

Come and See

How the Invitation to Abide in the Gospel of John and First John Can Impact a Congregation's Understanding of Its Ministry

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ABSTRACT

How the Invitation to Abide in the Gospel of John and First John Can Impact a Congregation's Understanding of Its Ministry Come and See

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"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 15:6-7)¹

The image of the vine and its branches is a simple yet powerful one. The vine is the source of life for the branches, and while not drawing attention to itself, the purpose of the vine is extremely important. It is the source of life and growth for all that cling to it. Jesus, calling himself the vine, seeks to provide the nourishment of wisdom, knowledge, peace, and love to God's children. By accepting this intimate invitation, we can receive the nourishment we need to bear fruit, the ultimate call from God to humanity.

One might ask, what does it mean to bear fruit and how long does it take to happen? More likely than not, it happens gradually through the joys, sorrows, inspirations, and challenges of a life journey. During these times, how can people stay connected to the vine to receive nourishment and work to bear the fruit of the good news? Jesus' answer is found in John 15:7, "abide in me." Do people understand what it means to abide in Jesus? If they do understand, why don't

more people accept the invitation to abide? Do they find it overwhelming? Do they feel alone or unworthy?

In the invitation to “come and see,” offered by Jesus in the Gospel of John 1:39, two newly baptized disciples, found the invitation enticing because in Jesus, the disciples saw the evidence of the intimacy between himself and God, an intimacy born at the beginning of time. Christians need the courage to accept the invitation themselves to “come and see” by abiding with Jesus.

To answer these questions, I invited leaders in my congregation to join me in a six-part study of discernment, scripture analysis and personal reflection, to see how this group of people could grow on the vine as individuals and as a group and how they could learn to develop a compelling invitation for others to come and see.

¹ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2011). Henceforth, all biblical quotations will be taken from this translation, unless otherwise noted.

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INTRODUCTION

The Christian Church invites the Body of Christ, women and men, children, adults, senior citizens, to worship God, read scripture, participate in the rituals and traditions of the church, partake in the Holy Eucharist, and build Christian community. The goal of participating in these activities is to deepen one's spirituality and to prepare Christians to go out into the world to spread the good news of Jesus in whatever way their gifts and talents support. Christians can, through a knowledge of scripture and an intentional recognition of Jesus Christ in the totality of their lives be ready to answer the call of the Great Commission. We see this in Matthew 28 where Jesus says: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:18-20). It appears, for many individuals, embracing a deeper spiritual experience for themselves as well as sharing their faith journey with others is difficult. For congregations, the lack of a clear identity and understanding of their ministry call only complicates the process, individually and corporately. This may inhibit a congregation's ability to bear good fruit.

I believe that part of the challenge in developing congregational identity and Christian leaders is found in a lack of grounding in the study and analysis of the sacred texts of the Bible, the willingness to engage in an intentional quest to receive understanding of what Jesus calls the body of Christ to do, and the reticence to enter discernment about how to know and intentionally live out God's call. The question that this leads me to ask is, why is it so difficult for those that say they believe in God to share the importance of that belief and discern how God wants that sharing to happen?

The goal of this paper is to illustrate the development of a foundation for discerning congregational identity and call. This will be accomplished through research and exegesis on the “come and see” theme found in the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John, together with the related “seeking” and “abiding” themes. Additionally, the implementation of a project will offer participants an opportunity to enter intentional spiritual discernment about the ministry to which God is calling St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church, the congregation in Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, of which I am Rector.

The specific question that will guide my research is, **how might a communal commitment to intentional spiritual discernment equip a congregation to invite people to Come and See in ways that are effective and compelling?** In inviting people to come and see, those that participate in this research will be sharing our faith in God and engaging in a process of discernment to answer a question that has become important for our congregation: Come and See *what*, precisely? Discerning that *what* is crucial to knowing what our call to ministry is.

One of the most important challenges that a church faces is welcoming the conversation about what their identity is as a congregation as well as if and how they are known as a community of faith. It has been my experience that people would rather have a member of the clergy tell them what to believe and how to act rather than enter a personal relationship with God, through the study of scripture and discernment of possibilities for action.

One of the main things that separates clergy from the laity is the lengthy process of discernment and study that the former undertakes in the journey towards ordination. The months and years filled with study, reflection, writing, and discussion help not only

in the development of their call but also in understanding how their call can help others who are seeking to do the will of God.

The word discernment is commonly associated with those who feel called to the priesthood, but not so much with the laity. In the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer Catechism*, two questions are asked, and responses given that address ministry and leadership in the church:

Question: Who are the ministers of the Church?

Answer: The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

Question: What is the ministry of the laity?

Answer: The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to continue Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.¹

If the laity is the first on the list of ministers, why is it that many do not invest time in developing their ministry rather than simply seeking to follow a spiritual leader's path? The ministry of the laity is clearly outlined in the Book of Common Prayer, so why do people not intentionally engage in it?

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Together with the Psalter, or Psalms of David* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), p. 855.

CHAPTER 1: GROWING STRONG BRANCHES IS CHALLENGING

Often people do not have a true understanding of personal and congregational Christian identity and find the process of discernment and transformation to be a frightening prospect. An individual can realize what their spiritual gifts are through discernment focused on Christian identity and how God is calling them to use their gifts in service to their family and community. The same is true for congregational Christian community discernment as a group of committed Christians seek to learn from God what they are being called to proclaim and what actions they are called to take to spread the Good News of the Gospel. This research responds to this challenge by illustrating the benefits of an intentional study of scripture that connects the text to daily lives, while remaining open to individual discoveries and opportunities for contribution to the development of a congregation's identity and ability to craft a compelling invitation to a deeper spiritual relationship with God.

Many who read the sacred texts, do so out of obligation, or to memorize them so they can recite them at the perfect moment. Others believe that God wrote the scriptures with God's own pen, as it were, and one should never question them. Then there are those few who believe that the scriptures, although inspired by God, are an invitation to wrestle with the text for our deeper understanding. That is the place where true discernment can begin.

What is discernment and how is it different from focusing on a solution to a problem? Discernment's goal is not a solution to a problem. It is an invitation to live intentionally in the context of a question and be open to creative possibilities while exploring the facets of a question before the process of working toward a potential

solution. Discernment invites the individual to try varied approaches based upon research, thought, conversation, and creativity.

This may seem like a daunting task to some; they may feel that they do not have the understanding, tenacity, or resources needed for discernment and the process may seem overwhelming. If so, they are not alone. Moses turned away from God's call five times (Exodus 3:11, 13, 4:1, 10, 13). In Exodus 3:11, we read, "But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'" Those first words, "Who am I?" express Moses' lack of self-confidence. That is the way many feel when approaching this invitation, because they associate discernment of call to be something that only those who are exploring ordination experience.

In John 15:16 Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." This statement is full of action and speaks about ministry. Bearing fruit that will last is the result of discerning God's call and our active response based upon the authority that we have received through the scripture as co-heirs with Jesus, as Paul writes in Romans 8:17.

In preparation before inviting our local community to come and see St. Bartholomew's, we need to know what that is for ourselves. What is the focus of our ministry and how, using the gifts and talents we have are we able to actively serve and proclaim the gospel? We will begin by reflecting on what it means to be a Christian church family seeking to know the will of God. Ruth Haley Barton, in her book, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*, writes about this important process:

One of the first lessons we learn about discernment—from Jesus, anyway—is that it will always tend toward concrete expressions of love with real people

rather than theoretical conversations about theology and philosophy. The disciples' blindness to the work of God in their midst is sobering because it demonstrates that even those who are closest to Jesus and on a serious spiritual journey can still miss things—especially as we are living and breathing the same cultural influences together.²

This passage addresses the heart of the matter. People can spend years attending church together each week, praying, worshiping, offering outreach to the community and still not have an intimate knowledge of the spiritual life of their church family, and even more disturbing, not having a relationship with Jesus that guides them to what their call, personally and as a congregation, is.

Consider the etymology of the word *discernment*. “The verb *discern*, derives from the Latin term *discernere*, meaning ‘to separate’ or ‘to divide,’ from *dis*, meaning ‘apart,’ and *cernere*, ‘to separate.’ The suffix *-ment* indicates a process or action: the process of discerning.”³ Discernment requires commitment to the process, time to be present in the work, and courage. Discernment requires trust in God and trust in ourselves. We must be willing to make mistakes as well as mid-course corrections. We need to be courageous, intentional, and determined in our journey of discernment, to be ready to hear and act upon what God is calling us to do. In his article “Transformative Spirituality and Missional Leadership,” Cornelius Niemandt writes: “Discernment is the first, and most decisive, step on this missional journey. It is a core practice of Christian leadership and spirituality. It is the art of reading and times and signs—opening yourself up to the context

² Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books/Formation, 2012), p. 23.

³ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/discernment>

and to God's involvement in the context... The skill of discerning is the door to transformation."⁴

Part of the work of discernment includes discerning how to use the biblical text as a basis for action. It has been my experience that people separate the scripture from their deeds instead of learning how to incorporate it. When scripture and action connect, a deeper experience of intimacy with God can occur. The scriptures do not call us to blindly believe, but they do encourage us to engage by questioning and challenging to obtain a deeper understanding of the context in which they are written and how they affect our lives in the present. Once we have that deeper foundation, we will not easily be discouraged when we face challenges. We find an example of this in John's Gospel in the calling of Nathaniel. Philip was excited about finding Jesus and rushed to share the news with Nathaniel. Instead of sharing in Philip's excitement, Nathaniel showed his skepticism. He replied, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (1:46). Philip, who remembered what Jesus had told him, replied "Come and See." He was confident in his identity as a follower of Jesus, and he was able to respond boldly to Nathaniel's dismissive reply.

Responding boldly is a result of dedicated time spent in reflection and discernment. The concept of discernment appears more than sixty times in scripture. In 1 Kings 3:9 we read, "So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong." In Hosea 14:9 the author writes, "Who is wise? Let them realize these things. Who is discerning? Let them understand." In Philippians 1:9-10 Paul writes, "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more

⁴ Cornelius Johannes Petrus Niemandt, "Transformative Spirituality and Missional Leadership," *Mission Studies* 33 (2016): 90.

and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” These are only some of the examples in scripture. It is obvious that discernment is important in our spiritual life.

Theologian Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, spoke about discernment leading to bold action in his *Spiritual Exercises*: “We seek to love as God loves—and, since love is expressed in action (*Exx* 230), this means we seek to act as God acts, responding according to the grace we receive.”⁵ David Coghlan, in his article, “Seeking God in All Things: Ignatian Spirituality as Action Research,” highlights the very important combination of prayer and activity in Ignatian spirituality. The combination occurs because of intentional discernment:

People typically present action and reflection as occurring in a cycle: one moves from planning to the action itself, to evaluation and then to planning something new. We learn from our reflection on experience. Knowledge and action are organically connected: knowledge is generated through reflection in and on action.⁶

Our response to God will be richer and more meaningful because of our commitment to the discernment process.

To begin to answer the question of what there is to come and see, I will dig deeper into two actions found in both the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John: “seeking” and “abiding.” Seeking Jesus is one of the most personal interactions a person can experience. The concept, in its theological sense, appears three times in John’s Gospel, in 18:4, 18:7, and 20:15. Jesus asks a specific question involving seeking: “Who do you seek?”/“Who is it you are looking for?” (*tina zēteite*). From the beginning of John’s

⁵ David Coghlan, “Seeking God in All Things: Ignatian Spirituality as Action Research,” *The Way* 43.1 (2004): 97-108. Accessed November 27, 2021: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx>, p.1.

⁶ Coghlan, “Seeking God in All Things”: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx>, p.1.

Gospel, through his passion and resurrection John challenges the reader to look within themselves and come to a clear understanding of what they need to be able to embrace God. This is key to the personal relationship needed with God to understand and respond to God's call. Abiding is also a theme that is carried throughout John's Gospel, as we shall see. Already in John 1:18 we read, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." Jesus later describes his relationship with his Father as "abiding" in his Father's love (15:10). The Son abides with the Father and the disciples will learn about abiding with God through their relationship with Jesus. It is in this time of abiding that learning takes place, questions are asked, observations made, and relationships formed.

An understanding of identity, achieved through seeking and abiding, is important in the life of a congregation. It is through this process that the ability to effectively witness and confidently invite others to "Come and See" becomes enticing. An example of the benefits of the confidence gained by knowing one's identity and purpose can be found in John 1:7 where it is written about John the Baptist, "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe." "And at the other end of the Gospel we read concerning the Beloved Disciple, "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe" (19:35).

That is one of the goals of Christianity, witnessing in order that those that hear will believe. The decisions that a congregation makes are rooted in their concept of who they are and what they believe that God is calling them to. The exploration of church identity begins with an examination of how congregation members perceive the nature and mission of their church and their own discernment journey. This understanding

contains characteristics that distinguish the church from other institutions within the local community.

CHAPTER 2:THE STORY OF MY BRANCH ON THE VINE

As I look back on my life, I realize that my search for discernment has been a life-long process. I am an only child and grew up in Northern New Jersey. My parents were both Roman Catholic, but my mother was more dedicated to the life of the church than my father. It was my mother who made sure that we did not eat meat on Fridays during lent, that we went to confession regularly, and prayed the rosary. I have three basic memories of church during my childhood, and they were: ritual practices, singing during Sunday Mass, and fearing the nuns in CCD (Sunday school on Tuesday afternoons). I loved God and Jesus because I was told that was what I was supposed to do.

In the late 1970's my aunt had an unexpected and difficult pregnancy. After she gave birth, she experienced what we now know is post-partum depression. What she claims brought her out of her depression was becoming a Born-Again Christian. She became a member of a Full Gospel Church and made it her mission to get everyone "saved." The family ignored her until my uncle (her husband) left the Catholic Church. That rocked the family. I did not know what to think but I absolutely admired her enthusiasm.

I became engaged to my husband Jay when I was eighteen. My husband was raised in the Congregational Faith, but his family did not attend church regularly. He had no problem being married in the Catholic Church, but the Catholic Church had a problem. All during our marriage preparation the priest kept encouraging us to wait. He would always quote divorce statistics for young couples. On the day of our last session the priest gave Jay a paper to sign stating that he would promise to raise our children in the Catholic Faith. I was furious. Having listened to my aunt for years I knew that this

rule was not in the Bible and therefore I believed that Jay should not have to sign it. The church was saying that his religion was not good enough. There was a big fight, but he eventually signed, and I swore that after the wedding I would never go back.

When I was in my late twenties, I began to feel the need to find a church. After “church shopping” Jay and I landed up, on Christmas Day 1989, at St. John’s Episcopal Church. I had never heard of the Episcopal Faith and was incredibly surprised because I realized that it was so close to my memories of the Catholic Mass of my childhood. I felt right at home.

From the moment that Jay and I went to St. John’s we were welcomed and supported as we learned about the Episcopal Faith. We attended Bible studies, newcomer’s classes, seminars and realized that there was a strong social justice ministry in which I was extremely interested. To me this was more of a participatory faith experience. Through all the worship services, activities, and other events that I took part in over the years, my faith and love for God and Jesus blossomed because I wanted it to not because I was told it had to.

For the next twenty-three years I became a dedicated student of lay ministry. What I observed was quite different than what I remember adults doing during my life in the Roman Catholic church. I joined the worship team where I was offered the opportunity to gain experience on how each part of the service, from the music, scripture, prayers, decorations in the church all contributed to teaching the message for the week and helped to create an environment where people could feel free to pray and worship God. I continued to learn as I taught Sunday School, sang in the choir, prepared the altar for worship, became a lay eucharistic minister and received hospital chaplain training.

My ministry also extended outside the church walls, serving food to those in need, reaching out into the community at different events in our town, sharing the joy that I found at St. John's. My branch grew stronger with each passing year.

In 2003 I felt the call to ordained ministry. I was accepted into the Master of Divinity program at Drew University. It was during those years of study, reflection, and conversation that I realized that the two things that I thought I wanted to do in life, being a teacher or a therapist, were realized in my ministry as a spiritual leader. My homiletics professor, Dr. Gary Simpson, often reminded us that when we were preparing a sermon, "Don't be afraid to wrestle with the text." To me that meant do not be afraid to question anything because I came to realize that in questioning, I was opening the channels of conversation between God and myself and allowing the Holy Spirit to help me receive wonderful insights that supported my continuing discernment of my desire to be ordained. My branch was getting stronger. My deepening faith and openness to sharing my journey with others helped me to realize what shape my ministry would take as the leader of a congregation. I was ordained to the priesthood in 2017 and after some time as a covering pastor in several congregations, I was called to the position of interim pastor at St. Bartholomew's in June 2018.

CHAPTER 3: ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S BRANCH ON THE VINE

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church has a long history in the town of Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey. In 1904 the "little schoolhouse", unused since 1880, became St. Bartholomew's Chapel, a mission of Christ Church, Ridgewood. A schoolteacher, Miss Hope Vinans, who lived in Ho-Ho-Kus and Mrs. Richard Hawes who had a sewing school in her home came together, along with a piano teacher and bible teacher to help the children in the community. They were concerned about the welfare of the families who were working in the mills at the end of the nineteenth century. What started with a class of five grew to a class of over fifty in three short years.

Between 1904 and 1914 St. Bartholomew's chapel offered worship services and community support to Ho-Ho-Kus under the pastoral direction of a curate (associate priest) from Christ Church. On April 19, 1914, the members of St. Bartholomew's chapel found out that, due to financial challenges at Christ Church, the curate would no longer be available to minister in Ho-Ho-Kus. In 1914 Bishop Edwin Lines gave his consent to the establishment of St. Bartholomew's Church, an exciting venture for fifty-three supportive families. "A donation of land, in 1927, on Sheridan Avenue, the present site, motivated the building of a Parish House in 1930.... In 1948 the old 'schoolhouse' was moved to the Sheridan Avenue site and became the nave and narthex, seating eighty, in a unified single unit structure. A sanctuary and chapel were added to the church and a parish house unit at the same time."⁷

Ho-Ho-Kus is in the northwest part of Bergen County, approximately twenty-five miles northwest of New York City and has a population as "of 2019 of 4,065 (100%

⁷ "St. Bartholomew's Church: Our History": <https://www.stbartshhk.com/about-us>.

urban, 0% rural). The population change since 2000: +0.1%, The median resident age: 42.3 years compared with New Jersey median age: 40.2 years, The estimated median household income in 2019: over \$200,000 (it was \$129,900 in 2000).”⁸ When reviewing the racial demographics, statistics reveal that residents of Ho-Ho-Kus are mostly white (78.7%), followed by Asian alone (12.5), Hispanic (5.2), two or more ethnicities (1.9%), and African American alone (0.3)⁹ The people who worship regularly at St. Bartholomew’s are not only from Ho-Ho-Kus but from eight to ten towns in the surrounding area.

