

Finding Our Commitment To Christ in Ordinary Times

A Study Guide Built On The Following Four Points:

- Evangelism calls people to commitment
- Worship celebrates that commitment
- Christian Formation teaches the meaning of that commitment
- Stewardship is the practice of that commitment

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Scripture quoted is from the NRSV.

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Session One

Evangelism calls people to commitment

Participants will need a Book of Common Prayer. The Facilitator should have a Bible.

Opening Prayer:

Facilitator and Participants: *I offer all the prayers, works, joys, and problems of the day to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I unite myself in the spirit and prayer with all the Eucharists that will be celebrated this day in the world. May the people of God witness the Good News of Christ in all times and in all places, now and always. Amen.*

The Word Made Flesh:

Acts 8:26-36, 38-39

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the

the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Matt 25:31-46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life

Comments for Thought

Phillip did not judge the Eunuch, rather he engaged him in conversation that led him into relationship with The Lord. Thus, both Phillip and the Eunuch were changed.

In 1 John, we are reminded of the inclusiveness of God's love for us. We (everyone) are recipients of God's love. This calls for a reaction on our part. How we respond speaks of our love for God.

When we think of even the "least of these" some would include even the lowly worm. Others are limited in their belief to only humans. Either way, Christ makes it very clear; we are all connected by the Christness within us all. We as Christians, because of God's love for us, are called to seek the Christness in others. Come and see...seek ye first the Kingdom of God...

Questions and Meditations Based on the Word:

If we believe that God is the source of all gifts spiritual and material, what implications does this have for everyday life?

What is our response to what we believe: gratitude, giving, being good stewards, a commitment to follow Christ?

Can we notice God if we do not notice others?

Does our definition of God limit God? Does our definition of evangelism limit us? Does our definition of Stewardship limit our relationship with God?

Do we give out of our love of God and Christ, or out of fear? Is it a "sacrifice" or "gift"? Is God's commitment to us any different than our commitment to God?

Is commitment duty based or relationship driven? Is there a difference?

Is this commitment sacrificed based on a privilege? Is it accomplished out of fear or love?
Is there a difference?

Finding Commitment to Christ in Ordinary Times:

John is _____. You can tell by his words and actions. I do not like people who
are_____.

Fill in the blank with the following: gay, homophobic, anti-homophobic, a bigot, black, anti-
-black, not a Christian, Muslim, Jewish, rich, poor.

Is there a difference as to how a Christian should respond to any one of these or should
our response be the same?

Remembering Christ's words, "what you did to the least of these", who or which are the
"least of these"?

As a Christian, how should I respond? How can I live my life in commitment to Christ?
What do I need to change?...I will with God's help.

Concluding Thoughts and Meditations

How do you now see God's relationship to us?

How do you now see our relationship to God?

Has there been a change in your commitment to Christ or the Christness in others?

What do I need to do now?

Closing Prayer

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that
I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are
pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

Please turn to page 7 and leave with the words of Hymn 581 *Where Charity and Love
Prevail*

Hymn 581

Where Charity and Love Prevail

(Copyright 1982 Hymnal, all rights reserved)

Words: Latin; tr. J. Clifford Evers (b. 1916)

Where charity and love prevail
there God is ever found;
brought here together by Christ's love
by love are we thus bound.

With grateful joy and holy fear
his charity we learn;
let us with heart and mind and strength
now love him in return.

Forgive we now each other's faults
as we our faults confess;
and let us love each other well
in Christian holiness.

Let strife among us be unknown,
let all contention cease;
be his the glory that we seek,
be ours his holy peace.

Let us recall that in our midst
dwells God's begotten son;
as members of his Body joined
we are in him made one.

Love can exclude no race or creed
if honored be God's Name;
our common life embraces all
whose Father is the same.

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Session Two

Worship celebrates that commitment

Participants will need a Book of Common Prayer. The Facilitator should have a Bible. As presented, this unit may require more than a 45-minute session that is typical for Adult Formation on a Sunday morning. It may be advisable either to: reserve two time slots for it; reduce the number of scripture passages for reading in class; or divide the group, if it is larger, into smaller discussion groups.

Opening Prayer:

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We take the need, even the requirement for worship for granted.

But what is worship, and why is it desirable?

