

HOLY
BIBLE

ACTS

continues

THE BOUNDLESS WORK OF THE SPIRIT

A Bible Study of The Vine United Methodist Church



Acts Continues

The Boundless

Work of the Spirit

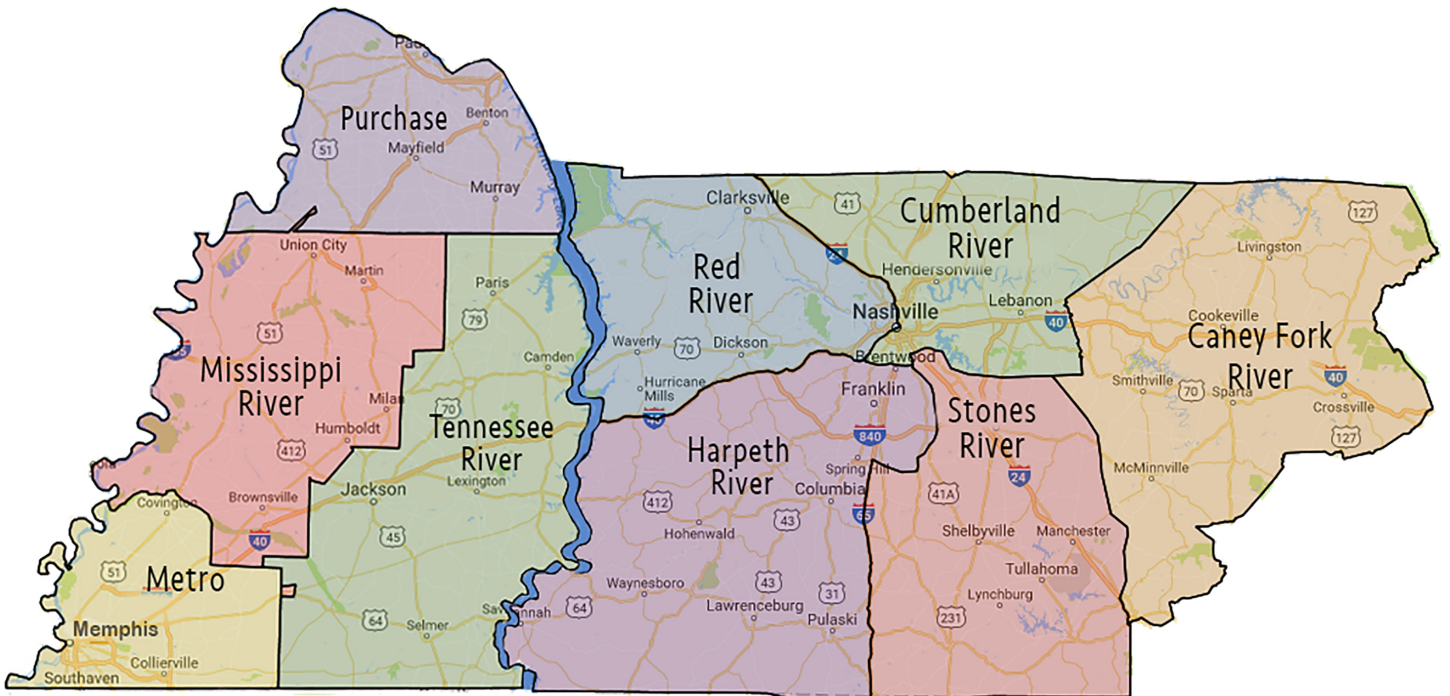


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Acknowledgments

The Book of Acts teaches us that the work of the Church is a work of collaboration, and the study you have in your hands is no exception. We thank our friends and colleagues who offered their time and gifts to make this work a reality. We also thank Bishop Bill McAlilly, Rev. Melinda Britt, Amy Hurd, and the leadership of the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference for the invitation to extend this study beyond the bounds of The Vine United Methodist Church.

A WORK ON THE USAGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI):

It is conceivable that future generations will regard November 30, 2022, as a watershed moment in human history, a date as pivotal as the first human mission to the moon or the birth of the internet. On this day, Open AI unveiled a technology that promised to redefine the boundaries of human-machine interaction. This breakthrough, not just a mere advancement in artificial intelligence, but a leap into uncharted territories of capabilities and implications, has since permeated diverse facets of society. As many of us have witnessed this technological evolution, one cannot help but ponder its implications for the Christian Church.

As an early adopter and practitioner in the realm of technology, and a student of theology, I've been embedded in this evolving dialogue surrounding AI's role in the Christian world. My journey from computer science to theology has offered me dual lenses to view this narrative; and, it has also continued to ignite my passion for the potential harmonization of technology and faith.

I've seen firsthand how AI can revolutionize mundane tasks. But, its application within the sacred halls of the religious world presents a more complex picture. For instance, can you imagine a reality where an AI system is used to tailor biblical teachings to individual congregants' needs? The efficiency could be remarkable, yet some questions must be raised about the nature of human-machine interaction such as, can AI truly understand human suffering or offer genuine comfort? How do we reconcile the cold logic of algorithms with the warm, nuanced teachings of Christ? What set of theological sources are enmeshed in the answers and analysis? While possibilities may seem boundless, they are rife with profound implications.

The ethical and theological conundrums at this juncture are manifold. While AI might offer unparalleled insights into biblical analysis and an unlimited range of topics, its lack of moral consciousness and inability to experience divine grace poses significant challenges. These are some of the challenges that I have grappled with—not just as a technologist or theologian—but, as someone who stands at the crossroads of both worlds.

So, why and how did we opt to use AI in this study? In short, we opted to use AI because like all technology, this is a tool whose moral outcome depends more on the user than on the technology itself. As we have mentioned, AI, as a tool, offers unparalleled opportunities to augment and enhancing the work we do in ways that would be unfeasible through traditional means. Our usage here was limited to generating images to augment the visual appeal of the work. That choice is not without controversy, for AI is unable to truly generate something new; its gift lies in creation through recreation.

AI-generated images in our Bible Study serve a specific purpose: to provide visual aids to help bring biblical stories and concepts to life. This usage of AI as a tool for visual storytelling in the context of our Bible Study opened up new avenues for engagement, particularly for visual learners.

However, this approach did raise important questions. The images created by AI are based on existing content created by others. AI systems work on recombining that which they have seen and recorded. This raises a theological question about the originality and authenticity of these representations. In Christian theology, the act of creation is central, seen as an expression of divine power and imagination. AI, in contrast, operates through algorithmic processing, lacking the spontaneous creativity we often attribute to divine or human creation. This dichotomy prompts a deeper exploration

into the nature of 'creation' itself and challenges us to consider what it means to create in a world increasingly mediated by technology.

While these AI-generated images can bring fresh perspectives, they also invite us to reflect on the unique value of human creativity, inspired by the divine, in portraying and understanding biblical narratives, the arts, and more.

Moreover, while these images can be powerful aids, they carry a risk of shaping, or even limiting, our understanding of biblical narratives—much in the same way artistic renditions throughout the centuries have shaped, challenged, and limited human perception of biblical narratives and the divine. An AI-generated image of a biblical scene is an interpretation mediated by the individual who creates the prompt, not a definitive representation. It's crucial for users to be aware that these visualizations are not replacements for the text, but are tools that can aid in understanding and engagement. Such imagery should be approached with discernment, always considering the broader context and the myriad ways in which biblical stories can be interpreted. By acknowledging these images as one of many ways to visualize and connect with the scriptures, we can use them as a starting point for deeper discussion and reflection, rather than as an endpoint that defines or confines our understanding.

Our use of AI for image generation in Bible Study was a deliberate choice to enhance learning experience. However, it was also a choice made with the awareness of the limitations and ethical considerations inherent in the technology. As with all tools, the key lies in how we use them – in this case, as a complement to, not a replacement for, traditional methods of study and contemplation. The challenge and opportunity lie in harnessing the potential of AI responsibly, ensuring that it serves to deepen, rather than diminish, our understanding of the Christian faith.

AI system used in this project:

- ChatGPT 4.0 / DALL-E text to image generator.
- OpenAI Coloring Book Hero

In Christ,

Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado



Preface

RATHER, YOU WILL RECEIVE POWER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS COME UPON YOU, AND YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM, IN ALL JUDEA AND SAMARIA, AND TO THE END OF THE EARTH.

— JESUS (ACTS 1:8, CEB)

In this era of unprecedented challenges and change, the Book of Acts stands out as a beacon of guidance for the Church. This profound narrative, which captures the disciples' evolution from companions of Jesus to pioneers of faith, powerfully illustrates a vital truth: our spiritual journey and growth are deeply rooted in the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

This year, as we prepare for Annual Conference, you are invited to join United Methodists from around the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference in a journey of learning and discovery. Our study and sermon series, "Acts Continues: The Boundless Work of the Spirit," is designed to offer both individuals and congregations a path to a more profound faith and understanding.

The Book of Acts transcends a mere historical account; it is a living, evolving narrative that is continuously shaped by the actions and faith of believers across the ages. In our seven-week series, we will embark on a transformative exploration, focusing initially on how the Holy Spirit guided the Early Church, then seeking insights into how the Spirit is actively present and working in our lives today.

This series aims to bridge the ancient wisdom of the early Christian community with the pressing needs of our modern world. As we dive into these sacred texts, we invite you to open your hearts and minds to the subtle, yet powerful influence, of the Spirit. Let us embrace the opportunity to be reshaped, challenged, and inspired. Together, we will embark on this journey, eager to witness the profound impact it will have on our personal faith, our communal bonds, and our enduring mission to the world.

Do not let this opportunity pass to deepen your understanding of the Holy Spirit's active role in our individual lives and our collective faith community. Join us on this remarkable journey. Be a part of this unfolding story of faith and transformation.

In Christ,

The Vine UMC



Introduction: Welcome to the Revolution

by Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado, The Vine UMC

In his commentary on the Book of Acts, Professor Willie James Jennings affirms the book is about revolution, depicting life in the disruptive presence of the Spirit of God.¹ This perspective elevates Acts from a simple historical account to a hands-on guide for those who yearn to witness the movement of the Divine in human affairs through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.² While it may seem unconventional to label Acts in this way, even a cursory reading reveals a distinct pattern of Spirit-guided action and human cooperation that leads individuals and communities to a newness of thought and heart. This newness is not without consequence. Often times the change experienced by individuals and advocated by communities stood in direct conflict with the norms of the day.³

1 Jennings, Willie James. "Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Belief: a Theological Commentary on the Bible) (p. 1). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

2 Maloney, Linda M., and Ivoni Richter Reimer. Acts of the Apostles. Edited by Mary Ann Beavis and Barbara E. Reid. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Pres., 2022), .

3 It's crucial to recognize that the primary aim of the early disciples was not to undermine societal norms for the sake of assimilation, acculturation, or even social harmony. These disciples were deeply rooted in the social, cultural, and religious landscapes of their era, and had largely succeeded in navigating these complex terrains. Their courage to challenge the prevailing norms was not self-generated; rather, it was cultivated, affirmed, and driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those challenges had significant repercussions. The followers of "The Way" encountered both internal and external challenges due to their

If one asks, "What happens when the Holy Spirit infuses the life of a community?" then we need to look no further than the Book of Acts for a faithful answer. To faithfully answer this question, Acts narrates the events surrounding those who follow the "The Way."⁴ It portrays a spiritual revolution that has real-world implications. While the term "revolution" may evoke a sense of discomfort and unease in some people by conjuring up images of violent uprisings, social unrest, and upheaval, at heart, revolution is fundamentally about change. Not just any change. But transformative change. In the Christian context, the Book of Acts serves as a compelling narrative of a revolution through which the Holy Spirit continues to alter the trajectory of human history.

This monumental revolution was set into motion when the Risen Christ instructed his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they were imbued with the Holy Spirit. This event, known as Pentecost, was the catalyst that propelled the disciples into a life of mission and ministry inclusive of all people, regardless of their ethnic, social,

commitment to follow Jesus and be guided by the expansive movement of the Holy Spirit.

4 See Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

or religious backgrounds. The disciples began to share the life-altering message of Jesus Christ. They started with their immediate community and gradually extended their reach. They invited everyone to be part of this divine undertaking—a transformative work that beckoned all to a renewed way of life.

The gospel message is perennially one of transformation. “Change your hearts and lives!” This clarion call was first sounded by John the Baptist, who urged the Israelites to repent and undergo personal transformation as preparation for the imminent arrival of God’s kingdom. Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, echoed this message but added a revolutionary twist: the kingdom of God was not just a future promise, but a present reality manifest in him. After the crucifixion and ascension, the disciples, fortified by the Holy Spirit, continued to preach this transformative message, inviting all to partake in God’s revolutionary work in the world.

However, it’s important to remember that not everyone was receptive to or even recognizes this divine work. When

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of God’s activity in the life of others in his book, *Life Together*, he points out:

“I can never know beforehand how God’s image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God’s free and sovereign creation. To me, the sight may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every man in the likeness of his Son, the Crucified. After all, even that image certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it.”⁵

This thought may seem odd, but if we look back at the history of our own nation and denomination, we will witness times when the movement of the Spirit pushed individuals far beyond their comfort zones so the reality of God’s kingdom would manifest for all to see. The invitation to participate is a reminder that inner change is never as natural as people believe it to be, and change requires participation.

In 1970, poet Gil Scott Heron penned the iconic lines, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” highlighting the idea that revolutions are not spectator sports. Revolution requires active, invested participation. We cannot be passive observers and expect to be part of change. Imagine if the disciples had remained locked in the Upper Room. When the disciples were empowered by the Holy Spirit, they moved beyond the closed doors to actively engage others in sharing good news. Revolution necessitates this type of positive action which calls us to change.

Revolutionary change and active engagement is epitomized in the lives of Peter and Paul, who, despite interpersonal conflicts and differences, were pivotal in spreading the Gospel through dynamic and proactive ministry. Their journey through conflict and collaboration underscores

⁵ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together* (p. 73). Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. Kindle Edition.



that transformative change often requires not just internal conviction, but also the willingness to engage, reconcile, and act.

The term “revolution is often a source of discomfort. Is it possible that when we have such feelings these reflect our hesitance or resistance to needed changes in our systems, world, and lives?

Our Christian faith continually reminds us that the concept of change is not just peripheral but central to the gospel message. Jesus himself stated, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.” This is a call for personal transformation, which in turn catalyzes communal transformation. The Book of Acts serves as a testament that this transformation is not a human endeavor but a divine intervention facilitated through the Holy Spirit. The disciples, who were initially paralyzed by fear and uncertainty, were radically transformed into bold and impassioned heralds of the gospel. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they preached in languages that transcended cultural and linguistic barriers, inviting all to a life of Spirit-empowered transformation.

In today’s world, the revolutionary work of God continues to unfold even amid internal conflicts and external challenges by way of the the audacious power of grace-based love. This love is vivified in God’s invitation to relationship through Christ. The promise of salvation and transformation is not an exclusive club reserved for a select few, but rather an open invitation to all. Each one of us is called to join this divine revolution of love and grace. We are invited to change our hearts and lives, to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, and to receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The narrative of Acts is an ongoing story, a story that includes each of us. The Holy Spirit’s transformative work continues to manifest in our lives, urging us to move from complacency to bold action. As active participants in God’s unceasing work of transformation, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to reach out to all people—our children, neighbors, strangers, and even those with whom we vehemently disagree. The work of the Spirit has no bounds.

As we journey through this series, we are invited to

embrace the life-changing work God is actively performing in each one of us and throughout the world. Let’s answer God’s call to be agents of change and continue to live the ever-expanding reality the Spirit places before us.

Our journey will follow the unfolding story of the Book of Acts and the boundless ways the Holy Spirit moves the community outward so it may share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people. We will reflect on the practical application of lessons found in this revolutionary book. In week one, we will read Acts 1-3 and reflect on the spiritual work of waiting. In week 2, we will read Acts 4-7 and reflect on the reality of the Holy Spirit and genuine Spirit-led community. In week 3, we will read Acts 7-10 and explore how the Holy Spirit breaks barriers to include outsiders in the story of faith. In week 4, we will read Acts 10-14 and explore what it means to experience transformation. In week 5, we will read Acts 15-17 and explore conflict and unity in the life of the church. In week 6, we will read Acts 18-21 and consider the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the world. We will close on week 7 by writing about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and community as we read Acts 21-28.

A WORD ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

All of us bring assumptions, biases, and even prejudices to our reading of the Scriptures. Our life experiences, social status, educational level, and theological backgrounds all contribute to our reading and understanding of the Holy Scriptures—we bring our whole selves to our reading and study. If we desire to encounter the living Christ through our reading of the Scriptures, this approach is necessary. But, always we remain aware of the lenses through which we read scripture. When used correctly, these lenses can reveal unimagined new truths about the text, God, and ourselves.

How would you read the Exodus story (Exodus 1-13) if your ancestors were African slaves? What perspective would you bring to the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-27) as a rape survivor? Or, how would you interpret the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) if you were a migrant worker? Though the stories remain

unchanged, the lens we apply to our interpretative work can provide a new perspective.

Of course, interpretation does not happen in a vacuum. United Methodists have held that Scripture is alone and yet never alone.⁶ Our interpretive work of Scripture occurs within the bounds of a theological framework that ensures the integrity of our interpretation, faithfulness to the historical tradition of the church, and consistency with our doctrinal heritage.

For United Methodists, this framework is called “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” As stated in the Book of Discipline, “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”⁷ This means that “Scriptural interpretation and faithfulness should always be accompanied by the proper use of tradition, reason, and experience.”⁸

Scripture serves as our primary source since, as stated in the Articles of Religion in The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, it “reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation.”⁹ Our claims about tradition, reason, and experience require that we clarify our meaning. We must be cautious not to misunderstand the “Quadrilateral.” This is not a means to arrive at our preferred answer to the deep questions of life. Rather, this is a tool that can move us towards growth by challenging our understanding of God, ourselves, and one another. Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason do not hold the same weight or function in this framework. Scripture is always primary. Like a house, Scripture provides the foundation for our reflection. The rest of the house is composed of tradition, experience, and reason. Tradition moves us to encounter the wisdom the Church has cultivated throughout the ages. Reason calls us to engage the fullness of our minds. Experience brings the work of the Holy Spirit to bear in our lives. This is a way we cooperate with God as we seek to grow in love, holiness, and understanding.

6 Scott Jones, “*Scripture Alone, Yet Never Alone: The Trajectory of United Methodist Doctrine*,” Fondren Lecture - Perkins School of Theology January 28, 2008, 9.

7 Book of Discipline, ¶ 105.4

8 Jones, 9.

9 Book of Discipline, ¶ 104.3.

A SHORT PRIMER ON THE BOOK OF ACTS

Much like a well-crafted sequel, the Book of Acts begins by orienting its readers into the context of the preceding narrative. The author, widely believed by scholars since the second century to be Luke—a close companion of the Apostle Paul¹⁰—skillfully connects the Gospel attributed to him with the unfolding events in Acts. This seamless transition offers readers a unified understanding of the overarching story and effectively sets the stage for the transformative spiritual odyssey that follows.

