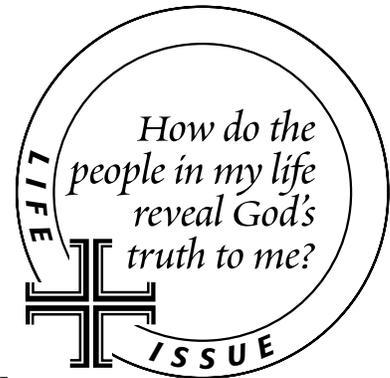


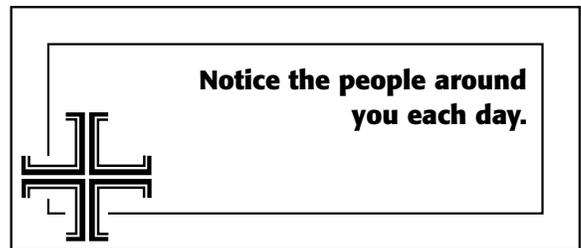
People



Theme

How many amazing people have you met in your life? If any one of us would stop to count, we would most likely have long lists of people who for some reason impressed us as being pretty amazing. We may find them amazing because of hardships they have overcome. We may find them amazing because of kind and selfless things they have done for others. We may find them amazing because they help us learn how to be more human ourselves. We may even find them amazing just because they are who they are! One of the wonderful ways that God reveals God's self to us is through other people. We can learn about how much God loves us by experiencing love from our family or our friends. Sometimes we learn about love when someone cares enough about us to hang in there during the tough times, to hold us accountable for our actions, or to listen to us as we figure out how to deal with life events.

The purpose of this session is to recognize that God created us to live with others in community. God created us to need others. How can we build deeper relationships with others? How do the people we come into contact with each day reveal God's truth to us? Can God work through people who are not believers? How do we listen to others in a nonjudgmental way that helps us learn more about their lives, including their hopes and dreams? How do our relationships with others help build a more faithful church and help bring about the kingdom of God?



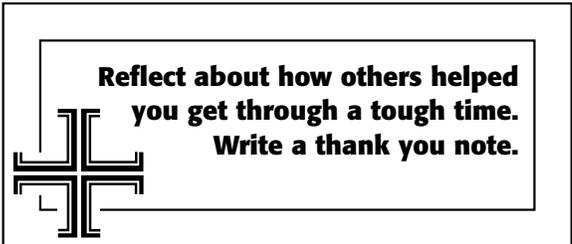
Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we are so thankful that you reveal yourself to us through those around us. Thank you for the gift of families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who nurture and support us. Surprise us in the ways that you come to us in the voice or hands of another. Help us to look for you in our conversations, and give us honesty, courage, and wisdom as we listen to what you say to us through others. Thank you for the opportunity for fellowship that you provide through this small group. Be present with us and help us to connect with each other through our conversations and prayers. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Mark 7:24-30

²⁴From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.



Joshua 2:1-16

¹Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. ²The king of Jericho was told, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land." ³Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land." ⁴But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. ⁵And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them." ⁶She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. ⁷So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

⁸Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof ⁹and said to the men: "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. ¹⁰For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. ¹¹As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.

¹²Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith ¹³that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." ¹⁴The men said to her, "Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."

¹⁵Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. ¹⁶She said to them, "Go toward the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterward you may go your way."

Think About...

- What is your first reaction to the manner in which Jesus addresses the Syrophenician woman? Are there other stories in which you remember Jesus being disengaged from those around him? (Mark 7)
- What is your response to Rahab’s conversion? Do you think it is genuine, or is she saying this to affect the deliverance of her family? If you believe she is sincere, what key elements support your belief? (Joshua 2)
- God uses Rahab, a pagan prostitute, to help the Israelites gain access to the promised land. If God can use Rahab, God can use anyone! When have you felt that God was working through you to bring a word of hope or aid to someone else? (Joshua 2)
- How is what the woman asks for different than a sense of entitlement? How did her response to Jesus reflect her beliefs? Does this woman experience a conversion, or is she already a believer? (Mark 7)

What do others say?

When my daughter was about 4, I remember attending worship with her during Lent. As a little person, she was not at all interested in the activity of worship but was very good at keeping herself quietly occupied with the contents of a busy bag. In this instance, she was drawing with a golf pencil and a piece of paper. I didn’t really pay attention to what she was doing until we got home and I asked her what she had drawn. I was struck with the poignancy of her drawing: a crude but nonetheless recognizable picture of Jesus on the cross shedding tears from his eyes. WOW. I was amazed and moved. I think this was probably the first time I realized, in a powerful way, that God speaks to us through people, as God spoke to me through my daughter.



