



connected

A FIVE-WEEK JOURNEY

WELCOME!

ABOUT THE JOURNEY

Often we go through life longing for community and connection but don't know where to begin. Even worse, our busy and hurried lives often contribute to our feelings of isolation and disconnectedness. This year we will be going on The Connected Journey, a journey toward deeper, more authentic connections with ourselves, God, the community of faith, and the world. The Connected Journey is designed to help God's people see with new eyes that living a "connected life" is just what our hearts long for.

Each week follows the same three-part rhythm:

Go to worship on the weekend

Each Journey week begins here. In worship, you will be introduced to a theme, provoked by art, video and music, encouraged by preaching, and join others in giving praise to God. It's important. Be there!

Meet with your Journey Group

In this fun and relational environment, you will share what you're learning, dig deeper into scripture and conversation, and strengthen relationships.

Do your weekly challenge

At the end of each Journey Group, you will receive a challenge to embrace your faith in the coming week. Do the challenge during the week and record what happens in the guide. You will also see some family challenges and social media prompts (if that's your thing) to consider doing as a way to engage more fully as a community.



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New this year!

Family Journey Supplement:
popluther.org/familyjourney

Your family is an important part of your Connected Journey. Take some time each week (or day!) to check in and follow through some of the additional activities that will complement the adult journey guide. There are family discussion questions, activity ideas, children's books, and video links that will bring the theme of the week home to your kids and teens.



GROUND RULES



Over the next few weeks, your Journey Group will be encouraged to get pretty vulnerable with each other, so it's probably a good idea for everyone to be on the same page.

First of all, know that your host is simply a fellow learner, not a Bible expert or professional guru. While your host can be your contact for finding more information, the discussion and learning in the group is everyone's responsibility.

Secondly, to help keep the group experience a safe, healthy way to grow, here are some ground rules:

1. **Be a great listener.**
Make eye contact. Don't interrupt.
2. **Be real.**
Honesty is the best policy.
Be your authentic self and trust each other.
3. **Keep it confidential.**
Gossip is lame.
4. **Share examples, not advice.**
Better to hear, "Oh, I experienced something like that once..." versus "Listen, here's what you need to do."
5. **Show up.**
Honor the commitment you made to the group.
6. **Unplug.**
This is a great opportunity to be present with others.
Don't let phones be a distraction.



THE BIG DISCONNECT

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.



weekONE

JOURNEY GROUP EXPERIENCE

*Everything below is for your Journey Group to read and do together.
Host, begin reading...*

1 Hi everyone! Welcome to week one of our journey group. This journey group is where we'll process much of the Connected Journey. You can expect this group time to be filled with lots of conversation, questions, scripture reading and prayer. Each week we will also be given a challenge to embrace the theme for the week. The point of this time is to grow together and build relationships as we more fully uncover our identity as children of God. The group time won't always feel perfect; it might take a



little getting used to or someone might talk too much or there could be awkward silences. In the end, however, we're certain it'll be a good time. So, to start this thing off right, let's go around the group, and **everyone share your name and your favorite television show.** Also, **share one thing you hope to get out of your journey experience this year.**

New reader...

- 2 It's been said that we live in a "highly connected world." Chances are you have a smartphone in your pocket right now that has given you access to more information than rulers of nations had for thousands of years.

Consider this: in 2011 only 35% of American Adults possessed a smartphone.

Not only are more people digitally connected, the rate of global access to information is moving at rapid speed. According to the Pew Research Center, 96% of American adults currently own a cell phone, and 81% own a smartphone. Worldwide, 3.5 billion people own a smartphone. That's 45% of the world's population!

That means that nearly half the world's population has instant access to news, weather, sports, social media, libraries, search engines, etc.

Even more astounding is the idea that half the world's population is just a phone call away...

How has your life been enriched through the age of connectivity?

In what ways has technology improved your life?

- 3 While we are living in an age with easier access to information, ideas, and peoples across the globe, there is another growing trend emerging in our society: feelings of loneliness and isolation.

A recent Cigna survey reported that 61% of Americans report that they "always or regularly feel alone."



Princeton University's Jane Brody's research has revealed that "social isolation is on a par with high blood pressure, obesity, lack of exercise or smoking as a risk factor for illness and early death."

Digital connection is up, but increasing evidence shows that human interaction is down.

The question for our Journey becomes –

**In the age of connectivity,
are we truly connected to what matters most?**

Someone else continue reading...

