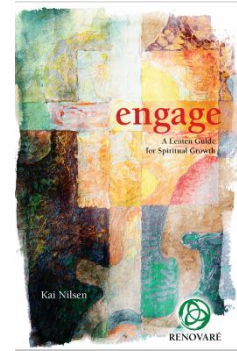


Engage: Community

Session Four

This guide for small group discussion is based on the Renovaré resource, Engage, written, compiled and edited by Pastor Kai Nilsen with contributions from Keith Matthews, Kathie Nycklemoe and Eric Magnusson and the Renovaré team. Download Engage: A Lenten Guide for Spiritual Growth from Renovaré at: www.renovare.org/books/engage.



Opening Questions

- What is something that you've learned from a friend or acquaintance?
- Tell about someone who you were unlikely to meet, but now has become a friend.
- What are some ideas or comments that you continued to think about after last week's gathering on the faith practice of "service"? What gets in the way of living into this practice? What helps you to engage with this practice?

Introduction

Eric Magnusson

"As you are in me and I am in you..." Relationship. It is the most foundational reality of life. As people, each and every one of us is born into relationship. We are nurtured for around forty weeks in a rich symbiotic participation with our birth mothers and born into the complex freedom of life in relationship with others. Long before we define ourselves by our professions or our natural giftedness, before we are athletes, teachers, sanitation workers, civil servants, pastors, or scholars, we are daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, lovers and enemies and friends. Relationship, and therefore community, is at the very heart of what it means to be human, and to be created in the image and likeness of the Triune God.

In some ways this most basic reality stands in contrast to how we often understand our identity as Christians. In a Christian culture where the litmus test of faith is often one's personal relationship with Jesus, the discipline of community is a commitment to a counter-cultural way of life – a life with, for, and in relation to others. Christian community is a reflection of God. The essence, the very nature of God is relational – open, participatory, receptive, welcoming. It is life characterized by self-giving and other-receiving love, in which each person of the Trinity creates space in God's self for the other persons: as Jesus said, "...as you, Father, are in me and I am in you" (John 17: 21).

The discipline of community, then, is one of the most vital ways that we can reflect God in the world. The discipline of community is a radical commitment to open ourselves to the transformative work of God's Spirit as we encounter God in one another, for we can never really encounter another person and be left unchanged. It is a participation in God's work of redemption and reconciliation in the world. And ultimately, community is about becoming who we truly are, because we really only become the persons God has created us to be in and with and through our relationships with other people. The with-God life is the with-community life, so we travel and we engage life together

What Does the Bible Say?

Community is one of those spiritual disciplines where we are the most human and the most divine. Spend time reading and prayerfully reflecting on Psalm 133 and the Philippians 2:1-8 passage. Begin with a brief moment of silence and pray this simple prayer of illumination from Gregory of Nazianzus:

Lord, as I read the Psalms let me hear you singing. As I read your words, let me hear you speaking. As I reflect on each page, let me see your image. And as I seek to put your precepts into practice, let my heart be filled with joy. Amen.

Psalm 133 (NRSV)

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

- What do the images of oil and dew tell us?
- Where do you sense the divine blessing of God in your relationships with others? Where do you wish for a greater sense of God's presence?

Philippians 2:1-8 (TNIV)

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death.

The words Paul uses here are so pregnant with the possibility of life and death in community: tenderness, compassion, humility, selfish ambition, vain conceit. Read slowly through this passage again.

- As you read this passage, who in your own life comes to mind for you? What stories, names, faces, experiences or events, connect to these words?
- What else speaks to you as you read this text?

Supplement—

Look at Acts 2: 41-47 with Pastor Joel Vander Wal at the end of this session. This can be used individually or together as a group.

What Do Our Guides Say?

Dallas Willard

Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals. The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other's flame. The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other. Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual of course has a unique and direct relationship with God, and God alone is his or her Lord and Judge. But, *The Life* is one that requires some regular and profound conjunction with others who share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking. (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 186-7).

- Reflect on your relationships. When you get together, are you individuals sitting on the edge of a fire, or are you heaped together and warmed by one another's flames? How does this affect your life?
- How do others contribute to the strength of your life in God? How do you contribute to the faith of others?
- As you reflect on the past day or week: What consumed your time, attention, and energy? When did you sense a sustaining and life-giving connection to others? When did you sense some disconnection?

What Do Others Say?

Eric Magnusson

Forming community is holy but hard. It's different than just attending worship and participating in church activities or spending time together. Several autumns ago, six of my university students unexpectedly invited my wife and me to join them for lunch at Panera Bread in metro-Detroit. We met together, ate, and talked about life and college. As the small talk subsided, they shared with us the real reason we were together. This group, mostly seniors at this point, was

staring graduation in the face. When they thought about their relationships with each other, they were at a loss. They had been friends for years and had navigated the liberal arts college experience together.

Inside, however, they had a nagging suspicion that unless something changed, unless something intentional happened, that they would graduate and leave school and never really talk to one another again. They spent a lot of time together, going to eat, critiquing pop culture, theologizing, and having fun, yet they sensed that there was something deeper and more substantive that they were missing, the thing that would really bond them together as a community. For some reason, they asked us to help them change it.

