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A Lenten Guide for Spiritual Growth

Kai Nilsen

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About the Authors

Kai Nilsen is Lead Pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio, and a member of the Renovaré team. He loves to engage all the callings in his life especially that of husband of 28 years and father of four kids. In his free time, he is frequently seen at the YMCA (sometimes even working out) and/or devouring a good book on the couch.

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Kathie Nycklemoe currently serves as Pastor for Spiritual Formation and Prayer at Zion Lutheran Church in Anoka, Minnesota, and has completed programs with the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Baltimore, Maryland, and the spiritual director program at the Franciscan Spirituality Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Kathie's favorite ways to engage often involve her husband, three young adult children, and renewed friendships now that the kids are older!

Eric Magnusson is an Associate Professor of Theology and director of the Master of Arts in Spiritual Formation and Leadership Program at Spring Arbor University in Michigan. When he's not hitting the Falling Waters Trail for a long run, Eric is likely contemplating life and spirituality with his wife and two strong girls, the real theologians in the family.



Introduction

Kai Nilsen

Dear Friend,

The season of Lent has traditionally been set apart by much of the Christian community as a time of reflection, repentance (changing our ways), and renewal. The forty days of Lent (excluding Sundays which are always a celebration of Jesus's resurrection) mirror forty years of wilderness wandering for the people of Israel and the forty days Jesus endured in the wilderness after his baptism.

This Lenten resource, *Engage*, is a guide for reflection, repentance, and renewal. Each week we will explore another classic spiritual discipline. In the Renovaré community we talk about spiritual disciplines as activities undertaken through our own power that open us to power beyond our own – the power of God's Spirit. There are disciplines of abstinence such as fasting, simplicity, solitude, etc. With these disciplines, we abstain from our normal desires for people, food, sex, etc., in order to focus more intently on the presence of God. These desires by themselves are not bad but we know they can be distorted and abused, thus becoming destructive to us, our bodies, our relationships with one another

and God. We focused on these disciplines in the Lenten resource, *Less is More.*

There are also disciplines of engagement. These disciplines are the ones through which we actively engage our lives with God, one another, and the world. As Dallas Willard writes in *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (p.175), "Abstinence and engagement are the outbreathing and inbreathing of our spiritual lives, and we require disciplines for both movements." This season we invite you to practice these disciplines of engagement: submission, study, worship, celebration, service, and community.

Our hope is that the daily immersion in the life of God through these disciplines becomes a life-giving habit that extends well beyond this season of Lent.

Peace,

that

Kai Nilsen

How to Use this Resource

We hope you will engage this resource with expectancy and anticipation, with grace and with love. We believe God longs for the transformation of the "inner being," as Paul says in Ephesians. We believe it is possible. So, we enter with expectancy and anticipation.

We also know how quickly gifts of God can become another burden. We deaden our spirits with "*must*" and "*ought*." What is meant to allow access to the life-giving power of the Spirit becomes another legalism that diminishes our souls rather than gives flight. Our hope is that these disciplines of engagement will crack open your heart and mind and soul so that the surprising and unsurpassing love of Christ will be poured in to overflowing. So, enter with grace and love.

Each week will include a description of a spiritual discipline, a scriptural reference, reflections on the discipline, and questions that can be used individually or in what we are calling "Formational Friendships." Formational friends are people willing to make an intentional journey of grace with you through the engagement of these practices of the faith. Use this guide as a way to strengthen existing relationships, deepen superficial relationships, or open up new and vital relationships.

Remember, the point of this journey is not simply to complete every page. If you miss a day, start again the next. The point is to open your life to God's renewing Spirit through intentional practice and reflection. We know you won't continue all these disciplines, all the time. We hope, though, that one or two of them become an integral part of the rhythm of your life, turning from activity to habit to a new way of being



Ash Wednesday Week Submission

Kai Nilsen

In a "me" world, the thought of submission, much less actually submitting ourselves to God and/or others, is anathema. Yet, what better way to enter this season of Lent than by engaging in the discipline of submission? The ritual action of Ash Wednesday, ashes being marked on our foreheads in the sign of a cross, reminds us of our brokenness, our mortality, and our dependence on God to work new life in us and through us. We are not in control!

Submission reminds us it is better to be in right relationship than always having to be right. We give ourselves to one another mutually, as learners and teachers, leaders and followers, desiring only the best for all. This discipline has been horribly abused in Christian community over the centuries – pastors imposing their wills on their people, husbands demanding strict obedience from their wives, parents wielding a heavy hand on their children as they punish "in accordance with the will of God." Nothing could be further from the truth of this discipline.

Submission invites us to humble, open, mutually dependent relationship with God and with one another. We accept our

place as servants of God, not masters of our own destiny. We relish being both learner and teacher, leader and follower, creators of vision and those who do the ordinary work of carrying it out.

Ash Wednesday

"If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life... Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand" (Philippians 2:1-4 *THE MESSAGE*, by Eugene Peterson).

What does it mean to you to submit yourself to following Christ?

What areas of your life are you less willing to cede control?

In what specific ways do you struggle with getting to the top, gaining your own advantage? Say a prayer of confession to God for those areas.

What would it look like, in your life, to "forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand?"

