

Searching for
A Deeper Well

Strategies for Spiritual Growth

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Study Guide by Dr. Alan Sears

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Preface

It is He whom we proclaim, teaching everyone, in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. (Colossians 1: 28)

This book is about spiritual growth. It is written for those who want to go deeper into the knowledge of the Scriptures and find in a more profound way, maturity in Christ.

Over the past few years people have shared with me their personal need of going deeper, of finding “a deeper well”, of not just knowledge of Christ, but how faith in Christ can deeply affect in a positive way one’s personal life.

This book includes five studies based on chapters in John’s Gospel, five studies from other Gospels, based on the parables of Jesus, as well as two closing chapters looking at the book of Job.

All the chapters have study guides attached, designed for both personal and community use.

It is my hope that this book will help you find that “deeper well.”

Part One – *Surprises from John’s Gospel*

Chapter One

Mid Life Beginnings

The Gospel of John 3: 1-8

1 There was a man named Nicodemus who was a Pharisee and a Jewish leader. **2** One night he went to Jesus and said, “Sir, we know that God has sent you to teach us. You could not work these miracles, unless God were with you.”

3 Jesus replied, “I tell you for certain that you must be born from above before you can see God’s kingdom!”

4 Nicodemus asked, “How can a grown man ever be born a second time?”

5 Jesus answered: I tell you for certain that before you can get into God’s kingdom, you must be born not only by water, but by the Spirit. **6** Humans give life to their children. Yet only God’s Spirit can change you into a child of God. **7** Don’t be surprised when I say that you must be born from above. **8** Only God’s Spirit gives new life. The Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to. You can hear the wind, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going.

Pre-reading reflection:

If you had a chance to ask Jesus one question what would it be?
Why would you choose that question?

There is a time in every life where there comes an opportunity to change. It is often described as a fork in the road, coming to a crossroads or taking the road less traveled. Sometimes the decision to change is forced upon us by circumstances beyond our control. We are no longer able to manage a big house alone so we move into something smaller. An adult child in another city needs our help because of illness or separation so we change our plans and we go there in the interest of another.

More often, this opportunity for change comes as the result of a build-up of disease or an unhappiness with the status quo. Life is not like we hoped it would be. The job seems to be going nowhere, the home we're in is getting tired, or the marriage is not turning out to be all that satisfying. Although we are reluctant to make any quick change because the options are not just there, we long for some change at a very deep personal level. At an even deeper level, many of us harbour frustration with life itself. Even when the job, the home and family are satisfactory, a voice tells us that something is missing! The things that used to give us pleasure and delight, the trips that used to bring us a renewal of spirit no longer do and we start asking spiritual questions that are new to us, or even re-asking spiritual questions we thought we had resolved.

Stop and Think

1. Have you had times when life was not what you 'hoped it would be'? What provoked those times?

Gail Sheehy, author of the book, *Passages*, explains that all of this is very human. All of us go through stages of life, she argues. She calls them passages, times that evoke differ-

ent feelings and experiences but also require decisions. The decisions move us into new territory and sometimes these passages are easy to pass through but quite often they are not. I remember becoming overly concerned with my health when I passed 40 years of age. Every pain, every cough suggested something malignant! Forty was old for me and I was anxious. It was comforting, therefore, to find out that all of this was rather normal. Passing forty was a passage and I was moving into a new space, even growing up!

“Midlife” presents us with opportunities for change, opportunities to take a new direction, a road less traveled. In times past I think we have seen midlife or “middle age” as 45 to 55 years of age, but I think this is now delayed. People in wealthy countries are living longer, and in North America, our children don’t leave home when they used to or should, and sometimes they make a big circle and come back!

Some of us are finding that retirement is also delayed and we continue to work into our late sixties. Whenever it happens, midlife according to Karl Jung, is when our personal life is rather one-sided and unbalanced and many aspects of life have been neglected or suppressed. Midlife introduces us to a time for deeper thought and reflection on what life is all about. David White in his book, *The Heart Aroused*, says this midlife is essentially the time of remembering what is essential to us. It is asking what it all means. Am I happy? Have I accomplished something valuable?

My wife and I were in the Toronto area serving an interim ministry in a local parish. Most of the Sunday attendees were in their sixties and over. One would suspect that people of that age would be rather settled in their lives and especially in their faith, but not so. During that time I offered a series of talks about spiritual development over a four-week period. To everyone’s surprise, the series was very well-attended, with almost half the Sunday congregation numbers turning out. In the open discussion that followed each session, people

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you 'longed for new opportunities for spiritual change'?*
- 2. Do you think such change is possible for you at this point in your life?*

made it clear that they had loved asking questions about their faith in God and that they were open to being challenged. It was not that they feared what lay ahead, rather that they wanted their lives to become meaningful. Several of them came to see me privately and it was very clear that they longed for some new opportunities for spiritual change.

If there is a story in the New Testament and a character that exemplifies all of this, we find it in the person of Nicodemus in Chapter Three of John's Gospel. I would guess that, for his time, he was a man in midlife. The text describes him as a member of the ruling Council of Judaism and you don't get there until you are a mature person. He is also a man with questions. He is unsettled and not sure of where his faith is taking him. It says in the text that he comes to Jesus at night and, for John, night had a deeper significance than just time after sunset. John uses the word "night" seven times in his Gospel and, wherever it appears, it has a spiritual implication.

In the story of Nicodemus, it suggests that he had troubling questions about his faith and maybe its effectiveness for him. Hearing about Jesus and his teaching and healing provided an opportunity for him to go deeper to something new. Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus in a very telling way. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a man of God because no one could perform these miracles unless God were with him." What Nicodemus did not say was that Jesus was a man of God because he was a strict and faithful adherent to the law of Moses, like himself, because Jesus' integrity before Nicodemus didn't come from following the rules of religion, rather it came from His ability to change people's lives for the better. For Nicodemus to make that admission

was a big step for him because his religion was all about rules, creeds and propositions and maybe not much fun.

We get another hint as to Nicodemus' state of mind and faith in his response to Jesus' statement, that unless a person is born again they cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus responds, I'm sure with some frustration, "How can a man be born again when he is old?" Now Nicodemus was no dummy. But, he was a legalist or, for some, a fundamentalist. As a Pharisee, he was told that he had it all. After that, where do you go? Religiously speaking he had reached the top. His was a legalistic interpretation of his faith and in his eyes he should have made it by now. But, here he is at night with this teacher from Nazareth admitting that there must be more to God and an experience of Him other than following the rules.

Throughout my ministry I have met many people like Nicodemus. These people are not sure of what to really believe. They have a strong religious past but it no longer satisfies them. Harvey Cox, theologian and writer in his book, *The future of Faith*, claims that in this first decade of the 21st century, we have moved from a period of religion to a new era of faith.

Twenty years ago, no one foresaw the resurgence of spirituality that we have seen in these days. But, he says, at least in the West, it is not a religion about rules, creeds, traditions and old music, it is rather a faith characterized by spiritual experience, community and social action. There are other reasons why people are searching for faith today. It is a reaction to the culture and society that we are in.

Stop and Think

1. *Do you see signs of this shift from 'a period of religion to a new era of faith'? What are they?*

Robert Sibley in his book, *A Rumor of God*, suggests that we live in a time of spiritual crisis, a condition when the spiritual concepts, metaphors and symbols by which we have

made sense of our lives no longer fulfill that function, thus rendering our lives increasingly incoherent and at the extreme, making us feel that our lives are meaningless. Thinking people, maturing people are tired of this empty feeling and, like Nicodemus, are looking for something deeper.

There is a third clue to Nicodemus' quest when he says to Jesus, "How can I change when I am old?" At first glance, it seems to be a reference to being an adult. However, with John it goes deeper and is perhaps more personal. One of the characteristics of people in their 60s and older is that change is very difficult. I see this in churches where the majority of its leaders tend to be resistant to change that they feel will cost them something and upset the status quo.

On a more personal level, all of us know this resistance that says to us "let's not rock the boat, old is good, keep things familiar." We dread the time when something happens and we have to make a decision about doing something new. This is where Nicodemus finds himself with Jesus, in a conversation he has never had before.

Jesus says the way to see what God really wants for your life is to see it as a rebirth of the spirit. Notice he doesn't say a rebirth of religion or giving the rules and traditions a second chance. No, he speaks of a rebirth in a much deeper place. This is not about getting a new hymn book or building a hall to get young people back in the church. It is deeper than that. It's about what God is doing and allowed to do, rather than what we do. It's a deeper more intimate experience of the divine spirit and something that we cannot control.

The story of Nicodemus is left open-ended and I find that very significant. In spite of his history, his beliefs, his age and reluctance to change, Nicodemus, this man in midlife, has begun a journey, not of religion but of faith. He has decided to walk on the road less traveled. What we see in John, Chapter Three is the first chapter of that journey.

Although everything we read about the psychology of midlife may be true for many of us, little we read tells us about what happens next. Yes, I see an emptiness in my life. Yes, I need more than tired worn-out dogmas and musty hymns. Yes, I need a change but what do I do to begin the journey? Is there a light at the end of the tunnel or is it just more darkness and uncertainty?

Something in the text from John, Chapter Three encourages me! Jesus says, “The flesh gives birth to flesh and the spirit gives birth to spirit.” In both instances the Greek word translates “gives birth”. The tense implies a continuous process. This is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but something that continuously happens. John, the writer of this gospel, uses this word and tense deliberately to catch the meaning of Jesus.

What this says about faith in God is that it is a process that begins with a personal decision to search for the spirit. Once we do it, that spirit doesn’t let us go. It continues to give us something new. Thomas Merton, a great man of prayer, once wrote, “the words ‘born again’ reveal the inner meaning of Christianity as life and dynamism. Man is not content with being a slave to need; making a living, raising a family and leaving a good name for posterity. There is in the depths of man’s heart a voice that says – you must be born again!”

In Philip Yancey’s book, *What Good is God?*, the author suggests that a person’s faith has three stages, the child, the adult and the parent. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the congregation where I served on an interim basis and about people who spoke to me about their struggle with faith. Although they were not young in years and not young in the church, they probably would admit to being in stage one, that of the child. That means that they had begun again to search for God.

Nicodemus, from what we're told, was in that first stage. For many of us this means that we have grown up in the church but gone no further. For others it might mean that we had an experience of God where the lights went on and we were "born again." But, for some reason, we stopped there and were never challenged to grow. After all, the book never changes from Sunday to Sunday, so why should I? We get the message that this is all there is and that we should be content. What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is, "it's time to move on, time to become a spiritual adult."

Maybe this transition from child to adult could be described as standing on a railway station platform waiting for a train. The platform is stage one. In my childhood, railway stations were fancy places where one could wait for a while. Trains would come and go but we would find it quite comfortable. The contradiction, however, is that we've got this ticket in our hand to somewhere else, an opportunity to enlarge our world and finally go home. However, it takes a decision to use this ticket to go to another station where new experiences await.

Stop and Think

- 1. Are you comfortably waiting in the station?*
- 2. Do you think it might be time to board the train?*

Brennan Manning once said, "When religion is a religion of memories of what other people have done, a second hand affair and not a primary experience of the grace and love of Jesus Christ, we become like unimpressive travel agents handing out brochures to places we have never been." Moving to the adult stage of faith is taking the journey to those other places. In my experience this often happens for many who have a personal crisis. That crisis may simply be reaching "midlife". It may happen because of a death of a parent or a struggle in the marriage. Whatever the cause, it forces us to reach out for grace that runs in a deeper place.

The third stage of the spiritual journey is the movement from being an adult to a parent. That's about giving birth to

faith in others and nurturing them in their faith. Although an “adults faith” is a great move we can never be satisfied there. All of us are called in some way to parent new life for others.

Nicodemus got the opportunity of a lifetime, the opportunity to start again. Likewise, God offers us that same opportunity, to get off that platform and go on a journey of faith. To use our ticket to get on the train and to move to a better and more exciting place, that place where God wants us to be. As Frederick Buechner once said, “If we are willing to draw nearer into the mystery of God in whatever way he can, with all our reservations and doubts notwithstanding, then we find out that to be where he is, and to go where he goes is to become more fully ourselves at last, fully each others at last and even more, become fully his at last.”

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. Share about one or two key crossroads or turning points in your life. What circumstances created the potential for change and how did you respond?
2. What stage are you at in your life? Would you describe yourself as being at mid-life? Why or why not?
3. Bishop Hockin suggests that Nicodemus approached Jesus because he 'had troubling questions about his faith and maybe its effectiveness for him.' How about you? Do you have questions about your own faith? What are they? Have you approached Jesus in prayer to ask him for answers?
4. Nicodemus seemed to regard Jesus as a man of God who had potential to make a difference in his life. How do you see Jesus? Do you think a relationship with him is possible? How might that change your life?
5. Nicodemus is confused and frustrated by Jesus' answer. Can you think of times when God's response to you – through scripture, a message in church, a word from a Christian friend, or inner promptings – was confusing or frustrating? How did you deal with that?
6. Do you find yourself more resistant to change with age? Are there ways to withstand this, to remain open to new possibilities?
7. Bishop Hockin writes that faith in God 'is a process that begins with a personal decision to search for the spirit.' Have you made that decision? Should you?
8. What stage are you at in your life – child, adult, or parent? What might you do to move forward spiritually to the next stage?

Going Deeper Into Scripture

Re-read John 3:1-8

1. Who was Nicodemus? Why did he come to Jesus and why at night?
2. Jesus tells Nicodemus he 'must be born from above before you can see God's kingdom.' How does Nicodemus respond to this? How do you respond? What do you think it means to be born from above?
3. Nicodemus finds Jesus teaching difficult to understand, can you think of other examples of people finding Jesus' teachings difficult or downright frustrating? (If you have difficulty thinking of some try: Matthew 16:21-23; John 6: 25-42; Matthew 5:29-30).
4. Jesus often taught using indirect, obscure and even offensive sayings and stories, why would he do this? Wouldn't it be better to be clear and direct?
5. Bishop Hockin writes that 'the story of Nicodemus is left open-ended.' Why might that be so? Why is an open-ended story a better teaching tool than a story with clear ending?

Read Luke 19: 1-10

This is also the story of a man, Zacchaeus, who came to Jesus. Compare and contrast the stories of Nicodemus and Zacchaeus in terms of:

1. Who the men were – their life circumstances.
2. How they approached Jesus.
3. Jesus' response to them.
4. Their response to Jesus.
5. What their stories have to teach you about your own life and faith.

Chapter Two

Finding Authentic Happiness

The Gospel of John 2: 1-10

1 Three days later Mary, the mother of Jesus, was at a wedding feast in the village of Cana in Galilee. **2** Jesus and his disciples had also been invited and were there.

3 When the wine was all gone, Mary said to Jesus, “They don’t have any more wine.”

4 Jesus replied, “Mother, my time hasn’t yet come: [a] You must not tell me what to do.”

5 Mary then said to the servants, “Do whatever Jesus tells you to do.”

6 At the feast there were six stone water jars that were used by the people for washing themselves in the way that their religion said they must. Each jar held about twenty or thirty gallons. **7** Jesus told the servants to fill them to the top with water. Then after the jars had been filled, **8** he said, “Now take some water and give it to the man in charge of the feast.”

The servants did as Jesus told them, **9** and the man in charge drank some of the water that had now turned into wine. He did not know where the wine had come from, but the servants did. He called the bridegroom over **10** and said, “The best wine is always served first. Then after the guests have had plenty, the other wine is served. But you have kept the best until last!”

Pre-reading reflection:

On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your life?

Why did you give this rating?

If you could add one thing to your life what would it be?

This chapter is written for those who may feel there's something missing in their lives. These people may seem to have it all – a lovely home and a pain-free life with a good family. Underneath all of this, however, there is a longing for something deeper that the shopping channels or Walmart can't offer.

I remember walking with an old friend in a very posh neighbourhood in Vancouver. He was a pastor in the area and as we walked and chatted, I exclaimed, "What beautiful homes lawns and gardens! These folks have it all".

"Not so much," he responded. "There is a lot of pain, a lot of emptiness behind those hedges." And so it may be for us. Outwardly we may seem to be doing okay, but every now and then in a quiet, unguarded, vulnerable moment, we have to admit to a gnawing at our insides. There's something missing!

That feeling is reinforced by our culture, which is screaming "You do *not* have enough." Although many of us may enjoy a high standard of living, (particularly in comparison to the rest of the world), and every choice available, there has been, I think, a loss of trust, a loss of civility, and a loss of kindness towards one another.

Issues such as bullying, road rage are dramatic examples of violence that come from a deeper place. When many of us were children, it was perhaps rare to have fights or conflict on

Stop and Think

1. *Have you or anyone you know tried to 'buy' happiness? How did that turn out?*

the playground. Now, for many children, this can be an everyday experience.

What's missing is something deeper than curriculum and deeper than the rules of engagement. My own observation suggests that there has been a decrease in mutual respect, in kindness, in caring for each other. These are things born and nurtured at a much deeper spiritual level and I think they decline in lockstep with spirituality .

Where, in all of this, can we find authentic happiness? Where do we find these missing pieces for a full and fulfilled life?

Let's explore a story in John's Gospel about a wedding in a small Galilean town. John's Gospel, we must first understand, is different from the other Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, as it was written about forty years after them and therefore written more for a second and third generation Christian.

As well, John writes on two levels. The first is telling the story of a wedding reception that runs out of wine. Jesus was on the scene, he performs his first miracle and the wedding reception is saved. But, John has more to say than that! He has a deeper level of meaning. It's much like a carrot growing in the garden. There are the greens that we see that some people enjoy eating. However, in order to find the real food, you have to do some digging to get below the surface of the soil. As a friend of mine says, "To understand John, you have to snorkel down. Get under the surface to find out what it's really all about".

We look at this story of the wedding in Cana because it speaks strongly and directly to our understanding as to what is missing! It's a familiar story. Jesus of Nazareth is invited to a wedding as a guest. His mother, Mary, is there perhaps as a relative of the couple. At the reception they run out of wine, which

was a great embarrassment to the family. Mary comes to her son and quietly asks, “Can you do something about this?” At first Jesus objects, “It’s not really my time yet.” Then he proceeds to give orders to the servants to fill six stone jars used for religious purposes with water and then to carry a glass of that to the master of ceremonies for him to taste. The master of ceremonies is amazed at the quality of wine, its rich taste and full color and asks where it came from. The end result is that the wedding reception is saved with about a thousand bottles of this wonderful Pinot Noir!

Stop and Think

1. Why do you think Jesus changes his mind and decides to act?

But, the story has a lot more to say; remember, John writes on two levels not just one. The first level is the wonderful story of the wedding and its miracle. The second level is a statement about missing pieces in our lives and where they can be found. John quite deliberately uses the image of six stone jars as a sign of what is missing in the religion and culture of his day.

