

You Matter!

You Matter to God: Faith Study for Faith Formation & Small Groups

Session 6: Listening to Others: Your Relationships Matter

Opening Questions

- Share about a friend from your childhood or earlier in life. How did you meet? What did you enjoy doing together?
- Share about a friend in your life right now. What do you value about the relationship? How do you typically talk with one another or spend time together?

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.

(2-3 minutes of silence)

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.

What Does the Bible Say?

John 15:9-17 NRSV

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

1 Thessalonians 3:6-12 NRSV

But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith...

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

Think About...

- What words or phrases stand out to you, as you read these Scripture texts? How might that word or phrase connect with your life right now?
- What does love require of us?
- What do you think God desires and hopes for our relationships, based on what you read in these texts?

What Do Others Say?

Our familiar and favorite servers at Byerlys restaurant; my colleagues up and down the hallway; my centering prayer group and (very) early morning small group; the sales people who have helped me with purchases while walking with me through funerals and weddings and ordinary days; Carolyn and Sandy, Barb and Natalie; my family in Arizona and a newly adopted granddaughter, Olivia. I miss you all. The pandemic has been tough on relationships.

Without a doubt, we each have our own list of people we miss (maybe it even includes a few people who surprise us). While the absence is terribly painful, we have seen with a new perspective the value of the other people in our lives – and how important we are to them. Almost every impact of the pandemic is somehow tied to a relationship. Physical distancing, virtual learning, job loss, business and restaurant closings, working from home, illness, loss and grief – all are interwoven with relationships. Likewise, practically all our relationships have, in some way, been altered by the pandemic.

All of this comes at a time when many people were already experiencing loneliness or finding it difficult to connect and sustain relationships. The Barna research group reports that loneliness has been steadily increasing for the past decade. In one poll during the pandemic, they found that half of the adults said they experience loneliness at least weekly (*Restoring Relationships: A Barna Digital Summit* at www.barna.com and *New Trends: 4 Ways the Pandemic is Negatively Impacting People* by Carey Nieuwhof at www.careyneiuwhof.com).

Even in this time, or especially in this time, Jesus says these words to us “abide in my love... that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete... love one another as I have loved you.” You matter to God. You matter to others. Together, we matter to God and to one another.

This summer I shared with a friend my topic for this reflection (certainly daunted by it) and after some conversation, he said “it seems to me that it’s all about ‘how is God already active and at work in our relationships?’” This question has stayed with me for months now. It is a question that makes me curious and gives me hope. When was God present and I didn’t even realize it? What blessings have others given me that were God’s way of revealing love and care? What words have been spoken by others that have been God’s nudges or guidance to help me find my way?

He went on to say, “Of course this is all mystery. We can’t really know...” But for me, this question gives me hope that somehow, God is already at work in the space between us, even as we are separated by physical distance, making something new. As I think through my list of relationships, I wonder, how has God been present? How *is* God present? This question also takes me to difficult relationships. Is there even the slightest chance that a broken relationship can be repaired or healed because of God’s presence and unfailing love for us? It gives me hope that even in those places, God is present. God is at work even when it seems like there is a vast ocean between us.

My sense of wonder and curiosity brings me to another question – what is my role in all of this? How am I part of bringing about God’s hopes and dreams for this relationship? How can I be God’s love and presence for others? How can I watch and listen for how God might be at work? How do I live out my relationships in a way that shows that relationships matter to God, just as all people matter to God?” Relationships are a gift from God and we get to be part of making that gift come alive. As writer Bob Goff says, “God doesn’t pass us messages, he gives us one another.”

Drawing on our theme for this series, I believe it all starts with seeing ourselves and one another as God’s loved creations, as people who matter to God. What does God see, when God looks at each one of us, and when God watches us engage with one another. For me, living this out means being present to one another, being deep and curious listeners, and drawing on prayer. Living this out means loving one another.

Loving one another is about being present. By showing up and paying attention to one another, we are explicitly saying, “you matter to God and you matter to me.” Sometimes this is about being physically (or now virtually) present. Sometimes this is about being present through a phone call or a text or the mail. At other times this is about paying more attention when we are already together.

Being present certainly applies to those who are closest to us, but it also applies to those people who we don't know very well. Underneath our smiles, underneath our masks, it is likely that someone you see needs a sliver of hope. You get to be God's presence and love for that person today. I think the pandemic actually gives us permission (or an excuse) to reach out farther, to people who we might not have imagined contacting, to say: "you came to mind... I haven't seen you in so long... what are you up to... how is this time for you?" And this is being present to one another.

Loving one another is about being curious. It is about opening space for conversation and starting with a simple question. It is about a holy curiosity that hopes to know more about this person God created and God loves and the richness of their story. By following the thread of the conversation and asking more questions, you just might hear what brings them joy or meaning or wisdom from their life.