- 4 Often, we go through life longing for community and connection but don't know where to begin. Even worse, our busy and hurried lives often contribute to our feeling isolated and disconnected. Over the next few weeks our Journey will be exploring four primary connections that can help us not only to live but thrive! We are going on a Journey towards deeper, more authentic connections with ourselves, God, the community of faith, and the world.

The Connected Journey is designed to help us see with new eyes that living a "connected life" is just what our hearts long for.

Someone read the passage below...

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:1-5

This passage stresses the importance of living "connected" to the source of life.



As a “branch” what helps you stay connected to the “vine”?

Have you ever felt like a dry branch?

Continue with the following activity...

5 As we begin this journey together, spend a few moments taking an inventory of your own sense of connection. Reflect below:

Connected with myself:

I feel in touch with my own thoughts, emotions, and physical sense of self. I have a good sense of self awareness and prioritize personal investment.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
(low) (high)

Connected with God:

I feel connected to God and cultivate spiritual practices that center me on God’s love and presence in my life.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
(low) (high)

Connected with others:

I have meaningful and authentic relationships with others that provide comfort and stability in my life. I have people in my life with whom I can be vulnerable.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
(low) (high)



Connected to the world:

I have connections with people, places, or organizations beyond my immediate community that give my life a greater sense of purpose or meaning.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
(low) (high)

Host, bring us home...

6

Spend some time sharing what you wrote down or reflected upon.

Now is a good time to practice vulnerability. As you begin this Journey, are there areas in which you feel more strongly connected?

Are some areas of connection weak?

What connection might you hope deepens over the next few weeks?

Prayer

7

Someone can pray their own prayer, or you can use this one.

God, thank you for this community and the opportunity you have created for us to journey together. Over the next few weeks, teach us, inspire us, and help us to live more connected to what matters most. Amen.





CHALLENGE:

Media Challenge

Individual Challenge:

This week your challenge is to take notice of your media (cell phone, tablet, computer) usage and reduce your consumption. YOU get to decide what this looks like. Maybe you will decide to limit screen time to 1 hour or less a day. Maybe you will decide to ban cell phones from the dinner table. The important idea is to help reduce those things that have the potential for distraction so that you can focus on deepening the more meaningful connections in your life.

Here are some ideas:

Instead of scrolling at Facebook in a waiting room, strike up a conversation (or reflect internally on your day).

Turn off the television at night and spend some time in prayer, conversation or journaling.

You get the idea!

Family Challenge:

This week try the Media Challenge with your entire family.

Challenge your family to either go without media distractions at meals for an entire week – or – pick one night to declare an entire evening as a media free night. Play a board game, go for a walk, engage in an activity you all enjoy, or have a deeper conversation instead!



CONNECTED TO YOURSELF

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”





weekTWO

JOURNEY GROUP EXPERIENCE

Host, read out loud...

- 1 Welcome back, everyone. Before we jump into our discussion, we've got another icebreaker. **Two lies and a truth.** One by one, everyone shares two lies and a truth about themselves. Others try to guess the true statement.

New reader...

- 2 Let's debrief our Challenges from last week. Last week we were



challenged to consume less media in order to be more present with those around us. **How did it go? Anyone want to share their average screen time statistics?** Anyone can start, but make sure everyone has time to reflect.

Keep reading...

3

You've just boarded a plane and finally made your way to your seat. You've managed to stuff that oversized "personal item" under the seat in front of you and you are all settled in and ready for your flight as the plane begins to taxi away from the terminal. Before your flight takes off a crew member goes through safety routine instructions. They show you how to buckle your seat belt, use your seat cushion as a floatation device and where the emergency exits are. They also go through what to do if the cabin were to lose pressure; oxygen masks would be deployed. They always emphasize to put your own mask on first before you try and help anyone else. The point is this: if you are not getting any oxygen, you will be in no condition to help others!

This week our focus is on "putting on our own oxygen masks", and together we will explore ways to re-connect with ourselves. But before we dig any deeper into this week's session, let's get the conversation going.

How many responsibilities or "things" are you currently juggling in life? What do you feel responsible for on a daily basis? Are there 3 "balls" in the air? 4, 5, or more?

Is there a "ball" you are currently juggling that you would drop in an instant if there were a way to do so?



New reader - move one to the right...

- 4 The Lenten season is a sacred time of the church year where people of faith are invited into a time of intentional fasting, slowing down, and self-reflection. Often people focus on setting a new intention or practice designed to help them draw closer to God and growth in faith.

