

BELONGING SEASON 1 SERIES GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Belonging is one of the three core values of Crosswalk Church. The three are experience, momentum, and belonging. But "belonging", we always say first. The reason why we do that is because it's important that Crosswalk always be a community of belonging. So what does that mean? What that means is that no matter where you're from, what you've done, no matter what you look like, you belong here. Period.

We all have different ideas about life and how it works. We have different political ideas about how things should be in our nation or other nations that you might be listening to this from. And probably most of us are right and wrong, but we come together in our communities of belonging in a way that should transcend these ideas that we have.

We become the people of God more profoundly when we're together. And yes, when we're together with people we don't always agree with, which I understand is hard. But we have the opportunity to create a different kind of world when we're in the presence of God. And so belonging is really important.

And one of the things that belonging does is it creates a commonality. It creates an us and them kind of understanding. Now it's actually quite easy to build communities when you're against something because everybody who's against that thing comes together and we all sit around and be against that thing. to build a community of diverse people.

Different ethnicities and cultures, different age ranges, different socioeconomic classes, to put all that aside and come before the risen King and worship and praise and pray together, to find ways to play together and live together and move and even have our being together.

This is what a community of belonging really is. It doesn't have to be beautiful. In fact, it probably won't be. In fact, it might be kind of ugly. We'll make mistakes along the way. People will get hurt. We'll apologize. And most importantly, we'll heal together. If we don't do those things, are we really fulfilling the call that God has given us to love our brothers and sisters, to love others as you would have them love you? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. If we're not willing to do these things, then we're not willing to be in a community of belonging.

So if you come to a crosswalk, chances are you may see somebody you don't like. You may see somebody who doesn't like you. You may see somebody who disagrees with your ideologies or your politics. You may see somebody who doesn't look like you, doesn't eat the same food as you, and sometimes doesn't even speak the same language that you do. But we are all the same. We are sinners. We stand before a loving and forgiving God. We worship Him for what it is that He has done for us. And we continue the hard work of belonging.

In this series, we're going to talk about stories of healing that Jesus has for us throughout Scripture. And as we do that, we are going to learn what it means to be healed, forgiven, restored, and brought back into a community of belonging. So if you're listening to this, I want you to go and find a crosswalk church close to you and know that when you get there, you belong.

Belonging.

Belonging is one of the 3 core values of Crosswalk church.

DAY 1

MARK 5:24-26

Mark 5:24 Jesus went with him, and all the people followed, crowding around him. ²⁵ A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding. ²⁶ She had suffered a great deal from many doctors, and over the years she had spent everything she had to pay them, but she had gotten no better. In fact, she had gotten worse.

Maybe this is a strange way to start a series about belonging. But I believe the opposite is true. Right from the beginning, we are talking about the idea of not belonging anywhere. This woman, who was clearly suffering from this malady, would have been something of a pariah. She would have had no community to belong to, and because her issue was one of blood, she would not have had status in the community. Honestly, it always surprises me that she had money to pay to care for her issue.

What is also interesting is the idea that she had “suffered” under so many different doctors. Medicine at that point was not a great deal more sophisticated than some form of home remedy that would not have had any scientific verification. And, of course, we were centuries, even millennia, away from germ theory, which is a real thing. Regardless of what anyone says or feels, germs were and are a problem, but ritual washing, while helpful, was mostly connected to religious services.

So we find this woman suffering from this malady, and this would have put her outside the scope of her regular standing in society, which would not have been great to begin with. And all the while, things were getting worse for her. Beyond the physical manifestations of her disease, she didn’t belong anywhere anymore. She was lost to her family and her society. She would not have been allowed into the town or village (Leviticus 15:19-33). It would have been a pretty brutal existence for her.

This is the context in which Jesus is about to interact with her. The fact that she was even in the crowd means that she was bucking social convention and was desperate for the opportunity to be healed by the one she had heard so much about. She was not in a place to ask for such grace, yet she seemed to believe that grace just might be given if what she had heard was true about this Jesus.

She was taking a chance to belong to someone, even if that someone was a person she had never met, had no business asking anything of, and would probably be rejected. But she was just bold enough to position herself in the crowd so that she might at least touch the hem of his robe.

1. Have you ever felt ostracized from your community?
2. How did that make you feel?
3. What did you do to change what was happening at the time?

Day 2.

Mark 5:27-29

²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe. ²⁸ For she thought to herself, “If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed.” ²⁹ Immediately, the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition.

This woman approaches Jesus from behind him. Most people approached Jesus from the front to grab his attention and to ask for healing. This woman is cautious and hesitant, perhaps because her condition makes her ceremonially unclean. Also, it might have been the only way this woman could approach Jesus because of the crowd around him.

Her faith was such that she did not demand an interaction with Jesus, but she knew that his power was such that if she simply touched the hem of his robe, she would be healed. This is pretty significant faith! It also speaks to the way that she felt about herself. At this point in her life, after 12 years of this particular issue, she would have been pretty concerned about whether or not she would be accepted in society (Hint: she would not), about whether she would be rejected from the crowd (Hint: She would be dismissed). The only question in her mind might have been

whether Jesus would reject her or not. By simply touching his robe, she might not have also experienced rejection from Jesus. Perhaps she could simply “steal” some of his power without him noticing.

As she touches his robe, it is reported that the healing occurs immediately. There is no waiting for a pronouncement, acceptance, or mitigating circumstances. Instead, she was healed, and she could feel the healing immediately throughout her body.

The fact she has been bleeding for 12 years is significant in the literature of Israel due to the 12 tribes. As well, the immediate following story is of Jarius' daughter, who was twelve years old. These numbers should not be lost on us as they were trying to tell a story to the Hebrews that they would understand. This kind of literary device includes more people reading and understanding the text.

But what does it do for you? What are you learning from this particular story?

We cut the text at just the point where she was being healed, and so this is the moment of the reversal in her life. She was about to be re-introduced into her society, her family, and into the community that rejected her due to her issue with blood.

We are on the precipice of the change that we are all looking for when it comes to being healed by Jesus.

1. Have you ever been in this same situation?
2. Have you ever been healed by Jesus?
3. What does healing look like for you today?
4. How are you feeling? Do you feel like you might not belong?

Day 3

Mark 5:30

Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my robe?”

Jesus recognized that something was happening around him. His ability to know when his power was tapped into must have been something to behold. He knew that someone had touched his robe and was healed from that slight touch.

It seems that Jesus had a cognizance of someone taking something from him. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is interesting. What was the power that Jesus held? Was it something different than who he was so he might feel it as it left his body? Or was it so close to who he was that he felt it leave, like feeling the blood slip out of your veins?

We don't know, nor do we have to know. We do know that Jesus was keenly aware of what was happening around him, who was there, and what they needed. This empathy that Jesus carried around with him wherever he went has served all of us well. Whether it is by seeing the example of empathy that Jesus showed us or the desire Jesus had to connect with others that has become a hallmark of his ministry and should be a hallmark of ours as well, we have learned more and more from the way that Jesus dealt with those around him—particularly those who were in need of something that he had to give them.

When we incorporate empathy into our lives, we are changed as well. Empathy is a way of living in which we are aware of the needs of those around us, and we are allowed to feel what they feel. This is sometimes difficult because we live in a world with a great deal of need, yet it allows us to serve those we come in contact with. Jesus was so in touch with this empathy that he could tell when someone needed some of his power and felt that power go out of him.

How do you experience empathy every day? Do you feel the needs of those around you in a way that brings you energy or saps you of your energy? We all have those people in our lives who seem to sap the energy from us, often because they are constantly having some drama in their lives. Maybe that person is you? Who knows, but we do know that when you have empathy, it can sometimes feel like it is being abused. This is the plight of those who live an empathetic life. Think of how much Jesus had to deal with every day.

1. How do you experience empathy?
2. Who in your life saps your energy?
3. What gives that energy back into your life? How can you do more of that?

Day 4

Mark 5:31

His disciples said to him, “Look at this crowd pressing around you. How can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’”

His disciples were relatively confused by what had just happened and vocalized their surprise. They didn’t really understand how Jesus could feel someone in particular when the crowd was so close to him. It seems there must have been quite a crush of people around him.

Have you ever been in that kind of situation with so many people around you that it was overwhelming? I can remember being about 9 years old at Buckingham Palace, and we were right up against the gate, looking in at the changing of the guard. I was small, and as the crowd got more and more intense, they pressed in more and more. This was disconcerting. My father had my mom and my sister in front of him and was protecting them, but I was sure I was going to be okay and could see better from my vantage point.

I soon realized that I was in some trouble as the crush of the crowd pushed me into the gate and almost through it, as I could almost fit through the space. It became uncomfortable, and then it became scary and painful. Finally, my father was able to grab me and put me in front of him, and I felt safe. At that point, if someone had tried to take something from me, there was nothing that I could do, as I probably wouldn’t have even felt it.

Maybe the crowd around Jesus was something like this. It must have been pretty bad in that the disciples couldn’t believe that he could discern that someone had taken something from him. He would have been touched at all sides, but her touch was different somehow.

John Lennon used to walk through Central Park in New York City. When they asked him how, being so famous, he could do that, he said that as long as he kept walking, the crowds would not stop and keep him from his destination. However, if he stopped, then he said that they would inundate him and he would be in danger.

I have never been famous like this, but there are times when, if I keep moving, the crowds will part, and I can get to where I need to go.

Jesus was willing to stop, even at personal danger to himself, to see who it was that took a bit of power, by faith, from him.

1. Have you ever been in a powerful crowd that made you a bit worried about your safety?
2. Would you have been as surprised as the disciples at what Jesus said?
3. How can you move forward, without stopping, in your life of faith?

Day 5:

Mark 5:32

But he kept on looking around to see who had done it. 33 Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell to her knees in front of him and told him what she had done.

I wonder what Jesus's gaze was like. I wonder what it is like? We don't know what color his eyes were, but judging by his ethnicity, they were probably brown or some dark color. But I bet his gaze can be pretty intense.

As he looked around to see it, the woman realized that she better confess to what she had done, but it seemed that she was pretty afraid of him. I have often wondered why she was frightened. Could it have been because she was nervous that what she had done was some violation of his privacy? Did she feel like she stole something from him? Was it not hers to take?

Could she have known what she was really doing when she thought that if she just touched his robe, she would be healed? It seems that this was more an act of faith than an act of thievery. It was a last hope in a good God that motivated her to reach out and touch the hem of his robe, believing that it might be enough to heal her. What an incredible act of faith.

She was clearly frightened that her act of faith might have upset Jesus. I would think that at this point there was very little information on what it was like if Jesus was angry. At this point in the narrative, people had not really seen Jesus upset at all, rather, they had encountered Jesus who was very serious about healing people and preaching the kingdom of God. So an angry Jesus might have been a bit out of the ordinary for them.