One of the strong ministry themes in the history of St. Bartholomew’s is outreach to the community. In the 1960’s St. Bartholomew’s partnered with Northside Forces in Paterson, whose goal, according to Herb McGuin, youth development and new programs director was

the renewal of urban life in a 51-block area of blight, poverty, unemployment, and disease. The organization, Mr. McGuin said in a recent interview, has steadfastly refused “to settle for holding the hand of a dying neighborhood” instead, through a battery of imaginative, broad-scoped programs, it is wrestling with the demons of urban decay and injecting an element of hope into the lives of the approximately 10,000 residents of the northside section.¹⁰

St. Bartholomew’s member, Ridgewood Mayor, George Clark, brought the news of the work of Northside Forces to the attention of the church leadership and they

⁸ <https://www.city-data.com/city/Ho-Ho-Kus-New-Jersey.html>. The present author is also the author of St. Bartholomew’s website.

⁹ Statistics taken from <https://www.city-data.com/city/Ho-Ho-Kus-New-Jersey.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/02/archives/a-battle-to-revitalize-paterson-name-was-adopted-in-69.html>

enthusiastically helped the organization by supplying food and working in the clinic. This ministry continued through the 1970's.

In the 1980's St. Bartholomew's reached out to Eastern European refugees as part of a resettlement program in Bergen County. The congregation sponsored two families. Along with donations of food and clothing, a parish member who owned an apartment building donated two apartments for the families to live in.

St. Bartholomew's call to outreach continued through the 1990's when they became part of the Family Promise program. Family Promise provides shelter to homeless people through donations of shelter space and warm meals to those in need. For years, the congregation was part of a team of churches that opened their doors once a week for homeless people to find a place to receive home cooked dinners and breakfasts along with a place to sleep.

It was during this time that congregation members learned of the work of the House on the Hill in Goshen, New York. The connection to the plight of the migrant workers came to the congregation through member Marjorie Taylor who possessed a strong belief in the power of few people who were committed to helping those in need to make a major difference in people's lives.

The support of the migrant workers continues to the present day. We sponsor diaper and toiletry drives four times a year for their community. Since the Covid pandemic placed restrictions on our interactions with the community, we have not visited the families for the past two years. The pandemic also caused us to pause some of our outreach to OASIS-A Shelter for Women and Children in Paterson. For many years two artists in our congregation have been offering Saturday art classes to the children in the

shelter. Months before the pandemic shut down, other congregation members were joining the artists at the shelter to help teach the classes. The involvement was growing but then in March of 2020 everything came to a halt. What we were able to continue to do was collect food each month for distribution at OASIS. What was a collection the first Sunday of the month that only church members participated in, most times yielding only small donations, became a community outreach as we moved the collection to our parking lot and promoted it on social media. Not only did donations increase from congregation members, but people in Ho-Ho-Kus and surrounding towns started to join in the effort to collect as much food as possible. One of the joys of being part of that experience is receiving the many expressions of thanks for offering this monthly collection. People who were so frustrated by the isolation of the pandemic were grateful to be able to do something for someone else. St. Bartholomew's family is grateful that the connections that we made during those bleak months remained strong and people continue their donations.

These are only some of the many outreach efforts that members of St. Bartholomew's have participated in during their history. I spoke to a few of our senior members and asked them about ministry efforts in the history of the church and what impact they had on their own spiritual journeys. All the people that I spoke to were happy about the OASIS ministry as well as the support of the Goshen community, but those were very recent ministries in the life of the congregation, within the past ten years. When asked about the history, most people directed me to a small book about the history of the church from its inception to 1964. Sadly, there seemed to be no personal or spiritual connection for the people that I spoke to, just the knowledge that there had been

people with dynamic ministries in the past, like former Rector Jutsin Childes, who eventually became the Bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta; Marjorie Taylor, a lay woman with a passion for outreach ministry; and former thirty-three-year Rector, Dan Kreller, whose ministry focused on those with substance abuse challenges and the homeless. It was the leaders and not the congregation working together in ministry that the people remembered. They were not living into the answer to the question of the catechism, “who are the ministers of the church”? Instead of starting with and remembering the work of the laity, the work of the clergy and a few lay leaders were the ones who made an impact.

CHAPTER 4: NOURISHMENT FROM THE VINE

Jesus as the vine provides physical nourishment and emotional nourishment to all humanity, the branches. It is from the vine that the branches are nourished and become support for each other in growth. What does Jesus Christ, the vine, provide? Jesus provides opportunities for experiences that can inspire and challenge through the scriptures and through fellowship. It is through abiding in these experiences and sharing them with others that the heart and mind are opened to the abundance of possibilities for ministry as well as understanding of God’s call and the realization that everyone is welcome to join in this journey.

The theological foundation of this work is found in attempting to answer the question of what to come and see. I propose that to craft an effective invitation, we need to accept the invitation ourselves. This project seeks how to prove that engaging in missional hermeneutics can open the door to the abundance of possibilities. “Missional hermeneutics is a type of theological interpretation of Scripture, which is a type of interpretation in and for the life of the church. It brings together the field of biblical studies, hermeneutics, and missiology.”¹¹ Missional hermeneutics focuses on three theological assumptions: “That God, who is love, is missional and therefore has a mission, the *Missio Dei*; that Scripture bears witness to God’s mission; and that the church is called and sent to participate in that mission in God-like, or God-shaped, ways.”¹²

¹¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go : Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), p. 2

¹² Gorman, *Abide and Go*, pp. 2-3

The Gospel of John and the First Letter of John emphasize relationships between Jesus, the disciples, and the community at large. The focus on building relationships and challenges in doing so provides a framework for looking at relationships today in the community and in the church. Intentional focus on, and study of, these scriptures along with knowing spiritual gifts and approaches to effective leadership provide the foundation for seeing the needs in the world and creatively working to answer these needs and build relationships with people.

In attempting this work, questions can arise such as, what Jesus really meant when he said that the greatest commandment is for one to love God, your neighbor as yourself; what it means to be a child of God; and what does it mean when Jesus says that he came into the world to bring abundant life, to name a few. These seem to be huge lofty concepts that many cannot seem to identify with. It is the mission of the church to help in bringing to light how these and other statements that Jesus made over two thousand years ago are relevant to us today.

CHAPTER 5: GROWING THE BRANCHES ON THE VINE

The Gospel of John begins with the introduction of the Word: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (1:1). The Word becomes human flesh and abides in the world. Jesus seeks those who will believe and follow him, and he does this by offering the invitation, “Come and See” (1:39). Those who accept the invitation to travel with and learn from Jesus are to be sent into the world to teach others. The Great Commission in the Gospel of John takes a distinctive form: “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’” (20:21).¹³

The building of relationships is found in the beginning of the Gospel of John as we enter the world of John the Baptist and his disciples. The first disciple mentioned by name is Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. After Andrew heard what John had said about following Jesus, he knew he had to share what he heard. “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus” (1:41-42).

Jesus asks them, “What are you seeking/what are you looking for?” (1:38). The disciples respond by asking where Jesus is staying, and a conversation begins. They never answer Jesus’ initial question and that is something to take notice of. In the original Greek text, the word for seek is *zētéō* which means properly, “to seek by *inquiring*; to investigate to reach a *binding (terminal)* resolution; to search, ‘getting to the bottom of a matter.’”¹⁴ This is a personal, introspective understanding of the word

¹³ John uses this commission to complete the circle begun in Chapter 1. Jesus invites disciples to come and see with the goal of then sending them to go and tell, to share their witness with others. Intimacy is the key found in both Jesus’ intimacy with the Father and the believer’s intimacy with Jesus.

¹⁴ [www.https://biblehub.com/greek/2212htm](https://biblehub.com/greek/2212htm)

“seek,” versus “seek” in the sense of actively looking for a missing object. This makes the disciples’ response to Jesus’ question even more confusing. They respond as though all they want to know is where Jesus is staying, not disclosing what they were searching for with their hearts to help them find understanding and peace.

The challenge of answering that question is a challenge that faces humanity to this very day. If you do not know what you are looking for, how will you know when you have found it? Maybe by saying “come and see,” Jesus hopes that in dedicating their lives to the journey with him and believing in his teachings the disciples, while forming relationships with Jesus and each other, will be able to answer the question for themselves.

Throughout the majority of John’s Gospel, we find him trying to engage with people and ask them what they are seeking. In three examples we find different interactions, conversations, and outcomes to Jesus’ attempts to build relationships: Nicodemus who intentionally seeks Jesus, and the Samaritan woman, whose chance encounter with Jesus causes her to realize that she has been seeking something she did not know she needed, and those that were fed by loaves and fishes, so moved by the experience of being physically fed that their desire for more is ignited. Unfortunately, they do not understand what will satisfy their true hunger.

The narratives of Jesus’ encounters with both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman found in John 3 and 4 respectively present a glimpse into how gender plays a part in Jesus’ conversations. Along with social status, gender is a factor in how Jesus interacts with people and how people cautiously respond. Colleen Conway writes in her essay, “Gender Matters in John,” about these quite different encounters:

Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman both misunderstand Jesus, but they respond to him in different ways. Nicodemus soon shifts from his confident opening statement to confused questioning. The Samaritan woman begins by challenging the appropriateness of the dialogue but plunges in anyway and sustains a lengthy conversation with Jesus even after he dismisses her.¹⁵

In Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, we realize that Nicodemus seeks a deeper understanding of the Kingdom of God but knows very well that he is risking his status in the community by even his desire to have his question answered. He comes to Jesus at night where he will have the cover of darkness to hide him. Craig S. Keener notes:

Jewish teachers often studied at night, especially those who had to work during the day, thus Nicodemus may have come to receive instruction from a greater sage, namely Jesus. More likely, he comes at night to avoid being seen; night was the time for secret (sometimes antisocial) deeds and whatever one wished not to be known.¹⁶

Nicodemus does not ask a question, but by referring to Jesus as Rabbi or teacher, he is confirming the status of Jesus' identity. Jesus, suspecting what the real question is that Nicodemus wants to ask, replies: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (3:3). Nicodemus clearly misses the point of Jesus' response. He asks Jesus a question that reveals his misperception of the conversation: "How can someone be born when they are old? Surely, they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" (3:4). In this story Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to think on a higher level, to raise his consciousness from the day-to-day ritual to a place where he can know what God's plan is for humanity and in the process be transformed in his mind and spirit. Keener writes: "'Teacher from God' is inadequate,

¹⁵ Colleen Conway, "Gender Matters in John," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, eds., *A Feminist Companion to John* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), p. 84.

¹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), Vol 1, p. 536.

as is a worldly understanding of Jesus' kingship; only supernatural insight can enable one to grasp the character of Jesus' identity. Jesus insists that Nicodemus be born from God, that is, become a child of God and of Abraham."¹⁷ We cannot be sure that Nicodemus had a clear question in mind when he went to Jesus that night. He was recognized as a teacher himself and he must have had several concerns that were affecting his ability to teach. In John 3:10 Jesus even questions Nicodemus' status. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things?'" Nicodemus is one example of the many people in the scriptures who felt something was missing or had great concerns about spiritual issues but did not have enough insight to know exactly what they were seeking and along with having to protect his social status at the same time in his interaction with Jesus, he misses an opportunity to build a relationship with him.

In Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4, the reader is left wondering whether Jesus was the only thirsty person at the well that day. Jesus asks for water for he is physically thirsty but what is the woman seeking, or thirsting for? When the woman encounters Jesus at the well and he asks her to give him a drink of water, the woman responds, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (4:9). She seeks to protect herself by putting the focus on Jesus, in essence accusing him of making the mistake of talking to her. By stating their respective ethnic identities first, she is challenging Jesus to remember that he should not be talking to her.

In his article, "Jesus at the Well: Our Approach to the "Other", Brent Neely explains why this is a dangerous encounter.

In this encounter, the potential for ritual contamination is palpable as the teacher makes himself vulnerable, relating to a Samaritan female apparently on the

¹⁷ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, Vol 1, p. 537.

margins of ever her own community. By the standards of Jewish halakhah¹⁸ close or easy interaction with a female outside the family circle, let alone a ‘heretical’ outsider, was at the least a risk to reputation.¹⁹

Jesus responds, in the same way that he did with Nicodemus, by turning the focus of the discussion to a higher level: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (4:10). The Samaritan woman tries to show that she has knowledge of the promise of the one that is to come by stating, “I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us” (4:25). Then Jesus shares his identity giving her the opportunity for transformation: “I, the one speaking to you—I am he” (4:26).

“The phrase, “I am he,” in Greek translation is *ego eimi*—“(the basic Greek verb which expresses *being*, i.e., *to be*), and its counterparts, (properly) convey ‘straight forward’ *being* (*existence*, i.e., without explicit limits).”²⁰ The theological significance of *ego eimi* comes from the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint. In the book of Exodus (3:13-14) when Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai, and asks what his name is, God replies with the *ego eimi* response, “I am.” In John’s Gospel, *ego eimi* is carried from the Father to the Son.

The description of Jesus’ identity begins in the first chapter of John’s Gospel. We read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

¹⁸ The word *halakhah* (from the root *halakh*, “to go”) is from the legal side of Judaism (as distinct from *aggadah*, the name given to the nonlegal material, particularly that of the rabbinic literature), and embraces personal, social, national, and international relationships, and all the other practices and observances of Judaism (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/halakhah>).

¹⁹ Brent Neely, “Jesus at the Well (John 4.4-42): Our Approach to the ‘Other,’” *Theology* 121:5 (September 2018): 332–40: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X18779027>.

²⁰ <https://biblehub.com/greek/1510.htm>

God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (1:13) When the Word becomes flesh (1:14), it takes on several meanings: Jesus the man, the good shepherd, the bread of life, the vine, the way, the truth, and the life. All these representations of the divinity of Jesus, manifest in his humanity, come together as he shares his identity with the Samaritan Woman; he is inviting her to a life transforming experience as she is in the presence of the incarnation of God.

Jesus was taking a risk in even speaking with the woman (see 4:27). Jewish people did not associate with Samaritans, and to add to the issue, he was speaking with a woman. This woman, whose name is not revealed, engages in a conversation that is an illustration of the importance, for Jesus, of continuing to reach out to touch people’s hearts by holding a metaphoric mirror up to them. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, in her feminist commentary on John, argues that the Samaritan woman’s initial contact with Jesus offers insight into the power of relationships in John’s Gospel:

Her initial contact with Jesus marks one of the few occasions in this Gospel in which a dialogue between Jesus and another character does not become a monologue for Jesus alone. Jesus meets her rather tentative confession with the powerful *ego eimi* (“I am”) formula, thereby revealing his divine identity to her directly.²¹

In contrast to Nicodemus who was seeking something but was not exactly sure what, the Samaritan woman, through her discussion with Jesus, gave birth to her desire for something more, to seek and to learn more from the man who raised her to the status of

²¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures: Volume 2* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1994), p. 573.

disciple as he encouraged her to look at her life direction.²² She was open and trusting—two crucial requirements of building a relationship.

We move from one-on-one interactions to a crowd of people who come into the presence of Jesus. In the sixth chapter of John, after the five thousand are fed and Jesus leaves them, the people travel to Capernaum to seek him (6:22-24). Those that went looking for Jesus were amazed at what they had witnessed. From five loaves and two fish Jesus was able to feed over five thousand people. Those that were present may have also known about the healings that Jesus was able to offer. This man was the great provider and people wanted to stay with him so their bellies would be filled. When they finally reach Jesus, he tries to explain to them that being physically fed only lasts a little while but that the bread of life, given by God, will sustain them forever. Jesus questions the followers as to what they are really seeking when they ask him to continue to provide the bread. When he realizes that the message is not getting through, he says: “I am [*ego eimi*] the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (6:35-36).

There were those that did not understand the message and became angry. Many people that were following Jesus decided to end their journey because the focus was only on keeping food in their stomachs and possibly being healed if need be. They could not understand or were not interested in understanding the true meaning of what Jesus had to

²² In John 4:39-41 the Samaritan Woman, an outsider, is so moved by the encounter with Jesus that she shares her story with her community, and because of this many were encouraged to listen to Jesus for themselves.

offer those that were seeking the truth of his identity instead of the tangible things he could provide. Discouraged at the events Jesus reaches out to his disciples and asks, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” (6:67). Simon Peter answered him, “We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68).

The story of the misunderstanding of purpose found in chapter 6 is a good example of when those who are working in ministry do not have the focus and deep understanding of purpose and call that comes from discernment. The disciples who deserted Jesus (6:66) had not yet internalized the call. They believed in Jesus’ divinity but did not engage in their own transformation to stand with Jesus in feeding their hearts as well as their stomachs.

There are consequences that come from not understanding a person’s point of view and following what the majority professes to be the truth. In John 18:4 and 18:7, when Jesus is facing his arrest, he asks the soldiers “Who is it that you want?” This direct question, spoken with no hesitation, yielded a weak response from the lack of knowledge. The soldiers respond that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth but seem to have a problem realizing that whom they seek is standing right in front of them. Jesus, whose relationship with God is strong, is clearly aware of his identity and purpose replying with the divine *ego eimi*, “I am”/”I am he.” The soldiers respond, in effect, by saying they wanted Jesus of Nazareth in name only. In her essay, Marianne Meye Thompson reflects on Jesus’ identity: “The theological aspect of Jesus’ identity shapes the way in which John portrays Jesus in every role and deed: it is as the Word of God, as the one who was the agent of creation, that the incarnate Jesus carries out his prophetic, messianic, and

salvific vocation.”²³ Jesus, knowing that his death was also part of his purpose, attempted no escape or denial. It is only by Jesus’ authority, and by his permission that his capture takes place. Clinton E. Arnold and Edward W. Klink write on the scene:

The repeated question is almost to assist the arresting mob, giving them a chance to reinitiate their intended purpose, now under the guidance of Jesus. Jesus has never been more in control at his arrest, trial, and death are at his hand, for it is his hour not theirs, and it is according to his authority.²⁴

Jesus’ intimate knowledge and connection to his identity gave him power to orchestrate the events surrounding his arrest and eventual crucifixion. Any fear that he might have felt during this time was able to be pushed aside because Jesus was able to rely on his relationship with God, his place in the creative process, and the importance of his sacrifice to humanity. Jesus knew who he was and what his purpose was on earth. Nothing would alter his mission.