Seven was a number that meant fullness and totality, while six always meant less. Water was all they had and you couldn’t serve that as a drink at a wedding banquet. I used to think that Jesus’ action was to simply transform the water into wine somewhere on the way to the master of ceremonies. However, Jesus more likely adds something to the water that make it wine. When you consider that eighty percent of a bottle of wine is water and the remaining twenty percent is composed of alcohol and other minerals and vegetable matter, which give it color, life, taste and in durability. What Jesus was saying is that, while he accepted what religion has to give, it is never enough by itself. He is the one who can add these extra ingredients that give life its wholeness, taste and energy. In our time, Jesus is saying that eighty percent living is never enough, that he has come to bring us life and bring it more abundantly. He is what is missing!

When we talk about authentic happiness, we are talking about more than having the odd good day. It is not just finding the right medication to keep our pain away. This authentic happiness is something deeper. In the language of Scripture it is a peace that passes human understanding – a joy that no one can take from you. I’m suggesting that in order to find these missing pieces called authentic happiness we must find this missing twenty percent. As the Book of Common Prayer observes, “That which by nature we cannot have.”

Stop and Think

- 1. We all know people who seem genuinely satisfied with the so-called good things in life described here, do you think they truly are?*
- 2. How important are material things to your own happiness?*

Not only do secularism and materialism provide eighty percent living, they also declare that this is all there is and all we need! We all have friends and people in our families who would tell us when we have a happy marriage, a personal trainer, a home that’s paid for and good health, we’ve got it all! We must admit that the subject of religion has been treated by both the media and some academic elites as a very dangerous thing our world.

Too often when religious leaders are portrayed in film and many novels, they are seldom part of the solution. Even worse, they are often the subject of ridicule and bad jokes. It is no wonder that people equate this twenty percent as something to be avoided.

However, there’s been a change in the last twenty years! Part of this change has been in the study of happiness by the social sciences. In the early nineties in the study of psychology there was a shift from what makes a person emotionally sick, to the study of what makes one emotionally well. Most prominent in these studies is the work of Dr. Martin Seligman,

Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of the book, *Authentic Happiness*.

Seligman is not alone. Other books such as, *Stumbling on Happiness*, *the Paradox of Happiness* and *The Happiness Equation* tell similar stories. The results of these studies have turned up some surprising discoveries especially for their authors. Dr. Seligman, an agnostic but searching for faith, says, “Authentic happiness or personal well-being, needs to be anchored in strengths and virtues that are, in turn, anchored to something larger. It consists of an attachment to something larger and the larger that entity is the more meaningful life comes.” All of this has moved Dr. Seligman and his colleagues to take a new look at the relationship between real happiness and the practice of faith.

By the 1990’s the data on the effect of religious faith on people’s lives revealed religious people are less likely to do drugs, commit crimes, or kill themselves. They were healthier, less thrown by divorce, unemployment, illness or death. Writing in the *Globe and Mail* a few years ago, Margaret Wentz, a self-proclaimed agnostic, confessed, “I envy people of faith. By all accounts they are happier, healthier and more emotionally secure than the rest of us. They give away more money and do more good works. They are kinder, more generous and more community minded. This is the twenty percent effect and the connection that people of faith have with the spiritual dimension. There is an energy that affects how a person lives, how they feel and actually how happy they are. Therefore, this authentic happiness, this sense of well-being, is something that by nature we cannot have. It is part of this value-added-twenty percent effect.

Before we go further and explore how we connect and stay connected to this twenty percent factor, we need to ask a question. What happens to a society or culture that aggres-

sively denies to itself this spiritual energy that the eighty percent world cannot give? What happens to a generation who are denied, or choose to ignore knowledge of God, a God who created them, loves them and longs to be their partner in life?

Stop and Think

1. *Do you agree that we live in 'a secular age'? If so, what are the signs that lead you to this conclusion?*

Professor Charles Taylor observes in his book, *A Secular Age*, that a secular world provides lives of self-authorization, where people do not feel they have to look beyond themselves for moral norms or values. What this means is that in an “eighty percent world” people authorize themselves to do what they want to do, without refer-

ence to any other voice beyond the self.

There are many studies being done on children of the Boomer generation born generally in the eighties and early nineties. Their parents, unlike their grandparents, were the first generation who, in great numbers, abandoned religious practice in favour of going it alone. According to Professor Reginald Bibby, these people moved from a culture of obligation to a culture of gratification. In spite of the Boomer generation abandoning religion, they still held memories from their parents' generation that provided values and moral norms. This is not so with their twenty-something children described by Jean Twenge in her book, *Generation Me*, as a generation without direction, without clear goals and very lonely. They are missing that twenty percent in their lives.

Finally, how do we experience this value-added thing called faith? First, this is what the twenty percent does when actualized in our lives. It brings a transforming energy into all of life. It brings color, richness and spirit. It enriches our attitudes towards ourselves, other relationships and our family life. Just as those twenty percent factors turn water into wine,

so the spirit of God, through our trusting in Him, changes us and how we live.

To simplify this, we could say that this twenty percent brings three new factors into our lives. First is a new friend, second is a new family, and third a new future. The friend is Jesus Christ. He is the friend who accepts us as we are, does not judge us or catalogue our many sins but accepts us and forgives us. He is the mirror image of God, the face that will never turn away!

Prior to Christmas, a few years ago while attending my daughter's church, I found the following story in a church bulletin: You have just boarded your commuter train. It is morning, you are tired and worried about your life. Enter Jesus. He first finds you a seat and then joins you there. He does not judge but only listens. He accepts you as you are and speaks to your troubled heart of forgiveness and mercy. And then he wraps a warm blanket around your shoulders and promises always to be your friend. Jesus says elsewhere, "I will never leave you or forsake you. No longer do I call you servants, I now call you friend."

The second part of this twenty percent gift is a new family. A friend is good but, along with him, you get a family thrown in. It's a community of other people who believe and have a relationship with this same Friend. The gift of a family puts into practice what Jesus tells us. It is very human and can and does make mistakes. However, there is nowhere else a person, regardless of gender, race, age, abilities, rich or poor can find nurture and acceptance. It helps us connect with right behaviours and is where we begin the lessons of how to give to others and love our neighbour as ourselves. I don't know about your experience, but mine has been that it is in this family we call church where I have

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you experienced the joy of family through the church?*
- 2. Have you contributed to others' experience of positive church family?*

found my best friends. These people care for me, encourage me and are people I like to spend time with. When I am down, they pick me up.

The third part of this twenty percent factor is regarding a new future. Being a follower of Jesus is never a dead-end life. It is a life rich in meaning that goes somewhere. Helmut Teileke, a German pastor of some decades ago once wrote, “A Christian sees the future differently. It is not so much what will come but who will come and if, in that last hour our lives belong to him, why do we need fear the next moment?”

Some years ago, in the *Globe and Mail*, there was a conversation between Ian Brown and Jean Vanier. Brown writes, “To me looking at it all the vantage point of fifty-five years of age, getting older looks like a discouraging journey into loneliness, dying being the ultimate solitude.” He asks Vanier, a man in his eighties, what for him lies ahead. Vanier said, “For me getting old is not a journey to loneliness but the journey to God. At the moment of my death I believe I will slip into another world. It will be a wonderful moment of peace, joy, and ecstasy of love. We have arrived at last. But then, there will be a moment of pain. We shall see clearly how and when we have hurt others and wounded life. Then, very quickly, yes, very quickly, there will be a new feeling of being loved in spite of all the brokenness dirt and mess. This is where we are fully accepted, fully forgiven, fully loved, forever.” The bottom line of these three things that the spirit of God or the gift of faith brings is the good news. That when things in our eighty percent world start to crumble, when there is trouble in the marriage, when we lose a partner, when we are depressed and feeling abandoned, then this twenty percent factor keeps us from falling apart. This friend, this family, this hope of the better future forms a kind of rock or solid floor that keeps you up. You may be wounded but not defeated. I remember hearing a man, who had lost his wife and son in a car accident, conclude, “I’ve been to the bottom but the bottom is solid.”

In our search for authentic happiness, this value-added energy, this connection this “attachment to something larger than just ourselves”, this new friend, this new family and this new future is available to us in Jesus Christ. It is available to anyone who asks.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Bishop Hockin writes that there has been ‘a loss of civility, and a loss of kindness towards one another.’ Do you agree? What are the signs of this loss? If you do not agree, can you give examples of where you think civility and kindness are flourishing?
2. Bishop Hockin goes on to argue that part of the deeper meaning Jesus was trying to convey through this first miracle was that religion is not adequate to meet our spiritual needs, that it needs ‘extra ingredients that give life its wholeness, taste and energy.’ Is there a difference between religion and faith? If so, what are those ‘extra ingredients’ that provide the extra 20%?
3. Do you have those ‘extra ingredients’ in your own life?
4. Bishop Hockin contends that religious leaders are often portrayed negatively in popular culture. Christian writer George Weigel goes even further and says that North American public culture ‘is increasingly Christophobic.’ Do you think they are right? What evidence supports your position? Why do you think this is so?
5. Margaret Wenthe wrote about envying people of faith because ‘they are happier, healthier and more emotionally secure than the rest of us.’ Do you think that is generally true? Is it true in your own life or the lives of your family and friends?

6. To what degree, if at all, are the three 'value-added' elements of 'a new friend', 'a new family', and 'a new future' a reality in your life? What might you do to more fully realize these in your own experience?
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Going Deeper Into Scripture

Re-read John 2: 1-10

1. What do you think it says about Jesus that he took time away from preaching, teaching and healing to attend a wedding?
2. Jesus seems to rebuff Mary quite sharply, how does she respond? What might explain her seemingly incongruous response?
3. Bishop Hockin argues that on one level this is simply a story of Jesus saving the day for both the wedding hosts and guests; why would he do that?
4. Jesus often worked with ordinary elements – water, wine, bread, fish, mud – to do extraordinary things. Can you think of other examples? Why would he rely on such ordinary things, wouldn't his miracles have been more spectacular if he had simply created something from nothing? Do his actions have anything to teach us about how we should think about creation?

Read Mark 10: 17-27: This story of the rich young ruler further illustrates the key points Bishop Hockin makes about Jesus miracles at the wedding.

1. What is the evidence this young man was religious and took his religion seriously?

2. In writing about Jesus' miracle at the wedding, Bishop Hockin writes, 'What Jesus is saying is that, while he accepted what religion has to give, it is never enough by itself.' How does Jesus response in this account demonstrate both aspects of that statement?
3. The young man had a fervent faith but what was missing?
4. How about you? If you were to encounter Jesus, would he see things missing in your faith? What might they be?
5. Are there things holding you back from following Jesus more fully, from achieving the 100% life?

Chapter Three

Finding a Deeper Well

The Gospel of John 4: 3-26

3 Jesus left Judea and started for Galilee again. **4** This time he had to go through Samaria, **5** and on his way he came to the town of Sychar. It was near the field that Jacob had long ago given to his son Joseph. **6-8** The well that Jacob had dug was still there, and Jesus sat down beside it because he was tired from traveling. It was noon, and after Jesus' disciples had gone into town to buy some food, a Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well.

Jesus asked her, "Would you please give me a drink of water?"

9 "You are a Jew," she replied, "and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink of water when Jews and Samaritans won't have anything to do with each other?"[a]

10 Jesus answered, "You don't know what God wants to give you, and you don't know who is asking you for a drink. If you did, you would ask me for the water that gives life."

"Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again. **14** But no one who drinks the water I give will ever be thirsty again. The water I give is like a flowing fountain that gives eternal life."

15 The woman replied, "Sir, please give me a drink of that water! Then I won't get thirsty and have to come to this well again."

16 Jesus told her, "Go and bring your husband."

17-18 The woman answered, "I don't have a husband."

"That's right," Jesus replied, "you're telling the truth. You don't have a husband. You have already been married five times, and the man you are now living with isn't your husband."

19 The woman said, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. **20** My ancestors worshiped on this mountain,[b] but you Jews say Jerusalem is the only place to worship."

21 Jesus said to her:

Believe me, the time is coming when you won't worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem. **22** You Samaritans don't really know the one you worship. But we Jews do know the God we worship, and by using us, God will save the world. **23** But a time is coming, and it is already here! Even now the true worshipers are being led by the Spirit to worship the Father according to the truth. These are the ones the Father is seeking to worship him. **24** God is Spirit, and those who worship God must be led by the Spirit to worship him according to the truth.

25 The woman said, "I know that the Messiah will come. He is the one we call Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

26 "I am that one," Jesus told her, "and I am speaking to you now."

Pre-reading reflection:

What about yourself do you most want to keep hidden from others? Why do you fear others knowing about that part of who you are? What steps do you take to hide that aspect of yourself?

In the first chapter we talked about the character in John's gospel named Nicodemus, a man not unlike a lot of us, searching for a deeper experience of God. And, like a lot of us, he was looking for opportunities to change direction, maybe in midlife with all its complications and questions.

Nicodemus had a private evening meeting with Jesus of Nazareth and was confronted with the wild idea that someone, even when they are old, can make a new beginning. A beginning that comes not from a new exercise plan or new stores to shop in, but rather born out of a new infusion of spirit. As Thomas Merton once said, "Man is not content with being a slave to need, just making a living raising a family, and leaving the good name. There is in the

depths of man's heart a voice that cries, 'I must be born again'."

In this chapter we look at yet another conversation. This time the conversation is between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. They meet at a town well. The central theme of this story is the issue of acceptance. It's been said that "There comes a time when you have to stand up and shout, 'This is me, I look the way I look, think the way I think, feel the way I feel. I am a whole complex package. Take me or leave me, accept me or walk away'."

Few of us throughout our lives miss out on the painful experience of being rejected, of not really being accepted for who we are. It may start in childhood and runs into adolescence. Some of us put a lot on the line and make a lot of moral sacrifices just to be accepted. Sometimes our need for acceptance is so overwhelming that we compromise what we know to be good and right, just to hear somebody say, "I need you." On the positive side, what a life-changing experience it is for anyone of us, knowing our limitations, knowing the mess of our lives, to have someone accept us just as we are, warts and all.

Stop and Think

1. *What is your most vivid and painful memory of rejection?*
2. *What is your greatest memory of being loved and accepted?*

In a book by Rachel Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings*, there is a story told by Dr. Richard Seltzer. "I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted in palsy, a tiny twinge of a facial nerve has been severed. To remove a tumour I had to cut that little nerve. Her young husband is in the room by her bed. The young woman speaks, 'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks. 'Yes, I say, it will. It is because the nerve was cut.' She nods and is silent. But, her husband smiles, 'I like it,' he says. 'It is kind of cute.' And unmindful of me watching them, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, twisting his lips to accommodate

hers to show that their kiss still works.” Now that is acceptance. It is the experience of a love that, in spite of a twisted face or a twisted life, takes us unconditionally as we are, and asks for nothing more.

At the core of the gospel story of Jesus and the woman at the well, the first thing we see is that here is a person who has known a lot of rejection. Then we see this other person, who in spite of all of that, accepts her unconditionally as she is. To summarize the story as John tells it, Jesus arrives alone at a well in the Samaritan town. It is noon and he sits down tired and thirsty. Soon a woman from the town arrives with a pitcher to draw water. Jesus asks her if she would give him a little drink. She resists the request and responds, “You’re a Jew. You are a foreigner to me. How come you have the gall to ask me a Samaritan for some water? You must be desperate”, referring to the racial and religious disconnect between their peoples. So she plays this card very well. After all, it is her turf, but Jesus is not put off. He takes the sarcasm and, after he recovers a bit, he says, “If you only knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would find living water, water that would satisfy the deepest longings of your life.” However, this lady doesn’t get it and, to keep her distance from what this man has to say, decides to take him on and she plays three “cards”: the “race card”, the “gender card” and the “religious card”. She says, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan. You are a man and I am a woman. You worship in Jerusalem and I worship on my own mountain, thank you very much!”

Of course she wasn’t doing fine at all! Behind her defensiveness, behind the walls that she is building and hiding behind, is a deeply hurt and frightened woman. All this becomes apparent when Jesus asks if he might meet her husband. On the surface it’s an odd

Stop and Think

1. Have you ever hidden a sense of insecurity or defensiveness behind walls of aggression or certainty? What did that look like?

request but it is the question that starts to reveal a sad and devastating past. “I’m not married,” she says. “I know.” says Jesus. Such powerful words these are, “I know.” He was saying, “I know all about you, you been married five times and the guy you’re with now is not your husband.” Now some of us know the pain of one divorce or maybe two but can you imagine five! Five rejections. Five partners who you are prepared to trust, and every one of them has walked out on you, turning their back on you. This is the pain this woman has been through. It is the pain that she was so desperately trying to cover up. But Jesus knew!

If you read the story carefully, Jesus never judges her, condemns her or puts her down. Instead, through it all, he accepts her. As the conversation comes to an end, the text tells us that she leaves her pitcher at the well and goes home and says to her neighbours, “Come with me to the well and meet this man who told me everything I ever was. It’s as if he’s been reading my diary and yet he accepts me as I am.”

I think the proof of Jesus’ acceptance, lies in the numbers. People around this period of history were very caught up in numerology. John, the writer of the gospel, knew that very well. He also knew that the number seven was known to be an important number to both Samaritans and Jews. In Egyptian and Chaldean mythology as well as in many references in the Hebrew Bible, seven was regarded as representing totality, fullness, completeness, God. When you do the math, this woman had five husbands who had rejected her and the one living with her was number six. Guess who shows up to be number seven? She in her joy of being totally accepted tells her neighbours, “Come and meet a man.” This is a man like no other, a man who was offering living water that would meet her deepest thirst for acceptance. She got that finally in Jesus Christ. What John is saying is, just as Jesus accepts this woman in a total, full and complete way and offers her redemptive options to her present life, so he accepts us.

The story asks three things of us: First, what aspects of ourselves can we see in this woman? Second, will we accept the challenge to draw our strength and faith from a much deeper well? Third, do we understand what the story tells us about a new kind of church or Christian community?

The Samaritan woman, like all of us, is conditioned by gender, race and religion. These things can divide people. They are too often the source of prejudice and judgment. For instance, the woman in our story belongs to a minority group, the Samaritans, who are despised and powerless. Feeling pushed down and without value can result in a form of collective despair or anger. Jean Vanier commented, “We discover that this woman is not only a part of a despised minority, she is also rejected by her own people. She has a broken self image who has deep feelings of guilt, of unworthiness and who feels that no one could ever love her as she is.”

Although few of us share the dysfunction of this woman’s past, all of us can be captives to our past. The hurts of childhood stay with us a very long time. Memories of losses, memories of mistakes we made, things we regret and feel guilty for can be buried for a long time. Then, for some reason, they come back to haunt us, and send us into a spiral of self-doubt and guilt.

In reaction to all of this, some of us build emotional walls, walls of protection against rejection, and we withdraw behind our cynicism and our anger to protect ourselves from others. This is what the woman at the well does. All Jesus does is ask for a little drink of water and she immediately becomes defensive: “Are you talking to me?”

