



We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. —1 John 3:16-18

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## **A one-year spiritual practices resource**

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## Introduction to the theme

Love is a verb. It's also a noun and an adjective. Love as a noun points to a particular thing or subject. *Love is all around us.* Love as an adjective describes the “subject.” *That was a love tap.* Love as a verb points to action. *I love you with all my heart.* Love as a verb is revealed and made concrete in act and deed. Love as an invisible feeling described by words is far less tangible than love in visible action. Similar to faith, love without action is dead, without life. Love as a verb is alive and active!

This is the perspective of 1 John 3:16-18, the theme text for the 2017 Mennonite Church USA convention in Orlando, Florida, July 4–8. Using the theme of love in 1 John, this spiritual guide explores the theme of love as a verb or action, along with six streams of spirituality.

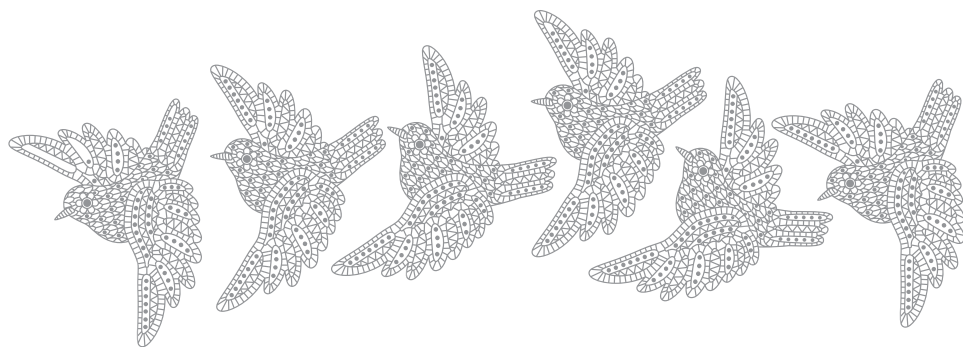
## A spiritual practices resource

The purpose of this resource is to stimulate spiritual practices in preparation for the 2017 Mennonite Church USA convention. By using this resource, participants will come to the convention spiritually nourished and prepared to share the love.

A one-year guide for spiritual practices, this resource is divided into 12 pieces, one for each of the months leading up to the convention. It begins in July 2016 and ends in June 2017. Each month contains meditations, questions, exercises and actions for you to engage over each of the weeks. The first six months focus on 1 John's theme of loving one another. The second six months focus on six streams of spirituality. Spiritual practices related to these various streams are offered throughout the 12 months.

The guide suggests using a journal and singing from *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. Have these available to strengthen your spiritual time.

# Part One: Loving one another



## Theme text

*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*  
—1 John 3:16-18, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The first epistle of John was originally an open letter with no title, an anonymous author, without designation of specific recipients, and with no greeting or farewell — all typical elements found in the books of 2 and 3 John and in Paul’s letters. It appears that the author, a member of the Johannine circle (i.e., a loose network of communities that shared the theology of John’s Gospel), was located some distance from the letter’s recipients in Asia Minor.

The letter itself gives a general picture of the audience being addressed. There is indication that “a faction from within the community has split off from the group and left in a huff” (See 1 John 2:19.).<sup>1</sup> Presumably, they split over theological differences within the larger community in order to start their own group. Those who split off appear to have shared a Gnostic Christology — a view that Jesus was so divine that he denied his full humanity.

At the center of this letter is a call to the remaining “disrupted community” to strengthen mutual love. Our theme text fits well within the context of both an ancient and a modern “disrupted community.” Theological

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1. Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Oxford University Press, 2011: 166–170.

differences have caused a split within the believing community. Such is the situation within the Johannine circle and, specifically for our context, within many of our modern churches in Mennonite Church USA. Theological differences have disrupted our modern Christian communities. It would be easy for us to identify with the “right side” of the conflict of 1 John, justify the necessity of separation based on “right theology,” and skip over the admonitions toward practical love that lie at the heart of our focal text.

But love is defined as an action. More specifically, love is epitomized in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ (v. 13). We know the apex of love in the sacrificial love of Jesus through his death for us. This perspective is reflected in the Gospel of John: “No one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Unfortunately, this text has too often been distorted to sanctify the soldier who dies in mortal combat protecting other soldiers, however noble a deed that is. Both texts are about self-giving, mutual Christian love as modeled by Christ’s death, which was at the hands of Roman soldiers serving the state. This type of love is not out of our reach. We are to imitate Christ (*imitatio Christi*) in his sacrificial love, even to the point of death for one another.

As Christ’s love is revealed in action, so our love is to be made concrete in our acts of compassion. Our love is not demonstrated simply in word but in action, particularly toward those who are most vulnerable and in need. Those who “have the world’s good” are to act generously towards Christian brothers and sisters who don’t. This active love, exemplified in Christ, extends beyond our own community to our neighbor (Matthew 22:39) and finally, to our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

## **Six streams of spirituality**

In his book *Streams of Living Water*, Christian theologian Richard Foster has outlined six streams of spirituality from historical church traditions to assist us in better understanding the diversity within the church and to offer a guide toward deeper spirituality.<sup>2</sup> Each of these streams is embodied in the life of Jesus Christ and represents a different spiritual tradition within the broader church. We will spend a month on each of the six streams reflecting upon and engaging in practices to nurture them.

One way to view the six streams is individually. Each individual within the church is drawn to one or another of these streams, even though he/she may

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2. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*. HarperCollins, 2010.

be shaped by several of these spiritual streams. Often within the church, groups dominated by concern for one stream see themselves at odds with or in competition with others of another dominant stream. As we consider them individually, we might learn to draw from the wellsprings of each of these traditions to nourish a deeper personal spirituality. Understood within the church as a whole, all of these streams can feed the spiritual life of the collective body.

Wholeness for the body of Christ doesn't necessarily mean that we individually share equally in each of these streams, but rather that the church as a collective body is nourished by all of them. That collective body could be the local congregation, a larger church body (such as a denomination) or the universal church. To affirm all six of the spiritual streams within our church calls for respect and appreciation for those whose more prominent stream is different from our own. At the same time, we remember that no individual or group reflects only one of these streams. That is why it is important to recognize the interconnection between each of these spiritual traditions within the individual and as a church body.

In this guide we also connect the *Love is a verb* theme and our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition with each of these spiritual traditions. Here are introductory descriptions of each of the six streams of spirituality.

**The contemplative stream (the prayer-filled life)** focuses on nourishing our relationship with God and the inner life through prayer and contemplation.

**The holiness stream (the virtuous life)** focuses on moral transformation and living a spiritual life of ethical integrity reflecting God to the world.

**The charismatic (the Spirit-empowered life)** focuses on the gifts of the Spirit and worship as an intimate connection to God's presence and power.

**The social justice stream (the compassionate life)** focuses on expressing God's compassion and justice in social relations and structures in hope of creating a more peaceful world.

**The evangelical stream (the Word-centered life)** focuses on the Word of God in Scripture and in Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the good news to the world.

**The incarnational stream (the sacramental life)** focuses on living within and reflecting upon God's presence in our everyday life within the world.

## July 2016: Love is a verb



*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*  
—1 John 3:16-18 (NRSV)

Throughout this month participants engage the theme *Love is a verb* and the text 1 John 3:16-18. Repeat these practices daily during the week. The suggestions for practice reflect elements of the six spiritual streams.

### Week of July 3–9

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the phrase *Love in truth*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Love in action*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What does this text reveal about God's nature?
- 2) What is the Spirit saying to me from this text and this time of meditation?
- 3) What does this text say about the nature of love?
- 4) What is the good news to be proclaimed from this text?
- 5) How should this text shape my moral character?
- 6) What is this text calling me to do in showing compassion for others in the world?
- 7) How I can embody the truth of this text in family life, vocation, leisure and relationships?

### Week of July 10–16

Each day, read through the theme text and pray these prayers of confession and assurance:

## Prayer of confession

*Holy God, in whom I live and move and have my being, you are the fountain of all goodness and grace. I confess that I have not always lived in the character of Christ. Too often I have confessed my love with lips and mind but have not expressed it with hands and feet. I have not always loved my brother or sister in Christ nor my neighbor as myself. Forgive me and mold my life into the likeness of Christ. Instill in me the practices and habits that will empower me to be holy as you are holy. For the sake of Christ, I pray. Amen.*

## Assurance of forgiveness

*God, if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (based on 1 John 1:9).*

## Week of July 17–23

Each day, read through the theme text. Consider performing an act of compassion, justice or peace each day this week. Suggestions:

- 1) Donate food to a local food bank.
- 2) Write your state representative on an issue of racial justice, such as police brutality against black people.
- 3) Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper concerning a peace-related issue in your community, such as gun violence.
- 4) Study the history of Native Americans in your area.
- 5) Prepare bag lunches and hand them out to the homeless in your city.
- 6) Downsize your wardrobe and donate your clothes to Goodwill or another nonprofit organization.
- 7) Visit one or more older single adults from your church, or take them out to lunch.

## Week of July 24–30

Each day, read through the theme text. Reflect on how the theme *Love is a verb* is already incarnate in life. Keep a journal — write down examples of your observations on the theme. Where do you see love enacted in your life? Be aware of living examples of enacted love as you read the newspaper, browse the internet, watch television, interact with friends and neighbors, go to church or work at your job.



## August 2016: **Love is obeying Christ**



*Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his commands, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, “I abide in him,” ought to walk just as he walked.*

—1 John 2:3-6 (NRSV)

As concepts, love and obedience seem to conflict. If their context were a marital relationship, we would probably be appalled at the combination of love and obedience. Love is freely offered and not contingent upon the obedience of one partner to the desires of the other. Obedience doesn't fit well with relationships defined by mutuality.

Some would further contend that obedience also has no place in describing our relationship with God or Christ. For them, the idea of obeying God/Christ carries with it the connotation of an immature, infantile relationship, as in the relationship of a demanding parent to an obedient child. The parent/child metaphor is linked with the biblical metaphors of God/Christ as king and Lord, which connote not only maleness but also a hierarchical relationship of command and obedience. Both the metaphors of parent/child and Lord/subject as describing the divine/human relationship are common throughout the Bible.

Let's remember that *all* metaphors of God are insufficient. Parent/child and Lord/subject as metaphors are both like and unlike the divine/human relationship and are thus limiting — as are all metaphors. They can illuminate but also limit our understanding of our relationship with God. That is why multiple metaphors are needed to express the many dimensions of our relationship with God/Christ. Note that “abiding in Christ” and “walking as Christ walked” (v. 6) are alternative but related metaphors to obeying Christ's commands.

In 1 John 2:3-6 the author uses the metaphor of obedience to draw a contrast between those who have splintered off from the church and those who remain. The writer characterizes those who have left as persons whose

understanding of knowledge, love and abiding in Christ have been divorced from moral action, that is, “obeying the word of Christ.” False knowledge is knowledge without obedience to God’s commands. Love without following God’s will is empty. One cannot abide in Christ without walking in his way. Those who reach “perfection” (v. 5), holiness or wholeness express their love of God in obedience to the word and will or commands of Christ. And what is the primary command of Christ? It is to love one another as Christ has loved us. Love works!

## **Week of August 1–6**

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God’s flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the phrase *Love in truth*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Love in action*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) How does this text portray God?
- 2) What does “obedience to God” mean to me?
- 3) Reflect on the many metaphors you use to describe your relationship with God/Christ.
- 4) What commands of God/Christ are central to your spirituality?
- 5) Reflect on the ways in which you “know God.”
- 6) What does it mean in your life at this time to “abide in Christ”?
- 7) What acts will you do this week to express your love for God?