I. Jewish worship, as reflected in Psalms: Have someone read the following scripture passages aloud, slowly and thoughtfully. Allow a brief silence for reflection. If needed, have another voice read them a second time. Then discuss the questions which follow.

Psalm 50, vs. 7-15 (BCP p. 654)

Psalm 66 (BCP p. 673)

Psalm 68, vs. 24-34 (BCP p. 678)

Psalm 81, vs. 1-4 (BCP p. 704)

Psalm 95, vs. 1-7 (BCP p. 724)

Psalm 96 (BCP p. 725)

1. What does “the beauty of holiness” mean to you, and what does holiness have to do with worship?

2. How do you define *worship*?
3. Who is worship for? God? The angels? The worshipers? How so?
4. What actions are involved in worship? What attitudes?
5. How is sacrifice involved in worship in these Old Testament passages? How about thanksgiving? Petition? Praise?
6. What are the main aspects of prayer in worship? Is the prayer of group worship different from that of an individual in private? How and why?
7. How is the worship of the synagogue different from that of the Temple?

II. Some Christian insights on worship: Have someone read these short passages from the Gospels slowly and thoughtfully. Then discuss the questions following.

Luke 4: 16-21 (“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”)

Mark 1: 14-15 (“The kingdom of God is at hand; repent”)

Matthew 15: 8-9 (“This people honors me with their lips”)

Matthew 21: 12-13 (“My house shall be called a house of prayer”)

Luke 18: 1-14 (the judge and the widow; the Pharisee and the tax collector)

John 4: 19-24 (“worship in spirit and truth”)

1. What are the implications of the destruction of the Temple to Christian worship?
2. What elements of Temple worship continue in the Christian Eucharist? What of synagogue worship?
3. What is “worship in spirit and truth?”
4. Why does the Good News begin with a call for repentance?

III. Bringing it together for today: Read the passages; discuss the questions.

John 16: 12-14 (“love one another”)

Matthew 5: 23-24 (“first be reconciled to your brother”)

Micah 6: 8 (“and what does the Lord require of you”)

1. The late Dr. Verna Dozier noted that we tend to switch the verbs in the Micah passage. We love justice, but we only do mercy. What might Dozier have meant by her observation? What is the difference?
2. How might that difference impact our worship “in spirit and truth?”

3. Sometimes, we say that worship prepares us to go into the world to practice our ministry. In what ways does the doing of justice and mercy prepare us to worship?
4. How is justice connected with worship?
5. How is stewardship connected with worship?

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Session Three

Christian Formation teaches the meaning of that commitment.

Participants will need a Book of Common Prayer. The Facilitator should have a Bible.

Opening Prayer:

Facilitator and Participants: *I offer all the prayers, works, joys, and problems of the day to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I unite myself in the spirit and prayer with all the Eucharists that will be celebrated this day in the world. May the people of God witness the Good News of Christ in all times and in all places, now and always. Amen.*

Facilitator: Listen to this prayer for mission written by Bishop Charles Henry Brent about 100 years ago and found in the Book of Common Prayer on page 101:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen.

For the next 45 minutes we will engage in a discussion and an exercise to see how Christian Formation helps us, collectively and personally, model our commitment to find and share Christ in ordinary times.

Simply stated, Christian Formation provides Christians with an approach to be so clothed in Christ's Spirit that you and I may find the inviting grace of God to discover the depth of our relationship with God and each other.

Let's discuss the following:

- How do you respond to the opening premise of the Bishop Brent's prayer?
Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace.
 - Do you promise to follow and obey Jesus Christ as your *Lord*? (BCP page 303)
 - How does the image of "*you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross*" affect you?
 - Do you respond to the image of Christ's *saving embrace*?
- What does it mean to you to be "*so clothed in Christ's Spirit*"?
 - What do you need so you can find the strength in this image to *reach forth your hands in love* to the "hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner...the least of these who are members of my family"? (Matthew 25:31-46)
- Do you identify the Great Commandment ("I give you a new commandment, that you Love one another as I have loved you." John 13:34) and the Great Commission ("Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole world." Mark 16:15) in the following:
 - "*Reaching forth our hands in love*"
 - "*May bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you.*"
- How does *An Outline of the Faith: commonly called the Catechism* found beginning of page 845 in the Book of Common Prayer stimulate a quest for *knowledge*?
 - Flip through the *Outline* and let your finger randomly fall on a topic.
 - Were you surprised by the questions and answers?
 - St. Anselm used the phrase "Faith seeking understanding."
 - Does the knowledge provided by the *Outline* strengthen your faith and/or reveal a need for greater understanding?