How do we live with this? What is the key to breaking the cycle of this self-destructive behaviour? Frederick Buechner has some good advice, “Each of us needs to discover what makes him or her most joyful, most alive. For this is the true battle of life, to become fully human and this is the battle we all can win, because this is the battle that God wants

us to win.” Now, that’s good news. No matter our history, our hurts, the hauntings of our past, there is Someone who wants our humanity to work. That was the message that finally got through to this woman. Here was a man who just wanted to accept her without the price tag. He wanted nothing in return and the realization of all of that for her must have been life-changing.

The second lesson of the story is to be found in the strength and confidence we get from finding a deeper well. We have to remember that the context of the story is a very arid place. Wells were very well marked and essential for life. Wells were community places, places where people got together. The woman in this story needed water, but she came alone, avoiding the crowd, the stares and thus the possible rejection. Jesus offers her something else: the redemptive option that he offers all of us. He calls it living water. He is saying, “You have a thirst for something deep that not even this well of Jacob can satisfy. You need to look deeper to someone else.”

A few summers ago, I was at a conference center in upstate New York. It was Sunday morning and there were about ten opportunities for worship followed by a “big tent” service at 11 o’clock, which usually drew four to five thousand people. For some reason I had gone to two of the services looking specifically for a message to excite and feed my soul. I was thirsty for something deeper than I was getting. The first two sermons did not touch that need, and I went to church again a third time, to a denominational group where I seldom go. This time the preacher got to me, and as I walked away I realized that this man was drawing from a deep well.

This depth came from a combination of a deep relationship with God, a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, and a deep commitment to prayer. Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, suggests that we recapture this depth in what he calls “a mysticism of the every day.” He suspects that one of the causes of unhappiness

for men and women is their unwillingness to sit quietly with their own thoughts. He also questions whether we have the courage and discipline to be inactive, to sit long enough to hear the approach of God. It is this sitting with the infinite mystery we call God, that we can arrive in such a way that we don't have to go any further. But, there is a cost to this. It means turning off the Blackberry, the cell phone, the i Pad and the TV. It means sitting quietly with our own thoughts long enough to draw deeply from the well of God.

Finally, what does the story of the Samaritan woman at the well with Jesus say about the building of a faith community, the church? In the last part of the recorded conversation between Jesus and the woman, she tries to get into a debate about religion or different denominations. Jesus responds, "The day is coming when place won't matter anymore. It will be the attitude of the worshiper, wherever they are, that counts.

John Bryce Chan, the former Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, in San Diego, California, wrote a philosophy for his church for visitors to read. "This Cathedral is a place where diversity is respected, encouraged, and protected. Herein a visitor is granted immunity from the painful ravages of division and intolerance. It is a place where your thoughts and prayers, tears, anger, and joy are received by a loving God, who in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, gives to every person who wishes to receive it: infinite forgiveness, acceptance, eternal life and unconditional love."

In conclusion, we have this woman who, in a conversation with this man from Nazareth, is not only accepted for who she is, but is offered an option to the way she is living. That option is a deeper well from which she can draw grace, forgiveness and a very deep love.

Stop and Think

- 1. Do you agree that the lack of quiet contemplation is a cause of human unhappiness?*
- 2. Do you make time for reflection – 'to draw deeply from the well of God' – in your life?*

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you ever met someone who seems to have special insight into who you are? Share about that experience. How did it make you feel?
2. The Collect that begins the The Order for Holy Communion in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* reads, in part, “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. . . .” Do those words bring you comfort? Fear? A bit of both?
3. Bishop Hockin writes, “Some of us put a lot on the line and make a lot of moral sacrifices just to be accepted.” How about you, have you made moral compromises to be accepted? Can you share about some of those? Did the compromises work? Was the acceptance of others worth it?
4. As an act of self-protection the woman Jesus meets plays up the differences between them – differences of ethnicity, gender, and religion. Where do you see these or other differences being used to divide people today? How about in your own life, do you ever emphasize difference in order to keep certain kinds of people at a safe distance?
5. Bishop Hockin contends that this story asks three things of us:
 - “What aspects of ourselves can we see in this woman?” In what ways are you like her? Are you a captive to your past? Have you built walls to keep others out and to protect yourself? How do these things show up in your life?
 - “Will we accept the challenge to draw our strength and faith from a much deeper well?” Are you willing to look to Jesus rather than others as the source of affirmation and acceptance? How can we take steps in that direction?

- “Do we understand what the story tells us about a new kind of Church or Christian community?” How do we create a community that includes rather than excludes; a community where everyone can move beyond the failings of the past and find acceptance and love? What can you do to help the fellowship community of which you are part move in that direction?
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Going Deeper Into Scripture

Re-read John 4: 3-26

1. What are the areas of difference between Jesus and the woman?
2. What can we learn from the passage about how each of them regards those differences?
3. Are you more like the woman or Jesus in how you deal with differences between and among people?
4. How does Jesus, a Jewish man, establish his credibility with this Samaritan woman?
5. Which people or groups are estranged from us by ethnicity, gender, religion or other differences?
6. While we do not have the supernatural insight Jesus did, what can we learn from this story about how we can establish connections with those people or groups.
7. Reading further in the story (John 4: 27-42), we find that this woman became the witness who led her whole community to Jesus. Why would Jesus choose a community outcast to be the vehicle to bringing his message to this town? Can you think of other examples of God using unlikely people as his messengers? Do these stories have anything to tell us about the Church?

Chapter Four

Finding God in the Ups and Downs of Life

The Gospel of John 6: 5-21

5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” **6** He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

7 Philip answered him, “It would take more than half a year’s wages [a] to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother spoke up, **9** “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). **11** Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” **13** So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

14 After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”

15 Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, **17** where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them.

18 A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough.

19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, [b] they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. 20 But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.” 21 Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

Pre-reading reflection:

Do you have a greater sense of God’s presence in good times or difficult times? Why do you think this is so?

There are two famous stories in John’s gospel that tell of two very different human experiences, both of which we can relate to. The first happens up on a hillside with a great view of the Sea of Galilee and a crowd of about five thousand sitting on the grass enjoying a picnic! They seem very content, wanting for nothing, even the preaching is great! As well, there is plenty of bread and fish, even leftovers to take home.

The second happens when the disciples go down to the Sea of Galilee a few hours later and experience a frightening, life-threatening storm on the lake. It is dark, the wind is high, and they struggle and are afraid. Then, out of the blue, Jesus comes walking toward them on the water saying, “It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

These experiences of the disciples of Jesus are also our experiences. All of us have “up” and “down” times in our lives. We can easily imagine being part of that picnic on the hillside, not a cloud in the sky, a beautiful day with a great view of the water. The grass is green and everything is provided including leftovers! Many of us experience “picnic times” like that in our lives, when our health is good and our families are together and happy. Even the economy is working in our favour. For those of us who go to church, our churches are full, we feel God’s presence and have few doubts

about spiritual things. We could say it is summertime and believing is easy.

But as well as these good times, these “picnic times”, we also know the experience of the down, dark, stormy times, when life is no picnic at all. We have all been on that boat with the disciples, in the dark, alone and afraid. As Job describes it, it is “that place of secret wounds and silent cries.” This dark time may come from a bad diagnosis, from a troubled marriage, or our children may be in trouble. These are times when we feel truly abandoned.

My intent in probing this story is twofold. It graphically paints vivid pictures of these two extremes of the human experience, (one could say the agony and the ecstasy), and it places God, his love and his presence, in the center of both of them.

At the picnic, Jesus is both preacher and provider. In the dark night experience he comes rather dramatically and joins the disciples in their boat. I’m not sure what those who first heard or read this story took from it. After all, they lived in very different times. But, for us in the 21st century, it is not all that easy to find God in either of these experiences of life.

Several authors, philosophers and sociologists speak of our time as a disenchanted time in which God and the things of God are no longer just simply taken for granted. One could say that we live in a culture that leaves God out of both our good times and our bad.

A few years ago, Margaret Wentz, writing in the *Globe and Mail*, told of her experience at a wedding. She describes the setting, the food and her good time with friends and family. Then she says, “They left God out.” She goes on to describe her own wedding and repeats, “We left God out.” Although she did not explain what she meant, we can assume she meant no clergy, no church and no prayer. It is not a rare occurrence to read or hear about weddings and funerals where God is left out. I was at a memorial service some months ago which included some reminiscences of the

departed, thanksgivings for his life, a few glasses lifted in his honour and we all went home.

The case can be made that the Boomer generation, those who came of age in the sixties and seventies, suddenly found themselves enjoying a picnic of a life. Employment was almost full. There were new freedoms and new experiences to be had. The standard of living was on the rise, there was unprecedented prosperity and, in such a time, who needed God. But, this has come at a considerable cost to our culture.

Prof. Charles Taylor in his book, *The Malaise of Modernity*, discusses this human experience of disenchantment. “There is now a narrowing and a flattening of our lives,” he observes. “There is a loss of resonance, depth and richness in the human experience. There is a loss of meaning and the fading of moral horizons.” In other words, many people are enjoying the picnic without acknowledging who makes it possible.

A friend was telling me of a conversation she had with her forty-year-old son. It was Saturday evening and my friend invited her son to join her at church the next day. The son looked at her and said, “Oh mom, how can you believe all that stuff, those stories of walking on water and raising the dead? That stuff is not part of the real world, at least it’s not the world I live in.”

What do we say to that? I would offer this. In my experience, people who take those positions are seeing life through a very narrow lens. It is the lens of the age taken for granted in our universities and seen on the screens of entertainment. It is the lens of rationalism, science, technology and business and it is the lens of thing and function. In a world that has been reduced to see human value in terms of what we have

Stop and Think

1. *Do you agree that our times are ‘disenchanted’, that we often leave God out?*
2. *Have you attended an event where God was obviously ‘left out’?*

and what we do, how healthy we are, how entertained we can be, there is little room left for anything else. What if that lens is not all there is? What if that lens is limited and narrow? What if this lens distorts the reality of being a truly authentic human being? Which I believe it does.

I am not arguing that business and technology are wrong. Nor is thinking scientifically or enjoying the good things of life in any way negative. What I am arguing is that they are never enough. To be a truly authentic human being one needs a wider lens. We need a lens that sees into the mysteries of life and the complexities of life. This way of seeing admits that the secular lens can never comprehend the fullness of life in all its richness and beauty.

Can you imagine being at that picnic on the hillside in Galilee without Jesus? You would certainly have the lovely view, the green grass, maybe the food, but there would be no larger or deeper reason to be there. There would be no message that makes sense of your life, gives you a depth and reason to wake up in the morning and to keep on going. There would be no centre, no significant meaning to the event, no meaning to life.

John's Gospel tells not only of the picnics we enjoy, but also speaks to the pain and fears in our lives, and where we experience God in these downtimes. Although these downtimes are certainly not the will of God, God does permit them

to happen. It is simply the product living in a fallen world. The text tells of Jesus' disciples in a boat on a stormy Lake. It's dark and they are struggling. Whatever we may think of Jesus' mode of travel that night, the point is that He comes to the rescue of his friends. It is easy for us to be distracted by the water-walking aspect of this story, because we know that people don't

Stop and Think

- 1. What is the lens through which you see the world?*
- 2. Do you focus on material circumstances alone or tend to see a broader reality?*

walk on water. But, when we employ a wider spiritual lens, the lens of faith, then the question is not just how Jesus comes but *why* He comes. The simple answer is: He comes to rescue his friends. His words to them were, “Take courage, it’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

One of the results of living in a disenchanted world is that, in troubled times, we find ourselves very much alone. We have questions but no answers. No longer are we naturally driven to our knees. In the words of the psalmist, “we walk through the valley of death”, but there is no rod and staff to protect us.

A few years ago, I was ministering to a woman whose marriage I had conducted some years before. About four years prior to our conversation, her husband had died of cancer. Within a year or so, she herself had been diagnosed and was enduring chemotherapy. As we might well understand, she could have felt cheated and cynical about spiritual things, but not so! She confessed to me a new presence in her life, “Bill, it sounds crazy to some of my friends, but God has joined me on this journey, his presence and compassion are carrying me. I’m not sure where this is taking me but I know I will never be alone again.” This woman had not been particularly religious, but somehow she knew to employ this different lens, a lens that gave her a broader and deeper insight into life that one does not find naturally in the disenchanted world.

The author, John Geiger, wrote a book entitled, *The Third Man Factor*. He documents a strange but not uncommon experience by people in crisis who fear for their lives. The list includes 9/11 survivors, mountain climbers, prisoners of war, aviators and astronauts. All have escaped traumatic events and tell strikingly similar stories of having experienced the close presence of a helper or guardian, this third man. Geiger writes that there is ample evidence, often in the same language of this unseen friend, this helper, to dismiss it as some hallucination. Our text from John identifies who this helper is and

what he might want to say to us, “Take courage I am with you. Do not be afraid.”

One of the strange contradictions of life is that it is often when we are in crisis, when we are vulnerable and feeling helpless, that we are more open to spiritual help. As one author put it, “Grace grows better in winter.” It is too often in the down times, the dark times where we learn to depend on God alone and grow deeper in our faith in him.

Anne Lamott, in her book, *Grace Eventually*, declares, “I wish grace and healing were more abracadabra, an easy and quick kind of thing. But no, it is in the clog and the slog of life, in the silence and the dark where we find this wonderful grace. I suppose that if you were snatched out of the mess, you’d miss the lesson, the lesson that grace is to be found in the downs as well as the uptimes of life.”

Finally, what might this motivate us to do? Can I suggest two things? First, that we acknowledge the presence of God in our picnic times, our uptimes. It means being a practicing Christian not just a passive or nominal Christian. Living in our current disenchanting leave-God-out world means that it is much harder than it has been to practise faith. It means most of us are doing it on our own. Our culture does not help us. Quite the opposite. Acknowledging the presence of God means taking time apart from the regular routine. It means setting aside Sunday morning as a time to be with God, whether in church or in some quiet place. It means grace at meals, saying thank you for something you did not create yourself. It means setting aside a daily quiet time for meditation, prayer and the reading of Scripture or some devotional book. Secondly it means acting and behaving in a way that our culture finds counterintuitive. It means defying a gravity that pulls us down into thinking solely about ourselves and our immediate needs. Just as Jesus walked on water for the sake of his friends, we need to behave in this counter-intuitive way, out of love for someone else.

I once talked to a man who told me how lonely he was. He lamented that he had few friends and those he did have were always too busy for him. He was a former member of the military and I suggested he become a volunteer at the veterans' unit in our hospital. "Oh, I don't have the skills for that," he responded. He was giving in to this gravity that was telling him he wasn't capable of just talking or listening to veterans. By defying that downward pull and moving out of his comfort zone he could have rescued someone else from their loneliness and maybe found a new friend.

Stop and Think

1. Do you sometimes disparage your own skills and abilities? Do you think this limits your opportunities to serve others and to serve God?

I read recently of a group of retired teachers who wanted to do something about the dropout rate of young people in the schools in their region. In the previous year their Board of Education had reported 1,667 grade eleven and twelve students had dropped out of school. The Board also reported that school dropouts cost 1.3 million annually in social assistance and criminal justice expenses. As a response, they came up with a novel approach. A team of retired teachers and guidance counsellors worked the phones late that August. They dialled every phone number they could find, refusing to settle for answering machines or voicemail. They reached all but fifteen students and persuaded 864 to come back to school. Nearly 300 graduated the following June and hundreds more are back in the system. The natural thing would be to just let these kids go. They were tough to teach and disrupted the classroom. But, these educators were prepared to think differently. One could say that they were prepared to "walk on water" to save these kids.

And so in the ups and downs of our human experiences, God in his mercy both provides the picnic in times of relative peace and his redeeming presence in times of struggle and

pain. He makes sense of what life is all about, adding wonder, mystery and fullness to life. In addition, in those times of “secret wounds and silent cries”, he comes to us as a helper and a friend saying, “Take courage it is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. Share about one of the ‘picnic times’ in your life. What made it so good? Did you recognize God as the provider of that blessing?
2. Share about one of the ‘dark times’. Did God come to you saying something like, ‘don’t be afraid’? Can you describe how He came to you or how you sensed his presence?
3. Charles Taylor claims that the progress of modernity has led us to find our meaning and security in material gain and leave God out. Do you agree? Why do you think that happens?
4. Are we more likely to neglect God in good times or in times of trouble? What evidence have you seen to support your position? Why do you think this is so?
5. How do you see the world – are you more likely to limit your thinking to what is ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ or do you see reality beyond the naturalistic world? If the latter, how do your friends, family and acquaintances react?
6. What does Bishop Hockin suggest we might do to widen our lens, to be able to experience God’s presence more consistently in our lives?
7. What do you do to acknowledge God in your daily life? What might you do to add to this?

8. Are you called to some service, to do something for the sake of others?
 9. What about corporately, is your church or Christian community being called to service for others? What might that be?
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Going Deeper Into Scripture

Read John 6:6-21

1. What are the similarities between these two stories? The differences?
2. In the first story, why are the crowds of people following Jesus? Do you know of people today who follow him for similar motives? How about yourself?
3. How do the disciples respond to Jesus question about buying bread for the crowd?
4. What does their response say about the lens through which they saw the circumstances before them?
5. How do the people respond to the meal Jesus provided?
6. What is his response to this? Why?
7. The disciples witness the miraculous feeding of the crowd and share, we assume, the crowds' awe for Jesus. Does that experience change the lens through which they see events in the world? How do you know?
8. Have you ever had a set of experiences like this – one that bolsters your faith followed by one that challenges it? How did you react? Why is it so difficult to permanently change our lens on reality to include the spiritual realm?

Chapter Five

When It's Hard to Believe

The Gospel of John 6: 60-69

60 Many of Jesus' disciples heard him and said, "This is too hard for anyone to understand." **61** Jesus knew that his disciples were grumbling. So he asked, "Does this bother you? **62** What if you should see the Son of Man go up to heaven where he came from? **63** The Spirit is the one who gives life! Human strength can do nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are from that life-giving Spirit. **64** But some of you refuse to have faith in me." Jesus said this, because from the beginning he knew who would have faith in him. He also knew which one would betray him.

65 Then Jesus said, "You cannot come to me, unless the Father makes you want to come. That is why I have told these things to all of you."

66 Because of what Jesus said, many of his disciples turned their backs on him and stopped following him. **67** Jesus then asked his twelve disciples if they were going to leave him. **68** Simon Peter answered, "Lord, there is no one else that we can go to! Your words give eternal life. **69** We have faith in you, and we are sure that you are God's Holy One."

Pre-reading reflection:

What aspects of Christian teaching do you struggle with or find difficult to accept? How do those difficulties affect your faith?

Just as we experience ups and downs in our personal lives, the same can happen in our spiritual lives. We go through periods when our spiritual life is strong and upbeat

but there are also times of discouragement when God's face is clouded and we feel his absence. These challenging times can happen when the faith community or church we belong to is struggling with their identity, theology and mission. It may be that we hear a lot of complaining about leadership. People argue and become offended and threaten to walk away, finding church life too difficult to continue. So it is that while John, Chapter 6, begins with a happy crowd of five thousand people following Jesus, hanging on his every word, enjoying a picnic on a break sunny afternoon, it ends very differently.

