
SESSION SIX



Practicing the Word-Centered Life

THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION

THE FOOTPRINTS OF GOD

At our last meeting each of us agreed to try one of the exercises in the Social Justice Tradition. Let's share our experiences by answering the following question:

What did you learn about God and about yourself while doing the exercise?

After a few minutes of silent prayer, open with a time of sharing that the leader begins by reading this opening paragraph and answering the question posed.

JESUS AND THE WORD-CENTERED LIFE

Gospel Passage: Luke 4:16–20a; 42–44

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

When everyone has had a chance to respond, ask a member to read this Scripture passage.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. . . .

At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.

Reflection Question

How did you first become aware of the good news of the kingdom of God? Did you hear it proclaimed by a person, or did you read about it in the Bible?

After a brief discussion, choose someone to read this section.

THINKING IT THROUGH

In these two passages from Luke's Gospel we see Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. He has traveled from Judea, where he was baptized by John in the Jordan River, fasted for forty days and nights in the nearby desert, and overcame the devil's three temptations. Filled with the power of the Spirit, he goes to his home region, Galilee, and teaches in its synagogues, receiving praise from everyone.

But being praised by Galileans was not always a compliment. Residents of Galilee were considered backward by their fellow Jews, the Judeans, for several reasons: Galilee was physically cut off from Judea by Samaria, much of its population lived in small towns, and its economy centered around agriculture and cottage industries. Today we might say that Judeans considered Galileans "crude and rude" while they viewed themselves as "refined and cultured." In fact, Galilee had been isolated from mainstream Jewish life for so long that its residents had a distinct accent (Matt. 26:73).

But it is among the plain, ordinary, scorned folk of Galilee that Jesus begins his ministry. Early in his travels, he comes to Nazareth and worships in the synagogue on the Sabbath. And it is to his former neighbors that he, the living Word of God, explicitly proclaims the good news of the kingdom of God from the Scriptures, the written word of God, and points to himself as the fulfillment of the passage from Isaiah.

We must understand the shock that Jesus' hearers feel before we can fully appreciate Jesus' action. For centuries these Galileans have hoped and waited for a deliverer, a Messiah who will free them from political oppression. Every Sabbath they go to their local synagogue to sing psalms, pray for the Messiah to come, and listen to the Scriptures, depending upon their rabbi to interpret the sacred texts. They have waited and waited. Numerous self-proclaimed Messiahs have lived . . . and died. Between Sabbaths many times their hope has died when they have been confronted by cruel soldiers or greedy tax collectors, but each time it has come alive again when they listen to the promises of Scripture.

Now here is the village carpenter—this man they know as the son of Joseph and Mary, this man who grew up in Nazareth—claiming to be the

anointed one, the Messiah, and proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor." *Who does he think he is? Any fool knows that the Messiah is to come from Bethlehem! What is this kingdom of God stuff? We want our own country! And what does he think he's doing, explaining Scripture in that way?* They become enraged and try, but fail, to throw Jesus over a cliff. However, their reaction does not stop him. He continues to focus on the *euangelion*, the proclamation of "the good news of the kingdom of God" throughout Galilee and in the synagogues of Judea—and even in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism.

How does Jesus speak the good news of "release to the captives" to your life?

Reflection Question

GOD AND THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION

God uses three central ways to reveal himself to us: the written word, the living Word, and the spoken word. Most of us are familiar with the Bible, the word of God written. The first section, the Hebrew law (or Torah), includes the Ten Commandments and was written first on tablets, then on rolled scrolls of parchment that were passed from generation to generation. Later the Hebrews added the scriptural components known as the "Prophets" and the "Writings." God has used the Scriptures to communicate directly with his people for millennia. Like the early Hebrews, their descendants believe that the Scriptures are sacred and handle them with great care. They view them as God's actual words that were transcribed by ordinary human beings. Tradition tells us that when a Jewish scribe copies the books of the Scriptures, he washes his hands before he writes the word "God."

Christians call the Hebrew Scriptures the "Old Testament" and add other writings called the "New Testament" to form the Bible. (Some Christians add a third section called the "Apocrypha," which tells the history of the Israelites between the Old and New Testaments.) In the New Testament we learn about Jesus in the Gospels, the beginnings of the Church in Acts, faithful living in the Epistles, and our ultimate destiny in Revelation. Christians know the two testaments together as the written word of God and hold both in high esteem because from them we learn about God.

