

WILDERNESS: WEEK SIX

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

SCRIPTURES:

When they were approaching Jerusalem, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

They did what Jesus had said and brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

Matthew 21:1-11 and Luke 19:28-39

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

John 12:1-6,8

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 can't love anybody,
it doesn't make any difference
whether you can't love a woman,
or can't love a man —
if you can't love anybody,
you're dangerous.
Because you've no way
of learning humility.
No way of learning
that other people suffer.
No way of learning
how to use your suffering,
and theirs, to get from one place
to another. – James Baldwin

In the midst of this spiritual crisis (in our culture) the key to building a true belonging practice is maintaining our belief in inextricable human connection. That connection – the spirit that flows between us and every other human in the world – is not something that can be broken; however, our belief in the connection is constantly tested and repeatedly severed. When our belief that there's something greater than us, something rooted in love and compassion, breaks, we are more likely to retreat to our bunkers, to hate from afar, to tolerate bullshit, to dehumanize others, and, ironically, to stay out of the wilderness. It's counterintuitive, but our belief in inextricable human connection is one of our most renewable sources of courage in the wilderness. I can stand up for what I believe is right when I know that regardless of the pushback and criticism, I'm connected to myself and others in a way that cannot be severed. (Brown, Wilderness worksheet)

FOR YOUR SELF-REFLECTION:

Start by reading chapter 6 in *Braving the Wilderness*. If you have not already, it might be helpful to listen to this week's sermon, followed by Lilly's solo, both available on the First Church Youtube page: <https://www.youtube.com/@FirstChurchBTV>.

FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER!:

Start by reading numbers 3-5 on the first page, and then go around the group and ask about the best concert you've attended and why. Then ask which question each person wants to make sure to discuss and do it!

1. What has been some of your most meaningful experiences of collective joy, as described by Brown? Collective sorrow?
 - a. Can you explain why these are important?
 - b. How do they show us glimpses of what is possible between humans?
 - c. How do they show us glimpses of the Realm of God?
2. Brown cites a video (linked below) as an example of collective joy that caused her (and her family) to intentionally make more time for collective experiences – for them, by committing to a favorite team.
 - a. How can YOU carve out more time for these experiences?
 - b. Video is here: <https://youtu.be/0g1OwCd1pX8?si=dq1XaFGiaGVmv5Kl>
(You can also simply google some combination of the words "Liverpool 95000 you'll never walk alone Australia")
 - c. How can we cultivate more of these as a church?
3. Mary is a perfect example of a "ministry of presence" – being able to be fully present when Jesus is hurting. This ministry of presence is hard – it's hard to sit with folks in struggle (see, for example, all the other disciples, throughout all of Holy Week).
 - a. Can you think of times when you have been present with another in their pain?
 - b. When someone has been present for you?
 - c. What are the behaviors of being fully present? How/do we do this **in** church? Are there ways we could do this better as a church?

- d. If applicable, how are you/we teaching and modeling this for our children?
4. Are there ways you can show up more regularly for others? What about all of us together as a church?
5. "Social media are great for developing community, but for true belonging, real connection and real empathy require meeting people in real time."
 - a. As the work world changes and more people work remotely, and more of us move further from our families, what practices help us stay connected in meaningful ways?
 - b. What about as we retire?
6. Brown speaks a word of warning against "common enemy intimacy". For some of the disciples, the enemy was Rome, or the religious authorities. In our lives, the way this shows up is often gossip, or talking behind someone's back, finger-pointing or blaming another person or team.
 - a. Where have you experienced this most in your life? Do you find yourself slipping into it? How do you feel after?
 - b. Are there places where YOU have perpetrated this behavior at church? (NOT someone else!)
 - c. How can we guard against this?
7. This chapter is penultimate, and the beginning of her summation. Brown reminds us that belonging is the ability to be yourself no matter where you are, and in many places today this takes courage. She reminds us that the root of **courage is the ability to be vulnerable**. There is **no** courage without vulnerability.
 - a. How can our time together and relationships as a church help us build our tolerance for vulnerability ("grow our vulnerability muscles" so to speak) and enable us to be more courageous in our daily lives?
 - b. What do you need to do to grow your tolerance for vulnerability? Are there places where it is easier? Harder?
8. You're downtown and a flash mob emerges. Do you dance? A little? Walk away? Are you leading the flash-mob?
 - a. When was the last time you were joyful enough you started to sweat?
 - b. When was the last time you allowed yourself to really cry in public without apology?
 - c. How can you do more of these things in your life?
 - d. In our life together?

Finish by sharing your joys and concerns with one another. Write them down if it will help you remember them.

If this is your last week finish with the following activity:

1. Start with a "person A" in your group. Go around the room and have each person in the group name at least one gratitude they have for person A. Then move to "person B" and so forth.
 - a. What is it like to be affirmed like this?
 - b. Think about what place affirmation might have in enabling us to find the gray in our political discussions and life together.

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 Many of these questions come from study guides created by Brown herself.