Some of the key verses from the text are: (verse 41) "The people started grumbling", (verse 52) "The people began to argue", (verse 60) "This is a difficult teaching" (verse 66) "Many no longer followed him." When you take all these verses together, it describes a very unhappy church. There is grumbling, there is arguing, there is offense, and people start to leave.

Chapter 6 begins with crowds in the thousands turning out to hear Jesus preach and ends with those same thousands leaving him. The crowds have been reduced to the twelve disciples. There is much in these verses reminiscent of what's happening in many of our churches today. The crowds that we remember back in the 60's, 70's and even 80's are no longer here. People have left the church for all sorts of reasons and many are offended at what Christianity is all about. I remember a young woman in a confirmation class telling me that she was leaving because the more she looked into the history of the Church, the more she was offended by it. She said, "I need a less offensive religion."

There's no question that, for many people, these last verses of Chapter 6 would be troubling. It is very personal, with Jesus referring to himself as the bread of life, something that

Stop and Think

- 1. Do you know people who have grumbled to the point of leaving the church or a particular congregation?*
- 2. What about yourself, are you a frequent grumbler?*

you internalize, consume, take into your inmost being, in order to find a more satisfying life. For some, this was too close, too much in your face. These folks were all fine with being fed at the picnic. They were excited about all the food left over. They were fine with the miracles and the healing, but to get too close to this man, Jesus, this very mysterious man, was hard to take and hard to understand. One of the keys to understanding these last verses of Chapter 6 is that Jesus is taking his disciples deeper into the mystery of what it is to believe in Him. Earlier in the chapter he says to them, “Don’t spend all your time on food that perishes but on food that endures for eternal life.” These verses in John describe a journey into spiritual growth and the pain and the struggle that sometimes goes with that.

Jean Vanier, in his commentary on John’s gospel, observes, “The movement from a faith in an all powerful God, who protects us and takes care of us, to a God who is flesh and blood as we are, who wants to be our friend and personal Redeemer, is just too big a jump for some people to make, and they turn away.”

Perhaps we can understand it best when we go to Chapter 15: 15 and see how Jesus uses two words. He says, “So far I have called you servants, but now I call you friends.” Could it be that Chapter 6, is the start of the story of this transition from being a servant of God to being a friend of God? It is a study of two spiritualities, that of servant and friend. Being a servant of God doesn’t sound all that bad. A servant is submissive, does what they are told, follows the rules, stays out of trouble, goes to church regularly and takes up the offering. Few of us would object to the epitaph, “Here lies a servant of God.”

Stop and Think

1. Would you rather be God’s servant or his friend? Why?

The other side of the servant–master relationship is distance. The servant never knows what the master is doing

(John 15: 15). There is no sit-down-for-coffee relationship. They eat and live in different rooms. There are clear limits to the relationship. Perhaps, for a lot of people we know who have dropped out of church, this is the reason: What they received from the church was a spirituality of service. It was all about “ask not what the church and God can do for you, but what you can do for the church and for God.”

To be a friend, however, which is the clear invitation from Jesus in John 15: 15, is to be closer. It is the language of relationship and intimacy. The story of Mary and Martha in Luke, Chapter 10, illustrates the difference very well. Martha plays the servant at that luncheon and the results are anger, competition, and frustration. Mary, on the other hand, plays the friend, sitting at Jesus feet, listening, engaging and growing in her knowledge of him.

Jean Vanier refers to this level of spirituality as mutual indwelling. “This kind of friendship implies equality between people, each one open and vulnerable to the other. In this friendship we give up our personal autonomy, we die a little to self, in order to make room for the other.”

The drama of these last verses of the chapter comes when Jesus approaches his inner twelve, perhaps hurt or at least perplexed by these defections and asks, “What about you? Do you also want to leave?” After I’m sure a bit of silence, Peter, speaks for the twelve saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we believe and know that you are the holy one of God.”

Peter was not saying, “Lord, we understand all your difficult teaching. We could pass the exam and all would get A’s.” For them faith was not having all the t’s crossed and the i’s dotted, but rather they had a relationship, a friendship with their lord and master.

A friend of mine was very hurt over reports of sex scandals and child abuse in his church. His wife was refusing to go to worship services she was so offended and hurt. “But for

me,” my friend said, “My faith doesn’t depend on clergy. It doesn’t depend on what the authorities say. My faith is about

Jesus.” Like Peter, he said, “Lord, where else can I go? You’ve got all.” I believe that rather than words that produce mutterings, argument and offense, these last verses of John described how the twelve disciples have moved successfully, from a spirituality based on service to a spirituality based on friendship and grace.

Stop and Think

1. Have any events or circumstances shaken your faith? Did you decide to remain faithful or to abandon faith? Why?

First, let’s examine the question, “Lord to whom shall we go?” (verse 6). This suggests the need to practice an openness, a questioning and a searching for a deeper reality of God. Where can we go? Professor Charles Taylor writes, “Many today are looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, immediacy, spontaneity and spiritual growth. It is a spirituality of quest, a spirituality of a pilgrim seeker.” It is a spirituality that can embrace the doubts and questions so many of us have, holding onto Jesus himself, while admitting we are on a journey of faith.

We remember Thomas, one of Jesus’ disciples. He was a man with many questions. After Easter (John 20) he has serious doubts about Jesus’ resurrection until he comes face-to-face with the risen Christ. Jesus does not chastise him or humiliate him for his uncertainty, but accepts him and loves him and gives him what he needs. As well, there is the story in Mark’s gospel of a father who brings his tortured son to be healed. Jesus says to him, “Everything is possible for him who believes.” And the father responds, “I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief.” There is an uncertainty that is not healthy. We could call it agnosticism, something that some people get stuck in, that blocks faith from growing. A healthier approach is to pray as that father did, “I do believe but help me overcome my unbelief.”

Secondly, verse 68 gives us a reason for hope, “You, Jesus, have the words of eternal life.” This is a faith that is upfront about who is the reason for its existence. It says without apology that Jesus Christ is this voice, its power, its good. It is not our venerable tradition or its beloved liturgy that holds the center. It is about Jesus and befriending him. Someone can walk into church, carrying a lot of baggage and have a lot of doubts and questions. But, if the prime message is about a Saviour who loves you, accepts you as you are, forgives all your offenses and offers you a second chance to live again, it is hard to walk away.

For Christians, Jesus is the human face of God. It is in the person and life of Jesus where we see what God is really like and how he feels about us. As Peter says, “Who else is there? You have the words of eternal life.”

Finally, let’s look at Peter’s words in verse 69. “We believe and know.” In a book by Diana Butler Bass called *Christianity After Religion*, the author argues that the word “belief” has undergone a change in meaning over the last several hundred years. Today it has come to mean, according to the Oxford dictionary, “a firm opinion, intelligent conviction.” The more ancient sense of belief meant trust. Belief was a thing of the heart more than a thing of the mind. It was more experience than dogmatic fact.

Archbishop Rowan Williams suggests that “I believe” is better understood as “I take refuge in.” He explains that to understand our relationship with the Creed, for instance, we could better say, “I take refuge in God, the Father Almighty. I take refuge in Jesus Christ, his only son. I take refuge in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church.” Rather than belief being just an intellectual assent or personal opinion, belief becomes an act of the heart, an act of surrender not just of the mind that of the heart as well.

As we pass through these difficult times, where the crowds may be thinning and all of us are getting a little older

and our children doing other things on Sunday morning, there are three things that may help us:

First, practise this healthy searching. Acknowledge insecurity and uncertainty about religious things. We might say that we are solid in the center but loose around the edges. Believing but working at our unbelief.

Second, see Jesus Christ as our center, as our way, our true friend.

And third, see belief as a thing of the heart, “taking refuge from all the darkness and uncertainty of life in the God who loves us and has made us to be his.”

All these things can happen by moving from a spirituality of service to a spirituality of friendship. That is a spirituality of intimacy, of communion, of mutual indwelling.

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. Fill out the chart below and share your responses.

*Aspects of Christianity or
Christian teaching I find most
appealing.*

*Aspects of Christianity or
Christian teaching I find most
difficult to accept or believe.*

2. Have you ever been tempted to abandon Christianity? Why? If you decided to stay, what factors played into that decision?
3. What is the difference between being a servant and being a friend of God?
4. In what ways might being a servant be easier and less demanding than being a friend?
5. What are the advantages of being a friend?
6. Would you describe your spirituality as one based on service or on friendship and grace? Why?
7. Drawing on the writing of Charles Taylor, Bishop Hockin argues that a mature spirituality is one “that can embrace the doubts and questions so many of us have.” Is that characteristic of your spirituality? If so, how have you come to be able to embrace doubts and questions and yet maintain faith?
8. Is your own belief more of mind or heart? Why do you say so?
9. How can we move toward the three aspects of a healthy spirituality discussed by Bishop Hockin: practising a healthy searching; seeing Jesus as our center and true friend; and believing from the heart?

Going Deeper Into Scripture

Read John 6: 25-69

1. In this passage Jesus make a series of claims about himself and demands on those who would follow. Using the chart below list these claims and demands.

Claims Jesus makes about himself.

Demands imposed on those who would follow him.

2. Which of the claims or demands seem to confuse or bother his audience?
3. Which of the claims or demands do you think would be most offensive to people today? Why?
4. How about you, do you find any of these claims or demands difficult and hard to accept? Why?
5. Do you sometimes find preaching or teaching in the church difficult and hard to accept? Is it possible the problem lies with you and not the preacher? How could you tell?
6. As a result of this difficult teaching many people decide to stop following Jesus but the 12 stay, why?
7. What about you, do the difficult teachings of Jesus tempt you to leave? How do you deal with them?

Part Two – *Surprises in the Parables of Jesus*

Chapter Six

The God Who Runs to Meet Us

Luke 15: 11-32

11 Jesus also told them another story:

Once a man had two sons. **12** The younger son said to his father, “Give me my share of the property.” So the father divided his property between his two sons.

13 Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. **14** He had spent everything, when a bad famine spread through that whole land. Soon he had nothing to eat.

15 He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs.[a] **16** He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating,[b] but no one gave him a thing.

17 Finally, he came to his senses and said, “My father’s workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! **18** I will go to my father and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. **19** I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers.’”

20 The younger son got up and started back to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him.

21 The son said, “Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son.”

22 But his father said to the servants, “Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals[c] for his feet. **23** Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat and celebrate. **24** This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life. He was lost and has now been found.” And they began to celebrate.

25 The older son had been out in the field. But when he came near the house, he heard the music and dancing. **26** So he called one of the servants over and asked, “What’s going on here?”

27 The servant answered, “Your brother has come home safe and sound, and your father ordered us to kill the best calf.” **28** The older brother got so angry that he would not even go into the house.

His father came out and begged him to go in. **29** But he said to his father, “For years I have worked for you like a slave and have always obeyed you. But you have never even given me a little goat, so that I could give a dinner for my friends. **30** This other son of yours wasted your money on prostitutes. And now that he has come home, you ordered the best calf to be killed for a feast.”

31 His father replied, “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. **32** But we should be glad and celebrate! Your brother was dead, but he is now alive. He was lost and has now been found.”

Pre-reading reflection:

Have you ever wished you could go back to the beginning and start life over? If so, what would you do differently?

I’ve been reading a book entitled, *God Never Blinks*, by Regina Brett. It is a New York Times bestseller, and contains fifty short chapters. It was Chapter 19 that caught my eye. The title is: It’s Never Too Late to Have a Happy Childhood – But the Second One is Up to You and No One Else. Brett tells of her own childhood growing up as one of eleven children. As she says, the photo albums were full of pictures of

the first four children, but she was seventh so she missed the album. “I hated my birthday,” she said, “it reminded me of the big mistake that I was, or felt I was. No matter what present I got, it didn’t touch that place inside me that felt so forgotten and alone.”

So many of us when we’re really honest and maybe a little down can feel like that. We can remember how we reacted in childhood or in our teen years to a life that never met our expectations. Some of us may have had tragic or troubled childhoods where parents were too busy to care for us or worse. The fact is that none of us can change our childhood years. A mountain of tears and regret and anger cannot correct our lost childhood but, as Brett suggests, “it’s never too late to find a second, a happy one, a second childhood where we not only become children again but where we find a new relationship with a parent, a parent who loves and adores us, no matter what mistakes we have made or how we have blown our lives.”

Stop and Think

- 1. How would you describe your childhood?*
- 2. Do you think new beginnings are possible?*

All of this brings us to a story of Jesus that we call, “The Parable of Two Sons.” The story describes two sons who discovered their second childhood through engaging in a new relationship with their father. What it essentially tells us is it’s never too late. Yes, it is up to us but it all depends on the parent we discover and how he responds to us.

Many of us know the story of the two sons, but let’s briefly review it. According to Luke, Chapter 15, a father has two sons. The eldest is any parent’s dream. He, like his father, is a farmer and loyal to the family business. He is faithful. He is a man that follows the rules. We might imagine him singing in the choir, being in church every Sunday. But, his younger brother is something else! Even at a young age he is restless, never satisfied, never works that hard, plays a lot and of course sleeps in on Sunday morning! Then in his

early 20s the younger son decides to leave the family to find a life of excitement. According to the text he seeks a far country. Before leaving he has the gall to ask his father for half of the family estate and to his surprise, his father gives it to him. The father has to mortgage the farm and sell some of the livestock, but the younger son gets what he wants.

Over the next few months, this younger son spends all his money on a good time, enjoying the proverbial wine, women and song. Then things start to fall apart. He has little education and little experience, and the only job he can get is feeding the pigs on a hog farm, and as the story progresses, no one gave him anything. After days or weeks of doing what he hates most, he comes to his senses. He starts thinking of home and his father. He becomes honest for the first time in a long time and writes a speech of contrition and heads for home. It was a long way. According to the text, as this younger son gets close to his home, perhaps a kilometre away, his father sees him coming.

Overwhelmed with joy the father runs, embraces him and upon hearing a few lines of his very sorry speech, orders the farmhands to bring a new robe, a new ring and a new pair of shoes. As well as that, he orders up a party with prime rib and calls the neighbours in to join him to celebrate his son's return.

In the meantime, the older brother happened to be returning from the fields. As usual, he had been faithful, following the rules, being a good son. He sees the crowd around his home; hears the music and gets a whiff of the cooking beef and is surprised. He asks one of the servants what is going on and the answer floors him! "It's your brother, the one who left home. He has returned and your father has thrown him a party and invited all the neighbours." The older son is shocked. Again, according to the text, he becomes angry and refuses to enter the house. His father comes out to him, and tries to persuade him to join the party. The older son responds, "Look dad, for all these years, I've worked hard for you. I've

never complained, but in all that time you never threw me a party for my friends. But this loser brother of mine, blows half your money, disgraces the family, showing up with nothing to show for his lost years and you throw a party!” The father responds, I’m sure with his hand on his shoulder and lovingly says to him, “Son, you are always with me. Everything I have is yours, but your brother came home, I love him too. He was lost and now is found. I thought he was dead but now he is alive again.”

Stop and Think

1. Do you think the older brother was justified in feeling shock and betrayal? Why or why not?

It’s a wonderful story because it describes two ways that people of faith find this second chance for a happy life. One could say it is a story of how people find a new birth or a new way to find God. Whenever I hear stories from people about their faith journey and how they became Christians, the stories usually describe either of two scenarios. Both are stories of grace, but they are very different.

First, many of us, like the older son, grow up in the church. We are faithful, we are fairly moral and we serve in some capacity the needs of others. We may have few doubts and we love the church. The church has become for us the place of refuge and safety. When confronted with contradictions in the way the church behaves, we are able to deal with that without much of a struggle. Possibly we’ve got a younger sister who behaved badly, had a baby, left home and lives on assistance. We might compare ourselves with her and thus look pretty good even feel morally superior. Regarding matters of faith we are confident and certain of the promises of God.

For the first 45 years of my life this was me! I was a faithful son, went to church and sang in the choir. Academically I was not over the top, but I squeezed through! After secondary school I went to seminary, graduated and got a good curacy and later some good appointments eventually

servicing in one of Canada's largest congregations. I remember a friend exclaiming, "Bill, you have arrived. This is the big time." But I knew that I had not arrived! Just scratch the surface of my heart, and you would see a very unhappy man. Hidden from everyone was a marriage in tatters. In spite of years of counselling and trying to work things out ourselves, that which had been hidden so long was finally out in the open. I had always been very bitter when I heard of a colleague getting divorced. I was judgmental and stayed away from them. But now all this had happened to me! This was devastating and I experienced great shame and much guilt. For so long I had trusted in my own righteousness, my Anglican pedigree. I thought that this is all I needed. But I was wrong, very wrong. Like the older brother, I got angry and bitter and even when God invited me to a new place, I at

first refused and stayed outside. Eventually however, I had to give in to a God who I had never experienced before. This was a God of grace. A God who just wants some sign of needing to change, a sign of repentance and remorse, and he jumps, reminding us that all he has belongs to us.

Stop and Think

- 1. What do you hide from others?*
- 2. Might it be better out in the open in the long run?*

I don't think my story is unique. There are a lot of us who grew up in the church, perhaps firstborn children. We did all the right things, we were faithful, perhaps felt an entitlement to God's presence. We might have said, "He owes us a good life", and we ride along feeling very much in control. Until, if we are lucky, something happens! Something that is life threatening, reputation threatening, or something we never dreamed of. Perhaps, it's that younger sister who comes home, and there's a party, and we feel left out. Sometimes this happens in midlife, and it's painful and we wonder what to do, and our old faith doesn't work for us anymore. This is the way many of us come to faith after many years of service then a crisis.

The second way many people come to faith is certainly more dramatic. We have no history of faithfulness. We've always done it our way, and for several years it may have worked. We have never gone to church, as a matter of fact we have ridiculed the faith calling anybody who did practise a faith hypocrites. Their anthem was Paul Anka's still popular song, "I Did it My Way." Then we get into trouble and we lose it all overnight. This is the story of many old saints of the church. It is the story of St. Augustine and St. Francis. These were lives committed to self-indulgence and then a crisis happens and God intervenes.

It is also the story of an American woman named Jordan Monge who grew up an atheist and was proud of it. "By age eleven my atheism was so widely known in middle school that a Christian boy threatened to come over to my house and burn it down. Then, at twenty I headed to Harvard to study government and politics. I was an "A" student, and had a great atheist future. I believed that Harvard would confirm all my beliefs. But I was surprised! In November of my first term I read an article by John Joseph Porter written in a Christian Journal. I wrote a critique of the article and he responded. Never before had I met a Christian who had responsible answers for my many questions and unlike me he was a very gentle person. He introduced me to the writings of C.S. Lewis and through it all I started to change. And then slowly but clearly, God revealed himself to me through Scripture, prayer and the new relationships that I discovered in a Christian community. I was baptized on Easter Sunday 2009. The journey is not over, but I am committed to follow the way of Christ wherever it may lead. I went to Harvard to confirm my atheism, instead I met God there, or maybe he found me!"