I wonder if she was frightened because of his reaction, because of his gaze, or because she didn't know what was going to happen next? It could have been all of these things or it could have been something else. But what we do know is that she fessed up to what she had done, and she was willing to throw herself upon his mercy.

1. Have you ever thrown yourself on the mercy of someone else?
2. How did that make you feel?
3. Did you feel vulnerable and perhaps a little alone?
4. Do you think this is what the woman in the story felt?

Day 6:

Mark:5:34

And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."

I bet the relief that she felt was palpable. She was frightened and worried, and in a small short sentence, her fears were laid to rest, and she was healed. Her suffering was alleviated, and she could go back and belong to her family, to her friends, and to her community. She had this issue for years, and all that time, she would have been ostracized from her community. Now, she was invited to return home to be perhaps a mother, a wife, and a sister again. We don't know her family situation, but this must have been a significant relief!

This is what Jesus did for the people. He was constantly giving them entrance back to the lives that they had lost because of their physical, emotional, or even spiritual ailments. Jesus wasn't just healing; he was creating belonging where there previously wasn't. This would have been an incredible grace that each of those he healed received.

And how does Jesus heal you and give you a sense of belonging?

I always work with hospitals as they seek to extend their continuum of care by working with faith communities. And it is always a realization to me that when someone enters into the hospital, they are separated from everything that they love. (I happen to be writing this on the 8200 floor of the Loma Linda University Health as I wait for some test results for my mom). My mom hates being in the hospital. She loves her caregivers, but hates how it takes her away from everyone and everything that she loves.

Every sickness, every malady, every issue that we go through does this. Jesus not only healed the emotional, physical, and spiritual problems, but he also injected belonging into people's lives so that they might go back to the lives they were supposed to lead. Rather than having to deal with the inconvenient interruptions that we all experience, they were put back into the places they belonged.

This gift that accompanied the healings of Jesus is perhaps more profound in the long run.

Jesus has a way of giving us back our lives.

1. How has Jesus given your life back to you?
2. Do you have a story of healing in some respect?
3. How can you give healing and belonging to someone else?

Day 7

Small Group Study Guides

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

When you were a kid, was there a time you got sick, or caught poison ivy/oak, or something else that wasn't fun? How long did it last and what did it feel like to go through that journey?

HEAD

1. Read Mark 5:24-34 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Knowing that the condition of this woman at this time would have banned her to isolation for twelve years, describe what you think the journey was like for her, and at what point she finds herself in by the time she sees Jesus.
3. What risks was the woman taking to get to Jesus, knowing that there was a crowd of people around her, pressed up so tightly that she would have had to touch people to get to Jesus? Why take those risks?
4. Why do you think the woman wanted to sneak in and sneak out to get her healing from Jesus?

5. How do you think this woman knew that simply by touching Jesus' robe she could be healed?
6. What was the difference between the crowd touching Jesus and this woman touching Jesus?
7. What do you think verse 34 meant to the woman to hear?

HEART

1. If you or a loved one had been sick for a long time, and you had spent everything you had but the problem only grew worse, to what lengths do you think you'd go next to seek healing?
2. Jesus wasn't just about healing, He was about restoring. What other ways does Jesus work to bring restoration in us aside from physical healing?
3. What do you think this story has to do with the idea of belonging? How are we introduced to the woman at the beginning of the story versus the end of the story?
4. What lessons can we learn from this story as to how we, at Crosswalk, seek to look out for those that are lonely and on the fringe, and bring them into community?

HANDS

Think of someone you know who has been battling an illness, whether that illness is temporary or has been a long battle. What is one thing you can do this week to encourage them in their journey and make them feel loved? Pray for them? Send a hand-written note of encouragement? Buy a plant to drop by, or a meal, or a gift card for a meal? If you can't think of anyone, what's one way you could bless someone who works as a health care professional as they care for others?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“When Jesus heard this, he told them, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.””

Mark 2:17 NLT

Day 8:

Mark 2:1 When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was back home.² Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there was no more room, even outside the door. While he was preaching God’s word to them,

Jesus was clearly getting famous at this point. This is a particular situation is especially interesting when it comes to going back to the area where you grew up. It is not so easy to be famous at home, with people who know who you are. They are much less impressed and much more likely to hold what you say with a grain of salt. However, Jesus seemed to overcome that and so many people were interested in hearing what he had to say that they packed the house to the point that there was no room for anyone else.

One thing that we don’t see in this particular narrative is that Jesus was healing at this house. While we well may have been, what we do know is that he was teaching and he was a popular speaker as he was preaching God’s word to those who were around.

People love a new preacher. They always do. Having had the opportunity to travel to new places, it is always great to be the new preacher in a place where you haven’t preached before. You can use your best sermons and they usually go over quite well. It is much harder to be a preacher who grew up in the area, because when people know you, they have a difficult time taking you seriously.

I will never forget preaching in the church I grew up in as a young pastor. It was horrible. They couldn't take me seriously, and I wasn't super coherent. It was probably a disaster for all of us. I think it took another 10 years before I preached there again, which was probably good for all of us.

Jesus was preaching the words that God had given him, and clearly, they were resonating with everyone who was in the room. However, there would have been many who were not able to hear him, to get close to him, or be healed by him. Even a full room can be a problem when you don't have enough space for all who want to enter.

You probably know what is coming next in the story, but if you don't, I won't spoil it for you!

1. Who is your favorite preacher? And have you traveled to go hear them before?
2. With the advent of the internet, you can hear all the greatest sermons from all the preachers you love, how has that made you experience church lately?
3. What would you do if you couldn't get into the church to hear the preacher that you love?

Day 9:

Mark 2:³ four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. ⁴They couldn't bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus.

Yep, you know this story. Four men arrived carrying their friend. The fact that they are carrying their friend shows you how much they love him. They are willing to go beyond what is reasonable, beyond what is appropriate, and beyond what most friends would do for each other. However, they would not be thwarted; they wanted their friend to meet Jesus and be healed.

This is an incredible statement about belonging. They wanted their friend to have such a sense of belonging that they were willing to go above and beyond in order that he might be healed and that he might have a sense that he belonged to the friend group and to the community. I don't know a lot of people who would do this for a friend, but they were going to elbow their way into where Jesus was.

I don't know how all of this would have worked. I know about thatched roofs and what they are made of, but I can't imagine the mess they would have made as they were digging through them. Jesus must have had stuff falling from the ceiling on him as he was preaching. I am sure it would have been a significant distraction as he tried to share God's word.

As a preacher, it is hard when something you are not expecting starts happening while you are preaching. I will never forget a time at another church I was working in when someone had a heart attack in the back few rows of the church. As this was a big church, the preacher continued to preach as they found medical professionals in the congregation and started doing CPR right during the sermon. The preacher who was preaching didn't even miss a beat, and most people didn't know what happened. It was a surreal moment, to be sure.

Jesus would have had to focus to continue preaching as these things were happening around him, and then the man came down on his mat, right in front of him. This was now not just a distraction but a disruption, and Jesus had to do something about it.

What I love about this story is that it shows the lengths this man's friends were willing to go to get him in front of Jesus. They had incredible faith and a desire for him to belong.

1. Do you have a friend for whom you would do this?
2. Are you a friend who has people who would do this for you?
3. How far are you willing to go to help someone feel like they belong?

Day 10:

Mark 2: ⁵ Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “My child, your sins are forgiven.”⁶ But some of the teachers of religious law who were sitting there thought to themselves,

Jesus honored their faith and hope. He seemed impressed by the lengths they were willing to go to ensure their friend's healing. But a weird thing happened; rather than healing the man, Jesus said his “sins are forgiven.” This was a little out of the ordinary when it came to what Jesus normally said and did. It would have also made some people pretty upset, which it did.

Jesus did two things: He forgave the sin and used language that showed how inclusive he was with the young man. He called him “my child,” and with that, he included this young man in the family of God.

When it comes to belonging, family is perhaps the greatest kind. Some of us grew up in homes where a sense of belonging was always present. This is a blessing, and we should strive to make it happen in all of our homes as well.

However, some of us grew up without that sense of belonging, creating some pretty difficult feelings for us. I am terribly sorry for that. If we can help, that should never be the case. If this was your situation, know that you belong in the family of God and have been invited, accepted, and celebrated.

I know that will not make up for what you didn't have as you were forming and developing, but let it heal you and grow you toward a stronger bond with Christ and a deep connection to those around you in your new family in Jesus. Things can and will get better when you have this in your life. And while this family will never replace what you were deprived of, it can bridge so many gaps.

Jesus also realized that these men were believers. They believed that Jesus could and would heal their friend, so they put it all on the line. What they did was probably unreasonable, but what a friend they were to this man who needed healing.

1. How deep is your faith that Christ can heal you?
2. Do you know how much you belong in the body of Christ?
3. What can you do to help others feel like they belong?

Day 11:

Mark 2: ⁷ “What is he saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins!”

And there it is. The criticism, the anger, and the righteous indignation. These men were not used to someone saying the things that Jesus was saying. And truthfully, Jesus was saying things that no normal person would dare to say. He is taking the prerogative of God and wielding it as if it was his right. Which of course, we know now that it was, but for those experiencing this for the first time, the words would have been inflammatory.

Jesus was willing to say these words because he knew who the father was and he was sure that he had the power to not only forgive sins, but to also heal the man physically. He was taking authority that few, if any, had been willing

to take. In fact, if anyone today would take that same authority, we would have the same reaction as those pharisee's that heard what he said.

Have you ever heard someone say something that they had no business saying? I get to work with healthcare professionals often in my consulting, and I am so impressed by what they know, their field of study, and how they have become experts in their fields. What constantly fascinates me, however, is how someone who has googled one thing one time will push back on those professionals, as if they actually have the authority to make the pronouncements they do, as if they have studied this particular field as long as the experts.

Jesus was taking authority that he and the father shared. It was not a stretch for Jesus to forgive someone of a sin or sins. However, when we step out of our areas and assume authority over someone else without actually having that authority, it can be pretty disconcerting, and in fact, it might well be offensive.

The people around Jesus did not all understand why he was willing to make such claims. But we often have the same issues with believing that Jesus is really all that he says that he is. His claims come from heaven, and it is hard for us to understand what heaven really is, and the power that it has in our lives.

Jesus made claims to not only heal, but to heal our sins, and that makes all the difference in the world.

1. What would you do if someone said they had forgiven your sins? Would you have a hard time believing?
2. Do you think the Pharisees were reasonable in their misunderstanding?
3. Which is easier, to heal or to forgive? Or are they the same things?

Day 12:

Mark 2:8 Jesus knew immediately what they were thinking, so he asked them, “Why do you question this in your hearts? 9Is it easier to say to the paralyzed man ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk’?”