Take turns sharing any Lenten disciplines people may have.

- 5 Lenten disciplines can be wonderful tools for helping us focus on our faith, however, they can also feel like one more “ball” being added to juggling routine. How many of the Lenten disciplines mentioned were doing activities? (reading scripture daily, prayer practices, food challenges, etc.)

As humans, we have a fascinating tendency towards “doing.” It doesn’t take much for us to turn a season that is designed for reflection, slowing down, and introspection into a frenzy of activity and obligations. Maybe some of you have not set a Lenten discipline, but after hearing others share now feel obligated to do so....

This week we are being challenged as a community to focus on the reality **that we are human beings, not merely human doings.**

New reader...

- 6 It only takes a few short chapters into Mark’s Gospel for the disciples of Jesus to experience how busy and all-consuming the life of discipleship could be. By now the disciples have witnessed healings, miraculous events, and received their first taste of the growing celebrity of Jesus. In the first part of chapter six, Jesus sends out the twelve **to do** the work of ministry.

Needless to say, they come back from the ventures tired and exhausted. Thankfully, Jesus takes notice that they are weary and sends them away to recharge.



The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them. "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.

Mark 6:30-32

Jesus understood and valued the importance of rest, sabbath, and renewal for his disciples, and he wants the same things for us.

Break into pairs & discuss...

7 For the next 5 minutes or so, break off in pairs and reflect on the tension in your own life between "doing" and "being". What does sabbath rest look like in your life?

When people are done sharing, read aloud...

8 Creating space in our lives to "be still" not only provides the much-needed rest we crave from busyness; it also creates space for healthy self-reflection.

Sabbath is not only for rest, but also reflection!

Cultivating practices of physical and mental stillness can help us reconnect with our own thoughts, feelings, and sense of identity. It is really difficult to have an authentic relationship with God or others if we are not connected deeply with our own sense of being.



The following exercise is designed to guide each of us to examine our sense of being in the world. Answer each question in the space below and don't look ahead. Simply answer each question in sequence. Once everyone is finished, we will process together as a group. Take your time on this exercise, no need to rush.

A) Write 10 words/phrases that complete the following phrase. Write down the first things that come to mind.

I am . . .

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

B) From those ten, which are the least essential to your sense of self?

C) From the original list, list the 5 words or phrases that are most essential to you.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



D) In looking at your list of most essential words, would it have been the same 5 years ago? Why or why not? What might have been on your list 5 years ago that is no longer there?

E) What is an identity on your list that is given to you by others?

F) How many items on your list have to do with roles you play in the world (doing) vs. aspects of your character or true identity (being)?

After a few minutes, discuss as a group...

10

After everyone has shared their top 5 with the larger group, spend time discussing any or all of the following questions:

What stood out to you about your list? Any surprises as you looked over what first came to mind when asked to respond to the simple phrase "I am"?

Did your silent or not so silent internal editor veto some of the factors you wanted to list?

Did anyone list "child of God" or something similar on their list?



New reader...

11

The main takeaway this week is simple: investing in yourself through sabbath rest and reflection is vital for life! Rest and renewal help us to stay attuned to our own emotions, thoughts, and desires as we go through life. Slowing down helps us listen more clearly

12

Host, close us in prayer.

Prayer

*God, we confess that often we find ourselves wrapped up in the busyness of life and leave little room to hear your voice. Help us to slow down and rest. Show us ways this week that we can re-connect with our true identity as your beloved children. **AMEN.***





CHALLENGE:

Self-reflection & Silence

Individual Challenge:

This week your challenge is to spend time **each day** this week centering around two simple prompts. One focuses on the feelings & emotions you experienced throughout the day and another on the greater longing within...

Today, I felt . . .

Today, my heart longs for . . .

Each day after you've spent a few moments reflecting on those questions, spend 5 minutes sitting in silence. I promise you the globe will still revolve while you take 5 minutes for yourself.

You just might be surprised what 5 minutes in solitude reveals to you about yourself!

More ways to reconnect with yourself this week:

Meditate

Journal

Take a walk outside and leave your phone at home

Invest in a hobby or activity that you enjoy

Exercise

Focus on breathing with 10 deep inhale/exhale exercises



week THREE

CONNECTED TO GOD

John 4:5-42

[Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the



Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”





weekTHREE

JOURNEY GROUP EXPERIENCE

Host, begin reading...