It's important to see in the journeys of these two brothers in our text that, although both come to it differently, they both return to the same home. One has always been there, the other comes back from a far country. What is the same is the father

that they meet. For both of them the meeting initiates a new relationship with him. Both are met with a profound grace that they had never seen in him before. In response to the younger son, the father gives him freedom even to leave him. But the father never forgets him. Never stops loving him. When he meets him on the road, there is no judgment, or condemnation, no mandatory behaviour modification course! No, here is a God who runs to meet him, who sees him coming, prepares a barbecue and throws a party as well as dresses him in the very best. It is the same for us older brothers. Even when we get better and refuse to share the joy of God over a repentant brother, this God, like the father, comes out to us, assuring us that we are always his and all he has belongs to us, and we are invited to initiate a new relationship with our brother, a relationship that we have never had before.

Another chapter in the book by Regina Brett, is entitled, *God Loves You Because of Who God Is, Not Because of Anything You Did or Didn't Do*. It's a humbling lesson to learn, regardless of our faith journey. Brett tells the story of going on a spiritual retreat. She was assigned to Father Francis, a Trappist priest, as her spiritual director. As she recalls, "I shared my confessional laundry list, my many defects, envy and resentments. The old monk sat there and smiled! I waited for his profound truths to soothe my soul. Instead the monk said, 'Can I tell you a story about a father with two sons!!' My heart sank! I already knew the story. But the monk was all excited. He told the parable in slow motion, every detail. Yeah, yeah I thought. I've heard it all before. I expected a few lines from Thomas Merton or a little Zen or maybe Henry Nouwen but all I got was a rerun."

"He told it all – his face glowed, mine darkened. He was siding with the wrong son. What does this have to do with me? The monk repeated the ending, 'The son didn't have to apologize. He didn't have to make amends. All he had to do is turn to his Father. That was it.' And I came to see that's all

any of us have to do. ‘God loves us because of who God is.’ the monk said, ‘Not because of who we are.’ At first, it stung, like a slap in my face. Then I started to get it. God didn’t want my perfect offering. God didn’t care if I was the best writer or the best volunteer since Mother Theresa. God didn’t care if I’d made a mess of my life. God loves me – it’s God’s nature to love. I can’t earn that love and I can’t lose that love. I am home with my Father at his invitation and all I have to do is to turn in His direction and He does the rest.”

It’s never too late to have that second childhood, because it all depends on this divine parent that you find in later life and however we do it, this Parent, the God and Father of Lord Jesus Christ, is there waiting to say to us either “Here is the best.” Or “I’m always with you. All you have to do it turn to me.”

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. Bishop Hockin writes that the brothers in this story illustrate common traits that many of us share, which of the brothers are you most like? Are you more like the faithful older son or the young rebel? Why do you say so?
2. Hard times cause the younger brother to take stock and recognize his mistakes. Have you had a similar experience of being brought up short? What caused it? How did you react? Do you think God used the situation?
3. The older son is shocked and hurt by the grace the father shows his brother. In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey argues that grace often offends our sense of justice because it seems that someone is getting away with something for which they should be punished. Have you ever felt that way? What was the situation?
4. Jordan Monge ran from God and found him waiting where she least expected it. Have you ever found God's grace and comfort in surprising circumstances? How was it made known to you?
5. Bishop Hockin writes, "it is never too late to have that second childhood, because it all depends on this divine parent that you find later in life. . ." Do you believe that? Can you accept the fact that God runs toward you no matter who you are or what you have done? If so, how does that change your outlook on the future? If not, what are the obstacles that prevent you from accepting God's grace?
6. What might we do as individuals and church communities to be more like the father who shows unconditional love?

Going Deeper Into Scripture

Reread Luke 15: 11-32

1. Inheritances are normally distributed after death so why do you think the father agreed to give the younger son his early?
2. Couldn't the father have prevented the younger boy's waywardness simply by denying him the money?
3. Do you think it was an easy decision to pay up?
4. What does the young man come to realize about his own life?
5. Given how he had insulted his father and squandered his inheritance, why would the younger son expect to be shown any mercy at home?
6. Like many siblings, these brothers are very different and those differences are easy to see. Are there any ways in which they are alike?
7. At different points in the story both brothers find themselves estranged from their father. What is the source of each brother's estrangement? Which kind of estrangement do you think more difficult to overcome? Why?
8. Do you feel close to God? If not, what is the source of your estrangement from the loving Heavenly Father? What might you do to take a step toward home?

Chapter Seven

Sometimes It Takes a Broken Heart

Mark 4: 1-8

1 The next time Jesus taught beside Lake Galilee, a big crowd gathered. It was so large that he had to sit in a boat out on the lake, while the people stood on the shore. **2** He used stories to teach them many things, and this is part of what he taught:

3 Now listen! A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field. **4** While the farmer was scattering the seed, some of it fell along the road and was eaten by birds. **5** Other seeds fell on thin, rocky ground and quickly started growing because the soil wasn't very deep. **6** But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and dried up, because they did not have enough roots. **7** Some other seeds fell where thornbushes grew up and choked out the plants. So they did not produce any grain. **8** But a few seeds did fall on good ground where the plants grew and produced thirty or sixty or even a hundred times as much as was scattered.

Pre-reading reflection:

Can you think of times when you have been particularly receptive to messages or promptings from God in your life? How about times when you have been more cynical or closed about these kinds of things? What do you think accounts for these different levels of openness?

I once read about a high tech mining company that specialized in the renewal of old abandoned gold mines. These were mines that former generations thought were exhausted and of no value. Because of new satellite technology, fresh or forgotten deposits were discovered. I think that too often the parables of Jesus from the Gospels have been treated like these old mines. We may think we have mined all we can. We think we know exactly what they mean and we know we have heard it all before! Even preachers can be guilty of abandoning the parables, thinking they have nothing new to say. Perhaps we have made a big mistake. Maybe we have quit too soon. Like the mining company we need to go back and perhaps find new deposits of truths. The parables of Jesus are like these old mines, stories that never stopped giving highly valued truths. Like the man who told them, there is no limit to what they can reveal.

With that in mind, let's look at the parable of the sower. It's important to note that in Matthew, Mark and Luke this parable is the first one Jesus told. It comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, during a time when he was very popular. Mark, in our text, uses the phrase "crowds" several times. This meant that things were going very well for Jesus. We can imagine chairs in the aisles and crowds brimming with great enthusiasm. It's interesting that Jesus' first parable is about the process of communicating the message of God, and how some get it and some do not. It's a story for all of us that works as a reality check on our best efforts.

After a Sunday service one morning, a woman shared with me the fact that out of her nine children only two of them in adulthood went to church. "Why?" she asked, "All of them had the same prayers at home. All of them went to the same church and Sunday School. Where did I go wrong?" Many of us can relate to that story. Why have so many of our children, after hearing the gospel and being nurtured in our best churches, lost their faith in later life?

Stop and Think

1. Do you know of people in similar circumstances with similar backgrounds who respond quite differently to God? Why do you think it happens?

I asked a friend of mine in the communications business about the prime essentials for marketing a message. He gave me three points. First, you need to have something good to say, something that you believe and are committed to. Secondly, you need a good communicator, using language that people understand. Thirdly, you need someone to hear it, a market. As Jesus put it in the parable, you need seed, a sower, and good soil. The goal of this enterprise, this sowing of the word of God, is that when the seed connects with the right kind of soil, something transformative happens. When God's word, the seed, his message of love and grace, is welcomed into an open and receptive heart something new and redemptive begins to happen.

And so let's talk about the seed, the sower and the soil.

According to the text, "the seed is the word of God". [Luke 8:11]. It is the message, the active language of God that will convey the ability for anyone to become fully human. That ability comes by God's grace alone. It is always his initiative that makes this transformation happen. It's like a seed, this message of God that contains all you need to live for a fully human life. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly". Certainly in Jesus' mind and in the language of the parable the seed is something to be trusted. This is not a message that is compromised or flawed by culture. It is fresh new seed. In Jesus' mind he is the sower and his seed is the message of the kingdom of God. As Jesus says in Luke 4:18, "The spirit of the Lord is on me. He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. To bind up the broken-hearted, to give freedom to prisoners, sight for the blind and to release the oppressed". One problem for us, living in the twenty-first century in a pluralistic world, is there seems to be many types of seed or faith

around. This raises questions as to the veracity of which seed really works.

Certainly a test for me as to the authenticity of the seed is the place of Jesus in the message. Any message that is going to be effective coming from the church must be Jesus-centered and focused. As well, it needs to be rooted in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, in the story of God reaching out to broken people like us. By his grace he accepts us, forgives us and loves us into a different and more fully productive life. As well, our message needs to be supported by the best traditions of the church. After all, in all of the last twenty centuries, God has had his faithful witnesses and the message they spoke is vital to our understanding of the message today. We could say that the seed is that “peace that passes understanding”, that love “that never lets us go”, “a joy that no one takes from us”, a face “that will never turn away”.

Secondly, let’s consider the sower. The picture we get from the parable is that he is a very generous sower. Barbara Brown Taylor calls him, “the extravagant sower”. “A sower that does not seem to be fazed by rocks and thorns who flings the seed everywhere, wastes it, feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks and is not afraid of thorns.” Human genius does not sow like this. We have taught ourselves to be selective, to carefully research a market before investing.

We are afraid of waste, knowing that our seed is limited. A more careful sower wouldn’t have bothered with the hard places, the shallow places, rocky and thorny places. He would have gone right to an open plowed field. But, this sower doesn’t do this. Because he is the God of lost causes and second chances, a God who goes to the publicans and sinners, to the Matthews and the Mary Magdalenes, very rocky ground, but ground nonetheless that, God knows, can bear good fruit.

Stop and Think

- 1. When you first heard the word of God were you “good soil” or “very rocky ground”?*

Remember, Jesus said that he came to call not righteous people “but sinners”.

Brennan Manning wrote, “Jesus comes not for the super spiritual but for the wobbly and the weak kneed, people who know that they don’t have it all together, who can admit that they are up to here in rocks and thorns, who are not too proud to accept the handout ‘of amazing grace’.” This is the extravagant sower, God, at work.

Greek was a language I needed to study the New Testament while in seminary. There were 25 students in our class. After a month or so, the professor discovered who his best students were, those who loved Aristophanes and Aeschylus, and did their homework. These students were moved to the front of the room. The rest of us were left on our own, with no questions and no attention. This teacher had decided where his fertile ground was to be found and was planting his seed very economically.

I want to tell you, that the God of the New Testament is not like this! He sows his seed in the hard places, the thorny places. His muddy footprints are to be found in prisons, faculty lounges and corporate boardrooms, as much as they are in hospitals and churches. There are no restrictions, no out-of-bounds where this sower will not go. It is comforting for me to know that my children and grandchildren, who may seem oblivious to holy things, who may be cynical about faith, are, as we speak, stepping on holy seeds every day. This is God trying to get their attention, even hoping that they might slip on one of those seeds, take a different turn and have a rethink about the amazing grace of God. This very generous extravagant God is always at work with no limit to his seed.

Finally, a word about the soils. Jesus in this parable, is making the point that belief is never automatic and seldom easy. Unless it makes contact with an open, vulnerable, even broken heart, not much will happen. The traditional interpretation of the soils is that it represents four different kinds of

people or four different kinds of human response.

First, there is the hard pathway. These are busy people, always rushing, who have passed over the open ground and as Joni Mitchell sings, “Put up a parking lot”. These folks always have the radio on or are texting, perhaps looking for the next message.

Then there is the group who live on superficialities. These are people committed to the “kingdom of thingdom”. They also live on superficial relationships never deep enough or long enough to bring tears to their eyes.

And then there are the thorny people. These are the confused folks who have allowed competing loyalties to take over their lives. Life gets choked, confused and lacks commitment. When the best does come, they cannot recognize it for what it is. The danger in this interpretation is that it may cause us to be judgmental. “After all, I’m a Christian. Obviously I have good soil but that brother-in-law of mine, well, you can see the thorns”. But I’m not sure we should rush to that conclusion.

Dr. Helmut Theileke, in his commentary, suggests that all four pieces of ground, including the fertile soil exist in every one of us. There are times when we get hardened to the voice of God, when life is too busy for prayer, where there’s nothing new going on. Likewise, there are times when we go through rocky relationships, times of conflicting loyalties, when our commitments are in conflict. Not everyone can admit to that. For those of us who can, who can admit to being the poor in spirit, the lost, the needy, the vulnerable, even the broken-hearted, then suddenly we find ourselves standing in open, receptive, repentant soil. At that moment, this sacred seed of God meets an open heart and transformation begins. This seed, perhaps hidden from view, opens up deep inside our lives and a new joy is born.

Stop and Think

1. Farmers work to prepare soil for planting. Is there anything we can do to prepare the soil of our hearts to better receive God’s grace?

So, we have a sower who sows his seed of new life, generously and extravagantly. We have seed that contains the means and the possibility for a new life. Then there's the soil, us, sometimes hard and closed, sometimes shallow and superficial, sometimes resistant and wanting to do life our way. But also, at our best moments, when we are vulnerable, repentant and even broken, with tears in our eyes, we engage with this sacred history of God's Spirit and will for our lives. In spite of our shame, sin and confusion, we are aware there is something new in our lives. Something that cries forgiven, accepted, needed and deeply loved.

The greatest sower of all time, at this very moment is throwing his seed all over the room where you are reading this. He's looking for an open heart, and don't worry He'll find me, find you.

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. Bishop Hockin opens this chapter with a story about about abandoned mines that are found to have hidden deposits of wealth and he urges us to approach Jesus parables in the same way. Have you ever had the experience of being surprised by new insights into a very old and familiar story? If so, what prompted this new learning?
2. In the twenty-first century, Bishop Hockin cautions, “there seems to be many types of seed or faith around.” What sorts of “seeds” have you consider as grounding for your life? How did they work out?
3. What criteria does Bishop Hockin suggest for judging among the many seeds or messages available in the contemporary world? Have you used these? Might there be other useful ones?
4. Bishop Hockin contrasts “the extravagant sower” of Jesus story with our often more scientific and targeted approach to the world. What is the danger in the latter? Do you know of unlikely people or groups who have responded positively to the gospel? What does this teach us about our interactions with others and the outreach mission of the church?
5. Can you think of examples of the different soils being present in your own life? What are those? How about right now, are there areas of your life where you are more or less open to God? What can you do to make the unproductive soil in your life more receptive to the divine sower’s seed?

Going Deeper Into Scripture

Read Mark 4: 1-20

1. Jesus draws a big crowd and is forced to teach from a boat off shore. What form did his teaching take? Why do you think he uses stories, why not just make clear and direct points?
2. What does Jesus say himself about his reason for using stories? How does that explanation strike you?
3. Why do you think he explains the meaning of the story to the disciples and not the crowd?
4. Can we learn anything from Jesus' style of teaching for our own interactions with people or about how we should approach teaching in the church?
5. Bishop Hockin makes the point that the sower in this story can be understood to represent Jesus himself but do you think it is limited to that? Who are – or should be – the sowers today? What can they – or we – learn from this story about how to approach sharing the word of God?
6. We meet the farmer in this story as he sets out to sow the seed but normally farmers work hard to prepare soil for planting. Do you think there is anything we can do as individuals or as the church to prepare the soil of our communities to be receptive to the gospel?

Chapter Eight

Fields of Dreams and Disappointments

Matthew 13: 24-30

24 Jesus then told them this story:

The kingdom of heaven is like what happened when a farmer scattered good seed in a field. **25** But while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and scattered weed seeds in the field and then left. **26** When the plants came up and began to ripen, the farmer's servants could see the weeds. **27** The servants came and asked, "Sir, didn't you scatter good seed in your field? Where did these weeds come from?"

28 "An enemy did this," he replied.

His servants then asked, "Do you want us to go out and pull up the weeds?"

29 "No!" he answered. "You might also pull up the wheat. **30** Leave the weeds alone until harvest time. Then I'll tell my workers to gather the weeds and tie them up and burn them. But I'll have them store the wheat in my barn."

Pre-reading reflection:

What are the things that disappoint you most about the world and about your own life? What prevents both from being 'perfect'? Can you imagine a better world and life? What do you think is the source of that imagining?

It seems that hardly a week goes by that we don't see or hear about horrendous things happening to young children and families. A seemingly ordinary man comes undone and kills his family. A mother murders her child for inexplicable reasons. Young boys pack a gun to school and take their rage out on their fellow students and teachers. We all live with memories of 9/11, Columbine and other unspeakable acts. Our reaction is both repulsion and moral outrage. Things like this should not happen. Children at school should be playing with one another in peace and harmony and not bullying or hurting each other. Parents should love and care for their children, not abuse or murder them. Heads of financial corporations should be leaders in the community, not icons of greed and corruption. There is a lot in life we cannot understand.

You may be familiar with the Old Testament character, Job. He was a good man who lived a very secure life. His children were healthy and successful. And then, almost overnight, he lost it all. His children die in a horrific accident. He becomes sick and cannot find relief. Job's reaction to this is outrage: I have lived a moral, faithful and good life. I never cheated anyone. I have been faithful to my wife, faithful to God. Why are these terrible things happening to me?

Stop and Think

1. Have you ever, like Job, felt that life has treated you unfairly? What were the circumstances? Did you react like him?

All of us have our own personal list of sad events. It may be an accident or a loss that has turned our family upside down. It could be sickness or a prolonged depression and we say, sometimes scream, "Why is this happening to me?" Most of us have this sense that life should be good and uncomplicated, the way it looks to be for our neighbours. But it is not. As a result, we ask a lot of questions: Where does all this dark stuff come from? Am I responsible? Is there a way out?

It is in this kind of world where we can best understand Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds. I am calling this

chapter, Fields of Dreams and Disappointments. Dreams because we all have this picture of what life ought to be like. Disappointments because there are events that regularly violate our dreams. According to the parable our dreams are for wheat, our disappointments are weeds.

The parable begins with Jesus' words, "The kingdom of heaven is like this." It was a phrase that Jesus used to describe how God's sovereign will and purpose shows itself, even in a fallen and corrupted world. Like the parable of the sower there is an original intention of God, what we might call his dream. However, along comes a corrupting influence, rocks and thorns, and the dream turns to disappointment. But, into this disappointment comes God's redemptive work to those who can be repentant and go forward in faith.

The story of the parable is one of a farmer trying to grow a field of wheat. He begins in the spring by planting good seed. One morning in mid-June, he wakes up to find that a fast growing weed is threatening to take over his crop. "This shouldn't be happening," he says, "my dream has been shattered." According to preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, his farmhands come out of the barn armed with machetes and "gallons of herbicides" to take on the weeds. But, the farmer says, "No. If you do that you will damage that wheat as well. Let's try Plan B! Let both grow together until harvest time, then we'll gather the wheat and the weeds will be burned."