Luke stands out among those who recorded events about the life of Jesus not only because of his mastery of storytelling, but also because he recorded a sustained account of the early life of the Church.¹¹ While we may be familiar with his words, we know very little about this author, who penned about one-third of the New Testament.

Much of what we do know about Luke is derived from the writing of the Apostle Paul.¹² From these, we gather that Luke was a physician, a companion of Mark, a Gentile Christian, and a companion to the Apostle in his time in prison.¹³ Through his own writings, we learn Luke was not an eyewitness to the Gospel events, but studied them carefully and produced a faithful account of all he had learned.¹⁴ Luke also offers some insights into himself through his writings. As we read the Book of Acts we will notice changes in language where the author alerts us to his presence at certain events through the use of “we” language.¹⁵

One could dismiss the need to seek knowledge about the author, but a better understanding of Luke, his audience, and his context will also help us better understand his writings. Contextual understanding is of vital importance for any reader of the Holy Scriptures. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “God’s word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the

10 Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sacra Pagina: The Acts of the Apostles: Volume 5* (Kindle Locations 193-194). Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition.

11 Ibid.

12 See Colossians 4:10-14; Philemon 24; and 2 Timothy 4:11.

13 Green, Michael. *Thirty Years That Changed the World: The Book Acts for Today* (p. 25). Eerdmans. Kindle Edition.

14 See Luke 1:1-4.

15 See Acts 16:10-17, 20:4-21:17, 27:1-28:1



point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It's able to judge the heart's thoughts and intentions."¹⁶ There is no question that the Holy Scriptures speak into our lives. Our search for contextual and authorship details is not an attempt to "prove" the words of the Bible are true—we receive the Holy Scriptures through faith. We seek understanding to ensure we do not stray from the path and attempt to interpret these sacred words after our own image. The work of biblical interpretation is an ongoing dialogue, and as heirs to the orthodox faith¹⁷ passed down from the Apostles, we are witnesses to instances where we, throughout history, have succeeded and failed in our representation of God's self-communication.¹⁸

Luke begins both his Gospel and the Book of Acts with a dedication to "Theophilus," a name that translates to "friend of God" or "God-lover."¹⁹ The identity of Theophilus has been the subject of scholarly debate; some propose that he was a specific individual who either commissioned or financially supported Luke's literary endeavors. Others argue that Theophilus serves as a symbolic figure, representing any reader who is a seeker or lover of God. In either case, the address to Theophilus serves a dual purpose. If he was a real person, the dedication acknowledges his role and importance in the creation of these texts. If symbolic, the name Theophilus encapsulates the ideal audience—those who are friends of God or who seek a deeper understanding of the Divine. This clever literary device allows Luke to both honor a possible patron and extend an invitation to all readers to become 'friends of God,' thereby engaging in the transformative stories and teachings that follow. We should take note of this as a personal invitation to enter into a journey of faith and discovery. Just as Theophilus, whether real or symbolic, is drawn into the narrative of Jesus Christ and the Early Church, we too are invited to immerse ourselves in these accounts.

In embracing Luke's works as personal letters to

¹⁶ Hebrews 4:12, CEB.

¹⁷ By "orthodox," I refer to the foundational tenets of Christian faith that are rooted in the Scriptures, articulated in the historical creeds, and transmitted through the enduring tradition of the Church. These core beliefs encompass essential theological concepts and practices that have been consistently upheld and cherished across generations within the Christian communities.

¹⁸ Pollefeyt, D., & Bieringer, R. (2005). The role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered. Risks and challenges in teaching the Bible. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 9, 117-139.

¹⁹ Wesley One Volume Commentary (p. 617). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

ourselves, we open our hearts to the possibility of transformation. Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts offer us a window into the life of Jesus and the actions of the Holy Spirit in the early church, encouraging us to reflect on how these divine interventions can resonate in our lives today. This perspective turns the act of reading from a mere intellectual exercise into a form of spiritual engagement, where the stories of faith, miracles, challenges, and triumphs become more than ancient narratives—they become relevant, living testimonies that speak to us in our current context.

Scholars and ancient readers concur that the Luke-Acts texts were not penned in Palestine or Syria. Early Christian theologians such as Irenaeus and Eusebius posited that Rome could be the place where these works were composed. Other ancient traditions have pointed to locations like Achaia and Caesarea as possible sites of composition. It's worth noting that these speculations are largely drawn from the text itself, as Luke-Acts does not explicitly state its place of origin.²⁰ As for the time when these texts were written, most scholars agree they were likely composed between 80 and 90 CE. This period falls after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, an event that had a profound impact on early Christianity and its writings. The timing also aligns with a period when the Christian community was becoming more organized and was increasingly separate from its Jewish roots - factors that are reflected in the themes and structure of Luke-Acts.

The Book of Acts demonstrates a crucial pivot in the life of the early Church and sets the theological and missional tone for Christians throughout history. Though this book was written in a specific time and place, its message is timeless and universal. Luke's meticulous account provides us with more than just historical data; it offers a spiritual roadmap, guiding us through the complexities of faith, community, and divine intervention.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Book of Acts is that its narrative is not confined to the pages of the Bible. The story continues to unfold in our lives today, as we, too, are led by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the Gospel. Whether we are breaking bread in fellowship, studying the Scriptures, or engaging in acts of compassion and justice, we are participating in the ongoing story that Luke began documenting nearly two millennia ago.

The Holy Spirit, which empowered the apostles to speak in tongues, heal the sick, and break down social barriers, is the same Spirit which moves in our communities today. It challenges us, comforts us, and calls us into deeper relationship with God and one another. As we navigate the complexities of modern life, let us remember that we are not merely readers of the Book of Acts; we are its living characters, called to continue the work that the early Church began—a work guided by faith, hope, and love. ■

²⁰ Fitzmyer, Joseph A., S.J.. "Introduction." In *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 45–152. New Haven & London: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1998.

Study User's Guide

STUDY USER'S GUIDE

Welcome to “Acts Continues: The Boundless Work of the Spirit.” Over the next seven weeks, we invite you to join us in an enriching journey through the entire Book of Acts. This exploration isn’t just about reading; it’s about growing in understanding of the profound themes within the text and being formed by the wisdom the Holy Spirit seeks to impart to us.

As United Methodists we believe the living core of our Christian faith is “revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”¹ This study draws on a diversity of perspectives, voices, and resources to help you have a deeper encounter with the “sound of the genuine.”² The late Bishop Rueben Job reminds us, “We are not left on our own to learn how to pray or how to discern God’s will; our Companion, the Holy Spirit, is our teacher and guide as we learn how to live more faithfully and fully in relationship with God.”³

Our study is structured to provide a manageable and immersive experience. Each week, you will be presented with daily Scripture readings and additional resources to augment your journey. These additional resources will provide you with opportunities to deepen your understanding and spiritual connection. These include:

- **Written Essay:** Weekly thought-provoking insights to complement your reading.
- **Visio Divina:** A contemplative practice using visual art to help focus and deepen your reflection.
- **Suggested Spiritual Discipline:** An activity to help you connect more deeply with voice of the Spirit.
- **John Wesley Sermons:** Deep theological insights and practical guidance for the people called Methodists.
- **Charles Wesley Hymns:** Lyrical expressions of our Wesleyan faith that resonate with the themes of Acts.
- **Activities for Young Children:** Engaging resources to involve the younger members of our community in this spiritual journey.

We understand everyone’s journey is unique, so feel free to engage with these activities as you feel led. Whether you immerse yourself in all these offerings or choose to focus on one, your participation in this journey is a valuable part of our collective exploration.

If you already engage in a daily practice of Scripture reading and prayer, we encourage you to integrate these resources to enhance and enrich your existing routine. Alternatively, if you are yet to establish a daily spiritual practice, consider this an inviting opportunity to develop a life-giving habit that can significantly deepen and expand your faith journey.

The pattern below can be a model for you to start your daily practice. For a more in-depth guide, visit www.prayonpurpose.com.

- **Begin With Prayer**
- **Read & Reflect on the Scripture**
- **Put Your Own Thoughts on Paper**
- **Read the Weekly Reflection**
- **Engage with Other Resource**
- **Share Your Thoughts**
- **Close In Prayer**

“Prayer is not bending God to my will, but it is a bringing of my will into conformity with God’s will, so that his will may work in and through me.”⁴

1 United Methodist Church. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (p. 142). The United Methodist Publishing House.

2 “The Sound of the Genuine” is a profound concept championed by theologian Howard Thurman, which underscores the presence of the Divine voice within us all. It calls for stillness to hear this inner whisper that unveils our true self and steers us toward our life’s authentic journey. Thurman eloquently presented this idea in his 1980 speech at the Spelman College Baccalaureate ceremony.

3 Job, Rueben P. Listen: Praying in a Noisy World (pp. 12-13). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

4 Jones, E. Stanley. How to Pray (p. 5). Ravenio Books. Kindle Edition.

Week 1:

Divine Anticipation: Waiting for the Spirit



Description: The Book of Acts opens with the resurrected Jesus instructing the disciples to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In this first week, we explore the waiting period experienced by the disciples before the arrival of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to wait for God's gracious action in our lives?

Daily Reading Schedule:

- **Day 1:** Acts 1:1-14 (Promise of the Holy Spirit)
- **Day 2:** Acts 1:15-26 (Choosing Matthias)
- **Day 3:** Acts 2:1-21 (Pentecost)
- **Day 4:** Acts 2:22-47 (Peter's Sermon and Early Church Life)
- **Day 5:** Acts 3:1-10 (Healing the Lame Man)
- **Day 6:** Acts 3:11-26 (Peter's Second Sermon)
- **Day 7:** Reflect and rest.

Daily Reading Questions

- How is the community of believers forming in these early chapters?
- What steps of obedience are highlighted?
- How did you see the disciples struggle with doubt or fear?
- How do the disciples prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit?
- What are the different emotions experienced by the disciples in the first two chapters?
- How does the early church deal with replacement and succession in leadership?

Additional Resources for Week 1

- **Written Reflection** by Rev. Jerome Scales, Jr. (*pages 22-23*)
- **John Wesley Sermon:** "The Means of Grace" (*page 21*)
- **Charles Wesley Hymn:** Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire (*page 21*)
- **Spiritual Practice:** Silence (*page 24*)
- **Coloring Page Art** by Sueli Furtado (*page 25*)
- **Visio Divina Guideline** (*page 26*)
- **Visio Divina Art** by Sueli Furtado (*page 27*)

John Wesley Sermon:

The Means of Grace:

In his sermon, “The Means of Grace,” John Wesley explores the concept of “ordinances” as channels for God’s grace. He argues that Christian practices like prayer, scripture reading, and sacraments are essential for conveying grace. Wesley warns against mistaking these means as ends in themselves or as substitutes for genuine faith. He emphasizes that grace is a gift from God, not earned through these practices. But, these ordained means are essential channels for receiving God’s grace. Wesley advises believers to actively engage in these practices while maintaining faith in God’s power to bestow grace.

Full Sermon: <https://thevineumc.church/the-means-of-grace>

Charles Wesley Hymn:

Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire:

Charles Wesley’s hymn “Come Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire” is a prayer for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and inspiration. Wesley acknowledges the Spirit as the source of prophetic fire and divine love. The hymn emphasizes the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in understanding divine truths and experiencing God’s love.

Full Hymn: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/603>

Week 1

Divine Anticipation: Waiting for the Spirit

by Rev. Jerome Scales, Jr., Seay-Hubbard UMC

“God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.”

-William Cowper

This poignant line from William Cowper’s poem beautifully encapsulates the theme of our study today: recognizing God’s work in our lives, even when it defies our expectations.

Around 30-33 A.D., Luke, a highly educated physician in the Greco-Roman world, continues his writings to Theophilus. His aim is to provide a well-researched account of the events leading to the emergence of “The Way.”¹ Luke’s meticulous attention to detail and reliance on eyewitness accounts lend credibility to his narrative, offering Theophilus a methodical, structured, and coherent understanding of Jesus’ ministry. His writings, influenced by Paul’s teachings, emphasize Jesus’ outreach to the marginalized, the universality of salvation, the role of the Holy Spirit as a helper, and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.²

This historical context sets the stage for understanding the disciples’ expectations and subsequent confusion about Jesus’ mission.

During this period, the Roman Empire’s control over Jerusalem weighs heavily on the children of Israel. Amidst heightened unrest, the Hebrew descendants, including Jesus’ disciples, await a Messiah to unite them, overthrow Roman rule, and bring freedom. However, the disciples grapple with confusion after Jesus’ execution, struggling to reconcile their experiences with Jesus and their traditional Messianic expectations. This confusion is evident in Acts 1:6, where they inquire about the restoration of Israel’s kingdom, revealing their misunderstanding of the Messiah’s role.³

¹ Luke’s dedication to Theophilus and his methodical approach are discussed in Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1. For language on “The Way,” see Luke 1:1-4, Acts 9:2, Acts 19:9.

² See Luke 2:10-11, Luke 4:21, Luke 5:31-32, Luke 12:12, Luke 13:29, Luke 14:13-14, Luke 24:44-45, Luke 24:49.

³ Acts 1:6 highlights the disciples’ confusion about the Messiah’s role in the political landscape of their time.



AI-generated image of disciples looking upward during the Ascension in Baroque style.

I often recall moments when I've frantically searched for keys in my hand or glasses on my head. It's a common human experience to search for something without realizing it's already with us.

Perhaps you've heard the story about the flood that stranded a man atop his house, crying out to God for help. Amid his wailing, along came a life vest, a speed boat, and a helicopter, but the man, who we'll call Roscoe, waved each of them away because he was still waiting on God.

Overwhelmed by the flood, Roscoe finds himself sitting at the desk of the Head Director of the Human Resources Department in the hereafter. After what seemed like an eternity, the director enters the room and sits across from Roscoe inquisitively. She asks Roscoe about his demise and why he didn't accept the life vest, speed boat, or helicopter that God ordered specially for him. Roscoe ponders briefly and says frankly, "Don't get me wrong, I saw what you sent. I just figured a yacht would be next. God is good!"

This story and our own experiences illustrate how we can overlook the answers or help already provided because we are looking for God to act or respond in a particular fashion. This may have been one of the first hurdles the disciples had to overcome to transition from their "own

way" and fully accept "The Way." A transition of this magnitude requires a willingness to abandon our meager preferences of how we think God should provide grace to us and begin the joyful rest of abiding in the unknown things of God. William Cowper, in his 1773 poem, "Light Shining Out of Darkness," wrote:

"God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm."⁴

These words, often misquoted as scripture, remind us of the marvelous nature of our God compared to ourselves—a perspective we should never be without.

It's not far-fetched to believe that confusion results from searching for something, waiting for something, and not knowing fully what is being sought. A further issue arises when we wait for something to occur but are blinded by our preferences. There are many ways we can miss the move of God if we allow our expectations of what God can do to overshadow who God is. To avoid this in our walk with God, we may want to be open to the option of believing God can do anything and move however is necessary for the will of God. ■

⁴ William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," in *African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal* (Nashville, 2011), 53.



AI-generated image of Disciples Waiting for the Holy Spirit in the style of Antonio Rocco.

SILENCE AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Silence as a spiritual practice is the intentional cultivation of stillness and quietude to deepen one's connection with the Divine. In a world that is increasingly noisy and filled with distractions, the practice of silence offers a sanctuary for the soul, a space where one can listen more attentively to the subtle whispers of God. Unlike other forms of prayer or meditation that may involve words, chants, or specific postures, silence requires nothing but a willingness to be present and attentive.

The Essence of Silence

The essence of this practice lies not in the absence of sound but in the presence of an attentive heart. It's about creating a sacred space where the clamor of the external world is muted, allowing for a more profound encounter with the Divine and with one's inner self. Silence is not emptiness; it is filled with the presence of God. It is a canvas upon which the Divine can paint insights, wisdom, and a sense of peace.

Benefits

- Fosters deeper self-awareness
- Enhances the ability to hear God's voice
- Reduces stress and promotes mental clarity
- Cultivates a sense of inner peace and spiritual depth

Practice for Individuals

1. **Find a Quiet Space:** Choose a location where you won't be disturbed, and where external noise is minimal.
2. **Set an Intention:** Before you begin, set an intention for your time of silence. It could be as simple as wanting to feel closer to God.
3. **Get Comfortable:** Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes if it helps you focus.
4. **Begin:** Allow yourself to enter into silence. Let go of the need to do anything, say anything, or think anything. Just be.
5. **Duration:** You can start with just a few minutes and gradually extend the time as you become more comfortable with the practice.
6. **Close:** Gently transition out of the silence, perhaps with a prayer of gratitude or a few deep breaths.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Gather:** Meet in a quiet, comfortable space where everyone can sit or lie down.
2. **Introduction:** Briefly explain the purpose and benefits of practicing silence for those who may be new to it.
3. **Group Silence:** Enter into a period of communal silence, each person engaging with their own intention or focus.
4. **Duration:** The group can decide beforehand how long the silence will last, usually between 5-20 minutes.
5. **Sharing:** After the period of silence, offer an opportunity for anyone who wishes to share their experience or insights they may have gained.
6. **Closing:** End the session with a collective prayer or a moment of shared gratitude.

Silence as a spiritual practice is both a gift and a discipline. It's a gift because it offers us the rare opportunity to disengage from the chaos of daily life and enter into the presence of God. It's a discipline because it requires intentional effort to set aside time and space for this sacred encounter. Yet, the rewards are immeasurable, offering glimpses into the eternal and the profound. ■

COLORING PAGE ART:



VISIO DIVINA GUIDELINE:

Visio Divina, or “Divine Seeing,” is a contemplative practice that involves meditating on a visual object, often a religious image, artwork, or even a natural scene, to gain spiritual insight and deepen one’s relationship with the Divine. Unlike reading or hearing, which engage other senses, Visio Divina invites individuals to use their sense of sight to explore the deeper spiritual meanings an image might hold.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Select an Image:** Choose a religious artwork, icon, or natural scene you find spiritually meaningful.
2. **Prepare:** Sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
3. **Observe:** Look at the image attentively, noting details such as color, form, and the emotions it evokes.
4. **Reflect:** Close your eyes and ponder the feelings, thoughts, or inspirations which arose while observing the image.
5. **Pray:** Open your eyes and look at the image again, this time offering a prayer related to your reflections.
6. **Contemplate:** Spend a few more moments in silent contemplation, allowing the image to speak to your soul.
7. **Journal:** Write down insights, feelings, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Select an Image:** As a group, choose an image to be the focus of your Visio Divina session.
2. **Group Silence:** Begin with a moment of silence to prepare everyone’s heart and mind.
3. **Shared Observation:** Project or pass around the image, allowing each person to look at it closely.
4. **Group Reflection:** Invite members to share their initial thoughts and feelings about the image. No response is too small or insignificant.
5. **Scriptural Reading:** Read a Bible passage which relates to the image, if applicable.
6. **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for a discussion on how the image and the Scripture intersect, and what spiritual insights have been gained.
7. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the insights gained during the Visio Divina.
8. **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

Visio Divina can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth, whether practiced individually or in a community. It offers a unique way to engage with the Divine, using the sense of sight as a gateway to deeper spiritual experiences. ■

VISIO DIVINA ART:

by Sueli R. Furtado, Connell Memorial UMC



Week 2:

Unquenchable Fire: Community & the Holy Spirit



Description: In our second week, we explore the Spirit-filled transformed life of the early Christian community. What does a genuine, Spirit-led community look like today? How can we better open ourselves to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in our communal lives?

