

PRAYER of Good Courage

Small Group Curriculum

WEEK 1: September 22-28

OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious God, you have claimed and called each of us as your beloved children. Help us to see ourselves as you see us: perfectly and wonderfully made. Give us clarity each day that we might see places where we can be your hands and feet in the world in all areas of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

WARM-UP QUESTION:

As this is the first week, go around the circle and share your name, pieces of your life that feel significant right now (i.e. life stage, work, family, communities you're part of, etc.), and a place where you saw joy in your life or the world this past week.

BIBLE REFLECTION:

Throughout the next six weeks, we will be reading from the book of Philippians as we work our way through the Prayer of Good Courage. Paul wrote this letter to the church community in Philippi (in modern day Greece) while he was in prison. The passage below comes from the beginning of the letter. Giving thanks was a typical part of opening a letter at the time, but this thanks and greeting is specific to this community.

Philippians 1:3-6 NRSV: *I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

Scripture Question: Even from prison, Paul is giving thanks for this church community, constantly praying for them with joy. He even offers them encouragement, saying that he is confident that God will complete the good work that God began in them. Reflect on this phrase "began a good work among you" in your own life. What "good work" is God beginning in you (either personally or in communities of which you are part) right now? Where do you experience God to be most present in your life, or most visible in the world?

The Prayer of Good Courage in Our Lives

1. At Westwood and in the Lutheran tradition, we often talk about call and vocation. We define vocation as "being claimed and called to be God's hands and feet in the world, in all realms of our lives." Reflect on this definition as a group. What does it mean to be claimed and called, accepted exactly as you are as a child of God? What does it mean for God to take you exactly where you are, but not leave you there? How does this play out in *all* realms of your life—in friendships, family relationships, work, retirement, looking for work, parenting, being a child, in times of joy and times of fear (add your own category here)? (Pick which of those questions most resonate with your group and focus on one or two.)

2. Henri Nouwen was a contemplative monk, teacher, and writer in the 20th century. Read his words on prayer below, and if you have a pen, write “be called” or “being called” or “a call” any time you see the word “pray” or “prayer” or “a prayer.” Does this help clarify what it means for you to be called? What phrases from the excerpt resonate most with you?

3. Read the excerpt from Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* below. Thurman is speaking in this book specifically to people who have experienced oppression and violence at the hands of society, and in this excerpt, he tells the story of his grandmother reclaiming her identity as a child of God even in the midst of being enslaved by White slaveowners. Think about this story in context of systems of inequality and violence that still exist today. If we are each claimed and called as God's children, and are fully loved exactly as we are by God, what does that mean for the way we need to change systems in our world so that everyone can experience that? What, in your vision, needs to happen so that all people can live as beloved children of God?

Readings and Media for Week 1:

From *With Open Hands* by Henri J. M. Nouwen:

To **pray** means to open your hands before God. It means slowly relaxing the tension which squeezes your hands together and accepting your existence with an increasing readiness, not as a possession to defend, but as a gift to receive. Above all, therefore, **prayer** is a way of life which allows you to find a stillness in the midst of the world where you open your hands to God's promises and find hope for yourself, your [neighbor], and the whole community in which you live. In **prayer**, you encounter God in the soft breeze, in the distress and joy of your neighbor and in the loneliness of your own heart. [...] In all these moments, you gradually make your life more **a prayer**, and you open your hands to be led by God even to where you would rather not go.

From *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman:

When I was a youngster, this idea [that I was a child of God, that I belonged to God] was drilled into me by my grandmother. This idea was given to her by a certain slave minister who, on occasion, held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves. How everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when, in her recital, she would come to the triumphant climax of the minister: “[...] You—you are not slaves. You are God's children.” This established for them the ground of personal dignity, so that a profound sense of personal worth could absorb the fear reaction. [...] The individual now feels that he counts, that he belongs, He senses the confirmation of his roots, and even death becomes a little thing.

PRAYER OF GOOD COURAGE

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WEEKLY ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Join us this Sunday, September 29 for Dr. Casey Elledge's final Bible study session on the book of Philippians between services. October 6 and 13, our Healthcare Affinity Group is hosting two Sundays on mental health, so mark your calendars and be sure to attend.