I love how Jesus knows what they are thinking and how he gets a little aggressive with them. That in itself must have been a little bit of a surprise. Whether this was divine knowledge, or perhaps he was just really good at anticipating what was going on we don't know, and it really doesn't matter. What does matter is that Jesus was willing to take the conversation head on, and teach them a thing or two while he is at it.

His questions for them are twofold: 1) Why do you question this? And 2) What is easier? Are interesting, so let's break them down.

When he asked them why they were questioning this, he was actually asking them a question about their faith. He was wondering if they were not willing to believe that he could do this. They were seeing him heal, yet they were still questioning them in their hearts. I wonder if we would do the same thing, even when we see how God is working, we see his results, in our hearts we still question if what he is doing is really of God or not. We are perhaps not that much different than the skeptics of Jesus' day.

The second question, which was easier, to heal or to forgive is almost a funny question. It contains humor in that those Jesus was talking to could not do either of these things. So for him to task them this question is to remind them that they were so far out of their depth in questioning him, it was almost laughable. They would not have known how to answer that question any more than you or I would know how to answer that question.

How do you answer a question when you couldn't possibly know the answer. Like these guys, you probably would simply shut your mouth and see what that person has to say.

1. How would you answer the second question?
2. Do you think you would have believed in Jesus if you were in that house that particular evening?
3. Do you ever find it hard to believe in the claims of Jesus, even 2000 years later?

Day 13:

Mark 2:10 So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins." Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, ¹¹"Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!"

¹² And the man jumped up, grabbed his mat, and walked out through the stunned onlookers. They were all amazed and praised God, exclaiming, "We've never seen anything like this before!"

I love the end of this story. Jesus doesn't just answer their questions, but he actually gives them a lesson in underestimating him. Jesus was going to not only convince them with his words, but he was going to show them with his deeds the power that was at play through him.

This was a "put up or shut up" moment for Jesus, and he did just that. Have you ever had one of those moments where you have said enough and it is just simply time for action? I can remember when I was a senior in High School and was playing on the Volleyball team. We were down 2 games and about to lose the third game, and thus the match. I came into the huddle, and as team captain, the words that I was saying needed to backed up by some serious actions!

The game starts and we go on a quick run, so we are finally up. Side out, side out, and I am up to serve. Luckily, I was a pretty consistent server, so I helped us push the run a little higher. We won that game, and as the momentum changed, we ended up coming all the way back and winning the whole match.

I met the coach of the other team about 20 years later in the grocery store, and he still remembered my name and remembered those games. He was gracious enough to say that he thought it was the greatest comeback he had seen while coaching. That was sweet of him, and certainly made me feel pretty good about things.

The truth is, if I had not helped by my actions, my words wouldn't have meant too much. Jesus showed them what power really was by healing and forgiving the man, and showing all of those who were there what it means to belong to the kingdom of God and have access to all of that power.

1. Do you think you belong to the kingdom of God? What makes you believe that?
2. How can you show, by your actions, what it means to belong to the kingdom of God?
3. What is the best thing anyone has done to help you know you belong?

Day 14:

Small Group Study

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

When you and your closest friends or family get together, what is an activity you enjoy doing together and why?

HEAD

1. Read Mark 2:1-12 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Could the paralytic have gotten to where Jesus was on his own?
3. Why did the paralytics friends not give up when they saw there were too many people to get their friend to Jesus?
4. When the paralytic was lowered to Jesus, why did Jesus forgive his sins first, instead of healing him? How do you think the paralytics friends responded to this act?
5. Jesus knew what the paralytic man needed the most, but what message was Jesus sending to the Pharisees, teachers of the law, and the crowd that day?
6. Verse 12 says that “they were all amazed.” Do you think this meant the Pharisees and teachers of the law as well? If so, how did they change their minds so quickly?

HEART

1. Do you have friends that would be willing to tear a roof off for you? Do you have people in your life that you'd rip a roof off for them? Where do you think we find people like this and make these types of relationships?
2. Knowing that Jesus often gives us what we need, over what we think we need or want, how do we work on building our trust in Him for all the ways He takes care of us, even when we're not sure what He's up to at the time?
3. One of the points we can make from this story is that Jesus is also God. Knowing this, what do we learn about God from this story?
4. Just for fun, do you think the friends later repaired the roof or did they leave it and walk away? What should they have done and why?

HANDS

As Paul wrote, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23). Spending time in repentance is a spiritual practice, and it reminds us of how much we need Jesus, and how grateful we are for Him. Spend some time this week practicing this act, laying out your sins and struggles, letting them go, and receiving God’s grace.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it through Him.

John 3:17, NLT

Day 15:

John 5:1 Afterward Jesus returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holy days. 2 Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches.3 Crowds of sick people—blind, lame, or paralyzed—lay on the porches.

You have probably heard this story, and if you have a bit of imagination, you have created what this structure might look like in your head. I have seen artist's renderings and it seems that this area would have been a very beautiful place to come and hang out and to sit by the pools. The porches were colored, which is something we never really

get to see in the ancient ruins of things. But during the Roman times, they had a generous use of paint to make their buildings look beautiful.

When you are at the ancient ruins of this place you realize how nice it must have been. It is in a lower area of the city, that place where the Via Dolorosa begins (The Way of the Cross). It is a large portico that opens to a wide veranda with pools that would have been great to swim in, sit next to, and generally relax by. The added beauty of the columns would have made it a wonderful experience.

While these texts are just the precursor, or the context for what is about to happen, the last verse reminds us that in this beautiful area were a bunch of people that might not have belonged there on a day-to-day basis. Rather, these people were the blind, lame, and paralyzed, those who would not be let into the temple area as they were not whole people, and they were considered less than the rest of society. However, there was a reason they were hanging out in this beautiful place.

Some manuscripts include verse 4, which states: 4: waiting for a certain movement of the water, 4 for an angel of the Lord came from time to time and stirred up the water. And the first person to step in after the water was stirred was healed of whatever disease he had.

This may be something that you are familiar with as it might be in the translations that you usually read. The NLT has chosen to leave it out as it can't be verified in some of the earlier transcripts that have been discovered. However, it does give us some background information into why they were there, waiting for the water to be stirred.

Let us be honest, that is a bit of a strange miracle for everyone to be waiting for. The idea is that an angel will come and stir the water, and then there is a competition for the healing that would ensue for the person who first made it into the pool. I can imagine there would be a bunch of false starts and weird anomalies that would make people run and jump into the water. It almost seems comical, and perhaps it wasn't put in until later due to the fact that it might not be historically accurate.

This actually doesn't alter the story at all, so I am fine with it being left out of the most current and accurate texts. Even without it, it sets the stage for a miracle of belonging.

1. Is there a place where you love to hang out and swim?
2. What is it like, where is it, and how often do you go?
3. If you were writing this story, would you include or exclude verse 4?

Day 16:

John 5:5 One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, "Would you like to get well?"

What an obvious question Jesus was asking this man. Would you like to get well? Of course, this man would like to get well; who wouldn't? What comes along with getting well? We know that this man would be brought back into the life of the Temple, his community, and even his career. He would be made whole and, as such, could participate in all aspects of life that he had been missing.

Can you imagine being afflicted for 38 years of something, and someone comes up and asks if you would finally like to be rid of the burden of being broken? How amazing would that be? And how incredulous would it be? Chances are you would have a really hard time believing that you were even having this conversation with someone. At this

point, you are a fixture in this pool, and everyone knows that you have little chance of getting into the pool before anyone else.

Hearing that this man might be interested in healing you would be a pretty big and exciting thing to process.

But perhaps we should linger in the question for a little while longer. And maybe we should personalize it a bit more. What if Jesus was asking you if you wanted to get well. Now, I don't know what you need to be healed from, but there is probably something. We all have issues that we have to deal with. Some are physical, some are emotional, some are spiritual, and some are combinations of all of these things. And I think that most of us want to get better from what ails us. However, are we willing to do the work that helps heal us?

Some of that work is leaning into the promises of God and trusting in the spiritual disciplines to lead us to a greater understanding and experience of God in our lives.

I actually think that God is asking us this question every single day of our lives. Do we want to be well, do we want to get better? Are we willing to partner with God in this healing? Are we willing to partner with those who God places in our way to help us heal?

If you are hoping to be healed, know that God is asking you if you want to be well, and he is willing to go on that journey of healing with you.

1. What do you think you could partner with God on to help you heal?
2. Are you open to therapy? What would stop you from going?
3. How can the community of God help you heal?

Day 17:

John 5:7 "I can't, sir," the sick man said, "for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me."

This man is speaking directly to his need for community. He doesn't have anyone who can help him get into the water when the bubbles come up. His inability to get help means that he has no chance of being healed.

Interestingly, this is probably true of us as well. If we don't have people around us who are willing to help us heal, to help us grow and mature, to help us see more than our own perspective then we will probably not find the healing that is being offered.

This is one of the great things about a Jesus community. When people come together for the purpose of getting to know Jesus, to support one another, to help each other grow, and to become more mature in our faith, we have the opportunity to heal in ways that being alone just doesn't really allow for.

This man was dejected and rejected by society. And after 38 years I am sure that he thought there would never be any reversal of his fortune. However, his life was about to change, he just couldn't see it yet.

Have you ever been on the precipice of change and yet you couldn't really see what was on the other side of the decision, of the chasm, or of the gap you have to go past? We usually function from the future we can see, not from the possibility of Jesus. Jesus can see more than we can, so some of the questions that he asks us might seem almost ridiculous. They were for this man.

"Do you want to be well. . .?"

Of course he did, but he couldn't see how that would be possible.

But with Jesus, all things are possible. You just have to have some faith. . .

1. What do you need faith for today?
2. Is there a future that you believe is being made for you that you haven't quite lived into yet?
3. Will you say Yes when God calls?

Day 18:

John 5:8 Jesus told him, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!"

We want Jesus to talk to us. We pray for this, we hope that we will someday hear his voice and understand his will. But what I have noticed is that when Jesus talks, when he gives us commands, he often makes it simple enough to understand, and hard enough to make it impossible for us.

It is impossible for us, until he makes it possible.

The command that Jesus gave to this man was not only impossible, but took a great deal of faith to even understand. He had not walked for 38 years. I imagine that his legs were atrophied and essentially useless. Somehow, through the power of Christ, this man would be able to walk, be able to stand, and be able to do things he had not done in almost 4 decades.

This request was ridiculous, unless it came from someone who could make all of this happen. The good news is that the request comes from someone who had the access to all of heaven's power. It makes the request no less ridiculous, but it also makes the outcome a foregone conclusion. All this man would have to do is have faith in the one who issued the command, and therefore, everything would be changed. The question becomes, then, will he do it?