## **Week of August 7–13**

Each day, read through the text of the month. Spend five minutes in silence, aware of God’s presence. Speak this affirmation aloud and with firm conviction as a prayer of commitment to God. You may want to repeat it several times and reflect on it as a refrain.

### **Prayer of commitment**

*With the help of God’s Spirit, I will seek the truth of God this week by living in the light of Christ. I will show my love for God through my actions. I will abide in Christ by walking as Christ walked.*

Consider memorizing this affirmation and meditating on it as you go about the tasks of this week.

## Week of August 14–20

Each day read through the text of the month. Stewardship is a spiritual discipline. It can be an act of love. Begin each day's devotional time with one of these prayers and seek to act upon them during the week. Sit silently, examining the thoughts and ideas that come to your mind and heart.

- Lord of all, what do I have among my possessions, gifts and abilities that I can offer to benefit others?
- Creator, show me how I can better care for your creation.
- Gracious God, how can I show my love to you and others by what and how much I consume?
- Heavenly Parent, reveal to me one way I can show my love to my family this week.

Act upon what God discloses to you through prayer.

## Week of August 21–27

Each day, read through the text of the month. Meditate on this biblical text:

*(God) has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. —Micah 6:8 NRS*

Starting this week, get involved in one of these options from Mennonite Central Committee:

- Make a donation to aid those involved by the Syria and Iraq crisis.
- Involve your church, Sunday School class or Bible study group in collecting items for relief kits or school kits.
- Write a letter to the president urging an end to family detention.
- Help stop raids to deport Central American families.

Visit [mcc.org/get-involved](http://mcc.org/get-involved) to learn more.

Remember, *Love is a verb!*

## Week of August 28–31

Each day, read through the text of the month. Christ commands us to love one another as he has loved us. Sit in silence for several minutes and then offer this prayer to God:

*Loving God, open my eyes to see someone within my Christian community with whom I need to have a better relationship. Pour upon me the power of your Spirit to work on my relationship with this person. Reveal to me some simple ways I may show my love toward this person during the week. I pray this in the name of Christ, who gave himself for us. Amen.*

Listen to what God is saying to your heart. Act upon what you sense as God's direction for you in nurturing a more loving relationship. Love acts!

## September 2016: **Love is mutual**



*Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. ... All who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters. For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.*  
—1 John 2:10; 3:10b-11 (NRSV)

*They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.* I remember singing this song by Peter R. Scholtes in the early 1970s around a log fire in the mountains of Big Bear Lake in California with a combined youth and college-age church group. The warmth of the cabin fireplace amid the winter snow, the smiling faces of Christian friends lit by the flickering flames and the soothing melody of the song nurtured my Christian idealism. They made me believe that Christians truly loved one another and others would see that love among us. I committed myself to Christian ministry during that time in my life over 40 years ago. Since then the words of that song have gotten torn, battered about and contradicted. My wider experiences in life and the church have at times caused me to question whether or not others will know us Christians by our love. Still, even with all the church fights, splits,

complaining, bitterness and hypocrisy I have experienced, I still believe that core truth — that Christians are to be known by our love for one another. The writer of 1 John believed that loving one another was at the core of the community's faith in Christ. Over and over again the writer points to the theme of loving one another. Like the Gospel of John, this epistle reflects a dualism of sharp contrasts — an either/or way of thinking. Those who love one another walk in the light of God. Those who do not love one another walk in darkness and are not of God.

Although this was a verbal attack on those who left the Johannine community, it still has a message for us today. *Love is a verb*. Love is mutual. Love is light. If we walk in the light, there is no cause for stumbling. Church splits, accusations and condemnations of brothers and sisters in Christ dim the light of God within the church and cause us to stumble along the way. Without active love for one another, the church is not walking in the light of God, and the church is not showing God to the world. “You are the light of the world!” Jesus says. (Matthew 5:14) Now is the time to live in the light of the words of that campfire song: *They will know we are Christians by our love*.

## **Week of September 4–10**

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the phrase *Love in truth*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Love in action*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the text for this month. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is the nature of God behind this text?
- 2) What is the good news in this text?
- 3) How am I seeking to “walk in the light”?
- 4) Where am I experiencing Christian love for one another?
- 5) How am I expressing Christian love for one another?
- 6) Where have I stumbled in trying to love a brother or sister in Christ?
- 7) In what ways can the Spirit of Christ empower me to love others more perfectly?

## Week of September 11–17

Find *They'll know we are Christians by our love* on YouTube. Various options are available.

Sit in silence for several minutes, attentive to God's presence. Sing the song to yourself. Reflect on people, images and experiences that come to mind when singing. Lift your arms to God. Give thanks and praise to God for the people, places, experiences, feelings and meanings that arise with the singing of the song. Again, sit in silence for several minutes.

### End with this prayer:

*Loving God, may your Spirit enable me to love my brothers and sisters in Christ in the weeks, months and years to come. Fill me with concrete acts of understanding, mercy and compassion. In the name of the one who loved us to death, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

## Week of September 18–24

Each day, read the theme text for the month. Our minds are God's gifts to be used wisely. We are to love God with "all our heart, soul and mind" (Matthew 22:37). Open your study time each day with a simple prayer:



*Creator of heart, soul, mind and body,  
may my study of your Word be pleasing in  
your sight. Amen. (2 Timothy 2:15)*

Like studying the Torah, also a spiritual discipline, we will study Scripture this week:

- 1) Read background commentary on 1 John.
- 2) Research the meanings of words for love in the ancient world (i.e., the Greek words *agápe*, *éros*, *phileo*, *storge*) and write down their meanings in a journal.
- 3) Using a concordance, look up the biblical texts on “love” or “love one another.” List specific contexts and different usage.

Conclude the week with this prayer:

*Creator of heart, soul, mind and body, give me the strength and wisdom to move my study of your love from my mind to my heart and from my heart to my hands and feet. Amen.*

## **Week of September 25–30**

Each day, read the theme text for the month. Locate a member directory of your congregation. Divide the names into groups of seven, one group for each day of the week. As you sit in silence for several minutes, hold the directory in your hands and lift it up as an offering to God.

Each day of the week during your time of prayer, read aloud and slowly each name or family listed within one of the seven groups. Reflect on these questions after reading:

- 1) What is my relationship with this person?
- 2) How well do I know this person?
- 3) Why do I know or not know the person well?
- 4) How have I expressed my love toward this person?
- 5) Can I love someone I hardly know?
- 6) How might I better get to know and love this brother/sister in Christ?

*We should love one another* (1 John 3:11). *Love is a verb*. Make a plan and write it in your journal to get to know someone in your congregation better or to express your love to someone you already know well (for example, a visit, letter, phone call or dinner).



## October 2016: Love is life-giving



*We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.*  
—1 John 3:14-15 (NRSV)

Life and death are biological and spiritual realities. Life as a biological reality points to animated, thinking, living and breathing bodies in the world. Death acknowledges the cessation of a person's physical life. The Bible also speaks of life and death as spiritual truths. Life is more than having a fully functioning body. And death is more than the end of our biological life. From a faith perspective, life links us to a vital relationship with God — in body, mind, and heart — and one energized by the Spirit. In spiritual terms, death cuts us off from that source of life. And spiritual life and death are not simply individual realities, but realms of being which can enlighten or overshadow corporate realities as well. The author of 1 John sees the community as moving from death to life in a type of resurrection. As “walking dead,” they lived a biological life devoid of a life-giving relationship with God in Christ. Now, being in Christ they have participated in Christ's death and resurrection. They live a new life in Christ. They have “passed from death to life” (3:14).

And the evidence that they have new life in Christ is not simply a verbal confession of faith, but their actual love for one another. Their love for one another is evidence of their new life. *They'll know we are Christians by our love.* Without that mutual love they would still be living (biologically) in the realm of death (spiritually). To not show love for a brother or sister in Christ indicates that they remain in the realm of death. Again, the author presents these arguments in sharp contrasts and with no middle ground.

Furthermore, the author of 1 John equates not loving brothers and sisters in Christ to hating them. Again, no middle ground. And whoever hates a brother or sister is a murderer! Jesus himself indicated that anger and insult towards a brother or sister would be judged harshly alongside murder (Matthew 5:21-26). No mincing of words! If we do not love our brothers or sisters in Christ, it's as if we have murdered them. And if that were not enough, 1 John concludes that murderers do not have eternal life abiding



within them! They are cut off from life and God and are the same as unbelievers. Thank God, the writer thinks otherwise (1 John 3:14).

Admittedly, for Christians who take the Bible literally, these are hard words to swallow. However we interpret these words, we should take them seriously and reflect on their meaning in our own personal and church settings. What do these words from 1 John say about interpersonal conflicts, congregational fights, denominational splits or other kinds of unloving attitudes and acts toward brothers and sisters in Christ? There are high stakes when we harbor unloving attitudes and commit unloving acts towards members of our family of faith.

## **Week of October 2–8**

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the phrase *Love in truth*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Love in action*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the text for this month. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is God's nature and action in this text?
- 2) Is it assuring or not that the evidence for passing from death to life is loving one another?
- 3) How have you experienced passing from death to life?
- 4) How have you experienced love within your church?
- 5) In what ways does the church operate in the realm of life? In the realm of death?
- 6) What is the Spirit saying to me through this text?
- 7) What is the Spirit saying to my church through this text?

## **Week of October 9–15**

Confession of sin is a spiritual practice. Within the Anabaptist tradition, confession has been a neglected liturgical practice, but it is slowly being recovered. Our text for this month calls for confessing our sins, particularly in relation to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Although these confessions are individual, they are to be shared in solidarity with the wider church.

Each day, read the text for the month. Enter into a time of silence. Read the daily confession followed by the assurance of forgiveness. Reflect on actions you may take to help redress these situations. Close with a personal prayer of thanksgiving.

### **Confession in relation to the global church**

*God of all that is, with the church I confess that too often your global church is out of sight, out of mind. We have neglected to remember the worldwide church in our prayers, concerns and sharing. May your Spirit remind us of our connection to brothers and sisters in Christ far away as well as nearby. Amen.*

### **Confession in relation to the church in our nation**

*God of all nations, with the church I confess that the church within our nation is divided and at odds. We have too often allowed our political positions and ideologies to overshadow our unity in Christ. Forgive us, and with your healing power, mend the broken body of the church. Amen.*

### **Confession in relation to the ecumenical church**

*God of the whole church, with the church I confess that we have often loved our particular traditions more than we have loved our brothers and sisters across denominations. Forgive us when we have put down the faith of others in order to prove that our faith is superior. Amen.*

### **Confession in relation to our racial divisions**

*God of all races and peoples, with the church I confess that our segregated churches are evidence against our love for one another. Forgive us, God, and enable us to actively address the problem of racism within our church and society. Amen.*

### **Confession in relation to our denomination**

*God of Mennonite Church USA, with the church I confess that we have loved our particular theology or ethics more than we have loved one another. Our actions declare that Jesus' command to love our enemies seems harder for us to live out within the church than it is to live out within the world. Forgive us for showing the world that we can be known by our animosity and divisions instead of by our love. Amen.*

## **Confession in relation to our local congregations**

*God of my congregation, with the church I confess that we have not always loved our brothers and sisters in Christ as you have loved us. Too many of our local congregations were started by church splits rather than missional vision. Forgive us and convince us all that we do not have a corner on the truth. Amen.*

## **Confession in relation to our personal issues**

*God of my life, I confess that it is difficult for me to love those I do not like. How can I love them if I do not like them? Show me how what seems humanly impossible to me can be spiritually possible in Christ. Amen.*

## **Assurance of forgiveness**

*If we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin (adapted from 1 John 1:7).*

## **Week of October 16–22**

Have ready two sheets of blank paper or a journal and a pen or drawing material. On one sheet draw a symbol of death (for example: a tombstone) and on the other a symbol of life (for example: an outline of a dancing body). Begin by reading this month's theme text. Sit in silence reflecting on these words: *How has the church passed from death to life?* On the sheet with the death symbol, list things the church does that are death-dealing. On the other sheet, list things the church does that are life-giving. In silence reflect on the question: *What concrete acts can I do to nurture life and love in my congregation?* Close by asking God to empower you with the Spirit to show your love in action. Share with someone how you have passed from death to life.