Another example is found in Mary Magdalene’s deep relationship with Jesus where she receives healing in her grief . In John 20:15, Mary also does not realize, through her tears, that Jesus is standing in front of her. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Until Jesus calls Mary by name, she is caught in her pain and grief. Different than the soldiers who seek to capture Jesus for arrest, trial and desecration of his body, Mary seeks Jesus out of love to be near him, even in death, to care for his body. All that Jesus had to do was call out to her by name and everything came rushing back to her. “She turned to him and cried out in Aramaic ‘Rabboni’

²³ Marianne Meye Thompson, “Word of God, Messiah of Israel, Savior of the World”: Learning the Identity of Jesus from the Gospel of John,” in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverley Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI 2008), pp. 166-179.

²⁴ Clinton E. Arnold and Edward W. Klink, III, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan, 2016) p. 735.

(which means teacher)” (20:16). Jesus’ identity was so strong that in only saying one word, all that he was, all that he stood for, all that he taught became clear to Mary who was grieving so deeply. The way Jesus’ life progressed, event after event laid the foundation for building his identity and living out his call, his personal discernment for his teaching and ministry was a life-long process. That is why he could challenge those he met to seek within themselves as in the case of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and those that were fed on the hillside, to attempt to recognize what it was that they really needed.

By looking at examples of seeking we learned of different reactions from the three examples reviewed. Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman found themselves in a deeper state of confusion, with both of their statuses being challenged. Nicodemus as a teacher and the Samaritan woman as one who did not seem to value her own identity, had different responses to their interactions with Jesus. The teacher, Nicodemus, whose job it was to instruct others, to share with them their history as people, and in so doing prepare them for the future, all but disappeared from the text. Although he does reappear briefly in later chapters (7:50-51; 19:39), his earlier encounter with Jesus does not have a resolution. The Samaritan woman, a social outcast, in modern terms “the other,” the one whom society expected to be silent, boldly shared her experience with others and became the catalyst for Samaritans to listen to Jesus and believe in him. Many that were fed on the hillside, who had the opportunity to experience a new definition of what it means to be fed by the “Bread of Life” began to fight amongst themselves and eventually to leave Jesus because in those moments they could not see past their own narrow view of life.

Seeking is the first half of designing the invitation to “Come and See.” As one travels through different encounters, seeking information and experiences to discern identity and purpose, they will find inspiring and challenging examples on the way. To complete the invitation for themselves, they need to reflect, meditate, share with others, and apply what has been learned in seeking to the issue at hand. We will explore that in the next section on abiding.

CHAPTER 6: SUSTAINING THE BRANCHES IN THE VINE-ABIDING

The second part of discernment that prepares us to be able to invite people to “Come and See” is found in abiding with Christ. In this context, abiding is the intentional development of a relationship with Jesus. The word in the Greek text is *menō* (μένω). In Andrew Brower Latz’s essay on abiding in John’s Gospel he writes “that μένω denotes the intimate, personal, committed, continuous, and reciprocal relationship between Christ and believers, whereby Christ (and the Father and Spirit) and believers indwell in one another” (14:23).²⁵

Jesus is quite clear from the beginning of John 15 as he invites people to “Abide in Me, and I in you” (15:4). It is an invitation that is, in its essence, reciprocal. Jesus wants to be a part of our lives as he wants us to be with, and in, the Father. He prays in John 17:21, “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be One in Us.” Abiding helps to build a solid foundation and firm belief, and from this foundation, decisions and plans for action can be developed.

Abiding has several meanings in John. In the first chapter of John the disciples simply want to know where Jesus is physically staying. When Jesus replies with “Come and See” he is inviting them into a place of deeper understanding not merely to a physical location. Abiding can be both a physical and spiritual experience at the same time. Returning to the story of the Samaritan woman we find that she leaves Jesus and returns to her community to share the story of her encounter. She must have been quite convincing because, as it states in John 4:39, “Many of the Samaritans from that town

²⁵ Andrew Brower Latz, “A Short Note toward a Theology of Abiding in John’s Gospel,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4.1 (2010): 112.

believed in him because of the woman's testimony." The people in the town found Jesus and asked him to stay in their community. The story continues with his two-day stay in the town, a physical abiding. The spiritual confirmation of the experience of abiding is found in verse forty-two when the townspeople share that they believe because they spent time with Jesus.

There is also abiding in the Word. In John 8:31, Jesus clearly states that the disciples must abide in the Word. The Word provides the instruction needed for a fruitful life in God, revealing truth that leads to freedom. In this section of John 8, it is revealed that those to whom Jesus is speaking are not students of the Word. When Jesus says that the truth will set them free, they immediately take that to mean freedom from physical imprisonment. As descendants of Abraham, they believe that they have never been slaves, but they forget the power that nations and empires such as Rome, Egypt, and Syria, to name but a few had over the Jewish community. That inability to focus on the point that Jesus was trying to make shows that they had not spent enough time, if any at all, abiding in the Word.

Abiding also means having the opportunity for intimacy. When reviewing John 1:1-4 the intimacy that is shown between God and Jesus is powerful; and from it, through the Word, comes all of creation, and because of it, darkness will never be able to overtake the light. Jesus carries the theme of intimacy to the end of life itself. In John 14:1-4 Jesus tells the disciples that he will go to his Father's house to prepare a place for each of them so that they can continue to abide for all eternity. For Jesus, abiding is not for a particular space and time, but it is an eternal intimacy with Jesus and the Father. This commitment requires, on the part of humanity, keeping the commandments, and living in a way that

honors God. In John 14:21 Jesus describes how the relationship between himself, and humanity can grow: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and show Myself to him.”

Reflecting on the intimacy of abiding between God and those that believe, Christopher David Bass writes,

It seems best to assert that there is a metaphysical union between the Father and the Son, which is categorically different from the union that any human might have with God due to the fact that the Father and the Son have eternally coexisted in the Godhead (1:1-2). On the other hand, this union should also be seen as the supreme example of the relationship that believers can have with God.²⁶

There are many places in John’s Gospel where Jesus speaks about his relationship with the Father.²⁷ The intimacy created through abiding is part of the foundation of Jesus’ identity and addresses a common fear in both intimacy and identity development, which is the fear of abandonment. In John 8:28-29 Jesus knows that God will not leave him.²⁸ Jesus says, “he who sent me is with me.” Because Jesus (as logos) has been with God since the beginning, abiding, and learning from God, he is confident of his mission.

Another example of the results of abiding in John’s Gospel are found in the story of John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin through his mother’s family (as Luke tells us). It is not as explicit as the examples of Jesus’ abiding with God but is still powerful. John 1:7 describes John in the following way: “He came as a witness to testify concerning that

²⁶ Christopher David Bass, “A Johannine Perspective of the Human Responsibility to Persevere in the Faith through the Use of *μένω* and Other Related Motifs,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 307.

²⁷ See John 1:14, 4:34, 5:19, 5:30, 8:28-29, 14:28, 17:25

²⁸ This is evidenced in John’s passion narrative where there is no cry of abandonment from the cross. Contrast the Gospel of Mark where Jesus’ agony is clearly stated in 15:34, “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” (see also Matt. 27:46).

light, so that though him all might believe.” That mission could not be effective if John the Baptist did not have an intimate abiding relationship with God. It is because of this intimate foundation that John the Baptist could expand his testimony to include his encounter with the Holy Spirit who tells him of the one coming who will not baptize with water, but with the Spirit. Latz notes: “The Spirit, who witnesses to John the Baptist that Jesus is the Messiah, does so precisely by remaining on Jesus. Indeed, the sign given to the Baptist to identify the Messiah is precisely that he is the one on who the Spirit will remain.”²⁹ The Greek verb translated as “remain” here is actually the “abide” verb, μένω.

It is through abiding that relationships can be formed and flourish as preparation for the intimate process of repentance thereby revealing the Glory of the Father and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Expanding the relationships to the Father and the Holy Spirit are part of the narrative in John’s Gospel. “John characterizes the ‘sin of the world’ as unbelief. For John, sin is ‘taken away’ when one recognizes the logos, and recognition comes only to those who believe.”³⁰ Believing comes from spending time with and abiding, in this case, with the Glory of God.

Now, we come back to where we started, on the vine. In John 15:4-7 Jesus speaks about the vine and the branches. Using the vine metaphor is completely appropriate to the agricultural communities that the text originally spoke to. The strong vine is the representation of the strength of God and those that choose to follow the Word are the good fruit of the vine. The concept of being good fruit can be found in the Hebrew

²⁹ Latz, “A Short Note toward a Theology of Abiding in John's Gospel,” p. 116.

³⁰ Alan R. Culpepper, *Anatomy of The Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 88.

Scripture. “When the Old Testament uses the image of bearing fruit, fruit usually signifies covenant faithfulness, particularly a character that displays God’s own beauty.... So, when Jesus tells his disciples to abide in him, he is telling them to be faithful members of that people for whom he is King.”³¹ Among other things, the vine illustrates the intimate connection that Jesus desired to have with his disciples as evidenced by the fact that the verb abide (*μένω*) is found ten times in John 15:4-10.

Jesus describes himself not just as the vine, but as the true vine, and in an *ego eimí* statement, what is more—“I am [ego eimí] the true vine” (15:1)—thereby indicating that the vine metaphor is designed to reveal another aspect of his divinity. In the Greek text the word for true is ἀληθινός. According to Strong’s Concordance the word is defined as follows: “*alēthinós* (‘substantially true’) refers to what is *essentially* true – connecting (visible) fact to its *underlying* reality. *Alēthinós* then emphasizes *the integrity* of what is true, down to its *inner make-up* (reality, ‘true inside and out’).”

Jesus saying that he is the vine is the last of the seven “I am” statements in John’s Gospel. These statements are Jesus’ attempt at describing his identity and what he has been called to do. As we saw earlier, scholars have found the origins of Jesus’ “I am” statements in the dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus 3:14: “God said to Moses ‘I am who I am.’”³² In Jesus’ seven descriptive references of his identity “I am,” he is connecting his identity directly to the Father’s identity and from that his mission,

³¹ C. John Collins, “Abiding in the Vine: True Branches Have No Choice but to Stay Connected to Christ,” *Christianity Today* 12 (March 2016): 49.

³² John C. Hutchinson., “The Vine in John 15 and Old Testament Imagery in the ‘I Am’ Statements,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 63–80: <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001819780&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

wisdom, strength, and actions flow. This powerful foundation is a part of the abiding since the beginning of time of the Father and the Son. The “I am” statements illustrate that Jesus is the source for spiritual nourishment that can help to transform those that abide in him from living in the restrictive human laws of the Old Testament to moving closer to God by living through the grace of Jesus.

The importance of abiding does not end with the Gospel of John. The theme is continued in the First Epistle of John. Different from the Gospel, the writer focuses on the personal interactions of Jesus with his community in helping them to seek God in a personal way and abide with him to grow in their relationship. First, the letter wants to protect the people from becoming too absorbed in the ways of the world. In the first chapter it clearly states, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them” (1:15). Other related themes in First John include being in fellowship with the Father through Jesus (1:3), experiencing true joy (1:4), avoiding sin (2:1), and the way to eternal life (5:13).

The process of abiding provides the opportunity for fellowship and the building of intimate relationships. This is difficult for many people. There are many reasons, but historically, going back to Greek and Roman times, the philosophy of life was such that having as few relationships as was needed was the ideal. By the time Jesus was preaching and teaching the seeds had already been sown and the roots were strong for this way of life. Yarbrough notes: “The message that John advances establishes a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This God is known personally and intimately cares for each of his worshipers and unites them to other community members in a bond

of love. Such doctrine was virtually unknown in the Greco-Roman religions that were indigenous to Asia Minor.”³³

Now in First John abiding provides protection from those that seek to attack the teachings of Jesus Christ: “As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him” (2:27).³⁴

Marianne Meye Thompson notes: “The author reminds his readers that what he is now telling them is in fact what the church has heard from the beginning. He warns them against those who are trying to lead them astray from that well-founded teaching which remains in you.”³⁵ The passion of Jesus and the original disciples is all but gone, those that are proclaiming the teachings of Jesus are doing so from second-hand stories. The facts may be accurate, but the passion is not firsthand. This makes the fight with those who seek to lead people away from the growing movement easier to accomplish.

This brings to light the emergence of the deeper meaning of abiding. If it only exists as an academic concept, those who wish to abide with Christ will learn about him, his teachings, and how they can model their own lives to be like his. Those are all important actions but there is much more. What helps abiding to be a transformative process is the intimacy that exists between the individual and Jesus. It is that intimacy,

³³ Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2008), 142

³⁴ Carol A. Newsom, Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Pheme Perkins, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁵ Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), p. 82

along with the wisdom and knowledge that can help a person, or a community, be ready to step out of their comfort zones and live into their call boldly.

Those who are part of the community that the author of 1 John is writing to do not seem to have invested their time abiding in the intimate sense of the word. There seems to be anxiety and confusion, fear of teachers who will lead the community in ways that were not taught by Jesus. Yarbrough reflects on this important aspect of 1 John. Referring to the author's readers, Yarbrough notes: "His readers are to abide in the one whose anointing they have received. They are to remain steadfast in the message about him that mediated salvation to them."³⁶ He then proceeds to state that effective action is predicated on this intimate relationship "They are not simply to articulate or confess but to live out the reality of abiding in him. This implies the ethical dimension of Johannine salvation that John returns to frequently in the epistle."³⁷ Yarbrough also comments that the basis for abiding in Johannine theology is the belief that "the Christ will remain forever."³⁸ Questions that become known regarding Christ's continued presence through the ages challenge us to examine how that message has been transmitted through the centuries.

Thompson writes concerning 1 John 2:27-28, "If God's blessings are sure and secure, why must believers be commanded to abide (2:27) and to continue (2:28) in the faith? Do these commands suggest that these readers can lose their status as God's children? The command admonishes them, but it does so by affirming them in their present course."³⁹ If they lose their status as God's children it would not be by the hand

³⁶Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, p. 165.

³⁷ Yarbrough, *1- John3*, p. 165.

³⁸ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, p. 165.

³⁹ Thompson, *1-3 John*, p. 85.

of God, it would be by their own hand in losing the intimate relationship that abiding can provide for them. That is why abiding is the second half of the circle. People can spend their whole lives seeking but to decide on a course of action or understand their own identity, they need to invest time in abiding as well, to review all the seeking that they have witnessed and decide how it will impact decisions that they will make.

Finally, we remember the essence of God's message, to love one another as God loves us. Those to whom 1 John was written needed to be reminded, amidst all the confusion that they were facing, that they were loved. 1 John 4:13-16 reads: "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God." When a person is abiding with God, being able to rely on the Spirit as the connection to the power and presence of God provides a great deal of comfort while discerning identity, purpose, and call.

CHAPTER 7: GOD KNOWS THE BRANCHES: DO WE?

I realized that in my study of the Gospel of John and 1 John on the come and see and abide and go themes, I was in my own process of discernment not only for this doctoral project but for the future of my congregation as well. I wanted to share the experience of intentional spiritual discernment with members of my leadership team, so I invited them to join me in a journey of learning about discernment and abiding with Jesus in the scriptures of the Gospel of John and 1 John. This group consisted of seven people, four women and three men. They ranged in age from fifty-five to eighty-five years old, having worshiped at St. Bartholomew's for an average of twenty-nine years with two participants attending for fifty years each. All the people that I invited to participate in the six ninety-minute study sessions were grateful to have been asked and they were willing to participate. Three people could not participate, however, due to work/life challenges.

In preparation for the study sessions, I requested that each person participate in a private interview with me so I could build my relationship with them as individuals before entering the group study. From the eight questions that were asked of each participant, four of them offered interesting results.

When asked what spiritual discernment meant, one person came close to a holistic definition of discernment. She said, "It is taking the time to understand scripture to gain wisdom and knowledge. Combining that with an open heart and a desire to please God, discernment gives us the time to understand and reflect before we do something."⁴⁰ One person admitted that he did not know much about discernment but was eager to learn. The responses from others centered around finding spiritual and religious tools needed to

⁴⁰ Lisa W., interview by author via Zoom, January 4, 2022.

help our church decide the ministry direction that God wants us to travel. Everyone expressed a desire to learn more about discernment.

The next question that gave way to remarkably interesting responses was what person from the Bible (either Hebrew or Christian scripture) illustrated the process of discernment. What made this an interesting question was that each person named a different person and when I reflected on all the reasons that were given for each person chosen, they illustrate the things that are part of a discernment journey. These were the responses given:

1: Jesus, because of his time with God, was able to teach in parables that challenged people to stretch their minds to understand key concepts.

2: Daniel, because of his ability to interpret dreams, which meant that he had to think deeply about what he shared with others.

3: Mary, because she believed in the vision of the angel and trusted in God.

4: Thomas, because he was not afraid to admit his doubts and admit his need to see proof.

5: Job, because during all his trials and tribulations, he kept moving forward.

6: Moses, because even though he was not sure of himself as a leader, he relied on God to show him the way.

7: Peter, because the internal conflict that he had impacted his ability to trust completely. He needed spiritual insight instead of physical proof so he could accept his call.

These responses show elements of the process of discernment which include, having vision, the ability to trust, accepting where a person is at a particular point in time,

relying on God, and having a desire to gain wisdom. The participants, for the most part, did not have in-depth responses to what spiritual discernment is, but they could see elements in the scripture stories.

A question was asked of participants about how St. Bartholomew's seeks to be open to God's call and how we work together as a faith community. I was pleasantly surprised at the responses about how the congregation is open to God's call included, participating in prayer, listening for God's response, being aware of needs in the community, encouraging people to participate in ministry activities, and not being afraid of stepping out into the community. One person highlighted the importance of knowing and living the message of Jesus found in scripture. Where we had an opportunity for growth was in being more intentional about how to develop an invitation for others to join in this process and how to be more specific about the direction for our ministry life.

When responding to how the congregation works together as a faith community almost everyone mentioned the fact that we offer our church to the AA twelve-step community that has hosted ten meetings a week there for over fifteen years. Yes, this is a wonderful thing, but there is no connection between our congregation members and the AA community. The only connection was through the prior Rector who was instrumental in opening the church for the meetings. The other responses centered around the OASIS food ministry and our community garden; both ministries have begun in the past three years.