- 1 It's week three of our Journey together! Hopefully by now you have had some time and space to reflect on what it means to be connected, and, in particular, to begin the journey of connecting with yourself that we started last week. Let's check in: **how did everyone do with last week's challenge?** If you forgot about it, that's okay—just listen to others as they share.

How did completing that challenge impact your connection with yourself?



Was it difficult to spend time in silence?

New reader...

2 God desires connection with us. Think about what that means: that the creator of the sun, the moon, the stars and the sea desires to be in relationship with US!! And yet, so many times God becomes a footnote in our life; not because we don't want a deep connection with God, but because other things in our lives distract us, or because we just aren't sure how to manage it. Sometimes even when we are praying or worshipping or are in a small group like this one, we find it difficult to feel connected to God—even as we acknowledge that God is always there for us.

Let's start with the first obstacle: our tendency to get distracted.

What are some things that distract us from connection with God?

What are some things that distract YOU from seeking a deeper connection with God?

3 It's probably not news to you that in the chaos of life, sometimes our relationship with God gets put on the back burner. The kids need to be fed, the project needs to be finished...and the list goes on. Part of this is because we do have responsibilities: to our families and to our jobs, and to other areas of our lives. But in an age of instant gratification, often we tend to confuse URGENT with IMPORTANT.



Take a few moments of silence to review the last week in your memory. What things did you accomplish or tend to that were URGENT?

What things did you tend to that were IMPORTANT?

Where did these two areas overlap, and where did they differ? Write your thoughts down below. After a few minutes have passed, please share them with your group!

Someone else continue reading...

- 4 It can be hard to put God first, especially when there are urgent and immediate needs in our own life. But the benefit—not only for ourselves, but also for our families and other relationships—far outweighs the cost. And the bible gives us a great example in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well.

Turn back to the page 22 and read John 4:5-42 out loud.

Someone else continue reading...

- 5 In this story, the Samaritan woman has an urgent need: water! In ancient Samaria, there were no taps in the sink, no hot and cold running water. If she—along with anyone for whom she was



responsible—was going to bathe, cook, clean, do laundry, or even just have water to drink—she needed to draw the water from the well and bring it home. In fact, even today our friends in countries like Haiti often spend hours walking long distances to wells and streams in order to complete this important chore. Getting the water she needed to survive was the priority when she saw Jesus there—and it was an important one!

But when the Samaritan woman takes the time to talk to Jesus, he offers her something even better: living water. And she doesn't get it at first, but she persists in her conversation with Jesus, and although she may not have a perfectly clear picture of who he is by the end of the story, she understands that he has given her a gift that far outweighs her need for physical water. And she shares that gift with the people around her, helping THEM to connect more closely with God.

There are very few things more important to our survival than water. But the Living Water that Christ provides is even more important than that.

Someone else continue reading...

6 Hopefully we all agree that a deep connection with God is IMPORTANT. Often, though, it doesn't feel URGENT—at least, not until some sort of crisis happens in our lives—and so we push it aside and focus on other things. We prioritize our families and jobs but also our hobbies and Netflix time and social media and a host of other things over our time with God. And ironically? If you were to walk into your local Christian bookstore (do those exist anymore?), you would find an entire section of books on how to connect with God...and many of us have spent significant amounts of time READING about how to connect with God. And that's not a bad thing, but...often we use our free time reading ABOUT connecting with God without actually putting that reading into practice!

So what if, instead of putting off deepening our connection with God until we've read the right books or found just the right spiritual practice, we just DO it?



Someone else continue reading...

7 This brings us to the second challenge that can prevent us from striving to connect more deeply to God: the uncertainty we feel about HOW we can connect more deeply with God. The truth is, though, you don't need a book or a TED Talk to tell you how to connect with God, because as a baptized child of God you have been equipped with power of the Holy Spirit. You have the gifts of God inside of you, as you are. And you know who is the expert on how to deepen your connection with God? YOU are! Sometimes, though, we need some help articulating it. Let's take the next few minutes and list below the ways that you prefer to connect with God. If you aren't sure how to answer that question, an alternative suggestion is to ask yourself, "What are the times in my life that I have felt closest to God? What was happening in those moments?". This might help you figure out how you most naturally connect.

Write your thoughts below and, when a few minutes have passed, share with your group.

As you shared with your group, **did any other thoughts or ideas occur to you? Write them here.**

Continue with the next reader...

