

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

October 19, 2014



Life was not meant to be lived alone-

Discussion Guide

We Pray

Acts 4.23-32

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Which do you prefer to play: individual sports or team sports? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes to explain the background and context of Acts 4.23-32. You might read Acts 4.18-22 to highlight the immediate concerns facing the early Church.
- Read Acts 4.23-32 aloud. Pause. Read Acts 4.23-32 aloud once more, seeking to imagine the events being described.
- In what ways did the early Church approach faith in a connected way? (Seek to find as many examples as possible in the text.)
- What were the outcomes of approaching faith in this manner? (Look for both the explicit and implicit outcomes.)
- Would you say that people today approach faith in a connected or disconnected (individualistic) manner? Why might this be the case? What would you say are the outcomes of approaching faith in this manner?

- How might you describe your approach to the faith journey? Do you approach faith individualistically or in a more connected manner? Why might this be the case for you? What forms does this take for you?
- What effects, if any, might your approach to the faith journey have upon you?
- What might it look like to pursue Jesus in connection with others? Do you think this is possible in our modern setting? Could you elaborate?
- Are there steps you would like to consider as a group to moving toward greater engagement with one another on the faith journey? What might these be? (Give space to elaborate upon these and then consider making space, now or at a later time, to process them together.)
- Conclude your time together in prayer for the Church, your group and for one another. You might consider praying for the grace to share the journey of faith more deeply with one another.

Context and Background

Prayer

Prayer might be generally described as humanity's engagement with the divine, which takes different forms with respect to the religion in which it is found. Most often, prayer takes one of four forms: petitions and requests from a divine (higher) being, a general reflection on the nature of life, dialogue with a divine (higher) being, and joining with the mind and essence of the divine (higher) being.

Within Christian thought, prayer might be generally defined as connecting with God with such connection being both a gift and a task. Prayer comes at God's initiation but requires mankind's response (Ezekiel 2.1-2; Psalm 50.3-4). While dialogue is certainly a large part of this God-mankind interaction, the primary purpose of this interaction is the revelation of the true self to the other; that is, in prayer God reveals his true self to us and we reveal our true selves to God (Proverbs 1.23). In this light, prayer becomes a two-way connection between God and people which may take the form of petition and answer, but it might also take the form of adoration and revelation, complaint and comfort, thanksgiving and blessing, and reception and revelation (Psalm 46.10)

1 Samuel 1.15; Lamentations 2.19; John 17.20-21). Because prayer is about connecting with God, and God is the author of life, the content of our prayers may cover the entire continuum of life (Matthew 6.9-12; John 17.20-21; Ephesians 6.18; 1 Timothy 2.1-2). In this way, prayer connects the entirety of our lives with the fullness of God; that is, prayer makes God a welcome and integral part of every aspect of our lives. This may be some of the intent behind Paul's command to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5.17).

The Text

Acts 4.23-32: *The praying church*

As one reads the text of Acts, it becomes apparent that the power and boldness that came with the reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) is not a passing phenomenon. The apostles (and other Jesus followers) move forward boldly, calling others to follow Jesus, and performing wonders and signs which verify the truth of their message. The first such sign appears in Acts 3 with the healing of a lame beggar (Acts 3.1-10). Astonished by this sign, a crowd quickly gathers, and Peter and John speak boldly about the identity of and hope found in Jesus (Acts 3.11-25). Because the apostles are preaching within the Temple compound, the Temple authorities quickly become aware that these two Jesus followers are teaching and that they are teaching about the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 4.2). Because these same Temple authorities were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus just a few weeks prior, and because they denied that Jesus rose from the dead (Matthew 28.11-15), this teaching is immediately called into question and Peter and John are arrested, basically for disturbing the peace (Acts 4.1-4).

After a night in jail, Peter and John are called before the Jewish ruling body (Sanhedrin) and commanded not to teach any more in the name of Jesus (Acts 4.5-18), a command which Peter and John reject. They refuse to stop telling others about Jesus because they have seen and experienced Jesus' ministry and person (Acts 4.18-20). Because the healing could not be disputed, the Jewish leaders further threaten Peter and John and then release them. At this point, Peter and John are free but they are not free to do as they wish. They may go forth and remain free if they are willing to stop speaking boldly. However, if they continue to perform signs and if they continue to tell others about Jesus, the reality is that they will probably experience the same end as Jesus (the cross).

