

# Caring for One Another

## Meeting One Another in Times of Suffering



### **Opening Questions** (select 1 or 2 questions)

- Tell about a movie or television show or a story that has stirred up your emotions. If you're open to sharing, what emotions came forward for you?
- Tell about a time when you were waiting for something.
- Tell about a time when you were concerned about waking up or getting somewhere on time.

### **What Does the Bible Say?**

*Some of Jesus' closest friends were the sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus who lived in Bethany outside of Jerusalem. When Lazarus became ill, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus; but by the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been dead four days. Martha met Jesus on the road with the words, "Master, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died."*

#### **John 11:28-36 (The Message)**

After saying this, [Martha] went to her sister Mary and whispered in her ear, "The Teacher is here and is asking for you." The moment she heard that, she jumped up and ran out to him. Jesus had not yet entered the town but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When her sympathizing Jewish friends saw Mary run off, they followed her, thinking she was on her way to the tomb to weep there. Mary came to where Jesus was waiting and fell at his feet, saying, "Master, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, a deep anger welled up within him. He said, "Where did you put him?" "Master, come and see," they said. Now Jesus wept. The Jews said, "Look how deeply he loved him."

### **Think About...** (optional, depending on time)

- What emotions do different people experience in this story? What emotions does Jesus experience?
- What does Jesus' response to the death of Lazarus tell us about God?
- Different versions of the Bible describe Jesus as "'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (NRSV), "terribly upset" (CEV), or "he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled" (King James) or "a deep anger welled up within him" (The Message). What do these descriptions say about the experience of grief? How do they shape your understanding of the story?

## ***What Do Others Say?***

When I lead worship in the Sanctuary, I have a great view of the gathering from up front. I see people singing (or not). I see parents managing young children. I see people whispering to one another and sometimes laughing about something that happened in worship or a private joke. I also see tears—sometimes because something in worship has touched their heart and sometimes because what’s happening in life is living close to the surface. I’m grateful for the tears and for the people who are willing to let them fall in this communal space of worship. It testifies to the holiness of the moment and that we are free to come before our Lord in worship just as we are.

I know it doesn’t always feel that way. Or maybe we feel like we can come before God, but we don’t feel like we can show up at church when we look and feel like a hot mess. From my seat up front, I also see people disappear from the Incarnation community and worship when life gets messy or complicated. So many things stir up a range of emotions for people and make it difficult to show up. Divorce, job loss, grieving after losing a loved one, experiencing infertility, and the repercussions of mental or physical illness are just some of the reasons people choose to distance themselves from the faith community and even from God.

I remember worshipping at my friend’s church several years ago. I don’t remember what the scripture passage was, but something in the assigned reading for the day and sermon touched an emotional raw spot. I had had a miscarriage about a month before and something in worship triggered emotions around the loss not just of the pregnancy, but of how I had pictured life might be and was supposed to be. As tears streamed down my face, I remember feeling so vulnerable, and uncomfortable with—or even embarrassed by—that vulnerability, because it wasn’t my choice. The flood of emotion took me by surprise.

These complex seasons of life can leave us feeling isolated, especially if we feel like we can only show up to church when we have our life together. But let’s face it, none of us have it all together. Some of us may project a Pinterest-worthy or Instagram-able life, but that’s because we’re curating, or carefully choosing, what we let people see.

When we look to Jesus and his interaction with people in the Gospels, Jesus has a way of seeing beyond the surface to what people are really dealing with and meeting them there. In fact, Jesus’ very life on earth, the Incarnation, was God’s way of entering into the fullness of the human experience. God doesn’t shy away from the pain and suffering; God meets us there. We get a taste of this in Mary and Martha’s exchanges with Jesus after their brother died. They are both so bold with Jesus, so raw and honest, and that’s okay. Jesus meets them with a full range of emotions. His grief is fully visible. By facing the difficult situation together, love is made visible.

What if Incarnation were known as a faith community where we meet one another in our suffering? What if Incarnation were known as a place where people could peel back the veneer (or remove the Instagram filter) and receive grace expressed through presence and compassion and space to be real about life in all its messiness and complexity? What if Incarnation were known as a place where love is made visible because, like Jesus, we don't shy away from pain and suffering but meet one another there?

I see this happening already in lots of ways. So many of you are already making love visible by how you show up for one another in your one-to-one relationships, or through smaller groups throughout the community.

I see it every year on the Sunday after Christmas when we do the Blessing of the Households. While we try to make our definition of "household" as broad and expansive as possible, still it can be difficult for people to come forward for the blessing if they are alone or if they've experienced a loss or change in their household. Time and time again, I have blessed groups of people that have adopted one another because someone knows another person's story or because they've noticed a need in the moment. I'm often moved to tears by the "households" that come forward and appear to be a hodgepodge of people but are really a holy community of care. I speak the words of blessing over the group—often huddled together with arms around one another—and love is made visible with Jesus in the thick of it.

—Reflection written by Jeanne Hartfield

### **Think About...** *(select one or more questions)*

- How have you reached out to comfort or walk alongside someone who is suffering? If you were in that place, how would you want to be comforted?
- In a time of grief or hardship, what are some of the ways you cope?
- How have you seen God work through the people that are around you?
- What are some of the things that seem to bring emotions or tears to the surface, maybe in an unexpected or surprising way?
- Are there places where you feel free to let your tears emerge? Where or with whom? What makes it a safe space?
- When you are in a difficult time, are you more likely to try to be alone or to surround yourself with people? What are the good things about both approaches?

### **Prayer**

Jesus, when we see tears or experience our own tears, we remember that your presence is close at hand, surrounding us with love. Help us to also be present to others who are in pain, whether we know the circumstances or not. Guide us to be a visible, tangible expression of your love, comfort and grace. Amen.

## **Connecting Faith with Daily Life...**

*(for individual reflection & action)*

- If you know someone who is in a difficult time, simply acknowledge their pain with words like, "I know you are going through a difficult time now."
- Offer to do something *specific* for someone who you know could use a helping hand, so that they don't need to think about what to ask for. For example, "Can I pick up something at the grocery store for you?" "Can I shovel your sidewalk?"
- Send a card to someone who is facing a challenging time, either individually or together as a group. It might be someone you know or someone that is on the prayer concerns list.

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