8 Connection with God is natural to us as baptized children of God...sometimes, we simply need to remember that! And we also need to remember that even though we may not be sure how to pursue connection with God...we don't need to stress about it because God is ALWAYS PURSUING US. We just need to be open to the ways in which that can happen and remember that it DOES happen. Once we assume a posture of RECEIVING instead of DOING, it's can be easier to recognize the connection that GOD makes with US on a daily basis.

Would anyone be willing to share a time when you unexpectedly



realized the presence and activity of God in your life?

Host, bring us home...

9 Jesus Christ is OUR Living Water, too. Advanced systems of pipes and plumbing and filtration aside, we don't fundamentally create water out of ourselves; we simply receive it from its source. In the same way, when it comes to connecting to God, the source of that connection is GOD, not us. We simply are called to explore and to be open to the ways that God connects to us, and to create the opportunities for those times, spaces, and activities to occur in our own lives.

10 One way that many of us connect with God is through PRAYER. You are encouraged to conclude your time together in an extended (longer than usual) time of prayer. You can do this in the way that's most comfortable for your group—many of you are prayer experts! Alternatively, **you can use this one.**

Prayer

God, thank you for gathering us together in this space. Thank you for helping us to connect with ourselves over the past week. Help us to be open to the connection with You that You desire for us. Help us to lay ourselves open to you, to be vulnerable in your presence.

Take a moment of silence to communicate to God what is on your hearts and minds at this moment. [Allow for a few minutes of silence. This can seem like a long time!]

*God, you know the desires of our hearts, the worries and fears that we have, the things that we prioritize in front of you. Help us to remember to put our connection with you first, to seek you all things, and to be open to your relational activity in our lives. **Amen.***





CHALLENGE:

Connecting with God

Individual Challenge:

When you get home, read over your answers to the questions above concerning the ways in which you feel most connected to God, or when you have felt the presence of God in your life in an acute way. Choose ONE of those connection points—you can use one that your group members said as well if you think it sounds helpful!—and engage in that practice one more time or period than you normally would this week. For instance, if PRAYER is a way you connect with God, and you always say bedtime or meal prayers, maybe spend some time in prayer immediately after getting up. Have coffee with Jesus!

If you feel connected to God in the OUTDOORS, add in a time this week to intentionally get some time outside. Take a hike or a bike ride with the intent of using that time to connect with God.

If you feel connected to God in conversation with other people, then think of someone you know who is a great conversation partner and ask them out for coffee this week!

The possibilities are endless; whatever works for you! You are the expert!



Family Challenge:

As a bridge between this week's theme on connecting with God and next week's theme of connecting with others, brainstorm some ways that people connect with God. Start from scratch or use some of the ideas you and your Journey group brainstormed from the questions above. Then, identify one way that people connect with God that really resonates with you...and then decide how you can help OTHERS connect with God in this space! For example, if you recognize that some people feel more deeply connected to God during worship, maybe your family could sign up to usher or serve communion. Some people connect deeply with God during quiet times of prayer and reflection; maybe you could arrange to babysit or host a playdate to enable a friend to have that quiet time for themselves and God. If you know that people like to connect to God in nature, maybe spend some time as a family picking up litter or cutting back branches on a local trail. There are lots of opportunities—be creative!



weekFOUR



CONNECTED TO COMMUNITY

John 9:1-41

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his



sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."



sermon notes/observations:





weekFOUR

JOURNEY GROUP EXPERIENCE

Host, begin reading...

1 Welcome to Week 4! We are more than halfway through with our journey together! As we continue with our theme of Connection, we move from connecting with ourselves and with God to connecting with others. **Who is someone whose connection with you has had a significant impact on your life? Take a minute to think and then share your answers around the room!**

New reader...

2 We can understand the love of God in many ways. Maybe last week, you took advantage of the weekly challenge and spent some time dwelling in God's love. Some of you may have spent some time in nature, others might have listened to music or viewed art that reminded you of the creator's love...the list could go on! For many of us, however, we find that we best come to know the love of God through experiencing and sharing the love of other people. Often the thing that draws us deeper into our faith is the example that someone else gives to us in our own lives. And since the time of Adam, God has reminded us again and again that we are meant to be in community with one another! We are meant to share healthy connections—deep connections—with other people!

3 This is one of the reasons that God has granted us this beautiful, messy thing that we call the Church. We certainly can and do experience God outside of our faith community. To experience God's



love ONLY apart from community, however, only allows us part of the story. Community gives us many lenses with which to understand God's Word, preventing us from turning God into a replica of our own thoughts and opinions. Community gives us love and support during times when we most need it. Community allows us to pool our resources—physical but also emotional, mental, and spiritual—in such a way that we can broaden our impact on a hurting world.

