

Our Story Faith Study

Session 3: Receiving Our Neighbor's Story



Opening Questions (select 1 or 2 questions)

- Tell us about a story you heard or told since our last gathering.
- Describe your hometown or one of the places where you grew up (urban, small town, rural, suburb...). What is something you remember from that place and time in your life?
- Tell us about one of your family celebrations or traditions. What kinds of activities, food, dress, traditions, music... are part of your celebrations?

Opening Reading (This responsive reading has been used in worship. Select someone to read the "one" section, while everyone reads "all").

One: From the beginning, God called Abraham and Sarah and blessed them so that they could be a blessing to all nations.

All: Their story mattered to God and to their world.

One: Through Jesus, God called a community of people and loved them so that they could love their neighbors as they loved themselves.

All: Our story matters to God and to our neighbors.

One: Our stories can speak bane or blessing to one another. For the times when they speak of greed not generosity; division rather than unity; fear instead of love, we ask for God's forgiving love to make our broken lives whole again. (Pause for a moment of silence)

One: God's Spirit writes a new story on your life each day through forgiving love. Be awakened to God's love each day. Be a blessing to the world. Live in love with your neighbor.

All: Our story matters.

What Does the Bible Say?

One of the wonderful things about being in community is that we all have different stories. Listening to our neighbors' stories enriches our own story and helps us see life in a fuller and more inclusive way. In Paul's letter to the embattled church in Corinth he reminds them even though they have diverse stories, there is unity in the story of salvation through Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12-20 (NRSV)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all

baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

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

- What verse or phrase in this text speaks to you today?
- What does this text tell you about your story and your part in a larger story?
- What do you think about using the body as an analogy for the Christian community? Is it helpful, distracting, confusing, valuable...? What other analogies can you imagine?

What Do Others Say?

When I traveled to Tanzania in 2007, I became very friendly with Frederika from Mkwawa Lutheran Church, one of Incarnation's partner congregations in Tanzania. Frederika and I were the same age, married, both had children, were people of faith and even both Lutherans! It seemed we had so much in common!

One Sunday morning, following worship at Mkwawa (Ma-qua-wa), I mentioned to Frederika how lovely she looked in the dress she was wearing. Her quick response was, "Then you should have it!" I was flabbergasted and as lovingly and graciously as I could, I backpedaled, arguing that no, that was her beautiful dress and she should keep it. We went back and forth a bit until I thought this was all behind us.

A few days later, Frederika approached me and privately presented me with a brown paper package which contained her dress from the previous Sunday, freshly laundered and pressed, ready for me to pack in my suitcase and bring home. I knew at that point that I could not refuse her loving and generous gift any longer.

Reflecting on this experience now, it is easy to see that Frederika and I each assumed that our values and view of the world were similar – and yet there was a beautiful diversity in our values that was hidden just below the surface...

This new perspective came to me as I began to see and more deeply appreciate the stories that make up another person's life – including Frederika's life. And, just as importantly, it came to me as I began to recognize and name my own stories – along with how my stories shaped my world view (in both good and detrimental ways).

A good question I've started to ask myself is, "What values, beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors am I bringing into a situation, understanding or interaction with my neighbor?"

The "Culture Iceberg" is a helpful model to use when considering a cultural framework. With this model, cultural elements which are visible (e.g., dress, cooking, art, music) sit on the iceberg above the waterline. Cultural elements which are less visible sit on the iceberg below the waterline, such as roles (related to age, class, gender), non-verbal communication, hierarchy, a sense of individualism or collectivism and much more. It's all that stuff sitting below the waterline of my own cultural iceberg that I often neglect to keep in mind when interacting with my neighbor or my neighbor's story.

Since taking the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) along with other people from Incarnation, and learning where I am individually on the development continuum, I've reflected on this experience with Federika and I think I understand something better today than I did before. I believe the discomfort I experienced in receiving such a generous gift (which was undoubtedly homemade and maybe one of a few special dresses Federika owned), may have resulted from culture-bound attitudes I brought to the experience: that is, to gift another person I barely knew with a such a valued possession was somehow overly extravagant. Clearly my cultural framework was not Federika's, which came from her history, lived experiences and other culture-bound attitudes. Both our frameworks are allowed to exist without value judgment or rightness or wrongness.