Think of ways to submit yourself for the betterment of others at home, at work, at school.

How can you be less controlling of others and more loving?

Thursday: How can we talk about this with others?

The themes of humility, ceding control, and offering ourselves for the sake of others launch our Lenten journey. As you talk with a formational friend or reflect upon this experience individually, consider these questions: In what areas of your life do you struggle with either lack of control or desiring to control too much? How can you imagine those relationships differently?

Control is often a manifestation of fear or anxiety. What are the fears underlying your desire to control or your perceived lack of control?

God chooses to work through love not coercion. Does that change how you see yourself in relationship with God?

What would it mean for you to submit yourself to others in love this week?

Friday: A personal reflection.

What's best for me isn't always what's best for all. I learned that the hard way in my first call as a pastor. I was young, energetic for ministry, eager to prove myself and make a mark. The pastor I joined on staff had a different vision for worship and ministry than I did, had made his mark, and (I found out later) was also struggling with his marriage - none of which I was particularly sensitive to.

When people would pull me aside and affirm my vision, instead of calling them to be part of "our" vision, I would concur. As I found out, it doesn't take long to drive a wedge between staff. When the staff of a larger church is divided, the whole body suffers. Alliances emerge. Bitterness takes root. Energy for mission is sapped out of the system. What's best for me isn't always what's best for all.

Sometimes you learn more through pain than pleasure. That was certainly the case for me. It's not easy to make decisions that work better for the body than for me. The discipline of submission has been a great teacher. The work can never be limited to what I can know, do, or control. So, I'm learning to give up control when it benefits others. It's not always about me. What's best for me isn't always what's best for all.

When have you learned to give up control? What was that like? How did it affect your relationship to others, your sense of self?

Saturday: Insights for the journey.

Each Saturday, we hope you will gather the salient experiences, the accumulated insights, the inner promptings from the week and write them down on the journal page.

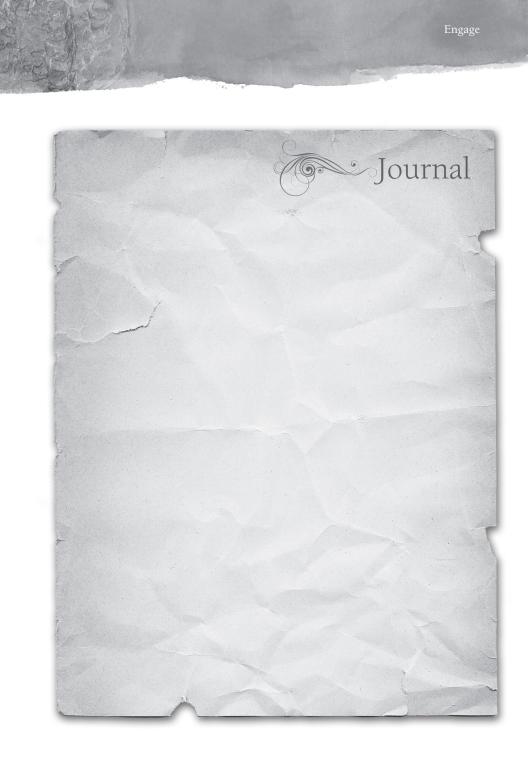
How have you experienced God's presence this week?

How has your connection with yourself, with others deepened because of your intentional work with this discipline?

What about this discipline will you continue to build into your life?

Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

Engage Life!





Week One Study Kai Nilsen

In the discipline of study we engage the written, spoken, and visual word so that our minds are renewed, our connection with the story of God deepened, and our discernment of what is good and right sharpened. Therefore, we study with expectancy. In the words of Dallas Willard, "Our prayer as we study meditatively is always that God would meet us and speak specifically to us, for ultimately the Word of God is God speaking." (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p.177)

Studying is not just reading or listening or watching. In our study we engage the material with a sense of expectancy that God is present. We reflect deeply on the words and images so that what enters the mind will shape the heart. Consequently, what we study matters. We live in a time of information overload. The mass of information at our ready access multiplies in ever shortening increments of time. But, information alone does not change anyone or anything. So, we read, reflect, pray, converse, and then repeat. By God's grace, we will be better able to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves.

Monday: What can I do?

Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), invites us into study and meditation by imaginatively entering the biblical stories.

- Choose some of your favorite biblical stories. Luke 15:11-32, Luke 10:25-37, John 8:1-11 may be good examples.
- Read the story slowly once.
- Reread the story imagining yourself part of the scene. Who is there? What is happening? What are the sights, smells?
- Put yourself in the place of each of the characters. What would you be thinking, feeling? How would you respond?
- If Jesus spoke to you in that scene, what would he say? Focus your mind on one word or phrase that strikes you.
- Say a prayer thanking God for inviting you to be part of the story.

Tuesday: What do the Scriptures say?

Read Psalm 1. Those who meditate on God's word are like "trees planted by streams of water..." Reflect on that imagery. When, if ever, has that been true for your life?

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Romans 12:2).

What worldly, cultural values are drawing you away from the mind of Christ, the way of love? What areas of your life need renewal?

Wednesday: What do our guides say?