Community, and the connections that come with it, also require risk. Everyone here has likely been hurt by someone in the church or another organization—or known someone who has. But here's the thing: even in the moments where we as a community fail to show God's love the way we should, if we are willing and able to remain connected, then we have an opportunity to experience forgiveness, grace, and mercy... especially when WE are the ones who have hurt others.

Are there any other benefits to being in community with other people in this thing we call the Church?

What about outside the church? Where else do we experience community in our lives, and why do these communities matter?

Some else continue reading...

4

We are called to be church together. And as church together, we are also called to be a part of our broader world, including the communities that we listed above. This helps combat the sense of isolation and loneliness that seem to be increasing in our world even as the number of ways for us to communicate technologically increase (see Week 1 for some statistics!).



But what does it MEAN to be in community with other people? Take a few minutes on your own to complete the following sentence: “Being in community means that....”. Write your ideas below. When a few minutes have passed, share with the rest of your group.

What ideas did people have in common?

5 One of the challenges that we face in American society today is in our very definition of community. For example, we find it easy to substitute in the one-off, selective culture of social media for deep friendship. Now, sometimes social media gets a bad rap, but it’s not the culprit here. It’s a tool. The culprit is our hearts. Because sometimes it’s frankly just EASIER to have relationships in that space than in “real life”. Because in real life, everything isn’t at your convenience. It’s not as simple as a like or share. It’s often not simple at all. Frankly, community in real life...is often a lot of work! The pay off, however, of deep and meaningful relationships, is worth it.

Another challenge in how we define community is our tendency towards tribalism. Throughout history, people have flocked to like-minded people, people who look and talk and act like them. Familiarity means safety for many of us, and it’s a very natural thing for humans to do. In fact, I would venture that ALL of us do it at some level.

Look at the examples of different communities that you listed in part 3 of this week’s Journey readings.

Are there any commonalities amongst them?



Are there people who are NOT a part of any of your communities? Who are they? Share as you feel comfortable.

Some else continue reading...

6 Building connections based on commonalities is natural, and it's not a bad thing! The trouble starts, however, when we prioritize commonalities of THIS world—our race, gender, socioeconomic class, education level, favorite baseball team—over the commonality that we all share: that we are ALL beloved children of a loving and merciful God. When we recognize that our community extends beyond the things of this world and that we are joined together in a much more critical way by our status of beloved children of God...then we can start to understand the community that God intends for us, the connection with others that is God's ideal.

If this seems impossible, if it seems too big, know that we aren't the only ones to think or feel that. The Bible, for instance, contains plenty of tribalism (often literally!). And as such, it contains record of those who are "in" and those who are "out". But when Jesus comes along, Jesus turns that narrative on its head. How much more "out" can you be than a man of no status, publicly executed for rebellion on an instrument of shame and torture? The cross is the ultimate example of how human boundaries for who is part of the community and who is not are thrown to the winds in the eyes of God.

But Jesus didn't start this particular reversal at the cross. His whole ministry is filled with reversals of societal norms around who belongs in a community and who does not. Oppressed Jewish citizens didn't want to eat with Roman-collaborating tax collectors. Pharisees didn't want to eat with prostitutes. And honestly, "sinners" probably weren't too happy eating with the people who judged them either! But Jesus ate with everyone. Jesus invited everyone to the table. And as Christians, we are called to do the same.

New reader...

7 Turn back to page 32 and read aloud John 9:1-41.



This text is a beautiful example of how God values our community with one another. The text features a man born blind. With an obvious physical challenge, he seems to only be known as “the blind guy”.

Can you recall a time in your life when you yourself were only known based on part of who you are, a particular trait or feature, a profession, or something similar?

It’s not always something bad. For example, if you are a teacher, your students might see you only as a teacher and be shocked (and maybe appalled) to see you out at a movie with your spouse. Or maybe you were defined by a trait or talent during childhood—“the athletic one”, “the shy one”, or whatever it might be.

How did this make you feel? Did this identification shape who you are today? If so, how? Share with the group as you feel comfortable.

Continue with a new reader...

8

By using this man’s blindness as his defining feature, the people who should have been his community were only willing or able to see a PART of his identity. This, combined with very real physical challenges, meant that he is not only blind but isolated. He does not have full status within the community. He is not able to participate in the rites, rituals, social events, and other events that defined the people he lived among.