The parable suggests that life is like a field. It begins well, like a newborn child or like a bride and groom on their wedding day. Life is full of promise but then it gets complicated. The new bride wakes up one morning and realizes that she doesn't really know this man lying beside her. There is panic "this is not my dream." "This should not be happening." That perfect child of yours turns two years of age and starts throwing tantrums. His favourite word is "no." As a quick reaction we can do some crazy things. Try herbicides, child psychiatrists, even lawyers! But life it is too complex

Stop and Think

1. *Can you think of a time in your life when you rushed to fix something that was wrong and your solution actually made the situation worse?*

for quick, easy solutions, answers that may damage the good in life as well as the bad. This is a parable that holds up the integrity of the dream, the goodness of Plan A, but also names the disappointment. It tells us that none of us get through life without the weeds.

The parable continues by announcing the good news of Plan B. It tells us that God never loses control of the situ-

ation. That Eden and all its perfection may be gone and are just a memory but God in his love for us sends Jesus, his son, to embrace the disappointment, soaking it all up in his blood, and as a result disappointment need never be the last word about our lives.

There are three verses from the text that I believe form the essential message of this parable. The first is verse 24, “He sowed good seed in his field.” The second is verse 28, “An enemy has done this thing.” The third is verse 30, “Let both grow together.”

First, let’s examine the good seed. The parable makes a vital point about good seed. It is mentioned twice. I believe that this is God’s first intention. Behind our fallen nature was always this original goodness. As it says in the book of Genesis, Chapter One, “God saw everything that he had made and it was very good.” The Garden of Eden, the world of Adam and Eve was a very nice place! In our imagination we can see no drought there. It only rained at night, there was no winter, weather was temperate, 25° every day. The flowers never stopped blooming; there was no hunger, no violence and no divorce. There was God in the very air you breathed. It’s important to recognize that before Chapter Three and the story of the human fall, there was this other world, Plan A.

Frederick Buechner, in his book, *The Longing for Home*, tells us of taking his family to Sea World in Florida. He

describes crowds of people, loud music, Mickey Mouse T-shirts and so on. But, the main attraction makes it all worthwhile. It takes place in a huge tank of crystal clear water. “It was a gorgeous day,” he writes, “a cloudless sky and warm. The bleachers were full. The show began with five or six whales leaping and racing around the pool. What with the dazzle of sky and sun, the beautiful people, the crowds all watching with delight matched only by the delight of the whales, it was as if the whole creation, men, women, sun and sky, for all I know maybe God himself all caught up in this one jubilant dance of unimaginable beauty. And then, right in the midst of it, I was astonished that my eyes were filled with tears. Upon reflection over several years, I wept because I had caught a glimpse of the ‘peaceable Kingdom’ and it had all most broken my heart. For a few moments we had seen Eden. We shed tears because we were given a glimpse of the way life was created to be – and is no longer!”

Stop and Think

1. Have you ever, like Buechner, caught a glimpse of a better world? What were the circumstances? How did it make you feel?

One of the values of the Gospels is that in them we see in Jesus the way human life is intended to be lived. It is to be lived in simplicity, in love, in non-violence. St. Paul refers to Jesus as the second Adam meaning that in him we see what we ought to be (1 Corinthians 15: 45). God has this good seed that by nature and much grace still dwells in us.

Let’s look at the second verse, “An enemy has done this thing.” This is the farmer’s forensic explanation of the sudden appearance of the weed. In Luke’s version of the parable, the weed is identified as darnall. The actual botanical name is *loli temulentum*. This is a plant that looks like wheat and hides out in the wheat but has a poisonous fruit. In my wife’s library there is a book entitled, Snakes in Suits. It is about psychopaths in the business world. These are evil people who can

be charming, smart, good-looking even well-educated but their goals are anything but good. They specialize in lying, manipulation and deceit in order to get ahead. That sounds like weeds to me!

About ten years ago in a CBC documentary, Don Murray examined the crime of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. As he walked through the ruins and devastation, and stood by the graves of innocent women and children, the one word he kept saying was “evil. There is much evil in this place.” We moderns have tried many ways to explain what’s wrong with the world. Where does this evil behaviour come from and what is at its root? Where do these acts of terror and brutality come from? According to the parable of Jesus, “an enemy has done this thing.” Many of us are very sensitive and uneasy when talking about evil. We prefer psychological or social logical explanations. We like to write it off as bad parenting, poverty and social deprivation. And certainly without doubt these things contribute to bad behaviour. But there are some things happening these days that defy explanation. For me, the best phrase that describes evil, at least in personal terms is “father of lies”, John 8: 14. This is Jesus’ description of the evil one. You may remember that in Genesis Chapter Three, the tempter ever so subtly says to Eve, “God doesn’t mean what he’s said. If you eat of the forbidden fruit, you will be like God himself.” Now that clearly was the lie! When Satan meets Jesus in the wilderness and tells him that all he needs to satisfy his life is to eat bread that he himself will magically make, he is telling a lie.

Several decades ago Dr. M. Scott Peck wrote a book about human evil. He called it, *People of the Lie*. Dr. Peck argues that people who do evil things are often people who have adapted their lives to a particular lie. Often the lie is that they are never wrong. It is the lie that life is all about them and others exist only for their benefit. It is also the lie that says you never need apologize, that you are the victim of other peoples’ evil, and need never apologize for your own.

In a letter to her sister, St. Teresa wrote “if you are willing to serenely bear the trial of being displeasing to yourself then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter.” Dr. Peck is referring to people who have never allowed themselves to be “displeasing to themselves.” Therefore, they can justify the evil things they do. In Jesus’ parable, Luke 18: 10 of the Pharisee and the Publican, it is the publican, the sinner, who is willing to be displeasing to himself. He says, “God have mercy on me a sinner.” On the other hand, the Pharisee says “thank you that I am not like others.” There is no hint here of being displeasing to himself, only righteousness in his own eyes. Such a life is not a pleasant place “for Jesus to dwell.” And so, “an enemy has done this thing”, and it is no friend.

Stop and Think

1. Are you more like the Pharisee or the Publican?

The third verse that explains the parable is “Let both grow together until harvest time.” This verse is a repudiation of that natural instinct in most of us to come up with easy solutions to the problem of evil. The response of the hired hands, with their machetes and herbicides is all too familiar. Human history is littered with stories of dealing with evil in the wrong way. The Salem Witch Trials of the 17th century in New England are a case in point. The idea was that evil resides in a person with different behaviour and when you kill the person you eliminate evil.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Russian writer and dissident, while in a Soviet prison discovered that “The boundary that separates good and evil does not pass between different states or between different races or religions, instead it passes through every human heart.” This parable offers us another solution. We can call it God’s Plan B. It finds its center in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. As St. Paul says, “Although without sin he became sin for us.” In doing so he took upon himself the evil of the world. This includes all the

lies and the power games, the manipulations of those “snakes in suits”, parents who abuse their children and justify it and men who abuse women and justify that. He takes it all into this cosmic sponge that soaks it up in his blood. “And by his wounds we are healed.”

This was not God’s Plan A, that was Eden, and although there seems to be in our spiritual nature this memory of our original goodness, it is not enough to enable us to live a fully human life. In order to recognize God’s Plan B, what we might call the way of grace, we must first recognize that Plan A will not work for us anymore. We must recognize that we do not live in a black and white world. For instance, few of our daughters marry the perfect man! Our children seldom get the Plan A marks or always hang out with Plan A friends. One’s employment and the people we work with are not always Plan A material. Richard Rohr, in his book, *Hope against Darkness*, wrote that playing the victim is an effective way of getting the moral high ground “without doing any moral development yourself.” You don’t have to grow up, you don’t have to be sorry or forgive. No, you just have to accuse someone else spoiling your life, “and you are okay.” It is a refusal to recognize within ourselves the weeds and that we are part of the problem. But Plan B is an offer from God who accepts us, weeds and all. He assures us that he will “let the wheat and the weeds grow together in your life, and you’ll manage that by my grace, acceptance, love and forgiveness.” As Richard Rohr concludes, “Jesus neither played the victim nor created victims. He became a saving victim for others”.

I know a lot of people celebrating their Plan B life. They have successfully overcome their victimhood, stopped blaming everyone else and moved on with their lives. These are people enjoying a remission from cancer or a second career. These are people enjoying a second marriage or a second birth in the spirit.

Being a Christian is engaging with this Plan B. It is getting past one's grief over the loss of Plan A, "and discovering that the enemy", has been outgunned by the grace of God!

Finally there is the text from the parable that speaks of harvest time. It is the time when the weeds will be destroyed and the good wheat will be stored safely in the barn. This is the promise of a day when evil will be eliminated from the face of the earth and all goodness restored. "When every tear will be wiped away and there shall be no more death nor crying nor any more pain, for the old things have passed away," (Revelation 21). It is living in the conviction that the wheat, the good, will survive and the evil will be swallowed up in this amazing love that is conquering the earth in Jesus Christ.

We all live in complicated and uncertain times. This parable reminds us of the goodness of the seed that God has planted in every one of us. However, there is an enemy that seeks to spoil that good. That evil is not eliminated by hose and herbicides, but by those who by moral and spiritual courage, confront it every day by love and faith. And finally the parable tells us that God's Plan B, this plan of grace, is what enables us to live with our weeds and to be victorious.

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. What have been or are the biggest disappointments in life for you? What had you envisioned instead of these? Do we all have to live with such disappointments? How should we handle them?
2. Bishop Hockin writes that the good news of Plan B “tells us that God never loses control of the situation.” How confident are you that this is true? What gives you a sense of security in this or causes you to doubt it?
3. The first of the three key verses in the parable speaks of the good seed sown by God who originally created a perfect world for us. In his book *The Holy Longing* Ronald Rolheiser argues that all people have a built in memory or sense of this perfect world and this is the source of much of our longing or disappointment. Like Frederick Buechner we know what is possible but “is no longer!” Do you think you have an inner sense of Eden, of how life is supposed to be? If so, how does it show up in your life?
4. The second verse on which Bishop Hockin focuses says that the world has been corrupted by “an enemy.” As Bishop Hockin says, the idea of a personal spiritual force for evil – or the devil – doesn’t always sit well with how modern or post-modern people like to see the world. How about you, do you think there is an evil force or evil forces at work in the world? Why or why not?
5. Finally, the third verse emphasizes letting the wheat and weeds “grow together until harvest time.” Do you think that means we should do nothing to counter the evil in the world or our own lives? How should we deal with that evil?
6. Bishop Hockin writes that we often refuse “to recognize within ourselves the weeds and that we are part of the problem.” What are the weeds in your life? Are there things you can do to move

toward a Plan B life that acknowledges the weeds but also moves forward positively and productively?

Going Deeper Into Scripture

Reread Matthew 13:24-30

Bishop Hockin focused the chapter on the disappointments and weeds in our personal lives. In the Bible study we shift the focus a bit to apply the parable to our church communities.

1. Just as God created the world, He also created the church to be a reflection of what restored and redeemed human relationships look like. Jesus said, the love of Christians – church members – one for another would be a sign to the world pointing to God. What would the perfect church look like?
2. How far off perfect is your church? What are the weeds that have grown up within it?
3. What are the lessons from this parable and Bishop Hockin's chapter for our churches? How can we apply the three key verses - "He sowed good seed in his field"; "An enemy has done this thing"; and "Let both grow together" – to our Christian communities?
4. Bishop Hockin makes the point that Jesus gives us a picture of what the perfect life should be like. He writes, "we see in Jesus the way human life is intended to be lived." In many of his teachings Jesus told his disciples they ought to provide an example of how perfect human communities were to look – see, for example, Matthew 20: 24-28; John 13: 12-17; John 13: 34-35; Matthew 18: 1-5; Matthew 18: 21-22. What can we do to make our church communities more like those described by Jesus in these scriptures?

Chapter Nine

The Most Satisfying Life

Luke 14: 16-24

16 Jesus told him:

A man once gave a great banquet and invited a lot of guests.

17 When the banquet was ready, he sent a servant to tell the guests, “Everything is ready! Please come.”

18 One guest after another started making excuses. The first one said, “I bought some land, and I’ve got to look it over. Please excuse me.”

19 Another guest said, “I bought five teams of oxen, and I need to try them out. Please excuse me.”

20 Still another guest said, “I have just gotten married, and I can’t be there.”

21 The servant told his master what happened, and the master became so angry that he said, “Go as fast as you can to every street and alley in town! Bring in everyone who is poor or crippled or blind or lame.”

22 When the servant returned, he said, “Master, I’ve done what you told me, and there is still plenty of room for more people.”

23 His master then told him, “Go out along the back roads and fence rows and make people come in, so that my house will be full.

24 Not one of the guests I first invited will get even a bite of my food!”

Pre-reading reflection:

What are you passionate about? What things in life give you the most satisfaction?

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman refers to the parables of Jesus, as “subversive re-imaginings of reality.” In other words, they describe human situations, where we think there is only one way of looking at things, but they surprise us by presenting a whole new twist that ultimately says, “you don’t have to live that way. Try this.” This is what we found in the parable of the sower. Here was this generous sower, sowing seed in all the wrong places, something that none of us would ever do. But, the results of his sowing were very successful.

The parable that we are exploring in this chapter is referred to as, “the parable of the great banquet.” It too is a re-imagining of what truly satisfies the human soul. It is also subversive, since it is a story that challenges the established view as to what is the good life.

Father Ronald Rolheiser describes the human soul as the “fire and the glue” of our inner lives. By fire he means our passions, those things that excite us in life, and the glue, those things that hold our lives together. He speaks of people having to keep a healthy balance between these two. Yes, we need our passions, but we also need the glue to prevent our lives from going off madly in all directions.

The issue in this parable concerns what really feeds the human soul. What is it that gives our lives that fire to imagine, to have great ideas, to worship, to create and to love? And, as well, what it is that gives us the glue, vision, direction, discipline and boundaries that can channel our passions into things that bring joy and satisfaction. What is it then that feeds the hungry soul?

The parable tells the story of a man who throws a big dinner party for his friends. The invitations had been out for weeks, and the final reminder comes before the banquet night. According to the text, “Come, everything is ready”. But, “they all began to make excuses.” Among the excuses is the response, “I have just bought property and I need to see it.” Another said, “I have just purchased a new team of oxen”,

Stop and Think

1. Have you ever shared this experience, had people turn down an invitation that was important to you? How did you feel? How did you react?

(probably John Deere), and I have to go to work them.” Another excused himself with “I just got married yesterday and we’re on our honeymoon, I’m sure you understand!” The bottom line is no one shows up for the man’s banquet. He is understandably annoyed! Can you imagine this table, beautifully set with the best silver, the best crystal, with splendid food, more than enough

for everyone “and they turn it down?”

Instead of throwing it all out, the host has this subversive idea. He tells his servants, “go out quickly and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” Within an hour the table is full with very hungry people. The door is shut and they all have a wonderful time. This parable is very much a re-imagining of what really satisfies the human soul and who it is that defines their satisfaction.

Some of you will remember Martha Stewart. Before her little fall from grace a few years ago and a few months in prison, she was the icon of what a lot of folks call “the good life.” She has made a comeback in recent years and continues to be a great cook and decorator, reflecting many of the values that our consumerist and materialistic world offers us as “the most desirable life.” We are a culture consumed “with quality of life” concerns. The mythology that drives many people today declares that intelligence, a good university degree, a good sex life, living in a good neighbourhood and above all being thin is what a successful life is all about. Although, there is nothing inherently immoral about any of these, what is novel and less moral and needs to be challenged is that the pursuit of excellence and quality of life are all tied

Stop and Think

1. How important are these things in your life? Is it possible they have become too important and crowded out other things?

to an explicit philosophy of life. Unbridled individualism and self-concern are all held up as virtues with this philosophy. According to Father Ronald Rolheiser, the word that best describes this condition is “idiosyncratic”. According to him it is a “movement towards oneself”, meaning that everything in life has value only when it serves the self.

Celine Dion, Canadian singer and entertainer, was once asked if she believed in God. “Oh yes”, she said, “I believe that God is my greatest fan!” The parable of the great banquet turns that kind of thinking on its head. It declares that what really feeds the human soul, what really provides the fire and the glue, comes from somewhere else. Ultimately the idiosyncratic world is stifling, limiting and ultimately dehumanizing. As sociologist Daniel Yankelovich once wrote, “In such a world we do not grow, we shrink.”

Referring back to the text, let’s now explore God’s alternative menu for the hungry soul. The image of a banquet has several echoes in the Old Testament. In Psalm 23, “You spread a table before me”, and my cup “runs over.” In Isaiah 25, “the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food and good wine.” The prophet refers to this as the messianic banquet, or a sign of the kingdom of God yet to come. The descriptions of this banquet are all given in the language of abundance. Phrases like, “running over”, and “the best” moves your imagination into overdrive.

Anne Frank, writing in her famous diary, recorded on February 12, 1944, “today the sun is shining the sky is a deep blue. “There is a lovely breeze and I am longing; longing to talk; longing for freedom; longing for friends. I don’t know what to read or what to write or what to do. I only know that I am longing for something else.” All of us have longings that the material world pretends to satisfy, but does not.

It was Dr. M Scott Peck that identified the difference between feasting at the tables of modernity and the table of God. The first, he writes, is a world dominated by thing and

function. It is a life dominated by what we have and by what we do. It is in our possessions and professions that give us meaning in life. How often do we identify ourselves under these two headings? It is about where we live, what we have and what we do for a living.

But the other world, according to Dr. Peck, is conditioned by transcendence and intimacy. It does not deny the benefits of thing and function but adds to them these two essential things. It says that what truly satisfies the human soul, what really feeds the fire and the glue, comes from who I worship and who my friends are. It is seeing the substance of a genuinely human life ultimately rooted in the things of the spirit and those close and faithful human relationships that we depend on every day. What God provides at His banquet table, what He offers to satisfy the longings of our lives, is rooted in what lies above us, first a relationship with God and then those healthy relationships with other people.

But if what God provides is so good, then why did the invited guests turn it down? It is important to note from the text what these original guests said in their last-minute excuses to the host. All three apologies begin with the words “I have.” The first excuse was, “I have purchased land.” The second justification was “I have got to work my new team of oxen.” And the third was, “I have just married. and I therefore cannot come. When we combine the words “I have” with the

words “I cannot” we have a very sad commentary on our contemporary materialistic culture. In the minds of the first guests, life for them was property, work and family, and many of us would understand that. I have sat through many funeral eulogies where I often hear what gave a person their joy in life. “He loved his cottage”, “He had a great career” and “He loved his

Stop and Think

1. How often do the phrases “I have” and “I cannot” run together in your life? Have they ever caused you regret, the feeling you have missed something important?

family.” It all resonates as thing and function. But, too often there is no mention made of who they worshiped and what values gave their lives passion and glue.