Don’t get me wrong; it’s not only God’s pain I believe we hear through the words of the people we encounter (or experience through the art they create or the music they compose). I also believe that, through the people we come into contact with day after day, we can see all of what God has to give and share.

Take, for example, the proverbial encounter at the grocery store with a particularly cheerful clerk, especially on a day when I’m not feeling so cheery or eager to fill others with God’s love. I approach the counter not thinking about being present, but rather preoccupied with the next item on my agenda. The clerk smiles and says, “Hi there! How are you today?” The sincerity and kindness in her voice pull me out of my fog. I snap into focus (a bit ashamed) and immediately my heart sings with gratitude for the blessing of a loving human exchange. After an experience like this, I am not only inspired to pay-it-forward with another (or the same clerk when I return to that store), but I am affirmed that God has gifted me with grace via someone who may or may not feel close to God. Isn’t it amazing to think that God “pokes around” in the lives of people sometimes without their awareness?

There is a book that says being unusually attentive to people and giving “free attention giveaways” are key elements to “doable evangelism” and a means to share Jesus with another person. The book is *a.k.a. Lost: Discovering Ways to Connect with the People Jesus Misses Most*, by Jim Henderson. When we practice the art of being unusually attentive, we give a gift to another, like the cup of cold water referenced in Matthew 10:42 when Jesus said, “...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple...none of these will lose their reward.” When we are unusually attentive, we can also hear the still, small voice of God speaking to us in return through that person—maybe not directly, but certainly in hearing the Holy Spirit’s translation of the person’s words to us.

Have you ever found another person’s wallet or purse and, upon returning it to the owner in its original condition with all of its contents, you were thanked profusely for your honesty? Can’t you also hear God’s voice saying, “...Well done, good and trustworthy slave...” (Matthew 25:21). Have you ever overreacted with your child, using a harsh tone and words you didn’t really mean and, when you apologized, your son or daughter said “That’s OK.” Isn’t Jesus also saying, “Your sins are forgiven”? Have you listened to the prompts of the Holy Spirit and sat with someone who told you a long story—one you’ve maybe already heard or would not normally care to hear? If you stayed the course and sat with that person, you were probably thanked for your attentiveness, the gift of your time, and your listening ears. Did you also hear God whisper, “I noticed you gave one of my little ones a cup of cold water. Thank you for showing this person my love.”

What about the ONE Campaign and the messages calling us to care for the people of Africa in all of their various struggles? Behind the words of the founders (Bono, Brad Pitt, Bill and Melinda Gates, George Clooney), can we hear God calling people of faith to action through these icons? Absolutely! Like Rahab, we may not agree with elements of these individuals’ lifestyles or political views, but we cannot dispute their urges to move on behalf of God’s children who are in great need, ultimately helping to bring about the kingdom of God.

God’s messages that come from others are more often small and quiet, but they can be just the nudge that gives us encouragement to continue on. It’s why we believe so strongly that faith without the community is an incomplete faith. For the next few days, pay attention to your interactions with all people. Listen carefully: you may hear God speaking to you in everyday but important ways—a radical and sometimes unexpected gift of grace from God.

Reflection from *The Signature of Jesus*

“...We belong to God’s people. Christianity can never be an affair that simply embraces our individual happiness... God did not call us into salvation in isolation but in community. Our personal destiny is but part of his magnificent saving plan that includes in its sweep not only the entire human community but the whole of creation, the inauguration of the new heavens and the new earth.”

From *The Signature of Jesus* (Revised Edition) by Brennan Manning,
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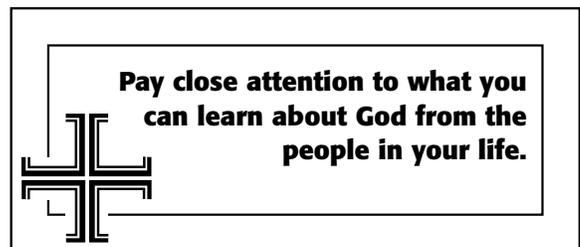
Think About...