This is the question we are asked every day as believers. Will you stand up and walk? Will you go where God is asking you to go, even if it seems impossible. Will you change your life, will you belong, will you move in a different direction than you thought you could? Will you pick up your mat and walk? Walk away from the things that are holding you back, your sickness, your disease, your frustration, sadness, and those things that block your progress in Christ?

It takes a leap of faith, a willingness to do the impossible, a simple answer to the command that was given to you to make this happen. Get up, take up that mat and simply walk away from all that hinders you and holds you back.

Wouldn't it be great if things really worked that easily for us? Just get up and walk away?

Here is the thing, it might not be that simple, but it starts that simply. It starts by simply following the commands of Christ and believing that we belong to him as a Child of God. We start the journey of 1000 miles with one simple step. Of course, healing is hard for us, but the first step is to trust that God believes in us enough to give us this command.

1. What is God calling you to today?
2. How can you take that first step?
3. Who do you need to help you take that first step?

Day 19:

John 5:9 Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath,

This text feels like we are just cherry picking a little bit. And we should probably include the following text in today's devotional. However, I am not because I want to discuss something very specific today.

The text begins with the man being healed as he stood up. He stood up, which was amazing, and then he rolled up his mat and walked away.

Amazing, right?

Immediately, someone needed to point out what day this happened on. It was on the Sabbath, so you know there are going to be some issues. It is always amazing to me that everyone is so willing to find something wrong with something that Jesus is doing. People will find something wrong with something that is going so right as a matter of course. Why is it that we can't let something amazing for someone else just be amazing?

We are critical creatures. I will be the first to admit it. I struggle with someone else getting something great and not feeling jealous, or left out, or even somehow vindicated that I am better because things didn't work out as well for me as they did for them. It is weird, right?

But I think we like to tear down the works of God when they are not seemingly for us. We get angry that other churches are growing, we feel like there is not enough abundance to go around, we hold ourselves as better than those because it is hard to be like us.

I have had the opportunity to teach often about the great things that are happening at Crosswalk, and I am always blown away by how often I am met with criticism, not joy. I have had people tell me that we are not really Adventist, that we are doing the devils work, that our churches are not real churches, and that our baptisms are not real baptisms. It is fascinating the way that people are not interested in being happy for the things that God is doing through Crosswalk, rather, they want to find a way to be critical.

I know that Crosswalk is not for everyone, but to deny the work that God is doing through our campuses, pastors, volunteers, and members seems to me to just be willfully ignorant and mean. But after having experienced this many times over many years I have come to one conclusion.

People are insecure.

When they feel like God might be working somewhere other than where they are, they will lash out, criticise, hurt, and sling mud if they can. They do this not because they are angry with you for doing well, they are angry with God for working in ways that they did not think of or were not capable of doing. People feel that if God works for you, how can he work for them?

This denies the fact that God is way bigger than we are, and probably has the capacity to work with many different people and ministries at the same time. We need to let God do that.

John 5:10 so the Jewish leaders objected. They said to the man who was cured, "You can't work on the Sabbath! The law doesn't allow you to carry that sleeping mat!"

11 But he replied, "The man who healed me told me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'"

12 "Who said such a thing as that?" they demanded.

Well, there is the objection. It was on the Sabbath. Forget about what it says in Luke about an “ox in a ditch”, and how healing would be that ox stuck in a ditch. There actually isn’t an Old Testament declaration that healing is wrong to do on the Sabbath. However, the Pharisees at the time would have seen this act of healing as work, rather than righteousness. So they would have thought it was anathema, and should not happen.

They wanted to get to the bottom of this and so they asked the man, who was now “working” by carrying his mat, which was a quick redirect for them, who had asked him to carry his mat. I love how the man answered, “the man who healed me. . .”

He wasn’t giving up Jesus’ name, nor do we know that he knew Jesus’ name. But he was being vague, intentionally. Why? Probably because he was so grateful for being healed that he did not want to give up the one who had done the healing. They were demanding a name, but he didn’t seem to want to give them one.

What do you do when you are asked to give up someone who is doing something so right, you want to protect them? Maybe you have never been in this situation before, and that is probably great, but how do you support those around you who are doing great things for God?

Because the truth is, when people really start to make strides with God, people not only take notice, but they struggle with jealousy. This is an ugly reality of the world that we live in. Every time I have worked in a situation where God really begins to move and things begin to happen in a big way, the criticism and the evil attacks start to happen. In fact, having been through it a few times now, I count these things as verification that we are making progress for God in the world. If the devil is leaving you alone, you probably aren’t really doing anything of note that is thwarting his work in the world.

Satan often doesn’t need to work too hard, as often we don’t do too much that causes him a problem. When you start to move toward God, then things become a bit more dicey for Satan. This is when he will use every means necessary in order to stop the work of God through you.

Jesus just healed the man, but those who were critical wanted to stop this good thing from happening. This is an age old story from the fall of humanity. Of course, we know that Jesus and his work will not be stopped.

1. Have you ever felt that you were really involved in something that is making a difference in the world for Jesus?
2. How did criticism come your way?
3. Did you give in to it, or did you keep going?
4. What is God calling you to do today for him? How can you take up your mat and walk?
5. Have you ever been criticised for something that you were sure was of God?
6. How did you respond?
7. Why does it seem that the harshest criticism comes from within the church?

Day 20:

John 5:13 The man didn’t know, for Jesus had disappeared into the crowd. 14 But afterward Jesus found him in the Temple and told him, “Now you are well; so stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you.” 15 Then the man went and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him.

This is an interesting addendum to the story. The man didn’t know who had healed him until later, when Jesus came up to him in the temple. The reason the man would have been in the temple is twofold. 1) because that is where he would have needed to be confirmed as healed. 2) he hadn’t been there in 38 years and this is where the hub of Jewish life happened. It is no wonder that he ran to the temple as soon as he could.

There, he meets Jesus again and realizes who it is that has healed him. Jesus gives him an admonishment to make sure that he stops sinning so that he might continue in the healing that has come to him. I know that this section feels like Jesus is being a bit brutal, but the truth is, when we go back to the habits that caused us to sin, healing stops. And Jesus wants him to continue to heal. Just because he can walk, doesn't mean that 38 years of being lame is fixed immediately. There would be mental and emotional scars as well. Jesus wanted him to continue in his healing journey.

When we begin a healing journey with Jesus, it is the first step that is the hardest, but the ongoing steps still require faith in Christ and in his ability to heal. Without the continued walk with Jesus, we would be left half-healed, and that sometimes leads to more hurting.

I am writing this with a large bandage on my face because I had to have some skin cancer removed from my face. They believe they got 100% of it from the area, and so now I am on my healing journey. I ended up with 12 stitches, and the size of the scar, I am told, is up to me and how I treat it during the wound care process.

But as I write this, it is itching like crazy, and I just want to scratch it, which would not allow it to heal at all, it would exacerbate the problem. Healing takes time, takes care, and takes a soft touch.

Jesus is willing to work with us through all of the healing process, not just the first step. So as you have the courage to take the first step, make sure you have the courage to take the next steps as well!

1. How have you seen Jesus heal you in the past?
2. Did you walk with him through the whole of the healing journey?
3. How can you know that Jesus is continuing to walk with you as you heal?

Day 21:

Small Group Study

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

What is one of your favorite things about the Christmas season? What's one of your least favorite things?

HEAD

1. Read John 5:1-15 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Can you imagine being sick for 38 years, and waiting day in and day out for someone to get you to the water, to help? What must that journey have been like for the paralyzed man?
3. Why do you think Jesus' first question was, "Would you like to get well?"
4. Do you think the man got used to sitting by the pool, watching others go by, receiving sympathy, or simply being overlooked?
5. Why did the Pharisees overlook the miracle? What keeps us from seeing God's miracles and activities in our world today?

6. Who told the man to stop sinning? Why? Are we to follow Jesus' example in this and tell people to stop sinning? Explain.

HEART

1. Knowing that this man had come day after day, year after year, to this pool to get well, but hadn't quite made it, what thoughts would be going through your head about him?
2. Why would this miracle be in the stories of belonging? How did the man experience belonging through this miracle?
3. What lesson about belonging is there for the Pharisees in this story?
4. In what ways has Jesus brought healing into your life? In what ways are you telling Jesus about the good things He has done for you?

HANDS

If you were able to spend 10 minutes with Jesus today, sitting at his feet, looking into his eyes, what would you ask Him to do for you? What would you ask Him to do for someone else in your circle of influence? Spend some time praying over these things, and if you're in a good place to do so, let the person you're praying for now that you spent time in prayer for them today.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results."

James 5:16 NLT

Day 22:

Mark 5:1 So they arrived at the other side of the lake, in the region of the Gerasenes. **2** When Jesus climbed out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out from the tombs to meet him. **3** This man lived in the burial caves and could no longer be restrained, even with a chain. **4** Whenever he was put into chains and shackles—as he often was—he snapped the chains from his wrists and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to subdue him.

This is a famous text about what happens when a man is possessed by evil spirits. Before you think that this doesn't really have anything to do with belonging, it is important for us to remember that each story of this series begins with people who are no longer a part of their communities for one reason or another. Whether it is disease, sickness, poverty, or possession, they have lost the ability to be with their families, the communities they grew up in, and they have lost access to the God they so want to serve. They are left out in the cold, not because of the harsh nature of people, but because their particular afflictions do not fit within the society they find themselves in.

This story, which takes place in the region of the Gerasenes, an area that is a bit removed from where the Hebrews often were, is a bit of an anomaly in the stories of healing that we usually study. Rather than this being someone from a Jewish background, left out of the community due to Levitical law, it is a person who comes from another culture, yet still is afflicted by the affects of evil taking over their lives.

Here is a story that you have heard many times. But let's take a look at it from a new perspective. However, before we move forward, a couple of notes; 1) Mental Health. If this is something that you struggle with, please get help. All kinds of mental health issues can be dealt with by great therapists and a great deal of prayer and strong community and family support. While this story touches on mental health, we don't want to assume expertise or anything

related to an issue that you or someone you know may be going through. 2) The understanding that what the Gerasene demoniac was dealing with was simply a mental health issue is a bit too simplistic as well.

Let us begin with the text.

We see that they were moving to the other side of the lake. Remember, this is right after Jesus is calming the storm, so the disciples of Jesus are somewhat primed for more of the “super-ordinary.” However, through the other gospels, we know some things about this man: 1) He had been demon-possessed for a long time (Luke 8:27). 2) He wore no clothes and lived like a wild animal (Luke 8:27). He lived among the dead (in a cemetery) which would have been anathema to any believing Jew. He pulled chains apart, he was self-destructive and had behavior that no one could control.

Have you ever seen someone like this? This is often frightening to polite society. We are often fearful when we are confronted with such issues. Some of us handle it better than others. But there is a bit of fear. The disciples would have probably felt the same when they saw this man. The added fear of the dead and being around corpses would have added to the anxiety.