Daily Reading Schedule:

- **Day 1:** Acts 4:1-22 (Peter and John before the Council)
- **Day 2:** Acts 4:23-37 (Community and Prayer)
- **Day 3:** Acts 5:1-16 (Ananias and Sapphira)
- **Day 4:** Acts 5:17-42 (Apostles Before the Council)
- **Day 5:** Acts 6:1-15 (Choosing the Seven)
- **Day 6:** Acts 7:1-29 (Stephen's Speech, Part 1)
- **Day 7:** Reflect and rest.

Daily Reading Questions

- What acts of courage stand out in these chapters?
- How do the disciples demonstrate trust in God?
- What are the societal reactions to the early Christian community?
- What is the role of prayer in these narratives?
- How are resources shared among the early believers?
- What do these chapters reveal about the risks of hypocrisy within the community?

Additional Resources for Week 2

- **Written Reflection** by Rev. Linda L. Furtado (*pages 30-31*)
- **John Wesley Sermon:** "The New Birth" (*page 29*)
- **Charles Wesley Hymn:** And Are We Yet Alive (*page 29*)
- **Spiritual Practice:** Breath Prayer (*page 32*)
- **Coloring Page Art** by Sueli Furtado (*page 33*)
- **Visio Divina Guideline** (*page 34*)
- **Visio Divina Art** by Rev. Jason Jones (*page 35*)

John Wesley Sermon:

The New Birth:

John Wesley's sermon "The New Birth" discusses the fundamental doctrines of justification and new birth in Christianity. Wesley explains that being born again is essential for renewing our fallen nature and achieving holiness. He clarifies that new birth is not the same as baptism or sanctification, but a distinct, instantaneous change by the Holy Spirit, creating a spiritual life in union with God. This transformation is necessary for both earthly happiness and eternal salvation, as it involves a profound inner change from sin to righteousness and true holiness.

Full Sermon: <https://thevineumc.church/the-new-birth/>

Charles Wesley Hymn:

And Are We Yet Alive:

This classic hymn by Charles Wesley reflects on the gratitude and awe of believers who, despite facing numerous trials and conflicts, find themselves still alive and united in faith. Wesley acknowledges God's preserving power and grace that have carried the faithful through challenges and internal struggles. The hymn encourages believers to boast in God's redemptive power, embrace the journey of carrying the cross, and keep their sights on the ultimate reward of salvation in Jesus Christ, which makes all earthly losses worthwhile.

Full Hymn: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/553>

Week 2

Unquenchable Fire: Community & the Holy Spirit

by Rev. Linda L. Furtado, Beech Grove UMC & Scarritt Bennett Center

I have listened to some imaginative writing in fiction tales by writers who take the realness of life and death and fold these experiences into stories. As I read the best of these stories, I am pulled into emotional connection and empathy as no news story, television series, or even movie can. To be invited into inner struggles and thoughts, to see with such fullness the world taking shape from the pages, fueled by my imagination, is almost like being all-knowing. The writer and I know things the characters could never know. It is not unusual for me to read and re-read such stories wishing the characters would make different decisions as I think to myself, “if they only knew.” Yet, here we are, characters in God’s story, in the midst of the struggles and joys of life with limited perspectives. And so, we require another source of connection beyond ourselves - someone who knows how and why we exist as we do.

God knows our every need, and one of those is that of community. We require open and honest community and loving connections with others so together our stories potentially reflect God’s story and God’s hope for us. This hope is what we were given at the beginning of creation. A life full of love. After all, God is love, and it is in God’s image in which we were created. Unlike the limitations of written words, God’s story, as spoken into existence, is ever-taking shape and embracing the infiniteness of God’s love by the Holy Spirit. This gift of love is one that invites us back into the rightness and goodness of God from creation just as soon as we decide to open ourselves up to that justifying love, being made or reborn in a spiritual way.

Since God is the ultimate gift giver and creator of perfect love, I expect God to give only good gifts. I imagine gifts that prove that love was there from creation and showed

itself again in the sacrifice of Jesus for us. This gift is expressed in forgiveness and offered to any who would receive it. In fact, it comes wrapped, embodied by the divine, and is extended to us in the form of the Holy Spirit. This unmatched presence shines brightly with the power to speak in any form it sees fit. Maybe this gift is too good by human standards. Why would God give to us with such extravagance? Why would God decide to take the story and become part of it as the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice? It must be that in each of us, God sees hope - a redemption story in the making, something and someone worth living and dying for.

For those of us who believe and have believed in this divinity for some time, the idea that we would be given so much that we could never earn may sound like old news. Some of us have lost the natural high of being newly let into some of the divine mystery of the story we have been living. Some of us who know the truth in our minds, but not yet know it in our hearts, since we live separated from God as if we are characters in a book, oblivious to the writer, editor, and reader who watches from beyond our comprehension. We either have forgotten, or never quite grasped, the fullness of what sacrificial love encompasses - a love that comes down to journey with us, suffer for us, and die for us.

Maybe you have weathered a storm and, during the experience, engaged in actions and prayers for someone else even as you rocked with physical, mental, or emotional pain. If you have, then you likely know what a good gift it is indeed - love without limits, love that lays vulnerably open to the emotional gut-punch of human limitations in a world that doesn’t forgive and doesn’t operate on grace. Love boldly says, “Here I am” in crowds that may not yet understand, even as they are part of the story or

witnessing in real time, such as the fire alight on each of those at Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit has a choice of whether or not to shed light on and within us. Fortunately for us, we are chosen. We are invited to live by the Spirit and to bear the light of love that comes with that gift. Yet, this is not a joyousness akin to getting a new book with an uncracked spine and pristine hardcover design. It is more like the handcrafted love and care of a hand-made book that has been through some things. With God's redeeming love our stories are rebound for continued exploration with space for new chapters to be written. Our part in God's anthology includes the light of love in our relationship with God, and any genuine loving relationship goes both ways. God loves us, and we are invited to love in the same way by inviting others by the Holy Spirit to know the God we know. It's how we love God back, listening to the still small voice of the author of our lives, as we love others unconditionally. In short, out of God's love, by the Holy Spirit, so then we must love.

Since this kind of love in community with God and neighbor is not just that sweet kind of love of a fairytale, know that it can be a painful love to commit to. Consider what you are willing to do, to endure, or to let go of for the sake of this love.

Whatever we may fear to take on, release, or admit to, let's remember that love is far more powerful than our doubts and fears. Whatever may be keeping us from opening up and seeking the relationship-healing power of forgiveness, let's remember that because the story is not over, there is hope. Let us be witnesses to one another and the world in our receiving and sharing of the light, the perfect love of God by the Holy Spirit as gifted to us by the grace of Jesus Christ. ■



AI-generated impressionist oil painting based on Acts 2:1-4, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit.

BREATH PRAYER SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Breath Prayer is a contemplative Christian practice that combines the natural rhythm of breathing with a short, meaningful phrase or prayer. This form of prayer aims to cultivate a constant awareness of the Divine presence, making it an accessible and grounding spiritual exercise. It's a way to integrate prayer into the very fabric of daily life, using the breath as a continual reminder of one's connection to God.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Choose a Prayer Phrase:** Select a short prayer or phrase that resonates with you. It could be a scripture verse, a name for God, or a simple request like "Lord, have mercy."
2. **Find a Quiet Space:** Sit or stand in a comfortable position in a place where you won't be disturbed.
3. **Center Yourself:** Take a few deep breaths to relax your body and focus your mind.
4. **Begin the Breath Prayer:** As you inhale, silently say the first part of your chosen phrase. As you exhale, silently say the second part. For example, inhale: "Lord Jesus," exhale: "have mercy on me."
5. **Continue the Practice:** Keep your focus on your breath and the prayer phrase. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the breath and the prayer.
6. **Duration:** You can practice Breath Prayer for a few minutes or extend it for a longer period, depending on your comfort and availability.
7. **Close:** End the session by thanking God for the time of connection and asking for continued awareness of His presence throughout the day.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Gather:** Assemble in a quiet, comfortable space.
2. **Introduction:** Briefly explain the concept and purpose of Breath Prayer for newcomers.
3. **Select a Common Phrase:** The group can choose a prayer phrase to use collectively, or each individual can select their own.
4. **Group Silence:** Begin with a moment of silence to help everyone center themselves.
5. **Guided Breath Prayer:** One person can lead the group in starting the Breath Prayer, guiding them to focus on their breath and the chosen phrase.
6. **Silent Practice:** Allow a few minutes for everyone to engage in the Breath Prayer silently.
7. **Sharing:** Open the floor for anyone who wishes to share their experience or insights gained during the practice.
8. **Group Prayer:** Conclude the session with a collective prayer, perhaps incorporating the phrases or insights shared.
9. **Closing:** End with a moment of shared silence or a brief expression of gratitude for the time spent in communal prayer.

Breath Prayer is a simple yet profound practice that can be easily incorporated into daily life, whether you're alone or in a community. It serves as a continual reminder of God's ever-present love and guidance. ■

COLORING PAGE ART:



VISIO DIVINA GUIDELINE:

Visio Divina, or “Divine Seeing,” is a contemplative practice that involves meditating on a visual object, often a religious image, artwork, or even a natural scene, to gain spiritual insight and deepen one’s relationship with the Divine. Unlike reading or hearing, which engage other senses, Visio Divina invites individuals to use their sense of sight to explore the deeper spiritual meanings an image might hold.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Select an Image:** Choose a religious artwork, icon, or natural scene you find spiritually meaningful.
2. **Prepare:** Sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
3. **Observe:** Look at the image attentively, noting details such as color, form, and the emotions it evokes.
4. **Reflect:** Close your eyes and ponder the feelings, thoughts, or inspirations which arose while observing the image.
5. **Pray:** Open your eyes and look at the image again, this time offering a prayer related to your reflections.
6. **Contemplate:** Spend a few more moments in silent contemplation, allowing the image to speak to your soul.
7. **Journal:** Write down insights, feelings, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

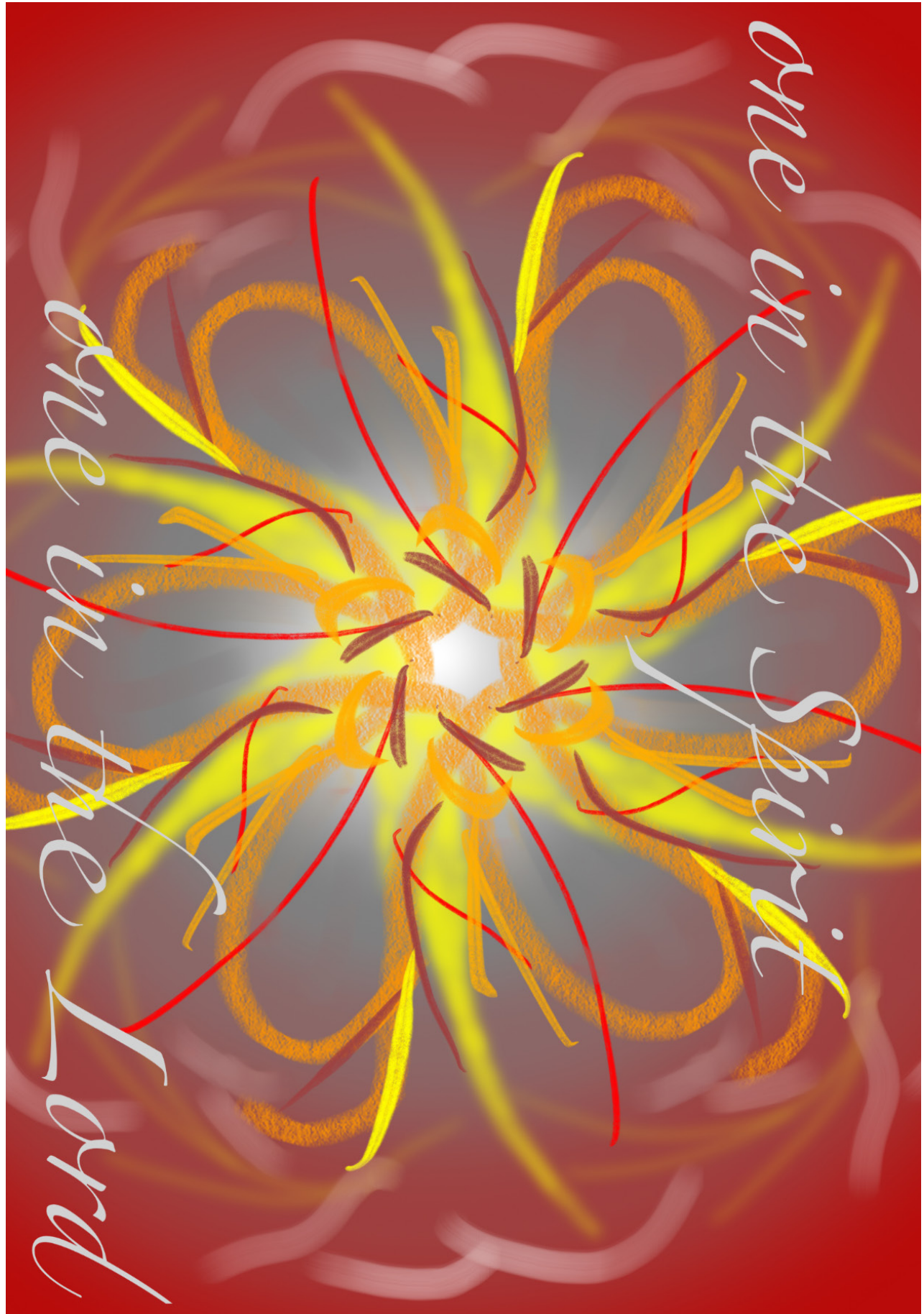
Practice for Small Groups

1. **Select an Image:** As a group, choose an image to be the focus of your Visio Divina session.
2. **Group Silence:** Begin with a moment of silence to prepare everyone’s heart and mind.
3. **Shared Observation:** Project or pass around the image, allowing each person to look at it closely.
4. **Group Reflection:** Invite members to share their initial thoughts and feelings about the image. No response is too small or insignificant.
5. **Scriptural Reading:** Read a Bible passage which relates to the image, if applicable.
6. **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for a discussion on how the image and the Scripture intersect, and what spiritual insights have been gained.
7. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the insights gained during the Visio Divina.
8. **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

Visio Divina can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth, whether practiced individually or in a community. It offers a unique way to engage with the Divine, using the sense of sight as a gateway to deeper spiritual experiences. ■

VISIO DIVINA ART:

by Rev. Jason Jones, Springfield First UMC.



Week 3:

Cosmic Crossroads:

The Spirit's Ever-Expanding Reach



Description: This week, we look at how the early church went beyond its comfort zones through the Holy Spirit's work in expanding the church. How can we break barriers and open our hearts to a diverse array of people, just as the early church began to include Gentiles, eunuchs, and other 'outsiders' under the guidance of the Spirit?

Daily Reading Schedule:

- **Day 1:** Acts 7:30-60 (Stephen's Speech, Part 2 and Martyrdom)
- **Day 2:** Acts 8:1-25 (Philip in Samaria)
- **Day 3:** Acts 8:26-40 (Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch)
- **Day 4:** Acts 9:1-19 (Conversion of Saul)
- **Day 5:** Acts 9:20-43 (Early Ministry of Paul)
- **Day 6:** Acts 10:1-23 (Peter's Vision)
- **Day 7:** Reflect and rest.

Daily Reading Questions

- How does God's grace extend beyond the Jewish community in these chapters?
- What elements of transformation are evident?
- What are the roles of angels and visions in guiding the believers?
- How does persecution serve as a catalyst for the spread of the Gospel?
- How do miracles validate the message of the Gospel in these chapters?
- What are some internal and external obstacles the early church faced in its mission?

Additional Resources for Week 3

- **Written Reflection** by Rev. Dr. Mary Beth Bernheisel (*pages 38-39*)
- **John Wesley Sermon:** "Catholic Spirit" (*page 37*)
- **Charles Wesley Hymn:** O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing (*page 37*)
- **Spiritual Practice:** Compassion (*page 40*)
- **Coloring Page Art** by Sueli Furtado (*page 41*)
- **Visio Divina Guideline** (*page 42*)
- **Visio Divina Art** by Rev. Mary Beth Eberle (*page 43*)

John Wesley Sermon:

Catholic Spirit:

John Wesley's sermon "A Catholic Spirit" emphasizes the importance of universal love and unity among Christians, regardless of differing opinions or worship practices. Wesley advocates for a spirit of tolerance and affection among believers, focusing on shared faith in Christ and love for God and humanity. He encourages Christians to support and pray for each other while maintaining their own convictions and congregational affiliations. The sermon underscores the value of a broad-minded, loving approach to Christian fellowship, while transcending minor differences.

Full Sermon: <https://thevineumc.church/catholic-spirit/>

Charles Wesley Hymn:

O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing:

This Charles Wesley hymn expresses a deep desire to praise God and proclaim the wonders of Jesus Christ. The hymn speaks of the transformative power of Jesus' name in alleviating fears and sorrows and celebrates His ability to redeem and cleanse even the most sinful. It highlights the healing and liberating impact of Jesus' work, encouraging all to embrace and rejoice in His salvation. The hymn concludes with an anticipation of the joy and forgiveness found in Christ, equating this experience with a taste of on earth.

Full Hymn: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/57>

Week 3

Cosmic Crossroads: The Spirit's Ever-Expanding Reach

by Rev. Dr. Mary Beth Bernheisel, Dyersburg First UMC

Philip got a direct message from an angel of the Lord. Peter got a vision from heaven.

I have, from time to time, harbored a bit of jealousy when I read these stories of boundary-breaching Bible heroes. When God called Peter to break through deeply entrenched religious barriers, and Philip to eschew well-established cultural and social norms, God made God's intention abundantly clear.

Philip got an angel. Peter got a vision.

Would it be easier for me to bravely breach boundaries if I received an angelic message or a hunger-induced vision? It's a question worth pondering.

While I like to think that I could be as brave as Peter and as bold as Philip if given supernatural motivation, what I most often experience is, as Edwin Friedman so aptly put it, a failure of nerve.

Radical inclusivity in our time, even in the name of Jesus, is apt to get us labeled as "woke"—and not in a good way. And yet, as Jesus's disciples, we are mandated to practice nothing less than radical inclusivity—for no other reason than God was first radically inclusive of all of us. Which means God has already provided all the supernatural motivation that I will ever need.

But would I still welcome an angel or a vision urging me on toward breaking down well-established walls?

Absolutely.

Instead, I—we—have the Holy Spirit.

Don't get me wrong; in no way am I implying that the Holy Spirit is an inadequate messenger and motivator. It's just that listening for the Holy Spirit—and listening to the Holy

Spirit—so often means I have to be still and be quiet. In a world that honors the kind of productivity that we can glibly post on social media, stillness and quiet aren't exactly deemed cardinal virtues.