The parable goes on to reveal that the host is very upset. He’s gone to the trouble of presenting this wonderful banquet and having the right people at the table. The elites of the world have turned him down and so he sends his servants out into the streets and alleys of the city to bring in “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” These are the people who did not own property. They probably were not employed. And, very few of them would have been a good catch as a marriage partner. Although this list needs to be taken literally, it also is a set of code words for those who have not. These are those who can admit that they have longings and hungers that property, work and even family cannot satisfy. They can admit to being poor in spirit, that they mourn, that they are crippled or blind. These people are those for whom thing and function has not worked. Only the grace God can satisfy their deepest longings.

Philip Yancey tells the true story of a couple in Boston preparing for their wedding reception. The two of them go to the Hyatt Hotel and arrange for a rather extravagant banquet. They both had expensive taste. The bill came to \$13,000, half of which had to be paid up front. On the day the announcements were to be mailed, the groom confessed that he had cold feet! “I’m not sure,” he said. When the upset fiancé returned to the hotel to cancel, she was told, “Sorry lady you can’t cancel this contract. Sorry, no refund is possible.” The groom had somehow vanished and her name was on the contract. But the more the jilted bride thought about it all, crazy as it seemed, the more she liked the idea of having the party anyway. Ten years before, this woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had pulled her life together, found a good job and saved her money. Now, she had this wild notion of treating the down and outs of Boston to a night on the town!

And so it was, on June 10, 1990, at the Hyatt in downtown Boston, she hosted a party that had never been seen before. The hostess changed the menu to “boneless chicken” in honour of the groom. Waiters in tuxedos served senior citizens holding onto aluminum walkers, bag ladies, addicts and prostitutes. They were all there, enjoying a level of extravagance they had never dreamed of by accepting the invitation of a very gracious and generous hostess.

Although many in our society will continue to see thing and function as the way to satisfy the deep longings of our lives, to satisfy “the fire and the glue” of our lives, this parable offers this subversive alternative. It teaches us that the longing for the good life is only truly satisfied when we embrace the transcendence and the intimacy that only God can provide. In order to accept this gracious invitation, we must come to a point in life where we can admit that we are on that second list of invitees, those who have not got it all together, those for whom things and jobs and even families do not satisfy the deepest longings of our lives. When we come to that realization, then we can say with the psalmist, you have prepared a table for me “and my cup runs over.”

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. Bishop Hockin writes, “we are a culture consumed ‘with quality of life’ concerns.” Do you think that is true? Why or why not? How about in your own life, how much of your passion do you dedicate to the things the Bishop lists as reflecting that concern for the quality of life – education, a nice home, a good sex life, looking good?
2. Has concern for those kind of things ever caused you to turn down an invitation from others or to ignore a leading from God?
3. To what degree are the things we have and the things we do – jobs, recreational pursuits, volunteer activities – able to satisfy our deepest needs and longings? What is missing?
4. Reflecting on how you spend your time and energy, who or what do you worship? How satisfying is that?
5. Many of us in Canada and the West have much, does this put us in danger of missing the best of what God has for us? Are we in danger of being on the outside of God’s banquet looking in? What can we do to ensure this doesn’t happen?
6. Bishop Hockin argues that Jesus parables are meant to be “subversive”, to challenge “the established view as to what is the good life.” Do you find this parable and the others studied in this series subversive? How have they caused you to rethink the nature of the good life?

Going Deeper into Scripture

Read Luke 5: 27-31

1. This story records both another invitation and another banquet, to what does Jesus invite Levi (Matthew)?
2. How does Levi respond and what does it cost him?
3. As a tax collector, Levi was one of the few Jews who benefited materially from the Roman occupation. He had a lot to lose, why do you think he responded as he did?
4. Do you think Jesus has an invitation for you? How will you respond? What might it cost and what might you gain?
5. What is Levi's first act as a follower of Jesus? Why do you think he does this?
6. How does Levi's banquet compare with the one in Jesus' parable?
7. How do the Pharisees react to the banquet? Why?
8. Should we, like Levi, be hosting subversive events like this? What might they be?

Chapter Ten

Bonanza at the Eleventh Hour

Matthew 20: 1-16

1 Early one morning a man went out to hire some workers for his vineyard. **2** After he had agreed to pay them the usual amount for a day's work, he sent them off to his vineyard.

3 About nine that morning, the man saw some other people standing in the market with nothing to do. **4** He said he would pay them what was fair, if they would work in his vineyard. **5** So they went.

At noon and again about three in the afternoon he returned to the market. And each time he made the same agreement with others who were loafing around with nothing to do.

6 Finally, about five in the afternoon the man went back and found some others standing there. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

7 "Because no one has hired us," they answered. Then he told them to go work in his vineyard.

8 That evening the owner of the vineyard told the man in charge of the workers to call them in and give them their money. He also told the man to begin with the ones who were hired last. **9** When the workers arrived, the ones who had been hired at five in the afternoon were given a full day's pay.

10 The workers who had been hired first thought they would be given more than the others. But when they were given the same, **11** they began complaining to the owner of the vineyard. **12** They said, "The ones who were hired last worked for only one hour. But you paid them the same that you did us. And we worked in the hot sun all day long!"

13 The owner answered one of them, "Friend, I didn't cheat you. I paid you exactly what we agreed on. **14** Take your money now and go! What business is it of yours if I want to pay them the same that

I paid you? **15** Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Why should you be jealous, if I want to be generous?"

16 Jesus then said, "So it is. Everyone who is now first will be last, and everyone who is last will be first."

Pre-reading reflection:

Are there differences between fairness and generosity or between justice and grace? If so, what are they?

One of the common features of the parables of Jesus is an element of surprise! It happens in the parable of the great banquet where the good people miss out on the extravagant meal, but the poor people and all the losers of society are included. In the parable of the two sons, we are surprised by the behaviour of the father in the way he welcomes his son home. It also happens in the parable of the Good Samaritan where the good religious people fail to help the wounded man and a

Stop and Think

1. Have you every experienced God working in surprising ways in your own life?

stranger, a Samaritan, is the one who really helps. These stories all reveal a God of surprises. Therefore, these parables push the boundaries of our faith imagination and intentionally violate status-quo thinking on who God is and how he acts in our lives.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard does all this in spades! Like the other parables it is a kind of mirror put up in front of us, giving us both a good look at what kind of people we are and what kind of people God wants us to be. Like the other parables it arises out of a question. In this parable it is Peter, the apostle that asks, "Look Lord, we disciples have been following you around for almost three years." "We have made sacrifices. Our families have missed us. We have

worked hard. At the end of the day what's in this for us?" In response, Jesus assures Peter that everything they've lost they will get back. But, to keep their thinking on the right track he tells them the following parable:

He begins, "for the kingdom of God is like this". In other words, when God is seen to be in complete control of the world, this is what that world will look like. The story tells us that the owner of a vineyard goes into town one morning where the workers are gathered at the employment office, looking to be hired. The time is right for picking grapes. He chooses his crew, the most experienced probably, agrees on a good wage for a twelve-hour day, lunch included! These men are happy to work. It means food for them and their families.

Realizing he needs more workers, the owner heads to town again about nine o'clock and finds others to work in the vineyard. He does it again at noon and then at three o'clock. These workers join the team. And then again, just before five o'clock, the owner of the vineyard goes to town again. Seeing a group of men standing there he asks, "Why have you been standing here all day?" They respond, "Because no one has hired us." The owner invites them to join him in the vineyards and they do.

Just after six o'clock, the work being completed all the workers line up for their daily wage. By order of the owner the last hired are first in line. Each of them receives a full day's pay! Needless to say, they are ecstatic. As well, those who worked from noon and and 3 pm get the same wage. They probably thought it was a mistake, but no one said a word! It was only when the very tired and sweaty workers who had been hard at work since 6 am got to the paymaster that things got a little ugly. They, too, got the same wage for a day's pay. And, although that's exactly what they expected and agreed to as they found out about the others and their wages, they were slightly ticked off! "These last have only worked one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal

to us. Not fair.” The owner of the vineyard calling them “friends” explains to them that they agreed to this wage. “What I give to others is my business,” he said. “Why are you angry because I am generous?”

There is no doubt that upon first hearing this parable of Jesus, we share the outrage of the workers who have been at it for the twelve hours. Our whole sense of fairness is violated with the actions of the owner. If, in our understanding of this parable the vineyard owner represents God, what can this mean? Equal pay for equal work, rules around seniority and experience all seem to be trashed by this employer. Buzz Hargrove would not be impressed! So, from a business or labour perspective it is hard to understand his actions.

To understand this parable we must look again at Peter’s question in Chapter Nineteen. Peter is reminding Jesus that their years with him have been very costly. “What’s in this for us?” Jesus’ response is generous. He tells Peter that they will sit on thrones, that they will have homes (maybe even a cottage by the Sea of Galilee). “But,” says Jesus, “don’t be surprised if there are others that don’t meet your standard. They will get it all as well.” Central to the message of this parable, is this surprised extravagance on the part of the landowner. It is something that is counter-intuitive to much of our thinking. Many of us operate on the principle that we get what we deserve; that there is no free lunch. We get what we work for. Therefore, the extreme generosity of the owner is a problem.

A few months ago a friend and I were discussing our habits at tipping in restaurants. He surprised me by saying that he tips twenty percent on average. I said, “What about the quality of food or service?” “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “These people work for minimum wage. They all get the twenty percent from me.” I remember speaking to a waiter at a well-known restaurant near a number of churches in Toronto. “What’s your best day?” I asked. “Oh”, she said, “that would be Saturday. People are out shopping and most of them are

generous with their tips. My worst day is Sunday, just after noon hour when all the church people come in. They are not good tippers.” What a sad commentary!

The cultural situation of Jesus’ day, of course, was very different. Work in a vineyard was seen not as a right but as a gift. There was no employment insurance and no workers’ rights. If you didn’t work, you didn’t eat and your family went hungry. It is suggested by John Claypool, preacher and writer, that the reason the employer kept going back to town every three hours, was that he just wanted people to work, so they could live. It was, in fact, this wonderful act of extravagant generosity, not just to give them handouts but the dignity of work.

But even with that explanation, we can’t help but feel sympathy for the twelve-hour workers and their sense of injustice. Another preacher, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, suggests that the way we read the parable depends very much on where we locate ourselves in the pay line. Do we see ourselves near the head of the line, those who don’t get many opportunities, or do we see ourselves in the middle or even at the end, people with more opportunity and abundance? Where do we place ourselves among these twelve-hour people, six-hour people or the one-hour people? How many would say, as Peter did, what will be my reward for all my patience and faithfulness? If we see ourselves as those first in line, who only worked for one hour, this parable is certainly great news. Even if we see ourselves as those who were hired at noon or three in the afternoon, it is still great news. But, if we’re last in line and have lived long, faithful lives, it may not be good news at all.

For those of us who are at a later stage in life and finally discover the grace and mercy of this extravagant God, this story

Stop and Think

*1. Are you a good tipper?
Are you often generous
to people who haven't
earned it? Should you
be?*

Stop and Think

1. Where do you see yourself in God's pay line? Have you been faithful for a long time or are you a 'Johnny come lately?' Does it matter?

is very good news. However, if we are among the faithful working for God and his kingdom all our lives this could be a challenging story. I expect that Jesus tells the story for these folks. There is something in us, something we have inherited from our broken world, that constantly compares ourselves with others. It is what the tenth commandment is all about. It is about competition, it is

about envy, it is about coveting what we don't have.

In our understanding of this parable, it is important to ask why the five o'clock workers were "standing idle in the marketplace?" Could it be that other employers passed them by, maybe because they were disabled or inexperienced or not too swift in the business? I don't know about you but I've been there many times. In my public school days, I was often the last to be chosen when it came to team sports!

In my school, spring and fall, it was baseball at recess. On the boy's side of the playground there were two ball diamonds. There were captains that formed teams and they got to pick who they wanted. Of course, the best players got chosen first. My memory is that often I was chosen last! The call would go out, "Who wants Hockin?" Not my finest hour!

As I look back on that experience, there was always this important principle at play: Everyone got picked! Everyone who wanted to play ball, got a chance to try again and again. This could be a metaphor for the overriding justice of God. It may not be our justice but it is the justice that will prevail in God's kingdom and so, at some point, we need to get with the program sooner rather than later.

Author, Philip Yancey, tells the story of a man who faithfully cares for his elderly mother, taking her into his own home when she becomes frail. Although he had three brothers and sisters, he rarely heard from them. "They have their

busy lives to lead,” said his mother. “But, I just thank God for you.” A year later the mother died and the family arrives, grieving as if they had been there all along. At the lawyer’s office they all crowd in to hear the reading of the will. The son who has spent most of his savings caring for his mother sits alone with his head down. “I leave my estate to be divided equally among my four dear children”, the lawyer reads, “because I love them all the same.”

Not fair? Not just? But is the love of a good mother not fair? Is the love of a generous God not fair? Certainly, central to the message of the parable is that no one is left out. Tax collectors and sinners are never left out. The poor in spirit and those who mourn are never left out. You and I whether rich or poor or somewhere in between are never left out. That’s why in this parable, the owner of the vineyard keeps coming back every three hours just to try and give folks a chance at worth, dignity and life itself.

You will remember that it was Peter’s question that initiated the parable. I’m sure as Peter got older and became the leader of the new church and looked back on those three years with Jesus, his memory would not be of any sacrifice or what he had lost. His memory would have been of the privilege of spending three redemptive years with this extraordinary compassionate generous man. He was able to see all kinds of people come into a saving relationship with him, at 6 in the morning, 9 o’clock, 12 o’clock, 3 o’clock and also many who just got there before “closing time”.

Many of us struggle with this sense that we never get enough, that we’ve never been placed well in the line, that the good seats will all be gone before we get there. We compare ourselves with others and lose every time, forgetting how generous and extravagance the God that calls us to this place is all about. As Pope Benedict wrote, “Every one of us is the result of the thought of God. Everyone loved everyone needed everyone necessary.”

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the most generous thing anyone has ever done for you? How did it make you feel?
2. Is it possible that others might have been made jealous by that act of generosity? How might you respond to someone who accused you of getting something you did not deserve, something they might feel rightly belonged to them?
3. Bishop Hockin writes, "There is no doubt that upon first hearing this parable of Jesus, we share the outrage of the workers who have been at it for the twelve hours." Is that how you responded? After reading the chapter and reflecting is your response different? Why?
4. Is "extreme generosity a problem" as Bishop Hockin contends? Why?
5. To what degree have you fallen into the trap of constantly comparing yourself to others? How does that show up in your life?
6. Have you ever been angry about generosity shown to others and not you? How do you feel about that now in the light of this parable?
7. What can we do to ensure that we respond more graciously to the abundant generosity God show to others and especially to those we think undeserving?

Going Deeper into Scripture

Matthew 19: 16 – 20: 16

1. What is it that prompts Peter's anxious question in verse 27 of Matthew 19?
2. Do you think he would find Jesus' response comforting?
3. Does the response comfort you? Why or why not?
4. How does the parable that follows at the beginning of Matthew 20, fill out Jesus' response?
5. Jesus ends his first response to Peter with the line, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." He repeats that thought at the end of the parable. What is the key point he is trying to make? How does that point make you feel? Are you amongst the first or the last as the world measures such things?
6. Bishop Hockin writes of the exceeding generosity of the landowner in two ways: in offering the dignity of work to those down and out; and in the material rewards he gives to those who have not earned them. Are we as individuals and Christian communities called to this kind of generosity? What might that look like in our lives or churches?

Part Three – *While We’re At It: Thoughts From the Book of Job*

Chapter Eleven

Is There an Upside to Suffering?

Pre-reading reflection:

In facing difficult circumstances have you ever felt abandoned by God? If so, do you still think you were left on your own to face hard times? Why or why not? If not, how are you able to maintain faith in the face of suffering?

I write this chapter after watching an interview with the parents of some of the children killed at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, in December 2012. As I watched and listened to the intense pain and loss of these parents I had serious doubts about any upside to suffering. It almost seems irreverent to even suggest it. But, as the interview continued, one of the mothers was asked, “How do you go on with life?” She responded, “What choice do I have? I have other children; I must go on.”

Margaret Clarkson, writer and poet, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for many years once wrote, “Pain is pain and sorrow is sorrow. It hurts, it limits, it impoverishes, it iso-

lates. It works devastation deep within the personality. There is nothing good about it. But, the gifts God can give with it are the richest the human spirit can know.” I’ve always been fond of those words, because although they seem to describe a deep contradiction, they are nonetheless true, in my experience, both personally and in my role as a pastor.

Stop and Think

1. Have you ever found “gifts” in pain and sorrow? What were they?

In the last two chapters of this book we turn our attention to the Old Testament book of Job, a book that comes as a kind of corrective voice to people like us, dealing as it does with the issues of loss, sorrow and suffering of many kinds. It suggests that there is meaning, some meaning, to our suffering.

Dr. Paul Brandt, who did much of his medical practice in the developing world, returned to North America making the following observation: “Upon my return, I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and were far more traumatized by it.”

The value of the book of Job is that, as Scripture, it comes as a corrective message to our culture “of complaint.” Like some of us, Job lived in a world where suffering never touched him. That is until one day all of his comfort suddenly disappeared. His health and his family’s reputation are all gone. In his confusion he cries out for meaning and asks the questions we all ask: “Why? Why do I suffer? What have I done to deserve this? Is God in control or not?” It is at times an irreverent, contrary and certainly angry book.

Because Job is seldom our favourite bedtime reading, I’ll briefly summarize the story. It all begins with a rare conversation between God and Satan. God asks what his adversary has been up to. The response is, “Walking here and there on the earth.” God says, “Have you met my servant, Job? He is

a good and righteous man, and he's my proof that good is prospering in the world." Satan observes that Job is prospering only because God is protecting him from harm. "Take away your fence of protection and he will fall," Satan predicts.

Job is a very prosperous man. In our world, he would probably be the chair of a big bank and serve on other important charitable boards as well and might even be on the board of deacons in his local place of worship. He was a trusted man, with a lifestyle to match. As well, he had a reputation for being a good, decent, generous person and a pillar of society. He was married, only once! He had seven sons and three daughters, all of them probably graduates of good schools and well-employed. He was a man of faith, a man of prayer and God, wishing to prove the adversary wrong, allows Job to be tested in the firm belief that Job will not lose his faith and his loyalty to him.

What follows is a series of tragedies for Job loses his home, his livestock and his children. Then he contracts a skin disease similar to shingles, however the rash completely covers his body. Job's wife, dealing with her own losses, suggests that her husband, "Curse God and die."

At first Job is philosophical about his pain and reacts stoically. In Chapter 2 we read, "Should we expect good from God and not evil as well?" "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away." Then the pain and loss continue. They do not let up, and Job's reason departs and he is driven to anger. For many chapters Job rails against heaven. His well-meaning friends, who occasionally come by with well-rehearsed platitudes, say "Well, Job. You must have done something wrong here. God is judging and punishing you for your past sins. Confess to them, repent and all will be well."