## **Week of October 23–29**

Begin each day by reading the text of the month. Sit in silence for several minutes reflecting on the text. Read the inspiring story of Jewish Rabbi Michael Weissner (<http://bit.do/flushing>) and how he showed his love to Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon Larry Trapp, fully captured in the book *Not by the Sword* by Kathryn Watterson.

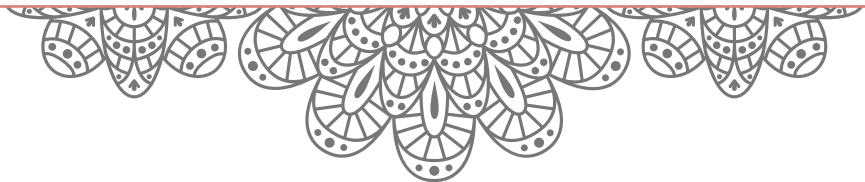
Recalling the story, reflect on these questions each day:

- 1) Who would I find it difficult to love?
- 2) What simple acts might I do to show my love toward others difficult to love?
- 3) Does my love for others stop at the church or people who are easy to love?
- 4) How can I better recognize and appreciate God's love in people of other faith traditions?
- 5) How can I show love toward people of other faith traditions?
- 6) Why does the type of love shown by the rabbi require empowerment by God's Spirit?
- 7) Meditate on Zechariah 4:6, repeating it as a continuous prayer to the Spirit for empowerment to love people I find difficult to love.



**This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel:  
Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit,  
says the LORD of hosts.**

*—Zechariah 4:6 (NRSV)*



## November 2016: Love is of God



*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning*

*sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

—1 John 4:7-12, 16b (NRSV)

Can love be commanded and logical? Well, the writer of 1 John thinks so. Let us love one another. And that's not the first time we have heard that. Here is the logic of divine love: *If love is from God, then those who love belong to God and know God. And whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.* Isn't that logical? Divine love doesn't fit into our general understanding of romantic love. It is commanded. It is logical.

It seems reasonable to expect that if God's essence is love, then those who belong to God enact love for one another. Logically, the opposite should be true. Since God is love, those who do not love one another do not belong to God. Again, it fits the author's either/or perspective. And it may be uncomfortable logic, but it is reasonable according to the logic of the writer's spirituality. Those who love one another are born of God. Those who do not love one another are not born of God. There is no middle ground. I suspect that most of us may squirm a bit at this kind of clear-cut spiritual logic.

The author appeals to the model or story of God's love. Divine love is fully shown in the sending of God's Son into the world so that we might live through him — through his atoning sacrifice. This act of love precedes any type of love that we might have shown toward God. Here is the logic of God's love. Since God has loved us to the extent of sending Christ, even into the realm of death, for us, then we ought to love one another.

No one has seen God, but we see the love of God in our love for others. By loving one another, we know that we abide in God and God abides in us.

The real evidence of the unseen God is seeing our love for one another. God's presence is in us when we love one another. This is the logic of divine love.

## Week of November 1–5

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the phrase *God is love*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Love one another*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the text for this month. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is the nature of God in this text?
- 2) What is the bad news in this text?
- 3) What is the good news in this text?
- 4) What words or phrases stand out to me and why?
- 5) How do I experience the love of Christ?
- 6) How do I experience the love of brothers and sisters in Christ?
- 7) Where have I seen the love of God within the world this week?

Close in silent meditation, mindfully repeating to yourself this significant truth: *God is love*.

## Week of November 6–12

Each day, read the text for the month. Sit in silence for several minutes reflecting on the text.

Consider the logic of love. Reflect on one of these statements each day of the week. Complete the logic of each incomplete statement; then meditate on its meaning for your own life and how it applies to your relationship with others:

- 1) If God so loved the world, then we \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2) If God forgives us, then we \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) If God blesses everyone, then we \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4) If God welcomes the alien and stranger, then we \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5) If God has compassion on the poor and hungry, then we \_\_\_\_\_.
- 6) If God loves the church, then we \_\_\_\_\_.
- 7) If God shares the abundance of the earth with us, then we \_\_\_\_\_.

Conclude by praying. Ask God for guidance about how you might put hands and feet to these statements about God's love this week.

## Week of November 13–19

Each day, read the text for the month. Meditate on the phrase *God is love* as you breathe in and on the phrase *Love one another* as you breathe out. Sit in silence for five to 10 minutes.

If God is love and is present in life, then we should be able to observe God's love living within human life. God's love is evident in our love for one another. Throughout this week pay close attention to the world around you — in human interactions, the media, work, leisure and church settings — and look for loving actions that reflect God's love among us. Write in your journal at least one observation for each day of this week. End your time of silence with this prayer:

*God of life, open my eyes to see your presence around me in the love shown to others. Amen.*

## Week of November 20–26



Use a favorite picture or icon of Jesus you have or print one off from online. Place it before you as a focal point for your time of meditation. Begin by reading the text of the month. Closely examine the picture of Jesus. Read again these words: *God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Close your eyes and in the silence reflect how you experience the love of God in Jesus Christ. Conclude with a personal prayer. With arms lifted, give thanks to God for sending Jesus into the world and into your life.



## Week of November 27–30

Each day, read the text of the month. Breathe in, meditating on the words *God is love*. Breathe out, meditating on the words, *Love one another*. Sit in silence for several minutes. Reflect on this question: *In what simple ways can I show my love to others this week?* In your journal, list all the loving actions that immediately come to mind. As you hold the list in your hands, meditate on it and consider which actions speak to you for that particular day. Pray to the Spirit to empower you to perform at least one loving act each day. With the Spirit's assistance and repetition, these loving acts may become habits.

## December 2016: Love is fear-less



*Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in the world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.*

*Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

—1 John 4:17-21 (NRSV)

The philosopher Bertrand Russell claimed that religion is based on fear, which leads to cruelty. In his lecture, "Why I am not a Christian," Russell said:

*Religion is based primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing — fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand. It is because fear is at the basis of those two things. —Bertrand Russell, 1927*



In their assessments, the 1 John author and Russell may have been observing the same type of people from different angles. They both seem to have in mind religious people whose spiritual lives are grounded in the fear of God or God's judgment and who do not practice love toward others. Both 1 John and Russell condemned fear-based religion along with another philosopher.

Russell admired the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza used the theme of *Love casts out fear* from 1 John to condemn the Dutch Reformed Church's persecution of nonconformists. The church's violent dogmatism was just the kind of religion that Russell deemed fearful and cruel. In *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza denounced "superstitious" religion, fueled by fear, as a perversion of Christian teaching. Spinoza wondered why those who boast of professing Christianity "should quarrel with rancorous animosity."

According to 1 John 4, Christian faith does not produce fear, but rather love. Love reaches the summit of perfection in the fact that we have boldness on the Day of Judgment. That boldness is grounded in the love of God which is expressed in love for one another. To dwell in love is to dwell in God, releasing us from the fear of judgment. Contrary to Russell's beliefs, the fear of judgment and cruelty — or any hatred toward others — does not find its source in God. Whoever does not love has not reached perfection in love.

If people say they love God, but do not love (= hate) their brothers and sisters in Christ, they are liars. And how can they even say they love an unseen God whom they cannot see while they do not love someone they can see right in front of them? This does not jibe with spiritual logic. The logic of 1 John is this: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters. According to 1 John, Russell's argument against all religion as based in fear would not fit with his spiritual logic, though it would apply to some who profess to be Christian.

## **Week of December 4–10**

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the phrase *God is love*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Love one another*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the text for this month. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is the nature of God in this text?
- 2) What is the good news in this text?
- 3) What is the bad news in this text?
- 4) What words or phrases stand out to you and why?
- 5) How does this text speak to the church at this time?
- 6) How does this text speak to your life at this moment?
- 7) How does this text challenge my faith?

Close by meditating on the phrase *Perfect love casts out fear*.

## **Week of December 11–17**

Each day, read the theme text for the month. Sit in silence. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the phrase *God is love*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Love one another*.

Fear keeps people from living life fully. Intercede in prayer for those who live in fear:

- 1) for those who fear God's judgment
- 2) for those who fear the future
- 3) for those who fear dying
- 4) for those who fear the nation's enemies
- 5) for those who use fear for political purposes
- 6) for those who fear being alone
- 7) for those who fear being unloved

Close by meditating on the phrase *Perfect love casts out fear*.

## **Week of December 18–24**

Each day, read the theme text for the month. Sit in silence. With slow deep breaths, meditate on the phrase *Perfect love casts out fear*.

Read the story of André and Magda Trocmé and the Christian community of Le Chambon. <http://bit.do/yadvashem>

For a fuller account, see the book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* by Phillip Halle. Reflect on these questions through the week:

- 1) How is the love of God seen in the acts of André and Magda Trocmé and their Christian community?
- 2) Why was their love for others stronger than their fear of getting caught hiding Jews?
- 3) Why should the fact that they were pacifists potentially make their work even more fearful?
- 4) What motivated them to love beyond the borders of their own community and faith tradition?
- 5) How might your church share its love beyond the borders of community and faith tradition?
- 6) What contemporary fears does the church need to transcend in order to love like those at Le Chambon?
- 7) Who models this kind of love for others today?

Conclude by praying for those, like Christian Peacemaker Teams, who risk themselves in their love for others.

## **Week of December 25–31**

Each day, read the theme text for the month. Sit in silence. With slow deep breaths, meditate on the phrase: *Perfect love casts out fear.*

Read and compare these contrasting texts:

*There is no fear in love. —1 John 4:18*

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. —Psalm 111:10*

*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. —2 Timothy 1:7*

How do you reconcile these verses? Through the week use available resources (concordances, study Bibles, commentaries or the internet) to study the following:

- 1) biblical texts and their contexts that speak of the “fear of God”
- 2) shades of meanings of the fear of God

- 3) differences and similarities between the fear and the love of God
- 4) how to translate the idea of the fear of God into our world where it is, on the surface, a foreign and objectionable concept
- 5) ways to reconcile the contrasting verses

Conclude the week of study by reciting this verse:

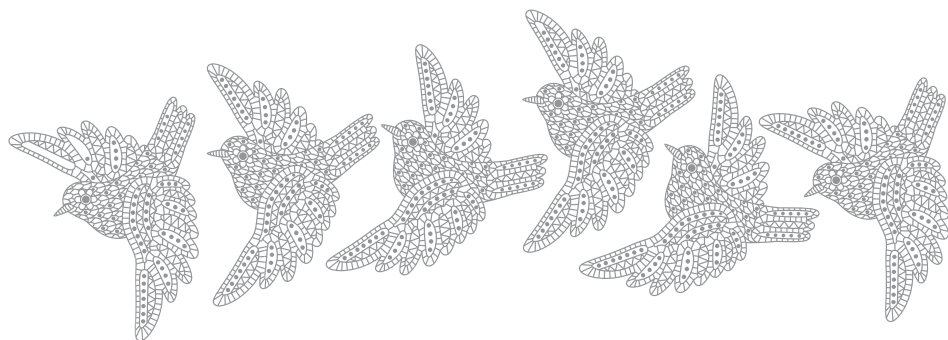


**Do your best to present yourself to God as one  
approved by (God), a worker who has no need to be  
ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.**

*—2 Timothy 2:15 (NRSV)*



## Part Two: The six streams



### January 2017: **Love is attentive to God**

#### **The contemplative stream**

##### **Introduction**

The next six months of this resource are based on Richard Foster's work on the six great spiritual traditions of Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> Readers reflect on each of the six spiritual streams through a biblical text, a summary of the stream, its relationship to the Anabaptist tradition, and its connection to the *Love is a verb* theme. Each week offers various spiritual practices related to the stream for that month.