And so I wonder, was the angel who spoke to Philip really an angel? Or, had Philip so tuned to his heart to the Holy Spirit that he knew God was calling him to the wilderness road? (Philip surely knew, after all, that God is always waiting for us in the wilderness.) Was it possible that Philip had practiced listening for the voice of God for so long that he simply sensed God's call to approach the stranger?

What about Peter's vision? Is it possible that all the time he had spent listening to Jesus had so accurately revealed God's character to him that he innately understood God's call to radical inclusivity, even across the most stringent religious lines?

I spent a good part of my life wishing that I could have the faith, guts, gumption, courage, trust, etc. to walk through life like the women and men I read about in the bible. But the truth is that the women and men with the audacity to break down walls—walls so established that even attempting to break them down was to risk alienation and permanent exclusion—are the men and women who cultivated the ability to listen deeply to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Were their actions still scary and risky? Not just Philip and Peter, of course, but everyone in our whole biblical story who dared to cross over arbitrary lines of separation or draw the circle wide enough for everyone to fit in? Of course they were. Anytime disciples of Jesus act on the side of radical inclusivity we are going to upset someone's apple cart.

But I also know that I want to be part of a church—on a local scale as well as a universal scale—so inclusive that people looking at us actually see God’s kingdom. I want to be a part of a church even more inclusive than I can imagine. And, I am as certain of this as I am of anything in my life: God wants us to be this church, too.

So I will listen to the Holy Spirit. And, I will cultivate my ability to hear the Spirit’s voice until it is as clear to me as the angel’s instructions were to Philip and the vision was to Peter. And, I pray that each of us who claim the name United Methodist will do the same until we are able to extend the same radical inclusivity which God extended to each of us, to each person who we encounter, each and every day. ■



AI-generated oil painting of Philip encountering the Ethiopian eunuch.

COMPASSION AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Compassion as a spiritual practice is the intentional cultivation of empathy, kindness, and concern for the suffering of others, rooted in a deep sense of interconnectedness with all beings. It is not merely an emotional response, but a principled commitment to alleviate suffering wherever it is found. This practice transcends religious and cultural boundaries, embodying a universal ethic of care and respect for all life.

The Essence of Compassion

At its core, compassion is a form of divine love in action. It is the practice of seeing the Divine in others and responding to their needs as if they were your own. Compassion calls us to move beyond our comfort zones, to engage with the world in a way that transforms both the giver and the receiver. It is a mirror reflecting our deepest, most authentic selves, revealing our capacity to love unconditionally.

Benefits

- Deepens your sense of connection with others and the Divine
- Enhances emotional intelligence and empathy
- Fosters a sense of inner peace and well-being
- Encourages altruistic behavior and social engagement
- Provides a pathway for spiritual growth and transformation

Practice for Individuals

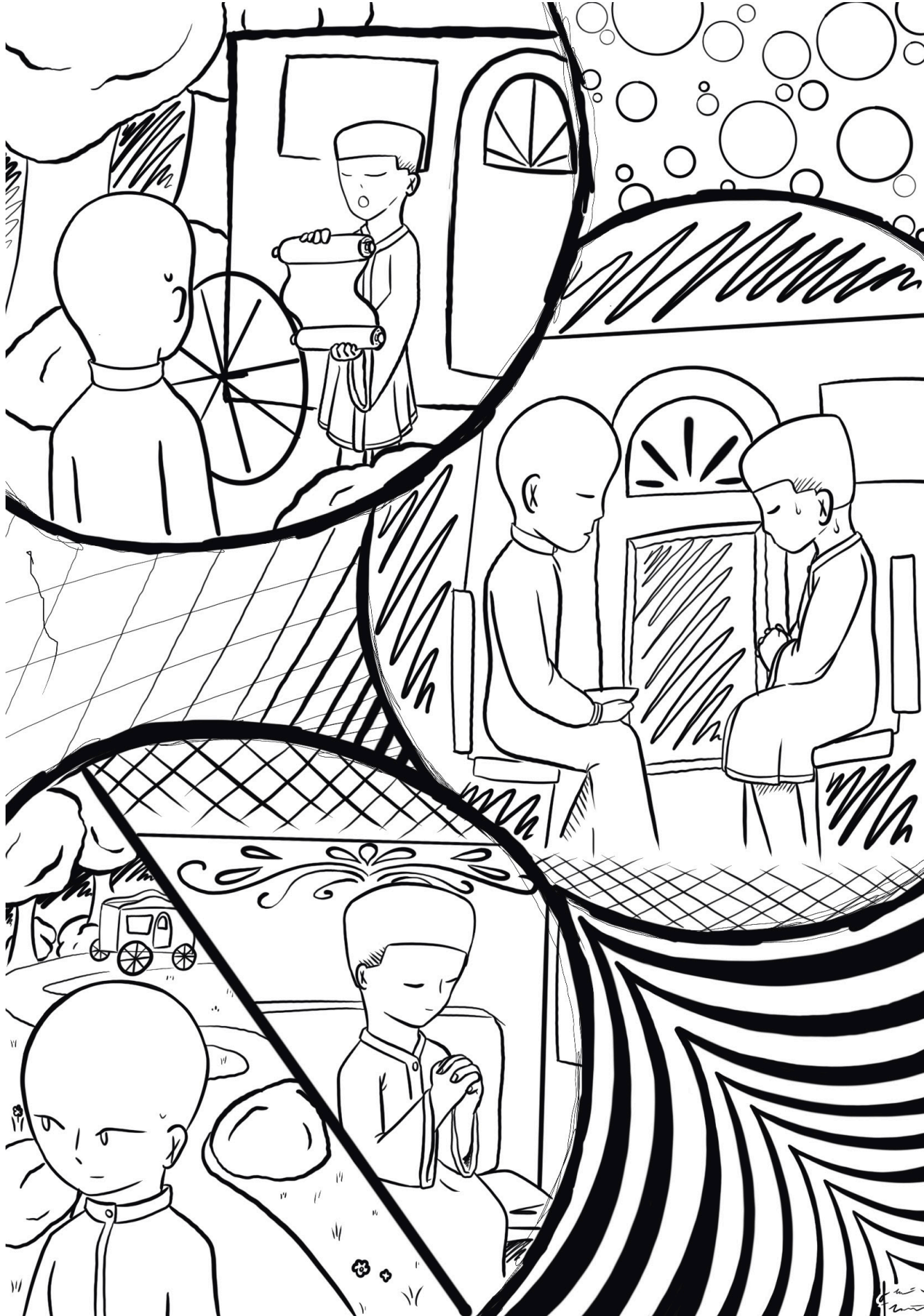
1. **Mindful Awareness:** Begin by becoming aware of your own feelings and thoughts. This self-awareness is the first step in being able to extend compassion to others.
2. **Intention Setting:** Make a conscious decision each day to practice compassion in your interactions.
3. **Active Listening:** When engaging with others, practice active listening to understand their needs and feelings fully.
4. **Acts of Kindness:** Perform small, random acts of kindness without expecting anything in return.
5. **Reflect and Pray:** Spend some time in reflection or prayer, asking for the strength to be more compassionate.
6. **Gratitude:** End your day by expressing gratitude for the opportunities you had to practice compassion.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Group Intention:** Start by setting a collective intention for your time together.
2. **Sharing Stories:** Allow group members to share personal stories or experiences where they either received or extended compassion.
3. **Group Discussion:** Discuss the challenges and rewards of practicing compassion in daily life.
4. **Role-Playing:** Engage in role-playing exercises to practice compassionate responses in various scenarios.
5. **Collective Action:** As a group, identify ways you can extend compassion within your community. This could be a group volunteer activity or a social justice initiative.
6. **Closing Reflection:** End with a moment of collective reflection or prayer, solidifying your commitment to continue practicing compassion.

Compassion as a spiritual practice is both transformative and healing. It changes the way we interact with the world, enriching our own lives as we enrich the lives of others. It is a practice that brings us closer to the Divine, reminding us of the sacredness of all life. ■

COLORING PAGE ART:



VISIO DIVINA GUIDELINE:

Visio Divina, or “Divine Seeing,” is a contemplative practice that involves meditating on a visual object, often a religious image, artwork, or even a natural scene, to gain spiritual insight and deepen one’s relationship with the Divine. Unlike reading or hearing, which engage other senses, Visio Divina invites individuals to use their sense of sight to explore the deeper spiritual meanings an image might hold.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Select an Image:** Choose a religious artwork, icon, or natural scene you find spiritually meaningful.
2. **Prepare:** Sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
3. **Observe:** Look at the image attentively, noting details such as color, form, and the emotions it evokes.
4. **Reflect:** Close your eyes and ponder the feelings, thoughts, or inspirations which arose while observing the image.
5. **Pray:** Open your eyes and look at the image again, this time offering a prayer related to your reflections.
6. **Contemplate:** Spend a few more moments in silent contemplation, allowing the image to speak to your soul.
7. **Journal:** Write down insights, feelings, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Select an Image:** As a group, choose an image to be the focus of your Visio Divina session.
2. **Group Silence:** Begin with a moment of silence to prepare everyone’s heart and mind.
3. **Shared Observation:** Project or pass around the image, allowing each person to look at it closely.
4. **Group Reflection:** Invite members to share their initial thoughts and feelings about the image. No response is too small or insignificant.
5. **Scriptural Reading:** Read a Bible passage which relates to the image, if applicable.
6. **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for a discussion on how the image and the Scripture intersect, and what spiritual insights have been gained.
7. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the insights gained during the Visio Divina.
8. **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

Visio Divina can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth, whether practiced individually or in a community. It offers a unique way to engage with the Divine, using the sense of sight as a gateway to deeper spiritual experiences. ■

VISIO DIVINA ART:

by Rev. Mary Beth Eberle, Grace UMC (Jackson) & UM Lambuth Wesley Foundation



Week 4:

Changed Lives:

Stories of Transformation



Description: In the fourth week of our series, we focus on the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in individual lives, exemplified in stories like that of the Apostle Paul and the jailer at Philippi. How can we support individuals who are seeking renewal and transformation? What stories of transformation can we share from our communities?

Daily Reading Schedule:

- **Day 1:** Acts 10:24-48 (Peter and Cornelius)
- **Day 2:** Acts 11:1-30 (Expansion to Antioch)
- **Day 3:** Acts 12:1-25 (James' Death and Peter's Escape)
- **Day 4:** Acts 13:1-25 (Paul's First Missionary Journey, Part 1)
- **Day 5:** Acts 13:26-52 (Paul's First Missionary Journey, Part 2)
- **Day 6:** Acts 14:1-28 (End of First Missionary Journey, Part 3)
- **Day 7:** Reflect and rest.

Daily Reading Questions

- How does the Holy Spirit guide personal and communal transformation?
- What challenges to transformation are present?
- How do the believers in these chapters deal with opposition?
- What is the role of Scripture in the narrative?
- How does the early church respond to signs and wonders?
- How do you see the Holy Spirit orchestrating events and interactions?

Additional Resources for Week 4

- **Written Reflection** by Rev. John Varden (*pages 46-47*)
- **John Wesley Sermon:** The New Birth (*page 45*)
- **Charles Wesley Hymn:** Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (*page 45*)
- **Spiritual Practice:** Spiritual Friendship (*page 48*)
- **Coloring Page Art** by Sueli Furtado (*page 49*)
- **Visio Divina Guideline** (*page 50*)
- **Visio Divina Art** by Rev. Linda Furtado (*page 51*)

John Wesley Sermon:

The Marks of the New Birth:

In “The Marks of the New Birth,” John Wesley explores the essence of being born of the Spirit, emphasizing that it transcends mere baptism and involves a transformative, living faith in Jesus Christ. He differentiates between intellectual assent and a faith that powerfully overcomes sin, fosters inner peace, and imbues the believer with a deep-seated hope affirmed by the Holy Spirit. Wesley concludes that the greatest evidence of this new birth is the love of God, a love that extends to all and manifests in a life committed to obedience and good works. This sermon challenges believers to move beyond nominal faith, examining themselves for these marks – faith, hope, and love – as true indicators of a vibrant, active relationship with God.

Full Sermon: <https://thevineumc.church/the-marks-of-the-new-birth>

Charles Wesley Hymn:

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling:

This Charles Wesley hymn expresses a deep yearning for the divine presence and transformative power of Jesus’s love. It begins with a call for Jesus, characterized by divine love and compassion, to dwell within believers, crowning them with mercy and salvation. The hymn continues with a plea for the Holy Spirit to instill in the faithful a sense of liberty and peace, removing the inclination towards sin. It concludes with an aspiration for spiritual renewal and the ultimate salvation of believers, culminating in eternal praise and glory in heaven.

Full Hymn: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/384>

Week 4

Changed Lives: Stories of Transformation

by Rev. John Varden, Hickman First UMC

We Are Blind

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul does not even recognize the one he is persecuting. He is blind. And remains so. For a while. “Who are you, Lord?” Saul does not recognize Jesus. “Who are you, Lord?” He is so blind he cannot see his hand before his face.

And Then Comes Change

Saul becomes Paul. This is such a Jewish thing to happen. Abram to Abraham. Sara to Sarah. Jacob to Israel. These are the biggies. Less known: Azariah to Abenego. Hoshea to Joseph. Lo-Ruhamah to Ruhamah. It also happens to Simon, who becomes Peter.

This happens all the time in the Bible. Names change when there is a change of status or other major life alteration. And, it happens to Saul. He is a zealous leader in the Jewish world. So zealous that he approves of stoning those who do not follow his version of faith. But, he’s not just a passive witness.

“And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” (Acts 8:1-3, NRSV)

And, he is heading to Damascus in this pursuit of those who follow the Way. But this is where his life takes a turn. And, where his name will be changed.

It is easy to call this Saul’s “conversion from being Jewish to Christian.” But, really, that is not how Saul, now Paul, would have seen what happened. He was a Jew who became an apostle of Jesus Christ. He would have seen himself as still a Jew, but one who now believed Jesus to be the Messiah.

This is not really a conversion, but a call. Saul is called to be a follower, an apostle even, of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls Saul to be his disciple. It is a radical change. But not a change of religion as if someone were converting from Hindu to Muslim. Or, Buddhist to Christianity.

But, oh, what a painful change this must have been for Saul. He was so sure of his beliefs, his convictions. He was willing to persecute, detain, and even kill for what he believed to be the right way, the right interpretation. It must have been painful and shameful to obey the call of Jesus.

But, it was not like his whole belief system had to change. All Israel was looking for and waiting for a messiah. Jesus was not just the kind of Messiah they were expecting. Saul just had to re-read and readjust his interpretations.

The world around us is swirling with change. It affects us. It affects the church. The political world is in a whirlwind. Science is making changes so fast few can keep up. Nanotechnology is building robots small enough to travel in our blood stream. Businesses are building rockets to take private citizens into space. Telescopes are seeing further into the center and edge of the universe, and microscopes are seeing into the microscopic world that previous generations could never imagine.

Our economy is shifting, sinking and growing, leaving some behind and taking others to wealth most cannot even imagine.

Our moral, political, economic and scientific landscapes are changing. And, sometimes we cannot find God in all this. “Who are you, Lord?” But, the risen Lord is there. We sometimes think of Jesus as gone, whisked off to the far heavenly reaches. But, as may be less than obvious, Jesus was there for Paul.

We Are Not the Only Ones

Jesus was also there for Ananias. Paul’s was not the only call. Ananias had to deal with a major shift as well. He had

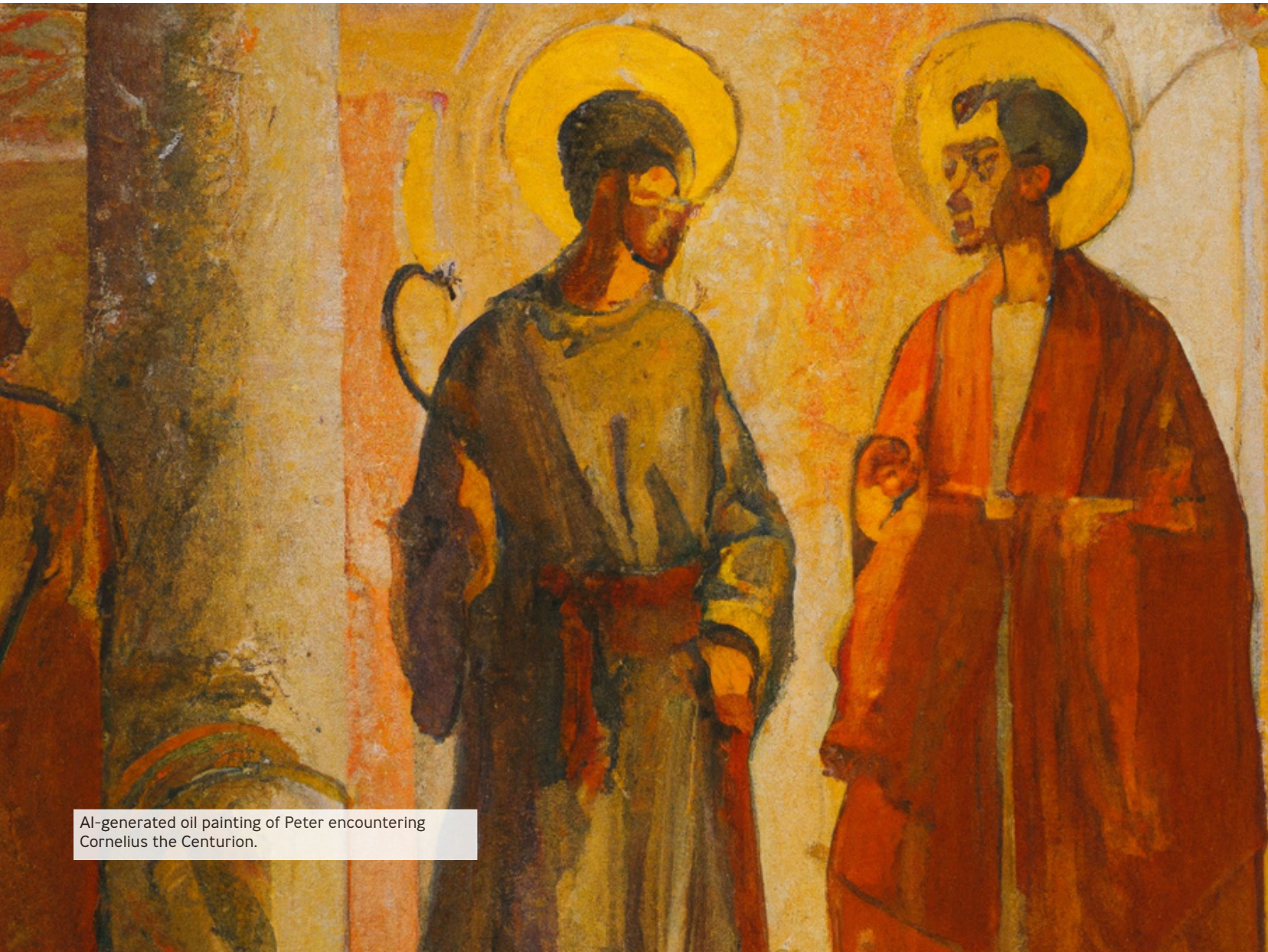
to accept that the one who was persecuting was now chosen by the Lord as an instrument by God. This was probably pretty hard to accept, much less believe.

