

Four Week Bible Study

*Note: This Bible Study owes a great deal to Amy Oden's book *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* by Amy G. Oden (The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, Ohio, 2008). Her description of the four characteristics of radical hospitality provided the basic outline for this study. If possible leaders of this study are encouraged to read this book in preparation for leading the group. The book is available from the Resource Library in the Office of Coordinator of Language and Migrant Ministries of the Germany Central Conference of the UMC. Return to the homepage for contact information.*

The four themes of this Bible Study are:

1. Our Identity – Defining who we are as people of God, our roots, and our identity as a church/community of faith in the community where we are.
2. Their Identity – Defining the “other” or the stranger and foreigner in the context of our specific community.
3. Meeting on the Bridge – Looking at ways the “us” and “them” groups might come together; exploring ideas and things that might need to change or be re-defined.
4. The Family of God – How to create a sense of one family of God where all are brothers and sisters together in the world.

Each theme will include reflections from the Bible, the world and one's own individual and community life. It is hoped that in the process, new ways for offering hospitality and welcome to all will be discovered, examined and tested.

The Basic Outline for each week in the Bible Study:

Gathering

Hymn

Prayer for Wisdom and Insights

Reading of Scripture

Reflection on Scripture

Introduction of theme of the week : how do the Scripture and theme intersect?

Modern Day Story – (*you can use what is written or adapt this to your local situation*)

Small Group Work or Individual Work

Group Reflection on what this might mean for the local congregation

Prayer – include prayers in intercession

Closing blessing and hymn

Resources needed each week: Bibles, hymnbooks, paper, pencils or pens, openness and a honesty.



Week One “Our Identity: Who are We?”

1. As people gather, provide means of hospitality: name tags if they do not know one another, light refreshments (these can be offered at the end if it is more convenient), a welcome place to sit in a circle (circles are best for enhancing discussion), greet each one by name and introduce the group to one another if needed.
2. Hymn
3. Open with a prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance and wisdom, open hearts and minds.
4. Answer the questions “Who are you?” or “How do you define yourself?” with one word answers (i.e. daughter, sister, artist, Christian...). Make a list for the whole group.
5. Scripture Reading: Genesis 18:1-15.
6. Reflections on the Scripture

God made a Covenant with Abraham that he would have children as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5-6) when Abraham and Sarah were much younger. Yet they remained faithful in the expectation that God would fulfill this promise. At the time of this story Abraham and Sarah at home near Hebron by the oaks of Mamre. In the heat of the day Abraham welcomes three guests. He runs to meet them and offers them rest and refreshment. “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.” (Gen. 18:3, NRSV) When the travelers agree to stay, Abraham treats them as special guests. In the end these strangers turn out to be emissaries from God promising again a son will be born to Abraham and Sarah. This time the announcement comes with a timeline and the completion of the Covenant begins.

This story provides the foundation for the beginning of the fulfillment of the Covenant between God and Abraham (Gen. 17:1-8). This is the beginning of the history of “the chosen people of God.” God’s chosen were to provide a model for how to live in relationship with God. Abraham and Sarah give birth to Isaac and through his lineage we find all the great leaders, kings and prophets of Israel down through Jesus.

7. Theme of the Week: Readiness



One of the first characteristics of Christian hospitality is that of readiness. Abraham is standing at the door of the tent waiting for travelers. He has not been told someone would arrive. He is waiting expectantly for whoever might come. This is a different kind of waiting and expectation than we normally experience when we wait for family or friends. Abraham was waiting for strangers to pass by. When travelers do pass by he runs out to greet them and offers them food and rest.

Dr. Oden defines this understanding of readiness in her book as “akin to moral nerve. It exudes trust: trust that opportunities to welcome are just around the corner, trust that offering welcome will draw us closer to God, trust that participation in hospitality is participation in the life of God.” (p.18 *God’s Welcome* – see above)

For most of us this kind of readiness would not come naturally. Trust involves opening our hearts to God’s welcome and learning to live by trusting in God. This takes practice and a daily walk of faith.

Sarah’s response to Abraham’s readiness was to help to prepare the meal for the guests. However, later, when she hears the response of the guests telling Abraham that she would have a son within a year, she laughs. Perhaps living a life of daily trusting in God and being open to the stranger also gives us the courage to laugh and be fully open as we experience all the wonders of God in the world.

8. Modern Day Story

An old rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

“Could it be,” asked one student, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it’s a sheep or a dog?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

Another asked, “Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it’s a fig tree or a palm tree?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

The pupils were confused and had no other answers to offer.