The living Word, Jesus Christ, is God's clearest expression of himself and statement of his purposes. John 1:1 states, "In the beginning was the Word [the Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." As the Logos, Jesus reveals to us a God who creates, who loves, who heals, who understands, who blesses. God became one of us to show himself to us and to bring us back into his family. When we look into the face of Jesus, we see God. We see eyes that radiate compassion and lips that say "God loves you." We see God, because Jesus *is* God.

It is impossible to express fully the mystery of Jesus as the living Word. In Colossians, Paul tells us that Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the

Have one member of the group read this entire section.

firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. . . . He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (1:15–16a; 17). We owe our very being and our day-to-day welfare to Jesus Christ, the living Word. Thanksgiving can be our only response.

But it is the spoken word of God, the proclamation of the gospel, that is at the core of the Word-centered life. The role of a word is to communicate. It conveys an idea or a meaning. We use words in order to have a relationship with another person; through words we connect with each other. In talking about our faith, we speak the written word (the Bible) that tells about the living Word (Jesus Christ) so that hearers can establish a relationship with God.

With spoken words we proclaim the gospel to those who have not heard: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). We are witnesses to the person of Jesus Christ, whose story resides in the Bible, and we use words to tell the good news to everyone—those who can read and those who cannot. Our task is to proclaim not our own words but God's Word to the nations.

Reflection Question

Allow each person a few moments to respond to this question.

How has the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ influenced your life? Describe its effects.

As before, have a member read this entire section.

WHAT IS THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION?

As we saw above, the Evangelical Tradition emphasizes the proclamation—the *euangelion*—of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Romans, Paul asserts, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"; but then he asks, "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (10:13–15).

By working backward, we can see the flow of the Evangelical Tradition and its practice: First, a person must be sent to those who have not heard the word of God. Second, the messenger must proclaim the word, or witness to it. Third, the listener must receive the word and believe. Fourth, the listener must ask God to restore their relationship. Again the words of Paul: "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

And what is this "good news of the kingdom of God"? God the Son entered history, bringing with him the message that the Father longs for us to return home, to respond to his love, to come close to his heart. And Jesus tells us that he is the way back into God's love, back into God's care, back into God's life. He reveals the kingdom of God to us—a kingdom that is full

of joy and love and peace. When we look at Jesus, we see not only God, but the kingdom too.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom would come, he responded, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' Or 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:20b–21, NASB). And the kingdom in our midst—the life of God—is available to everyone who hears the *euangelion* of the gospel. This is the heart of the Evangelical Tradition.

Many of us learned that evangelism alone was at the heart of the Evangelical Tradition. Does the concept that the Evangelical Tradition includes the written word, the living Word, and the proclamation of the gospel help or hinder you? Explain.

Reflection Question
Give each member a chance to respond to this question if he or she wishes.

PRACTICING THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION

When we talk about the three main aspects of the Evangelical Tradition—the Bible, Jesus Christ, and proclamation—many of us feel anxious. For a lot of people, the Bible is a very difficult book to read, much less understand. Others may not be ready to believe that Jesus Christ is the living Word, the Son of God; they may feel that they need to have more faith. Many of us are often hesitant about proclaiming the gospel, fearing that we will offend someone or sound "preachy."

These are legitimate fears. The Bible is *not* always easily read or understood. Many times belief in Jesus Christ's full identity *does* come only gradually, as we grow spiritually. And it *is* easy for our words to be rejected when we discuss the gospel of Jesus Christ with someone. But these fears should not prevent us from taking small steps so that our ability and faith gradually increase and we can take big steps. The following suggestions may help ease our fears.

A contemporary translation of the Bible is much easier to read than an older one such as the King James Version. While the King James language is beautiful, the centuries-old wording can be difficult to understand. A translation such as the New Revised Standard Version (used in these lessons) or a paraphrase-translation such as *The Message* can help people get into the practice of using the Bible regularly.

Keep in mind that we are reading the Bible with an ear to what God is saying to us, not simply studying it like a textbook. On one level we are trying to understand its message—what is it saying? what is the main point?—but at a deeper level we are interacting with words that will mold and shape our thoughts and our hearts. For this spiritual formation to take place, we should read the Bible slowly, repeating each verse several times, letting the words sink deep into our spirit.