Therefore, when Jesus heals him, Jesus not only removes a physical challenge but also restores the man to community. And when Jesus is challenged by the authorities, he points out that the REAL blindness is not in the man Jesus had just healed, but instead in those who ignored him, who neglected him.



Is there anyone in your own communities—including but not limited to the church—who cannot fully participate or is not fully included? Why?

What could be done to equip them to participate more fully, or to help the community open their own eyes, acknowledge, and include them?

Host, bring us home...

9

Ultimately, we experience immense support from our communities. Hopefully the groups that we are a part of encourage and support us. They help lift us up, and they show us God's love. And when that DOESN'T happen—because people are people!—hopefully they help us to embrace God's values of forgiveness, mercy, and healthy reconciliation. These connections are worth investing in. These connections are worth deepening.

Equally important, however, is recognizing those with whom we are NOT in community...and asking ourselves why that is. Keeping in mind that we are all beloved children of God—who is left out? Who is unseen? And how do we as God's children learn to include and to see all people, not just those who are like us?

And what gifts and blessings might we be missing when we fail to include others?

The reality is that all people need chances to both receive and share God's love. We live in a world sharply divided by tribalism; we are called to show others that God's love extends beyond the walls that we put up. We are called to show others that we love them and that we are capable of learning about the love of God through them as well.



10

As we close our time today with THIS community, the community of our Journey Group, we join together in a time of prayer. Please pray as you see fit, or if you would like to read a prayer instead, **you can use this one.**

Prayer

*God, thank you for the other people in our lives who show us your love. Help us to show your love in healthy ways to others, and to see people with your eyes: to recognize those who are not included, and to reach out to them. Equip us to create communities where all are truly welcome. Help us to see people first and foremost as your beloved children...including ourselves. **Amen.***



CHALLENGE: Connecting with Our Community

Individual Challenge:

Think of someone in your life with whom you could build a deeper connection, and reach out to them in some way. Maybe it's someone you see at worship each week but don't really know much about—maybe it's that person whose name you always forget! Maybe it's a coworker or classmate or someone else with whom you interact regularly but don't really KNOW. Maybe it's someone who is very important to your children or parents or siblings but whom you yourself don't know very well. Who is that individual for you? Brainstorm some ideas, and then reach out to them in a way that increases your level of connection. Maybe this is as simple as asking for their name (again) and having a brief conversation outside of the sanctuary. Maybe it's something like asking that person out for coffee after work. Whatever is appropriate in your setting!



Family Challenge:

Our text this week talks about people who ignore and are ignored. Have a conversation around the dinner or breakfast table with your family about the people YOU don't see. For instance, often kids receive their lunch from the same cafeteria workers each day, and hopefully say thank you, but don't know their names. Likewise, adults often receive assistance and services from people who help us but whom we don't actually know. Alternatively, are there a group or class of people in your own neighbors who aren't seen the way God sees them? In your city? In your state? Take some time together to list out some of these individuals and think of what you could do to REALLY see them, to reach out and deepen your connection in some way. Again, this could be as simple as introducing yourself and greeting them by name when you see them! Then either pick a person as a family and reach out to them...or each family member could do this on their own. Make sure, however, that if you do the latter, you circle back around with one another to share your stories!



weekFIVE



CONNECTED TO THE WORLD

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said



to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.



sermon notes/observations:





weekFIVE

JOURNEY GROUP EXPERIENCE

Host, begin reading...

- 1 Hello everyone! It's our last week! For tonight's icebreaker, everyone share something they have appreciated about spending the last few weeks together.

New reader...

- 2 For the last few weeks we have explored the theme of being connected. We have looked specifically at being connected with ourselves, God, and within the Body of Christ.

Let's Review:

Connected to Ourselves

*We are more than human doings;
we are human beings.*

Even in the midst of "juggling" many "balls" and responsibilities, it is vital that we never lose sight of ourselves in the midst of serving others. When we are more attuned with own thoughts, emotions, and needs we are better equipped to connect with others.



Connected to God

*God is not only the creator,
but also the sustainer of life.*

Cultivating connection to God through prayer, worship, study, and service are life-long ventures. God desires both a personal and communal relationship with each of us. When we are connected to God the fruits of God's Spirit are evident (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control).

Connected to the body of Christ

Faith is made whole in community.