“Then what is it?” the pupils demanded.

“It is when you can look on the face of a stranger and see a friend. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.” (Hasidim Tale)

9. If your group is larger than 8 persons, divide into small groups of 4-5 persons and discuss the following questions:

What does it mean for me to live in readiness?



What does it mean for this faith community to be rooted in readiness?

10. Share as a whole group.
11. Closing Prayer – including prayers of intercession
12. Hymn of Blessing
13. Assignment for next week: Read Genesis 21:1-21 and consider the differences between Ishmael and Isaac.

Week Two “Their Identity- Strangers and Foreigners”

1. Gathering
2. Hymn
3. Opening Prayer
4. Scripture Reading: Genesis 21:1-21
5. Reflection on Scripture

Sarah tells Abraham to send away Hagar and Ishmael. The biblical account tells us it is because of her desire to keep Isaac’s inheritance intact. Abraham questions this. After all Ishmael is also his son. Hagar was sent to him by Sarah to have this son. They have done nothing wrong.

God assures Abraham that they will be protected and safe in their banishment from his home. God promises Ishmael that God “will also make a nation of Him, for he is your offspring.” (Gen 21:13, NRSV) Although Hagar almost gives up in despair an angel is sent to save them. The Ishmaelites become identified as desert people and traders.

The story of “God’s chosen people” will continue through Isaac but God also protects the one who was cast out. God promises an abundant family to both Isaac and Ishmael. Hagar had no power as a slave to protect her son, but God intervened.

This story clearly shows God’s care and love for all persons. We do not know as much about the Ishmaelites because the Biblical story follows another line, but there is no limit to God’s ability to care for this tribe and nation. They are strangers to the Biblical story as we know it. They soon disappear outside the frame of reference. But God has cared for and protected them. They are welcomed members of the family in this account.

6. Theme of the Week: Risk



It is dangerous to welcome those outside our own “story” – our own culture and history – those we know little or nothing about. To welcome those who are radically different from us exposes us to different ideas, different interpretations, disruption of our routines and perhaps physical danger. Yet the Biblical story knows no stranger who is not welcomed by God. If we are to be open as Christians and as a Christian community, it will be important to evaluate our willingness for risk-taking.

When we welcome strangers, it is important to get to know them and their needs as they define them. Often this leads to new lenses through which we can see ourselves as well. We can learn from the stranger what we think we value and must be willing to risk in order to provide hospitality. Some of the risks might be as uncomplicated as changing to sitting when praying and standing when singing. Others might involve much greater risk such as offering companionship for asylum seekers as they go through the waiting process. It might mean that worship will be disrupted as children find a new place they can call “home”. There is no limit to those who God welcomes and the ensuing transformations to be made.

Dr. Oden reminds us in her book *God’s Welcome* that “the risks of hospitality humble us, remind us we rely on God’s welcome for courage, and force us to stay openhanded, ready to receive whatever outcome results.” (p.22)

7. Modern Day Readings (from *On Frequent Journeys: Worship Resources on Uprooted Peoples*) edited by Rebekah Chevalier (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1997)

What is a Refugee?

What is a refugee?

Well and good to answer.

To answer such a question we need to be careful,

because those who can answer it are very rare in this world.

To answer such a question, needs you first to take refuge,

otherwise your answer will be simple and meaningless.

As refugees, we are victims of violence and war.

We left our motherland

because we were being mistreated in many ways.

We ran to get protection in other countries.

But as a refugee, you are always simple in front of anybody.

You are subject to prejudice and mistaken always.

You can pass through any disaster

and nobody cares about you.

Oh! What is lovely like our homeland?

In your own country, you are free,

free like a butterfly when it flies from flower to flower,

free like a fish moving in the water.



Homeland is a second heaven.

Without your home

you are like a dog without a tail.

Give us peace,

to return back to our beloved country,

our precious heaven Sudan.

Give us our ancestors' land.

Africa, live in peace forever!

(Andrew Mayak, the Sudan written in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, northwestern Kenya, 1995)

Migrant

Stranger in your homeland and stranger

amongst strangers

month after month you labour and every day

is the same as yesterday.

But for you also there comes

the happiest of days

That in which you return home:

and once you are home

the misunderstandings begin.

Your children have grown

of you all they know is your name

but your affection, your love is enough

to draw them all

to your heart

and the old tie is remade.

Your dreamed-of days

have vanished quickly

you go – and the old round begins.