There Are Practices to Help

Change is difficult, but there are steps we can take together to steady us in this world of change. These practices follow what Paul must have gone through in his transition from a persecutor to a follower of Jesus:

1. **Fasting.** This is the first thing Paul did. He did not eat or drink until Ananias came to help him understand his call.
2. **Confession.** Answer the question, How have we failed God in our life together?
3. **Examen:** Prayerfully reflecting on the joys and sorrows of our daily lives.
4. **Hold fast to fellowship and community.** And, specifically in our fellowship, we need to intentionally discern how God is at work in our midst.

*“Finish then, Thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see Thy great salvation
perfectly restored in Thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before Thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.”*



AI-generated oil painting of Peter encountering Cornelius the Centurion.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Spiritual Friendship is the intentional cultivation of a deep, meaningful relationship centered around mutual spiritual growth and support. Unlike casual friendships, a spiritual friendship is rooted in a shared quest for divine understanding, ethical living, and soulful connection. It's a friendship that transcends social norms and personal interests to focus on the higher goals of spiritual enlightenment and mutual well-being.

The Essence of Spiritual Friendship

At its core, spiritual friendship is a sacred bond that serves as a mirror for our spiritual selves, reflecting both our strengths and areas for growth. It is a relationship that challenges us to be better, to dig deeper, and to strive higher in our spiritual journey. This form of friendship is not about convenience or superficial connection; it's about soul-level engagement. It's a friendship that asks questions, listens deeply, and provides the kind of accountability that fosters spiritual growth.

Benefits

- Deepens your spiritual understanding and practice
- Provides emotional and spiritual support
- Enhances self-awareness and personal growth
- Fosters a sense of community and belonging
- Serves as a source of inspiration and encouragement

Practice for Individuals

1. **Intentionality:** Be deliberate in seeking out and maintaining friendships that have a spiritual focus.
2. **Deep Listening:** Practice the art of listening deeply to understand your friend's spiritual struggles and triumphs.
3. **Mutual Accountability:** Hold each other accountable for spiritual practices, ethical choices, and personal growth.
4. **Shared Learning:** Engage in shared spiritual activities like prayer, meditation, or study of sacred texts.
5. **Regular Check-ins:** Make time for regular conversations focused solely on your spiritual journeys.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Group Covenant:** Establish a set of guidelines or commitments that will govern your spiritual friendships within the group.
2. **Sharing Circles:** Create a safe space for people to share their spiritual experiences, questions, and insights.
3. **Collective Practices:** Engage in group spiritual practices such as communal prayer, meditation, or scriptural study.
4. **Group Retreats:** Consider going on spiritual retreats to deepen the friendship. Focus intensely on spiritual growth.
5. **Ongoing Support:** Offer ongoing emotional and spiritual support to each other, especially in times of crisis or spiritual dryness.
6. **Closing Ritual:** End your gatherings with a ritual or prayer encapsulating the group's spiritual intentions and commitments.

Spiritual Friendship is a transformative practice that enriches our spiritual lives in ways solitary practice cannot. It offers a unique blend of companionship, challenge, and inspiration that propels us forward on our spiritual journey. It is a gift of grace, a divine instrument for personal and communal transformation. ■

COLORING PAGE:



VISIO DIVINA

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Practice for Individuals

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Practice for Small Groups

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6. **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for a discussion on how the image and the Scripture intersect, and what spiritual insights have been gained.
7. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the insights gained during the Visio Divina.
8. **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

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VISIO DIVINA:

by Rev. Linda L. Furtado, Beech Grove UM & Scarritt Bennett Center



Week 5:

Unity Amidst the Storms



Description: This week, we look at how the early church went beyond its comfort zones through the Holy Spirit's work in expanding the church. How can we break barriers and open our hearts to a diverse array of people, just as the early church began to include Gentiles, eunuchs, and other 'outsiders' under the guidance of the Spirit?

Daily Reading Schedule:

- **Day 1:** Acts 15:1-21 (Jerusalem Council, Part 1)
- **Day 2:** Acts 15:22-41 (Jerusalem Council, Part 2)
- **Day 3:** Acts 16:1-15 (Second Missionary Journey Begins)
- **Day 4:** Acts 16:16-40 (Paul and Silas in Prison)
- **Day 5:** Acts 17:1-15 (Paul in Thessalonica and Berea)
- **Day 6:** Acts 17:16-34 (Paul in Athens)
- **Day 7:** Reflect and rest.

Daily Reading Questions

- What are the essentials of faith emphasized in these chapters?
- How does the early church navigate disagreements and maintain unity?
- What is the role of discernment in making communal decisions?
- How are leaders chosen and commissioned?
- How does the early church balance evangelism and social responsibility?
- What challenges and victories do Paul and Barnabas experience in their missionary journey?

Additional Resources for Week 5

- **Written Reflection** by Rev. Dr. Joey Reed (*pages 54-55*)
- **John Wesley Sermon:** "On Schism" (*page 53*)
- **Charles Wesley Hymn:** Blest Be the Dear Uniting Love (*page 53*)
- **Spiritual Practice:** Unity (*page 56*)
- **Coloring Page Art** (*page 57*)
- **Visio Divina Guideline** (*page 58*)
- **Visio Divina Art** by Rev. Linda Furtado (*page 59*)

John Wesley Sermon:

On Schism:

In this sermon, John Wesley explores the concept of schism, often misunderstood and misrepresented in religious debates. He clarifies that schism, according to the Bible, refers to divisions within a church, not separation from it. Wesley argues that schism is a grievous sin, not because it implies separation from a particular church, but because it breaches love within the Christian community, leading to various negative consequences like discord, hardening of hearts, and hindering spiritual growth. He urges Christians to avoid forming or supporting factions within their communities, emphasizing peace-making and unity. Wesley's exposition aims to correct misinterpretations and encourage harmony among believers.

Full Sermon: <https://thevineumc.church/on-schism>

Charles Wesley Hymn:

Blest Be the Dear Uniting Love:

Charles Wesley's hymn "Blest Be the Dear Uniting Love" celebrates the spiritual unity and bond among believers in Christ, regardless of physical distance. It emphasizes that true unity comes from being joined in spirit to Jesus, following His guidance and walking in His ways. The hymn also highlights the shared experience of grace, maintaining unity in beliefs and emotions. It conveys that this spiritual connection transcends all earthly circumstances, including joy, grief, time, place, life, and death.

Full Hymn: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/57>

Week 5

Unity Amidst the Storms

by Rev. Dr. Joey Reed, Collierville UMC



December, 2021 Tornado - Mayfield, KY.
Photo by State Farm.

Unity in hardship is a funny thing. Challenges can cause a community to come together, but they can also cause a community to fly apart. When a community has something to rally against, those commonalities and emotional connections come into clear focus. On the other end of the spectrum, communities can fall into tribal skirmishes when we lose sight of those ties that bind.

In the days of COVID 19 and cultural clashes, Mayfield First United Methodist Church found itself at odds within our congregational community. Not only were we at odds over theology, but our congregation was also fracturing along cultural and social differences. Fueled by a nasty political environment and rampant partisanship in social and mass media, we were being given reasons to distrust and even dislike our neighbors and friends. It was no surprise that the conversation on disaffiliation within the

United Methodist Church began to ramp up to a whole new level.

I spent a lot of time studying the book of Acts in those days. Throughout the book, we see profound examples of the challenges and dynamics of unity within the early Christian community. Often, it was not just a minor disagreement that set the community at odds, but a deeply rooted cultural and religious challenge. Still, there was a consistent recognition that the commonality of faith in Christ should supersede cultural and religious differences. The success of the communities described in Acts emphasizes the essential nature of grace and faith in Christ, which in turn underscores unity over legalistic requirements. But where was our commonality of faith in Mayfield, Kentucky? Would we ever find a way to pull together as a church to make a difference in our community?

Then, on a very warm December night in 2021, Mayfield, Kentucky experienced the worst disaster in the town's history. An EF4 tornado ripped through the downtown precincts, destroying block after block of rental housing, scores of businesses and homes, and more than half of the downtown churches, including Mayfield First UMC. As we began relief efforts, we didn't care who else was handing out hot meals. We didn't ask who survivors voted for in the last election before we offered them a warm blanket. And, the aid and assistance rolled in from across the country. I turned again to the Acts of the Apostles, looking for cues for how to lead a church without walls in trying times. Acts 16 reminded me that true resilience is not just about enduring hardship, but about maintaining faith, hope, and a commitment to a greater purpose.

And so, we came together as a congregation with the shared purpose to grieve our losses. We mourned the devastation of our building – but, not because it was “the church.” We knew we were the church and our physical loss was architectural. However, we were honest with ourselves and the community: That building was where families had spent the most important days of their lives. We remembered those who were baptized there, married there, and mourned in death there. That building

was a repository of our memories as well as our hopes and dreams for the future. But, when we had done all the grieving over the building that we could do, we turned to our neighbors and offered them hope. We were committed to an even greater purpose.

That commitment to a greater purpose provided our people with that commonality and shared values which draws a community together. We didn't have time to tear each other down when we were busy building others up. We set about the task of meeting needs in our community, organizing our efforts to scale up our processes, and partnering with other like-minded communities of faith and outreach organizations.

I wish I could tell you that those lessons from Acts 16 were all I needed to show our community our petty differences weren't worth our time, that we had greater responsibility to our community. And, I'm sad to report that doctrinal identities became a major problem even in the early days of recovery. Despite those setbacks, I can still say with confidence that we were never more together as a congregation or as a community than in those days when we all stood together to provide relief to our broken neighborhoods. Clearly, our greatest efforts should be spent transforming a broken and hurting world. For Wesleyan disciples of Jesus Christ, the core values of love and hope are those which bind the UMC together, not just seeking compromises that preserve the unity of the Church.

In July of 2023, I moved from Mayfield to serve another of our congregations experiencing a turbulent storm of its own. Here, too, we are focusing on the mission and ministry of the church to reach out to a broken and hurting world. We are finding that the way forward isn't landing on a resolution to the many disagreements which plague the church. The way forward is to focus on the missional work that is at hand and the opportunity to share Jesus with the people of our community.

I still treasure the friendships I developed while I was appointed to Mayfield First UMC. I do not miss the stress and anxiety that stormy day brought to me and my family, but I do find myself thinking about the strong bonds of community forged in those moments of crisis, no matter how fleeting they might have been. It is in that spirit I invite you to regular contemplation of resilience amidst hardships, courage in navigating church disaffiliation, and steadfast diligence in rebuilding broken community as you draw wisdom from the early church's experiences and Wesleyan principles. ■



AI-generated expressionist painting of the Jerusalem Council.

UNITY AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Unity as a spiritual practice is the conscious endeavor to foster a sense of oneness and interconnectedness among individuals, communities, and even with the Divine. It transcends mere tolerance or coexistence, aiming for a deeper level of engagement and harmony. Unity in this context is not uniformity; rather, it celebrates diversity while recognizing the underlying spiritual thread that binds us all.

The Essence of Unity

At its core, the practice of Unity is a recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of all beings and an acknowledgment of our common spiritual origin. It is a commitment to dissolve barriers that divide and to engage in actions that promote inclusivity, understanding, and mutual respect. Unity is both a state of being and a continuous practice, a dynamic interplay of individual and collective efforts to create a harmonious existence.

Benefits

- Fosters a sense of belonging and community
- Enhances emotional and spiritual well-being
- Reduces conflict and promotes peace
- Encourages altruistic behavior and social responsibility
- Deepens understanding and appreciation of diverse spiritual traditions

Practice for Individuals

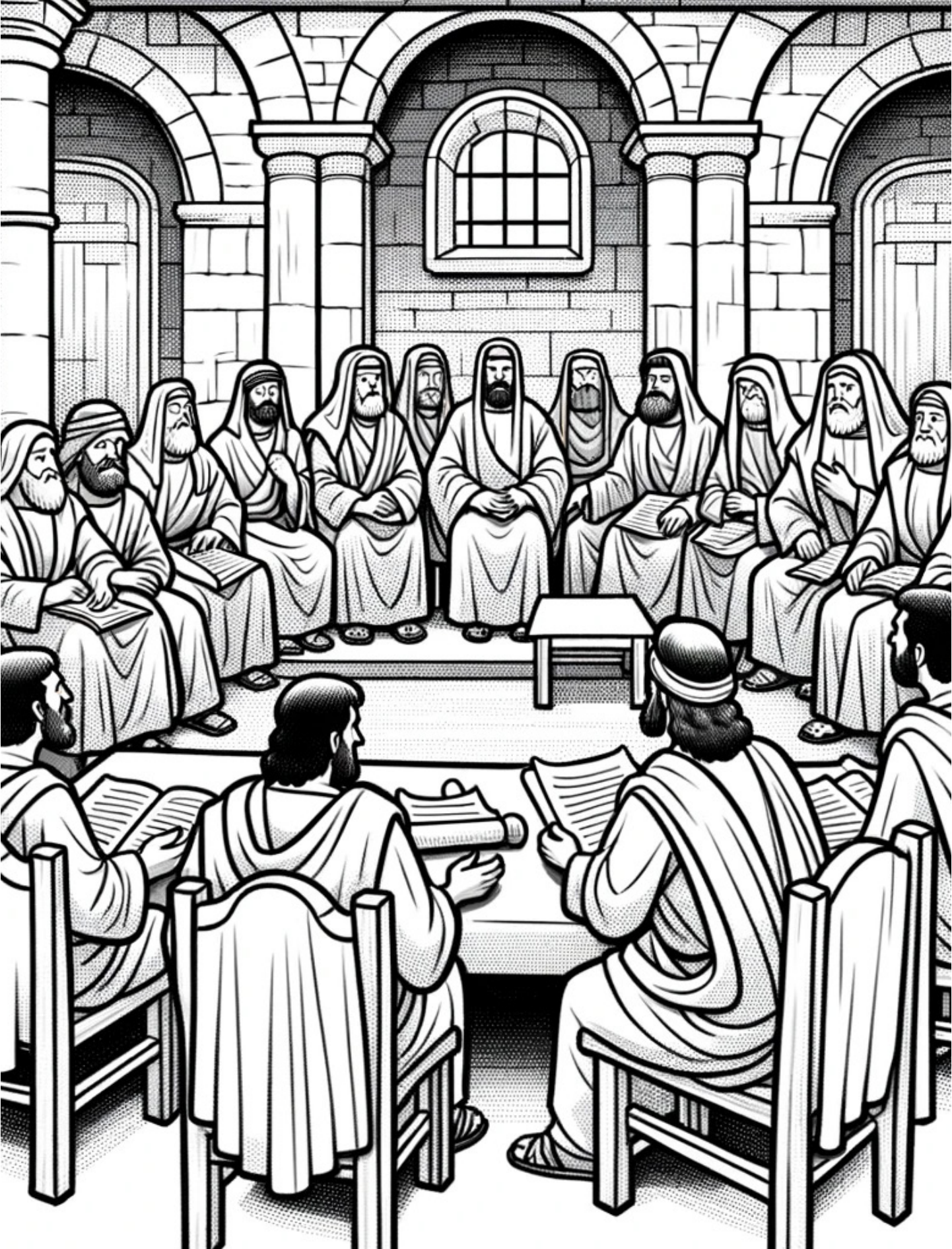
1. **Self-Awareness:** Begin by recognizing your own biases, prejudices, and divisions. Acknowledge them as barriers to unity.
2. **Intention Setting:** Make a conscious decision to practice unity in your daily interactions.
3. **Mindful Engagement:** Engage with others mindfully, listening deeply, and speaking respectfully.
4. **Acts of Kindness:** Perform acts that foster unity, such as community service or interfaith dialogue.
5. **Reflection and Prayer:** Spend time in reflection or prayer, focusing on themes of unity, oneness, and interconnectedness.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Group Intention:** Start by collectively setting an intention for unity within the group and beyond.
2. **Open Dialogue:** Encourage open and respectful dialogue about the challenges and opportunities for practicing unity.
3. **Collective Activities:** Engage in activities that foster unity, such as group meditations focused on peace or community service projects.
4. **Study and Discussion:** Consider studying texts or teachings that focus on the theme of unity across different spiritual traditions.
5. **Affirmation and Celebration:** Regularly affirm and celebrate acts and milestones of unity within the group.
6. **Closing Ritual:** Conclude your gatherings with a unifying ritual or prayer which encapsulates the group's commitment to unity.

Unity as a spiritual practice is a transformative journey towards wholeness, both individually and collectively. It challenges us to look beyond our differences and to see the divine spark in each other. It is a practice that brings us closer to our true selves, to each other, and to the Divine. ■

COLORING PAGE ART:



VISIO DIVINA GUIDELINE:

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Practice for Individuals

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6. **Contemplate:** Spend a few more moments in silent contemplation, allowing the image to speak to your soul.
7. **Journal:** Write down insights, feelings, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

Practice for Small Groups

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7. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the insights gained during the Visio Divina.
8. **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

Visio Divina can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth, whether practiced individually or in a community. It offers a unique way to engage with the Divine, using the sense of sight as a gateway to deeper spiritual experiences. ■

VISIO DIVINA ART:

by Rev. Linda L. Furtado, Beech Grove UMC & Scarritt Bennett Center



Linda Furtado
2023-12-30

Week 6:

Acts Continues:

Writing the Next Chapter



Description: This week, we explore the Book of Acts not as a closed narrative but as an ongoing story in which we are the ‘actors.’ We are invited to reflect on our roles in this divine drama—how do we, in our daily lives, embody the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit? How do we contribute to this narrative, and how can we embrace the call to advance the work of the Spirit in the world?

Daily Reading Schedule:

- **Day 1:** Acts 18:1-28 (Paul in Corinth and Ephesus)
- **Day 2:** Acts 19:1-22 (Ephesus and the Holy Spirit)
- **Day 3:** Acts 19:23-41 (Riot in Ephesus)
- **Day 4:** Acts 20:1-16 (Journeys and Eutychus)
- **Day 5:** Acts 20:17-38 (Paul’s Farewell)
- **Day 6:** Acts 21:1-17 (Paul’s journey to Jerusalem)
- **Day 7:** Reflect and rest.

Daily Reading Questions

- How may you find encouragement in Paul’s life and challenging circumstances?
- What can we learn from the challenges faced by the Early Church as we seek to be resilient?
- How have you felt hindered in sharing your faith? What hindered you? How did you overcome it?
- How has reading the Book of Acts in its entirety affected your view of the Church and its mission?
- How have your views on the Holy Spirit changed or deepened after this reading plan?
- If you could sum up the overall message of Acts in one sentence, what would it be?