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you experienced "Job's comforters" – people who try to help but actually make things worse – in your life? Have you been one?*

Job has a serious problem with this moral theology, noting “I have not sinned”, “I have been faithful.” Eventually towards the end of the book, after Job finishes his angry rants, and after his friends give up their preaching, Job is left silent. It is in that silence that God shows up. Although God does not answer any of Job’s questions, he affirms his faithfulness to Job. Job relents and finally acknowledges, “I spoke of things that I never knew. You are God and I am not.”

The book of Job challenges the glib reasons that some religious people offer up as reasons for our losses and pain. For example, Job’s friends pointed out, “You must have done something wrong here.” This thinking is not restricted to the Old Testament. We find it even in John’s Gospel in Chapter 9 where Jesus’ disciples, seeing a blind man, ask their master, “Which one sinned, this man or his parents?” Jesus’ quick response is “neither.” In spite of Jesus’ answer, such thinking seems to be part of our human response when tragedy strikes. Too often the first thought that comes into our head when we get a bad diagnosis is, “What have I done to deserve this?”

I remember visiting one of my parishioners in a chronic care hospital. She had suffered from arthritis all her life. As a result, her spine was fused from her neck down and she was bedridden. In spite of this, she had an alert mind and an active spiritual life. To visit her was a delight for me and we developed a close friendship. One day she told me that someone in the ward had died. Although the curtain had been pulled for privacy, she could hear the priest saying to the family, “This is the will of God and we must accept it.” “I don’t believe my disease comes from God,” said my friend, Mary, “God wants me to be well. Therefore, my suffering has to count for something. God’s will is my freedom. God’s will is a new life.” This woman was a modern Job standing against life’s easy shallow solutions.

Rev. William Sloane Coffin, former preacher at Riverside Church in New York, suffered the loss of his son, Alex, in a

car accident late at night when the car went out of control. Two nights after the accident, Coffin was in a friend's home when a well-meaning woman, carrying a plate of sandwiches, said to him, "Well, I certainly don't understand the will of God." Coffin, very much into his loss and emotionally raw, responded, "I'll say you don't, lady. Was it the will of God that Alex was driving too fast and maybe had too much to drink? Can God be blamed for that?" Later, when he writes about this reaction he observes, "You should never say, by way of comfort, this is God's will because we simply don't know why. When the water covered my son's head, God's heart was the first to break." Later on Coffin reflected, "I have come to believe that God provides minimum protection but maximum support." I believe Job would agree – minimum protection but maximum support.

In all of this discussion about human suffering, it is too easy simply to say that suffering should play no part in our lives. That somehow the righteous should have a kind of warranty, entitlement to good health and a pain-free life. Maybe it's my age but I have become so aware lately that the warranty for me and many of my friends has already run out! After

all, suffering is an integral part of our lives. In denying it we deny the fullness of living. In fact, none of us escapes these experiences for very long. Pain is a kind of alert system in our bodies, our emotions and in our thinking that signals a problem and we deny these signs at our peril.

Stop and Think

1. How do you react to pain and suffering in your life? Is your reaction helpful or productive?

Pain is also a great motivator. Who would we be without our scars? Suffering can move us off the comfortable coach of our easy religion and thinking and take us deeper. I remember leading a spiritual renewal conference in Newfoundland some years ago. Most of the 30 to 40 participants were people in their late 50's and 60's. I asked how many of them

came to a deeper more satisfying faith in God in later life. I asked them to put their hands up if that renewal had come out of a time of crisis, loss, illness or divorce. Most of the participants raised their hands. In much of the great literature in our culture, nobility and greatness are often the product of struggle, being led through a period of suffering but coming out of it the better for it.

This is not to celebrate suffering. However, it is to recognize as Margaret Clarkson did, “Pain is pain and sorrow is sorrow. It hurts, it limits and there is nothing good about it. But, the gifts God can give with it are the richest the human spirit can know.”

After all, the core of our Christian faith is a cross, not a bouquet of flowers! It is a faith rooted in the suffering and dying of one man, Jesus Christ. As the story in the garden of Gethsemane tells us, suffering was not his choice. He wanted that dreaded cup to pass from him, but it did not. Resurrection was the result. Suffering and death could not hold Jesus of Nazareth and, as Isaiah wrote, “By his wounds we are healed.” On Easter afternoon Jesus tells two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, “It was necessary that I suffer and then to enter my glory.”

I close with this story. It comes from author Regina Brett. She tells the story of Chris Wood, who at 21 fell out of a pick-up truck on a four-lane highway. Two cars hit him. Fortunately the third vehicle coming along was an ambulance. He had a broken jaw, pelvis and knee. He also had head injuries and for three months all the news about Chris was bad news. “He’ll be a vegetable” “He’ll never walk”, were the grim prognoses.

His family, however, did not accept this and started a prayer chain for Chris. One night his sister was awakened suddenly by a voice. She said God whispered to her, “He will live not die.” It took Chris thirty-two surgeries and years of treatment at a rehabilitation hospital to recover enough to resume his previous life.

After enrolling in university and getting low marks, one of his rehabilitation workers urged him to drop out. Instead of listening to that, Chris claimed his favourite Scripture passage, Proverbs 23: 7, “For as a man thinks in his heart so is he.” Chris credits his mother for his successes. The Bible was her playbook. Chris now has three jobs. He is an intern at the rehabilitation hospital working with head injury patients. As well, he does computer design work for his church and is an usher for the local baseball team. It took three times to pass his driver’s license. On the day he graduated from university and got his BA in Psychology he received a standing ovation. He wasn’t the smartest one there nor was he the most talented, “But, he was there.”

Stop and Think

1. Do you know stories of tenacity and success like this one? How would you respond in similar circumstances?

No one would have wished that suffering on Chris or on his family. But it happened. Life sometimes happens. In Chris’s case his family came together and prayer was answered. Faith in the risen Christ grew and people were stretched to trust, to love and to patiently wait for God’s answers.

As St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4, “We have this treasure of life in jars of clay. We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed. We are perplexed but not in despair. We are persecuted but never abandoned. We are knocked down but never destroyed. So,” urges St. Paul, “do not lose heart.”

In the end, the upside of suffering means two things. First, it can, if we are willing, draw us closer to God and our need for his grace; and God always delivers. Second, our suffering always draws us closer to other people who suffer. If you have ever spent any time waiting in a hospital emergency ward, you know what I mean. Becoming a part of this slice of humanity, we are confronted with a choice. We can either isolate ourselves from them or humbly become a part of them. We may even be able to help them.

Jesus always chose the latter piece. He is the wounded healer, who comes close to suffering humanity. Today he comes close to us, if we will let him touch us and comfort us. If we are open to his touch of grace, we find light in our darkness and his presence in our loneliness.

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the most courageous facing of suffering you have ever witnessed? How did it impact you? From where did the individuals or groups draw strength?
2. Dr. Paul Brand described North America as “a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs.” Do you think that is true? What is the evidence for or against that statement? Is it wrong to seek to avoid pain at all costs?
3. The chapter speaks of “gifts” that come from pain and suffering quoting one writer who claims they are “the richest the human spirit can know”? Is this true, can difficult times be good for us? How?
4. Good people, like Job, often feel a deep sense of injustice when they face pain and suffering, is this a reasonable response? Why or why not? Have you ever felt this way about suffering that has come your way?
5. Bishop Hockin writes that “pain is a kind of alert system in our bodies, our emotions and in our thinking that signals a problem and we deny these signs at our peril.” Can you give examples of when this has been true in your life? How might things have turned out differently if the pain had not been present?

6. Bishop Hockin goes on to claim “pain is also a great motivator.” Has this ever been true for you? How?
 7. The chapter tells us about Job’s suffering and makes the point that Jesus himself endured considerable anguish. Can you think of other Biblical examples of good people who suffered extraordinary pain? What can we learn from these examples about what to expect as Christians in the world?
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Going Deeper Into Scripture

Read Job 1

1. Describe Job’s circumstances at the beginning of the story?
2. How do they change?
3. How would you react to such devastation?
4. How does Job react?
5. What does the conversation between God and Satan reveal about:
 - God’s attitude toward Job?
 - How Satan operates?
 - How God operates?
 - The source of suffering and pain?
6. What questions does this account raise for you?
7. God demonstrates a high degree of confidence in Job; does he have reason to have the same level of confidence in you? Why do you say so?

Chapter 12

The Most Shattering Thing

Pre-reading reflection:

Have you ever felt abandoned by others? By God? What were the circumstances and how did you react?

You will remember from the last chapter that Job suffered a number of terrible losses. He lost his children, his business and the confidence of his wife. He was afflicted with a skin disease, something like an acute form of shingles. “If only God would tell me why,” Job cried, but God was silent and Job felt abandoned.

One of Job’s deepest pains, the cause of much of his suffering, had to do with his sense of abandonment. That is, in spite of his clean living, religious life and charitable work, God had become silent to him. Job wanted a reason for his suffering, and although his friends gave him rationalizations for his pain, Job wanted a reason from God himself.

William Safire, writer for the New York Times, is the author of a book on Job, “The First Dissident.” He argues that in any victim’s mind the worst fear is not that he or she is being punished for some just cause. Rather the greatest anguish one can experience is the fear that their suffering is the proof that they have been cast off by God. During adversity, fear of abandonment, of being left alone, is the “most shattering thing.”

Stop and Think

1. *Do you think it is true that fear of abandonment is the “most shattering thing?” Why might that be so?*

A very close friend of mine was once stricken with a form of leukemia. After years of therapy and struggle he finally died. He was a deeply spiritual man, confident in his faith, a good teacher and preacher. As well, he was very helpful to me in a dark time of my own life. In spite of all of this, his dying was not easy. Although he expected God to be close and merciful to him, he found only silence. Like Job he wanted reasons. In spite of numerous visitors and long conversations about faith as well as many prayers, nothing seemed to crack the abandonment he felt. I would often leave his home feeling so helpless, at a loss to find the right words, the right reasons, the right prayers. I wondered why God did not intervene in this good man's life. I found myself asking, "What is it that we do, if anything, to possibly block the comforting presence of God?"

Given all of that, how do we deal with all our unanswered questions and prayers and God's silence? There are certainly no easy answers to these deep human questions, but there are some things that we can say.

First of all, according to the Christian experience, God's silence does not mean his absence. This is one of the good news pieces we get from Job. In spite of his anguish and anger, Job never once declares God dead. Atheism was not an option for Job. He got angry with God, he was cynical and sarcastic with God, but he never once questions His existence.

I'm not sure how religious the culture was that Job lived in, but for those of us who live in a very secular culture that delights in leaving God out, it is difficult to get much support from such a world. We live in times where religious answers for life's big questions have been silenced, in favour of reason and science. So the world around us doesn't offer us much help when we seek the presence and voice of the divine. Therefore, for those of us who continue the struggle to believe, we find ourselves driven back to the words of Scripture for any kind of answer.

Throughout the New Testament there are several stories of people who experience the silence of God. The first was when Jesus' disciples were out on the Sea of Galilee, and a storm came up threatening to swamp their boat. Although Jesus was with them, he was asleep and silent in the stern of the boat. As written in Mark 4:38, the disciples got angry and upset at his silence and said to him, "Don't you care that we are drowning?"

But notice Jesus position in the stern; the stern is the place of control. It's where the tiller is.

In the famous painting of this event by the artist, Rembrandt, Jesus is clearly located in the stern of the boat. Although he is not holding the tiller, he is very close to it. The artist has someone else actually steering the boat. Perhaps it was Peter or John or one of the others. What is remarkable about the picture for me was that Rembrandt is not portraying a peaceful sea after Jesus had controlled the winds and the sea is calm. Rather, the artist shows the boat at the height of the storm. The bow of the boat is almost straight up in the air. Many of the disciples are in panic mode with the exception of those closest to Jesus. It is almost as if the painter is telling us that even in the rage of the storm, when things are at their worst, closeness to Jesus makes the difference. This perhaps is what it means to take refuge in God, facing our worst fears by being close to the one in the stern.

Remember this story as well, when Jesus went to a town in Syria, where a Greek woman came to him requesting healing for her sick daughter. As recorded in Matthew 15:31, "He answered her not a word." In John 11:21, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, dies. Jesus for some reason stays away until after the funeral. When Jesus finally arrives, the number one question from both Mary and Martha is "Lord, where have you been? Lord, if you had been here our brother would not have died." It was the age-old question, "Why, Lord, have you left us alone?"

The writers in all of these stories connect Jesus' silence with the issue of faith. In the boat after the sea became calm,

Jesus said to his disciples, "How was it that you did not believe?" To the woman of Syria, Jesus after witnessing her persistence and humility He said, "Woman, you have great faith." To Mary and Martha, Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe that?" In every case, God's silence is connected to our need to believe, to trust him in spite of silence.

Stop and Think

1. Does God's silence in the face of suffering and questions ever cause your faith to waiver? What keeps you connected to God in those times?

In a previous chapter, I quoted the thoughts of Diana Butler Bass on belief. Bass, quoting Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, suggests that another way of saying "believe" is to use the phrase, "I take refuge in God." There is more trust in taking refuge, more emotion, more a thing of the heart than of the mind. It suggests that belief is more about relationship than simple reasons or opinions.

As Henry Nouwen says, "It is at the center of our longing for the silent God that we discover his footprints. It is in the patient waiting and longing where he makes himself known." A friend advised me during a particularly dark time in my life, "Bill, you need to lean into the pain not run from it. The more you lean into your pain through the darkness the sooner you find the light on the other side."

All of us take refuge in something. For some of us it is family or work. People say, "I throw myself into my work."

For others it can be a more destructive kind of refuge. It can be addictions, their own success, self-fulfillment or what people call their passions. Whatever we take refuge in can easily become a god. After all, it's what we believe in.

Stop and Think

1. Where do you turn for refuge in times of trouble? How satisfying has that proven to be?

When someone takes refuge in God, far from being a limiting experience or something that blinds us to the real world, this act of trust opens the door to a widening and expanding human experience. Consider the lives of authors like C.S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham or Desmond Tutu. These were lives richly lived which continue to make a contribution to the lives of others. All of these lives were centered in a faith in Jesus Christ. What we “take refuge in” strongly determines our happiness, our self-worth and our vision for the future.

My favourite Easter story in Luke’s gospel, is the walk to Emmaus. Luke’s account describes two disciples of Jesus wondering how to handle his death and their sense of abandonment. They leave Jerusalem on that Sunday afternoon and travel 11 km to a little town called Emmaus. Author, Frederick Buechner says Emmaus “is that place we go to try and forget that the world around us holds nothing sacred.” For these followers of Jesus, any hope of a better world had been snuffed out on the cross. As they walk along talking about all of this, they suddenly realize that a third man has joined them. He asks what they’re talking about. “It’s about Jesus and his death and how we had been hoping he was the Messiah.” they respond. This third man then engages them in a kind of Bible study, pointing out to them how suffering and even death were all part of God’s plan. By the time they had arrived at Emmaus, it was late in the afternoon and the disciples invite their new friend for supper. He accepts their invitation and as they sit at table and Jesus breaks bread, they suddenly recognize who he really is. Suddenly everything changes. The story tells us that the disciples find a new energy, energy to run back to Jerusalem, in the dark, their sense of loss eclipsed by joy.

I remember an interview on the CBC a couple of years ago between Melissa Fung, a CBC correspondent, and Ingrid Betancourt, a dual French-Columbian national. Both women had been hostages, one in Afghanistan and the other in

Columbia. In this rare and intimate interview both admitted to be women who prayed, both experienced God's presence, a presence that gave them energy and hope to survive.

According to art critic, Sister Maria Gloria Reva, "If you have faith, you can see beyond the limitations of most vision. You can see the light of the now where others see only the darkness in the not yet."

Let's return to Job in his struggles over God's silence. In the end, after Job's many speeches and cries for understanding, he becomes silent. In Job's silence, God speaks. We might imagine God laying a gentle hand on Job's shoulders and telling him how well he has done throughout all his sufferings. God might have reminded him how much deeper he has grown in his faith. He might have offered words of comfort about how much worse it might have been. But no, none of the above is offered. Instead, what Job hears is something that could have been written for a Green Party Convention or the Sierra Club. God reminds Job of all the wonders of creation. "Have you ever commanded the morning to appear or caused the dawn to rise in the east?" asks God.

Never does Job hear God give a reason for his sufferings. Although God chastises Job's friends for their bad theology, God corrects Job only on the limits of his vision. As Sister Maria Riva put it, "Job had been stuck in the darkness of the not yet and had missed the light of the now."

In the end, what most moved Job to some resolution and acceptance was the fact that God spoke to him at all. It was the answering, not the answer, that gives Job redemption. "I was talking about things I knew nothing about. Things too wonderful for me." Job 42: 2

Job had been humbled by his suffering. It was a place he needed to be to understand the depth of God's love for him. Job finally understood the big picture, the picture of a God whose hand is on the tiller of life. In spite of the waves and the wind roaring all around him, he realized that he was not

alone. Someone, much bigger than he, was in control. It is this bigger someone that all of us are invited to take refuge in.

Questions and Activities for Reflection and Discussion

1. In this chapter Bishop Hockin highlights all kinds of people who question God in times of trouble but whose queries remain largely unanswered. Can you think of times when you or someone you know had urgent and possibly angry questions for God which remained unanswered? What were the circumstances? Why do you think God was silent?
2. Bishop Hockin writes, "God's silence does not mean his absence." Do you think this is true? How can we approach God or sense his presence when he is silent?
3. The Bishop contends that "what we 'take refuge in' strongly determines our happiness." Where do you take sanctuary in times of trouble? How effective or satisfying are those refuges?
4. God finally spoke to Job once he stopped raging and became silent. In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* Dallas Willard contends that two important spiritual disciplines for those who would take refuge in God are solitude and silence. Do you make time for solitude and silence in your life? If so, how and do you find God there? If not, is this something you should consider?
5. Bishop Hockin writes of leaving his sick friend's house "feeling so helpless, at a loss to find the right words. . ." Many of us have shared this experience. Given that we often don't have the answers our friends and loved ones seek in times of trouble how can we as individuals and churches be most helpful?

Going Deeper Into Scripture

Read 1 Kings 19: 1-18

1. Do you notice any parallels between this account and the story of Job summarized by Bishop Hockin?
2. Why does Elijah run?
3. How does he express his fear and frustration in verse 4? Who does he seem most disappointed in?
4. His tone seems to change a bit by verse 14, who does he seem frustrated with here?
5. How does God respond to the first outburst (verse 4)? Why?
6. How does God respond the second complaint (verse 14)?
7. Why do you think the focus of God's final response to Elijah is to give him more work to do rather than to address his concerns?
8. What do we learn about God's care for us from this story?