Let's share a physical/spiritual exercise:

Hopefully a member of the group gathered for this study is willing to come forward and be a demonstrator. Have the demonstrator stand facing the group with enough space to allow the demonstrator to swing his or her arms when fully extended in a circle. The narrator, who can be the group facilitator, will read the following instructions and explanations while the demonstrator enacts the instructions.

Narrator: Imagine in front of our demonstrator that God is offering invitations in the form of blips of light in various colors. The invitations are constantly changing.

Instruction to the Demonstrator: Please cup your hands around your eyes to form blinders that give you a narrow field of vision.

Narrator: When the demonstrator has a narrow field of vision he/she can only see a fraction of what God is offering. This is how most people pray, especially when they are in distress. They are looking for something very specific from God rather than seeking the fullness of what God has to offer. There is nothing wrong with this approach. However, what if the demonstrator changes position?

Instruction to the Demonstrator: Please stay standing in your current position but stretch your arms out as far as they will go to the right and to the left. While keeping your eyes looking straight ahead, raise your pointer finger on each outstretched hand and determine your field of peripheral vision.

Narrator: The blips of light that are the ever-changing invitations from God are now visible to a much wider field of vision. Let's say that one such invitation is evident in the lower right hand quadrant at 4:00 o'clock. This now catches the demonstrator's attention.

Instruction to the Demonstrator: Please cup your hands around your eyes to form blinders but turn your head to focus on the blip of light invitation at 4:00 o'clock.

Narrator: This is what happens when most people try to stay open to God's holy invitations. They see it and focus directly on the invitation. Again, this is not a bad thing. This exercise reveals how helpful it is to be committed to being open to God. Notice how the demonstrator has moved to the right. Let's continue the demonstration.

Instruction to the Demonstrator: Please be sure your body is aligned towards where you are now focused. You should have made a quarter turn from your original position. Please repeat the part of the exercise where you extended your arms and determined your peripheral field of vision.

Narrator: Notice that the demonstrator's field of vision now includes an area that was behind him/her at the beginning of the exercise.

Instruction to the Demonstrator: Please turn your head and your body to the farthest right point of your field of vision and cup your hands around your eyes.

Narrator: If we have been successful in the demonstration, the demonstrator will now have his/her back to us. Maybe the invitation that God has been yearning for the demonstrator to discover has only been accessible by being open to a journey that takes the demonstrator from one point to another. Maybe Christian formation gives us the tools and the discipline to learn how committed God is to each and every one of us.

Facilitator: Now let's all try the exercise. Be sure that you have enough space to swing your arms when in a full circle.

A reflection of the physical/spiritual exercise

- When you stretched out your arms to find your full field of peripheral vision, did you feel a connection to Jesus Christ who “stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross?”
- Bring your arms in towards your body and reward yourself with an embrace.
 - Do you feel connected to the “saving embrace” of Jesus Christ?
- Does this physical part of the exercise
 - Bring you a deeper understanding of the discipline necessary to be “so clothed in his Spirit”?
 - Make you aware that when you reach out your hands in love you are offering the “saving embrace” of Jesus Christ?
- Does the spiritual part of the exercise
 - Make you aware that God is continually offering you invitations that you can better be able to receive when you are committed to being open to God?
 - Help you see that Christian formation offers tools to help you commit to a discipline that brings you closer to God (who is already closer than you can ask or imagine!)?

Final Questions

- What is God's commitment to us?
What is our commitment to God?

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Session Four

Stewardship is the practice of that commitment.

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Opening Prayer:

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Stewardship: How do we put stewardship into practice and how are we to respond?