What do you normally do when you are confronted with a situation like this? Do you flee? Do you engage? Do you protect yourself? All of these are reasonable responses when we encounter something like this. But is this what we are called to do, as Christians, in response to those who are in desperate need? While some of this feels like a serious mental health issue, in tomorrow’s text, we will see there is something more at play here.

1. How comfortable are you with those who seem to have these sorts of symptoms?
2. What can you do to help ease their discomfort?
3. How do you think Jesus felt when he saw this man?
4. What is something that you can do today to help understand mental health and some of its issues?

Day 23:

Mark 5:4 Whenever he was put into chains and shackles—as he often was—he snapped the chains from his wrists and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to subdue him. 5 Day and night he wandered among the burial caves and in the hills, howling and cutting himself with sharp stones.

6 When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw him, ran to meet him, and bowed low before him. 7 With a shriek, he screamed, “Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don’t torture me!” 8 For Jesus had already said to the spirit, “Come out of the man, you evil spirit.”

As we continue the story, we see that there are super-ordinary things that are happening here as well. There is strength that seems overwhelming, behavior that was disturbing, and self-harm that showed he was dealing with some significant unhappiness and distress in his life. All of this is an understatement, to be sure. As we know, he was filled with an “unclean spirit.” This was a Gentile territory, and even the Gentiles often thought of graveyards as a place where demons were to dwell. But what is more disturbing is that we see the demons had taken such control of him, that they were harming him (in the form of self-harm) and they had no respect for the vessel which carried them. This led to him being ostracized and to be treated in an uncaring fashion by his own people. Of course, they didn’t know what to do in order to tame the man who had become a wild beast.

What comes next is fascinating by all accounts. The man sees Jesus and runs to meet him! You would think that this man and these demons would run the other way, in danger of their very existence. Rather, they ran toward him and bowed low.

Even the demons recognize the Authority of Jesus.

They submitted to Him at every turn. This is not the only exorcism narrative that we see in Mark. Previously, 1:32-34, 3:11-12, that of the disciples, 3:15, and a major controversy that arose out of a successful exorcism (3:22-30). As well, there would be further exorcisms recorded in this book (6:7,13; 7:24-30; 9:14-29). But this narrative is by far the most spectacular. The notion that it took place in a Gentile area, the severity of the possession, the naming of the multiple demons, and the success of transference of the demons make this story significant. It also shows us a window into the Almost world that Jesus also carries authority into.

When we say that even the demons recognize the authority of Jesus, we mean that his power is in no way confined to the physical world we inhabit, but it transcends into the spiritual world that we only get glimpses of at certain times in our journeys with Christ. But these glimpses remind us that we know very little of the way the universe works, especially in correlation to where God's power and authority truly expresses itself. The demons bow, they submit, because they are of a lesser power, a lesser authority, and in this instance, while faced with the creator God of the universe, they were utterly terrified.

Now this fear is not fear of the unknown for them; it is fear of the awesome power they knew existed in Jesus. They bowed as a sign of respect and submission. We, at times, bow out of respect, but our submission is sometimes lacking, or at least waning.

1. What authority does Jesus have in your life?
2. How do you submit to God?
3. Are you willing to let your obedience be anything less than the obedience of the demons we see in this story?

Day 24

Mark 5:6 When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw him, ran to meet him, and bowed low before him. **7** With a shriek, he screamed, “Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don’t torture me!” **8** For Jesus had already said to the spirit, “Come out of the man, you evil spirit.”

We are reiterating this verse today as it holds so much for us to unpack. Some of scripture is deep upon deep, layer upon layer; like an onion, layers that become more powerful as you unpack them. These demons bowed low to Jesus, but the use of language here is fascinating. We won't go into a deep word study other than to say it is usually the exorcist that uses an “oath” to bind the demon. In this language, the demon is the first to utter an oath, in what seems like a worthless attempt to somehow get the upper hand on Jesus. There is a great deal of scholarship and evidence around the idea that to declare the name of a person or spirit was to wield power over them, and similar ways of naming people were quite common in the ancient literature. (A book by J.M Hull entitled “Magic” speaks to this.)

Jesus will use a name in V.9 to control the demons, so this is interesting that the demon sought to bind Jesus first. But the title they give Jesus here seems to make it silly that a demon would think it could have authority over Jesus. The use of “Son of the Most High God” shows the demons knew exactly who they were dealing with. Their begging Jesus not to torture them implies that Jesus not only had the authority, but the power to do so, as well.

The language again shows us that Jesus had taken initiative by calling the demon out of the man. V.8 is a parenthetical statement by the author to give us further context. Perhaps as the man walked up to Jesus, Jesus gave the call for the spirit to come out of the man, and so the oath the demon utters is in response to the command

Jesus gave to the spirit. We don't always see evil/unclean spirits talking or dialoguing with Jesus, but we do in this case. As we will see, this case is not just one evil spirit, but a multitude.

Again, however, we are struck with the deep authority that Jesus wields in both the ordinary and super-ordinary realms of existence. And this plays into the way that we see the authority of Christ in our lives.

How do we follow Christ each and every day? How can we understand what it means to live under the authority of Christ and to submit to Him daily? Paul gives us some suggestions in the book of Romans, particularly in the 12th chapter: 12:1-2 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (Message Bible)

We are struck again with the notion that every aspect of our lives is not only worship, but under the authority of Christ. So here are some questions:

1. Is there a place where you have failed to submit to Christ in your life? Are you holding a portion of your life back?
2. When you examine your life, have you figured out why you don't give it all to Christ? Why do you think you are holding on to a portion that you don't want to submit to Christ?
3. What will you have to give up? Is it worth the sacrifice?

Day 25:

Mark 5: 9 Then Jesus demanded, "What is your name?"

And he replied, "My name is Legion, because there are many of us inside this man." 10 Then the evil spirits begged him again and again not to send them to some distant place.

11 There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby. 12 "Send us into those pigs," the spirits begged. "Let us enter them."

Names are important, as we have established. Now, Jesus is turning the tables on the conversation. Have you ever noticed how good Jesus is at this? He always asks more questions than he answers. I wonder if that wouldn't be a good model of conversation for us as well at times. In our witness, it might make sense for us to actually listen to someone else's story before we dive into our own.

When Jesus asks for the name of the demon, the reply is in the plural. Legion, meaning what could be literally thousands, answer. The name is descriptive as well as obligatory. They seem to have to give Jesus their name. As well, it seems that the conversation moves now from a conversation with the man who is possessed, to the demons inside of him. The whole narrative shows us that the New Testament seems to deal with demon possession as less of a psychological problem, and more of a problem of alien occupation. Once Jesus has dealt with the demons, he will begin to deal with the man again.

The introduction of the pigs as an alternative is interesting. There seems to be some indication that some ancient societies believed that demons were relegated to certain areas, and therefore they didn't want to be cast "out" or "away" from their home turf! However, there is no indication of that in the Jewish tradition. Rather, pigs were unclean, these demons are spoken of as unclean spirits, so the correlation between the ideas of unclean in both arenas might make more sense. Also, the man was spending his time in an unclean area (graveyard) among unclean corpses. Seems like we might be onto something here.

What is not up for question is that Jesus was going to rid this man of the demons; the only question seems to be where these demons would go!

Perhaps the size of the herd was mentioned because it was so significant that it could hold the multitude of demons described by the term “Legion.” It seems that, even for this region, this herd was particularly large. On this account, we cannot be sure. However, it seems that Jesus considered this suggestion and took it quite seriously.

What are the practical applications of today’s text? Perhaps there is a two-fold application that we can look to: 1) Jesus knows your name as well. In knowing your name, he does hold power over your life. But he does not use this power as leverage, but as knowledge to connect with you, to be an intimate guide through the Holy Spirit, and to let you know that He is interested in being part of every aspect of your life! 2) That uncleanness seems to lead to more uncleanness. When we are fully unclean, we seek respite in the worst of things, rather than in the best of things. The demons asked to be placed in a situation in which they were comfortable. In the pigs, they found the uncleanness they had become accustomed to. In our lives, the more we seek that which could be called “unclean,” the more comfortable we become with this in our lives. Jesus seeks authority, not simply to punish, but to make us more comfortable with the best and most holy things in our lives. He is not comfortable with the unclean, and when he enters into our lives, he seeks to remove that which is not holy and replace it with a righteousness that is all encompassing.

1. Where are there areas of your life that are unclean that lead to more uncleanness?
2. How can you take the time to specifically give those to God today? Also, is there anything that might need some professional help to overcome?
3. What can your church/family/community do to help? Are support groups needed? (While this can be painful, reaching out to those who are safe can be a helpful tool in overcoming these parts of our lives.)

Day 26:

Mark 5: 13 So Jesus gave them permission. The evil spirits came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd of about 2,000 pigs plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned in the water. 14 The herdsman fled to the nearby town and the surrounding countryside, spreading the news as they ran. People rushed out to see what had happened. 15 A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons. He was sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid. 16 Then those who had seen what happened told the others about the demon-possessed man and the pigs. 17 And the crowd began pleading with Jesus to go away and leave them alone.

Jesus heard the demons’ plea to be put in the herd. He let them go there. This was a physical manifestation of his power. However, the pigs then ran to the water and drowned themselves. The herdsman ran to the town to let people know what happened. The narrative the herdsman may have given might not have been the best thing. Remember, there are some significant financial implications for what just happened. 2,000 pigs is a huge herd, even by today’s standards, and it would have shocked that area economically for years!

Also, the author would not have had the same sort of empathy that the modern reader might have for livestock and their fate. The treatment of the animals was not the point for Mark; rather, the incredible demonstration of the power of Jesus over a spiritual entity that, until that point, had not been managed, contained, or controlled.

And did you notice everyone’s response? They were “all afraid.” As so often is the case, and was certainly the case in the story of Jesus calming the storm, when his power is truly expressed, people don’t know how to react. The real and true power of God, when experienced, is nothing short of overwhelming, and this has not changed even up until

today. When we experience the true power of God's grace in our lives, we are overcome and our life trajectories experience a change!

However, for these people, the change they saw in this man's life — now sane, clothed, and in his right mind — was too much for them to handle. Jesus became an unsettling presence in their midst, and rather than accept him, they asked him to leave.

I have often wondered what we would do if Jesus came to church with us today? Would we sense his disturbing presence and want him to leave, as well? Would Jesus be comfortable in our church, in our lives, and would we be able to conform our lives to his presence? For those in the Decapolis, his presence was unsettling because it did not conform to what they expected from their gods. His presence was disturbing because to be in proximity to that much real and palpable power could only remind them of their humanity, their brokenness, and their weakness. No one likes to be reminded of this, especially without the understanding that Jesus could have fixed all of that for them. He was outside of a salvation schema for them; he was not a savior, he was a disturber of the peace and order of things.