Additional Resources for Week 6

- **Written Reflection** by Rev. Amanda Crice (*pages 62-63*)
- **John Wesley Sermon:** “Christian Perfection” (*page 61*)
- **Charles Wesley Hymn:** And Can It Be? (*page 61*)
- **Spiritual Practice:** Witnessing (*page 64*)
- **Coloring Page Art** . (*page 65*)
- **Visio Divina Guideline** (*page 66*)
- **Visio Divina Art** by Rev. Monica Mowdy (*page 67*)

John Wesley Sermon:

Christian Perfection:

John Wesley's sermon "Christian Perfection" addresses the concept of sinlessness in the life of a believer. He explores the idea that Christians, through faith and grace, can reach a state where they do not commit sin. Wesley clarifies that this perfection does not mean a complete absence of ignorance, mistake, or infirmities, nor does it imply being free from temptation. Instead, it indicates living a life free from willful sin, guided by the love and grace of God. Wesley emphasizes that this state of Christian perfection is attainable in this life, not just after death, challenging the belief that continual sinning is inevitable for believers. He affirms that through Christ, believers can indeed lead a holy and sinless life.

Full Sermon: <https://thevineumc.church/christian-perfection>

Charles Wesley Hymn:

And Can It Be?:

This hymn by Charles Wesley expresses awe at the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The hymn marvels at how Christ's death brings salvation to sinners, describing this as a profound and mysterious act of divine love. It reflects on the personal transformation experienced by the believer, moving from a state of spiritual bondage to freedom and enlightenment through Christ's grace. The final verse conveys a sense of confidence and joy in salvation, emphasizing the believer's direct relationship with Jesus and the hope of eternal life.

Full Hymn: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/363>

Week 6

Acts Continues: Writing the Next Chapter

by Rev. Amanda Crice, Martin First UMC

I'm a big fan of the Netflix show, *The Crown*. The series follows the long, incredible reign of Queen Elizabeth II from the time she took the throne of the British Commonwealth until about 2005. Each episode creates little vignettes of what they imagine the life of the Royal family to be in their humanity and in their splendor throughout the events of the seven decades of Queen Elizabeth's reign. The show is brilliant at naming the tension between duty and authenticity, the tension between the individual good and the good of the whole, and the theme that seems to run through the whole show is the tension between tradition and progress. In one of the last episodes of the series, the Queen's popularity is waning after the death of Princess Diana while Prime Minister Tony Blair's popularity is skyrocketing. The Queen does something unheard of and asks Prime Minister Blair to recommend changes that should be made to modernize the monarchy. After his careful research, he comes back to the Queen with suggestions about removing archaic rituals and pageantry. The queen is defensive, but looks into every recommendation earnestly. In the process of re-examining these traditions and rituals, the Queen is reminded of the why behind the opulence of the Crown: "This is our duty: to lift people up and transport them to another realm—not bring them down to Earth and remind them of what they already have," she says.

As a leader in an institution that is also losing popular appeal, I can resonate with the depicted struggle between tradition and progress. And, I found the fictional Queen's words to be somewhat wise as we remember our traditions point to the transcendence of God. We shouldn't get so wrapped up in whatever is popular right now.

When I look at the book of Acts, I see a similar thread

throughout the book that highlights the tension between tradition and progress. Like the Queen, I think Paul is rooted in the purpose of religious tradition. And yet, he is a faith leader that models something different than the Kingdoms of this Earth. He knows the God we serve dwelled among us and in his humble service pointed to the transcendence of God. As those who continue to weather the storms of the institutional church, it is important to remember our duty is not in preserving what has been, but like Paul, we are to use every circumstance to point to Christ.

Jesus first, followed by Paul, show us that Religion is lived out more as a journey than an established institution that mimics the kingdoms of this world.

We are a people traveling through faith together. We don't need to get too weighed down with trying to carry the past forward. However, we shouldn't be traveling so fast that we miss everything that has been does indeed point us toward the transcendent reality that we are a people of the Kingdom of God which is simultaneously now and not yet. Paul's ministry was not tied to one place or one people. In fact, he'd often use the culture of the people he was with in order to help point them to the ways that God was already working and moving in their midst.

The image of Paul renting his home at the end of Acts is striking to me because I am someone who has many times had to make my home in a place that wasn't mine. We are in a season in our church where perhaps we feel as if we are inhabiting places that are temporary, that aren't our own, or even that we feel imprisoned by (as Paul was). These circumstances might mean we can't do all the things we used to do and our tradition feels fragile. Like the Queen, perhaps we see the transcendent value of all that has been. But, perhaps there are also places where

we have conflated theology and methodology intended for worship and guidance. Our job is not to establish ourselves once and for all here.

Paul is known for his guidance and pastoral leadership of so much of the early church, but what we might miss in his example is that we are all sojourners in this life of faith. We cannot cling so tightly to what has been that we miss the opportunities, even in situational hardship, that we have to point to Christ among us even here and now. Perhaps writing the next chapter requires that we hold that tension of tradition and progress as well. And, perhaps in that tension our next faithful steps in the journey that is this life of faith will be revealed. ■



AI-generated watercolor depicting Paul imprisoned in Rome.

WITNESSING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Witnessing as a spiritual practice is the intentional sharing of one's faith, beliefs, or spiritual experiences with others, with the aim of inviting them into a transformative relationship with the Divine. Far from being a mere proselytizing effort, witnessing in this context is a deeply spiritual act that stems from a genuine desire to share the joy, peace, and liberation that one has found in their own spiritual journey.

The Essence of Witnessing

At its core, witnessing is an act of love and service, motivated by a sense of calling and a commitment to the well-being of others. It is a practice that requires humility, empathy, and a deep respect for the individual journey of each person. Witnessing is not about imposing one's beliefs on others but about offering an invitation to explore new spiritual landscapes. It is a way of being in the world that reflects the love, grace, and inclusivity of the Divine.

Benefits

- Deepens one's own understanding and commitment to their faith
- Fosters meaningful connections and community
- Encourages spiritual growth for both the one who shares and the recipient
- Serves as a form of spiritual stewardship, passing on valuable insights and experiences
- Enhances one's ability to communicate and articulate their spiritual beliefs

Practice for Individuals

1. **Personal Testimony:** Be prepared to share your own spiritual journey and the transformative experiences you've had.
2. **Active Listening:** Engage in conversations where you not only speak, but also listen attentively to understand the other person's perspective.
3. **Service and Kindness:** Practice acts of service and kindness as a way to embody the teachings you wish to share.
4. **Prayer and Meditation:** Regularly pray or meditate for the spiritual well-being of others and for guidance in your evangelistic efforts.
5. **Study and Preparation:** Equip yourself with a deep understanding of your faith, scriptures, or spiritual teachings, so you can share them effectively.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Community Outreach:** Organize events or services that meet the needs of the community. Offer a space for spiritual dialogue.
2. **Group Testimonies:** Share personal testimonies within the group to practice articulating your experiences and to learn from each other.
3. **Role-Playing:** Engage in role-playing exercises to practice evangelism in a safe, supportive environment.
4. **Collective Prayer:** Dedicate time for collective prayer for the spiritual awakening of the community or individuals you are in contact with.
5. **Accountability and Support:** Create a system of accountability and support within the group to encourage each other in your evangelistic efforts.

Witnessing as a spiritual practice is a fulfilling and enriching way to engage with your faith and share it with others. It invites you to step out of your comfort zone and reach out to others in love and humility. It is a practice that not only enriches your own spiritual life, but also has the potential to bring light and transformation to the lives of others. ■

COLORING PAGE ART:



VISIO DIVINA GUIDELINE:

Visio Divina, or “Divine Seeing,” is a contemplative practice that involves meditating on a visual object, often a religious image, artwork, or even a natural scene, to gain spiritual insight and deepen one’s relationship with the Divine. Unlike reading or hearing, which engage other senses, Visio Divina invites individuals to use their sense of sight to explore the deeper spiritual meanings an image might hold.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Select an Image:** Choose a religious artwork, icon, or natural scene you find spiritually meaningful.
2. **Prepare:** Sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
3. **Observe:** Look at the image attentively, noting details such as color, form, and the emotions it evokes.
4. **Reflect:** Close your eyes and ponder the feelings, thoughts, or inspirations which arose while observing the image.
5. **Pray:** Open your eyes and look at the image again, this time offering a prayer related to your reflections.
6. **Contemplate:** Spend a few more moments in silent contemplation, allowing the image to speak to your soul.
7. **Journal:** Write down insights, feelings, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

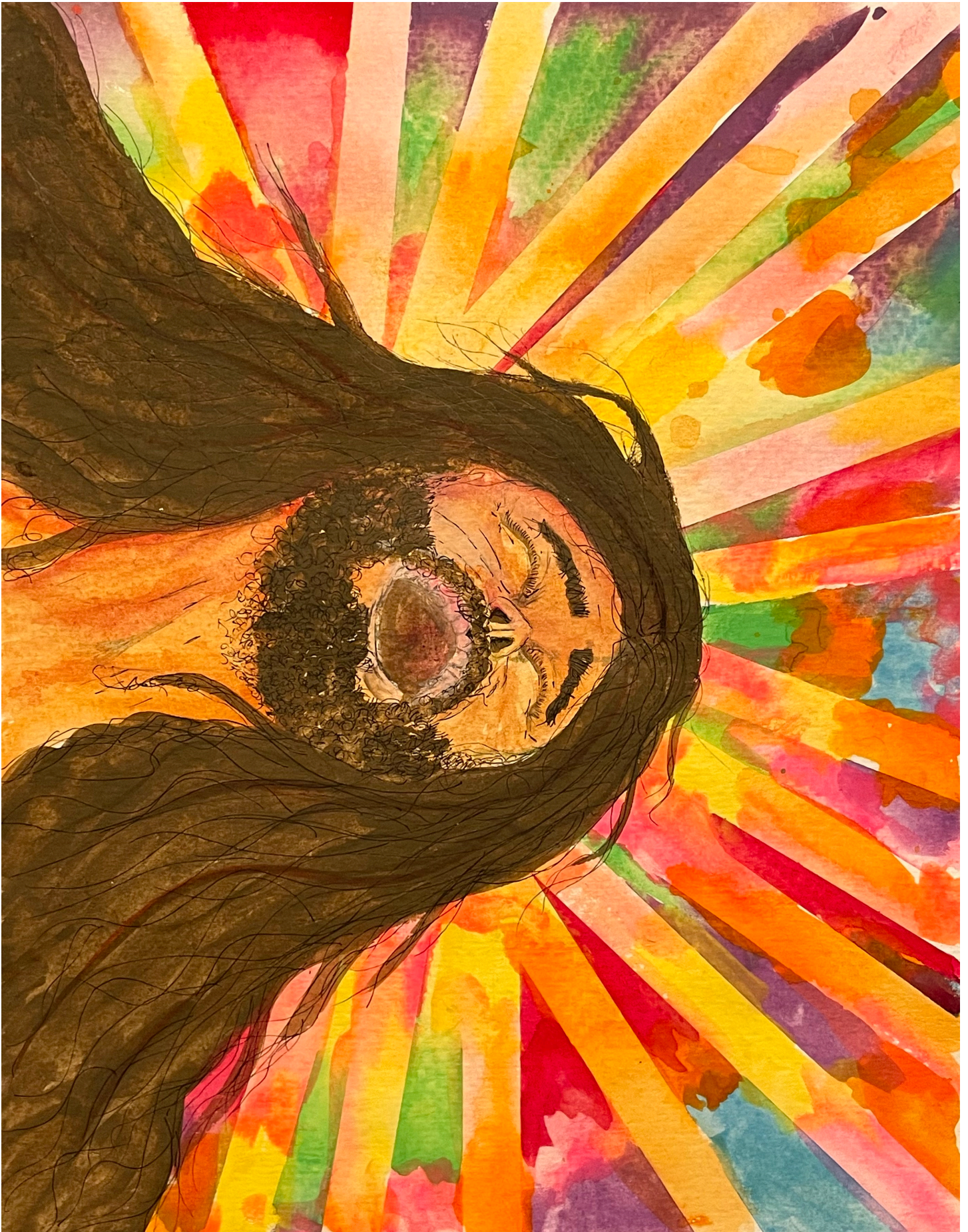
Practice for Small Groups

1. **Select an Image:** As a group, choose an image to be the focus of your Visio Divina session.
2. **Group Silence:** Begin with a moment of silence to prepare everyone’s heart and mind.
3. **Shared Observation:** Project or pass around the image, allowing each person to look at it closely.
4. **Group Reflection:** Invite members to share their initial thoughts and feelings about the image. No response is too small or insignificant.
5. **Scriptural Reading:** Read a Bible passage which relates to the image, if applicable.
6. **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for a discussion on how the image and the Scripture intersect, and what spiritual insights have been gained.
7. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the insights gained during the Visio Divina.
8. **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

Visio Divina can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth, whether practiced individually or in a community. It offers a unique way to engage with the Divine, using the sense of sight as a gateway to deeper spiritual experiences. ■

VISIO DIVINA ART:

by Rev. Monica Mowdy, Carthage UMC



Week 7:

The Story Continues: Living Acts Now



Description: The ongoing story of the Holy Spirit's action in our lives and the world continues to be written. Until Jesus comes again, we are called to work so the love of God, which has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, will be shared with all people. So as the story continues, what stories are unfolding in your life and in the life of your community?

Daily Reading Schedule:

- **Day 1:** Acts 21:18 - 22:29 (Paul's defense before the Jerusalem crowd)
- **Day 2:** Acts 22:30 - 23:22 (Paul before the Sanhedrin)
- **Day 3:** Acts 23:23 - 24:27 (Paul's transfer to Caesarea)
- **Day 4:** Acts 25:1 - 26:32 (Paul's defense before Festus and Agrippa)
- **Day 5:** Acts 27:1-44 (Paul's journey to Rome by sea)
- **Day 6:** Acts 28:1-31 (Paul's arrival and ministry in Rome)
- **Day 7:** Reflect and rest.

Daily Reading Questions

- How does Paul adapt his defense and presentation of the Gospel to best fit his audience?
- How do you see God's providence working alongside human decisions?
- What role does Paul's Roman citizenship play in different scenarios he find himself in?
- What qualities or characteristics of Paul stand out to you the most and why?
- How does Paul exemplify a unity of purpose and mission, even in the face of hostility?
- How does the Book Acts demonstrates the ever-expanding reach of the Gospel?

Additional Resources for Week 7

- **Written Reflection** by Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado (*pages 70-71*)
- **John Wesley Sermon:** The Almost Christian (*page 69*)
- **Charles Wesley Hymn:** Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast (*page 69*)
- **Spiritual Practice:** Centering Prayer (*page 72*)
- **Coloring Page Art** (*page 73*)
- **Visio Divina Guideline** (*page 74*)
- **Visio Divina Art** by Rev. Linda L. Furtado (*page 75*)

John Wesley Sermon:

The Almost Christian:

John Wesley's sermon "The Almost Christian" discusses the distinction between being almost and altogether a Christian. He first outlines what it means to be almost a Christian, which includes practicing honesty, having a form of godliness, and being sincere in religious actions. However, Wesley argues that being almost a Christian is not enough; to be altogether a Christian, one must deeply love God and others. This involves a heartfelt, life-changing faith in Christ, resulting in inner transformation and genuine love for one's neighbor. Wesley emphasizes the critical importance of this complete and authentic Christian experience.

Full Sermon: <https://thevineumc.church/the-almost-christian>

Charles Wesley Hymn:

Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast:

The hymn "Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast" by Charles Wesley is an invitation to all people, regardless of background, to embrace the grace and salvation offered by Jesus Christ. This hymn emphasizes the openness of this invitation to everyone and urges people not to let worldly distractions or excuses prevent them from accepting this divine offer. The hymn reflects on the sacrifice of Jesus and the redemption it brings, encouraging believers to fully embrace and experience God's love and salvation..

Full Hymn: <https://hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/616>

Week 7

The Story Continues: Living Acts Now

by Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado, The Vine UMC

During our family road trips, I often find myself at the wheel, listening to an enthusiastic chorus of voices from the back seats. On occasion, this chorus breaks into song or transforms into a lively performance of “Hamilton: The Musical,” turning our car ride into an impromptu theatre. Our three girls join together singing, and their favorite number is “The Schuyler Sisters” where each embraces a character that somewhat reflects their unique personalities. Their singing infuses our journey with a harmony that never fails to bring a smile to my face.

As I reflect on the Book of Acts during this season of our lives, a poignant line from the musical often echoes in my mind: “Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now!”¹ As people from the Global North, who have benefited from decades of Christianity as a cultural norm, we now find ourselves at a moment in time when the realities we read in the Book of Acts do not appear to be too distant from us. As the hymn, *Just As I Am*, tells us, over the past few years we have collectively lived through seasons where we have been “tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without.”² Yet Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to call us to see new realities that are constantly unfolding in our midst.

It may seem odd to say it, but indeed, how lucky we are to be alive right now! In this moment in time, when the needs of the world and its people are broadcast before our eyes on screens large and small. In this moment in time, when disorder is normative, disunity standard, and hatred commonplace. In this moment in time, when the poor still

need good news, prisoners still yearn for release, many still need healing, and those who are oppressed need liberation. How lucky we are to be alive right now and have not only stories of ages past when the world faced similar challenges, but an answer to that which ails us. Just as those who experienced the events of the Book of Acts, we too are invited to respond to the challenges before us through a clear and deep commitment to the teachings of Jesus, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.

Though we may feel far from the events narrated in Acts, we must remember they did not conclude with the final verse of the book. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God continues to speak, call, challenge, and broaden the barriers we raise that prevent some from the blessed life of community we enjoy. The work before us is the same as it has always been: to join together and fully participate in the ongoing story God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to create among us. The great United Methodist theologian, Justo L. Gonzalez, reminds us this Book of the Bible is much more than a historical narrative of what God has done in the past, but “a call to Christians to be open to the action of the Spirit, not only leading them to confront values and practices in society that may need to be subverted, but perhaps even leading them to subvert or question practices and values within the Church itself.”³

How is God inviting you to engage with the world around you? What lessons can we incorporate into our daily lives so the dynamic and multifaceted faith depicted in the Book of Acts becomes a tangible reality in our era?

Our reading of the Acts narrative presents us with a community characterized by its diversity, inclusivity, and

¹ *Hamilton: An American Musical* (Original Broadway Cast Recording). Performances by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Leslie Odom Jr., Phillipa Soo, and Jonathan Groff, Atlantic Records, 2015.

² William B. Bradbury, “Just as I Am, Without One Plea” in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 357.

³ Justo González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 8.

a deeply rooted sense of purpose. This early Christian group confronted persecution, internal disagreements, and the formidable task of merging diverse cultures and beliefs into a unified faith community. Despite these challenges, they unwaveringly adhered to the teachings of Jesus and were guided by the Holy Spirit. Their story encourages us to examine our own commitment to these principles, urging us to embrace diversity, seek understanding amidst differences, and foster a community bound by love and the pursuit of a greater purpose. By doing so, we not only honor their legacy but also actively participate in the living story of faith that continues to unfold in our own time.

In a world that often seems fragmented and polarized, the message of Acts is profoundly relevant. It calls us to a deeper understanding of community, where differences are not just tolerated but celebrated as part of the rich tapestry of God's creation. It challenges us to be agents of change, embodying the love, compassion, and justice of Christ in our actions and interactions.