These six streams of spirituality reflect the diversity within Mennonite Church USA. By understanding, reflecting upon and practicing these six spiritual traditions, we, as individuals, might better understand the place of these diverse streams in our spiritual lives. Rather than viewing these streams as being in conflict or competition with one another, we, as the church, can come to better respect all of them as practiced within our faith community and in other settings.

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3. For a fuller description of these spiritual streams, see Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*. HarperCollins, 1998, and *A Spiritual Formation Notebook*, HarperOne, 1991.

## Theme text



*They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”*  
—Mark 14:32-36 (NRSV)

*Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*  
—Luke 5:16 (NIV)

Even with his busy life, Jesus often took time to be alone and pray. Both action and contemplation played important roles in his life and ministry. In seminary I attended a congregation that used the church model of Gordon Crosby, who had pastored the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. He designed his congregation around the call to discipleship. Discipleship was understood as both an inward journey and an outward journey. Those who wanted to join the church were required to be on both a journey inward (prayer, contemplation, study) and a journey outward (small group community ministry).

Besides his outward ministry of teaching, preaching, healing and resisting the powers, Jesus was on a journey inward. His relationship with God centered his life. Prayer nurtured his relationship with God and energized him spiritually for the work God called him to do. Mark mentions three times Jesus went alone to pray: at the beginning (1:35), in the middle (6:46) and at the end (14:32-36) of his ministry.

Our text finds Jesus near the conclusion of his life in prayer. Jesus and his disciples have come to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has his disciples wait for him while he takes Peter, James and John aside. Jesus is deeply grieved. “Wait here and keep awake,” he tells them. Jesus goes aside and throws himself on the ground, and in inner turmoil he prays that “this cup will pass” from him. Jesus knows it is time for him to drink the dregs of death. This is not a moment of contemplative detachment, but anguished

prayer within the heart of darkness. He faces the terror of martyrdom, confronting the dark power of the empire with only the empty hands of nonviolence. It is possible that Jesus' inner struggle involves the temptation (see next month's text) to violently fight back against those who will come to arrest him. But he avoids forming an armed rebellion and takes the hard road of nonviolence that leads to his death.

## **The contemplative stream**

Bubbling up from the pool of Jesus' life, the contemplative stream flows throughout church history. It emerges in Antony of Egypt, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the monastic movement and the Benedictines. It has continued to refresh the church through the writings of Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and currently the New Monasticism.

In imitation of Christ, the contemplative stream seeks to nourish our relationship with God. Traditionally this has been practiced through the inward journey of prayer, praise, contemplation, confession, meditation, silence, self-emptying, fasting, devotional reading, praying the Scriptures, practicing Sabbath, retreating and journaling. The focus is never on the methodology but always on the goal of communion with God.

Strengths of the contemplative stream include:

- 1) It can stir up our love for and intimacy with God.
- 2) It frees us from a faith in the mind alone.
- 3) It moves us beyond simple petitionary prayer to contemplation, silent and unceasing prayer.
- 4) It nurtures solitude before God.
- 5) It can provide greater inner peace.

Pitfalls of the contemplative stream are:

- 1) It can separate us from our busy, everyday world and pressing social issues.
- 2) It can become obsessive for some, like spiritual gluttony, and an end in itself.
- 3) It can devalue the intellectual dimension of our faith.
- 4) As a wholly personal practice, it can lead to isolation from the faith community.

## The contemplative stream and the Anabaptist tradition

Early Anabaptists were accused of being “monkish” or “new monastics.” Some of the early Anabaptist leaders had been monks (e.g., Michael Sattler). Similarities existed between the monastics, who were grounded in the contemplative tradition, and the early Anabaptists, who extended some of the monastic influence to the everyday Christian life. A vital, living relationship with God through Christ lay at the center of Anabaptist faith. The Anabaptists rejected a cultural faith that included baptizing infants into a church of Christendom — a church in alliance with the state. Instead, a present, dynamic relationship with God was the basis for membership in the church.

Anabaptist spirituality focused upon following Jesus in daily life through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> All of life became the arena of spirituality. Early Anabaptists reacted against Catholicism and some of its spiritual practices. Also, the Anabaptist emphasis on the believing community was a reaction against a highly individualized spirituality. For this reason, and the centrality of discipleship, one did not hear about Anabaptist spirituality.

The charismatic nature of early Anabaptist worship (which we will consider in the charismatic stream) nurtured spontaneous, ecstatic prayer. Spiritual practices included reading, reflecting on and remembering the martyrs (see *Martyrs Mirror*). Singing hymns as a form of praise and prayer was an important spiritual practice that flowed within the contemplative stream. Other parts of the early Anabaptists’ spirituality included nonviolence/peacemaking, truth-telling, solidarity with the believing community, and mutual aid.

Contemporary Anabaptists are not only borrowing from the spiritual practices of other traditions but also recovering their own Anabaptist spirituality. Some today see a resonance between Anabaptism and the New Monastic movement.

## The contemplative stream and *Love is a verb*

Contemplation and love as action may seem far apart from each other. Contemplation is in essence the spirituality of doing nothing. At the same

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4. Harold Bender’s *Anabaptist Vision* has been critiqued for lacking a vital spiritual dimension. See Stephen F. Dintaman, “The Spiritual Poverty of the *Anabaptist Vision*,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 10.2 (Spring 1992): 205–208.



time, contemplation without action is lifeless. That is why it is necessary for the contemplative stream to not stand alone.

Love for God lies at the heart of the contemplative stream. Love for the neighbor is at the heart of the social justice stream. Love for God and neighbor are inextricably linked together. These two streams find their balance in one another. The works of Trappist monk Thomas Merton and theologian Howard Thurman epitomize the integration of contemplation and social action.<sup>5</sup> Contemplation provides the spiritual groundedness and empowerment for the more active stream of social justice. Social justice provides a compassionate outlet for contemplation. *Love is a verb* calls for a spiritual rootedness in the truth that we are to love God with all our heart, mind and strength and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

## Week of January 1–7

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in, meditating on the word *Abba*. Slowly breathe out, meditating on the phrase *Father*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is the nature of God in this text?
- 2) What is the good news and bad news of this text?
- 3) What words or images stand out to you and why?
- 4) What questions does this text raise for you?
- 5) Why is Jesus "deeply grieved"?
- 6) What would it mean for God to "remove this cup" from him?
- 7) Why would Jesus question if his will were God's will?

Conclude by silently meditating on the phrase *Not my will, but your will be done*. Then, sit in solitude in wordless, thoughtless silence for up to 10 minutes.

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5. See Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, University of Notre Dame Press, Reprint edition, 1998; Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, 1996.

## Week of January 8–14

Read the theme text of the month each day, using the practice of praying the Scriptures or *lectio divina*.<sup>4</sup> Briefly, the *lectio divina* approach consists of four movements:

*Lectio* — Reading — under the eye of God

*Meditatio* — Meditation — when your heart is touched

*Oratio* — Personal prayer — expressing to God what is in your heart

*Contemplatio* — Contemplation — giving yourself up to love

Conclude each day by silently meditating for several minutes on the phrase *Not my will, but your will be done*. Then, sit in solitude in wordless, thoughtless silence for up to 10 minutes.

## Week of January 15–21

*Kataphatic* and *apophatic* prayer are two major types of prayer. Both offer channels for communion with God. *Kataphatic* prayer uses words, images, symbols and ideas (intercessory, thanksgiving, imaginative). *Apophatic* prayer empties the mind of all words, images, symbols and ideas (centering prayer, contemplation, meditation).

One *kataphatic* prayer form, taught by St. Ignatius and others, is the Ignation prayer. A key form of Ignation prayer is praying with the imagination, which is found in his *Spiritual Exercises*. It involves imaginatively placing oneself in a biblical story. So, begin by slowly reading the theme text of the month within its wider context: Mark 14:26-51. As you read, imaginatively place yourself within the scene preceding Jesus' arrest. Try to experience the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, trees, moonlight, sounds, smells and feelings. Feel Jesus' agony and sense of betrayal. Be present as if listening in on the conversation between Jesus and his disciples and Jesus and God. Enter with Jesus into prayer. Wait in silence.

During the week, practice this Ignation praying of imagination by using this same text to deepen your experience of the particular passage, or use it with other Mark stories of Jesus praying (1:35-39; 4:45-52) or other Gospel stories.

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6. You can find a brief description of the practice by Marlene Kropf at <http://bit.do/lectio-divina>.

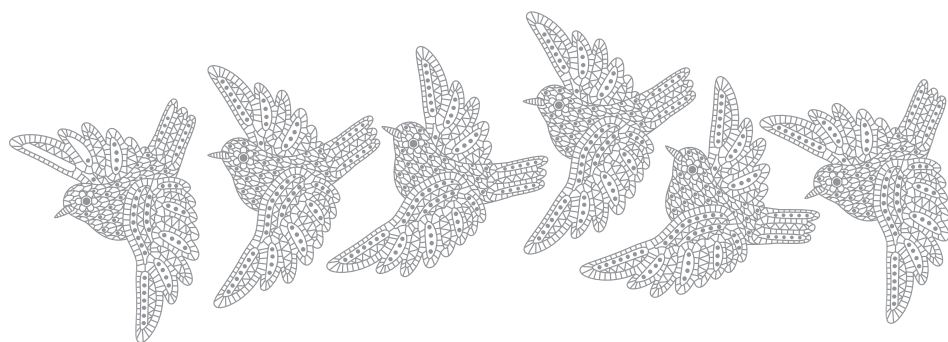
Conclude each day by silently meditating for several minutes on the phrase *Not my will, but your will be done*. Then, sit in solitude in wordless, thoughtless silence for up to 10 minutes.

## **Week of January 22–28**

Each day, read the theme text for the month. This week will be a practice of *apophatic* prayer, also known as *centering* or *contemplative prayer*. Begin with rolling your neck and shoulders to begin relaxing. Take several deep breaths. You may begin with either the Lord's Prayer or by repeating simple words, such as *Jesus, Abba, Mothering God, Holy, Love, Peace*.

Then meditate slowly on this phrase from Psalm 46:10: *Be still and know that I am God!* After a moment of silence, shorten the phrase to *Be still and know that I am*. Again after a moment of silence: *Be still and know*. Then, *Be still*. And finally, *Be*. Enter the silence. Try to keep your mind free of concerns, thoughts, words and images. Without words or images, seek the presence of the unseen God. If you become aware of thoughts, return to the words *Be still* until the thoughts fade. Meditate in the silence for several minutes or longer. Practice this spiritual discipline until centering prayer is comfortable and you sense God's presence.

Conclude each day by silently meditating for several minutes on the phrase *Not my will, but your will be done*. Then, sit in solitude in wordless, thoughtless silence for up to 10 minutes.



## February 2017: **Love is wholeness**

### **The holiness stream**

#### **Theme text**



*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the LORD your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

—Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV)

The story of Jesus' temptations follows his baptism in the Jordan River and immediately precedes his public ministry in Galilee. The Spirit, God's agent in his baptism, leads Jesus into the wilderness, which echoes the Exodus story. The wilderness was also considered the haunt of demons. Jesus, the

“New Israel,” is tested in the wilderness but remains faithful to God. He is tested by the devil particularly as to his role as “Son of God,” a term also used in the Hebrew Bible of Israel, and as God’s ruling king (Note the words “You are my beloved Son” at his baptism and that each temptation begins with, “If you are the Son of God.”). The devil represents the evil power behind the kingdoms of this world. Will Jesus remain true to the nature of his calling as Son of God, harbinger of the reign of God, or will he succumb to a role defined by the devil, power and empire?