1. Have you ever thought it would be better if Jesus just went away and let you alone?
2. Have you ever asked him to leave? (Because he will honor that request.)
3. Should Jesus have tried to explain to them what had just happened?
4. How can we seek to strengthen the presence of Jesus in our lives, not diminish it?

Day 27:

Mark 5: 18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged to go with him. 19 But Jesus said, "No, go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been." 20 So the man started off to visit the Ten Towns of that region and began to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed at what he told them.

I love how Jesus does not argue or try to convince the people that he should stay. He simply gets back into the boat. However, the newly healed man does not want to part with Jesus and asks to go with him. The word used is "begged" to go with him. It is a shame that Jesus says no; however, it is not for a negative reason. Jesus had already chosen his "inner circle," if you will, and now he wants this man to become an evangelist, telling the world how merciful God has been to him. We see that the man does just this. People responded, and while we don't know exactly the process, we do know that when Jesus goes back to this area in 7th chapter of Mark, the foundation has been laid for work amongst the Gentiles, as they expected Jesus to come and heal those afflicted in their area. Jesus always meets a request for discipleship with trepidation. Have you noticed that anytime someone wants to go with Jesus, he seems to push back and tell them things like "foxes have holes, birds have nests, but. . ." (Matthew 8:20) Why does Jesus do this?

Remember, Jesus is about multiplication, not simple addition. He knows that if this man stays, he basically will become a missionary to his own people. This man, with his first person story of healing, will be able to translate the gospel to his own people better than any emissary that Jesus could send from the Jewish people. The effect of this one man could be so much more impactful than that of someone else.

So where is Jesus asking you to tell your story of healing and redemption today?

Who are you a missionary to? Who is God calling you to share your testimony with? Is it family, is it co-workers, is it a people group that only you have great access to? Is it the underserved or the over-served? Where do you find

yourself placed with influence and a voice? Chances are, it is right there that God wants you to serve, to tell your story of redemption and to be a voice for the kingdom!

While this must seem like a big ask from God, and you may not feel trained, remember, this man was healed, and then began to tell the story. That was all the training that he needed. We don't evangelize by having the best argument; we evangelize by telling the world of what Jesus has done for us. This is a better way of letting the world know about the love of Christ for humanity. The powerful portion of this story is that Jesus used a broken man to tell the Gentile area of his love for them. Then, as people became comfortable with the idea of Jesus, he was able to visit them again and make a real impact. This healed man laid the groundwork for a great harvest. Perhaps that is what you are called to do today!

How do we glimpse belonging in this story? The man was obviously let back into the town. But he also had a great responsibility to teach others. He became the agent of belonging!

1. How has Jesus healed you?
2. How can you share that with others?
3. To whom has God given you influence?
4. How can you impact them for the kingdom with your story of healing and redemption?

Day 28

Small Group Bible Studies

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Ok, so have you ever experienced an encounter with what you considered was evil? What was it and what happened?

HEAD

1. Read Mark 5:1-20 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Why do you think the evil spirit was anxious to come and out confront Jesus?
3. Why scream, "don't torture me?" to Jesus?
4. Jesus didn't have to allow a conversation with the demons, but He did. Why do you think He did?
5. Pigs were a symbol of one of the most successful Roman armies, called the 10 legions. With that in mind, what might Jesus have been trying to show the people there that day, mostly Gentiles, about His power and the kingdom of God?
6. Why do you think the people were still afraid at seeing the man even though now, he was sitting next to Jesus and in his right mind?

HEART

1. We don't have any other mention of Jesus doing anything in this region other than healing this man, which makes us think that healing this man was the only reason Jesus traveled to this area. What does that say for how far Jesus will go to rescue you and bring you into community?
2. Was there any question that the demons wouldn't have to do whatever Jesus said? Who was in control?
3. Jesus usually tells people he heals to not tell others. Why do you think he told this Gentile to go and tell others what the Lord had done for him?
4. Knowing this was Gentile territory, what impact do you think this display of healing, of power, of authority, had on these Gentiles and preparing their heart to receive the kingdom?

HANDS

The demoniac was told to tell others of all that Jesus had done for him. What has Jesus done for you? Make a list, spend time thinking back whether those things were recent, or happened a while ago. Then look for an opportunity to share those things with someone you think may need to hear them.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places."

Ephesians 6:10-12 NLT

Day 29:

Matthew 8: 5 When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, 6 "Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain."

I have always loved this interchange. This is a man who has some clout and importance and is willing to break with protocol in order to take care of one of his servants. Jesus immediately shows his willingness to serve and heal, yet the man knows that Jesus doesn't need to even come, but has the power to heal from wherever he is.

What this man is really doing is acknowledging the power that Jesus really holds in the world. The disciples saw it when they recognized how Jesus could calm the storm, but this Roman officer knew very well the power that Jesus held in his hands. Rather than asking Jesus to come home with him, he simply asked Jesus to care. He used the example of men under his authority, and in this way, he was acknowledging the power that Jesus had access to. Without reservation, he asked Jesus for help he knew Jesus was capable of giving. Again, the question was not whether Jesus could help him, but whether he would help the man.

Of course, we see Jesus is willing to heal, even to go out of his way to help the officer.

I wonder how willing we are to go out of our way to help others? Are we willing to inconvenience ourselves to help others? If so, how much are we willing to inconvenience ourselves? These questions can lead to some guilt if we feel we have not done enough, which is not my point. My point is to show how much Jesus was willing to go through to show compassion and mercy. His miracles always did at least two things: 1) They physically healed the person, and 2) they restored the person to a socially acceptable status in the community.

When you think of it, going into the hospital is a break in the flow of your life, and healing gets us back to that. Jesus did the same thing for those with chronic illnesses, which is powerful. Is there a way that Jesus has healed you back into the community that you might have left? Sometimes we isolate ourselves from the communities of care that we

know because of something that has happened to us there, a misunderstanding, or honest and true trauma. Jesus has a way to heal all of that, without regard to history.

1. How has Jesus healed you?
2. Was your place in the community restored?
3. How can you help someone else be healed?

Day 30:

Matthew 8:7 Jesus said, “I will come and heal him.” 8 But the officer said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. 9 I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, ‘Go,’ and they go, or ‘Come,’ and they come. And if I say to my slaves, ‘Do this,’ they do it.”

So this centurion knew that when someone with authority made a decision, there are those that would make it happen. He is using the analogy of an army officer, because that is what he is. The use of the idea of authority makes sense to us as well, as we understand that Jesus had authority over heaven and earth. He used it only for the glory of God and he was able to heal and even raise people from the dead with this power.

Authority is an interesting thing. It is real, when those under your authority make it real by agreeing to the power structure. This is true in the army, true in the corporate world, and true when there is a structure of hierarchy. However, Jesus existed beyond those structures and had authority that was given to him by the Father. Therefore, many of those who chose to follow him did not do so out of any duty, but out of the love that developed over the time of listening to him and experiencing the grace that Jesus gave through his words and his healing actions. The centurion was not necessarily a believer in the Hebrew God. Rather, he was a foreigner who was serving in an occupied land. However, he was not immune to the signs of the times. He was seeing what was happening all around him and all around Jesus. He was probably curious, but even more than that, he was probably deeply moved by the healing that he had seen Jesus doing.

This centurion understood power structures, and he was not above using them. As a leader he understood that you can speak to another leader in a different way that perhaps subordinates might not understand. So he spoke to Jesus as if he were a leader of men, and a man who had authority over more than just men. He had authority over that which can heal and that which can create a peace in people's life that goes beyond their understanding. I would be that this centurion had never seen something like this before, and so he went to ask for help from the one who seemed to have more authority than he had ever experienced before.

1. Who has authority over you and your life?
2. Do you think of Jesus as carrying authority over people?
3. How do you think Jesus exercised his authority?

Day 31.

Mathew 8:10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, “I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel! 11 And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As the story continues, Jesus finds himself at a loss for words, almost, when it comes to the interaction with this man. I don't think Jesus gets amazed too often, but this man's faith floored Jesus. It floored Jesus so much that he had to take a moment to rebuke his disciples and all those of Hebrew descent who followed him. His rebuke was swift and had elements of the Old Testament banquet table included. His warning is such that people who think they are safe might not have a seat at the table because of their lack of faith.

This Roman officer had a faith that was not tainted by doctrine, not diminished by culture, and was not biased by ancestry. Rather, it was the faith of someone who has just met Jesus and understands that there is something inherently special, powerful, and loving in this God/Man. The Roman officer did not hesitate to ask for a favor, knowing that this man was for him and not against him. He was willing to look like a fool, something that would have happened had Jesus said “no” to him, because of both his love for his servant and his belief in the goodness of Jesus.

I think the rebuke Jesus gives his followers is one we should probably heed today. There is no question that we believe in Christ, but do we really have the faith that it takes to change our lives, to see him for who he really is, and to carry us to places that are uncomfortable, unsettling, and even cause us risk? We often don’t, for comfort is a powerful aphrodisiac. But this man had no trouble risking it all for someone he loved and cared for.

And Jesus did not disappoint. Jesus not only healed the man, but told the man to go back home, as this is a done deal! I am sure the man had many gracious words for Jesus that are not recorded, and I wonder if his trip home was an exercise in excitement, waiting to see if the servant was truly healed, and hoping beyond hope that everything was better. What an incredible affirmation of his faith when he rounded the corner and probably saw the servant waiting for him outside, ready to run and thank the officer for going out of his way.

1. Have you gone out of your way for someone you cared about?
2. Have you gone out of your way for someone you didn’t know?
3. How can you explain how much Jesus cares for someone?

Day 32.

Matthew 8:11 And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven.

What an amazing prophecy. And what a statement of belonging! What Jesus is saying is clear. The kingdom of Heaven is for everyone, not just for the Jews. Its gates are wide open to any who would believe, and there is room enough in his Father’s house for all of us. When we become gatekeepers of the kingdom of God, we stand in the way of those who would otherwise be let in with a resounding “welcome!”

We have an incredible opportunity to be the invitation into the kingdom for other people, to welcome them into the kingdom, and to share with them the grace that God has given to us. As we share this grace that we have been given, a greater portion, pressed down and overflowing, will be granted us. God will not have his people “run out” of grace, so never be stingy with the grace that you give to others.

I know I have said these things to you before. And I know that we have journeyed together for a long time when it comes to understanding what belonging is. I reiterate these things to you in order that we might always have it present in our minds what God has done for us and how that compels us to do the same for others. It is a virtuous cycle of love and grace that is needed in order for us to be able to perpetuate this cycle into other’s lives and so that we might be able to live in the grace God has given to us.