Finally, there were two questions that when joined together revealed much about the feelings people had on the congregation's history and what the participants wanted people to Come and See at St. Bartholomew's. The first question asked participants to

reflect on what events in their history as a church family are part of the story, they would tell someone. This is where I began to learn of some of the issues that caused division in the congregation. Most everyone shared that a big part of St. Bartholomew's story included a deep prayer life and support for members in times of joy and sorrow. One of the members broke his back in a surfing accident and was paralyzed for a time. This happened in Atlantic City and even though the congregation was three hours away, people went to be with the family, did whatever was needed to help, and prayer vigils were organized to offer healing prayers. Some members attended spiritual conferences where they learned about different healing prayers and how to offer them for others. Others commented about the fact that even though church attendance numbers have declined over the years, those that are still active in worship are even more active in ministry. Another part of St. Bartholomew's story that people want to share is that spiritual nourishment is especially important and that is a major focus in our church. Worship services, including weekly eucharist, help provide that nourishment.

Participants reflected on some of the challenges that the congregation had faced in recent history. After the September 11th attacks the members were divided in their grief. A segment of the congregation believed that all those who followed Allah were at fault for the destruction and the loss of so many lives. Another issue surrounded the AA community and ministry to the homeless. The Rector allowed people to live in the church for extended periods of time and increased the number of AA meetings to include weekends. The people living in the church as well as the increase of cars on the street angered the neighbors as well as some congregation members. The neighbors went to the town to protest and that set-in motion an adversarial relationship, and, although

agreements were reached on both issues, what was left was an ostracizing of the church by the community.

Yet, with those challenges and others over the years, those that remained have become closer and more determined to be a thriving congregation. Everyone commented that there was much to Come and See at St. Bartholomew's: A place that was welcoming, where you could feel God's love in a worshipping community, where creativity is encouraged, and outreach to those in need is a part of what we are called to offer.

What I came away with was a powerful sense of a group of people thirsty to drink from the well of God's love, grateful to be asked to participate in this journey, and ready to engage in a higher level of spiritual interaction both from an intellectual and emotional viewpoint. The desire to participate in discovering God's will for our congregation provides the canvas for this creative journey.

CHAPTER 8: EXPLORING THE VINE TOGETHER

If, as Jesus says, he is the vine and we are the branches, it is not only nourishment that helps the vine to grow, but also how the branches support each other and intertwine. The branches could cut off needed exposure to light, or the ability to access nourishment. What tends to happen in the life of congregations is that the history and established practices of a congregation, either bad or good, dry, or moist and nourishing, either facilitate growth or restrict the flow of needed resources.

To introduce a new way of processing to the group that agreed to join me in this effort, I wanted to provide a path that would honor their history while learning to use it as a foundation to reflect on understanding what worked and what did not in their ministry. In honoring the work of the past as we planned for our future, I knew that one of the keys to accomplishing the goals of my project was to engage people in conversations about what people were yearning for themselves and their dreams about our church ministry in the future.

To prepare myself for this work I studied the material found in the Bowen Family Systems Theory. “Bowen came to understand that families function as ‘emotional systems’ not simply as assemblies of individuals, and the emotional system became the focus of his work with them.”⁴¹ Bowen purports that there are two distinct forces that are at work in an emotional system. “He calls these the ‘togetherness force’ and the ‘individuality force.’ They represent the pressure we experience in relationships to be ‘we’ and the pressure we experience to be ‘me.’”⁴²

⁴¹ R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic), p. 15.

⁴² Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, p. 16.

A church is a type of family. Some people grow up in one church, some move around. Some come to a church as adults and realize for them, this is their new home. We bring to our church the history that we have from our past experiences, inside and outside of church life. The more we become a part of a church family, the more we will tend to adapt our identity to match the church and/or choose to be a change agent. Ronald W. Richardson, in his book, *Creating a Healthier Church*, reflects on the relationship between individual and church family identity:

We develop our identity as church members and leaders in relation to the identity of others in the church. And the church as a whole develops a collective identity in relation to other systems—other churches and the community. The identity of individual and of the church also develops in relation to previous generation of church members.⁴³

There were two hopes that I had for each of the participants in the group. The first was to deepen their own self-awareness about their own spiritual journey and reflecting on their interpersonal relationships as members of a church family. R. Robert Creech, in his book, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry*, notes that the focus on self in this work, is one of the many responsibilities of a leader: “Women and men who carry out effective leadership will be those who work to focus on their own lives, their own thinking, their own roles and responsibilities, their own part to play, the log in their own eye, rather than on the failures of others.”⁴⁴

In using this approach, I wanted to see if the participants would gain clarity in their own spiritual lives and vision for ministry in our church. I would be looking for the health of our branches, in relationships with each other, openness to trust, willingness to

⁴³ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press), p.27.

⁴⁴ Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, p. 53.

look at things from a unique perspective, and the ability to share their thoughts with those in the group.

On January 10, the Come and See study group met for the first time. We met via Zoom due to the Covid-19 pandemic protocols in place. Most people agreed that being in a room, physically distanced with masks on all the time would not promote a comfortable learning and sharing environment. I created a Power Point presentation for each session to add creativity to the process. We began and ended each session with prayer and at about the halfway point we took a five-minute break to breathe, reflect, receive, and give thanks. We did this while listening to instrumental music.

Session One

We began with a discussion on Acts 2:1-2, “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” We had a good discussion about how one could approach scripture. We focused on what the meaning of the blowing violent wind meant to the participants. At first there was silence, but after a few moments members shared that many times they do not understand scripture and do not even know the questions that they want to ask so they remain silent, the opposite of the blowing violent wind. I assured them that all questions were Holy Spirit inspired and should be shared with the group as we were all on the journey together.

Next, we did a deep dive to obtain a better understanding of what discernment is. Drawing from the book by Suzanne Farnham, *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*, where several aspects of discernment are discussed, we focused on the following thoughts from her book:

Discernment is more a journey than a destination. We may not find answers for all our concerns, but we can be receptive to God's presence as we ponder the questions.... Discernment is central to doing God's work. To serve God we must constantly be alert to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without God, we can do nothing. "Those who abide in me and I in them," said Jesus, 'bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).⁴⁵

That formed the basis for the rest of the discussion during the first session. The discussion revealed that the destination was usually more important in their history for several reasons including the desire to serve God and to "get it right" and the pressures of the many responsibilities that people face leaving limited time to enter a journey and invest the time in reflecting.

An investment of time was exactly what was made as the group reflected on the passage from John's Gospel about the vine and the branches, so much so that it inspired me to write the beginning passage of this dissertation. We responded via mutual invitation, where the person speaking invites another to speak and the ability to pass was always an option. The first person shared what she thought were the many ways St. Bartholomew's has borne fruit over the years through prayer and outreach, but then said she knew that we could do more and different things. Another commented on how, if we are truly grounded in God, who is our nourishment, we can be strong branches.

Several questions were asked such as "how do we abide, what does the pruning of the vine mean for each of us, is it punishment or refinement, what are the signs that we can look for as to what God wants us to do, what can we do to get out of the way and let God in, what are we afraid of?" Two things were focused on as things that caused fear, the first being ignorance and the second being perfectionism. Most of the participants

⁴⁵ Suzanne G. Farnham, *Listening Hearts : Discerning Call in Community* (New York: Morehouse, 2011), pp. 6-7.

were not aware of the importance of lay ministry as stated in the catechism; in fact, they admitted that they had not read those sections of the prayer book. To me, that is something easy to fix in offering a course on getting to know our Book of Common Prayer. The other fear was more concerning. The participants admitted that they were afraid of making a mistake in leading worship or leading a ministry team or being on the Vestry (the lay governing body of the church). I would much rather see them try something new or expand something they are interested in and make a mistake that we can all learn from and correct than to sit on the sidelines not feeling that they are “qualified” to even try.

The branches were nourished that night as we began the tender work of building relationships. Just like those in the scriptures, we had our fears, we talked about our inadequacies, we realized there were things we didn't know but, in the process, we also celebrated the growth we experienced, especially in the past three years. The most important thing was that we were building trust in each other.

Session Two

Before beginning our journey into scripture study, I wanted to understand where the members of our come and see group were regarding what they wanted from this experience. I thanked them for being willing to invest their time to help me with my doctoral project, but I wanted them to be aware of how they wanted to grow in their faith and spiritual journey through these meetings.

My opening question asked them to state at least one thing that they were seeking for themselves/or our church in this study. Except for the first person's answer which was peace, all the other responses expressed desire for a deeper understanding of the scripture

and what God was calling us to do in ministry. The responses also included: knowledge, wisdom, interpretation, insight and understanding. I knew that this was a gathering of people who were hungry and ready to engage in this process.

The focus of session two was a deep dive into chapters three and four of the Gospel of John, we compared the interactions of Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman with Jesus in their encounters with him. Our conversation centered not only on the different interactions but also what the results were in relation to how both changed or didn't because of their time spent with Jesus.

In discussing the Nicodemus story, we talked about how a person's status factors into their decision to allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to trust God, and members of a faith community. Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus in the middle of the night and didn't have a direct question, just a statement about how Jesus had to have come from God because of the signs and miracles that people witnessed. Jesus did not ask Nicodemus what he was seeking or looking for but challenged him with the statement about being born again. At this point the question from the group was if fear prompted Nicodemus' strange reaction, his query about how someone could be born a second time. The fear was not just the challenge to his status with the community if his meeting with Jesus became known, but a deeper fear involving a realization of the inauthenticity of his own life. This is hinted at when Jesus says in disbelief in John 3:10, "You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?"

We discussed the different types of people that we have encountered in our Christian journey, including those that are "all-in" and desire a deep relationship with God; others who are occasional Christians connecting with a church family when they are

in crises or want to be a part of celebration; and those that keep themselves at arm's length, making a yearly financial contribution and worshiping only at Christmas and Easter. One of the questions was, how does a church reach out to each of these types of people while not compromising on their identity and mission?

Another issue that came up was the fact that people have different feelings about what Jesus thinks of them. We went back to the text and reflected on what Jesus might have thought about Nicodemus. The overwhelming response from the group was that even though Jesus might have been frustrated with Nicodemus, he still loved him and wanted him to have an epiphany that would help him to break free of his mental and emotional captivity. It is in this conversation that one of the most powerful pieces of scripture is found, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus' words were a powerful seed that was planted; and in Nicodemus's case the seed took some time to grow. Even as Nicodemus seems to disappear into the night after his conversation with Jesus, we later see in 7:50-51 how Nicodemus courageously defends Jesus when he is attacked by fellow Pharisees. Then in 19:39-42, Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, claims Jesus' body as he is taken from the cross and prepares a proper burial for him, complete with an anointing with expensive ointments provided by Nicodemus. There are Nicodemus's that pass through every congregation each Sunday morning and then seem to vanish into the night. We are called to plant the seed and trust God to help cultivate it for each person.

After a five-minute break, which was planned for each session, and in which participants relaxed while instrumental music was played, we continued by shifting our

focus to the story of the Samaritan Woman. In this story, it is Jesus whose status can be negatively affected by his conversation with the woman. We reflected on Brent Neely's article, "Jesus at the Well: Our Approach to the 'Other,'" and his explanation of why this was a dangerous encounter: "In this encounter, the potential for ritual contamination is palpable as the teacher makes himself vulnerable, relating to a Samaritan female apparently on the margins of even her own community."⁴⁶

We discussed who are "the other" in our community and the fact that it is a difficult thing to determine based upon the demographics of Ho-Ho-Kus and the towns that surround our church. With that being said, we realized that we could not allow ourselves to think that everyone in the town was wealthy and that there were no people suffering and also have the added burden of not wanting to show themselves as people in need in an otherwise affluent community. We also talked about the fact that our "community" is expanding beyond our geographic boundaries. Our ministry with OASIS-A shelter for Women and Children, located in Paterson, NJ is expanding our understanding of what it means to be a church family. What started as a ministry of two women wanting to offer art classes to children has become a monthly ministry to provide food and other resources to the shelter clients. After more pandemic restrictions are lifted, members of our church family want to help with the art classes as well as other aspects of life at OASIS.

Returning to the scripture, the next part of our discussion focused on the results of the interactions of Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman. As stated before, it took Nicodemus some time before he became courageous enough to publicly speak and act on

⁴⁶ Brent Neely, "Jesus at the Well (John 4.4-42): Our Approach to the 'Other,'" *Theology* 121:5 (September 2018): 332–40: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X18779027>.

Jesus' behalf, and through the century's recognition of Nicodemus's growth as a bold witness to Jesus grew so much that he came to be venerated as a saint in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, which is an honor. In contrast, it did not take the Samaritan Woman a long time to share the story of her encounter with Jesus. The woman was astounded at the fact that Jesus would talk to her at all and on top of that, how much Jesus knew about her. Even with Jesus calling out the woman for having had so many husbands, which was embarrassing, he did not dismiss her, in fact he continued the conversation with her and in the end revealed that he was the Messiah.

It was because she was able to accept Jesus' teachings that she was moved by them, and her life was forever changed. It was this woman, one of "the others," whose testimony helped many Samaritans believe in Jesus which is in direct contrast to what could have been a powerful testimony from an established teacher, Nicodemus, but his attachment to his status kept him largely silent.

We then spoke about different groups of people in our church family and experiences that took place that were deeply spiritual to some and, at the same time, separated others. During the thirty-three years that the prior Rector had served in the church, he offered the opportunity for charismatic worship experiences such as soaking prayer and evangelical conferences where Holy Spirit encounters happened. In a way this was like the Samaritan Woman's powerful experience with Jesus. In these encounters that church members participated in, they were not called out on aspects of their lives, but they experienced a higher degree of spiritual intensity than members of the congregation who had not participated in them. There was, and still is, a powerful spiritual connection

for these people, but what about those who, for whatever reason did not want to be a part of these opportunities? We prayed for the spiritual unity of our congregation.

As this session ended, I asked the participants what God was saying to them at that point. The answers revealed a growing trust and relationship in the process and in relating to God. Answers included, “The Lord knows all about me;” “I have peace in heart and mind”; “We are all one in God”; “Rest in God”; “Be strong because of God”; “Keep an open mind.”

Session 3

The focus of session three was to move from the big picture stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman to other stories in the Gospel of John that look at specific situations in Jesus’ interactions with people where he tries to build relationships. I began this session with a graphic of a small boat on the shore with no one in it and only one oar. The caption was, *Love God, Abide in Him*. I asked what the significance of the boat with only one oar was to the group. The theme of the responses was that even with only one oar Jesus would be in the boat and provide the other oar to help us in our journey. The word safe or safety was used several times. The other theme was inviting. The invitation was welcoming because those who saw it as an invitation could come as they were, and the oar would be provided for them. The discussion moved to what it meant to each person to accept the invitation to come to be with Jesus. It was during this time the group reach out to support and uplift each other in their responses. The first person to respond talked about how she was a person who felt immediate action was the best course in any situation. She admitted how it was hard for her to connect to the emotional side of accepting the invitation. The next person related the acceptance of the invitation, to come

as a call to prayer with the hope of God answering the prayers. The invitation to come for some was an invitation to live more into their creative gifts. One of the women related the invitation to come as an invitation to be guided by a best girl friend to different forms of creating. Another woman saw the invitation to come as a “cheer,” a way to say, yes, you can do this. She shared her story of being invited to be a part of a worship ministry team. She didn’t think she had the skills needed to be a leader in worship. It was the voice of the pastor at the time who told her that she had everything she needed that helped her to accept that invitation.

One of the men connected the invitation to come by abiding with Jesus. It made him think of the song, “Getting to Know You,” from *The King and I*. He enjoyed his private time with God but admitted that it was a struggle to commit each day to spending dedicated time with God. He wondered what Jesus was thinking of how the man spent his time each day.

Finally, one person did admit that there were times that she felt blocked, and the world seemed too overwhelming to experience God. In the feeling of being blocked it was extremely hard to accept an invitation to come. She said that sometimes she had to intentionally step away for a while to return with a fresh eye and to see if there was a sign for her, to help her accept the invitation.

The session continued with a review of John 2, the wedding at Cana, and Jesus, in John 6, feeding the five thousand. In the wedding at Cana story, we thought about why Jesus invited the disciples to this wedding and what was important about Jesus changing water into wine. People agreed that Jesus’ first miracle and his mother’s encouraging him to begin his ministry was important but what, in terms of building relationships, was also

important was that Jesus shared the experience with his disciples and afterwards they all went to a place to be together and to reflect. They were fed together, Jesus in beholding the first miracle of his ministry and the disciples in being firsthand witnesses to the event.

In the feeding of the five thousand, the miracle of providing, in this case, food for so many, seemed to have a different result than the gratitude of those at the wedding. The people who were fed did not seem to be grateful but as we read, “So they asked him, ‘What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?’” (6:30). We agreed that it was more likely that those that attended the wedding were more likely to have had a transformative experience than those who were fed on the hillside. If they were transformed, they would not likely have asked for additional signs.

In the Holy Eucharist worship service, Rite II, Version C the priest says the following during the consecration of the bread and wine,

Lord God of our Fathers: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.⁴⁷

In this paragraph, said right before The Lord’s Prayer, we are reminded of our spiritual history, invited to intentionally look for God’s presence in the world and to live with purpose and conviction and, while being blessed, we pray for courage and that what we share together will join and strengthen us for service in the world.

⁴⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Together with the Psalter, or Psalms of David* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), p. 372

With that in mind, the next question that I asked the group was what hunger of theirs was fed through receiving the Eucharist, the bread of life? The conversation that followed was a passionate one where it seemed that the group was praying as they were sharing their responses. Their hunger consisted of love, safety, companionship, courage, confidence, a deeper understanding of God and what God needs from us to grow the Kingdom on earth. One of the beautiful things is that as each person spoke and shared their individual hunger, they also connected it to a story in their life. One man shared about coming to the altar to find strength as he was grieving the loss of his wife from cancer and facing the world alone raising two young children. A woman shared how sharing communion with others gave her encouragement to live life not just go through the motions. Another woman, who was born and spent many years of her childhood in Palestine, shared how challenging it could be at times for her to declare her Christian faith while many people thought that she was Muslim. She desired a Christian community to support her in her spiritual journey and found the times receiving the Eucharist a confirmation of her faith and the joy of love that she felt.