His first temptation or test by the devil is to turn the desert stones into bread, manna in the desert. Jesus has been fasting for 40 days and nights, echoing Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness. Will Jesus use his power to satisfy his own hunger — not at God’s, but at the devil’s, bidding? This test does not pit spiritual against physical needs but rather raises the question of Jesus’ ultimate trust and allegiance. And yet, behind this temptation lurks the test to see if Jesus will feed the multitudes and perform signs in order to secure his rule among the people. In an agrarian peasant society, where almost 90 percent of the people live in poverty, will he pander to the populace and win the people through their stomachs? Will he lead a kingdom based solely on social reform? It is, for Jesus, a real temptation.

To affirm his allegiance to God, God’s word and God’s reign, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, a text concerning the Exodus wilderness. Although Jesus will feed the hungry, the reign of God is more than bread alone. This is not a one-time temptation for Jesus; each of these tests symbolizes recurring temptations throughout his ministry. For example, when Jesus provided bread for the people, they wanted to take him by force and make him king (see John 6:15).

In his second temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the holy city and places him on the pinnacle of the temple. The Jerusalem temple is the seat of economic and religious power, where all nations will eventually be gathered together. In Jesus’ day the temple has become a tool of exploitation; the elites are ruling over the common people. Will Jesus throw himself off the temple at the devil’s bidding, miraculously land and reveal himself as the true Lord of the temple? The devil quotes Psalm 91:11-12 concerning God’s protection to encourage Jesus to perform this miraculous floating feat. Again, Jesus quotes from the wilderness experience in Deuteronomy 6:16, when Israel’s faithfulness to God was tested and they failed. Jesus will not fail the test nor falter from his sole allegiance to God.

In his third and final temptation, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. The devil, who claims to hold the power of all earthly empires, offers them to Jesus, if Jesus will bow down and worship him. In Jesus' day the Roman Empire dominated the known world. The political world of ruling by domination is understood to be the devil's domain. It is not the reign of God. One can imagine what it would realistically take to gain and rule the empires of the world like a Caesar — and the violent means required. These possibilities are laid before Jesus.

Jesus demands that Satan leave and quotes from Deuteronomy 6:13: *You shall worship and serve only God*. Unlike the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, who turned to idolatry, Jesus remains faithful as God's Son.

## **The holiness stream**

Holiness is not about rules and regulations or moral perfection, but rather wholeness of life lived within God's will. The heart of the holiness tradition is about wholly living life according to God's purposes. We see this stream among the early Anabaptists, Wesleyans, Puritans, Pietists, Assemblies of God and Pentecostals.

The Holiness Stream focuses on a holy life of virtue and purity of heart and action. A person's life flows from the wellspring of the heart. If the source is stagnant, the stream is stagnant. Striving to live a transformed life of sanctity is not an end in itself but a means of faithfulness and allegiance to God.

Strengths in this tradition include:

- 1) It focuses on the goal of reflecting the glory of God in one's life.
- 2) It centers on the heart as the wellspring of action.
- 3) It provides hope in character transformation.
- 4) It calls for spiritual disciplines in order to grow in godliness with the help of God's grace.

Pitfalls in this tradition are:

- 1) It can lead to legalism, substituting external requirements and actions for the work of the heart.
- 2) It can turn into a form of works righteousness, whereby we try to earn God's favor through moral effort.
- 3) It can develop into perfectionism, causing us to judge others based upon our own standards of moral achievement.

## The holiness stream and the Anabaptist tradition

From its beginnings, the Anabaptist movement had a strong strain of holiness. The concept of *Gelassenheit*, or self-surrender, reflected a desire to wholly yield to God's will. A strong ethical dimension in the Anabaptist tradition emphasized discipleship. At the center of that ethic was an active, demonstrative love for God and one another.

The Anabaptist emphasis upon the believing community extended holiness beyond individuals to the church as a corporate body. Early Anabaptist theology made a dramatic dichotomy between the church and the world into two distinct realities. The Anabaptist concept of the "pure church" reflected a desire to form a church wholly separate from and in nonconformity with the world. The practices of mutual counsel and church discipline were efforts to form a holy church.

The strengths and the pitfalls of the holiness stream are evident in the Anabaptist tradition. The virtuous lives of early Anabaptists admirably reflected Christ to the world around them. They were able to maintain a critical distance from the temptations of the world and the violent rule of its empires. And yet, the concept of the pure church and the disciplines needed to maintain it often turned into harsh legalism, moral perfectionism and a graceless and merciless kind of works righteousness. For some, holiness became equated with dress and avoiding worldly pleasures.

## The holiness stream and *Love is a verb*

In connecting these two themes, let's consider the heart as the source of moral action. Expressing love in action calls for purity of heart. Examining our relationship with God, our motives and our heart is key to action that is truly loving. The heart, from which love springs, is the source of godly action. Holiness connects purity of heart to social action. James puts it this way: *Religion, that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.* —James 1:27 (NRSV)

## Week of February 5–11

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Slowly breathe in and



out, meditating on the phrase: *I am a child of God*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is the nature of God in this text?
- 2) What is the good news and bad news of this text?
- 3) What words or phrases stand out and why?
- 4) What questions does the text raise for me?
- 5) How does this text speak to my life today?
- 6) What recurring temptations do I face?
- 7) How have I used Scripture to strengthen my moral character?

Conclude with several minutes of silence, meditating on the phrase: *Worship and serve God alone*.

## Week of February 12–18

Each day, read through the theme text for the month. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Practice the *Prayer of Examen* or *Daily Examination of Conscience*. It is part of St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. It is an imaginative prayer by which we review our daily life to examine where we see God in all things, which also reveals where we have not lived in God's light. The five steps of this prayer are:

- 1) **Recognize** the presence of God by lighting a candle or performing a sacred gesture.
- 2) **Invoke** the assistance of the Holy Spirit to recognize God in everyday life.
- 3) **Review** the day with gratitude, remembering the movement and actions of the day leading up to this moment and the hints of God's presence within it.
- 4) **Reconcile** with God, yourself and others through deeds done or omitted during the day. Ask for forgiveness.
- 5) **Resolve** to trust in God's grace and the Spirit's empowerment to renew your life in the days ahead.



Conclude with several minutes of silence, meditating on the phrase: *Worship and serve God alone.*

## **Week of February 19–25**

Each day, read the theme text for the month. Sit in silence for several minutes. Pray the Lord's Prayer.

Choose from one or both of these suggestions to practice this week:

- 1) Try a 24-hour partial fast from food. Begin by dedicating this time to God. After eating lunch on one day, go without eating until lunch the following day. This means skipping the evening meal the first day and breakfast the second day. Drink water and juice at mealtimes, if needed. Fasting will make you aware of your body and test your patience, emotions and determination.
- 2) Read James 3. Perform a daily fast from negativity, criticism and dishonesty by “taming the tongue.” Begin by seeking the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Be particularly aware of your words and attitudes throughout the day. Find ways to be positive in your words and expressions toward others.

Conclude with several minutes of silence, meditating on the phrase: *Worship and serve God alone.*

## **Week of February 26–28**

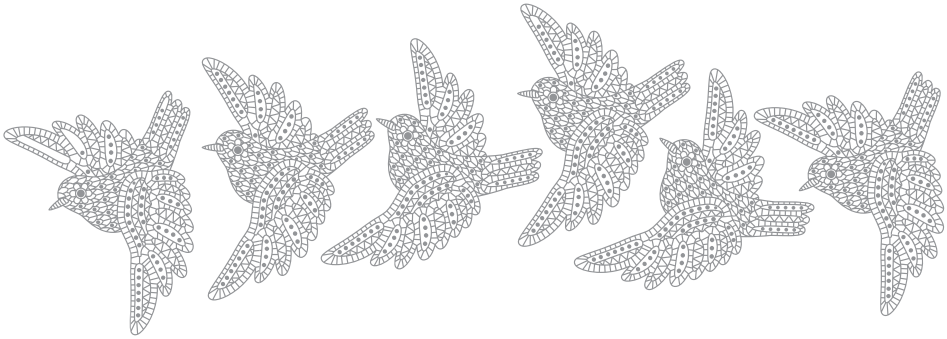
Each day read the theme text for the month. Sit in silence for several minutes. Pray the Lord's Prayer.

Read Isaiah 58:5-9a. Connect this text with James 1:27. Consider performing one or more of the following actions during this week:

- 1) Share a sack of groceries with a local food pantry.
- 2) Provide clothing through a rescue mission or clothing assistance service.
- 3) Fast for a day and donate the saved money to the justice and peace work of Christian Peacemaker Teams ([www.cpt.org](http://www.cpt.org)) or the Mennonite Church USA Peace and Justice Support Network ([www.pjsn.org](http://www.pjsn.org)).
- 4) Visit or have lunch with a widow or widower in your congregation.
- 5) Consider participating in the mentoring program of your local congregation or the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program.  
<http://bit.do/BBBS>

- 6) If these types of actions are difficult to consider performing, spend time in silence reflecting on the question “why?”

Conclude with several minutes of silence, meditating on the phrase: *Worship and serve God alone.*



## March 2017: **Love is a spiritual gift**

### **The charismatic stream**

#### **Theme text**



*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ... I have said these things to you while I am still with you.*

*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ... When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. ...*

*Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about*

*sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*  
—John 14:15-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15 (NRSV)

This theme text is composed of five of the Paraclete sayings from the Gospel of John. The Greek word *Paraclete* can be translated as “advocate” (literally, “to call alongside”) and in its legal sense means an advocate who provides a defense. The Holy Spirit is called to our side as an assistant or advocate on our behalf. According to the text, the Paraclete will come only after Jesus departs. The disciples will not be left as orphans during their mission in a world set on persecuting and prosecuting them. The Holy Spirit will counsel them.

These texts enumerate the character of the Holy Spirit:

- 1) The Spirit is the author of **truth** in the midst of the world’s falsehood and dishonesty and guides the disciples into truth.
- 2) The Spirit is both **with us** and **within us**.
- 3) The Spirit **teaches** the disciples, reminding them about what Jesus said to them.
- 4) The Spirit **witnesses** for Jesus, along with the disciples.
- 5) The Spirit **convicts** the world of sin, righteousness and judgment.
- 6) The Spirit **declares** what is heard from God and the things that are to come.

## The charismatic stream

At the center of the charismatic stream is an emphasis upon the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This power becomes particularly evident in praise and worship. The stream also focuses on the spiritual gifts (charisms or extraordinary powers) of the Holy Spirit, while nurturing the fruits of the Spirit (peace, joy and love). Traditionally these charismatic gifts have included speaking in tongues, prophecy, visions, ecstatic worship, miracles and healings, although the gifts of the Spirit can be considered much wider

(Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28; Ephesians 4:7-16). Historically this stream emerged with Montanus in the second century and continues today in the Franciscans, Anabaptists, Pentecostals<sup>7</sup> and Charismatic renewal movements.

Strengths of the charismatic stream are:

- 1) renewing the unpredictable wind of the Spirit among people who tend to domesticate God.
- 2) freeing the church from an anemic, routine, tradition-bound, cerebral religion.
- 3) challenging spiritual growth through exercising our spiritual gifts.
- 4) providing a Spirit empowerment for witness and service.

