

## WILDERNESS: WEEK FOUR

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

### SCRIPTURE:

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, <sup>7</sup> saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam". Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

<sup>8</sup> The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" <sup>9</sup> Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am he." [...]

<sup>13</sup> So they brought the man to the Pharisees. <sup>14</sup> Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes <sup>15</sup> and the Pharisees also asked him how he received his sight. He explained to them, and <sup>16</sup> some of the Pharisees said, "This man Jesus is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.

<sup>17</sup> So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man said, "He is a prophet."

<sup>18</sup> They still did not believe he had been blind until they called his parents <sup>19</sup> and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" <sup>20</sup> His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, <sup>21</sup> but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."

<sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid, for it had been agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

<sup>24</sup> So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "We know that this man, Jesus, is a sinner."

<sup>25</sup> He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." <sup>26</sup> They said to him again, "How did he open your eyes?" <sup>27</sup> He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"

<sup>28</sup> Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. <sup>29</sup> We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

<sup>30</sup> The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. <sup>32</sup> Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

<sup>34</sup> They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

From John 9

## 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

## WILDERNESS: WEEK FOUR

### For further Reflection:

*And if our faith asks us to find the face of God in everyone we meet, that should include the politicians, media, and strangers on Twitter with whom we most violently disagree. When we desecrate their divinity, we desecrate our own, and we betray our faith. (76)*

*The women and men I interviewed who had the strongest sense of true belonging stayed zoomed in. They didn't ignore what was happening in the world, nor did they stop advocating for their beliefs. They did, however, commit to assessing their lives and forming their opinions of people based on their actual, in-person experiences. They worked against the trap that most of us have fallen into: I can hate large groups of strangers, because the members of those groups who I happen to know and like are the rare exceptions. (64)*

*"Do I really care about the pain that drives drunk, violent assholes who make college campuses so dangerous that female students need a book about how to avoid those people? NO. Screw you, and screw the pain of the people who are causing pain. But to what end? Not caring about our own pain or the pain of others is not working. How much longer are we willing to keep pulling drowning people out of the river one by one, rather than walking to the headwaters ... to find the source of the pain? What will it take for us to let go of that earned self-righteousness and travel together to the cradle of the pain that is throwing all of us in at such a rate that we couldn't possibly save everyone?" (66)*

*In addition to the courage to be vulnerable, and the willingness to practice our BRAVING skills, moving close means we need tools for navigating conflict. [abbreviated from Dr. Michelle Buck, below...]*

- 1. Agreeing to disagree does not work.. the key is to learn how to navigate conflicts or differences of opinion in a way that deepens mutual understanding....*
- 2. Explicitly address the underlying intentions. What is the conversation about and what is it really about? The intention is the deepest-level reason why the topic is so important to the person.*
- 3. Focusing on what did or didn't happen in the past, or what past events led to the current situation, usually increases tension and decreases connection. A critical first step is to shift the focus to 'Where are we NOW?' and the most important turning point comes when we focus on the future.*
- 4. Focus on conflict transformation, not resolution. We are creating something new, not going backwards.*
- 5. We need not only to be open-minded, but to listen with desire to learn more about the other person's perspective ... One of the most courageous things to say in an uncomfortable conversation is "Tell me more." (80-82)*

### FOR YOUR SELF-REFLECTION:

**Start** by reading chapter 4 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. There are lots of theories on why Jesus used mud to heal the blind man. Mud was often considered a homeopathic treatment in his time (and ours!); using mud echoes God's creation from dust in Genesis, and perhaps the most obvious: kneading dough was forbidden on the Sabbath. The word for dough is *pelon*, which is properly translated mud – so he was intentionally challenging the Sabbath rules.
  - a. Why? The man had been waiting a lifetime – another day wouldn't have mattered. Why would he intentionally challenge the Sabbath rules?
  - b. Why choose healing to challenge those rules? Why blindness? Why this man?
2. Do you form your opinions of people based on your actual, in-person experiences? Or do you fall into the trap of hating/disparaging large groups of strangers, because the members of those groups who we happen to know and like are the rare exceptions?
3. Dr. Michelle Buck uses the term 'conflict transformation' saying that it's about 'creating deeper understanding' that requires 'perspective taking.' Is there a place in your life you could use 'conflict transformation'? A relationship? What could emerge if you did?
  - a. What about at church? Work?

### FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER!:

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of these questions come from study guides created by Brown herself.

**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. In Brené's interview with Viola Davis, she describes her true belonging practice – a few simple rules she lives by. These rules include practices like allowing herself to be seen, not being afraid, and "putting it all out there."
  - a. What practices guide and support you in belonging to yourself? How do you apply them in your personal life and your work?
  - b. How do these practices reflect the gospel as you understand it?
2. "Participants who put true belonging into practice talked openly about their boundaries... The clearer and more respected the boundaries, the higher the level of empathy and compassion for others. Fewer clear boundaries, less openness. ... the line was drawn at physical safety and at what people were calling *emotional safety*. Physical safety is one of the nonnegotiables – we can't be vulnerable if we are not physically safe. ...Emotional safety wasn't about getting their feelings hurt, they were talking about dehumanizing language and behavior." (70)
  - a. How clear are your boundaries?
  - b. How do we create an environment where folks are able to be vulnerable?
  - c. In what settings is this easier? Harder?
3. "...we are all vulnerable to the slow and insidious practice of dehumanizing, therefore we are all responsible for recognizing it and stopping it."
  - a. In your life, what is taught and modeled about the importance of boundaries when it comes to how people talk to each other? At home? At work? At church? With friends?
  - b. Do people walk the talk consistently?
4. Brown says it's much easier to be angry than it is to be hurt or scared. It's easier to inflict pain than to feel it. But anger is a catalyst. Holding on to it will make us exhausted and sick. Internalizing anger will take away our joy and spirit; externalizing anger will make us less effective in our attempts to create change and forge connection.
  - a. In your family of origin did you talk about pain and practice being in it and working through it or was anger and shutting down modeled?
  - b. What about in your current life – are you more likely to work through anger, or shut down?
  - c. Where are you externalizing anger? Where do you see others doing it?
5. The blind man showed incredible courage in today's scripture. He had been on the outside his whole life. Telling the truth about Jesus meant he would stay on the outside, but he did it anyway. Why do you think he did it?
  - a. What gave him that strength?
  - b. Who do you see as the ones on the outside now, who are the "truth-tellers"? Do we listen to them? Or close our ears for safety?
  - c. The authorities spoke to him – did they actually "come closer"? Why/why not?
6. Brown writes that when we commit to getting closer, we're committing to eventually experiencing real, face-to-face conflict. Whether it's over dinner, at work, or in the grocery line, in-person conflict is always hard and uncomfortable... maintaining the courage to stand alone when necessary in the midst of family or community or angry strangers feels like an untamed wilderness.
  - a. How comfortable are you with conflict?
  - b. Can you think of a time when you faced conflict, and were able to move through it? What got you through? What role did faith play? Forgiveness? Love?
  - c. How did the man born blind handle conflict? His parents? The disciples? The authorities?

**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.