Groups that have been together for one or more years may want to use the questions with ■◻

- What are some gifts of faith or life that you would have missed out on if others hadn't pointed them out to you?
- In the first reflection, the author talks about being surprised by what she learned about God's love from her young daughter. How have people in your life revealed something about God's character to you?
- ◻ When have you been "rewarded" for being a good listener? Your reward might have been to see the speaker in a different light or to discover a similarity between the speaker and yourself, or the reward might have been a deeper connection. Do you expect those rewards or, when they come, do you consider them gifts of grace?
- What distracts you from listening to what God may be saying to you through others?
- Besides the members of this group, who are the people in your life with whom you can talk about your faith? How do you typically introduce the topic? If you haven't had these conversations, how might you imagine yourself introducing the topic to receptive listeners?
- When have you experienced God through the actions of someone who does not profess to be a follower of Jesus? How did that "cup of cold water" lift your spirit?
- ◻ How might God be using you to reveal God's love or another aspect of God's character to a person in your life?
- ◻ The second reflection talks about how God created us to be in community with each other. How do our relationships with others help build a more faithful church and make a difference in our world to help bring about the kingdom of God?
- When have you experienced a sense of being connected to other people and God?
- What are some of the gifts that come from feeling connected with others? Are those gifts expected? How do we develop an awareness of those gifts and value and cherish them more?
- ◻ How has a difficult time with someone revealed God's love to you?

What's my response?

None of us has an exclusive relationship with God. We were created to live with and learn from others. This month, look for opportunities to create and nurture relationships with others. Pay close attention to what you can learn about God from those people who are in your life by picking one or two of the following activities:



- Take some quiet time to think about the people in your life who have nurtured your faith in the past as well as those who continue to do so. As you think of each person, focus on how he or she taught and encouraged you and how they continue to do so. Thank God for this group of faithful people in your life.
- Notice the people around you each day. Think about one thing that you could do to listen more intently to their stories or to learn more about them.

- Reflect on the times that you have needed to lean on other people. As you think about those who have been shelters or good listeners, say a prayer of thanks or write a thank you note to each one telling them how they have affected your life.
- Think about the people for whom you have been a support. As you think about them, pray for each one.
- Think about someone that you'd like to know more about. How could you make that happen?
- Look through your local paper to find a community event, like a special celebration or annual festival, and then volunteer to become involved. You may be surprised who God puts in your way or who you are called upon to serve in the process.
- Take the time to become acquainted with a neighbor you do not know well. Open the conversation by asking a question like, "Where did you grow up?" or compliment the person on the yard or the paint job on their house—anything that will allow you to start a conversation that will lead to establishing some commonality with your neighbor.
- Think about a broken relationship in your life. What is one thing you can do this month to reach out and maybe bring some healing to that relationship?
- Thank God for your small group and pray that you and the other members of your group will be open to developing a deeper sense of community. Note how each person in the group has been a "little Christ" for you.
- Go out of your way to do something for another person that requires compassion or kindness. This does not have to be a big thing, but it probably would mean a lot to a friend, neighbor, or extended family member. Some examples might be taking time to listen to someone you know who is having a rough time; visiting a senior who lives alone; offering to pick up groceries for an elderly relative; or watching a young couple's children so that they can get away for some time alone.
- Pick a phrase from one of the Bible readings for this session. Carry it with you as a reminder of ways that others can reveal God to us so we can live out our faith in our relationships with others.

Closing

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for creating us to be in relationship with you and with each other. Open our eyes and ears to see you and to hear your voice as we interact with our families, friends, and coworkers each day. Use us to show your love for the world to people we come into contact with each day. Thanks for this community and the blessing that each person in this group has been for us today. Be with each of us throughout the coming month until we are together again. We pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you'd like to read more...

"Friendship," *Alive Now*, January/February, 1999, Nashville, TN: The Upper Room. www.upperroom.org/alivenow

Henderson, Jim. *a.k.a. Lost: Discovering Ways to Connect with the People Jesus Misses Most*. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2005.

"Household of God," *Alive Now*, May/June, 2003. Nashville, TN: The Upper Room. www.upperroom.org/alivenow

Manning, Brennan. *The Signature of Jesus*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1996.

"Mentors," *Alive Now*, May/June, 2000, Nashville, TN: The Upper Room. www.upperroom.org/alivenow

The ONE Campaign is an effort to rally Americans to fight the emergency of global AIDS and extreme poverty. Learn more at <http://www.one.org/>