What gifts have you been given that continually refill rather than are depleted? There are not a lot of things in this life that work that way, but in the kingdom of God, very much works that way. Particularly, the grace, the belonging, and

the hope that is given to us through Christ is that which is replenished daily. We know that his promises are made new every day, and so we are recognize those gifts and make sure that we are giving them to the world around us as well.

I love what Jesus says here, that many will come from all over the world. This means the church will continue to be a diverse and interesting. On earth, as it is in heaven.

1. How can you give grace to someone today?
2. What is the biggest gift that God has given you that is constantly replenished?
3. How can Crosswalk help you realize and give your gifts?

Day 33:

Matthew 8:12 But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

13 Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, “Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened.” And the young servant was healed that same hour.

Jesus was willing to heal the man's servant because of the overwhelming faith that this man showed. In fact, he makes the point to let others know that many of them—those that called themselves Israelites, would not be known by God, but this man would. I think it is good of us to understand that one of the principles that we can take out of this story is that Jesus was not interested in being a savior for simply the children of Israel, but is interested in being the savior of the world. Therefore, things like nationality and even ethnicity are not so interesting or dividing for Jesus as they are for us. Jesus is the God of all, not the God of just the Israelites.

Jesus blames the healing on the faith of the Roman officer. While we know it was the power of God that healed the boy, we also know that our faith can often be the agent from which that power comes. We don't control what God will do, but if we are open to following what God would have us do, and to believing in the promises that God has made to us, then our faith intertwines with the Power of God to help change the world.

However, we don't have to simply have faith in order for God to do supernatural things. God can do incredibly natural and compassionate things through us when we are willing to be faithful to the call that God has given us in our lives as well. We don't have to be agents of supernatural healing to be incredible agents of grace in the world today.

1. What have you done in order to follow the will of God today?
2. Has your faith ever made you do something you didn't expect?
3. Do you think where you come from matters when it comes to matters of faith?

Day 34:

The account of Jesus healing the centurion's servant, found in Matthew 8:5–13, is a powerful demonstration of faith, humility, and Jesus' divine authority. This narrative unfolds shortly after Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and serves as a profound lesson about the universality of God's kingdom and the importance of trust in Him.

In the story, a Roman centurion, a man of significant authority in the occupying Roman army, approaches Jesus in Capernaum. Despite his status, the centurion demonstrates remarkable humility, acknowledging Jesus as someone with the power to heal his servant who lies at home, paralyzed and in great distress. The centurion's approach is

noteworthy because he is a Gentile—a non-Jew—seeking help from a Jewish teacher, breaking social and cultural barriers of the time.

Jesus responds with compassion, offering to go to the centurion's home to heal the servant. However, the centurion astounds Jesus with his reply: "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed." This statement reflects the centurion's deep understanding of authority. As a military officer, he recognizes that commands given with authority are obeyed, and he applies this principle to Jesus' divine authority over sickness and the natural world.

Impressed by the centurion's faith, Jesus marvels and declares that He has not found such great faith even in Israel. This statement highlights the centurion's extraordinary belief and serves as a rebuke to the religious leaders of Israel, many of whom doubted Jesus despite witnessing His miracles.

1. How does the centurion's faith challenge your understanding of trusting Jesus' authority in your life?
The centurion believed that Jesus could heal his servant simply by speaking a word, demonstrating faith in Jesus' power even from a distance. Are there areas in your life where you need to trust Jesus more deeply, even when you cannot see immediate results?
2. In what ways can you emulate the humility of the centurion in your relationship with Jesus and others?
Despite his position of power, the centurion approached Jesus with great humility, acknowledging his unworthiness. How can you cultivate a similar attitude of humility, both in prayer and in your interactions with those around you?
3. What does this story teach you about breaking barriers to show compassion and faith?
The centurion crossed cultural and social boundaries to seek help from Jesus, demonstrating that faith and love transcend divisions. Are there barriers in your life—cultural, social, or personal—that you need to overcome to demonstrate Christ-like love and faith?

Day 35

Small Group Bible Study

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Can you remember back to a time when someone in your life stood up for you in a meaningful, maybe even transformative way, when no one else was? What happened?

HEAD

1. Read Matthew 8:5-13 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Knowing that Roman Centurions weren't just Gentile, they often treated Jews horribly, what do you think the typical Jew would have thought about Jesus helping a Centurion?
3. How do you think the Centurion had the faith to believe in the kind of authority Jesus had? How did he come to believe that Jesus could simply say the word and his servant would be healed?

4. What do you think it was like for the Jews to hear Jesus praise this Roman Centurion, and talk about the faith to come of the many Gentiles, compared to the Jews who would be thrown into darkness?
5. Imagine for a moment what you think happened to the Roman Centurion after this. Share your thoughts with the group.

HEART

1. Who are the people on the fringe in our world today that we need to pay attention to?
2. Are there people in your life that you would go to great lengths to stick up for, to bring them to Jesus, community, healing?
3. Jesus isn't often "amazed" at what he sees humans do, but he is amazed by the Centurion. What do you think causes that amazement and how might you and I live in such a way as to amaze Him?
4. It seems that Jesus continued to ignore cultural boundaries, ethnic distinctions, and racial divides in order to bring healing and gospel to all people from all places and backgrounds. How do you and I practice living this same way; in our homes, at work, in our church, in our communities?
5. What does this act of healing teach you about belonging?

HANDS

Who is someone in your church, at your school, at your work, or in your neighborhood that you may have made assumptions about, or who you admittedly don't know much about who they are, where they come from, and what their story is? Would you be willing to find a time to approach them and find a way to listen to their story, learn more about where they're coming from and how they see the world, and then write down what you learned from this experience?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands."

Revelation 7:9 NLT

Day 36:

Luke 22:49 When the other disciples saw what was about to happen, they exclaimed, "Lord, should we fight? We brought the swords!" 50 And one of them struck at the high priest's slave, slashing off his right ear. 51 But Jesus said, "No more of this." And he touched the man's ear and healed him.

Luke 22:49–51 recounts a dramatic moment during Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, revealing His unwavering commitment to nonviolence, mercy, and obedience to God's will. This brief passage offers profound insights into Jesus' mission and His response to human aggression.

As Jesus and His disciples pray in the garden, Judas leads a group of soldiers and religious leaders to arrest Him. The disciples, realizing what is about to happen, ask, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" Without waiting for an answer, one of them—identified in John's Gospel as Peter—acts impulsively, striking the servant of the high priest and cutting off his ear. This act of violence underscores the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus' mission. Despite spending years with Jesus, they still anticipate a Messiah who would establish His kingdom through force, not realizing that His kingdom is spiritual and rooted in peace.

Jesus' response is immediate and striking. He commands, "No more of this!" and touches the servant's ear, healing him. In this moment, Jesus demonstrates that His kingdom is not advanced by violence but by love and mercy. By

healing the wounded man, Jesus not only shows compassion but also protects His disciples from the consequences of their rash actions. His intervention prevents further escalation and reaffirms His commitment to fulfilling His mission through obedience to God's will, even in the face of suffering.

This passage challenges readers to consider their own responses to conflict and injustice. Jesus' rejection of violence highlights the importance of trusting God's plan and relying on His power rather than taking matters into our own hands. It also underscores the value of showing mercy even to those who oppose or harm us, reflecting Jesus' teaching to love our enemies.

Moreover, the healing of the servant's ear is a profound act of grace. Even in the midst of betrayal and impending suffering, Jesus' focus is on restoration and reconciliation. This act serves as a reminder of His mission to bring healing and redemption to a broken world.

In this brief but powerful moment, Luke 22:49–51 encapsulates the heart of Jesus' ministry: love, mercy, and submission to the will of God. It invites believers to follow His example, seeking peace and reconciliation in all circumstances.

1. How do you respond when faced with conflict or injustice?

Jesus chose to respond to aggression with peace and mercy rather than retaliation. In moments of conflict, do you rely on God's wisdom and seek reconciliation, or do you act impulsively like the disciple with the sword?

2. In what ways can you show mercy and grace to those who oppose or hurt you?

Jesus healed the servant who came to arrest Him, demonstrating love even in the face of betrayal. Are there people in your life who need to experience Christ-like compassion through your actions?

3. How can you trust God's plan more fully when circumstances seem unjust or overwhelming?

Jesus submitted to God's will, even when it led to suffering. What situations in your life challenge your trust in God, and how can you surrender them to His plan, knowing He works all things for good?

Day 37:

John 18:10 Then Simon Peter drew a sword and slashed off the right ear of Malchus, the high priest's slave. 11 But Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Shall I not drink from the cup of suffering the Father has given me?”

12 So the soldiers, their commanding officer, and the Temple guards arrested Jesus and tied him up.

John 18:10-12 recounts a pivotal moment during Jesus' arrest, highlighting themes of surrender, obedience, and trust in God's greater plan. The passage begins with Simon Peter drawing his sword and striking the servant of the high priest, Malchus, cutting off his ear. This impulsive act reflects Peter's zeal to protect Jesus but also his misunderstanding of Jesus' mission and the nature of the kingdom He came to establish.

Jesus immediately intervenes, commanding Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" This response reveals Jesus' complete submission to God's will, even as it leads to suffering and death. The "cup" symbolizes the suffering and sacrifice Jesus is about to endure for the salvation of humanity. Rather than resisting arrest or allowing His disciples to fight for Him, Jesus willingly surrenders, demonstrating His trust in the Father's plan and His resolve to fulfill His mission.

This act of surrender stands in stark contrast to the human tendency to resist suffering and seek control in difficult situations. Peter's action, while well-intentioned, represents a reliance on human strength and understanding rather than faith in God. Jesus' rebuke is a reminder that God's ways often defy human logic, requiring trust and obedience even in the face of hardship.

The passage also underscores Jesus' commitment to nonviolence and His role as a healer and reconciler. According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus heals Malchus' ear, further illustrating His love and mercy, even toward those who come to harm Him. This act reminds us of the depth of Christ's grace and His desire for restoration, even in moments of betrayal.

As the soldiers arrest Jesus and lead Him away, the scene shifts focus from Peter's impulsive actions to Jesus' calm surrender. His willingness to face arrest and crucifixion highlights His love for humanity and His obedience to the Father's redemptive plan.

This passage challenges us to reflect on our own responses to adversity and conflict. Do we act out of fear or control, like Peter, or do we trust in God's plan, like Jesus? It calls us to lay down our "swords" and embrace a posture of faith, surrender, and love in every circumstance.

1. How do you respond when God's plan leads you into difficult or uncertain circumstances?
Jesus trusted the Father's will even in suffering. What helps you surrender to God's plan during challenges?
2. Are there "swords" you need to lay down in your life—actions, attitudes, or habits rooted in self-reliance?
How can you replace them with trust in God and His power?
3. How can you show grace and love to those who oppose or hurt you, following Jesus' example with Malchus?
What opportunities do you have to be a reconciler in your relationships or community?