Pitfalls of the charismatic stream are:

- 1) rejecting reason and the intellectual side of faith.
- 2) separating the gifts of the Spirit from the fruit of the Spirit.
- 3) turning worship into spectacle and inauthentic drama.
- 4) depending on the spectacular and miraculous to typify the ordinary Christian life.
- 5) becoming overly speculative and engaged in end times prophecy (i.e., eschatology).

## **The charismatic stream and the Anabaptist tradition**

In numerous ways 16th-century Anabaptism was a charismatic renewal movement. The Spirit played a key role in Anabaptist understandings of new birth and conversion, living faithfully, empowering lay preachers, the spontaneous sharing of gifts in informal charismatic worship, communally interpreting Scripture, and facing martyrdom. Anabaptists avoided attending the Reformed state churches because worship and preaching there were captive to the isolated, trained pastor. They believed in the practice of what came to be known in Anabaptist scholarship as the Rule of Paul (see 1 Corinthians 14), where all were allowed to share their gifts and Spirit-led dialogue in worship.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Pentecostalism began as a pacifist church tradition, but pacifism became less of a distinctive over the years. See Paul Alexander, *Pentecostals and Nonviolence: Reclaiming a Heritage* (Pentecostals, Peacemaking and Social Justice), Pickwick Publications, 2012.

8. See Leo Hartshorn, *Interpretation and Preaching as Communal and Dialogical Practices*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

Jacob Hutter, father of the Hutterites, claimed a miraculous element to his ministry. Pilgram Marpeck did not limit the miraculous to the early church. Some early Anabaptists engaged in speaking in tongues, “prophetic processions,” healings and ecstatic worship. The Spiritualist wing of Anabaptism emphasized the Spirit (the inner Word) over the Letter (the outer Word). Today the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have had a wide influence on the modern Mennonite Church among both Anglo and Hispanic congregations.

Early Anabaptism also shared in some excesses of the charismatic stream. Thomas Müntzer, a revolutionary Anabaptist, encouraged dreams, visions and revelations and engaged in apocalyptic, end-times speculation, as did Melchior Hoffman. Müntzer influenced the Anabaptist Hans Hut, who was associated with similar practices. In some extreme cases Anabaptists displayed rather bizarre behavior, similar to what some charismatics today experience as the Toronto Blessing.<sup>9</sup>

The charismatic stream has made significant inroads into the modern Mennonite Church. Recognizing its strengths and weaknesses is important for appraising its role within the Anabaptist tradition.

## **The charismatic stream and *Love is a verb***

The opening sentence in the six Paraclete sayings in John says, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments (14:15)*. Devotion to Jesus after he departs and sends the Holy Spirit requires a love that not only remembers and cherishes Jesus’ words, but also enacts the teachings of Jesus. And one of his greatest commands is to love one another.

1 Corinthians 12 to 14 enumerates a variety of gifts the Spirit offers to the church. Charismatics view these gifts as still present and active. Love is listed as the greatest of the gifts of the Spirit to the church (1 Corinthians 13). In this context love is not merely a feeling of the heart, but an active stance of compassion and care toward others. Love is a gift. *Love is a verb*.

Because the Spirit is the source of the charisms (gifts) to the church, love also has its source in the Spirit. Therefore, charismatic love is at its heart. And a life lived in the presence and power of the Spirit will manifest itself in active love for others.

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9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toronto\\_Blessing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toronto_Blessing)

## Week of March 5–11

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Raise your arms to the heavens and whisper this invocation several times: *Come, Holy Spirit*. Sit in silence for several minutes. As an invocation, sing or reflect on the words of "Spirit of the Living God" in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB) 349.

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What are the Spirit's roles in these texts?
- 2) How do you understand the various roles of the Holy Spirit in your life?
- 3) What are the relationships between God, the Father; the Spirit; and Jesus?
- 4) What is the good news and bad news in these texts?
- 5) What words or phrases stand out to you and why?
- 6) In what ways does this text speak to your life at this moment?
- 7) Where do you see the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of your congregation?

Close each day with this prayer: *Holy Spirit, empower me to bear the fruit of the Spirit in my life this day. Amen.*

## Week of March 12–18

Light a candle to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit. Open with several minutes of silence. Raise your arms to the heavens and whisper this invocation several times: *Come, Holy Spirit*. Sit in silence for several minutes. As an invocation, sing or reflect on the words of "Spirit of the Living God" (HWB 349).

The wind of the Holy Spirit is not pinned down. Neither is the Spirit easily defined. Unless our tradition or congregation has emphasized the role of the Spirit in personal and church life, we often leave it undefined. Read "Article 3: Holy Spirit" in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Herald Press, 1995): [http://bit.do/Confession\\_of\\_Faith](http://bit.do/Confession_of_Faith). Read several of the biblical texts and the commentary during the week.

At the conclusion of the week, reflect on these questions:

- 1) What new ideas have I learned about the Holy Spirit?
- 2) What beliefs have been reconfirmed?
- 3) Which statements(s) in Article 3 do I most appreciate?
- 4) What questions do I still have?
- 5) Which of these truths about the Holy Spirit are particularly needed in my life and in the world around me?

Close each day with this prayer: *Holy Spirit, empower me to bear the fruit of the Spirit in my life this day. Amen.*

## **Week of March 19–25**

Light a candle to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit. Open with several minutes of silence. Raise your arms to the heavens and whisper this invocation several times: *Come, Holy Spirit*. Sit in silence for several minutes. As an invocation, sing or reflect on the words of “Spirit of the Living God” (HWB 349).

The charismatic movement has had a significant impact on modern Mennonite congregations. A task force was formed in 1974 to study the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church, particularly in light of the increasing influence of the charismatic movement. In 1977, the Mennonite Church affirmed this study document at a national assembly. Read through this summary statement during this week: <http://bit.do/anawiki>

Reflection questions:

- 1) What stands out to you from this 1977 statement?
- 2) Would most of it hold true today or might there be some changes in our understanding?
- 3) Try to answer the “Focal Points of Concern” questions under No. 2 for yourself
- 4) What do you agree with, disagree with or question in the overall statement?
- 5) How does it compare to the later Article 3 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*?

Close each day with this prayer: *Holy Spirit, empower me to bear the fruit of the Spirit in my life this day. Amen.*

## Week of March 26–31

Light a candle to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit. Open with several minutes of silence. Raise your arms to the heavens and whisper this invocation several times: *Come, Holy Spirit*. Sit in silence for several minutes. As an invocation, sing or reflect on the words of “Spirit of the Living God” (HWB 349).

The charismatic tradition holds that the gifts of the Spirit are still present in the church today. Read through the lists of the gifts of the Spirit (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28; Ephesians 4:7-16). Reflect on these gifts during the week. Also reflect on natural abilities the Spirit can empower in us that may not be in these lists (for example, art, creativity, analysis, organizing, writing or speaking). When have you and your God-given abilities been a gift to others? Ask God for guidance in understanding your own spiritual gifts.

*Gifts of the Spirit* need to be balanced with *fruit of the Spirit*. Read through the nine virtues or fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, which are contrasted with the *works of the flesh* in earlier verses. Meditate on the fruit of the Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal which fruit you need to develop in your life. Ask the Holy Spirit to empower and make evident the fruit of the spirit to you.

Close with this prayer: *Holy Spirit, empower me to bear the fruit of the Spirit in my life this day. Amen.*



## April 2017: Love is justice

### The social justice stream



#### Theme text



*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*

—Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

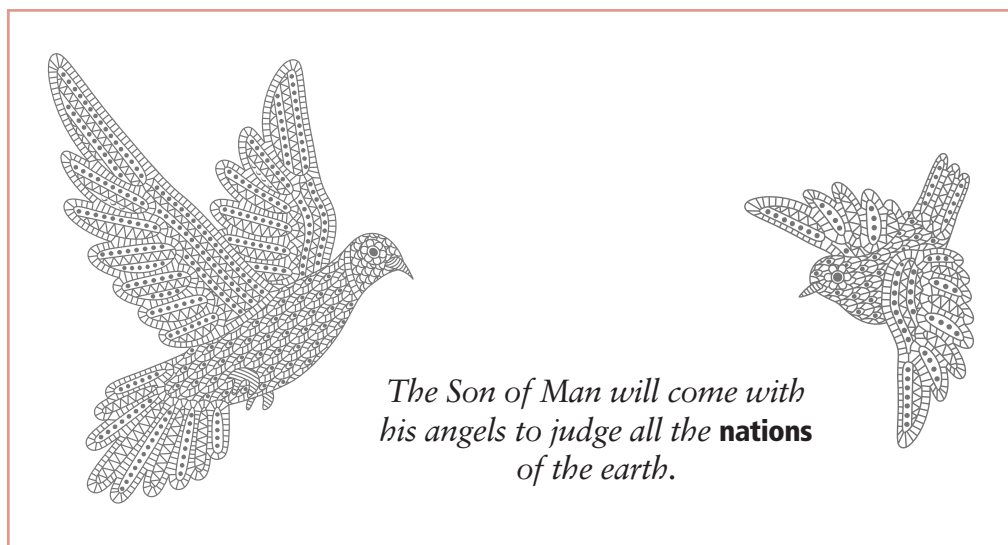
These words of Jesus are set within the context of two chapters in Matthew on the end times and the day of judgment. Often in these apocalyptic scenes of judgment the empire of God triumphs over the empires of the world (e.g., Revelation), and the social status of the rich and poor are reversed (e.g., the parable of the rich man and Lazarus). The ultimate purpose of this judgment scene is not to speculate about the life hereafter. It is a visionary story used to convict, challenge and motivate the hearer to respond with compassion to the oppressed, poor and captive.

The Son of Man will come with his angels to judge all the nations of the earth. In contrast to the individualism of the West today, ancient Middle Eastern thought focused on communities and peoples. So, it is the nations who are gathered together for God's judgment. Even as the sheep are separated from the goats (a practice in shepherding), the portrayal of those separated seems to be more collective. The people are separated for honor (God's kingdom) or dishonor (Gehenna: a place of misery).

The key to the judgment in the next life revolves around how people responded in this life to those described as "hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger or imprisoned." Ancient Palestine was an agrarian peasant society; 80 to 90 percent of the population lived in poverty. The elite 2 to 10 percent (for example, the ruling Roman elites) of the population lived off the work and produce of the common peasants and taxed them heavily. When debts could not be paid, their land was confiscated while they continued working for the landlords of the elite class. These peasants often dropped to the lowest rung of the desperately poor: the hungry, thirsty, naked or imprisoned. The prisoner could either be someone in debtor's prison in Jesus' day or a fellow believer in Matthew's day. The stranger represents the poor, traveling foreigner or sojourner who comes into a community depending on residents to supply his or her immediate needs. Hospitality could mean the difference between life and death and was taken very seriously in ancient Middle Eastern culture.

To those who first heard these words — and to us today — the reason behind the separation and judgment of people comes rather unexpectedly. It may even be shocking! Eternal judgment, at least as it is portrayed here, is not based on a pious life, a particular doctrine of atonement, the right beliefs, living a good life or doing good deeds. The basis of the final judgment has to do with a believer's response to the poor and marginalized of the world. Caring or not caring for the practical needs of the poor, the

imprisoned and the stranger is the basis of the last judgment. The clincher in the story is Jesus' identification with the poor and marginalized. What we do or do not do is not just an act for or against the poor. More profoundly, it is an act for or against Christ! To be part of his "flock" (Matthew 7:21), we who claim Jesus as Lord must show compassion and action for the poor here and now.



## The social justice stream

Threads of the social justice tradition run throughout the Bible and church history. They are evident from the Deuteronomic laws protecting the poor, strangers and widows to the prophet Amos' call for social justice and to the compassion of Jesus towards the poor. Luke 4:16-30 indicates that social justice was not only at the start but at the heart of Jesus' ministry.

