

WILDERNESS: WEEK THREE

Everywhere and Nowhere | True Belonging | **High Lonesome** |
Move In Closer | Speak Truth. Kindly. | Hold Hands. With
Strangers | Strong. Soft. Wild.

SCRIPTURE:

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, but in Spirit and truth, for that is the worshipper God seeks.

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony...

From John 4

THE
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH, UCC
Lent 2024

How-to:

1. Find **six-seven times to meet** with your group between February 18 and April 6. Groups should be no fewer than 2(!) and no more than 10 people. If you choose to meet 6 times, combine weeks 1 and 2.
2. Each week, Elissa will pass out a handout with questions and quotes related to that week's sermon, to be used as the starting point for your group discussion. **Do not feel limited to them.** Feel free to bring your own material to supplement.
3. **Resist the urge** to focus on "what you will get" from this small group. Instead, ask yourself how you can contribute to this group, and what God is going to do through you because of this new community.
4. **Keep in mind** that healthy small groups will develop with an **investment** of time and a collection of shared experiences, and will flourish where there is trust and grace. Earn each other's trust by keeping **confidential** the personal details people share. Extend grace and respect to one another when you disagree on theology or on another topic. It will happen, and that's okay. As business leadership author Stephen R. Covey wrote, "Strength lies in differences, not in similarities."
5. **Pray.** Open with a check-in (a high/low from the week and/or an experience of God), so you bring all of yourselves to the meeting. Close with prayer requests for the week, that you might hold one another in prayer

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For further Reflection:

"If you look at rates of loneliness, there's lots of evidence that they've been increasing linearly since the 1970s...the evidence really points to the fact that there are probably a lot of causes going on at once, but those things are coming together to really make us a much more unhappy and a much more isolated kind of population right now...[speaking of causes:] I think one of the big ones that we don't often think about is just time, right? People are busy. People are spending more time at work. I think that we just don't have enough free time to connect with the people that we care about.

So individuals who report feeling lonely are more likely to experience things like dementia, heart disease, stroke. It actually affects longevity. Meaning that people who self-report feeling lonely are even more likely to die than those that aren't. Vivek Murthy the current surge in general estimates that reporting that you feel lonely is like smoking 15 cigarettes a day in terms of its impact on our health and our well-being.

"...the most striking thing, especially for me as a college professor, are the rates of loneliness that we see among our young people right now. So nationally, among college students, we see levels of loneliness around 60 percent, which was so striking to me. Right. These are students who are young, who are living on campus, often in the dorms with other students, yet 60 percent of them are reporting feeling very lonely."¹

- Laurie Santos, cognitive scientist and psychology professor at Yale University, as told to PBS

FOR YOUR SELF-REFLECTION:

Start by reading chapter 3 in *Braving the Wilderness*. If you have not already, it might be helpful to listen to this week's sermon, available on the First Church Youtube page: <https://www.youtube.com/@FirstChurchBTV>

1. After reading the scripture above, reflect on the fact that, while commentators, preachers, and scholars throughout the centuries have speculated about the woman's "sins," Jesus doesn't seem to care about them *at all*. All that matters to him is the way she understands God. And, in a few short verses—a few short hours—she goes from an outcast, trapped in her own social stagnation, to becoming the first evangelist to other religions. (Here, again, we have a woman leading the way.) When was the last time, the scripture seems to ask, you left room for that kind of transformation in your life?
2. Say you are out shopping at a convenience store, or a farmers' market, or a gas station, and Jesus shows up. What do you think he would say to you to convey he knew you?
3. In the heat of the desert, this passage seems to say it is easy to mistake water for salvation. What do you mistake for salvation? Where does society tell you to find it?
4. If 61% of Americans regularly report being lonely – do you? How has your social circle changed over the past twenty years?
5. Brown says that "When we're suffering, many of us are better at causing pain than feeling it. We spread hurt rather than let it inside." We need to feel hurt, rather than spread it. What hurt do you need to feel? Have you been spreading it unintentionally?

FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER¹:

Start by reading numbers 3-5 on the first page, and then go around the group and ask which question each person wants to make sure to discuss – then do it!

¹ Some of these questions come from study guides created by Brown and Rohr themselves.

1. Discuss question four in the self-reflection section. How are you seeking belonging? Conversation? Connection?
2. When hard things happen to you, or to our community, or in the world, do you respond with criticism or contribution? Do you lead from cynicism or hopefulness?
 - a. What about as a congregation?
3. Have you ever had a respectful, safe conversation about race, gender, and class? Where were you? What did it look like? If no, what would it look like?
4. Brown says she sees division multiplying in society... "fear is burrowing and metastasizing. What feels like a rallying movement is really a cover for fear... as fear hardens, it expands, and becomes less of a protective barrier, and more of a solidifying division" (57). Where do you see fear "metastasizing" in your community? In your life? In the nation?
 - a. What 'camps' have you joined? Which party line do you toe?
 - b. Who is cut off from you as a result? Who do you not see regularly? What are you missing?
5. How is faith an antidote to fear?
6. How is belonging – that deep-down knowledge that we are loved, just as we are, that we belong to God, and to one another – how / does belonging give us what we need to combat this growing fear?
7. If we believe, as Brown states, in the "power of inextricable human connection – the belief that we are all connected to each other by something greater than us", what Christians call God, rooted "in love and compassion" – are we (you) living that way? How? Why or why not?
 - a. What changes would you have to make in your life to reflect this truth more deeply?
8. Brown tells the story of a friend who tries to offer her a book about faith and guns, to teach her about "the other half" of America, not understanding that her family resides fully within that 'other half'. Telling the joke about Thanksgiving and plastic cutlery, she wonders who in our lives are ideologically different?
 - a. How do we all contain "both sides" in ourselves or extended networks?
 - b. Would you/have you cut folks out of your extended network for their ideology?
 - c. What was the result?
9. Brown asks whether we can find our way back to ourselves and to each other, and still keep fighting for what we believe in. What do you think?
 - a. She seems to indicate that the way to do this is to know your own values, to know yourself, while still staying curious and open to the opinions of others. How does one do this?
 - b. What opportunities do we have to do this in our daily life?
 - c. How, as a congregation do we or can we create these opportunities?

Finish by sharing your joys and concerns with one another. Write them down if it will help you remember them. Pray over them for each other until your next gathering.

Closing Prayer (feel free to say your own!): Dear God, thank you for this time together, for the blessing of these relationships. Help us keep one another in mind this week, as well as the insights and the challenges of our conversation. In your name we pray, Amen.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-americans-are-lonelier-and-its-effects-on-our-health> Published January 8, 2023. Accessed March 3, 2024.