It makes me wonder how many times I have absorbed and inaccurately interpreted (and maybe judged) or simply haven't heard the stories of my neighbor because I used the lens of my own cultural framework or my own life story as I interpreted what was taking place.

Having thought about this experience deeply and recognizing that I bring culture-bound attitudes into my interactions with others from whom I am different, has been helpful. Knowing I have a different cultural framework than my neighbor who lives in different circumstances than I, has a different political bent than I, has a different sexual identity than what I grew up understanding, lives in a different country, has different physical abilities than I, or experiences other "differences that make a difference"... I'm understanding there is much to be gained if I think about the culture-bound attitudes I bring with me, as I listen to and engage with my neighbors' stories. Which neighbor and which stories might you understand and appreciate better if you consciously brought into awareness the cultural framework you carry with you each day?

Peter Harrits of the St. Paul Area Synod and a trained IDI administrator, who has taken several groups through the IDI, is quick to invite participants who are receiving composite or individual data, to accept their data with grace and compassion for themselves. He also encourages us individually, but also as a community to think about the “mix of differences that make a difference” which characterize our life and work, within our congregation and with our local and global neighbors.

-Reflection by Becky Benson

Think About *(select one or more questions)*

- What aspects of your story might influence how you see someone else's story?
- Tell about a time when your perspective changed because you heard more of someone else's story.
- How can we show grace and respect to ourselves and one another as we talk about difficult topics? For you, what creates a space where it is safe to share?
- How does our faith guide us in listening and receiving one another's stories?
- For you, what are some of the things that define a culture? Which are visible? Which lie below the surface of the “cultural iceberg”? Do you think there are more things above the water or below the surface? How does this translate into our interactions with others?
- Tell about a time when you interacted with someone and became aware of a “difference that makes a difference.” What did you discover or learn?
- From your perspective, what are some of the characteristics that define Incarnation's culture? Which of these characteristics are visible and which are not?
- How do you think someone new to Incarnation would describe its culture? How might their description be similar to or different from your perspective?
- What is something from your story that would help others to see and know you more fully?

Connecting Faith with Daily Life *(for individual reflection & action)*

- Read a book or memoir that tells a story from a different cultural perspective such as *A Good Time for the Truth* from the Minnesota Historical Society. Or read *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer for a holistic way of looking at the world.
- Learn more about the cultural iceberg. Check out the images under “additional resources” on www.incarnationmn.org/our-story/.
- Volunteer to serve with an organization that brings together people with other cultural backgrounds. Check out Incarnation's ministry partners at: <https://incarnationmn.org/serve/ministry-partners/>.

- Whenever you have the opportunity, make it a point to talk with someone who has a different cultural background than you do.
- Watch for other ways to become more self-aware of your own biases, accepting of the differences of others, and think beyond stereotypes. Pay attention to these concerns in your daily life and watch for other opportunities to learn.

Prayer

This session may have brought up differing viewpoints or perspectives and tough topics to consider. Pause for a few moments of silence before reading the prayer. Remember that while we may have differences, we are all children of God, dearly loved by God, and gathered together in God's presence. Hold up any discomfort or difficulties for God's grace and love.

(Read this blessing together. It is a blessing you offer to one another)

The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen

-Numbers 6:24-26 (NRSV)

The Lord Bless You

(optional—for any session)

The blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 has been used in Sunday worship with an illumination (artwork) from *The Saint John's Bible*. If time allows, view the illumination and use the guided questions. Both are available under "additional resources" at: www.incarnationmn.org/our-story/

Want to Learn More About the Intercultural Development Inventory?

To find out more about the IDI and how it has been used by congregations check out these articles from the Saint Paul Area Synod:

New Tool for Intercultural Development

<https://spas-elca.org/a-new-tool-for-intercultural-development/>

Assessing Intercultural Competence

<https://spas-elca.org/assessing-intercultural-competence/>

Kairos, an Incarnation adult learning opportunity, featured Peter Harrits from the St. Paul Area Synod speaking on the IDI on Sept. 13, 2021. Attendees had a chance to think about how we can increase our capability to 'shift cultural perspectives and appropriately adapt behavior' as we encounter a host of *differences that make a difference* in our lives and ministry together. To listen to a recording, contact Denise Floe at: dfloe@incarnationmn.org.