An important distinction must be made between personal or corporate charity and social, institutional or political justice.<sup>10</sup> Technically speaking, providing others with food, clothing or a home is not necessarily social justice — these acts of charity towards individuals do not necessarily address the systemic realities that create hunger and poverty. One is a soup kitchen in a black neighborhood and the other is the Black Lives Matter

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10. Foster talks about social justice practiced in three arenas — personal, social and institutional on a type of continuum — but fails to highlight the important distinction between personal and corporate charity separate and in contrast to social, institutional and political justice.

movement. But both acts characterized as charity and justice are included in Foster's presentation of this stream, along with peacemaking although it can also be distinguished from social justice. Peace devoid of justice is not an authentic peace. As with charity and social justice, to be truly authentic, peacemaking and social justice must work in concert.

Within church history the social justice tradition has been embodied in St. Vincent de Paul; Sojourner Truth and the abolitionist movement; Susan B. Anthony and the suffrage movement; Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement; Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farms; Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Freedom movement; the Berrigan brothers; Fellowship of Reconciliation and the peace movement; Jim Wallis and the Sojourners community; just to name a few. Practices within this stream include charitable donations to food pantries and clothes providers, serving at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen, protesting police brutality or national wars, and writing congressional representatives to support bills for clean water or to stop offshore drilling.

Strengths of the social justice stream are:

- 1) It calls us to live in just social relationships.
- 2) It enhances our understanding of the church and its relationship to culture, society and politics.
- 3) It interconnects the personal and the social.
- 4) It is Christian love socially distributed.
- 5) It broadens the agenda of ecological justice.
- 6) It points us to the vision of a redeemed heaven and earth.

Pitfalls of the social justice stream are:

- 1) It can become a means to its own ends.
- 2) It can separate us from the power of the Spirit and our grounding in a living spirituality.
- 3) It can become another form of legalism or works righteousness.
- 4) It can become too closely identified with partisan politics.

## **The social justice stream and the Anabaptist tradition**

The contemporary Anabaptist tradition is often associated with peace and justice by many outside the tradition, to both the delight and chagrin of those inside the tradition. Both peace and justice have had peculiar historical expressions within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Historically Anabaptists have been characterized as pacifists and part of the peace

church tradition, although not all 16th-century Anabaptists were pacifists. And one could make the argument that the peace tradition of the modern Mennonite Church has been slowly decaying through the influence of other traditions.<sup>11</sup> The longer historical tradition of the Anabaptist peace witness has been peace understood and practiced as nonresistance or defenselessness. This was manifested in nonviolence toward others and opting out of military service, though not always the case for many Mennonites. The church considered that being a peace church within itself was a peace witness to others (although a history of church divisions calls this stance into question). Active engagement with the surrounding community and society concerning peace did not take place until much later in the tradition's history. Only since the 1960s has the Anabaptist peace tradition included more actively and socially engaged acts beyond its own community — through nonviolent direct action, nonviolent resistance, political protests, government petitioning and global peacemaking.

Justice would probably not be an appropriate word to describe the historic Anabaptist tradition. Its teaching of separation from the world and often rural and cultural isolationism kept it from engaging in social justice beyond its own communities. Beginning with early Anabaptists, faith groups expressed their Christian faith through concrete acts of love for brothers and sisters in Christ and others in their communities. These charitable acts included relief work, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and poor, health care and mutual aid. Overt acts of social justice were not part of the tradition until the church underwent greater acculturation to society and encountered the social revolutions of the 1960s. Since then the Anabaptist tradition has included acts such as community development, nonviolent resistance and political advocacy connected to racism, sexism, injustice, poverty, social and economic inequity, and most recently and more controversial, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) advocacy.

## **The social justice stream and *Love is a verb***

Ethicist Joseph Fletcher defined justice as “love distributed.”<sup>12</sup> In a similar way, Foster describes the social justice stream as “the compassionate life.” Love and compassion for others lie at the heart of the social justice stream of spirituality. The axis of love for God and neighbor runs straight through

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11. I have argued, as minister of peace and justice for Mennonite Church USA, that we could be in real danger of letting our peace witness fade. See Leo Hartshorn, “When Is a Peace Church No Longer a Peace Church,” *Mennonite World Review*, July 21, 2008. See <http://bit.do/churchplant>

12. <http://bit.do/sitethics>

the social justice tradition. In this stream love takes on an active, socially-engaged dimension. *Love is a verb* in this stream is expressed in concrete acts of compassion, charity, justice, mercy and equity.



*The axis of love for God and neighbor  
runs straight through the social justice tradition.*



## **Week of April 2–8**

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God’s flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Love*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *Justice*. Sit in silence for several minutes. Sing or meditate on the words of “I bind my heart this tide” (HWB 411).

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is the nature of God in this text?
- 2) What is the good news and bad news of this text?
- 3) What words or phrases stand out to you and why?
- 4) What questions does the text raise for you?
- 5) What questions does the text answer for you?
- 6) How does this text challenge you and reassure you?
- 7) When have you seen the Lord hungry, thirsty, poor, homeless or in prison?

Close each day with several minutes of silence. Conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

## Week of April 9–15

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Love*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *Justice*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

During the week pay close attention to the world around you through observation, the media and social interaction. Be aware of situations of injustice, oppression, inequity, abuse, hatred, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia or other forms of discrimination. Reflect on which incidents particularly impact you and which you tend to ignore. Pray to God, asking for guidance on which situation you might respond to and in what way. Ask for the Spirit's empowerment to turn your love into action. Consider sharing your desire to act with a spiritual friend or small group. Conclude the week by thanking God for giving you the conviction and power to act upon your love for God and neighbor.

## Week of April 16–22

Each day read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Love*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *Justice*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Read through the Mennonite Church USA Statement on Immigration at <http://bit.do/immigration-statement>.

In silence, meditate on these two questions:

*Who is the stranger in our midst?*

*How do we practice Christian hospitality?*

As you reflect on the document, consider ways you may respond through prayer and action. With others in your congregation, discuss the two questions and the immigration statement.

Conclude each day with several minutes of silence, reflecting on the words: *Lord, when did I see you hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger or in prison?*

Consider adding other words to describe the poor, marginalized or oppressed each day.



## Week of April 23–29

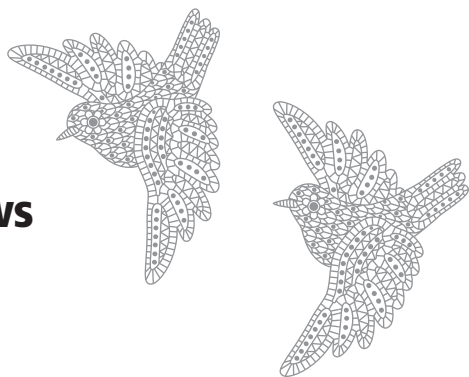
Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Love*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *Justice*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Do a Bible study on texts of peace and justice. Use concordances, commentaries, books and the internet (search for the Peace and Justice Support Network of Mennonite Church USA).

Reflect on these two questions:

- 1) What does the Bible say about peace and justice?
- 2) What are we called to do in relation to peace and justice?

Conclude each day with several minutes of silence, reflecting on the words: *Lord, when did I see you hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger or in prison?* Consider adding other words to describe the poor, marginalized, or oppressed each day.



## May 2017: Love is good news The evangelical stream

### Theme text



*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. ...*



*At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.” So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.*  
—Luke 4:16-20a; 42-44 (NRSV)

This biblical passage is set within the missionary vision of Luke and Acts. The good news begins among Jesus’ own Jewish people and spreads to the whole Gentile world. Within the Gospel of Luke this text follows the baptism of Jesus, his anointing by the Spirit and the beginning of his public ministry. It announces the central theme of Jesus’ mission — preaching good news to the poor.

In his hometown synagogue Jesus is invited to read from Isaiah 42, the assigned text for the Sabbath. He reads of good news to the poor, liberation of captives, sight for the blind, release of the oppressed (perhaps from debtors’ prison) and proclamation of the time of God’s favor. The good news is not a formula for getting to heaven or about believing in particular doctrinal statements. The good news is the hope of concrete acts of liberation for a people caught in the grips of poverty and oppression!

Sitting after the reading was the position a teacher would take to expound upon the text. Jesus hands the scroll back to the attendant, sits down and says, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus embodies the good news of this text for his ministry.

The good news is further defined as “the good news of the kingdom of God.” Jesus has come to proclaim to his people the reign of God present and to come. The reign of God is more than a place in heaven. It is the good news of God’s will enacted “on earth as in heaven.”

## **The evangelical stream**

Central emphases of the evangelical stream are the Bible, Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the good news.<sup>13</sup> In the evangelical stream, the Bible is critical to a right understanding of the faith and being a Christian. That understanding of the Bible is shaped by a particular evangelical lens. Jesus

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13. *Evangel* is the Greek word for “good news.”

Christ is at the heart of Christian faith, with a strong focus upon his saving work on the cross. The call to evangelize, or share the good news of the saving work of Jesus Christ, is essential to practicing the Christian faith. Implied in the sharing of the good news is a sharing or recognition of the bad news: that we are all sinners under God's judgment and in need of saving grace by faith in Jesus through which we are reconciled to God.

Representatives of the evangelical stream in church history have included the Protestant reformers, John Wycliffe, preachers of the Great Awakenings like George Whitfield and Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. The modern missionary movement, which began in the 18th century, had roots in the evangelical stream.

Strengths of the evangelical stream are:

- 1) It places a strong emphasis on the New Birth or "being born again."
- 2) It has led in the missionary endeavor to proclaim Christ to the world.
- 3) It places the Bible at the center of faith.
- 4) It emphasizes the significance of right belief.

Pitfalls of the evangelical stream are:

- 1) The stress on conversion can diminish the need for faithful discipleship or living the faith.
- 2) Salvation and evangelizing can become narrowly focused on "getting sinners to heaven" and neglect the breadth of the meaning of salvation.
- 3) The Bible can become an idol or an instrument for judging others.
- 4) Right belief can become an end in itself, separated from right living and issues of peace and social justice.
- 5) Evangelicalism can take the form of rigid fundamentalism.

## **The evangelical stream and the Anabaptist tradition**

Among early Anabaptists the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) was understood to apply to every Christian. Every follower of Christ was to follow the command of Christ and share the gospel as a missionary in his/her world. This was a unique view within the Protestant Reformation. Within Christendom, new Christians were added to the church by expanding Christian territories and baptizing infants into the church/state. The church of Christendom tried to silence the Anabaptist voices, but the Anabaptists gave verbal witness even as they were martyred and witnessed to their faith with their very lives. (The term *martyr* in Greek means witness.)

Anabaptists emphasized the importance of the New Birth by grace through faith and by the agency of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, they recognized that the reality of being “born again” was evidenced by the new life in following Jesus. The way one lived was as important as a verbal witness. They balked at the type of “cheap grace” that cost the believer nothing and that simply provided a saving formula of justification before God.

The evangelical stream has significantly influenced the modern Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Some would say the influence has been to the tradition’s benefit and others to its breakdown. One of the traditional weaknesses within the later Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has been its strong reliance upon a witness of life without spoken testimony. While the evangelical stream plays a significant role in our Mennonite churches today, there remain important and crucial differences to be recognized between Evangelicalism and Anabaptism.<sup>14</sup>

## **The evangelical stream and *Love is a verb***

At the heart of the evangelical stream is God’s love for the world (John 3:16). When rightly practiced, the tradition’s missionary zeal and proclamation of the good news spring from the wellspring of Christian love for others. When proclamation is not coupled with concrete acts of compassion and love toward others, its theme becomes “love is verbal.” Love must become embodied through concrete acts of love and not simply through words. Luke 4 reminds us that at the heart of Christ’s good news (i.e., *evangel*) we discover a tangible message of hope for the poor and marginalized.