Ultimately, the Book of Acts is a testament to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us we are part of a larger story, one that began with the early church and continues through us. As we engage with this text, we are encouraged to look around and recognize the privilege and responsibility of being alive in such a time as this.

We are called to be active participants in God's unfolding narrative and co-creators with the Spirit in the ongoing work of redemption and renewal in our world. ■



AI-generated oil painting showing a community gathering.

CENTERING PRAYER

Centering Prayer is a form of Christian contemplative prayer that aims to cultivate inner stillness and deepen one's relationship with the Divine. Unlike other forms of prayer that involve specific requests or active dialogue, Centering Prayer focuses on simply being in the presence of God. It encourages letting go of thoughts, distractions, and emotional turbulence to enter a state of pure awareness and communion with the Divine.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Choose a Sacred Word:** Select a word or short phrase that embodies your intention to be in the presence of God. This will serve as your anchor during the prayer.
2. **Prepare:** Find a quiet, comfortable space where you won't be disturbed. Sit upright and take a few deep breaths to relax your body and mind.
3. **Intention:** Silently express your intention to be open to God's presence and action within you.
4. **Begin:** Close your eyes and silently introduce your sacred word as a symbol of your intention.
5. **Let Go:** As you become aware of thoughts, sensations, or distractions, gently return to your sacred word.
6. **Duration:** Continue this practice for a predetermined period, usually 20-30 minutes.
7. **Closing:** To conclude, remain in silence for a couple of minutes, allowing the effects of the prayer to settle in. You may also want to end with a traditional prayer or expression of gratitude.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Gather:** Assemble in a quiet space where everyone can sit comfortably.
2. **Introduction:** Briefly explain the purpose and process of Centering Prayer for those who may be new to it.
3. **Choose a Sacred Word:** Each member selects their own sacred word or phrase.
4. **Group Silence:** Begin with a few moments of silence to prepare everyone's heart and mind.
5. **Guided Start:** One person may guide the group into the prayer, reminding them to focus on their sacred word and let go of distractions.
6. **Silent Prayer:** Engage in Centering Prayer as a group, each person silently focusing on their own sacred word for 20-30 minutes.
7. **Closing Silence:** After the timer goes off, sit in shared silence for a few minutes, allowing the experience to resonate within the group.
8. **Group Sharing:** Open the floor for anyone who wishes to share their experience, insights, or challenges faced during the prayer.
9. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the collective experience or individual needs.

Centering Prayer is a transformative practice that can enrich both individual and communal spiritual lives. It offers a pathway to deeper inner peace and a more intimate relationship with the Divine. ■

COLORING PAGE:



VISIO DIVINA GUIDELINE:

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6. **Contemplate:** Spend a few more moments in silent contemplation, allowing the image to speak to your soul.
7. **Journal:** Write down insights, feelings, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

Practice for Small Groups

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VISIO DIVINA ART:

by Rev. Linda L. Furtado, Beech Grove UM & Scarritt Bennett Center



Linda L. Furtado
1/13/2024

Small Group Leader Guide

NOTES FOR GROUP LEADERS

Following the transformative outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the early believers didn't just go about business as usual. Instead, they committed themselves to a life marked by diligent study of the Scriptures, meaningful engagement with one another, the cultivation of deep relationships, and a robust prayer life. This unity among the faithful wasn't merely the result of human effort or good intentions; it was and continues to be the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.

Living in such a community is far more than a social benefit; it's a divine gift of immeasurable value. This God-ordained fellowship serves multiple purposes: it enriches our spiritual journey, deepens our understanding of God, and fosters a greater sense of self and interconnectedness with others. When we come together to study the Scriptures, we're doing more than just expanding our intellectual horizons. We're creating a space where God can speak, not just to individuals, but to the community as a whole. The Book of Acts serves as a poignant reminder that this vibrant communal life is orchestrated by none other than God Himself.

This study guide is structured into seven sessions and is versatile enough for both small-group settings and individual exploration. We urge you to approach this study with patience and grace, recognizing that spiritual growth is a process. Keeping a journal may be beneficial, and establishing a daily routine can help you become more attuned to the Divine presence in your life.

Whether you're journeying through this study in a communal setting or taking it on as a personal endeavor, our heartfelt prayer is for you to encounter the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit. Through this experience, may you come to realize the Spirit's work in creating and sustaining community is as active today as it was in the days of the early church.

PREPARING AS TO LEAD A SMALL GROUP

- Begin your work with prayer.
- Decide if your group will meet in person, online, or have hybrid gatherings for this study.
- Communicate with your group the time, date, and location for each session.
- The study is designed to be completed with robust discussion in about an hour to an hour-and-a-half for a group of five to twelve persons.
- A good way to prepare for the study is to read the Written Reflection, Daily Readings, and Reflection Questions.
- Seek to practice Theological Hospitality and teach others how to lead in this way. (see details below)
- See a sample guide below. Remember, the guide is not a fixed rule to be followed, but rather a guide that can facilitate the presence of the Divine in the life of the group.

THEOLOGICAL HOSPITALITY

"Theological Hospitality" refers to an approach within religious and theological settings which encourages open dialogue, inclusivity, and a welcoming attitude toward diverse perspectives and theological interpretations. Unlike an exclusive approach that holds one interpretation or tradition as the only valid one, theological hospitality recognizes the value of multiple viewpoints and creates a space where these can be explored and discussed respectfully.

The idea is rooted in the broader Christian ethic of hospitality, which calls us to welcome the stranger and care for others. In the context of theology, this means creating brave spaces where people can question, doubt, explore, and grow in their understanding of faith without fear of judgment or condemnation. It's an approach that can be particularly useful in ecumenical settings, interfaith dialogues, or any religious context where diversity of thought exists.

Theological hospitality doesn't mean that anything goes or that all viewpoints are equally valid; rather, it acknowledges our understanding of the Divine is limited and that we can benefit from listening to others who have different insights

or experiences. It's a way of enriching our own faith and understanding, even as we offer that same opportunity to others.

One way to live out the principle of Theological Hospitality is by asking "Open, Honest Questions." Asking "Open, Honest Questions" is the practice of posing inquiries that encourage thoughtful, candid responses, rather than leading the other to a predetermined answer. These questions are open-ended, meaning they can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," and they are framed in a way that shows genuine curiosity, respect, and a desire for deeper understanding.

The "open" aspect of such questions allows for a wide range of responses inviting people to share more of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This can facilitate deeper dialogue and greater insight into the topic at hand.

The "honest" aspect implies that the questions come from a place of genuine curiosity or concern, rather than an attempt to trap, manipulate, or lead the other to a particular conclusion. Honesty in this context also means being willing to hear and consider answers that might challenge one's own beliefs or assumptions.

We believe that by being open to truly listening to what lies in the hearts of others, the Holy Spirit is at work in both us and them, drawing us nearer to the perfect image of Christ and fostering deeper connections with one another.

SAMPLE SESSION FLOW

- **Welcome Group Members (3 minutes)**
 - Set a routine to welcome and gather opening time. This can be lighting a candle or any other action that reminds all that Christ is present in our midst.
- **Check-in (6 minutes)**
 - It's important to recognize all of us come into shared spaces with the worries of life in our minds and hearts. It is appropriate to pause for a moment of sharing so we recognize the collective challenges that seek to steal our focus and prevent us from being fully present.
- **Silence & Prayer Time (6 minutes)**
 - Spend some time in silent reflection. At the end, offer thanksgiving for God's presence with us. Lift up the concerns of the people. Ask for God's guidance as we seek to grow in faith and understanding of the Holy Scriptures.
- **Reflection & Response (40-70 minutes)**
 - You are invited to make use of the weekly resources to guide the group reflection. Each week you will have a written reflection, Vision Divina, Spiritual Practice, John Wesley Sermon, Charles Wesley hymn, daily readings, and reflection questions. You do not need to use all resources. The daily scripture readings are the central component of the study. The Weekly Reflection, Visio Divina, John Wesley's Sermon, Charles Wesley's hymn, Spiritual Practice, and other resources are designed to augment and support the readings. The guides below offer instructions on Lectio Divina, Vision Divina, Centering Prayer, Prayer of Examen, and Breath Prayer.
- **Closing (5 minutes)**
 - Offer closing words to the group and thanksgiving to God for the work of the Spirit in the lives of all participants.

Note: It's important to clarify the primary objective of this study isn't to acquire new knowledge, though that might occur. The focus is on immersing oneself in the Scripture, experiencing it deeply by living in and reflecting on it. This approach emphasizes a personal, meditative engagement with the biblical text. Formation and transformation, empowered by the Holy Spirit and life in community. ■

LEARNING CONCEPTS FOR GROUP STUDY

Learning Concepts for Week 1:

- **Spiritual Anticipation:** Cultivate an atmosphere of expectation for the work of the Holy Spirit.
- **Understanding Prevenient Grace:** The Wesleyan concept of God's grace goes before us, wooing, and preparing our hearts for transformation.
- **Active Waiting:** Exploring the balance between actively waiting on God and taking faith-inspired actions.
- **Community Building:** Fellowship and unity are core parts of a community which wait together for the Holy Spirit.

Learning Concepts for Week 2:

- **Deepening Fellowship:** Develop an understanding of 'koinonia' (deep fellowship) and its significance for Christian community.
- **Social Holiness:** Discuss the Wesleyan concept of social holiness and its application in modern church life.
- **Resource Sharing:** Encourage a culture of generous giving and communal support within the church.
- **Celebrating Spiritual Gifts:** Help participants identify their own spiritual gifts and how they can be used for communal edification.

Learning Concepts for Week 3:

- **Expanding Boundaries:** Foster a willingness to step out of comfort zones for the sake of the Gospel.
- **Celebrating Diversity:** Recognize the value of diversity in the body of Christ and how it reflects the universality of God's grace.
- **Disrupting Norms:** Challenge cultural and societal norms that may hinder the expansive reach of the Holy Spirit.
- **Active Obedience:** Grow in obedience to the Spirit's leading, as exemplified by Philip and Peter.

Learning Concepts for Week 4:

- **Personal Transformation:** Reflect on one's own stories of transformation and assurance.
- **Sanctifying Grace:** Understand that God's grace continually works to transform us into Christ's likeness.
- **Sharing Testimonies:** Create space to share stories of transformation.
- **Inspiring Change:** Grow as agents of change and transformation within their broader communities.

Learning Concepts for Week 5:

- **Conflict Resolution:** Learn about Christian (Wesleyan) approaches to resolving conflicts within the community.
- **Unity in Diversity:** Explore the meaning of Christian Unity. Explore how to live in diverse community while valuing the unique gifts of individuals, and creating space for diverse voices.
- **Essentials and Non-Essentials:** Explore the Wesleyan principle of unity and charity.
- **Community Building:** Explore how to strengthen the communal bonds that enable the church to endure internal and external conflicts.

Learning Concepts for Week 6:

- **Continuing the Narrative:** Understand that we are active participants in God's ongoing narrative.
- **Spirit-Led Activism:** Inspire change in local communities, following the revolutionary examples set in Acts.
- **Personal Testimony:** Share stories of transformation and build a community narrative.
- **Contextual Application:** Identify contemporary issues that require a Spirit-led revolutionary response.
- **Commitment to Action:** Develop tangible commitments for individual and communal action.

Learning Concepts for Week 7:

- **Active Participation in God's Work:** Emphasize the importance of each individual's active role in continuing the mission of the Church today. Explore what it means to be a living part of the Body of Christ in modern times.
- **Embodying the Teachings of Christ:** Discuss practical ways to live out Christ's teachings in everyday life while focusing on love, service, and compassion as central tenets of Christian living.
- **Intergenerational Community Building:** Highlight the importance of fostering a church community that bridges generational gaps allowing for shared wisdom, mentorship, and growth.
- **Responding to Modern Challenges with Faith:** Equip participants with tools to address contemporary challenges and societal issues through a faith-based lens, encouraging active engagement, and compassionate responses.
- **Sharing and Celebrating Modern-Day Acts:** Create a platform for sharing testimonies of how God is working in individuals' lives today, celebrating the diverse ways the Holy Spirit is active in the contemporary world.

Detailed Session Flow

The following outline is intended as a flexible guide for group leaders. Feel free to tailor the wording to best suit your group's unique dynamics and needs.

GATHERING



Welcome! It is such a gift to have you here today. As we prepare ourselves for our time, we light a candle as a symbol of Christ's presence with us. This gesture reminds us that, in this space, we are not alone, for the light of Christ and His love are here—with us and in us.

Questions you can ask before the study gets underway:

- *What do you hope to experience as we gather today?*
- *Is there something from the readings and spiritual practices this past week that you hope we will talk about today?*



Take note of which content elements come to light from the participants. Lean into those among the optional elements listed below in this leader's script.

CHECK-IN



As we come into this space, we acknowledge our continued connection to the world outside. So, we pause for a moment of quiet and stillness, allowing our minds to become present to all that this space will offer. Let us share a couple of minutes in silence and after we will have a moment to share any concerns we bring that might distract us during our group time.



Remember, participation is always voluntary — sharing and involvement are invitations, not obligations. This approach nurtures a respectful and supportive environment where each person can be present and connected, yet free from the pressure to conform.

[After the time of silence]



Is there anything you would like to share with us that may impact your ability to participate today?

Examples:

Participant: *I've lost my voice and need to use paper notes (online: virtual chat), feeling tired and may ask for things to be repeated or miss some dialogue, kids are home and may call me or interrupt, intentionally having camera off for one reason or another, cooking dinner, traveling, waiting for a delivery and may have to step away, etc.*

Leader: *Thank you for letting us know how we can support and engage with you as we journey through the study together. With hearts and minds open and clear, let's begin with a prayer.*

OPENING PRAYER

Offer a unique or original prayer, lifting up the concerns or joys expressed by the group. Note the responses given related to desired topics for discussion as well as the needs people have lifted in the check-in. You may want to use the following outline.

- *Praise and thank God for the time to study together.*
- *Pray in light of needs lifted up in the check-in.*
- *Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance as you discuss...[List any items you plan to address from planning and from what attendees mentioned during the gathering time.]*

Example:

Gracious God, as we enter into this time of community and reflection, we lift our concern to you, trusting your grace and love to move in and through us, so our minds will be open to your truth, our hearts to your will, and our lives to your ways. Move us so together we will overflow with your compassion and embody the love we have encountered in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE



Let's get into the content of the week by looking at the daily reading questions.

(As you look at the questions, you can expand the dialogue by asking things like

- *What personal experiences helped you gain this insight?*
- *What other thoughts, questions, or revelations have you had?*
- *How has your understanding of this topic evolved over time?*
- *Are there any particular authors, thinkers, or experiences that have influenced your thoughts on this topic?*
- *How do you see this insight impacting your daily interactions or decisions?*
- *Have you encountered any resistance or skepticism regarding this insight, either from others or within yourself? How did you address it?*
- *Are there any aspects of this topic that you are still grappling with or curious about?*
- *How do you envision this insight guiding your future growth or development?*

OPTIONAL ELEMENTS



The elements below are intended to enhance the group time and offer greater context to the weekly readings. You are not required to engage all optional elements in your group time, during your time of preparation discern which elements may be beneficial for the group. During the group discussion and introduction, be attentive of which elements come to light from the participants. Lean into those insights and seek group feedback if in need of clarity.

Written Reflection:

- Facilitate a brief discussion around common themes or differences in perspectives based on their readings of the reflection.

John Wesley Sermon:

- Briefly introduce the selected sermon and its relevance to the week's readings. Engage the group in a conversation about the key takeaways and how it relates to their lives.

Charles Wesley Hymn:

- Play or sing the hymn, creating a reflective atmosphere. Discuss the hymn's lyrics, exploring connections with the readings and personal experiences.

Spiritual Practice Exercise:

- Guide the group through a spiritual practice related to the week's theme. Allow time for individuals to share their experiences and insights from the exercise.

Coloring Page Art:

- Provide copies of the coloring pages related to the study theme as found in the study materials. Encourage participants to engage in quiet reflection as they color, fostering a meditative atmosphere. This is something that people can work on during discussions as well.

Visio Divina Art:

- Explain the concept of Visio Divina. Share the provided piece of art for the and guide the group in a meditative reflection.

CLOSING:

- Summarize key insights from the discussion.
- Offer a closing prayer, thanking God for the time spent together and seeking God's continued guidance throughout the week.
- Announce any relevant information for the upcoming week's study.
- As you end the session, ensure everyone feels heard and valued before departing or closing if using an online meeting room.

LECTIO DIVINA:

Lectio Divina, or “Divine Reading,” is an ancient Christian practice of prayerful scripture reading aimed at reaching a deeper relationship with the Divine. Unlike traditional Bible Study, which focuses on analysis and interpretation, Lectio Divina encourages a meditative approach, inviting individuals to let the words resonate within them and inspire personal reflection and prayer.

The traditional Lectio Divina practice is usually divided into four main steps, each with a Latin name Lectio (Reading), Meditatio (Meditation), Oratio (Prayer), and Contemplatio (Contemplation).

Practice for Individuals

- **Select a Passage:** Choose a short scripture passage that speaks to you.
- **Prepare:** Sit in a quiet space, take a few deep breaths, and center yourself.
- **Read (Lectio):** Read the passage slowly, either aloud or silently, savoring each word.
- **Meditate (Meditatio):** Reflect on the text, letting it speak to you. Pay attention to any words or phrases that stand out.
- **Pray (Oratio):** Engage in a personal dialogue with God, sharing your thoughts, feelings, and questions that arose from your meditation.
- **Contemplate (Contemplatio):** Sit in silence, open to receiving whatever wisdom or insight God may offer.
- **Journal:** Write down any insights, emotions, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

Practice for Small Groups

- **Select a Passage:** The group chooses a scripture passage for the session.
- **Group Silence:** Begin with a moment of silence to prepare everyone’s heart and mind.
- **Shared Reading:** One person reads the passage aloud slowly, allowing everyone to absorb the words.
- **Group Reflection:** Members share any words or phrases that stood out to them during the reading.
- **Second Reading:** Another person reads the same passage again, followed by a period of silent reflection.
- **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for members to share their reflections, insights, or questions that arose from the reading and meditation.
- **Group Prayer:** Each member offers a short prayer related to their reflections or the needs of the group.
- **Closing Silence:** End the session with a moment of shared silence, allowing the experience to settle in everyone’s heart.
- **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

Lectio Divina can be practiced individually or in a group and is often used as a structured approach to prayer and scriptural study. It offers a more contemplative and personal way to engage with the Scriptures, as opposed to academic or analytical methods. ■

VISIO DIVINA:

Visio Divina, or “Divine Seeing,” is a contemplative practice that involves meditating on a visual object, often a religious image, artwork, or even a natural scene, to gain spiritual insight and deepen one’s relationship with the Divine. Unlike reading or hearing, which engage other senses, Visio Divina invites individuals to use their sense of sight to explore the deeper spiritual meanings an image might hold.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Select an Image:** Choose a religious artwork, icon, or natural scene you find spiritually meaningful.
2. **Prepare:** Sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
3. **Observe:** Look at the image attentively, noting details such as color, form, and the emotions it evokes.
4. **Reflect:** Close your eyes and ponder the feelings, thoughts, or inspirations which arose while observing the image.
5. **Pray:** Open your eyes and look at the image again, this time offering a prayer related to your reflections.
6. **Contemplate:** Spend a few more moments in silent contemplation, allowing the image to speak to your soul.
7. **Journal:** Write down insights, feelings, or inspirations which came to you during this practice.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Select an Image:** As a group, choose an image to be the focus of your Visio Divina session.
2. **Group Silence:** Begin with a moment of silence to prepare everyone’s heart and mind.
3. **Shared Observation:** Project or pass around the image, allowing each person to look at it closely.
4. **Group Reflection:** Invite members to share their initial thoughts and feelings about the image. No response is too small or insignificant.
5. **Scriptural Reading:** Read a Bible passage which relates to the image, if applicable.
6. **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for a discussion on how the image and the Scripture intersect, and what spiritual insights have been gained.
7. **Closing Prayer:** End the session with a group prayer, possibly related to the insights gained during the Visio Divina.
8. **Journaling:** If time allows, members can jot down their personal reflections for future contemplation.