Each Friday for the rest of the school year, this great group of students came to our house. We would share dinner and catch up on small talk before we more intentionally practiced the discipline of community. After eating we took turns sharing our stories with one another. The simple practices of creating hospitable lives, of being vulnerable to each other, and of deep listening changed each of us. God was present.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- What jumps out for you from this reading?
- In the story of weekly dinners together, what draws you to this weekly expression of community? What makes you uncomfortable?
- What were the ingredients that built community in the weekly dinners? What actions help to create a sense of community for you?
- How did you experience community when you were growing up or as a young adult? What can you learn from that experience?
- "Community is one of those spiritual disciplines where we are the most human and the most divine." Reflect on this quote together.
- Do you have casual relationships now that, with a little more intentionality, could bring a greater sense of community? What can you do to move in that direction?
- Eric *Magnusson* writes, "...for we can never really encounter another person and be left unchanged. It is a participation in God's work of redemption and reconciliation in the world..." What comes to mind for you as you read this quote?
- "The themes of unity, diversity, vulnerability, and transformation permeate the discipline of community." What role or function does each theme play in creating community? Which themes are the most challenging? Where do you see possibility or hope?

Faith Practice – What Can I Do?

Intentional Actions

- Think of someone who you'd like to get to know more fully or connect with more often. It could be a friend, acquaintance, neighbor, colleague, etc. What is one step you could take to be more intentional about this relationship in the coming week?
- Think of a group or community that you are already part of. What could you do to strengthen or contribute to this group or community in a new way? For example, volunteer for a role or project... be more fully present as a listener... think about how to add to a good dialogue... work on connecting people with one another to build a sense of belonging and community... etc.
- Check out the article, *Yes, You Should Talk to Strangers. Small Talk has Big Benefits*, from the StarTribune on Sunday, February 11, 2024.
- Introduce yourself to someone sitting near you in worship (it is ok if you don't remember their name) and start a short conversation.

Reflection & Prayer

- For the next week, take an inventory of your day using the suggestions in *"What do our guides say?"* What most consumed your time, attention, and energy? Where did you sense the greatest sustaining and life-giving connection to others? Where did you sense the greatest sense of disconnection? Prayerfully talk with God about this.
- Prayer strengthens our connections with one another, as well as our relationship with God. Spend intentional time in prayer for others. Use the Incarnation prayer concerns list this week in your prayers. Pray for the people in this group. Or, ask someone how you could pray for them.
- Throughout this week, ask God to reveal to you how you can better "have the same attitude of mind that Christ Jesus had" with others in your community.

Closing Blessing

Leader: In this season of Lent, let your soul be shaped by intentional and compassionate engagement in Jesus' way of life.

All: Thanks be to God.

Share the date, time and location for the next gathering.

Brown, Brené. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. Random House, 2021. www.penguinrandomhouse.com and www.brenebrown.com

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Nilsen, Kai, and Keith Matthews, Kathie Nycklemoe, Eric Magnusson & the Renovare Team. *Engage: A Lenten Guide for Spiritual Growth*. Renovare. 2014. www.renovare.org.

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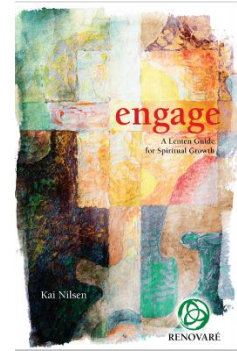
Scripture texts marked TNIV are from the HOLY BIBLE, TODAY'S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. TNIV®. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. HarperOne, 1999. www.harpercollins.com and www.dwillard.org

"True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are."
—Brene Brown, *Atlas of the Heart* (p. 156-157)

Engage—Reflection Time

Before the next gathering, spend a few minutes quietly reflecting, journaling or writing a few notes on one or more of these reflection questions.



Faith Practice Questions: Community

- What do you think about this practice?
- For you, what is the core intention or hope of this practice?
- What is helpful about the practice? What is challenging or difficult? What do you wonder about?
- What are various ways to do this practice, keeping in mind the purpose?

Insights for the Journey:

- How have you experienced God's presence this week?
- How has your connection with yourself, with others deepened because of your intentional work with this discipline?
- What about this discipline will you continue to build into your life?
- Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

Engage—Supplement

Community as a Spiritual Practice

Pastor Joel Vander Wal - created as part of the Wednesday Bible Study



Since the dawn of time, people have recognized the value of journeying through life with others. When the early church began on the first Pentecost Sunday 2000 years ago, those first followers recognized the importance of practicing community. It can take a long time to develop the trust that is needed to cultivate true community. As you read this passage from Acts, consider the values that the early church centered themselves around to practice community with one another.

Acts 2: 41-47 (NRSV)

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 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.

Questions to Ponder

- Tell of an experience in life when you knew you belonged to a community.
- What are some key values that you see the early church displaying as they practiced community together?
- What role do you play in practicing community with your family, friends, work, school or church?

Community Illumination in *The Saint John's Bible*

If you are at Incarnation, view the Illumination on *Community* in *The Saint John's Bible*. You can find the Illumination in Acts 5-6. It may be on view in the display case or you can see it in the "coffee table" size books.

- Who do you recognize around the table?
- What does this Illumination tell us about community and how God views community?