Day 38:

John 18:13 First they took him to Annas, since he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest at that time. 14 Caiaphas was the one who had told the other Jewish leaders, "It's better that one man should die for the people." 15 Simon Peter followed Jesus, as did another of the disciples. That other disciple was acquainted with the high priest, so he was allowed to enter the high priest's courtyard with Jesus.

John 18:13-15 recounts the events immediately following Jesus' arrest, as He is brought to the high priest's residence for questioning. These verses highlight the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, human weakness, and the sovereignty of Jesus even in moments of apparent vulnerability.

Jesus is first taken to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Annas, a former high priest, still held significant influence. Caiaphas, who had earlier advised that it was better for one man to die for the people (John 11:50), epitomizes human reasoning that seeks to justify sin for the sake of expediency. His words, though politically motivated, were unwittingly prophetic of Jesus' sacrificial death for the salvation of humanity.

Amidst this, Peter and another disciple follow Jesus. The unnamed disciple, often thought to be John, gains access to the high priest's courtyard because of his connections. Peter, however, hesitates, waiting outside the gate until the other disciple brings him in. This moment foreshadows Peter's impending denial of Jesus, which occurs later in the chapter. His initial courage to follow Jesus into the courtyard contrasts sharply with the fear and weakness he later displays.

These verses invite us to reflect on the tension between human frailty and divine purpose. Jesus, though seemingly in the hands of His enemies, remains in control, fulfilling the Father's will. Meanwhile, Peter's actions remind us of the struggle to remain faithful under pressure. His proximity to Jesus is physical but not spiritual, as fear begins to overshadow his earlier bold declarations of loyalty.

The passage challenges believers to examine their own faithfulness. Do we, like Peter, follow Jesus from a distance when the stakes are high? It also calls us to marvel at Jesus' willingness to endure humiliation and suffering, trusting fully in God's plan.

Ultimately, this scene reminds us that even in moments of weakness or failure, God's purposes prevail. Peter's story does not end in denial but in restoration, demonstrating that God's grace is greater than our shortcomings.

1. How do you respond when following Jesus places you in situations of discomfort or fear?
What can you learn from Peter's initial courage and subsequent hesitation?
2. Are there areas in your life where you are following Jesus "from a distance"?
How can you draw closer to Him, even when facing challenges?
3. How does reflecting on Jesus' control over His suffering inspire your trust in God's sovereignty over your life?
In what ways can you surrender your fears and uncertainties to His plan?

Day 39:

Luke 22:54-62:

54 So they arrested him and led him to the high priest's home. And Peter followed at a distance. 55 The guards lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter joined them there. 56 A servant girl noticed him in the firelight and began staring at him. Finally she said, "This man was one of Jesus' followers!" 57 But Peter denied it. "Woman," he said, "I don't even know him!" 58 After a while someone else looked at him and said, "You must be one of them!" "No, man, I'm not!" Peter retorted. 59 About an hour later someone else insisted, "This must be one of them, because he is a Galilean, too." 60 But Peter said, "Man, I don't know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. 61 At that moment the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Suddenly, the Lord's words flashed through Peter's mind: "Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me." 62 And Peter left the courtyard, weeping bitterly.

Luke 22:54-62 recounts Peter's denial of Jesus, a heart-wrenching episode that highlights human weakness, the dangers of fear, and the restorative grace of Christ. After Jesus is arrested, Peter follows at a distance, eventually finding himself in the courtyard of the high priest. While warming himself by the fire, Peter is recognized as one of Jesus' disciples. Out of fear, he denies knowing Jesus three times, just as Jesus had foretold. At the moment of the third denial, a rooster crows, and Peter remembers Jesus' words. Jesus turns and looks at Peter, and Peter, overwhelmed with guilt and sorrow, weeps bitterly.

This passage illustrates the tension between human intentions and actions. Peter had previously vowed to remain loyal to Jesus, even to the point of death, yet fear overtakes him in the face of danger. His denial demonstrates how even the most devoted followers of Christ can falter when relying on their own strength. It serves as a warning to guard against overconfidence in our ability to remain faithful without depending on God's grace.

Jesus' look at Peter is profound. It is not one of condemnation but of deep understanding and love. This moment of conviction, while painful, ultimately leads to Peter's repentance and eventual restoration. It reminds us that failure does not disqualify us from God's plan. Jesus knew Peter would deny Him, yet He also knew Peter would become a cornerstone of the early church. This reveals the depth of God's grace and His ability to redeem our failures for His purposes.

Peter's story challenges us to examine our own hearts. Do we, like Peter, follow Jesus at a distance when fear or pressure arises? The passage encourages us to move from fear-driven denial to grace-filled repentance, trusting in Christ's forgiveness and restorative power.

1. Are there moments in your life when fear or pressure has led you to deny your faith or compromise your values?
How can you rely on God's strength in those situations?
2. What does Peter's restoration teach you about God's grace and His ability to redeem your failures?
How can this truth encourage you in moments of guilt or shame?
3. How does Jesus' understanding and love in this passage inspire you to extend grace to yourself and others?
In what ways can you show compassion to those who struggle in their faith?

Day 40:

Belonging in the Bible

The theme of belonging is central throughout the Bible, reflecting humanity's deep desire to be connected to God and one another. From the opening chapters of Genesis to the closing verses of Revelation, Scripture reveals God's plan to draw people into a loving relationship with Himself and into community with others.

In Genesis, we see the foundation of belonging in the creation story. Humanity is made in the image of God, designed for relationship with Him and with one another. Adam and Eve's union in the garden signifies that we are not meant to live in isolation. However, the fall disrupts this sense of belonging, introducing separation from God and strife among people. Despite this, God's desire to restore belonging remains steadfast.

The covenant promises throughout the Old Testament emphasize belonging. God calls Abraham and his descendants to be His people, a holy nation set apart to belong to Him (Genesis 17:7-8). This covenant is a declaration that God is committed to creating a people for Himself. Even when Israel fails to uphold their part, God continually seeks to restore the relationship, showing that His love for His people is unwavering.

In the New Testament, Jesus expands the understanding of belonging. He breaks down barriers, welcoming outcasts, sinners, and Gentiles into His kingdom. His teachings and actions reveal that belonging to God is not based on heritage or social status but on faith in Him. The Apostle Paul underscores this truth, declaring that in Christ, there is no division between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female—we are all one in Him (Galatians 3:28).

The church becomes the expression of belonging for believers, described as the body of Christ. It is a community where each member plays a vital role, emphasizing unity in diversity (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Belonging to the church reflects the ultimate belonging believers will experience in eternity, when God dwells among His people in perfect fellowship (Revelation 21:3).

Ultimately, the Bible reveals that our truest belonging is found in God. Through Christ, we are adopted as His children, making us heirs of His promises (Romans 8:15-17). This belonging gives us identity, purpose, and a place in God's eternal family.

1. How does understanding your identity as a child of God shape your sense of belonging?
In what ways can this truth bring you comfort and assurance?
2. Are there barriers in your life that prevent you from fully belonging to God or His community?
How can you address these with God's help?
3. How can you foster a sense of belonging for others within your church or community?
What practical steps can you take to reflect God's inclusive love?

Day 41:

What It Means to Belong to a Church Community

Belonging to a church community is a vital part of the Christian life, offering a sense of connection, purpose, and mutual encouragement. The church, described in Scripture as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), is not merely

a gathering of individuals but a unified spiritual family bound together by faith in Jesus. This belonging reflects both our relationship with God and our relationship with one another as believers.

To belong to a church community means being part of something larger than yourself. It involves shared worship, fellowship, and service. In Acts 2:42-47, the early church exemplifies what it means to belong: they devoted themselves to teaching, prayer, breaking bread, and caring for one another's needs. Belonging is not about attending services occasionally but being an active participant in the life and mission of the church.

A church community is also a place of mutual support and accountability. Belonging means sharing joys and burdens with others, as instructed in Galatians 6:2, which calls us to "carry each other's burdens." It's a space where spiritual growth is nurtured through teaching, discipleship, and encouragement. Proverbs 27:17 reminds us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another," emphasizing the refining and strengthening role of Christian community.

However, belonging also comes with responsibilities. It requires commitment, humility, and a willingness to serve. Ephesians 4:16 teaches that every member of the body contributes to its growth and health. When you belong to a church community, you use your gifts and talents to build up others, contributing to the collective mission of advancing God's kingdom.

Belonging to a church is not about perfection but about being part of a group of imperfect people seeking to follow Christ together. It's a place to find love, grace, and forgiveness, reflecting the nature of Jesus. In times of trial, the church community becomes a source of strength; in times of celebration, it's a place to rejoice together.

Ultimately, belonging to a church reminds us that we are not alone. As members of God's family, we journey together in faith, united by His love and purpose.

1. How does belonging to a church community help you grow in your faith and relationship with God?
Are there ways you can deepen your involvement?
2. What gifts or talents has God given you to contribute to your church community?
How are you using them to build up others?
3. How can you foster a stronger sense of belonging and connection within your church?
Are there people who might need your encouragement or support?

Day 42

Small Group Bible Study

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

What is one of your favorite things about the Christmas season? What's one of your least favorite things?

HEAD

1. Read Luke 22:49-51, John 18:10-15, Luke 22:54-62 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading.
2. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus said to sell off your coat to buy a sword, but here, in this story, Jesus told them to put away their swords. Did Jesus contradict himself or did he mean something else earlier in the chapter (verse 38)? Wouldn't this have been confusing for the disciples?
3. How surprised do you think the soldiers were that not only did Jesus not want to fight, he actually healed one that was hurt when his disciple attempted to fight?
4. What do you think would have happened if the disciples did try to fight? What would it have said about Jesus and his movement?
5. What do you think those watching Peter thought about this Jesus movement? If he was their only point of reference, what conclusion would you make?

HEART

1. Are there "swords" you need to lay down in your life—actions, attitudes, or habits rooted in self-reliance? How can you replace them with trust in God and His power?
2. Peter has his Messiah arrested. His Messiah tells him not to fight and heals someone he struck. Then Peter denies knowing his Messiah and watches him die. How do you think Peter felt after all this; did he belong to anyone anymore?
3. Have you ever been tempted to deny your faith? If so, what happened. If not, have you ever seen someone deny your faith? Why do you think they did? How did their denial make you feel about them?
4. Knowing that Peter denies Jesus, yet Jesus goes straight to Peter after his resurrection, what does Peter's journey teach you about Jesus and belonging?

HANDS

Who is on the outside of your community? Is it you? If it's you, why do you think that's the case and who could you talk to about how you feel? If it's someone else, what could you do to reach out to them to help them feel loved and as if they not only could belong, but do belong?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death."

Romans 8:1-2 NLT