Your soul once again you leave here

and alone, with your bag

filled with memories you go:

This is your whole life consumed

between and arrival and a departure

and to think that you went

to stay for only a year or two. (Rosa Coppola, From Balai, Asian Journal No. 12)

8. Small Group Work –



In groups of two or three, discuss what it feels like to be a stranger in a foreign land. Did you have resources to live? What if you did not have resources? Who helped you? What do you consider “home” now? What did you need to survive – physically, spiritually, emotionally?

9. Group Reflection

Discuss what active role your church or fellowship might have in welcoming the strangers. What needs to be done? What can be done?

10. Closing Prayer – including prayers of intercession

11. Hymn of Blessing

12. Assignment for next week: Read Acts 10. Consider what might be a modern day equivalent to the unclean food or something that separates one group from another.

Week Three “Meeting on the Bridge”

1. Gathering

2. Hymn

3. Opening Prayer

4. Scripture Reading: Acts 10

5. Reflection on the Scripture

The early Christian church was divided about its acceptance of gentiles and especially their practice of eating foods thought to be unclean by Jewish Law. God speaks to both Cornelius and Peter in their dreams. This is a common method for God to use when speaking to people. The images are very clear for both Cornelius and Peter. God speaks to both a Gentile and a Jewish Christian. Through these dreams Peter is convinced that “God shows no partiality.” (Acts 10:34, NRSV) Peter focuses on the relationship between persons and God rather than the rules one obeys.

This was a significant experience in the life of the early church. The Gentiles not only are accepted into the life of the Church, they receive the power of the Holy Spirit. The mission of the early church will move beyond the mission to the Jewish communities to the Gentile communities. The Jewish Christian community asks Peter to defend his new understanding. Acceptance brings about the evangelization of the known world. It took God to speak



through dreams to change the focus of the development of mission. One can only surmise that if God had not intervened, Gentiles might never have received the Good News until much later in history.

6. Theme: Repentance

Repentance is a biblical notion. "It means changing one's mind, or turning, literally changing one path to the other ." (Oden, p.22)" In the process of welcoming the stranger we begin to see things differently – if we are willing to open our hearts to listening and receiving what the stranger offers. Superficial welcome handshakes and words of greeting will probably not challenge us to change our ways or repent. But in the process of genuinely welcoming another person, we begin to hear and see the world and things around us in a different way. Sometimes we hide our unwillingness to offer hospitality behind assumptions about certain groups such as "The Turkish people are all Muslims" or "She is just seeking asylum and won't be here long." When we get to know these individuals, we begin to understand our own prejudices and challenge their validity. We "turn around" in our understanding of who the stranger is. It is the beginning of a different world view – or perhaps one should say "faith view".

The term "building bridges" has often been used to bring reconciliation between persons following a time of repentance. Perhaps the bridge is already there – built by God and opened to each through Jesus Christ. We meet our brothers and sisters in God's family on the bridge. But first we need to discover how to find the bridge and be willing to walk onto it. The gate to the bridge is always open. It is God's welcome. The surface of the bridge is built by our welcome of others as we learn daily to trust in God. Can we meet one another there or will we stay safe on the banks of the river of familiarity?

7. Modern Day Story

Two persons wanted to watch a special football match on television. The antenna was not working well and one needed to go on the roof to change it to get good picture. When it was finally adjusted to get the best picture the one remaining in the house, got occupied watching TV and forgot about the other. After all the game had started and every minute counted.

The one on the roof, though, had tried to climb back down to watch the match but his foot had slipped and he ended up hanging off the eaves of the house. The friend inside could not hear the yelling. In fact, it seemed no one could hear the yelling. Finally, when the one on the roof was about to lose grip, a cloud moved to just above the home.

There was a voice, "Do you need help?"

"Yes, oh, yes , finally someone can help me," came the response.

"Do you believe?" said the voice from the cloud.

"Yes" came the response.



“Then let go with one hand.”

“Okay. “ And the one hanging on the eaves let go with one hand. “Now what?”

“Do you really believe?” asked the voice from the cloud.

“Yes, I really believe,” came the response again.

“Then let go with the other hand.”

The one hanging from the eaves looked up, looked down, paused for a brief second—then put his first hand back on the eaves and asked, “Is there anyone else up there who can help me?”

(source unknown)

8. Small Group

In a group of 3-4 discuss the following questions:

Are there limits to your willingness to offer hospitality?

List prejudices you think are common in your community.

Have you ever had a “turning around” repentance experience related to hospitality that you are willing to share?

9. Group Reflection

Talk about the prejudices and other things that keep your church or fellowship from offering hospitality. How do you think the situation might change? Do you think your church or fellowship would be open to “dreams” from God?

