers, essential workers, health care workers, educators, parents, those who are ill, those who are experiencing the loss of a loved one, isolation or loneliness...). Select one or more of the possibilities and imagine various ways to respond.

Connecting Faith with Daily Life

In the week ahead...

- Spend time reflecting on one or more of the questions in the written reflection... Who do you find your heart drawn to? What causes are important to you? What gifts has God given you for the sake of others?
- Think of someone whose life has been disrupted in 2020. What specific action can you take this week to walk alongside them with God's love?
- Take a next step, whatever that looks like for you. Think of someone who needs a sign of God's presence and love and be that sign. Look for organizations active in the areas that you're drawn to and find out more. Go out and serve in some way – and bring a friend!

Closing Reading and Prayer

Romans 12: 1-2 from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

¹⁻² So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out...

Prayer

God of love, help us to lift up our ordinary, everyday lives as an offering to you. Through our time together, we recognize that we are not alone, but are part of a larger community seeking transformation and a wider world that needs signs of hope and love. As we leave this place, we ask for your presence to guide us in our work – at home, in school, at the office, or in the community. Whether we find ourselves connecting in-person or on-line or in another way, help us to remember that we matter to our neighbor, just as we matter to you. Fill us with your love, O God. Move us to be people who love. Amen.