"What we study determines what kind of habits are to be formed. That is why Paul urged us to center on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious." (Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p.55)

Do an inventory of what you read, watch, or study? How is your life being shaped? Where is it leading you?

How often do you consciously reflect on what you read or watch versus simply filling your mind with more content? Try it this week. Read or watch less. Reflect more.

What are you studying now? What can you study in the future to center your life on "things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious?"

Thursday: How can we talk about this with others?

The themes of renewal of mind, focus for life, and connecting with a bigger story arise from our engagement with the discipline of study. As you talk with a formational friend or reflect upon this experience individually, consider these questions:

Who was/is your favorite author or teacher? What have they taught you about life?

What shifts do you need to make in what you read, study, or watch that will help you focus on God's life and character?

How are you continually reminding yourself that you are part of the larger narrative of God's story?

Friday: A personal reflection.

Many personal trainers are touting the principle of muscle confusion as a key for physical growth. By varying your training

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routines your muscles can't adapt to one specific routine, thus they stretch and break down, and in building back up, they grow.

The same is true for my mind. Throughout my adult life, the times of greatest stagnation have, upon reflection, been the times when I immersed myself in only one genre of books or study. For a season it was only church growth books. Another season I focused on leadership. Still another I focused on culture and how the world was changing. Each had its benefit, but in each season I reached a point of stagnation.

My wife is always the one who senses it first and, subsequently, has developed a rule for me on vacation – no books about Jesus. So, I press into a novel or a historical biography and my mind is stretched and my heart released. Cross-training for the mind. It's when I am at my best.

How can you vary your study habits? What do you need to release for a season? What do you need to engage?

Saturday: Insights for the journey.

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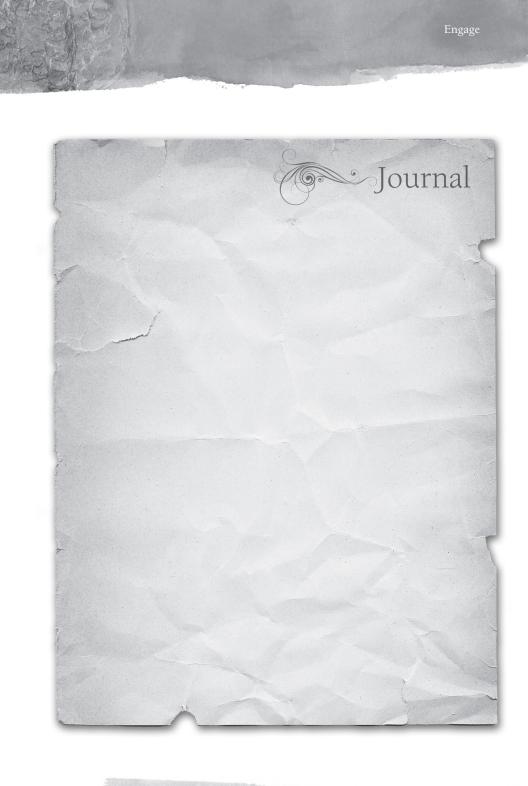
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Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

Engage Life!





Week Two Worship

Kai Nilsen

"Worship didn't do anything for me today." "I didn't get anything out of it." "It was so boring. I didn't feel anything." "I don't have time to get to worship this weekend. I have so much to do."

Notice the focus of each statement. I... I... Worship, properly understood, shifts the focus. Worship focuses our minds on God. "We engage ourselves with, dwell upon, and express the greatness, beauty and goodness of God." (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p.177) In that way, worship is profoundly counter-cultural. We offer ourselves not for what we will get or feel but because God's presence and gracious goodness is worthy of praise.

We also diminish worship when we think about it primarily as something we do for an hour a week or, in our contemporary church world, when we make a distinction between the time of singing (which we call worship) and the rest of the service. **Worship is an event but it is also a posture of living.** We live our lives in worshipful response to God's goodness when, daily, we speak words of thanks and praise to God and live lives of loving service, not for what we will gain, but simply to say thank you to God.

Monday: What can I do?

Weekly:

- If you are an inconsistent participant in worship make a commitment for more frequent worship this season.
- Choose to think of worship as an offering of praise and thanks to God first, rather than entering with the mindset of "What will I get out of it?"
- Prepare for worship by reading the appointed Gospel text for the day or by arriving early and sitting quietly in prayer.

Daily:

• Each day this week, keep these words on your lips, "Thank you, God!" When you wake in the morning, thank God for a new day. When you experience the beauty of creation or laughter or holy tears, say "Thank you, God." Challenge yourself to find multiple ways every day to offer thanks to God.

Tuesday: What do the Scriptures say?

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they existed and were created" (Revelation 4:11).

What, in your mind, makes God worthy of our honor and worship? Say or write the things that come to your mind and then thank God for them.

"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6).

Sometimes we focus only on "doing worship" and not on what the act of worship can produce in us by God's grace. How does your worship enhance your desire to experience and express God's steadfast love?

Wednesday: What do our guides say?

"Worship is our responding to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father." (Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p.138)

Think about a time in your life when you responded to someone's overture of love. What was that like?

Now, imagine that love, and more, being poured out for you each day by God. How will you respond?

Spend time today responding to the wonder of God's love. What do you need to thank God for today?

