



JOURNEY INWARD *to* JOURNEY OUTWARD

The Journey Outward, Week 2: BEING CURIOUS

Summary

This week encourages compassionate curiosity about our neighbors. As author Valerie Kaur writes, “wonder is where love begins, but the failure to wonder is the beginning of violence.” Once we stop wondering about others -- once we no longer see others as part of us -- we disable our instinct for empathy. Thankfully, the opposite is also true.

Introduction

This week we move from our relationship with all of creation to be more specific – our relationship with other people, each of whom is created in God’s image. It’s easy to “notice” the variety in a rock or a tree without being judgmental. It’s much harder to notice the variety in humanity without judgement. In fact, it might be baked into our religious tradition to view people outside our “group” as people to be judged, changed, or fixed.

We’ll start with a powerful story in Acts that reveals God’s openness to all sorts of people, disrupting the dominant religious view that “only certain people should belong.” This story, often called “Peter’ Vision” sets the stage for us to imagine that God is up to something important in people we might deem as unworthy.

We will take some time to be honest about how and why we approach people with judgement and what we could do differently. We’ll discover why curiosity, not judgement, is such a powerful attitude, and try to apply it to our own lives.

Gathering

- Give names again and report back: How did your faith practice go last week? What did you “notice?” Did anything happen to you?
- Read together “Not Pity but Compassion” by Howard Thurman in the readings at the back of this section. Take a minute of silence to let it soak in.

Discussion based on the readings.

1) Lessons from Cornelius and Peter, “Wholehearted faith.”

- a. Look over the scripture. List all the times in the story that Peter, Cornelius and others had a choice to change or stay the same.
- b. What does God do in the story?
- c. About this story, Rachel Held Evans wrote, “I have been Peter, and I have been Cornelius...And God is still God...Even as I still believe that God calls us to help change the world, to make it more just, to make it more equitable, to make it more loving, I also believe that God empowers the world to help change us, to make us more just, to make us more equitable, to make us more loving.” Share ways that you have been changed – and especially how your faith has been changed – by encountering someone new or different.

2) Wonder and Curiosity (See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love, Valarie Kaur. This Here Flesh, “Wonder” and “Dignity” excerpts, Cole Arthur Riley)

- a. Briefly reflect together on why these writings think an attitude of “wonder” is so powerful?
- b. Individually, think about someone you find challenging. Spend a few minutes writing some “I wonder...” statements that can change your perspective on them. Share only if you’d like.
- c. Cole Arthur Riley says “In order to rend whiteness from the face of God...we have to expand our understanding of how other cultures and peoples contain the divine.” Where have you sensed the divine outside of your own culture?



- 3) Being a Good Neighbor.** (Poems by Joe Davis: Good Neighbor & Who Is Your Everyone?)
- a. Read both poems out loud. What images are powerful for you?
 - b. Share a time when someone different from you gave you the benefit of the doubt.

For a faith practice this week,

- A. Notice when you are judging someone else and be intentional to get curious instead.
- B. Make a new relationship at work, church, community, school. Try to stay curious about the person.
- C. Read Howard Thurman's "Compassion Poem" every day, as a prayer.

Closing

- Make sure everyone knows where and when you will meet next week.
- Close with this prayer, repeated 4 times.

May I be at peace.

May my heart always be open.

May I awaken to the Divine Light within and all around me.

May I be healed. May I be a source of healing.

The next time through the prayer, pray it for someone dear to you.

The third time through, pray it for something of great concern to you in the world.

And lastly, pray it over yourself once more.



Week 2 – Being Curious – Scripture

Acts 10 (The Message Translation)

10 ¹⁻³ There was a man named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea, captain of the Italian Guard stationed there. He was a thoroughly good man. He had led everyone in his house to live worshipfully before God, was always helping people in need, and had the habit of prayer. One day about three o'clock in the afternoon he had a vision. An angel of God, as real as his next-door neighbor, came in and said, "Cornelius."