Again, choose a member to read these paragraphs.

We ask Jesus Christ to increase our faith in him. James says that “you do not have, because you do not ask” (4:2b). Then, with the certainty that God will grant our request, we act. We read the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, books that contain a record of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection—over and over. We see Jesus as a newborn baby. We watch him heal the sick and exorcise the possessed. We observe him confounding the “religious” experts. We walk with him down the dusty roads of Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. We listen to his teachings. We weep with him at the tomb of Lazarus. And more. We get Jesus into us. And while we are getting Jesus into us, we claim the verse “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” trusting that God will increase our belief (Heb. 11:1).

When sharing the gospel, we need to remember that we are simply to tell others what God has done; it is not our job to convert anyone. If we emphasize changing those we share the gospel with, we will end up frustrated, and they, sensing our true motives, will be offended that we think they need to change. By keeping the focus on what God has done to bring humankind back into relationship with him, and on the love and joy and peace that Jesus Christ is bringing into our lives, we will make them hungry for what we have. They will want to know more about the God we are talking about. We should always keep in mind that the Holy Spirit draws, not coerces, people into the kingdom of God.

EXERCISES IN THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION

Have each member read over the exercises silently, or have members read them aloud, one at a time. Spend a few moments considering them as each person chooses the exercise he or she will do before the next meeting.

1. *Memorize a verse of Scripture.*
Select a verse unfamiliar to you from a favorite translation. You may want to pick one of these excellent verses—Galatians 2:20, Romans 5:1, John 3:16, Psalm 1:1, Ephesians 2:8—or you may want to choose some other verse. Memorizing Scripture allows God’s word to take root in your thought-life and in your inner heart. It is easier to memorize a verse one phrase at a time than all at once. Keep adding phrases and saying the verse to yourself throughout the day until you are able to repeat it from memory.
2. *Read one of the shorter books of the Bible out loud.*
The Gospels, and even Paul’s letters, were read aloud to the early Christians in their gathered communities. Read one of Paul’s shorter letters (for example, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Titus) out loud to yourself. Imagine how the Christians listening to those words for the first time felt and responded.

3. *Meditate on a verse or brief passage about Jesus Christ.*
Keep your selection simple: for example, John 1:1, John 1:14, Hebrews 1:1-2, or 1 John 1:1-3. Take twenty minutes or so to read the verse or passage slowly and carefully. Pause after each sentence and reflect on it. Ask questions: What does this sentence mean? What is God telling me about himself? about Jesus Christ? about me? about others? If a particular word or phrase stands out, spend additional time reflecting on it.
4. *Imagine yourself as one of Jesus' brothers.*
Read John 7:1-8. You have known Jesus since you were born; he is your older brother. You grew up in the same house and worked together in the carpentry shop. But he is acting crazy, going around the countryside healing people and preaching to crowds and making outlandish claims. Yet Jesus wants to keep out of the public eye. How do his actions make you feel? Do you feel ashamed? proud? angry? jealous? willing to side with his enemies? Do you share some of the same doubt Jesus' brothers did? If so, ask Jesus to help you overcome it.
5. *Look for an opportunity to tell someone about your faith.*
Prayer precedes these opportunities, so begin by praying that God will bring you into contact with someone who needs to hear about Jesus. Ask God to let you know in some way who is the right person and when is the right time. When that person asks how you are doing, or how things are going, gently begin speaking about the central place faith in Jesus Christ has in your life. Do not speak in a way that makes the person feel he or she is being judged or manipulated. Simply express what has happened to you and let that word go forth simply and honestly.
6. *Proclaim the gospel by your actions.*
St. Francis reminds us, "Always preach Christ; use words when necessary." During the next few days let your actions speak for you, but before beginning, pray for the insight to see your life as others see it. Then as you come into contact with people, pay particular attention to your actions and what they are conveying. The fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, and so on) witnesses to the power of God. When people see these qualities in your life, they will instinctively want to know what makes you "different." By the end of this exercise you should be able to pick out areas in your life that speak well of Christ and areas that need correcting.

ENDING AND BEGINNING

Allow each member time to share which of the above exercises he or she plans to do during the week. Encourage each other in this venture. After everyone has shared, join hands in a circle and pray the Lord's Prayer aloud and in unison.

Ask for a volunteer to lead the next meeting.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.