With this reality facing them, the Church bumps into its first real obstacle. They can stop being the Church and have a life of ease, or they can be the Church and be persecuted. In light of this choice, Peter and John return "to their own people," a phrase which indicates that these two men had a tight knit band of fellow Christians with whom they were connected. This may involve the other disciples but since these men are not specifically mentioned this group probably included more. Simply put, Peter and John had community. They went to this community and shared what had happened to them as well as the threats that had been made. In response, this community of Jesus followers joined together in prayer. While this may mean that they prayed all at the same time, at the very minimum it means they prayed for the same thing. What they prayed for is summarized by Luke in a prayer that emerged from that gathering.

This group came before God acknowledging that God had all creative power and authority and that this creative authority could not be resisted (Psalm 2.1-2). They had witnessed how rulers had attempted to resist God, but in the end the result was they only did what God desired. In light of the reality that God possessed all power, the believers made two simple requests. They asked for boldness to continue speaking in the face of the very real threats, and to be granted signs and wonders which would confirm God's presence and power among them. The structure of this prayer somewhat resembled Hezekiah's prayer (Isaiah 37.16-20; 2 Kings 19.15-19) with the difference being that these believers asked for boldness rather than deliverance. More than likely, the model for this prayer is found not in the Old Testament but in Jesus' teaching about life and prayer. Jesus had taught his disciples that suffering was part of the journey of discipleship and he modeled prayer as beginning with acknowledging God's character and then asking for God to further his plans on earth (Luke 9.23-24; Matthew 6.9-13).

However, the coming together in prayer had another result. At this point in the narrative, Luke paused once more to note what life in the early Church was like, a life which resulted from the practices in which they were engaging. Interestingly, the first result is one of unity. Somehow, the coming together in prayer bound these early believers together in such a way that they were connected with one another.

Real life with Blake:

I want to connect with others. God has wired this into the deepest parts of me, in the deepest parts of all of us (Genesis 1.26-27; 2.18). These verses remind me that connecting takes a willingness to engage in the journey of faith with others. So often, I think of the faith journey as an individualist experience. "I" am following after Jesus. The early followers of Jesus did not approach faith this way. They approach faith as "we" are following Jesus, together. This can be seen in the way they reacted to the threats facing Peter and John. These threats were faced and handled together. In light of the prospect of suffering, they met together. In the face of certain suffering, they prayed together and asked not for deliverance but for the boldness to move forward together. Is it any wonder that the outcome of this joint practice of the faith journey resulted in them being together? As I think about my own experience with the practice of faith in this way, I have to admit that my individualistic approach lies more in my unwillingness to invite others in rather than an unwillingness of others to join me. I simply do not call others to join me in what I am facing. To experience connection, I must ask others to join me in engaging with God, to join me in the tasks that lie before us, to join me in the experience of God's power and presence. If I would do this, and if people responded, would it be out of bounds to expect that at the end of the day our hearts would be knit together?

Real life with you:

One of our deepest desires is to connect with others. One of our greatest struggles is how to actually connect with one another. While we can connect in a myriad of ways, perhaps one of the easiest is simply to connect with others on the faith journey. Rather than faith being a relationship between you and Jesus, could you approach faith as our relationship with Jesus, as pursuing Jesus together? Could you surround yourself with people with whom you share the victories and struggles of faith? Could this group join together and say, "This is our victory. . .our struggle. . .our pain. . .our joy"? Could you approach and experience God, not just as individuals but as a connected community? What might this look like? This might take the form of a small group, a regular gathering of 8-12 people who desire to connect and grow on the faith journey together. It could take the form of joining The Table and regularly praying with others for the progression of the Kingdom of God. It might just look like you and a friend meeting over coffee to share how you are each experiencing God and what pursuing God together might look like. For these and other opportunities, check out the bulletin or the website, www.unioncenter.org, during the Me We Series.

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake's blog at BlakeShipp.blogspot.com



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