Thursday: How can we talk about this with others?

The themes of praise and wonder shift our focus from ourselves to God. As you talk with a formational friend or reflect upon this experience individually, consider these questions:

In what ways have you made worship all about you and not about praise of God?

When we offer ourselves to God in worship we also open our hearts to receive. Talk about a time in worship when you sensed God's presence.

Worship is not just a weekend event but also a life posture. How can you order your days, your life in such a way that you are consistently offering small utterances of praise throughout?

Friday: A personal reflection.

One of the curses of being in ministry is the tendency to evaluate worship experiences rather than enter them with a spirit of honor and praise. I watch the movement of people, listen for the competency of the musicians, critique the theology or delivery of the pastor's sermon. In doing so, worship becomes production not praise. I could simply say it's an occupational hazard. But, it's also a sin, a distortion of God's intent for worship.

All Saint's Sunday, in the congregation I serve, is always a corrective to my self-absorbed view of worship. As hundreds of people, young and old, healthy and frail, line the aisles in mournful procession to light a candle for a loved one who has died, my "self" is yanked from the center of my attention. It's not about me. God is light in darkness, hope to the despairing, an all-embracing presence of love as intimate as the gently rolling tears and as transcendent as the power to life eternal. All I can say is "thank you."

Talk or think about experiences of weekly or daily worship when all you could say was, "Thank you, God."

Saturday: Insights for the journey.

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How have you experienced God's presence this week?

How has your connection with yourself, with others deepened because of your intentional work with this discipline?

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Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

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Week Three **Celebration**

Keith Matthews

Dallas Willard comments that the discipline of celebration is "one of the most important disciplines of engagement, yet most overlooked and misunderstood. We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God's greatness, beauty and goodness."

We remember the gift of our life and world, and seek to celebrate God's gracious action towards us and others. While this discipline might begin in private reflection, it typically involves others who know God and mutually celebrate with us. It involves eating and drinking, singing and dancing, and sharing of stories of God's action in our lives. Celebration recognizes that there is an appropriate and much needed time for this to be engaged in our lives. Many Christians find this hard to do, perhaps because it may seem self-indulgent, yet it **IS** important and necessary in our life with God. Let's celebrate!

Monday: What can I do?

A key component for practicing celebration is remembering . . .

- To cultivate "remembering" one must take time to slow down. Ponder your life, not what is wrong, but what is right. Where have you seen God at work in you, in your family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers, not just the big things, but little in-breakings of God's grace? And celebrate!
- As you consciously slow down, go on a walk or hike, perhaps at a park, through your neighborhood, or a local walking trail. Reflect on God's creation, its variety, its beauty, its intricacy, its wonder. And celebrate!
- Plan a dinner with a few close friends... go all out! Good food, conversation, and have some fun. Celebrate God's goodness through mutual love and support. Share what they mean in your life (be specific). And celebrate!
- Share a family "communion" experience... bread, wine (or grape juice). Remind everyone that "this is a celebration meal"... Jesus's presence will never leave us! And celebrate!

Tuesday: What do the Scriptures say?

Let's begin with Jesus! Jesus's first miracle was at a wedding celebration in Cana (John 2). He seemed to create and enjoy meals often with religious leaders (Luke 7:36-50), disciples (Luke 22:8-20), large groups (Matthew 14:13-21), and small groups (Luke 24:13-32). There's just something about eating with others that brings about a climate for good celebration!

We see again and again portraits of unabashed celebration and delight from God's people in the Scriptures... why do we (you) have a difficult time celebrating?

Can we (you) celebrate the goodness of God in others?

Wednesday: What do our guides say?

Dallas Willard states, "Certainly this will seem far too hedonistic to many of us. But we dishonor God as much by fearing and avoiding pleasure as we do by dependence upon it or living for it. Celebration heartily done makes our deprivations and sorrows seem small, and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God because his goodness becomes so real to us." (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p.180-181)

Richard Foster says, "Celebration is central to all the Spiritual Disciplines. Without a joyful spirit of festivity the Disciplines become dull... celebration brings joy into life, and joy makes us strong... God's normal means of bringing his joy is by redeeming and sanctifying the ordinary junctures of human life." (Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, pp.191, 193)

Reflect deeply on the insights from these two wise mentors. There is much for us to pray, seek, and to act upon in these words. You might want to write down how these words are speaking to you in a few simple paragraphs.

Thursday: How can we talk about this with others?

The themes of joy and delight permeate the discipline of celebration. As you talk with a formational friend or reflect upon this experience individually, consider these questions:

What did you celebrate as a family when you were growing up? What did those celebrations say about what your family valued?

Have you ever been or encountered a joyless Christian? How can the discipline of celebration inform your/their journey?

Celebration is not just for grand events or significant movements of God. How can you celebrate small successes in your day?

Friday: A personal reflection.