## **Week of May 1–6**

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God’s flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Good*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *News*. Sit in silence for several minutes. Sing or meditate on the words of “Here I am, Lord” (HWB 395).

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

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14. See C. Norman Kraus, ed., *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, Herald Press, 1979, and Ted Grimsrud at <http://bit.do/ana-evangelical>.

- 1) What is the nature of God in this text?
- 2) What is the good news and bad news of this text?
- 3) How is this good news for our society and world?
- 4) How is this good news for you?
- 5) What words or phrases stand out to you and why?
- 6) What questions does the text raise for you?
- 7) What questions does the text answer for you?

Conclude each day with several minutes of silence. Imagine the Spirit of God descending upon you and sending you.

## **Week of May 7–13**

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Good*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *News*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Pray. Ask God to reveal to you places and opportunities to share the good news of Christ. Pray for the Spirit's empowerment to establish a relationship. Invite someone to your church. Write down your faith journey and share it with someone. Reflect on how and what you would share to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ. Avoid formulaic steps to salvation and simply share from your experience of Christ's good news in your life.

Close each day with several minutes of silence and reflection on Matthew 28:18-20.

## **Week of May 14–20**

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Good*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *News*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

While memorizing Scripture is something many of us practiced in childhood, many of us have abandoned it in adulthood. Memorization can saturate our minds with God's Word, allowing us to recall it in moments of need or at perfect times for sharing. Find short verses important to you or to our shared faith (e.g., John 3:16; Luke 4:18-19; Romans 5:1). Meditate on the meaning of the verses. Repeat them over and over by reading them, then reciting them from memory. Once you have short verses down, consider memorizing larger passages (e.g., 1 John 3:16-18).

Close each day with several minutes of silence and reflection on Psalm 119:11.

## **Week of May 21–27**

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Good*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *News*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Using the Bible, concordances, commentaries, the internet and other Bible study aids, do a Scripture study on salvation/redemption/reconciliation in the Bible in all its breadth and depth. Consider the personal, social, cosmic and time (past, present and future) dimensions of salvation. Be sure to include such verses as Romans 5:10; 8:22-23; 11:6.

Close each day with several minutes of silence and reflection on 2 Timothy 2:15.

## **Week of May 28–31**

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the word *Good*. Breathe out, meditating on the word *News*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Using a large sheet of paper or poster board, draw a visual map of your faith journey. Make it as simple or elaborate as you wish. You might place along the roadway of your journey significant influences upon your faith: parents, friends, mentors, congregations, events, books or ideas. Possibly illustrate mountaintop highs and deep valley lows. After drawing your journey, spend time at each illustrated station, thanking God for the road marks along your journey. Consider sharing this with another person or forming a small group where all can share their faith journey maps and stories as mutual witness.

Close each day with several minutes of silence and reflection on Hebrews 12:1-2.



## June 2017: **Love is embodied**

### **The incarnational stream**

#### **Theme text**



*Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.*  
—Luke 13:10-17 (NRSV)

Among a number of Gospel stories about miracles and sabbath controversies, Jesus’ healing of a woman highlights Luke’s emphasis upon a universal gospel for everyone and Jesus’ compassion not only for women but for the poor and marginalized. The story also reminds us that healing is a significant part of Jesus’ ministry. The fact that her infirmity had lasted 18 years emphasized her desperate situation. At the same time, the real focus of this story is not so much on the miraculous healing of the woman as it is on the conflict that the healing incites.

The leader of the synagogue condemns the healing as work done on the sabbath, a day of rest from labor. The synagogue leader considers the act of healing as work, which is forbidden on the sabbath. He protests that there are six other days in the week when Jesus could have done the work of

healing. Jesus defends his healing of the woman by referring to the sabbath allowance for freeing an animal to find drink. If animals can be loosed, how much more should he free a woman — made in God's image and tied up in "the bonds of Satan" for 18 years? For Jesus, healing is a sacred and restoring act that conforms to the original intent of the sabbath and reflects the nature of the reign of God.

This text highlights the sometimes artificial separation between work and faith and between the sacred and secular.

## **The incarnational stream**

*Incarnation* means "in the flesh." It is a theological term Christians use to speak of God becoming incarnate in the humanity of Jesus Christ. The Gnostics and Docetists in early Christian history emphasized spiritual reality and denied the substantial, material reality of creation and the real, fleshly existence of Jesus. On the other hand, incarnational theology recognizes and celebrates the created order, the humanity of Jesus, and all of the concrete, material human existence. Incarnational theology emphasizes the recognition of God's presence incarnate in common human experience. The incarnation-stream makes the invisible presence of God evident in everyday life.

Sacraments are material forms through which we recognize and receive God's presence and grace. We traditionally associate sacraments with religious rituals and observances (for example, the Eucharist, baptism, anointing). To say that life is sacramental is to affirm that God's presence and grace can be experienced in the most mundane and everyday aspects of human life. The incarnational stream does not separate the sacred from the secular but celebrates all of life as a sacred, human, material form through which we experience the presence and grace of God. The incarnational stream is exemplified by such figures as John Milton, Isaac Newton, Susanna Wesley, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Dag Hammarskjöld.

Strengths of the incarnational stream are:

- 1) It affirms that God permeates every aspect of human life and creation.
- 2) It grounds our faith in everyday life.
- 3) It offers a way to appreciate the world of work.
- 4) It offers a critique of Gnosticism and the material world as completely bad.
- 5) It reminds us that our bodies are sacraments of God's presence.
- 6) It opens up the possibilities of ecological theology and practice.



Pitfalls of the incarnational stream are:

- 1) It can lead to idolatry, the identification of God with the material universe (i.e., pantheism) and the fusing of the sacred object with the spiritual reality it points toward.
- 2) It can cause us to try to control God through human means, such as through our church structures, rituals, liturgies or sabbath/Sunday observances.

## **The incarnational stream and the Anabaptist tradition**

The Anabaptist tradition is incarnational in its understanding of God manifested in the flesh of Jesus Christ. At the same time, Menno Simons, who affirmed the full divinity and humanity of Christ, went so far in stressing the divinity of Christ as to speak of his “celestial flesh,” which he derived from Melchior Hoffman. In other words, Jesus did not receive his flesh from Mary, but directly from God. This doctrine has hints of Docetism. Simons had a tendency to present a rather pessimistic view of human flesh and relied on church discipline to subdue the “sins of the flesh.” If Anabaptists had held to this theological peculiarity of Simons, we would have moved a step further away from a fully incarnational theology.

Among early Anabaptists, the strong separation between the church and the world did not position our tradition toward fully embracing the incarnational stream. The world was seen as the domain of the Devil. The church was to be “pure and spotless,” which led toward a burden of perfectionism. This view of separating spiritual and material matters isolates God from the world and centers God only within the church. Within Anabaptist-Mennonite life, God’s presence can be seen in hard work, mutual aid, relief and charitable acts along with being born and dying — all parts of our common life within the world. Herein lies the potential for an Anabaptist incarnational theology.

## **The incarnational stream and *Love is a verb***

Love became incarnate in Jesus Christ. We see God’s love in Christ through his acts of healing, mercy, compassion, confrontation and resistance to evil. Jesus was the sacrament of God’s love in the world. Following Christ means to live as Jesus lived within our personal and corporate humanities, cultures, times and physical locations. For us, to incarnate God’s love in Christ is to make it real and active within everyday life. By living in active, loving ways, we become sacraments of God’s presence to others.



## Week of June 4–10

Find a solitary place. Light a candle to represent the presence of God's flaming Spirit. Sit in silence for a few minutes. Clear your mind of thoughts and distractions. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the phrase *God within me*. Breathe out, meditating on the phrase *God around me*. Sit in silence for several minutes. Sing or meditate on the words of "He comes to us as one unknown" (HWB 498).

Open the Bible and read through the theme text. Over the week, as you ponder the text each day, reflect on these questions and how they connect to your life. Focus on one question per day:

- 1) What is the nature of God in this text?
- 2) What is the good news and bad news of this text?
- 3) What words or phrases stand out to you and why?
- 4) What questions does the text raise for you?
- 5) What questions does the text answer for you?
- 6) What kind of healing are you in need of?
- 7) When has religion blocked you from experiencing wholeness?

Close each day with several minutes of silence and conclude with this prayer: *In you, O God, we live, and move and have our being.*

## Week of June 11–17

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the phrase *God within me*. Breathe out, meditating on the phrase *God around me*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

Practice praying the newspaper each day of this week. Get hold of a daily newspaper. Glance through its headlines, stories and advertisements. If something catches your attention, stop and read it thoroughly. Reflect on how you can turn this item in the newspaper into a prayer to God of praise, petition, thanksgiving or lamentation. Pray to God concerning the newspaper item.

Close each day with several minutes of silence and conclude with this prayer: *In you, O God, we live, and move and have our being.*

## Week of June 18–24

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the phrase *God within me*. Breathe out, meditating on the phrase *God around me*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

*Practicing the Presence of God*, a spiritual practice of Brother Lawrence, a 17th-century Carmelite monk, is incarnational. Brother Lawrence did not distinguish between prayer while kneeling in church and praying while washing the dishes. He devoted himself to responding to God in the tasks of everyday life.

Each day of this week, respond to God's presence in your everyday tasks of cooking, cleaning, working, resting and playing. With a short prayer, acknowledge and thank God for being present in every aspect of our lives. There is no need to stop what you are doing to pray a short mental prayer. The difficulty is to remain vigilant in your attendance to God's presence in the ordinary activities of the day.

Close each day with several minutes of silence and conclude with this prayer: *In you, O God, we live, and move and have our being.*

## Week of June 25–30

Each day, read the theme text of the month. Take several deep breaths in and out. Breathe in, meditating on the phrase *God within me*. Breathe out, meditating on the phrase *God around me*. Sit in silence for several minutes.

If you plan to attend the Mennonite Church USA national convention in Florida, pray that you might be aware of God's presence in this gathering of God's people. Take along a journal to write down places and situations in which you are keenly aware of God's presence in common events and situations and among all people. Try to recognize God where you normally would not expect to find God. Be aware of how people express their spirituality in terms of the six spiritual streams. Take opportunities to share in concrete acts your love for God and one another. Give thanks to God for the church's many people and for the experiences of God's love in the gathering.

Close each day with several minutes of silence and conclude with this prayer: *In you, O God, we live, and move and have our being.*

## Conclusion to this resource

If you have used this spiritual practices resource to its fullest extent, then you have spent a whole year exploring the meaning of love in 1 John, the theme of *Love is a verb*, and Richard Foster's six spiritual streams along with the interconnections of these various themes and their relation to our Anabaptist tradition. You have also engaged in at least 50 formative spiritual practices that have touched on all of these elements! The hopes for this project were to saturate our people in Scripture, prayer, contemplation, action and spiritual practices that honor and praise God. May we feel Christ-like in our community of faith, while affirming our diversity and the many streams that make up Mennonite Church USA. *All praise be to God! Love is a verb!*

### About the author



*Leo Hartshorn is retired after more than 40 years of church ministry in California, Texas, Pennsylvania and Oregon. He served for seven years as minister of Peace and Justice for Mennonite Church USA, was cofounder of Drumming for Peace, and adjunct professor for Lancaster (Pennsylvania) Theological Seminary (UCC) and Eastern Mennonite University's Lancaster extension. Leo has written for MennoMedia's Adult Bible Study series; a spiritual discernment guide in preparation for the 2015*

*Mennonite Church USA national convention in Kansas City, Missouri; and numerous other publications. He has been married for 43 years to Iris de León-Hartshorn, director of transformative peacemaking for Mennonite Church USA. They have three adult children.*



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