

Be Loved Faith Study

Session 4: Be Steadfast



Relationships are an enormous blessing and a gigantic challenge. We open ourselves up to times of discord, differences, disagreements, and brokenness in relationships. It's a reason we sometimes hesitate or pull back. It's a reason we can feel inadequate or not up to the task. In all of this, God calls us beloved and calls us into God's beloved community. Are there healthy ways or good practices to navigate difficult times? Where can we find God and how does God guide us?

Opening Questions (select 1 or 2 questions)

- What are some ways you show love to your neighbors?
- What gives you strength in times of difficulty?
- Tell about a time when you showed compassion to someone despite difficulties in your relationship (avoid sharing information that would identify this person). How did they respond?

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we are living in troubled times when things are moving so quickly that we often don't know who to trust or what to believe. Give us wisdom to face these conflicts with patience, discernment, and love. Remind us to center ourselves in you so that we may weather disappointments, losses, illness, all difficulties that we face every day knowing that you walk with us every step of the way. Amen.

What Does the Bible Say?

Being in relationship with others can bring us great joy, but there are also times when these relationships become difficult. Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught us that living the abundant life means loving God and loving our neighbors. But what happens in those times when we find it difficult to love those in our community? Jesus teaches his disciples that following him means not only loving those who love us, but also being kind to and even praying for our enemies! Just as God treats us mercifully, we are called to extend mercy to all.

Before we go further, we want to be clear that: We, as the church community, want to be sensitive to people who have had the painful and complex experience of mental, emotional, sexual or physical abuse. For victims of abuse to heal, love and forgiveness can mean separation from the abuser and a long journey toward healing. Praying for or forgiving the abuser should be guided by a professional whose priority is the safety and healing in mind, body and spirit of the victim. Incarnation

pastors are available for listening, pastoral care and referrals to other professionals and resources.

Luke 10: 25-28 (NRSV)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Luke 6: 32-38 (NRSV)

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

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

- What word or phrase speaks to you today from the Bible readings?
- What does it mean to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind"?
- How do you define "neighbor"? Who comes to mind for you?
- Who are our "enemies"? What could "love your enemies" look like in our world today?
- Relationships have been compared to a bank account. We make deposits (do good things) and get rewarded (what we want). How does this analogy break down in the context of what Jesus tells us?
- How does judging others affect our loving them?

What Do Others Say?

There are few things in life as painful as getting hurt in community, losing trust in a loved one, or losing faith in yourself. That pain is often multiplied when that crisis happens in the context of a faith community. Aren't we supposed to be better, to do better, to love better?

I wonder, sometimes, if we haven't created unrealistic expectations for ourselves and others in community, especially Christian community. We have biblical visions of what we hope to be and do— *"By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another"* (John 13: 35) or *"Love is patient and kind..."* (1 Corinthians 13: 4). In reality, we are as susceptible to bitterness and judgment and biting conversations as anyone else. So, we keep striving and we keep falling short, striving and falling short.

Brené Brown, in her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, paints a painful picture of what happens when our "healthy striving" devolves into an unattainable perfectionism.

Understanding the difference between healthy striving and perfectionism is critical to laying down the shield and picking up your life. Research shows that perfectionism hampers success. In fact, it's often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis.¹

I think Christians are particularly susceptible to such twisted ideals of perfectionism, to our own spiritual and relational detriment. We not only carry the weight of our own expectations. We carry the weight of what we perceive God is expecting from us.

Using Brown's category of "healthy striving," what might it mean to be both honest about who we are and hopeful about who we can be in relationship with one another?

Paul gives us a wonderful guide in Colossians 3: 12-14 (NRSV):

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Look at where the relationship starts and where it goes. You are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. You are... not because of what you have done or not done, but because God has chosen to love you, in all your glory and through all your imperfections. So, if God has done that for you, can you offer that same grace to others, to yourself? Don't skip over that question too quickly. *If God has done that for you, can you offer that same grace to others, to yourself?*

That grace then takes on specific form and action. Compassion, kindness, humility (do you really think you can be perfect before God and with others?), meekness and patience—can you offer that to others and yourself?

Then, forgiveness. Look closely. It starts with a God who has already forgiven you fully. You simply need to accept it. Can you then offer that to others and yourself?

Now, I'm sure we have entered very tender space at this point. Forgiveness is hard. Patience is hard. Kindness can be hard, especially to unkind people. Remember, God's choosing you didn't happen because you were particularly good at all of these things. God chose you because God is perfectly good at all these things toward us.

So, give yourself a break when needed. And then start again. Let God's grace and love be the generative energy for living and the re-generative energy for forgiving.

"Above all things, clothe yourselves with love" says Paul. He doesn't say, figure out love on your own. He says, "put on love." It's already there. Just say, yes, again, today!

-Reflection by Pastor Kai Nilsen

Think About (select one or more questions)

Love and Healthy Striving

- For you, what does it mean to clothe yourself with love? What images, actions or feelings come to mind when you think about this?
- Read the text from Colossians 3 again. What word or phrase do you notice today? If you are comfortable sharing, how might that word or phrase speak into your life today?
- How does the phrase "healthy striving" from Brené Brown resonate with you? How do we see "healthy striving" in the context of the Luke texts?
- The texts from Luke set a high bar for loving others. What is a healthy strategy for giving ourselves a break when we fail to reach that bar?

Living and Loving in Challenging Times

- When you hit a relationship difficulty with a friend or neighbor, what are the reasons to keep working on it? What has helped you to move forward?
- What do you draw on from your faith that helps you with difficult relationships? When have you felt God's presence or guidance walking with you?
- How do you care for yourself and remember you are beloved by God in challenges with other people?
- When you think of another person as God's beloved child, how does that impact your perspective?
- We have experienced very difficult times in our community in recent years. What can we bring from these texts into challenges facing the community?
- Think about a time of forgiveness – when you forgave someone or someone forgave you. How did the act of forgiveness change the relationship?

- When have you seen God's grace and love be generative or re-generative energy for your relationships with others?

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

- Take the love of Christ a step further by praying for someone you don't like very much. After praying for this person for a while, notice whether your attitude toward this person has changed.
- Jesus brought reconciliation into the world. Check out The Forgiveness Project www.theforgivenessproject.com. This website documents stories of forgiveness as well as the effects of forgiveness on relationships, health, and geo-political conflicts. You may be inspired to ask someone for forgiveness or forgive someone who has wronged you.
- The next time you are speaking with someone you don't agree with either spiritually or politically, take time to listen to what the person is saying. Be conscious of your own defensiveness and don't jump in with your own point of view until you have patiently listened to the other person. No matter how much you disagree with the person's point of view, make it a point to listen deeply for greater understanding. Strive more for understanding than to be persuasive.

Closing Prayer

Spend time in silence, surrounded by God's love, as the leader (or someone from the group) reads a selection from Psalm 46.

As we prepare to leave this time together, let's quiet ourselves as we dwell in God's presence. Think about the gift of forgiveness – both being forgiven and forgiving others – and the blessing of starting fresh filled with God's grace and love.

Silence

Be still and know that I am God. *Silence*

Be still and know. *Silence*

Be still. *Silence*

Be. *Silence*

Amen.

¹Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Hazelden Publishing, 2010.
www.brenebrown.com

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