I have served the church as a pastor and lay-leader for over forty years and I must say that I have not witnessed "celebration" as a discipline being practiced very well throughout my life. I've struggled myself with this practice, primarily because of my personal issues with hurry, busy-ness, and a myriad of distractions that preoccupy my life. Another barrier is more theological. It's the thought that "holy people don't indulge themselves in celebration." What a diversion this makes! It subverts the soul into a life with God that is scarce and withholding, not befitting the magnificence and generosity that his true character exudes. Yes, there is a time for celebration with God and others! (Ecclesiastes 3:4). You need not wait until you step into heaven. Together let's learn how to do this well on this side of eternity... then we will be prepared for an eternity of it!

Ponder the thought that if I can't celebrate in this life, how will I do it in the next?

How can I celebrate today? God IS good!

Saturday: Insights for the journey.

Each Saturday, we hope you will gather the salient experiences, the accumulated insights, the inner promptings from the week and write them down on the journal page.

How have you experienced God's presence this week?

How has your connection with yourself, with others deepened because of your intentional work with this discipline?

What about this discipline will you continue to build into your life?

Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

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Week Four Service

Do we really *need* each other? And if we do, why? Can't I live my solitary life, with my individual rights as most important? Today our consumer culture encourages such thinking, and puts the "self" in the center. We can easily see others as worthy if they are like us and benefit us, and less than worthy if they do not. Yet this thinking is a deceptive illusion. God is in the center of all life and all people are of shared value and worth. Jesus showed us that truth many times, and in the divine design of God we are created to see others as worthy AND to simply help one another along the way.

God has created us to be in community and we are most "alive" when we live into this reality in humble service to one another. True service is alive when we share our gifts with joy, as well as when we allow others to share their gifts with us. True service leads to God and not to self. True service is much more than something we do – it is who we are created to be. It is more than an activity, it is a way of life. Any time we love, listen to, or lift up others, we serve. "True service is a life-style. It acts from ingrained patterns of living. It springs spontaneously to

meet human need." (Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p.129)

Monday: What can I do?

"In service we engage our goods and strength in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world." (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p.182)

- Pray for openness to see the needs of others. Opportunities to promote the good of others (friends and strangers) come to us all the time. Pray for openness to see these opportunities as well as the humility and wisdom to engage.
- Listen to others with no agenda or need to "fix" them. Imagine seeing them through Jesus's eyes and allow them the space to be heard.
- Let go and love. Take a chance to offer God's love to others in daily life. Hold the door open for others, attempt to be patient in the grocery line or in traffic, contact someone you are thinking of, surprise someone with a smile, speak up when others are being belittled.
- Practice hospitality in the workplace, where you volunteer, at home, at church, anywhere.
- Allow others to serve you with gratitude. You may be providing a great opportunity for their soul!

Tuesday: What do the Scriptures say?

"It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28). How have you been "served" by God?

Where do you see God at work through people sharing their time, gifts, and love?

Frederick Buechner teaches us that, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC) Where does your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet?

How is God glorified when you share your gifts with others? How is God glorified when you allow others to share their gifts with you?

Wednesday: What do our guides say?

"True service comes from a relationship with the divine Other deep inside. We serve out of whispered promptings, divine urgings." (Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p.128)

When have you experienced "whispered promptings" to help others? What happened? What was the outcome?

Do a "motivation check" – do you seek affirmation and results in your service to others, or are you willing to do your best and let go and allow God to work?

How do you cultivate your relationship with God, the divine Other?

Thursday: How can we talk about this with others?

The themes of sacrifice, giftedness, and focus on others permeate the discipline of service. As you talk with a formational friend or reflect upon this experience individually, consider these questions: Who do you know that models a life of service? What characteristics are evident in their life?

What messages did you receive about others when you were growing up? Were you encouraged to serve others or live for yourself?

What unique gifts do you have to offer? Where can you offer them?

Friday: A personal reflection.

I am heartened by the many ways children are encouraged to serve these days. When I was young I remember being taught the Golden Rule and watching my parents help others, but it was nothing near the emphasis of service that many children are taught today. Recycling, volunteering at food banks, and "adopting highways" are part of children's lives in contrast to our self-centered, consumer culture. There is great hope.

When I think of the many ways I have received God's great love, people are always involved. When I was a junior in high school there was a teacher with whom I would talk for hours. Who knows what we talked about but I do remember his generous ear and heart. When our children were young and my husband and I were trying to be good parents and pastors – it took a village. We received meals, encouragement, and prayers. And when my dad was dying of cancer, the service of love, prayers, casseroles, and the occasional good humor, got us through.

Call to mind the many ways you have been blessed by others throughout your life or just in the past few days. Take a quick inventory of what you already engage in that promotes the good of others as you go through the day. Offer a prayer of thanks for the many ways you have been blessed by others.

Saturday: Insights for the journey.