This is probably about asking questions that can't be answered quickly with one word (yes, no, green, blue...) but rather questions that start with "tell me about..." or "how did you get started with..." or "what is it like to..." These are not the questions you ask so that you can interject yourself and your own story. These are not the questions where you already know the answer or questions that are subtly tied to a judgement. This isn't about starting rumors or gossip or a sense of "who knows more" about something. This is about a holy curiosity.

Loving one another is about listening deeply. The other half of asking questions is listening deeply. Practically, this is about setting aside the internal and external distractions to really focus on the other person. It takes practice and intentionality. Deep listening places value on the *relationship*, even when there are great differences between us. Deep listening can be about wondering how God has been at work in another person's life. It's about listening even in the silence to the beauty of simply being together. Deep listening is a holy act.

Loving one another is about prayer. Maybe you started this session with the hope that you'd find the answer to your tough questions about relationships (me too). The answers are not here, but the question, "how is God at work" brings forward the truth that God is not distant and far off. God is right here with us. This means we can call on God to go ahead of us, to give us guidance, to ask how to be God's love here and now, and to ask for forgiveness and a fresh start. Prayer connects us with God and with one another, whether that is simply lifting up a name or a more specific prayer request.

As summer moved to fall, another friend pointed out to me that relationships are only possible because at the core, we matter to God. At the heart of things is God's rock bottom love for each one of us. That love makes it possible for us to extend ourselves and reach out to someone else. That love makes it possible for God's people, filled with flaws and imperfections, to enter into

relationships. That love makes it possible for us to be vehicles of love for one another, living out God's hopes and dreams for the world.

You matter to God. You matter to others. You matter to this small group. You have gifts to live out for this world. You are a deeply loved creation of God, who said "and it is good."

--Reflection by Denise Floe with Joel Wiberg and Carolyn Young

A Moment for Individual Reflection

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

Think about some of the people and relationships in your life. As you think about these relationships:

- How might God be at work in the relationship?
- How might you be an expression of God's love for the other person?
- What is one new or imaginative way that you could strengthen this relationship?
- What prayer would you lift for the other person or for the relationship?

Think About...

- What relationships fill your soul and make you feel alive?
- What relationships are important because they are a chance to be God's love in the world or receive God's love through others?
- What relationships do you too easily pass by? What might you be missing?
- What are the practices that build relationships? How do our spiritual practices shape our relationships?
- When you've needed guidance in a relationship, what have you drawn from your faith?
- What prevents you or holds you back from investing in relationships more fully?
- There is much in our culture that works against building relationships and community. How can we push against the individualism, unhelpful aspects of technology and other impediments to develop a sense of true community?
- What are you doing right now to devote yourself to relationships and a sense of community?
- What are the things you've discovered about relationships during this unprecedented, historic year?

Question for Closing this Season

We've reached the closing session in this series with these people and at this moment in time. Spend a few minutes in silence reflecting on these questions:

- What is something that someone in the group said that has stayed with you?
- What did you hear that gave you a sense of curiosity or wonder?
- What has already made a difference for you? What would you like to carry forward? What would you like to explore more fully?

- How can you express gratitude *to* the others in the group and *for* the others in the group? *You matter to God and you matter to one another!*

Connecting Faith with Daily Life

- Reach out to someone you haven't seen or heard from recently to check in and ask about their life. If possible, consider taking a risk and connect with someone you might not normally talk to. How can you be present to them, without being physically present?
- Discover something new about someone you already know. Think about how to ask questions and what questions might open your conversation in a new way. Strive to listen deeply for a greater sense of understanding or awareness.
- Step into a conversation with someone who holds a perspective that is different from your own. Focus completely on deepening your understanding of what values and experiences have brought them to this perspective. Use this as a time to move toward shared understanding, not consensus or convincing of one another.
- Think of five people in your life. Send a card or email to each person and share the message that they matter to you and you are grateful for them.
- Read or watch a video on "active listening skills."

Closing Prayer

God of love, thank you for reminding us how deeply you love us and how immensely we matter to you. You've given us gifts to live out for the good of others and placed us in relationships and communities where our presence matters. For all this and for all the people you've placed in our lives, we are grateful. Thank you for your presence in our relationships, both those that are life-giving and those that challenge us. We ask for your guidance, wisdom and forgiveness. We also ask that you spark our imaginations and prayers for how you can bring about restoration, healing and blessings. Today, we especially thank you for the people who have come together in this small group to be a part of community together and to walk through this journey of life and faith with one another. Thank you. We are grateful.

Now, as we abide in God's love, may we increase and abound in love for one another and for all. Amen.