Visio Divina can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth, whether practiced individually or in a community. It offers a unique way to engage with the Divine, using the sense of sight as a gateway to deeper spiritual experiences. ■

PRAYER OF EXAMEN:

The Prayer of Examen is a reflective spiritual practice rooted in Ignatian spirituality. It involves a structured meditation aimed at discerning God's presence in the everyday moments of life. Unlike other forms of prayer that may focus on requests or praise, the Examen encourages individuals to review their day with an eye for recognizing God's guidance, blessings, and invitations for growth.

Practice for Individuals

1. **Prepare:** Find a quiet space where you can sit or lie down comfortably. Take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
2. **Gratitude:** Begin by recalling the blessings and positive moments of your day, thanking God for each one.
3. **Review:** Walk through your day chronologically, from morning to evening, paying attention to your feelings, interactions, and activities.
4. **Discern:** Identify moments where you felt closest to God, as well as those where you felt distant or disconnected. Ask yourself what these moments reveal about your spiritual state.
5. **Reflect and Pray:** Consider what God might be saying to you through these observations. Offer a prayer for insight, forgiveness, or strength, depending on what you've discerned.
6. **Look Forward:** Think about the day to come. Ask God for guidance or grace for specific events or challenges you anticipate.
7. **Close:** End with a prayer of gratitude or a specific prayer that aligns with your reflections.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Gather:** Meet in a quiet, comfortable space where everyone can sit in a circle.
2. **Introduction:** Briefly explain the Prayer of Examen for those who may be new to the practice.
3. **Group Silence:** Start with a few minutes of silence to help everyone center themselves.
4. **Guided Examen:** One person can lead the group through each step of the Examen, allowing time for individual reflection after each prompt.
5. **Sharing:** Open the floor for members to share insights, challenges, or blessings they've identified, if they feel comfortable doing so.
6. **Group Prayer:** Collectively offer up the insights and concerns that have been shared, asking for God's guidance, wisdom, or peace.
7. **Closing:** End the session with a moment of silence or a closing prayer that encapsulates the group's collective experience and insights.

The Prayer of Examen is a versatile and enriching spiritual practice that can be adapted for both individual and communal settings. It offers a structured, yet flexible, framework for recognizing God's presence in daily life and discerning His guidance for the journey ahead. ■

DISCERNMENT AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Discernment in a spiritual context is the intentional practice of seeking divine guidance and wisdom in making decisions or understanding one's life path. It is more than mere problem-solving or ethical reasoning; it is about tuning into the subtle movements of the Spirit to recognize where God is leading you. Discernment involves a blend of prayer, contemplation, and active listening, aimed at understanding God's will in various aspects of life.

The Essence of Discernment

At its core, discernment is a dialogical process between the individual and the Divine. It is a practice rooted in humility, acknowledging that human wisdom alone is insufficient for navigating the complexities of life. Discernment invites us to surrender our own agendas and open ourselves to divine possibilities. It is a way of seeing that penetrates beyond the surface of things, offering a deeper understanding of situations and relationships.

Benefits

- Deepens your relationship with God
- Provides clarity in decision-making
- Enhances self-awareness and understanding of your calling
- Offers peace and confidence in choices made
- Builds a foundation for ethical and spiritual integrity

Practice for Individuals

1. **Create Sacred Space:** Find a quiet place where you can focus without distractions.
2. **Prayerful Preparation:** Begin with a prayer, asking God for guidance and clarity.
3. **Present the Issue:** Clearly articulate the decision or issue for which you are seeking guidance.
4. **Listen and Reflect:** Spend time in silence, contemplation, or scriptural reading related to your issue.
5. **Seek Counsel:** Sometimes discernment involves consulting trusted spiritual advisors or reading relevant spiritual texts.
6. **Make a Choice:** After a period of discernment, make your decision based on the guidance you've received.
7. **Offer Gratitude:** Thank God for the guidance and wisdom provided, regardless of the outcome.

Practice for Small Groups

1. **Gather and Set Intentions:** Meet in a quiet space and clarify the purpose of the group discernment session.
2. **Group Prayer:** Begin with a collective prayer asking for divine guidance.
3. **Share:** Allow each person to share the issue or decision they are discerning, if comfortable.
4. **Group Silence and Reflection:** Enter into a period of silence, during which each person contemplates the shared issues.
5. **Group Discussion:** Open the floor for respectful dialogue, sharing insights, or scriptural wisdom that may aid in discernment.
6. **Collective Prayer:** Close the session with a prayer, entrusting all decisions and discernments to God's wisdom.
7. **Check-in:** It may be beneficial to have follow-up sessions to see how the discernment process is unfolding for each individual.

Discernment as a spiritual practice is a transformative journey that not only aids in making decisions, but also fosters a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. It is a lifelong skill that requires ongoing practice and openness to the Spirit's leading. ■

HANDS-ON WEEKLY ACTIVITIES:

WEEK 1: THE PROMISE AND THE BEGINNING

- **Activity:** Pentecost Fire Ceremony
- **Objective:** To symbolize the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.
- **Activity:** Distribute small red paper flames to each participant. Have them write a prayer or wish for the Holy Spirit's influence in their life or the life of the community. Collect and display these.
- **Connection to Current Reality:** Discuss the significance of the Holy Spirit in empowering and guiding the Church, particularly in today's complex societal landscape.

WEEK 2: PERSECUTIONS AND BOLDNESS

- **Activity:** Boldness Jar
- **Objective:** To encourage boldness in faith.
- **Activity:** Each participant writes several ways they can be bold in their faith on small pieces of paper and place it in a jar. During the week, they draw from the jar and act on what's written.
- **Connection to Current Reality:** Discuss examples of modern-day believers who exemplify boldness despite persecution or criticism.

WEEK 3: MARTYRDOM AND EXPANSION

- **Activity:** Stephen's Stones
- **Objective:** To understand the cost of discipleship.
- **Activity:** Each participant holds a smooth stone while reflecting on the story of Stephen. After a time of reflection, they can place it at the foot of a cross in the room.
- **Connection to Current Reality:** Discuss current regions or communities where Christians are persecuted and consider ways to support them.

WEEK 4: BREAKING BARRIERS

- **Activity:** Cornelius' Tent
- **Objective:** To appreciate the inclusivity of the Gospel.
- **Activity:** Create a 'tent' space with fabrics and invite participants to enter and reflect on what it means to be included by God despite cultural or social barriers.
- **Connection to Current Reality:** Discuss current societal or cultural barriers that hinder Gospel inclusivity.

WEEK 5: COUNCILS AND MISSIONS

- **Activity:** Council Debate
- **Objective:** To understand the role of communal discernment in faith matters.
- **Activity:** Stage a mock "Jerusalem Council" where participants argue different sides of a current ethical or theological issue.
- **Connection to Current Reality:** Discuss the importance of communal wisdom in navigating current ethical dilemmas the Church faces.

WEEK 6: ACTS CONTINUES: WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER

- **Activity:** Community Outreach Day
- **Objective:** To engage in hands-on mission work.
- **Activity:** Organize a community service day where participants can volunteer at local shelters, food banks, or other community organizations.

- **Connection to Current Reality:** Discuss how this service is a continuation of the Church's mission, as initiated in the Book of Acts.

WEEK 7: THE LIVING WORD: SCRIPTURE IN ACTION

- **Activity:** Scripture in Motion
- **Objective:** To connect scripture to daily life and actions.
- **Activity:** Participants choose a verse or story from Acts that resonates with them and develop a small skit or representation of how they can live out this scripture in their daily life. This could be a family project, a personal commitment, or a community initiative.
- **Connection to Current Reality:** Discuss how the principles from the Book of Acts can be applied to our contemporary challenges and the role of scripture in guiding our responses to societal needs.

SERMON SERIES OUTLINE

WEEK 1: DIVINE ANTICIPATION: WAITING FOR THE SPIRIT

- ◆ **Scripture:** Acts 1:4-14
- ◆ **Sermon Focus:** *The expectation of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual work of waiting.*
- ◆ **Description:** *The Book of Acts opens with the resurrected Jesus instructing the disciples to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In this first week, we explore the waiting period experienced by the disciples before the arrival of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to wait for God's gracious action in our lives?*
- ◆ **John Wesley Sermon:** ["The Means of Grace"](#)
- ◆ **Theological Connection:**
God's prevenient grace in preparing the hearts of the disciples and the role of the Means of Grace.
- ◆ **Life Connection:**
In a world of immediate gratification, discuss the importance of waiting on God's timing.
- ◆ **Sermon Reflection Questions**
 - *How do you relate to the disciples' sense of anticipation for the Holy Spirit?*
 - *Where do you see God's prevenient grace working in your life?*
 - *How might anticipation for the Holy Spirit manifest in your community today?*
 - *What are the challenges of waiting on God's timing?*
 - *How do you reconcile human initiative and divine intervention?*
 - *When have you felt the Holy Spirit's guidance? Describe these experiences.*

WEEK 2: UNQUENCHABLE FIRE: COMMUNITY & THE HOLY SPIRIT

- ◆ **Scripture:** Acts 2:1-4, 37-45
- ◆ **Sermon Focus:** *The role of the Holy Spirit in establishing and guiding the early Christian community.*
- ◆ **Description:** *In our second week, we explore the Spirit-filled transformed life of the early Christian community. What does a genuine, Spirit-led community look like today? How can we better open ourselves to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in our communal lives?*
- ◆ **John Wesley Sermon:** ["The New Birth"](#)
- ◆ **Theological Connection:**
Discuss John Wesley's notion of "social holiness" and the communal aspects of sanctifying grace.
- ◆ **Life Connection:**
In the age of social media, explore what an authentic Christian community looks like.
- ◆ **Sermon Reflection Questions**
 - *How does the concept of "social holiness" resonate with the communal life seen in Acts 2:42-47?*
 - *Where do you see sanctifying grace operating within your community?*
 - *How can modern churches cultivate 'koinonia' (fellowship) like the early church?*
 - *How does your community celebrate spiritual gifts?*
 - *What practices can your church community implement to better live out Acts 2:42-47?*
 - *How does your community respond to needs within and outside the church?*

WEEK 3: COSMIC CROSSROADS: THE SPIRIT'S EVER-EXPANDING REACH

- ◆ **Scripture:** Acts 8:26-40, Acts 10:1-48
- ◆ **Sermon Focus:** *How the Holy Spirit breaks barriers to include outsiders like the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius.*
- ◆ **Description:** *This week, we look at how the early church went beyond its comfort zones through the Holy Spirit's work in expanding the church. How can we break barriers and open our hearts to a diverse array of people, just as the early church began to include Gentiles, eunuchs, and other 'outsiders' under the guidance of the Spirit?*
- ◆ **John Wesley Sermon:** ["Catholic Spirit"](#)
- ◆ **Theological Connection:**
Discuss Wesley's emphasis on the universality of God's grace.
- ◆ **Life Connection:**
In 1960, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. lamented that 11 o'clock was the most segregated hour in Christian America. Today, this continues to be the lived reality of most Christians. Why is the unity and diversity found in sports fields, stadiums, workplaces, etc., so difficult to achieve in the church?
- ◆ **Sermon Reflection Questions**
 - *How does the inclusion of outsiders in these chapters reflect the universality of God's grace?*
 - *In what ways can the Church today extend its reach to outsiders?*
 - *How do these chapters challenge traditional boundaries and comfort zones?*
 - *What lessons can we learn from Philip's and Peter's obedience?*
 - *How does the Holy Spirit disrupt cultural norms?*
 - *What are the ways the Holy Spirit is calling you to expand your boundaries?*

WEEK 4: CHANGED LIVES: STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

- ◆ **Scripture:** Acts 9:1-19, Acts 10:9-16
- ◆ **Sermon Focus:** *Transformation stories like Paul's conversion and Peter's vision.*
- ◆ **Description:** *In the fourth week of our series, we focus on the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in individual lives, exemplified in stories like that of the Apostle Paul and the jailer at Philippi. How can we support individuals who are seeking renewal and transformation? What stories of transformation can we share from our communities?*
- ◆ **John Wesley Sermon:** ["The New Birth"](#)
- ◆ **Theological Connection:**
Discuss Wesley's own 'Aldersgate experience' and the concept of 'assurance' in transformative grace.
- ◆ **Life Connection:**
What does it mean to experience transformation? What are modern-day testimonies or stories where people have been transformed by God's grace?
- ◆ **Sermon Reflection Questions**
 - *How do the transformation stories in Acts echo John Wesley's own experience of assurance?*
 - *Where do you see transformation in your life or community?*
 - *What aspects of Paul's and Peter's life were fundamentally changed?*
 - *How do these transformations affect those around them?*
 - *What does it mean to be "transformed" in the Wesleyan understanding?*
 - *Are there transformation stories in your community you can share?*

WEEK 5: UNITY IN THE MIDST OF STORMS

- ◆ **Scripture:** *Acts 15:1-35*
- ◆ **Sermon Focus:** *Facing inner conflict and achieving unity of purpose, like in the Jerusalem Council.*
- ◆ **Description:** *As we enter into week five, we tackle the complex and yet essential theme of unity in the Church. The reality of division that has become too real in our lives calls us to explore how the early church navigated doctrinal disagreements and diversity.*
- ◆ **John Wesley Sermon:** [“On Schism”](#)
- ◆ **Theological Connection:**
Explore Wesley’s phrase, “If thine heart is as my heart, if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: Give me thine hand.”
- ◆ **Life Connection:**
Conflict is a part of life—not even the church is immune to these realities. What does our tradition have to say about unity? How do we create space for the movement of the Holy Spirit in times of difficulty so we may be guided toward unity of spirit and not uniformity of action?
- ◆ **Sermon Reflection Questions**
 - *How might the Jerusalem Council reflect Wesley’s emphasis on unity and love?*
 - *Where can modern churches apply this principle to resolving conflicts?*
 - *How do you balance unity and diversity within a faith community?*
 - *What “non-essentials” tend to cause division today?*
 - *How does the concept of Christian unity apply to contemporary church debates?*
 - *What are some practices that can promote unity in the church?*

WEEK 6: ACTS CONTINUES: WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER

- ◆ **Scripture:** *Acts 28:30-31*
- ◆ **Sermon Focus:** *Embracing our role in the ongoing narrative of the Holy Spirit’s work in the world.*
- ◆ **Description:** *In this penultimate week of our series, we turn our focus to the continuation of the Book of Acts beyond its final written words. The narrative of the early church doesn’t end with Acts 28; it extends into our present day and beyond. We are the current actors in this divine drama, called to carry forward the mission and ministry of the Early Church. How do we perceive our role in the ongoing story of the Holy Spirit? What chapters are we writing today in our lives and communities?*
- ◆ **John Wesley Sermon:** [“Christian Perfection”](#)
- ◆ **Theological Connection:**
Reflecting on John Wesley’s sermon “Christian Perfection,” we examine the concept of continuous spiritual growth and our role in the ongoing story of faith. This week, we explore how we, like the Early Church, are called to grow in grace and participate actively in the Holy Spirit’s work.
- ◆ **Life Connection:**
How does the narrative of Acts inspire us to engage with our current context? What does it look like to live as modern-day disciples, writing our own chapters in the ongoing story of the Church? This week challenges us to see ourselves as active participants in God’s unfolding plan, living out the gospel in tangible, transformative ways in our world today.
- ◆ **Sermon Reflection Questions**
 - *How does understanding Acts as an open-ended story change your view of your role in the Church?*

- *What aspects of Wesleyan theology resonate with the notion of a continuously unfolding Christian narrative?*
- *How are you experiencing God's sanctifying grace in your life today?*
- *What kinds of acts do you feel the Holy Spirit is prompting you to engage in your community?*
- *In what ways do you see yourself as a participant in the ongoing story of the Church rather than just an observer?*
- *How can we partner with the Holy Spirit to write the next chapter in our community?*

WEEK 7: THE STORY CONTINUES: LIVING ACTS NOW

On the last week of this sermon series, we encourage you to invite your congregation and community to share how the story of Acts continues to unfold today. How might you structure your worship service or sermon time to allow diverse voices to speak?

- ◆ **Scripture:** Acts 17:28-32
- ◆ **Sermon Focus:** Continuing the legacy of the early church by actively participating in God's work in the world and our communities today.
- ◆ **Description:** In this final week, we reflect on how the story of Acts is not just a historical account, but a living narrative we are part of. As we have journeyed through the Book of Acts, we've seen how the Holy Spirit moved in powerful ways through the Early Church. Now, it's our turn. We are the current "actors" in this ongoing story of faith and action. We explore how the Holy Spirit is actively working in our lives and our communities today and how we can join in this divine narrative.
- ◆ **John Wesley Sermon:** ["The Almost Christian"](#)
- ◆ **Theological Connection:**
This week, we dive into the concept of being 'practical Christians' as emphasized by John Wesley in his sermon "The Almost Christian." We explore how our faith is not just a matter of belief, but also of action, as we are called to live out the gospel in our daily lives.
- ◆ **Life Connection:**
What does it mean to be a living act of the Holy Spirit in today's world? How do we embody the teachings of Jesus Christ in our daily interactions, our decision-making, and our response to the needs around us? This week challenges us to consider our role in continuing the story of Acts in the 21st century.
- ◆ **Sermon Reflection Questions:**
 - How do you see yourself as a part of the ongoing story of Acts?
 - In what ways can you actively participate in the work of the Holy Spirit in your community?
 - How does John Wesley's call to practical Christianity resonate with your personal faith journey?
 - What specific actions can you take to live out your faith more fully?
 - How can we, as a community, embody the teachings of Jesus in our current context?
 - Share a recent experience when you felt led by the Holy Spirit to act or make a difference.

As we conclude this series, let us remember that the Book of Acts does not end with chapter 28; it continues with each of us. We are invited to be co-authors with the Holy Spirit in writing this ongoing narrative of faith, hope, and love. Let us embrace this call with courage and joy, knowing our stories are an integral part of God's grand story.