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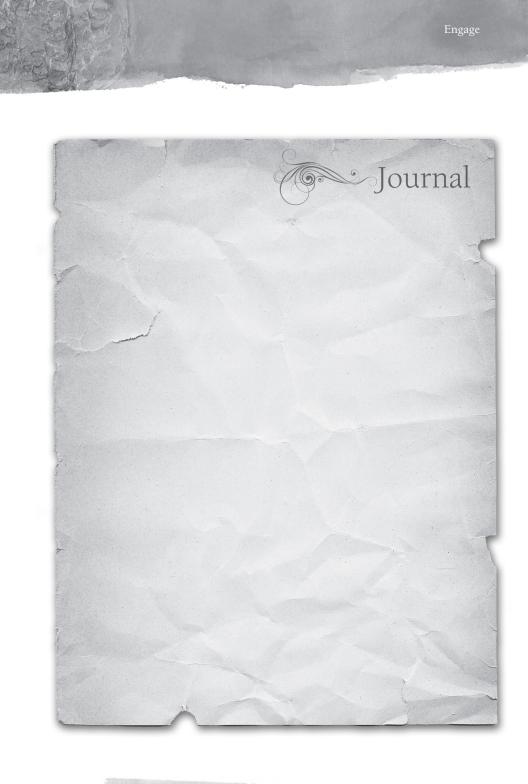
How have you experienced God's presence this week?

How has your connection with yourself, with others deepened because of your intentional work with this discipline?

What about this discipline will you continue to build into your life?

Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

Engage Life!





Week Five **Community**

Eric Magnusson

"As you are in me and I am in you..." Relationship. It is the most foundational reality of life. As people, each and every one of us is born into relationship. We are nurtured for around forty weeks in a rich symbiotic participation with our birth mothers and born into the complex freedom of life in relationship with others. Long before we define ourselves by our professions or our natural giftedness, before we are athletes, teachers, sanitation workers, civil servants, pastors, or scholars, we are daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, lovers and enemies and friends. **Relationship, and therefore community, is at the very heart of what it means to be human, and to be created in the image and likeness of the Triune God**.

In some ways this most basic reality stands in contrast to how we often understand our identity as Christians. In a Christian culture where the litmus test of faith is often one's personal relationship with Jesus, the discipline of community is a commitment to a counter-cultural way of life – a life with, for, and in relation to others. Christian community is a reflection of God. The essence, the very nature of God is relational – open, participatory,

Engage

receptive, welcoming. It is life characterized by self-giving and other-receiving love, in which each person of the Trinity creates space in God's self for the other persons: as Jesus said, "...as you, Father, are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21).

The discipline of community, then, is one of the most vital ways that we can reflect God in the world. The discipline of community is a radical commitment to open ourselves to the transformative work of God's Spirit as we encounter God in one other, for we can never really encounter another person and be left unchanged. It is a participation in God's work of redemption and reconciliation in the world. And ultimately, community is about becoming who we truly are, because we really only become the persons God has created us to be in and with and through our relationships with other people. The with-God life is the with-community life, so we travel and we engage life together!

Monday: What can I do?

We can create space to listen. There are many robust practices of community, but one of the most powerful acts is sharing and listening to our stories. Story listening is truly an act of participation. We are changed when we receive another person's life story and begin to weave it together with our own.

• This week, invite two or three other persons to join you for a couple of nights of story listening. I recommend inviting one person you know fairly well and one or two whom you do not know well. Explain to them that you want to come together to share your life stories with each other. When you are together, give each person 20-25 minutes of uninterrupted time to share their story in whatever way they choose, while the rest of you are simply liberated to listen with no internal pressure to respond or outdo the storyteller. When the storyteller is done, feel free to ask questions and explore the story for a bit before offering up a blessing for the ways that you

see God working in that person's life and in their story. If there are four in a group, you might let two people share their stories each night. (Imagine about 75-90 minutes each time you're together.)

• After the experience, reflect on what happened that evening. Where did you sense God in your midst? How was God uniting you to these other people as you received their stories and offered them yours? How would our lives and our communities be different if they were marked by this kind of reciprocal sharing?

Tuesday: What do the Scriptures say?

Community is one of those spiritual disciplines where we are the most human and the most divine. As we turn to the Scriptures this week, spend time prayerfully reflecting on Psalm 133 and the Philippians 2:1-8 passage. After stilling yourself for a brief moment of silence, begin by praying this simple prayer of illumination from Gregory of Nazianzus:

Lord, as I read the Psalms let me hear you singing. As I read your words, let me hear you speaking. As I reflect on each page, let me see your image. And as I seek to put your precepts into practice, let my heart be filled with joy. Amen.

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore" (Psalm 133).

Reflect on your life in community. Where do you sense the divine blessing of God in your relationships with others? Where do you sense its absence?

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death" (Philippians 2:1-8, TNIV).

The words Paul uses here are so pregnant with the possibility of life and death in community: tenderness, compassion, humility, selfish ambition, vain conceit. Read slowly through this passage again.

Where do you see your own life? What stories, what names and faces and scenes, can you connect to each of these powerful and poignant words? Throughout your day, ask God to reveal to you how you can better "have the same attitude of mind that Christ Jesus had" with others in your community.

Wednesday: What do our guides say?

"Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals. The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other's flame. The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other. Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual of course has a unique and direct relationship with God, and God alone is

Engage

his or her Lord and Judge. But The Life is one that requires some regular and profound conjunction with others who share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking. (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 186-7)

These are wise words from a deep, spiritual mentor. Spend some time reflecting on your relationships with others in your community. When you gather together, are you individual brands sitting on the edge of a fire, or are you heaped together and warmed by one another's flames? How do others contribute to the strength of your life in God? How do you contribute to others?