As the priest, I always look into the eyes of those to whom I am giving the bread and wine, and many times, I see hope, joy, and love. There are those who never look at me, always coming to the altar with their head bowed. I am not sure if that is a sign of reverence or uncertainty. I wonder if some people come to the altar because that is what they have been taught to do since childhood, not thinking too much about what is taking place as the host moves from my hand to theirs or if they hope that somehow, they will find a deeper faith through the experience, that somehow God will reach them in a way that they are desperate for.

We also talked about personal spiritual transformation. The participants were asked whether they felt that they had experienced a transformation in their lives and whether it was a lifetime or one-time event. Everyone agreed that transformation was a lifetime process. The overwhelming response was that service was a transformative process, that in helping others, they learned a lot about themselves. For some, the struggles of life offered more opportunities for transformation than the easier times. One of the participants remarked that it was through relationships, walking the road with someone else, and sharing the journey that they learned more about themselves and their own relationship with God.

The last scriptures that we reviewed in session three were John 18:4 and 18:7 where Jesus was arrested. We talked about Maryanne Meye Thompson's work and the concept of authority grounded in identity. Thompson writes, "Jesus was able to rely on his relationship with God, his place in the creative process, and the importance of his sacrifice to humanity. Jesus knew who he was and what his purpose was on earth. Nothing would alter his mission."⁴⁸

I asked the participants if they believed that knowledge of what God was calling us to offer in ministry and a deeper knowledge of our identity as Christians would give us authority in our mission. I received a lot of push backs on the word authority. I rephrased the question several times illustrating the point that it was Jesus' strong identity with God that gave him the authority to allow his arrest. The key word was "allow." It was his authority developed in his presence in the Trinity that kept him in control of the situation, surrendering his life, not having it taken from him, as painful as it was.

⁴⁸ Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL Intervarsity Press, 1992), p. 82

The group could not connect to the word authority; they offered other words such as confidence and assurance. They believed that a deeper relationship with God would give them confidence to carry out ministry but not authority to do so. I believe that this is something we need to investigate further as a church family because there will be times, as there have been in the past for this congregation, that they might face challenges in the work they are called to.

The session ended with another attempt at the question of what we thought we could discern about the future of the mission and ministry at St. Bartholomew's. This time a few people offered suggestions—not everyone, but more than the zero responses that I received at the end of the first session. This time there were four responses. The first was learning what it means to intentionally bear witness to our faith. The next was how to connect mission and vision. The third was what else does Christian identity mean besides the knowledge that one believes in Jesus Christ and his teachings. The last response was about how to get people to come to church, not simply to fill up the seats but to help people understand that our church family is an extended family of care and support letting people know that individuals can offer God's love today.

Session 4

In the fourth session we moved from the Gospel of John to 1 John with the focus on abiding. I also introduced another method of discernment into our group sessions. I realized that the work we had been doing was intellectual work, reviewing scripture and scholarly writings. Discernment can be more effective if diverse ways are used to look at a question. Additional ways for use in discernment include reflecting on artwork, music,

being in nature, etc. In this session I offered visuals for use in our reflections and discussions.

Anne-Marie Bos, in her essay, “Discernment in Kings 19:1-18: Biblical Spirituality in Works of Art,” looks at using art in discernment for transformative processes:

Actively entering into a relation with a work of visual art involves not only providing meaning to the work, but also the reverse: what does the work say to me? Are you the one that is looking at the work of art or can you also see how the work is looking at you? How does the work of art give shape to you? Perceiving implies a transformation of the percipient. It is an encounter with a work of art, in which the percipient is immediately touched. A key aspect is “being involved.”⁴⁹

My goal was to build on the trust that was being formed and the passion which the participants were expressing for the work. Focusing our discussion on visuals along with the text could add a new dimension to this study as we were entering a deeper discussion on abiding.

Our first scripture for the evening was 1 John 2:2, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the entire world.” I asked the group what the 1 John 2:2 verse meant to them. In the prior sessions, the first question was what I would call an “ice-breaker,” something that was open to whomever wanted to answer. Usually, three to four people would answer the first question. This time, they all answered. The picture was of a cross with a sunrise in the background and four ropes coming down from it, almost like the ropes were helping the cross not to fall over.

The theme of the responses was that of being overwhelmed at the sacrifice Jesus made for us. John 3:16 was repeated several times with people focusing on the part where

⁴⁹ Anne-Marie Bos, “Discernment in 1 Kings 19:1-18: Biblical Spirituality in Works of Art,” *Acta Theologica* 32(2S) (2013):59: <<https://eds-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.drew.edu/eds>>.

it says that God gave his only begotten son. When people attempted to equate the word “gave” to the picture of the cross with the ropes metaphorically tying Jesus to the cruelty of the world, the participants just could not believe how Jesus went through the process of humiliation, suffering, and crucifixion and how he sustained his own faith through his pain. I brought this part to a close by bringing us back to the end of the last session where we talked about the importance of Jesus knowing his identity with God and in God. That is what gave him the power to sustain the physical and emotional pain that he was in.

Moving into the abiding discussion, we looked at a picture of Jesus holding a man in his arms with the words “Abide With Me” in the picture. We talked about how the words could be spoken by both Jesus and the man, Jesus wanting the man to draw close and share time with him and the man wanting to know that Jesus would really be there with him. The conversation continued to a discussion on how trust is learned by abiding. The words, written so often in the scriptures, “Be Not Afraid,” could be experienced by abiding with Jesus. Abiding with Jesus could teach people to have an easier time letting go of worries and challenges and give themselves to God.⁵⁰

We contrasted this picture with another picture of a dark blue sky with clouds and the words “Abide In Me.” The next question focused on what the difference was between abiding with and abiding in. The theme that surfaced was the difference between Jesus asking a person to abide, or a person having the confidence to say that when facing a situation, that person will decide to spend the time with Jesus in discernment (abiding) to find the knowledge that they seek. Other responses included, relinquishing my plan to his; Jesus knowing the human experience and the universal truth; and through abiding

⁵⁰ See Matthew 11:29-30: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

being able to receive a deeper understanding, as well as intentionality—as one person said, being in it 100%. One of the descriptions of discernment the group agreed upon was that the words discernment and intentionality were intimately linked together.

The next visual was a picture of a beach scene and the words, “In life and in death O Lord abide with me.” In 1 John, the continuing of the story of the Gospel of John is found in the next generation of people who came after the death of Jesus. The passion of Jesus and some of the original disciples are all but gone; those that are proclaiming the teachings of Jesus are doing so from second-hand stories. The facts may be accurate, but the passion is not firsthand. This makes the fight with those who seek to lead people away from the growing movement easier to accomplish. We reflected on 1 John 2:27: “As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.”

We talked about the strains of life that prevent people from dedicating time to study, discussion, and discernment. The responses included, bad things that happen to people; stupid stuff that takes a lot of mental and emotional energy leaving people tired; focusing on my faults; being caught up in the news of the world that is usually depressing; as well as sometimes when things are going too smoothly, feeling that a person might not need to spend as much time with God.

In 1 John 5, we read the exhortation to Christians to live by faith because through our faith in Christ we overcome the wickedness of the world. In addition, we read one of the most powerful and assuring statements concerning the work of Jesus on the cross:

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13).

We ended the discussion by looking at the article, “Come and See” by Patrick J. Wilson, and comparing it with 1 John 5:13. The article begins by highlighting how to move forward; sometimes things must be left behind. John the Baptist’s disciples leave him to follow Jesus. Wilson writes, “Come and See beckons us to an alternative world, a place we have never been. It is a disturbing invitation.”⁵¹ Wilson continues by challenging the reader to think about the question Jesus asks, “What are you looking for?” Many times, Wilson comments, people are so caught up in managing their lives, calendars, lists, spreadsheets and all the other commitments of their lives that they don’t have time to consider abiding with Jesus. I asked the group what they thought they needed to give up, or put aside, either themselves or our congregation, to move forward with Jesus. Most of the responses were expected ones, falling into the category of slowing down the pace of life so people could spend more time with God.

An interesting comment came up when one person said that the congregation needed to move on from elements of its history. This person said, “In the past there were definitely a lot more people in the church on a Sunday morning but not as much compassion for each other as there is now.” The others were quite passionate about the fact that their history, no matter what it might have been, has brought us to the place that we are at in the present moment and should not be discarded. Another person said, “History is a gift.” Another person said that what should be left behind is any bitterness. No one mentioned a specific part or parts of the congregation’s history that could be

⁵¹ Patrick J. Wilson, “Come and See,” *Christian Century* 110:37 (1993): 1297: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fth&AN=9403294479&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

forgotten, but the discussion was passionate on both sides. This conversation happened in the last minutes of our agreed upon time for the session, so I suggested that a good next step in a specific discernment study would be to reflect on what elements of our history could be carried into our future exploration of identity and our call to mission.

I believed that the homework that I would give the group for the next session would help us look at this question from another perspective. I also believed that having the visuals as part of our reflection time helped the participants go to a deeper place of awareness on the exploration of discernment.

Author Madeleine L'Engle in her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, talks about how creativity opens the mind to new ways of looking at life and situations, which is an art needed in the process of discernment. She writes:

In the act of creativity, the artist lets go the self-control which he normally clings to and is open to riding the wind. Something almost always happens to startle us during the act of creating, but not unless we let go our adult intellectual control and become as open as little children.”⁵²

It was with that connection to creativity in mind that I gave the group a homework assignment for the next session. The assignment was to produce a word or phrase that they thought represented St. Bartholomew's identity as a church community. Then the second part was to bring to the next meeting a visual representation of their thoughts of our identity. I got a lot of smiles, nervous ones I think....

⁵² Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (Wheaton: The Crown Publishing Group, 2016), p. 75.

Session 5

I began session five with a visual that I found on Facebook. It listed sixteen verses from scripture that had “Love One Another.” Out of the sixteen, eleven were from the Gospel of John and 1 and 2 John. I thought this would be an interesting start, to look at the differences in the applications of these verses in the different contexts.

This session took place about two weeks after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine. Looking back, I believe that myself and my congregation were in shock, because we didn’t say anything at all about the invasion in those initial days. When the group saw the list of “Love one Another” scriptures, one of the participants said, “Does God love Putin?” Then there was silence. Another person spoke about how overwhelming this question was and how God must be in so much pain watching his children fight one another. We talked about what it means to genuinely love your enemy and if that is possible to do. The next person spoke about the trauma that not only the Ukrainian people were experiencing, but the trauma felt by the world watching it all on television. This was additional trauma on the heels of over two years of fear and anxiety from the Covid-19 pandemic. There was another period of silence. The final comment was asking that we remember to pray for the people of Russia. I knew that I needed to take a break at this point before going into the visual representation assignment. We listened to our reflection music and prayed.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the preparation that went into the choices of the visual representations presented in session five. The group did their homework well! I began with offering a wooden cross that was handmade for me by a dear friend’s father. It represented, for me, the creativity and love that I know are part of St. Bartholomew’s

identity. Other items offered were a book called *Three Minute Devotions for Men* with a cross from this man's wife who had died two years before. He believed that part of our identity was compassion. The next person offered a picture of a verse from Proverbs, which said "Trust in the Lord with all your heart." It was given to him as his wife was dying and it represented all the prayers from the church community. The power of prayer in the church family helped him get through his pain. Another presentation focused on the power of love and appreciation for service. The gift was a tiffany cross given to one of the women by the Vestry for her dedication to service. Thinking about the power of the eucharist, one of the men brought a wine bottle. The fact that each week St. Bartholomew's offers the eucharist helped him to be grounded in his faith journey. Coming from a non-liturgical background, he was looking forward to the time when wine would be served as part of the eucharist. The next participant showed us an English horn which was in her family for a long time. She explained that for her, St. Bartholomew's boldly proclaimed their faith and commitment to outreach.

We moved into the next section which focused on Jesus' model of leadership.

Author Gene Wilkes in his book *Jesus on Leadership* writes:

Churches, organizations, and the communities they serve, need leaders who know how God has made and gifted them for service and who willingly serve Christ and those placed in their care.... Mission (and the vision of that mission) is the connection between service and leadership.... Servant and leader stand together as a model for those entrusted with the well-being of a group. Leaders who follow the example and teaching of Jesus will lead first as servants.⁵³

⁵³ C. Gene Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership: Timeless Wisdom on Servant Leadership* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011), pp. 14 and 18.

I asked the group what they were passionate about and what spiritual gifts they thought they brought to ministry. I shared with them that part of getting the most out of discernment was knowing about themselves so they could connect their desires and gifts to the work of ministry. All those in the group had participated in a study of spiritual gifts that I offered in 2019. I reminded them of the work that we did and asked them what gifts they believed that they had. The responses included: leadership, faith, exhortation, service, visual arts, compassion, teaching. The gifts they suggested aligned with their passions .

Our discussion moved to Jesus as a servant leader. We talked about what the characteristics of servant leadership are. The first thing we discussed was the ability to know your identity and mission and to live it with passion. Once a person is confident in these things, they can lead while they serve. The servant leader leads by example. They inspire and challenge people to grow in their ministry. The servant leader allows others to shine in their ideas and execution of them while keeping the big picture moving in the direction of mission and vision.

The theme of the session was solidified in the responses to the final question of what God was saying to them at the end of the night. The responses were: “Do not be afraid”; “Do not be disappointed”; “I love you”; “God is in control”; “Live compassionately”; and “Put your hand in my hand so we can walk together.” These are the responses of servant leaders.

Session 6

“Leadership is worth the risk because the goals extend beyond material gain or personal advancement. By making the lives of people around you better, leadership

provides meaning in life. It creates purpose. We believe that every human being has something unique to offer.... [T]he gift might be your knowledge, experience, values, presence, your heart, or wisdom. Perhaps it's simply your basic curiosity and your willingness to raise unsettling questions.⁵⁴

I believe that this quote from the book, *Leadership on the Line, Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change*, accurately captures the essence of how I wanted to bring our final group session to a close. Each one of the participants is a leader in their own way, and with their gifts they each offer a glimpse of beauty and power of the Kingdom of God on earth. The focus of this last session was to reinforce that for each of them and help them to understand that the work they committed to for my project was not only for their care for me as their pastor but also for developing themselves to further challenge and explore where God is calling St. Bartholomew's to in ministry.

The goal of this session was to get the participants to a place where they would be willing to commit to a discernment project for our church. They did not necessarily have to participate in it, if the time was not right for them, but to decide what God could be calling us to discern.

The first question in this path was based upon a picture of a man with his back to us walking towards a cross. The man had a puzzle piece in his back and in the center of the cross was the missing piece that would make him whole. The group was unanimous in their take on the picture. The cross with the missing puzzle piece was inviting the man

⁵⁴ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Brighton, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), p. 3.

to come and see so he could be made whole. Jesus is the missing piece of the puzzle. We talked about how many people had no idea how to fill the hole in their lives. Part of our mission at St. Bartholomew's was to help people know that the love of God is for all humanity.

Our discussion moved to the article, "Seeking and Finding: Incarnational Ministry in John's Gospel."⁵⁵ In the article, the author, D'Esta Love, reflects on how Jesus became part of the places he visited. He did not want to just pass-through town. I asked the group what neighborhoods could God be calling us to be a part of? Working from inside out, the group thought that our neighborhood was much more than the town of Ho-Ho-Kus, but there was also work to do in the town because we want to re-introduce ourselves and our ministry to the town who still might harbor some objections to our ministry to the AA community. We talked about the town next to us, Waldwick, which doesn't have an Episcopal church. We talked about other needs in Paterson and in the town where our Diocesan offices are, Newark. We also reflected on what more we could do for the Oasis community and the migrant workers in Goshen, New York whom we currently collect diapers and toiletry items for a few times a year. The overwhelming theme was that we have many neighbors that we can share the good news of Christ with.

As we neared the end of the session, I reminded them of the list of biblical characters they shared as part of our initial interviews and asked them to share what they thought made those characters historic in the scripture text. The overwhelming response was that, including Jesus, they were all people who had to struggle in their context to

⁵⁵ D'Esta Love, "Seeking and Finding: Incarnational Ministry in John's Gospel," *Leaven*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 3.

actively minister in the call they believed that they had. Then I showed them a list of their own names and asked what the difference was between the two lists. After smiles and laughs, they realized that they were also called and also struggled with the challenges of life while desiring to serve God.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION: BEARING GOOD FRUIT ON THE VINE

There were two final questions. The first was what each person learned about themselves and/or about discernment throughout the six sessions. The overwhelming response to this question focused on what people learned about themselves. There were three responses given, in one form or another, by all. First, was that they were amazed that they were able to complete the six sessions. There were things going on in some of the group members' personal lives during the three months that the sessions were taking place. I was pleased that even if someone had to miss a session, they were eager to schedule a make-up meeting. The next response was that all the members were grateful for each other and the deepening of the bond that already exists between them. Finally, the response that everyone shared is that they believed, even more now than before the group meetings began, that God is calling the congregation of St. Bartholomew's to continue service in the name of Jesus and to explore new ways to serve. The responses about serving others included: "I feel close to God when I am helping others"; "In the service of others, we learn more about ourselves"; "Start by helping your family, then your church family, then our neighbors, we can all help each other in this ministry"; "Don't ever give up, ask for help when you are struggling"; "Pray every day for God to show us how to be better servants"; "We have always been able to work together, even our former Bishop noticed that the last time he visited our church"; and "God is calling us to engage more with our neighbors and in the community. Having a group that can work together to make that happen is a blessing."⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Session Six of Come and Study Group

The final question centered on future discernment possibilities. I asked the group what they felt God was calling us to discern next. I reviewed the fact that in these six sessions, we were studying the process of discernment, with a focus on a specific topic, the come and see and abide and go themes in the Gospel of John and 1 John. What we did not do for this project was focus on a specific question. Ultimately, this is what I wanted to know: Did this experience inspire the group to accept the invitation to move forward, to learn more about discernment, more about working together, and how to bring other church members into the process? The answer was a resounding YES!

I was extremely happy to hear their responses. The next question was what did they feel that God was calling them to enter discernment about? The overwhelming response was discernment about how to increase our outreach and service to the community. I was not surprised at the response for two reasons. First, and most important, I believe, is that all through the group meetings, there was a strong connection to prayer and service. These group meetings were not the first time I realized that service was a strong call from God to this church congregation. When I first arrived as an interim pastor in 2018, I offered a study on spiritual gifts. Approximately fifty people participated in a spiritual gifts study which included taking an inventory assessment. The two main answers to the question of what people believed were their spiritual gifts were prayer and service.

