

You Matter!

You Matter to God: Faith Study

Session 1: Your Life Matters to God

Opening Questions

- Introduce yourself to the group by sharing your name. Is there a story or something else that is significant about your name?
- Tell about a time when someone was proud of you or you were proud of someone else.

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.

Group Hopes & Expectations

- What are your hopes for this small group?

Walk through the "Hopes and Expectations" information found at the end of this session. Offer input. Share logistics and other details about the group (dates/times/location...).

What Does the Bible Say?

Genesis 1: 26-31 (NRSV)

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Mark 1: 9-11 (The Message)

At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."

Think About...

- What words or phrases stand out to you, as you read these Scripture texts today?
- Where in the texts do you see and hear of God's love for us?

What Do Others Say?

Does my life matter? Does anything we do make a real difference? Would anyone miss me if I wasn't here? What is the meaning and purpose of my life? Or, In the words of the musical *Hamilton* "Who lives? Who dies? Who tells our story?" Who does? Who cares?

When we scrape away all the layers of distraction in our lives—our incessant need for affirmation, our pursuit of recognizable achievement, and the seductive lure of affluence with all its component fears of never having enough or never being enough, we uncover the core question of our existence. Why am I here?

There are many ways we can respond and each response shapes our journey through life whether we are conscious of it or not.

We are here for fun. So, we invest our resources of time and energy pursuing a life of leisure or excitement.

We are here to be seen, to be noticed. Then, we position ourselves so that everything we do can be represented in a good light, especially to those we hope notice the most.

We are here for good. We find ways to do what we define as good and right for the sake of others.

We are here for ourselves. Our vision narrows down to what we need, what is best for us—who cares how it impacts others.

On and on... The way we answer the question shapes our journey, whether we are conscious of it or not.

What if we were to begin our quest with this response:

Why are we here? Because God delights in us. Because God created us in love, for love. Because God hopes we can reflect God's nature in the world.

The scriptures begin with a remarkable assertion: Each one of you, individually, and us, communally, have been made in the image of God. God is present within us as a composer is present in their composition, as a poet is present in their poetry.

Ask any artist about their work and they will tell you, "Something of me is present in that piece."

Ask God about you (individually) and us (communally) and God says, "Something of me is present in those people."

In other words, you matter to God. Not you-the image you want to project on the world. Not you-the mistakes you have made in your life. Not you-the words other people say about you.

You. You matter to God. All of you.

Strengths. Weakness. Successes. Failures. Desires. Indifferences. Triumphs. Tragedies.

You. You matter to God. All of you.

This season we will explore how You (both singular and plural) receive and respond to that good news. Our inward journey this season will remind us how much we matter to God. Our outward journey will then help us discover what God has asked us to do.

What we do matters to God.

What we do matters to others.

How we do it will be a reflection of the God whose image we are made in. Our hope is the "how" looks a lot like the God of service and generosity and compassion and justice and love that was revealed in Jesus.

Remember Jesus didn't come to help us build better churches; Jesus came to help us imagine and then co-create a better world.

For that better world to be born... You matter.

-Pastor Kai Nilsen

A Moment for Individual Reflection

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

What does God think about when God thinks about you? What is it about you, as part of God's creation, that makes God smile with delight?

Think About...

- What is one of your earliest recollections of knowing that you are one of God's beloved children? How did that make you feel at the time? How do you feel about that idea now?
- Who is someone who reminds you of God, because of the way they live their life or because of something about them that is God-like?
- What distracts you or pulls you away from realizing that you are loved by God? When are you most likely to forget or to live in a way that discounts that love?
- When do you most need to remember God's love for you?
- "Why am I here?" It is likely that we have had different responses for that question across our lifetime. How have you answered it in the past? How would you answer it now?
- What does it mean to say "you matter to God" in a time of pandemic?
- How does the phrase "you matter to God" speak to a time of seeking justice, whether racial, economic or another form of justice?

Connecting Faith with Daily Life

- Spend time journaling by starting with this phrase: "Because I matter to God..."
- Notice how someone in your life is living out a God-like characteristic (kindness, generosity, love, creativity, joy...) and thank them for this gift.
- Be creative or think about something you created in the past. How do you feel about what you created? Does it pull on your heart in any way?

Closing Prayer

One: God created the heavens and the earth.

All: And it was good.

One: God created light – the sun, moon and stars – the day and the night.

All: And it was good.

One: God created water and earth – living creatures and vegetation.

All: And it was good.

One: God created you and God created me.

All: And God blesses us all. Amen.

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Hopes & Expectations

Small groups typically begin by sharing “what will make this a life-giving and safe experience for all?” Take a few minutes to review this list of “hopes and expectations” and offer your own ideas.

Hopes:

1. Discover how to live more fully into the themes *You Matter to God* and *You Matter to Your Neighbor*.
2. Reflect on how to live out these themes in ways that share God’s love with our neighbors and engage our gifts in acts of service and generosity.
3. Engage in conversations in this small group and build a sense of community with one another.
4. Explore faith practices that ground us in a sense of God’s love and offer comfort, hope, peace and healing.
5. Pray for one another, for the community and for the wider world.

Guidelines:

1. **Offer grace to one another, living out of God’s love and grace.** Respect one another. Encourage one another. Watch and listen for the unique gifts and perspectives each person brings with a sense of holy curiosity.
2. **Listen to one another without judgement.** Refrain from problem-solving and giving advice. Be attentive, deep listeners. The purpose of the group is not to come to a consensus, rather to share with one another, deepening faith and understanding.
3. **Be consistent in attending & participating whenever possible.** Others in your group are looking forward to your insights and you will want to hear their ideas and stories. Take part in the faith practices and readings, as much as it is possible for you. If meeting in person, follow good safety practices and do not attend if you are not feeling well or have been exposed to COVID-19.
4. **Practice confidentiality** with all that is shared in the group, to create an atmosphere of openness and trust and to honor each person (unless explicitly given permission to share with others). Also refrain from talking about others who are not present.
5. **Talking and listening are both gifts.** Watch the amount of “air time” in the group, so that everyone has a chance to share and the conversation is generally balanced among those in the group.
6. **Start and end on time.** If you’re running late, feel free to join the conversation that is already taking place, when you arrive. If you are meeting virtually, try to join a few minutes before the start time, to allow time for any technical difficulties.

7. **Prepare by printing the faith study** before each gathering or arrange to view the faith study during your group. Faith studies are available on the *You Matter to God* webpage (see below).
8. **Remember that You Matter to God** and *Your Neighbor Matters to God* (including your neighbors in this group) and *You Matter to Your Neighbor*.

You Matter to God Webpage: <https://incarnationmn.org/ymg/>
(or go to the Incarnation website and look under the small groups tab)

You Matter to God Sunday Sermons: <https://incarnationmn.org/worship/this-sunday/>
(or go to the Incarnation website and look under worship and again under the worship tab)

Incarnation Website: www.incarnationmn.org

Additions from your group:

Your dates and times:

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