Before you retire this evening, take an inventory of your day. What most consumed your time, attention, and energy? How often were you consciously aware of others in your community? Where did you sense the greatest sustaining and life-giving connection to others? Where did you sense the greatest sense of disconnection? Prayerfully talk with God about these things.

Thursday: How can we talk about this with others?

The themes of unity, diversity, vulnerability, and transformation permeate the discipline of community. As you talk with a formational friend or reflect upon this experience individually, consider these questions:

How, and through whom, did I experience community when I was growing up?

What keeps me from opening up to others?

Are there any relationships I need to tend to right now?

Friday: A personal reflection.

Forming community is holy but hard. It's different than just attending worship and participating in church activities or spending time together. Several autumns ago, six of my university students unexpectedly invited my wife and me to join them for lunch at Panera Bread in metro-Detroit. We met together, ate, and talked about life and college. As the small talk subsided, they shared with us the real reason we were together. This group, mostly seniors at this point, was staring graduation in the face. When they thought about their relationships with each other, they were at a loss. They had been friends for years and had navigated the liberal arts college experience together.

Inside, however, they had a nagging suspicion that unless something changed, unless something intentional happened, that they would graduate and leave school and never really talk to one another again. They spent a lot of time together, going to eat, critiquing pop culture, theologizing, and having fun, yet they sensed that there was something deeper and more substantive that they were missing, the thing that would really bond them together as a community. For some reason, they asked us to help them change it.

Each Friday for the rest of the school year, this great group of students came to our house. We would share dinner and catch up on small talk before we more intentionally practiced the discipline of community. After eating we took turns sharing our stories with one another. The simple practices of creating hospitable lives, of being vulnerable to each other, and of deep listening changed each of us. God was present.

Do you have any casual relationships now that, with a little more intentionality, could become significant relationships? What can you do to move in that direction?

Saturday: Insights for the journey.

Each Saturday we hope you will gather the salient experiences, the accumulated insights, the inner promptings from the week and write them down on the journal page.

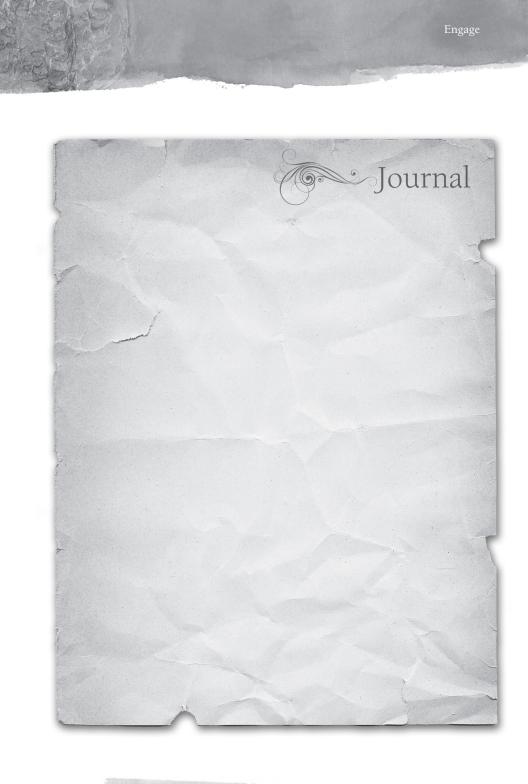
How have you experienced God's presence this week?

How has your connection with yourself, with others deepened because of your intentional work with this discipline?

What about this discipline will you continue to build into your life?

Ask God for continued guidance and encouragement as you make the journey of this season.

Engage Life!





Holy Week

We enter the holiest week of the Christian year. Throughout this week, we will read continuously from Matthew's version of the Last Supper, the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of our Lord. The temptation in reading any familiar story is to gloss over it quickly. We've heard it all before. Thus, we miss the opportunity to immerse ourselves in this grand narrative of tragedy and triumph, human sinfulness and Jesus's faithfulness, paralyzing fear and sacrificial love, bitter death and sweet resurrection to new life.

Each day, read the text slowly one time, then again, and even a third time if possible. Allow the story to move from your head to your heart. Note what words strike you, what characters resemble you or repulse you, and what Jesus endured for you. God's story is your story.

Holy Week Readings:

Monday: Matthew 26:1-29

Tuesday: Matthew 26:30-46

Wednesday: Matthew 26:47-75

Thursday: Matthew 27:1-31 Friday: Matthew 27:32-66

After each reading, ask yourself:

What does this story tell us about the God revealed in Jesus?

What does this story tell us about humanity?

What prayer would you offer to God this day? What prayers would you offer for others, for our world?

Saturday: Insights for the journey.