The second reason I was not surprised at the response was that at our annual church business meeting, which was held at the end of January, one of the questions that came up was what did the church leadership plan to do with a significant amount of money that was in a restricted account for outreach. I needed to tip my hand at that point

because some were suggesting checks that could be written to worthy causes. I wanted to have a group that would pray and discern where God was calling us to invest our time and money. I said at that point that I would be calling a group together to discern this question. My group remembered that, and I also believe that it a factor in their choice.

Either way, the questions that I had at the beginning of my research were answered. The participants want to participate in further discernment opportunities. One other area that I suggested might be a topic for discernment was how we could develop a clearer mission and vision statement. I did this because it came up, loosely, at the end of session three when I made the same suggestion and got a few responses. I believe that having a clear mission and vision will help us as we study outreach possibilities and other ministry opportunities in the years ahead. The group agreed.

I believe that this research was a wonderful start for a core group at St. Bartholomew's. One of the regrets that I have is that there was not enough time to introduce all the topics I would have liked. I believe that ninety-minute sessions were the right time length because I did not want people to feel overwhelmed; also, I wanted them to have time to process their thoughts and feelings.

As we move forward in discerning specific questions there will be things to consider. One of the most important is having people in discernment groups that have been a part of my research and those who will be coming to it for the first time. I will create a program that is both informative for those starting out and adds additional material for those who have been a part of this experience.

I need to include a session on how to deal with anxiety in the group setting. In session six, one of the participants talked about feeling anxious about something that we

were discussing, and I assured her that there was a way to explore action and reaction feelings and responses based upon my study of the *Bowen Family Systems and Congregational Life* book.

In my opinion, the most important event that happened in this journey is that everyone in the group accepted the invitation to come, abide, and in the process see something new about the scripture texts and themselves. In the process of abiding, they were transformed. The Rev. Dr. James Lemler in his book, *Transforming Congregations*, writes on this topic of transformation:

A theology of transformation is a theology of hope. The human life and soul are transformed so that they may be joined to God and enjoy new life and hope. It recognizes the power of God at work in the world, in the church, in the local congregation, and in the human heart and soul. But transformation inevitably means change, and change is a complex experience of transition and loss as well as hope and renewal.⁵⁷

In the fast-paced daily lives that most of us have, filled with responsibilities, people to care for, children and adults alike, making the intentional investment of time dedicated to discernment is nonetheless a commitment that one must make in order to receive the wisdom that one seeks, intentional focus, study, prayer, and meditation, along with conversation. This needs to be the path forged for answers.

I began this research with several questions. The first, from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, was: Why do people not recognize the call that they have as members of the laity to be active in ministry? This evoked further questions: Do people understand what it means to abide in Jesus? If they do understand, why don't more people accept the invitation to abide? Do they find it overwhelming? Do they feel alone or unworthy?

⁵⁷ James Lemler, *Transforming Congregations* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), p. 35.

The study of the Gospel of John and 1 John gave me the theological foundation for the overarching answer to these questions. The answer is found in love and in relationships. Love builds trust. Trust offers the invitation to venture out of a person's comfort zone, to risk asking questions, to invest the time in abiding, the courage to reach out to another on the journey so they do not feel alone. As this dissertation has endeavored to illustrate, the Gospel of John gives rich and powerful examples of Jesus reaching out to his varied neighbors to build such relationships, and because of those attempts, people's lives were transformed. Each person in the Gospel's stories came to their encounter with Jesus with their own baggage as well as their gifts, just as we do. Theologian Henri Nouwen in his book, *Discernment*, reflects on the blessings that we all have which are the gifts that have been given throughout the ages.

As beloved children our core identity is secure in the memory of God. Whether we do anything worthwhile, prove anything important, or give anything of value, God still loves us unconditionally. It is a strong, vital, and active fatherly and motherly kind of love that holds us safe and affirms our worth, wherever we go and whatever we do. Our first and most important spiritual task is to claim God's unconditional love for ourselves. To remember who we truly are in the memory of God.⁵⁸

I believe that in the end, we realized our need to learn more about different ways to abide in God, while being intentional in studying scripture, and learning more about the gifts each of us has. When we can share with others in a trusting community of faith, we will be able to offer an authentic invitation to our neighbors and the wider community to come and see.

⁵⁸ Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), p. 135.

APPENDIX 1

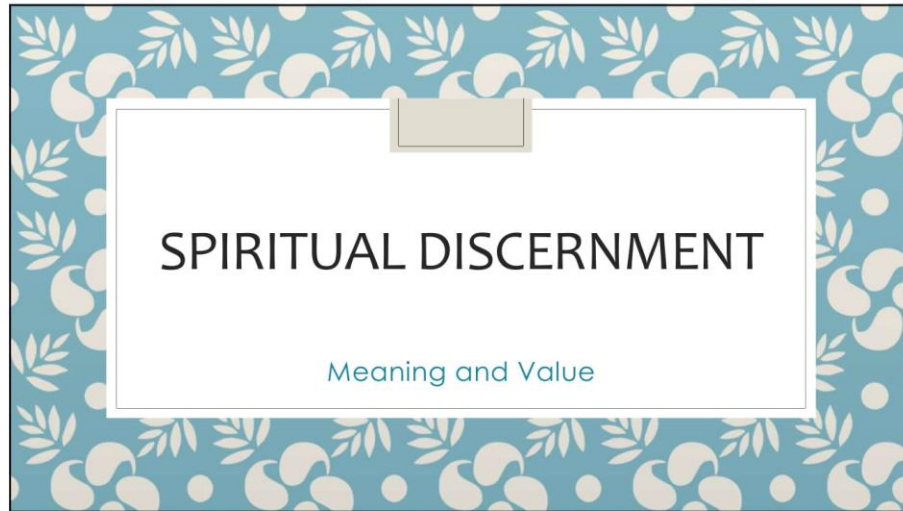
DMIN Project Interview Questions-Final

- 1: Would you be willing to enter intentional spiritual discernment regarding our call to ministry for St. Bartholomew's.
- 2: What does spiritual discernment mean to you?
- 3: What person from the bible (either Hebrew or Christian scripture) illustrated the process of discernment?
- 4: What does it mean to you to abide in the presence of Jesus when you are seeking wisdom and knowledge?
- 5: What have we incorporated into our story of being a congregation, the body of Christ at St. Bartholomew's, from our successes and failures, from crises and celebrations?
- 6: How do we seek to be open to God's call to us, to rethink our vision and mission, and how we work together as a faith community?
- 7: Are all people welcome at St. Bartholomew's? What leads you to believe either Y or N?
- 8: What do we want people to Come and See at St. Bartholomew's?

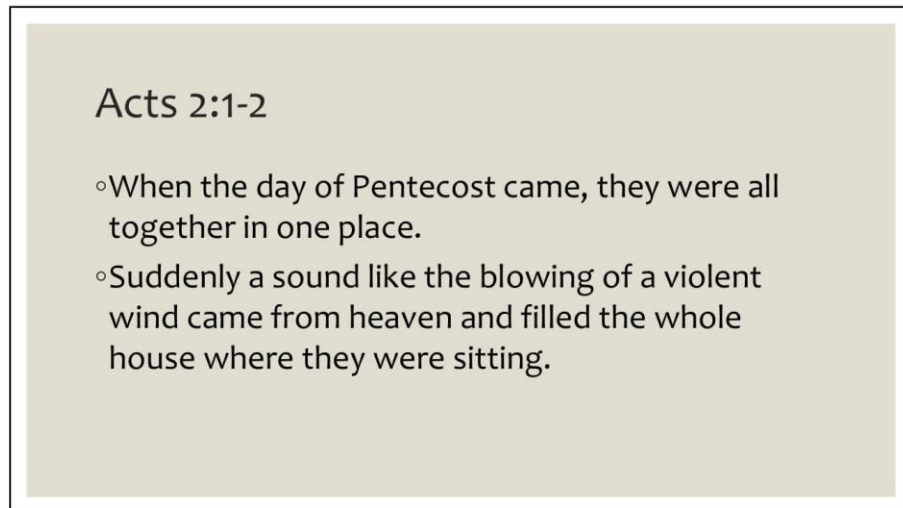
NOTE-Questions 5-6 are adapted from those found in Interim Ministry in Action-Normal B. Bendroth

Appendix 2-Power Point Presentations

5/2/2022



1



2

5/2/2022

- God knows our deepest potential, sees the hidden complexities of our circumstances, comprehends our situation in relation to the larger picture, and grasps the broader implications of our plans.
- **Discernment** is our effort to tap into the flow of this divine wisdom.
- **Discernment** is distinguishing the voice of God from other voices that speak to us: the voice of our parents echoing from years past, the voices of friends, voices of urgency or fear.
- **Discernment** is a prayerful informed and intentional attempt to sort through these voices to get in touch with God's spirit at work in a situation and to develop a sense of the direction in which the Spirit is leading.
- **Discernment** is more a journey than a destination. We may not find answers for all our concerns, but we can be receptive to God's presence as we ponder the questions.
- **Discernment** is more than saying prayers that ask God to guide us in rational consideration of matters. It is a mode of prayer that involves opening our entire selves to the working of the Holy Spirit. It bids us to let go of preconceived ideas so that we can be open to new possibilities with a readiness to view things from new perspectives. Discernment beckons us to be still and listen with the ear of our heart. It draws us into alignment with God.
- **Discernment** is central to doing God's work. To serve God we must constantly be alert to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without God, we can do nothing. "Those who abide in me and I in them" said Jesus, "bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn15:5)
- *Grounded in God-Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations.-Farnham, Hull, McLean 1989 Morehouse*

3

Breathe (in the peace of God)

Reflect (on the love of God)

Receive (inspiration and knowledge
from God)

Give Thanks (to our God)

4

2

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“The Christian Church invites the Body of Christ, women and men, children, adults, senior citizens, to worship God, read scripture, participate in the rituals and traditions of the church, partake in the Holy Eucharist, and build Christian community. From participation in these activities, the goal is to deepen one’s spirituality and to prepare Christians to go out into the world to spread the good news of Jesus in whatever way their gifts and talents support.

Through a knowledge of scripture and an intentional recognition of Jesus Christ in the totality of their lives, Christians can be ready to answer the call of the Great Commission from Matthew 28 where Jesus says: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:18-20).

Sadly, for many individuals, embracing a deeper spiritual experience for themselves as well as sharing their faith journey with others is difficult. For congregations, the lack of a clear identity and understanding of their ministry call only complicates the process, individually and corporately. This makes it incredibly hard to bear good fruit.”

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5

In the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer* Catechism, two questions are asked, and responses given that address ministry and leadership in the church:

Question: Who are the ministers of the Church?

Answer: The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

Question: What is the ministry of the laity?

Answer: The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

Question: If the ministry of the laity is clearly outlined in the Book of Common Prayer, why do many people not intentionally engage in it?

The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Together with the Psalter, or Psalms of David (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), p. 855.

6

3

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Deep Dive into Discernment

“The verb *discern*, derives from the Latin term *discernere*, meaning ‘to separate’ or ‘to divide,’ from *dis*, meaning ‘apart,’ and *cernere*, ‘to separate.’ The suffix *-ment* indicates a process or action: the process of discerning.” **Discernment requires commitment to the process, time to be present in the work, and courage. Discernment requires trust in God and trust in ourselves. We must be willing to make mistakes as well as mid-course corrections.**

We need to be courageous, intentional, and determined in our journey of discernment, to be ready to hear and act upon what God is calling us to do. In his article “Transformative Spirituality and Missional Leadership,” Cornelius Niemandt writes: **“Discernment is the first, and most decisive, step on this missional journey.** It is a core practice of Christian leadership and spirituality. It is the art of reading and times and signs-opening yourself up to the context and to God’s involvement in the context...**The skill of discerning is the door to transformation.”**

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/discernment>
Cornelius Johannes Petrus Niemandt, “Transformative Spirituality and Missional Leadership,” *Mission Studies* 33 (2016), p. 90.

7

The decisions that a congregation makes are rooted in their concept of who they are and what they believe that God is calling them to.

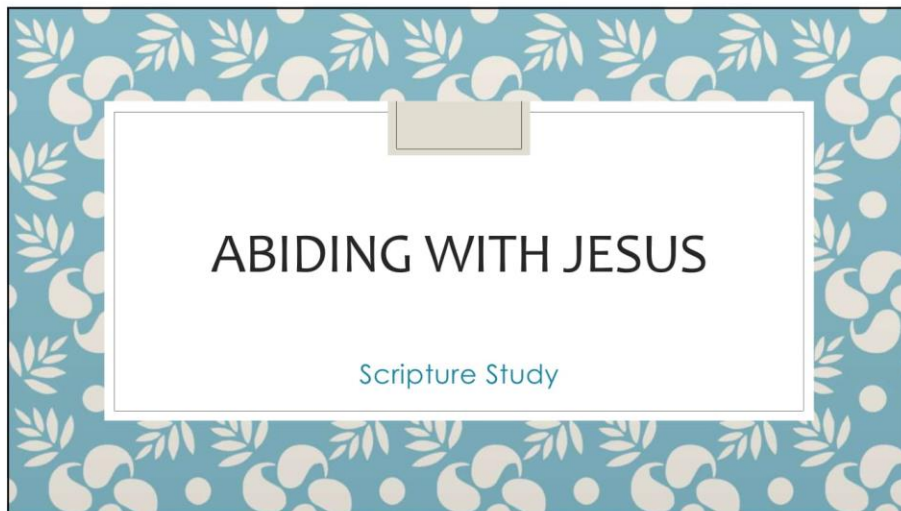
The exploration of church identity begins with an examination of how congregation members perceive the nature and mission of their church and their own discernment journey.

This understanding contains characteristics that distinguish the church from other institutions within the local community.

Question: What do you believe that the mission St. Bartholomew’s is?

8

4



9

In the Beginning.....

John's Jesus uses ordinary words in a manner charged with different layers of meaning, which his listeners usually misunderstand. Water is not just water, nor is bread only bread. **Many concepts with which we are familiar are used in a unique way.** The word "truth" in verse 14 of the prologue will be unfolded along with the narrative of the Gospel. We are familiar with the word "life," which is used fifty times in the Gospel of John. Its Johannine meaning, however, dances tantalizingly beyond our immediate comprehension. It is wise not to approach the text with preconceived ideas, but as if we are reading it for the first time. **Let the text provoke, challenge, and enlighten you. Don't be afraid to question the text or argue with it.**

The Gospel of John reflects the tensions, pressures, and influences of the time and place in which it was written. John has a very black-and-white view of the world: good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and flesh. His narrative is not given to the sort of nuance that we would normally expect and can seem unduly harsh and abrasive at times. Scholars tell us that the Gospel was written around A.D. 90, while the community was involved in acrimonious polemics with fellow Jews. The term "the Jews" (hoi ioudaioi) is often used in a very pejorative way, usually to describe the enemies of Jesus. It is important to remember that the author and his community were also Jews. **We should not assume that the historical Jesus vilified or rejected his people.**

John develops the theme of preexistence and takes us back to the very beginning, **before the world was ever created.** We as readers know where Jesus is really from, while most of the characters of the Gospel of John do not. John's Jesus is not the product of human societies; he is a stranger and alien in the world, even though it was created at his hands. The prologue introduces the theme of the descent and ascent of the emissary of God, as well as the opposition arrayed to thwart the mission of the Word made flesh, an opposition that is represented by the "world" and the "Jews."

MLA 8th Edition (Modern Language Assoc.)
Scott M. Lewis. *The Gospel According to John and the Johannine Letters: Volume 4. Liturgical Press, 2016.*

APA 7th Edition (American Psychological Assoc.)
Scott M. Lewis. (2016). *The Gospel According to John and the Johannine Letters: Volume 4. Liturgical Press.*

10

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Jesus asks them, “What are you seeking/what are you looking for?” (John 1:38).

Question-Name one thing that you are seeking for yourself/or our church in this study?

11

What are you seeking/looking for?

“The story of the disciples in the Gospel of John begins as we enter the world of John the Baptist. The first disciple mentioned by name is Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. After Andrew heard what John had said about following Jesus, he knew he had to share what he heard. “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus” (1:41-42).

Jesus asks them, “What are you seeking/what are you looking for?” (1:38). **The disciples respond by asking where Jesus is staying, and a conversation begins. They never answer Jesus’ initial question and that is something to take notice of.** In the original Greek text, the word for seek is *zētēō* which means properly, “to seek by *inquiring*; to investigate to reach a *binding (terminal)* resolution; to search, ‘**getting to the bottom of a matter.**’” **This is a personal, introspective understanding of the word** versus “seek” in the sense of actively looking for a missing object. This makes the disciples’ response to Jesus’ question even more confusing. They respond as though all they want to know is where Jesus is staying, not disclosing what they were searching for with their hearts to help them find understanding and peace.

The challenge of answering that question, is a challenge that faces humanity to this very day. **If you do not know what you are looking for, how will you know when you have found it?** Maybe by saying “come and see,” **Jesus hopes that in dedicating their lives to the journey with him and believing in his teachings the disciples will be able to answer the question for themselves.**

[www.https://biblehub.com/greek/2212.htm](https://biblehub.com/greek/2212.htm)

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Jesus and Nicodemus-John Chapter 3

13

“In Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, we realize that Nicodemus seeks a deeper understanding of the Kingdom of God but knows very well that he is risking his status in the community by even his desire to have his question answered. He comes to Jesus at night where he will have the cover of darkness to hide him. Craig S. Keener notes:

“Jewish teachers often studied at night, especially those who had to work during the day, thus Nicodemus may have come to receive instruction from a greater sage, namely Jesus. More likely, he comes at night to avoid being seen; night was the time for secret (sometimes antisocial) deeds and whatever one wished not to be known.”

Nicodemus does not ask a question, but by referring to Jesus as Rabbi or teacher, he is confirming the status of Jesus’ identity. Jesus, suspecting what the real question is that Nicodemus wants to ask replies, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (3:3). Nicodemus clearly misses the point of Jesus’ response. He asks Jesus a question that reveals his misperception of the conversation: “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely, they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” (3:4). **In this story Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to think on a higher level, to raise his consciousness from the day-to-day ritual to a place where he can know what God’s plan is for humanity and in the process be transformed in his mind and spirit.”**

Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), Vol 1., p.536.
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Keener writes: **“‘Teacher from God’ is inadequate, as is a worldly understanding of Jesus’ kingship; only supernatural insight can enable one to grasp the character of Jesus’ identity. Jesus insists that Nicodemus be born from God, that is, become a child of God and of Abraham.”**

We cannot be sure that Nicodemus had a clear question in mind when he went to Jesus that night. He was recognized as a teacher himself and he must have had several concerns that were affecting his ability to teach.