⁴⁻⁶ Cornelius stared hard, wondering if he was seeing things. Then he said, "What do you want, sir?"

The angel said, "Your prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. Here's what you are to do. Send men to Joppa to get Simon, the one everyone calls Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is down by the sea."

⁷⁻⁸ As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two servants and one particularly devout soldier from the guard. He went over with them in great detail everything that had just happened, and then sent them off to Joppa.

⁹⁻¹³ The next day as the three travelers were approaching the town, Peter went out on the balcony to pray. It was about noon. Peter got hungry and started thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket lowered by ropes at its four corners settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: "Go to it, Peter—kill and eat."

¹⁴ Peter said, "Oh, no, Lord. I've never so much as tasted food that was not kosher."

¹⁵ The voice came a second time: "If God says it's okay, it's okay."

¹⁶ This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies.

¹⁷⁻²⁰ As Peter, puzzled, sat there trying to figure out what it all meant, the men sent by Cornelius showed up at Simon's front door. They called in, asking if there was a Simon, also called Peter, staying there. Peter, lost in thought, didn't hear them, so the Spirit whispered to him, "Three men are knocking at the door looking for you. Get down there and go with them. Don't ask any questions. I sent them to get you."

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, "I think I'm the man you're looking for. What's up?"

²²⁻²³ They said, "Captain Cornelius, a God-fearing man well-known for his fair play—ask any Jew in this part of the country—was commanded by a holy angel to get you and bring you to his house so he could hear what you had to say." Peter invited them in and made them feel at home.



God Plays No Favorites

²³⁻²⁶ The next morning he got up and went with them. Some of his friends from Joppa went along. A day later they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had his relatives and close friends waiting with him. The minute Peter came through the door, Cornelius was up on his feet greeting him—and then down on his face worshiping him! Peter pulled him up and said, “None of that—I’m a man and only a man, no different from you.”

²⁷⁻²⁹ Talking things over, they went on into the house, where Cornelius introduced Peter to everyone who had come. Peter addressed them, “You know, I’m sure that this is highly irregular. Jews just don’t do this—visit and relax with people of another race. But God has just shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. But now I’d like to know why you sent for me.”

³⁰⁻³² Cornelius said, “Four days ago at about this time, midafternoon, I was home praying. Suddenly there was a man right in front of me, flooding the room with light. He said, ‘Cornelius, your daily prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God’s attention. I want you to send to Joppa to get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’s staying with Simon the Tanner down by the sea.’

³³ “So I did it—I sent for you. And you’ve been good enough to come. And now we’re all here in God’s presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us.”

³⁴⁻³⁶ Peter fairly exploded with his good news: “It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he’s doing it everywhere, among everyone. . . .

The Holy Spirit came on the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on “outsider” non-Jews, but there it was—they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God.

⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ Then Peter said, “Do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They’ve received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did.” Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.



Week 2 – Being Curious - Readings

Not Pity but Compassion, by Howard Thurman

God is making room in my heart for compassion.
 There is already a vast abundance of room for pity. It is often easy to be overcome with self-pity, that sticky substance that ruins everything it touches. My list of excuses is a long list and even as I say it, I know that under closest scrutiny they disappear, one, by one. There is pity in me—pity for others. But there is something in it that cannot be trusted; it is mixed with pride, arrogance, cunning. I see this only when I expose myself to the eyes of God in the quiet time. It is now that I see what my pity really is and the sources from which it springs.

God is making room in my heart for compassion:
 the awareness that where my life begins is where your life begins;
 the awareness that the sensitiveness to your needs
 cannot be separated from the sensitiveness to my needs;
 the awareness that the joys of my heart are never mine alone—nor are my sorrows.
 I struggle against the work of God in my heart; I want to be let alone.
 I want my boundaries to remain fixed, that I may be at rest.
 But even now, as I turn to Him in the quietness, His work in me is ever the same.