We are hard-wired for meaningful human connection. Just as Jesus formed a community of faith with the first disciples, we too are invited to live a communal life where joys and sorrows are expressed and shared.

Which of these three do you feel most connected to?

Which one has the most potential for growth?

Has God been stirring anything within you these last few weeks?



Keep reading...

3

In this last week of our journey we will be exploring one final connection that promotes human flourishing: **Our connection to the wider community and world.**

To begin, take a short inventory of all the connections you have to the community you live in or near. For example, I serve at the museum center, I coach soccer, etc.

Once finished, go around the group and share your connections.

New reader...

4

As disciples of Jesus we are called to embrace mission-oriented lives. However, it's easy for us lose sight of this greater calling from God and focus our attention and time solely around our immediate families, closest friends, and faith community. At times, it may feel as if our lives simply don't have the margin to add "one more thing". It's understandable and at various points we've ALL probably felt that way.

However, here's a word of simple, yet hard truth.

*Living for the sake of the world is not just
one more thing to add to our plates.*

*In fact, it happens to be the central thing
God calls the church into.*



What do you think it means to live a mission-oriented life?

Consider the following passages:

“This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send to you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”
Luke 24:46-49

“Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”
Matthew 9: 37-38

“Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you!
As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”
John 20:21

Continue reading...

5 The reach of the Gospel is greatly diminished when Christians spend all their time inside their congregations keeping busy with “church life”. Remember, the Gospels show us that Jesus own ministry largely occurred in the center of villages, along the sides of roads, near the fishing ports, and at the local watering well.

Jesus ministry also spanned across the whole Judean countryside, into Samaria, and the heart of Jerusalem. In fact, as Jesus sent his disciples to carry on his ministry, he reminded them that they were to go “to the ends of the earth”.



*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Acts 1:8

It's impossible to be missionally effective in a community when one is not connected to the wider community.

Questions for discussion

What do you think it means to be "connected to the wider community"?

What are ways the people of faith could become more involved or connected in their local communities?

How would you rate our congregation's connection to the community in which we are located?

New reader...

6 Remember, It's God's grace that equips us for ministry! God has given us everything we need to live with great purpose. No congregation should exist for the sake of its own self-preservation. Rather, faith communities are designed to help orient their people towards an "inside-out" lifestyle where the congregation becomes a catalyst for service and witness to those outside of it's "walls".

How has being a part of a faith community helped you live more missionally?



Has God placed a passion on your heart that might benefit the wider community or a community around the world?

One last activity

7 Over the last five weeks we've covered a lot of ground as we've journeyed together. To close out this 5-week journey, we are going to take some time to reflect individually to identify ONE THING to do differently because of your experience in this journey.

Maybe it is beginning to spend time in daily devotion, reading a bible verse or spending time in prayer to deepen your relationship with God. Maybe it is ensuring family dinner time is protected in a 'tech-free' zone. Maybe it is committing to reaching out in the world by volunteering somewhere... actually find a day and time and put it on your calendar.

Spend a few minutes reflecting on a SPECIFIC thing that you feel the Holy Spirit is calling you to do, something that is achievable and realistic, and set a goal. Be as detailed as possible to help yourself be successful. List things that will help, obstacles you may encounter, and maybe someone with whom you can share your goal for some encouragement and accountability.

Write down your reflection and when everyone is done, those who are comfortable doing so can share with the group what it is they are going to do differently beginning tomorrow.



Prayer

God, thank you for this journey experience and the people in this room. Help us in our lifelong journey to follow you wherever you might lead. Give us your spirit of hope, and clarity to see all the ways in which you are restoring the world with grace & peace. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.



CHALLENGE: Connecting with the World

Individual Challenge:

Your final challenge is this: find a way to serve the wider community in which you live, or a community around the world. Don't overthink this – you could serve at a local non-profit, clean up a park, raise funds for an international organization.

Use your time, talents, and energy to bless someone else!





CHALLENGE: FIND A GROUP or CREATE ONE!

Now that this journey has come to close, consider joining or forming a group! The journey of faith is more enjoyable and doable when you have the support of others around you who are also seeking to live & love like Jesus. That is why we encourage everyone to find a group where you can belong.

Prince of Peace currently has a wide variety of groups that meet on a regular basis. Take a look:

www.popluther.org/find-a-group

You could also consider forming a new group. Gather a few people together. Maybe it's centered on a book you are reading or a hobby you enjoy. If you need help in the process don't hesitate to reach out.

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NOTES







Prince of Peace

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