In John 3:10 Jesus even questions Nicodemus’ status. **“‘You are Israel’s teacher,’ said Jesus, ‘and do you not understand these things?’”** Nicodemus is one example of the many people in the scriptures who felt something was missing or had great concerns about spiritual issues but did not have enough knowledge to know exactly what they were seeking.

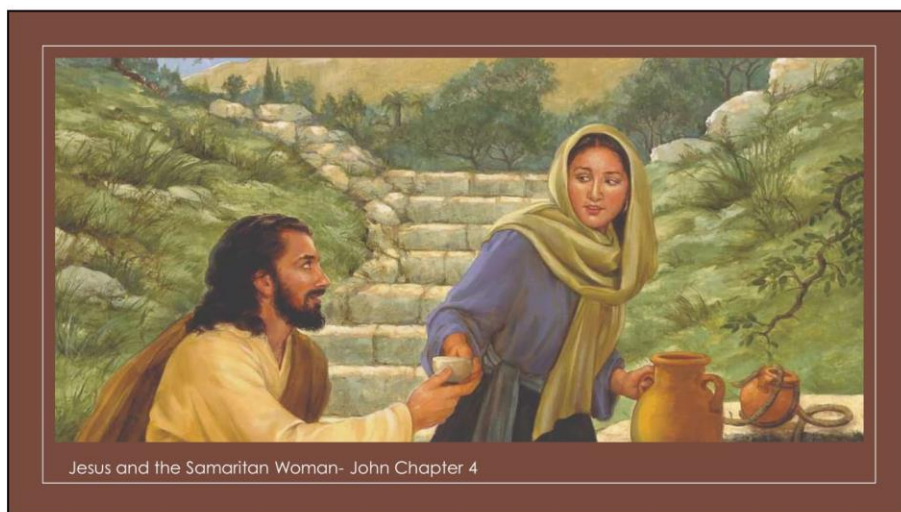
15

Questions:

- **What do you believe Jesus is thinking about Nicodemus?**
- **Have you ever been afraid to bring your questions to Jesus?**

16

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17

"In Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4, the reader is left wondering whether Jesus was the only thirsty person at the well that day. Jesus asks for water for he is physically thirsty but what is the woman seeking, or thirsting for? When the woman encounters Jesus at the well and he asks her to give him a drink of water, the woman responds, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (4:9). She seeks to protect herself by putting the focus on Jesus, in essence accusing him of making the mistake of talking to her. By stating their respective ethnic identities first, she is challenging Jesus to remember that he should not be talking to her.

In his article, "Jesus at the Well: Our Approach to the "Other," author Brent Neely explains why this is a dangerous encounter: "In this encounter, the potential for ritual contamination is palpable as the teacher makes himself vulnerable, relating to a Samaritan female apparently on the margins of ever her own community. By the standards of Jewish halakhah close or easy interaction with a female outside the family circle, let alone a "heretical" outsider, was at the least a risk to reputation."

Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) Vol 1., p. 537.
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18

Jesus responds, in the same way that he did with Nicodemus, **by turning the focus of the discussion to a higher level:** “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (4:10).

The Samaritan woman tries to show that she has knowledge of the promise of the one that is to come by stating, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us” (4:25).

Then Jesus shares his identity, giving her the opportunity for transformation: Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he” (4:26).

19

Questions:

What is the difference in attitude between Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman?

How does that impact their reaction to their meeting with Jesus?

20

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Question for Reflection

What do you want God to help us with in our understanding of our identity and mission as the church family of St. Bartholomew's in Ho-Ho-Kus?

Please reflect on this and share what you feel comfortable sharing when we meet on February 7

21

Psalm 139

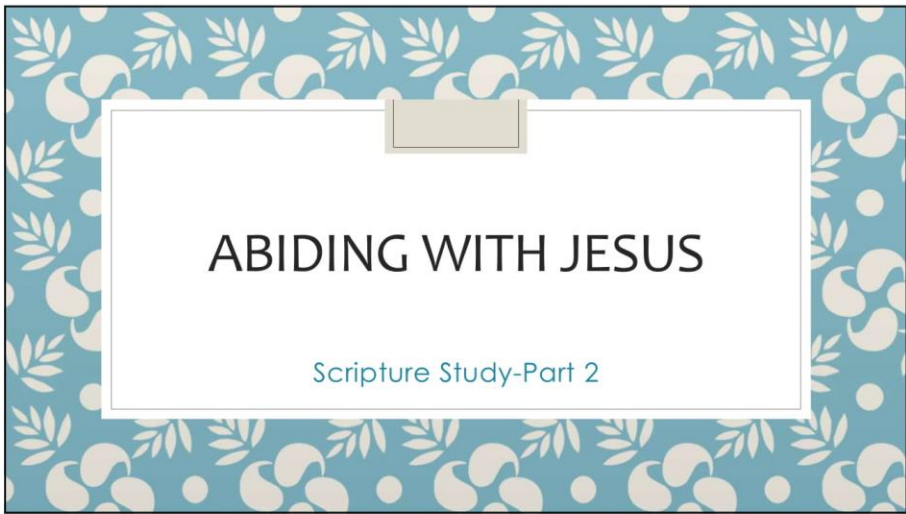
You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
²You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
³You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
⁴Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.
⁵You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
⁷Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
⁸If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
⁹If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
¹⁰even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
¹²even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

22



- **Breathe** (in the peace of God)
- **Reflect** (on the love of God)
- **Receive** (inspiration and knowledge from God)
- **Give Thanks** (to our God)
- **Question:**
What is God saying to you tonight?

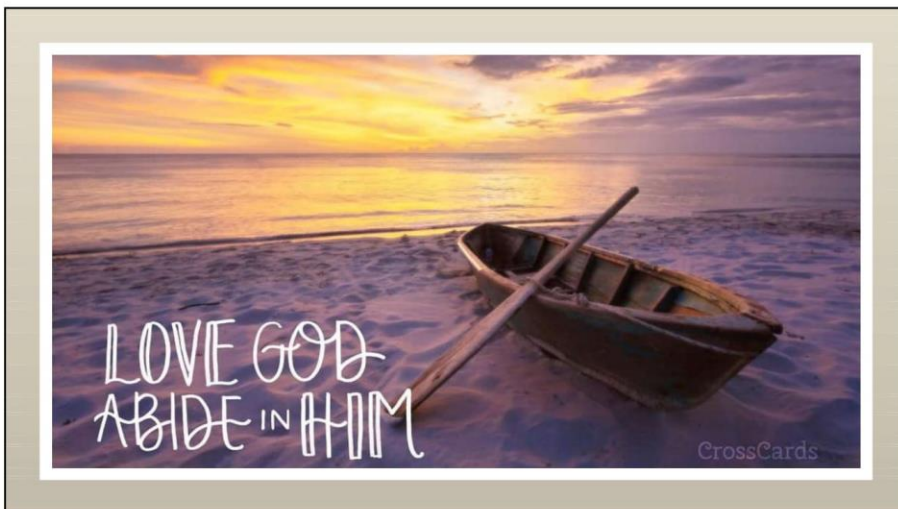
23



ABIDING WITH JESUS

Scripture Study-Part 2

24



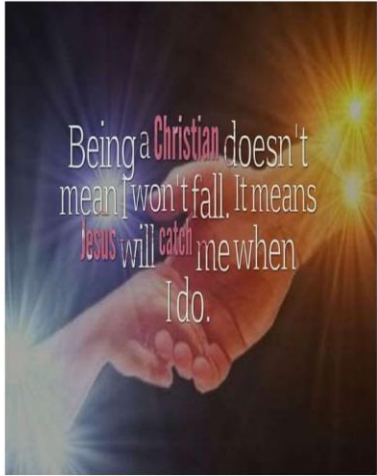
25

- **Come.** It is a word of invitation, a word of inclusion, a word of relationship, of becoming known.
- The Apostle John uses the word come, or erchomai in the Greek, more than any other gospel writer. Erchomai is rich with meaning. It can simply mean, to come or to go. But it also contains implications of being known and of growth. John tells us that Jesus knows all men (and women by implication). (1John 2:24)
- Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
(John 1:11-14)
- Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. (John 15:4)
- Indeed, John is very forthright in his gospel, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:31)
- Life is found in Jesus. (John 1:4)

adapted the website, from the heart.com

26

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Being a Christian doesn't mean I won't fall. It means Jesus will catch me when I do.

Question:

How has accepting the invitation to "Come" changed your life?

How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?

27

John-The Gospel of Relationships

The Wedding at Cana
 "Jesus goes to the wedding to celebrate; he is wonderfully human. He goes there to be with members of his family and friends.... It is important to understand that at that time in Israel wedding feasts were grandiose and lasted a week. **Why did Jesus take the disciples to the wedding?**

Jesus invites us to enter into an intimate relationship with him, into a friendship or communion with him.... It is a celebration of love as in a wedding feast.


Let us be filled with joy and gladness. It is the wedding feast of the Lamb, and the bride has made herself beautiful; she is ready for her husband! Rev. 19:7-10.

The vision of Jesus, even on earth, is to invite us to enter a loving relationship with him, so we may live in him and he in us.

The most profound meaning of the story of Cana is the sign of the **transformation** of water into wine. We are also called to be transformed in love. To live this relationship, the water of our humanity must gradually be transformed by the Holy spirit into the wine of love. This wine of love is also the wine transformed into the blood of Jesus. The Lamb who loves us seeks to be united to us so that we can become fully ourselves. Jesus does not seek to possess or control us but wants to help us completely fulfill our mission and vocation."

Jean Vanier-The Gospel of John, The Gospel of Relationship

28



Question:

What does self transformation in your relationship with Jesus mean to you? Is it a one-time event or a life-time process?

29


Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

“In the sixth chapter of John, after the five thousand are fed and Jesus leaves them, the people travel to Capernaum to seek him (6:22-24). Those that went looking for Jesus were amazed at what they had witnessed. From five loaves and two fish Jesus was able to feed over five thousand people.

Those that were present may have also known about the healings that Jesus was able to offer. This man was the great provider and people wanted to stay with him so their bellies would be filled. When they finally reach Jesus, he tries to explain to them that being physically fed only lasts a little while but that the bread of life, given by God, will sustain them forever.

Jesus questions the followers as to what they are really seeking when they ask him to continue to provide the bread. When he realizes that the message is not getting through, he says: “I am [ego eimi] the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (6:35-36).”

Question: What hungers are fed through the Bread of Life?



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30

The Arrest of Jesus

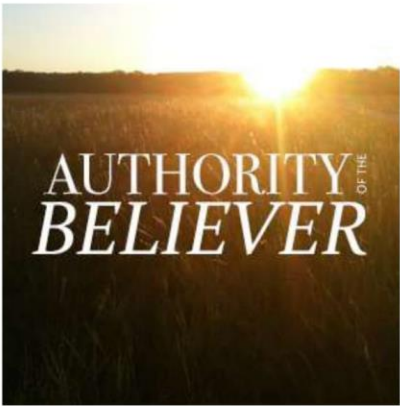
“In John 18:4, and 18:7, when Jesus is facing his arrest, he asks the soldiers **“Who is it that you want?”** This direct question, spoken with no hesitation, yielded a weak response. The soldiers respond that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth but seem to have a problem realizing that whom they seek is standing right in front of them. Jesus is clearly aware of his identity and purpose replying with the divine ego eimi, “I am”/“I am he.”. The soldiers respond, in effect answered by saying they wanted Jesus of Nazareth in name only.

In her essay, Marianne Meye Thompson reflects on Jesus’ identity: “The theological aspect of Jesus’ identity shapes the way in which John portrays Jesus in every role and deed: it is as the Word of God, as the one who was the agent of creation, that the incarnate Jesus carries out his prophetic, messianic, and salvific vocation.” Jesus, knowing that his death was also part of his purpose, attempted no escape or denial. It is only by Jesus’ authority, and by his permission that his capture takes place.

Jesus’ intimate knowledge and connection to his identity gave him power to orchestrate the events surrounding his arrest and eventual crucifixion. Any fear that he might have felt during this time was able to be pushed aside because Jesus was able to rely on his relationship with God, his place in the creative process, and the importance of his sacrifice to humanity. Jesus knew who he was and what his purpose was on earth. Nothing would alter his mission.”

Marianne Meye Thompson, “Word of God, Messiah of Israel, Savior of the World”: Learning the Identity of Jesus from the Gospel of John, Cathie Studwell-Dissertation Text 2021

31



AUTHORITY
OF THE
BELIEVER

Question:

Do you believe that you have authority through your relationship with Jesus?

If you are comfortable doing so, share a time when you relied on that authority for your strength?

32

The Arrest of Jesus

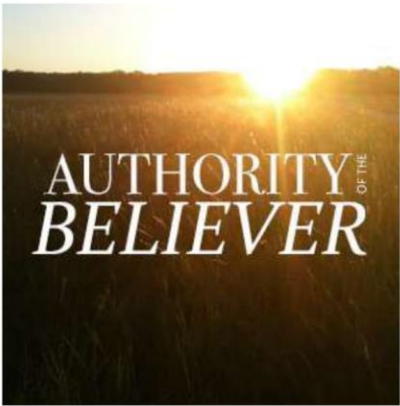
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Marianne Meye Thompson, “Word of God, Messiah of Israel, Savior of the World”: Learning the Identity of Jesus from the Gospel of John, Cathie Studwell-Dissertation Text 2021

31



QUESTION:

Do you believe that you have authority through your relationship with Jesus?

If you are comfortable doing so, share a time when you relied on that authority for your strength?

32

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John 17:12-26

While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. 14 I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. 15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. 19 For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

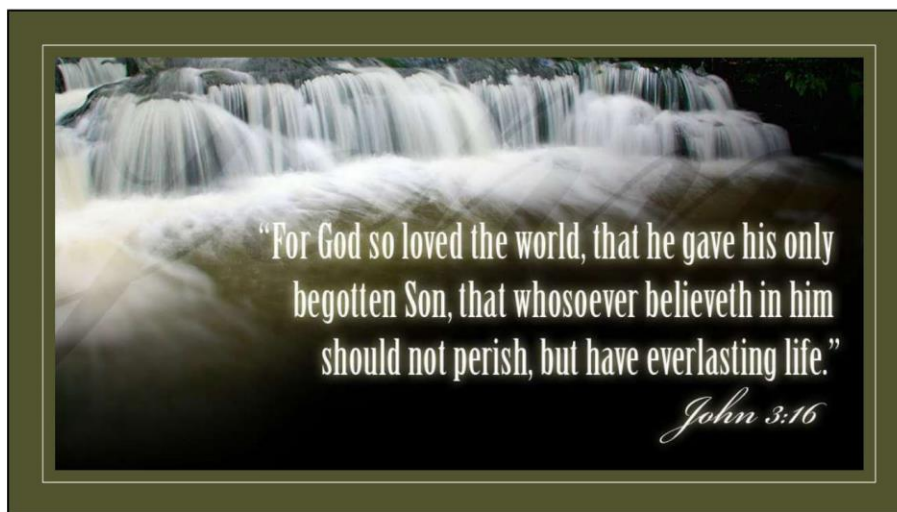
20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

24 "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

25 "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Question: With this passage as a foundation, Jesus praying for the disciples and for all believers through time, how do you describe yourself, your identity, as a follower (believer) of Jesus Christ?

35



36

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Psalm 145:1-9

I will lift my praise above everything to You, my God and King!
I will continually bless Your name forever and always.

²My praise will never cease I will praise You every day;
I will lift up Your name forever.

³The Eternal is great and deserves endless praise;
His greatness knows no limit, recognizes no boundary.
No one can measure or comprehend His magnificence.

⁴One generation after another will celebrate Your great works;
they will pass on the story of Your powerful acts to their children.

⁵Your majesty and glorious splendor have captivated me;
I will meditate on Your wonders, sing songs of Your worth.

⁶We confess—there is nothing greater than You, God, nothing mightier than Your awesome works.
I will tell of Your greatness as long as I have breath.

⁷The news of Your rich goodness is no secret—
Your people love to recall it
and sing songs of joy to celebrate Your righteousness.

⁸The Eternal is gracious. He shows mercy to His people.
For Him anger does not come easily, but faithful love does—and it is rich and abundant.

⁹But the Eternal's goodness is not exclusive—it is offered freely to all.
His mercy extends to all His creation.

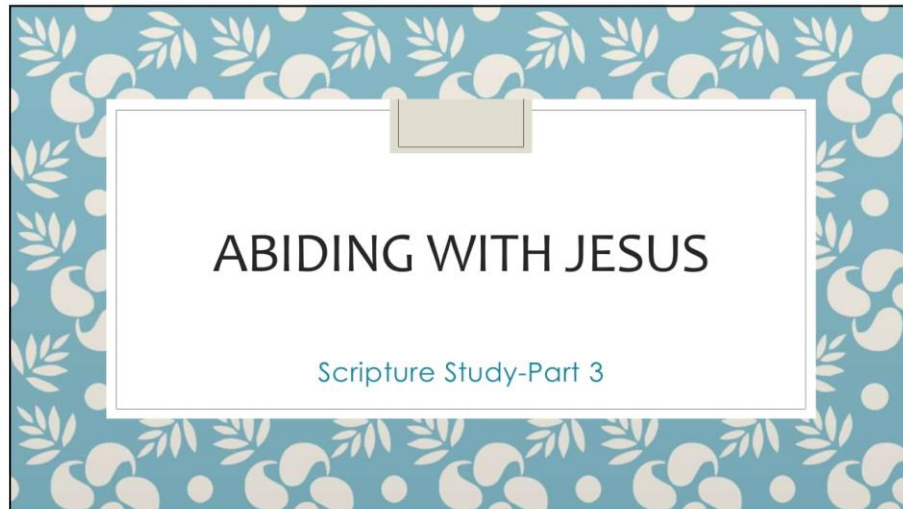
37



- **Breathe** (in the peace of God)
- **Reflect** (on the love of God)
- **Receive** (inspiration and knowledge from God)
- **Give Thanks** (to our God)
- **Question:**
What is God saying to you tonight?

“Sharpen my spiritual discernment that I may hear You clearly; let prophetic insight be upon me today.”