God is at work enlarging the boundaries of my heart.

“Not Pity But Compassion,” Meditations of the Heart by Howard Thurman, Beacon Press, 1953.

Peter/Cornelius, by Rachel Held Evans

After Christ’s departure, the first apostles allowed themselves to be changed by the goodness they encountered in the world. When law-abiding, kosher-eating, Roman-hating Peter encountered a centurion who feared God and gave to the poor, Peter, to his own astonishment, said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” Then Peter even went so far as to share a meal, as Jesus might have, with his new friend. “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile,” he said to Cornelius. “But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.”⁴



Not anyone.

Only recently have I understood the remarkable sweep of that statement—and the sobering reality that I am still not done yet. When I was a Bible-thumping, churchgoing, know-it-all Republican, God used bleeding-heart, politically correct, question-everything liberals to teach me a little bit more about how to be human and to toy with my concretized notions of who my enemies were. And now that I'm a bleeding-heart, politically correct, question-everything liberal, God still insists on using Bible-thumping, churchgoing, know-it-all Republicans to teach me a little bit more about how to be human and to toy with my concretized notions of who my enemies are.

I have been Peter, and I have been Cornelius. I am still Peter, and I am still Cornelius.

And God is still God. That same patient, long-suffering, often annoying God seems rather adamantly committed to putting to death my notion that this life is all about being right—and especially that my life is all about me being right. Even as I still believe that God calls us to help change the world, to make it more just, to make it more equitable, to make it more loving, I also believe that God empowers the world to help change us, to make us more just, to make us more equitable, to make us more loving. The stubbornness of my cynicism, it turns out, is no match for the resilience of God's love or for the steady work of living water.

Wholehearted Faith, by Rachel Held Evans and Jeff Chu, excerpt on Peter and Cornelius.

(pp. 115-116). HarperCollins.

See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love, by Valerie Kaur

Valerie Kaur - a Sikh civil rights attorney whose family and community experienced unimaginable abuse at the hands of American citizens and policies after the 9/11 attacks. She spent years documenting the backlash against her community after 9/11 2001.

The call to love beyond our own flesh and blood is ancient. It echoes down to us on the lips of indigenous leaders, spiritual teachers, and social reformers through the centuries. Guru Nanak called us to see no stranger, Buddha to practice unending compassion, Abraham to open our tent to all, Jesus to love our neighbors, Muhammad to take in the orphan, Mirabai to love without limit. They all expanded the circle of who counts as *one of us*, and therefore who is worthy of our care and concern. These teachings were rooted in the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual contexts of their time, but they spoke of a common vision of our interconnectedness and interdependence. It is the

ancient Sanskrit truth that we can look upon anyone or anything as *Tat tvam asi*, "I am that." It is the African philosophy: *Ubuntu*, "I am because you are." It is the Mayan precept: *In La' Kech*, "you are my other me."

What has been an ancient spiritual truth is now increasingly verified by science: We are all indivisibly part of one another. We share a common ancestry with everyone and everything alive on earth. The air we breathe contains atoms that have passed through the lungs of ancestors long dead. Our bodies are composed of the same elements created deep inside the furnaces of long-dead stars. We can look upon the face of anyone or anything around us and say - as a moral declaration and a spiritual, cosmological, and biological fact: *you are a part of me I do not yet know....*

Wonder is where love begins, but the failure to wonder is the beginning of violence. Once people stop wondering about others, once they no longer see others as part of them, they disable their instinct for empathy. And once they lose empathy, they can do anything to them or allow anything to be done to them.

Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (One World: 2020)

This Here Flesh, by Cole Arthur Riley

From the chapter called "Wonder":

Wonder includes the capacity to be in awe of humanity, even your own. It allows us to jettison the dangerous belief that things worthy of wonder can only be located on nature hikes and scenic overlooks. This can distract us from the beauty flowing through us daily. For every second that our organs and bones sustain us is a miracle. When those bones heal, when our wounds scab over this is our call to marvel at our bodies—the regeneration, their stability or frailty. This grows our sense of dignity. To be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintop, the sunlight refracting—this manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other.