COMMENT: We have taken this journey together in the hope that we all see and understand stewardship differently and maybe even now find ways to put our faith into practice. Through **Evangelism;** our call from Jesus Christ to commitment. **Worship;** which celebrates that commitment. **Christian Formation;** in which we find the meaning of that commitment. Finally **Practicing Stewardship,** our response. The question we might ask ourselves is: "Is the journey over? Do I now go back to living my life as it was?" or can we find that by practicing our response, we see a continuing wheel where we're constantly revisiting everything over and over? Hopefully this journey has lit a light in all of us who seek to find a clearer understanding of where God's commitment to all of us is and how His commitment never fails us. On the other hand, it is to ask ourselves; "How do I now see my commitment to God (Christ)? Has this journey opened new windows for me to re-evaluate my commitment?" If we allow ourselves to ask those kinds of questions, the challenge is that we be honest with ourselves. That's challenging! If you're anything like me, many times I try to answer my own questions on my own. I find that very convenient. I might suggest these kinds of challenging, soul searching questions be better dealt with if we "take them to the Lord." This is where we find God being true to His side of commitment, when we prayerfully discern, seek out our personal struggles through scripture, allow a humble openness to our community of faith, to walk with us in our struggles and discernments. This is when we find honest answers and paths which will

bring us to a place of awareness and transformations that will give us a deep desire to respond to God's love. One of the greatest hidden treasures in Holy Scripture is finding ourselves in them. When we try to see ourselves in the stories or in the parables, which brings them into a real place for us, sometimes a good place. But for me, most of the time, a place that challenges me to discern. I find in the story of the rich young ruler myself in several roles. (Jesus not being one of them) Let's hear the story and see if we can find ourselves in it.

Mark 10: 17-27

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." 19 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all of these since my youth." 20 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me." 21 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 22 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" 23 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 24 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 25 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" 26 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

COMMENT: There's a lot going on in this short story. Right off the bat I found myself in an uncomfortable place in those commandments this person said he kept from his youth, not to mention what else I lacked. Keep in mind, according to Mark's Gospel, this is an actual event that Jesus and his disciples encountered, not a parable. We in our culture might have a tendency when hearing this story to allow ourselves a reprieve because we can all find people in our culture that have many more possessions and a lot more money than we do, so we can exempt ourselves of even discerning "what little bit we think we have." But let's look at it through different eyes. Maybe it would be helpful if we asked some pertinent questions.

QUESTION: How have you come to Jesus and ask Him what you must do to have eternal life? (Keep in mind this means more than getting our ticket punched to get to heaven when we die. It's greater than that. It's an invitation to live in God's kingdom now. To Respond.)

QUESTION: Did the answer Jesus gave you reveal anything in your life you lacked? If so how did you respond?

COMMENT: I see in this story a call to respond. But more importantly I see Jesus being very patient, understanding and loving. Before Jesus brings us to an awareness of what we lack, HE LOVES US!!! He commits to us in His love for us, then He shows us the way. This is not a story to show us necessarily that our stuff might be getting in the way of our entering into God's kingdom, but rather what we lack that keeps us from committing totally.

QUESTION: Did you ever see the things you have as something you lack?

QUESTION: What if Jesus asked you to sell the thing you discover that makes you lacking, give it to the poor and follow Him. Could you do it?

COMMENT: The power in this story is not so much finding what we may lack and responding, but rather we discover the abundance of God's generous grace. (God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved. There's commitment in there.) Jesus clearly shows us how hard we make it on ourselves when we accept the invitation but try to bring all our baggage with us. It's as difficult as a camel try to get into Jerusalem in that small entranceway, (The Eye of a Needle), ducking down and literally crawling through with all its stuff on. Almost impossible.

Jesus gives us this wonderful invitation and opportunity to respond and enter into a commitment He has already made with us. Our response is not as simple as "Okay, I'll give more to the church" or, "I'll volunteer more time to the food pantry." Jesus is calling us to trust Him to show us what we lack and then follow; (ie: respond). Yes, maybe what we lack is our possessions but it may not be. Whatever we discover we lack, chances are we're initially going to respond like the rich young ruler. If what we discover we're lacking is not astounding to us, it's probably not what we're really lacking. May I suggest the way we are to respond to everything we've shared in this process is allowing Jesus to astound us. Allowing us to see our call from Jesus Christ to commitment, celebrating our commitment, finding the meaning of our commitment, then "Going forth to love and serve the Lord!" Always remembering, that on our own it is impossible, but not for God; "For God, all things are possible."