38

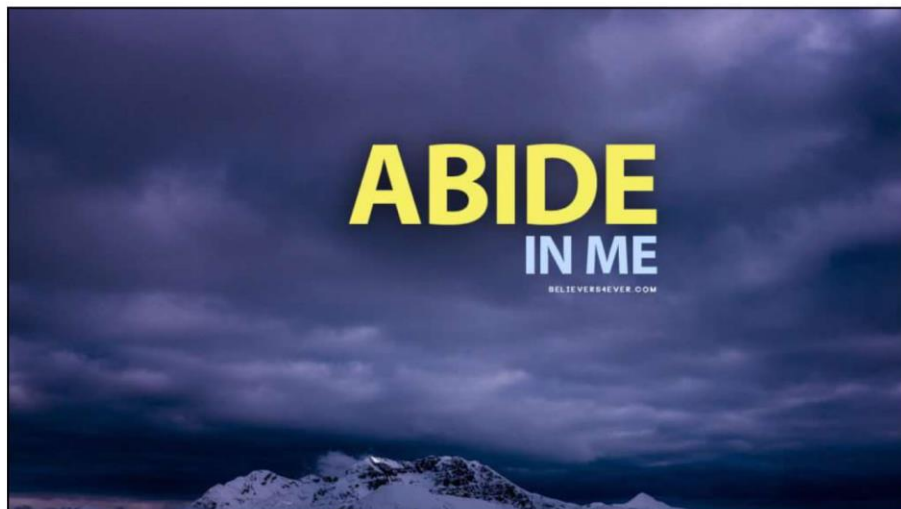


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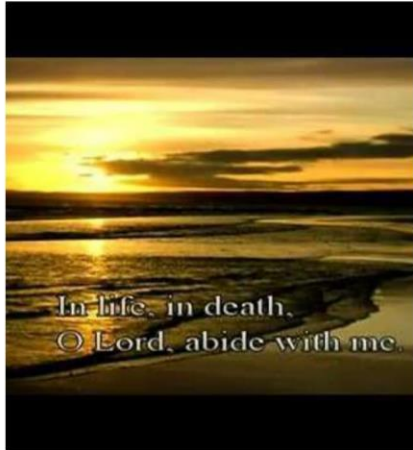
A slide with a blue border. On the left, there is a photograph of a wooden cross on a hill at sunset. Overlaid on the left side of the photo is the text: "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:2". Below the photo is the text "DailyVerses.net". To the right of the photo, the text "1 JOHN A DIFFERENT LOOK AT RELATIONSHIPS" is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the slide, a question is posed: "Question: What does this verse mean to you in your relationship with Jesus and with God?". A small, light-colored rectangular tab is visible at the top center of the white box.

40

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43

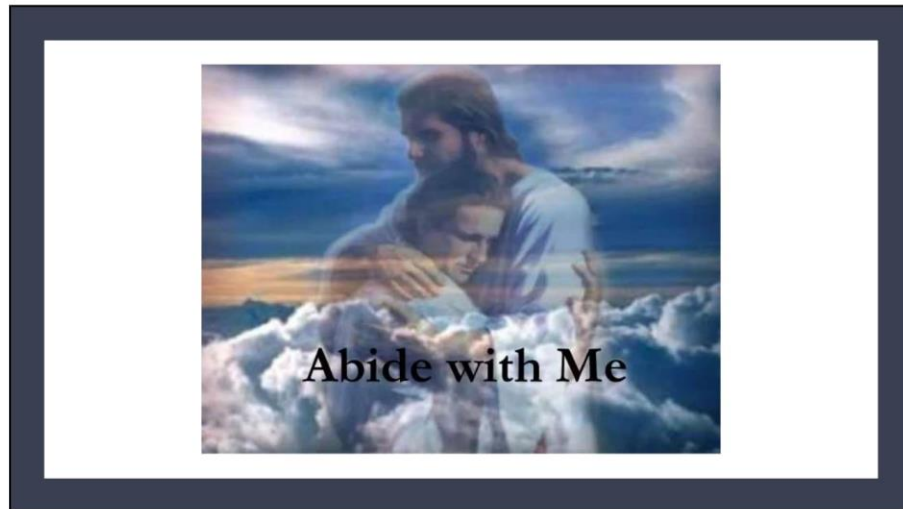


- "Now in First John **abiding provides protection from those that seek to attack the teachings of Jesus Christ.** "As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him." (2:27).
- Scholar, Marianne Meye Thompson notes: "The author reminds his readers that what he is now telling them is in fact what the church has heard from the beginning. **He warns them against those who are trying to lead them astray from that well-founded teaching which remains in you.**"
- The passion of Jesus and the original disciples is all but gone, those that are proclaiming the teachings of Jesus are doing so from second-hand stories. **The facts may be accurate, but the passion is not firsthand.** This makes the fight with those who seek to lead people away from the growing movement easier to accomplish."

◦ Cathie Studwell Dissertation Text 2021

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"The book of 1st John is a General Epistle (Apostolic Letter). It is written by the Disciple/Apostle John around 85-95 A.D. probably from Ephesus. The key personalities are the Apostles Peter and Paul. **Its purpose was to warn about the increasing threat of false teachings and to reassure Christians of their faith and love in Jesus Christ.**

- Chapters 1-2, John reassures believers explaining, "God is Light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1:5). He wrote that if sins were confessed, He would cleanse them, because Jesus is the propitiation for "the whole world" (2:2). Because John was aware of the continuing attack of false teachings, he then urged believers not to love and follow after the world because it was not of the Father and would ultimately pass away. **Discernment is necessary to thwart the constant attacks of heresy.**
- In chapters 3-4, He teaches about the love of God and that through His love He sent Jesus, "To destroy the works of the devil" (3:8). Therefore, believers should love each other not only with words but also, "in deeds and truth" (3:18), as Jesus commanded.
- Chapter 5, John exhorts Christians to live by faith because through our faith in Christ we overcome the wickedness of the world. In addition, John writes one of the most powerful and assuring statements concerning the work of Jesus on the cross, "**These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life**" (vs. 13). John wanted all believers to know 100%, that because of their faith and trust in Jesus Christ they would spend all of eternity with Him."

https://biblehub.com/summary/1_john/1.htm

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Questions:

1: What are the things that take you away from time spent abiding with God?

2: If you were to ask God to abide with you, what would you really be asking of God?

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“If God’s blessings are sure and secure, why must believers be commanded to abide (2:27) and to continue (2:28) in the faith?” Thompson

Do these commands suggest that these readers can lose their status as God’s children? The command admonishes them, but it does so by affirming them in their present course.” If they lose their status as God’s children it would not be by the hand of God, **it would be by their own hand in losing the intimate relationship that abiding can provide for them.**

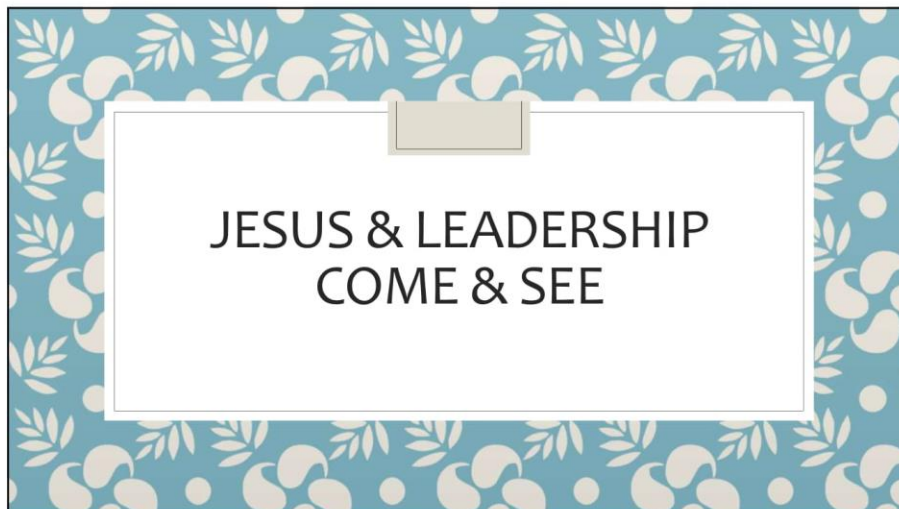
That is why abiding is the second half of the circle. People can spend their whole lives seeking but to decide on a course of action or understand their own identity, they need to invest time in abiding as well, to review all the seeking that they have witnessed and decide how it will impact decisions that they will make.”

Cathie Studwell-Dissertation Text 2021

Question: What do you think we could do, as a congregation seeking to define its identity and mission, to abide with Jesus?

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<p>LOVE ONE ANOTHER (John 13:34a) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (John 13:34b) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (John 13:35) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (John 15:12) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (John 15:17) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (Romans 13:8) MAKE YOUR LOVE INCREASE (1 Thess 3:12) LOVE EACH OTHER (1 Thess 4:9) LOVE ONE ANOTHER DEEPLY (1 Peter 3:8) LOVE EACH OTHER DEEPLY (1 Peter 4:8) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (1 John 3:11) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (1 John 3:23) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (1 John 4:7) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (1 John 4:11) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (1 John 4:12) LOVE ONE ANOTHER (2 John 5)</p>	<p>My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15:12)</p> <p>Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8)</p> <p>No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:12)</p> <p>Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)</p>
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Visual Storytelling

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S
IDENTITY
AS WE UNDERSTAND IT
VISUAL
STORYTELLING

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Jesus Model of Leadership

- "For Jesus, the mission was to be the Messiah. He was sent to bring salvation to the world as God's Sent One....His personal mission was to serve not his own will but the will of his Father. He said, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38).
- Churches, organizations, and the communities they serve, **need leaders who know how God has made and gifted them for service and who willingly serve Christ and those placed in their care.**
- **Mission (and the vision of that mission) is the connection between service and leadership.**
- Servant and leader stand together as a model for those entrusted with the well-being of a group. Leaders who follow the example and teaching of Jesus **will lead first as servants**. True servant leadership begins when the leader humbles himself to carry out the mission entrusted to him rather than his personal agenda.
- **The passion for the mission** drives the leader to recruit and empower other to join him on that mission. A servant leader is also servant to the on mission with him. The leader becomes servant to those who have joined him when he provides adequate vision, direction, correction, and resources to carry out the mission entrusted to the group. The leader serves when he equips others and "teams" with them to reach the goal of mission together." Jesus on Leadership-C. Gene Wilkes-Selections from Chapter 1

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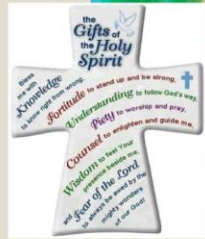
Questions:

What are you passionate about?

What gifts do you bring in support of your passion?

55

Spiritual Gifts



- Administration
- Discernment
- Evangelism
- Exhortation
- Faith
- Giving
- Healing
- Hospitality
- Knowledge
- Leadership
- Mercy
- Musical Arts
- Missionary/Apostle
- Prayer
- Pastor/Shepherding
- Prophecy
- Service
- Teaching
- Visual Arts
- Wisdom



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Questions for Reflection
Seeking & Finding-Incarnational Ministry in John's Gospel

What do we know about the life of Jesus, and his teachings, that we want to share with others who are seeking?

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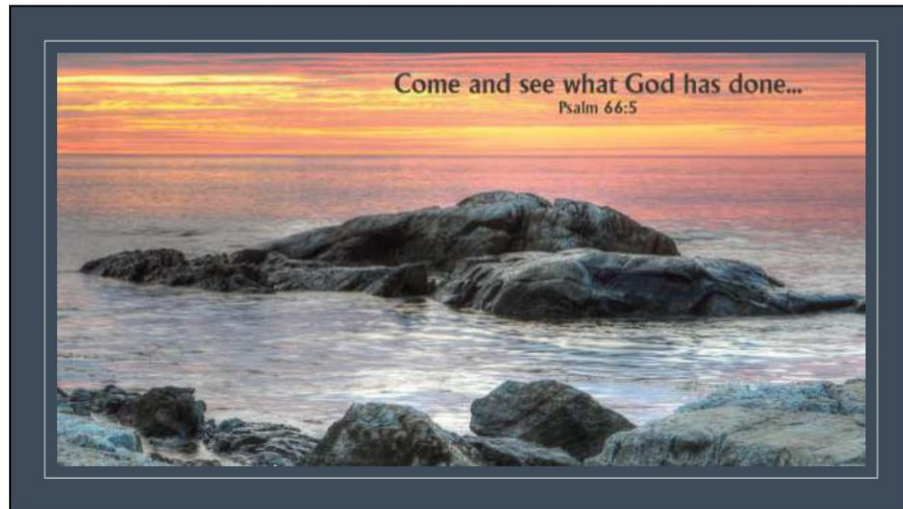
Questions for Reflection
Jesus on Leadership-Timeless Wisdom on Servant Leadership

When you read the term servant leadership, what does it bring to mind?

What characteristics of Jesus' life describe him as a leader? What characteristics describe him as a servant? How do the two work together?

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Jesus Model of Leadership

- "For Jesus, the mission was to be the Messiah. He was sent to bring salvation to the world as God's Sent One....His personal mission was to serve not his own will but the will of his Father. **He said, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38).**
- Mission (and the vision of that mission) is the connection between service and leadership.
- **The passion for the mission** drives the leader to recruit and empower other to join him on that mission. **A servant leader is also servant to the mission with him.** The leader becomes servant to those who have joined him when he provides adequate vision, direction, correction, and resources to carry out the mission entrusted to the group. The leader serves when he equips others and "teams" with them to reach the goal of mission together."

Jesus on Leadership-C. Gene Wilkes-Selections from Chapter 1

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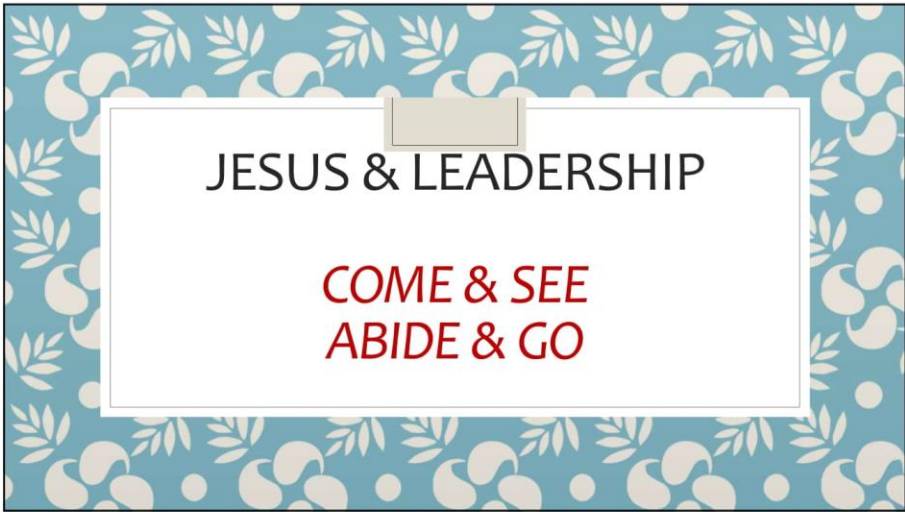


Sharpen my
spiritual discernment
that I may hear
You clearly. let
prophetic insight
be upon me today.

- **Breathe** (in the peace of God)
- **Reflect** (on the love of God)
- **Receive** (inspiration and knowledge from God)
- **Give Thanks** (to our God)

◦ **Question:**
What is God saying to you tonight?

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JESUS & LEADERSHIP

COME & SEE
ABIDE & GO


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- "The quest for Jesus and his abode leads us to a place of mutual indwelling, in which we find the life that sustains and empowers us. Barron observes that "...we see that the form of Christian discipleship is not primarily listening or learning, but rather moving into the "house" of Jesus, discerning his mode of life, being with him at close quarters."
- This is the place from which we do ministry. It is that abiding place in the presence of God that protects us from the world as we are sent into it. It is also that place to which we invite others, as we say, "Come and See"
- Through the invitation to come and see we are invited to participate in the mission of God. We enter into the task of seeking and finding. Seeking and Finding: Incarnational Ministry in John's Gospel
- **Jesus, we want to come and see?????**


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Where do we need to go to invite people to come and see?

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JESUS
the servant king

*Jesus on Leadership-Timeless
Wisdom on Servant Leadership*

What characteristics of Jesus' life describe him as a leader?

What characteristics describe him as a servant?

How do the two work together?


67

"Every day you must decide whether to put your contribution out there, or keep it to yourself to avoid upsetting anyone, and get through another day. You are right to be cautious. Prudence is a virtue.

To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear, their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking, with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility.

Leadership is worth the risk because the goals extend beyond material gain or personal advancement. By making the lives of people around you better, leadership provides meaning in life. It creates purpose. We believe that every human being has something unique to offer....the gift might be your knowledge, experience, values, presence, your heart or wisdom. Perhaps it's simply your basic curiosity and your willingness to raise unsettling questions."

Leadership on the Line. Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change



I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.
Philippians 4:13

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Jesus on Leadership in the Gospel of John

1. Prepare for the Future

Jesus then said, "I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come." John 7:33-34 [ESV]

2. Be more effective by communicating in different ways to different groups of people.

"I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father." John 16:25 [ESV]

3. Lead like a shepherd.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. John 10:4-5;11-15 [ESV]

4. Glorify God above all else.

"He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:30 [ESV]

5. Be Inclusive.

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" John 4:27 [ESV]

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6. Trust God When Things Seem Impossible.

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

John 6:14 [ESV]


Jesus answered "...For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."
John 18: 37

Seek
the
Truth...

70

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◦ **Questions:**

- **What is God saying to you tonight?**
- **What have you learned about discernment and/or yourself during these sessions?**
- **What is something that you think God is calling the family of St. Bartholomew's to discern?**

71

Psalm 66:1-12

Shout for joy to God, all the earth!
² Sing the glory of his name;
 make his praise glorious.
³ Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!
 So great is your power
 that your enemies cringe before you.
⁴ All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you,
 they sing the praises of your name."⁽¹⁾
⁵ Come and see what God has done,
 his awesome deeds for mankind!
⁶ He turned the sea into dry land,
 they passed through the waters on foot—
 come, let us rejoice in him.
⁷ He rules forever by his power,
 his eyes watch the nations—
 let not the rebellious rise up against him.
⁸ Praise our God, all peoples,
 let the sound of his praise be heard;
⁹ he has preserved our lives
 and kept our feet from slipping.
¹⁰ For you, God, tested us;
 you refined us like silver.
¹¹ You brought us into prison
 and laid burdens on our backs.
¹² You let people ride over our heads;
 we went through fire and water,
 but you brought us to a place of abundance.

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