From the chapter called "Dignity":

It takes time to undo the whiteness of God. When I speak of whiteness, I am referring not to the mere existence of a person in a particular body; I am referring to the historic, systemic, and sociological patterns that have oppressed, killed, abducted, abused, and discredited those who do not exist in a particular body. Whiteness is a force. It moves in religion in the same manner it moves in any sphere of life. In art, it might look like the glory of the American Western film and the lie of white bravado. In global development, the lie of the white savior. These are spiritual afflictions in and of themselves, but in religious communities, when whiteness becomes inseparable from the character of God, you'll find customs such as evangelism equated with conquering, but admissible under the guise of "love." You'll find guilt driven spirituality, which is obsessed with alleviating guilt and becoming "clean" – for whiteness always carries the memory of what it has done to those in bodies of color, and guilt is its primary tormentor. The irony, of course, is that this guilt cannot be relieved save by a rending of whiteness from the image of God (which the force of witness will never do).

In order to rend whiteness from the face of God, we must do more than make new images. We have to persist in observing and naming all the ways this force has obscured the face and character of God. The God I've known does not dominate; he kneels and washes enemies' feet. God does not make himself a hero; he heals and works miracles both publicly and privately.

We also have to expand our understanding of how other cultures and peoples contain the divine. Does God slap the tambourine like my auntie? Do they put butter and salt in their grits?

Some theologies say it is not an individual but a collective people who bear the image of God. I quite like this, because it means we need a diversity of people to reflect God more fully. Anything less and the image becomes pixelated and grainy, still beautiful but lacking clarity. If God really is three parts in one like they say, it means that God's wholeness is in a multitude.

Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*, (Convergent Books: February 22, 2022)



Good Neighbor, by Joe Davis

If everyone is our neighbor
And the world is our neighborhood,
Then what kind of behavior
Does God say makes a neighbor good?

If I see a new neighbor, would I stop and stare,
Make fun of their clothes, or laugh at their hair?

Or would I ask them their name
And how they like to be greeted
So I can treat them the way that they'd like to be treated?

Would I listen to their stories, their songs, their jokes?
Would I share with them my fears, my dreams, my hopes?

If we have different cultures or speak different languages,
Would I want to learn more or think that they're dangerous?

And how can I make the space feel safe to them?
Are there things that need to be created or changed for them?

Are they asked to stand when they need a chair?
Do they need a ramp when we only have stairs?

If I have what they need, will I happily share?
What ways can I show that I actually care?

Being a good neighbor isn't about saving others
Or behaving in ways the laws say we should,
But discovering how God's grace already makes us good,
And how God's love turns beloved neighbors into beloved neighborhoods.



Who is your Everyone, by Joe Davis

Who is your everyone?

Is it only those in the country you were born in?

Or migrant workers whose customs and cultures may seem foreign?

Does it only mean those in your church Sunday morning?

Or the nonreligious, of Jews, or Muslims, or Mormons?

With whom does your “everyone” begin or end?

Is it only those with your zip code, your language, your skin?

Can your vision extend beyond “us versus them”

Toward a bridge of love where true justice bends?

Where all our walls crumble and fall

Between “those people” who make us feel most uncomfortable?

Different and distant, they seem so unlovable –

But we will come to discover: God loves them too

No more or less, but just as much as you!

This is the truth we often may forget:

That of a transformational relationship

When we celebrate everyone’s human sacredness.

For we are them and they are us, all created in God’s image.

Who is your everyone?

Joe Davis, “Good Neighbor” and “Who is Your Everyone,” found in *Remind Me Again: Poems and Practices for Remembering Who We Are*, (Sparkhouse: 2023)