10. Closing Prayer – include prayers of intercession

11. Hymn of Blessing

12. Assignment for next week: Read 1 Corinthians 12-13. Bring images of “family” to next week’s study. Decide as a group if you want to have anything special to celebrate the last week of this Bible Study.

Week Four “The Family of God”

1. Gathering

2. Hymn



3. Opening Prayer
4. Share your pictures of “family”.
5. Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 12-13
6. Reflection on Scripture

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians offers us an image of a Christian faith community as a body with many members. The Christian community in Corinth is made up of a cross section of the various classes within the city. Some are educated; many are not. Most are Gentiles, but not all. There are a variety of gifts but all make up the whole. No one part of the body stands alone. No one spiritual gift is complete within itself. The Christians in Corinth need one another to make a whole.

Paul continues to exemplify this concept by stating there is even a better way. Rather than speaking of the necessity of being together as individuals to make the whole, he writes his famous section on the gift of love. In love, all divisions are destroyed and the way of life becomes one which reflects God’s love and not the noise and superficiality of human power. In Paul’s discourse on love, it becomes the guiding force for all Christians. It becomes the unifying factor in the restoration of relationship with God and reconciliation with one another.

7. Theme: Recognition

Dr. Oden writes in her book “When God values us truly and recognizes us as God’s children, rather than strangers, God sees beyond our appearances. God recognizes us for who we really are. When we recognize strangers as Jesus, we too see beyond appearances. Gospel hospitality is marked by such recognition.” (p.25)

In each of us is the strong desire to be recognized for who we are. Sometimes this desire limits our ability to recognize the other because our own need is so great. As we experience the acceptance and love of God, we can begin offer it to others. We see the Christ in the other – regardless of their class or status or age. When we listen to the stranger we recognize them as having value and worth as an individual. This is part of the proclamation of Good News that God loves every one through Jesus Christ.

Each person is unique. Each has his or her own gifts. Each has his or her own story. Each is a child of God – made in God’s image. Each is our brother or sister in the one family of God. As members of the same family we respect, honor and love one another...as God loves us. We are reconciled with one another through the restoration of our relationship with God-

8. Modern Day Story



The Way Home

*Our "Home" is the realm of God.
It is where love and justice prevail.
and we are called by God
to make wherever we are
as much like home as possible.
We dare not feel "at home" in a world like this:
where one-third of the people live abundantly,
and two-thirds live in scarcity –
Two ghettos: one rich, the other poor.
In such a world we are refugees
dwelling on either side of a dividing wall
afraid to cross the boundary.
Christ breaks down the dividing wall.
"Home" happens when the walls come down,
and the ghettos are no more,
and we are all brothers and sisters.
The beginning of the way home
is the way of sharing!
Our footsteps down the aisle to share with others
are the first short steps
of the long journey "home."*

(Richard Wilcox, Spain, from *Gifts of Many Cultures: Worship Resources for the Global Community*, Cleveland: United Church press, 1995.)

9. Small Group Work

In groups of two discuss the similarities and differences between the family pictures and the understanding of God's family. How does this affect the church or fellowship in its understanding as the family of God?

10. Group Reflection

Share from the small groups.

11. Prayer – include prayers of intercession

12. Litany

Sisters and brothers,
let us stand and affirm what we have discovered
of God's will in the company of each other.



That we worship one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
in whose image we are made,
to whose service we are summoned,
by whose presence we are renewed.

This we believe.

That it is central to the mission of Christ
to participate, by word and action,
in the struggles of the poor for justice,
to share justly the earth's land and resources.
to rejoice in the diversity of human culture,
to preserve human life in all its beauty and frailty,
to accompany the uprooted and to welcome the stranger,
and to witness – every day –
to the love of God for people of the earth.

This we believe.

That we are called to become the Church of the Stranger,
to open ourselves to the transforming power
of the Holy Spirit
which may come to us through the foreigner,
to take the risk of speaking out on behalf of those
who are different from us,
and to see that when we minister to the stranger,
the uprooted
we are serving our Lord and Saviour.

This we believe.

That God has called the church into being
to be the servant of the kingdom,
to be a sign of God's new order,
to celebrate in the streets and fields of every land
the liturgy of heaven,

This we believe.

That Christ, fully aware of our differences,
prays that we might be one



so that the world may believe.

This we believe.

And to this we are committed
for the love of God,
in the way of Christ,
by the power of the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***
(from On Frequent Journeys)

13. Hymn of Blessing