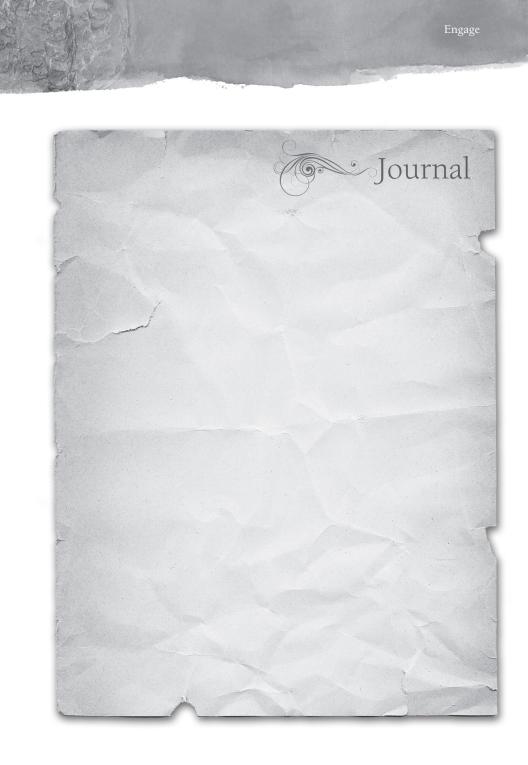
This Saturday of Holy Week, we hope you will gather the salient experiences, the accumulated insights, the inner promptings from this season and write them down on the journal page.

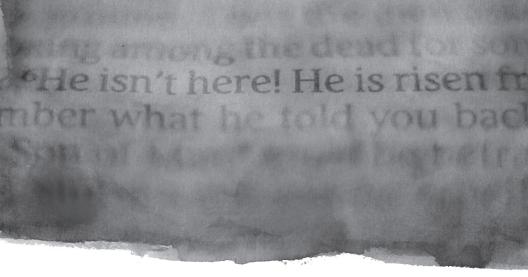
How have you experienced God's presence this season?

How has your connection with yourself, with others deepened because of your intentional work?

Which discipline will you continue to build into your life?

Say a prayer of gratitude to God for the work that God's Spirit has done in your life this season.

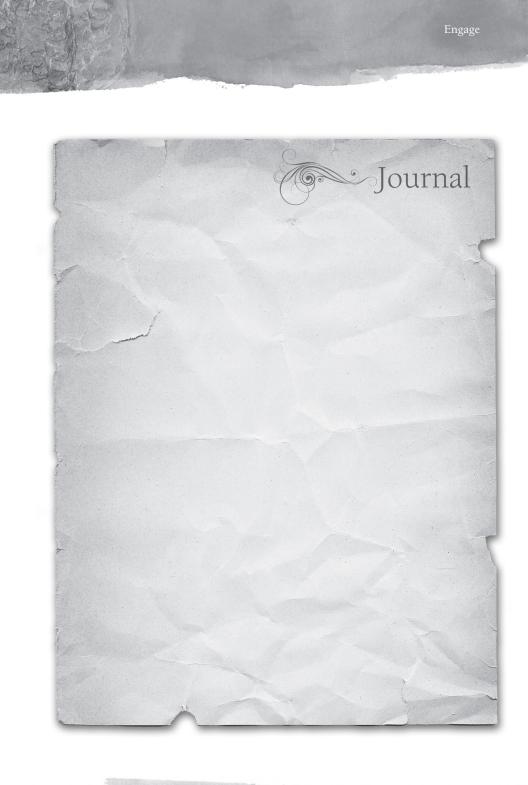




Easter Sunday

Attend worship and/or read Matthew 28:1-20

Christ is Risen! Engage Life!



What is Renovaré?

Renovaré USA is a nonprofit Christian organization that models, resources, and advocates fullness of life with God experienced, by grace, through the spiritual practices of Jesus and of the historical Church. We imagine a world in which people's lives flourish as they increasingly become like Jesus.

Through personal relationships, conferences and retreats, written and web-based resources, church consultations, and other means, Renovaré USA pursues these core ideas:

- Life with God The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant.
- The Availability of God's Kingdom Salvation is life in the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ. We can experience genuine, substantive life in this Kingdom, beginning now and continuing through all eternity.
- The Necessity of Grace We are utterly dependent upon Jesus Christ, our ever-living Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend for genuine spiritual transformation.

- The Means of Grace Amongst the variety of ways God has given for us to be open to his transforming grace, we recognize the crucial importance of intentional spiritual practices and disciplines (such as prayer, service, confession, or fasting).
- A Balanced Vision of Life in Christ We seek to embrace the abundant life of Jesus in all its fullness: contemplative, holiness, charismatic, social justice, evangelical, and incarnational.
- A Practical Strategy for Spiritual Formation Spiritual friendship is an essential part of our growth in Christlikeness. We encourage the creation of Spiritual Formation Groups as a solid foundation for mutual support and nurture.
- The Centrality of Scripture We immerse ourselves in the Bible: it is the great revelation of God's purposes in history, a sure guide for growth into Christlikeness, and an ever rich resource for Spiritual Formation.
- The Value of the Christian Tradition We are engaged in the historical "Great Conversation" on Spiritual Formation developed from Scripture by the Church's classical spiritual writings.

Christian in commitment, ecumenical in breadth, and international in scope, Renovaré USA helps us in becoming like Jesus. The Renovaré Covenant succinctly communicates our hope for all those who look to him for life: In utter dependence upon Jesus Christ as my ever-living Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend, I will seek continual renewal through spiritual exercises, spiritual gifts, and acts of service.



www.renovare.org

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Register Today WWW.renovare.org

April 3-5, 2014 [Thursday-Saturday]

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First Presbyterian Church of Houston 5300 Main St. | Houston, TX 77004

