

BEYOND BROKEN

Leader Guide

youth  RESOURCE

By Brian Barlow

Beyond Broken is a six-week study for middle school and high school youth focused on God's intent for identity and relational wholeness. The study begins with a larger discussion focused on gender, and specifically, on God's design for male and female and how they were intended to be in relationship with one another.

The studies are written in such a way as to open and invite dialogue and subject that discussion to what Scripture says in regard to relational and sexual wholeness. Topics include God's plan for relationship, gender, identity in Christ, confusion in culture, and grace and witness. Each lesson contains a connective learning exercise to further engage and clarify how the lesson applies to life.

These lessons are not intended to exhaust the topic but to offer a scriptural and clear starting point in which to bring the hope of Christ to a hurting and often confused world.

Introduction: The Bigger Discussion

Lesson One: Why Not the Garden?

Lesson Two: Love Not Hugs

Lesson Three: Who Does He Say I am?

Lesson Four: Gender What's the Big Deal?

Lesson Five: Leaving the Grave Clothes Behind

Lesson Six: Now What? The Gospel Advance



Introduction

Whenever the topic of homosexuality and gender comes up in conversation, all the taboos of sexual perversion appear to swallow up our imaginations and experiences, inviting us into a discussion. It's as if we have a classroom set aside for just this conversation. The expectation, dictated for us in part by geography, implies that here is the place where we will discover what went wrong and identify the key to fixing the problem of gender confusion both within the church and in the world.

For this journey, I would like to propose the larger room conversation takes place in the Assembly Hall. Here a broader conversation is set forth that in part helps provide understanding for the person who is same-sex attracted. I would also like to propose the topic fundamental to all sexual sin and broken expressions found in our relationships is more about what happened to mankind as male and female in "The Fall" (Genesis 1) and is in fact the more important discussion. All forms of sexual brokenness, including homosexuality, are just part of the bigger conversation. *What is this big conversation? Why do men and women struggle in relationships?*

God fashioned mankind in His image and likeness. The Latin term for this is *Imago Dei*. He created man to not be alone. He made man for woman and woman for man on purpose for a purpose. An engendered gift for the other. We call this *Missio Dei*. By creating a complement partner, "the other," if you will, humanity could truly know life, reflecting His likeness and image. Mankind, then, is fully human and able to learn, understand and make right choices that come from a divine order for relationship to God and others. Different in expression and function, but complementary. This holy and unique creation was given a part in His profound plan for creation.

Just as all other parts of creation were given the function to be fruitful and increase, now so was the crown of all creation. Mankind was formed to unite and produce life. We were never intended to divide and live apart. God made us male and female to be a gift to each other. As a parent, Father God created the best of all possible gifts to give Adam and He created Eve. Imagine what it must be like for a parent whose gift is rejected.

*So God created man
in his own image,
in the image of God
he created him;
male and female he
created them.
And God blessed
them. And God said to
them, "Be fruitful and
multiply and fill the
earth and subdue it
and have dominion
over the fish of the
sea and over the birds
of the heavens and
over every living thing
that moves on the
earth."
Genesis 1:27-28 (ESV)*

Today, we live in a world where men and women struggle to live life together. Sadly, the statistics for divorce among Christians is no different than those who don't profess Jesus as Savior and Lord. Man crushes the responsive tender heart of a woman, often challenged because she is different from man. Woman spars with man, emasculating his person, leaving him impotent and unnecessary. Homosexuality is in part the rejection of "the other." It resigns itself to sameness, committed to figuring out life with others like ones-self. The problem is that we were created in His likeness to live fully integrated and united with the other. The image and likeness of God is both fully male and fully female. How then can we truly reflect the fullness of His likeness separated from the good of "the other"?

To be clear, I'm not suggesting the only place for wholeness is in marriage between a man and woman. What I am suggesting is that whether single or married, unless we understand how to be in right relationship with God, whole enough in our own unique gender as male and female, we will not be able to be in right relationship with each other. We will either encourage, bless, complement, build-up, and honor the other gender or we will tear-down, reject, curse, dishonor, and dismiss the other. Whether it be a teacher, employer, brother, sister, father, mother, or friend our relationships were created to reflect the harmony of a Triune God.

In His plan for mankind, male and female was intended to communicate perfectly with God and each other. To reject God's plan for male and female is to step out of relationship and leave this holy communion with God and others, thus opening the doors to relational horror. The classrooms reflect facets of sexual brokenness. They include but are not limited to promiscuity, pornography, adultery, homosexuality, and transgenderism. Therefore, for this 6-week study we will look at the topic of gender and sexuality through 4 vantage points:

Displacement - Why not the Garden?

Belief - Part 1: Love is more than tolerance and

Part 2: Gender, What's the big deal?

Ethnicity - Who does HE say that I am?

Class - Leaving the Grave clothes behind

And finally, we'll look at how to extend His Mercy and Grace to a disfigured culture.

Session 1: Why Not the Garden?

Opening question

- When did you, if ever, agree with your parents about a punishment you received?
- Have you ever tried to stop a friend from doing/saying something before they did it? Did it work out or not? What would have been better?
- In today's study, we're going to look at how God showed His mercy even as He was disciplining Adam and Eve at the very beginning of mankind.

Introduction

God's Word begins with a familiar story about the first of mankind, their rebellion and displacement from their home. The remainder of Scripture lays out God's plan to reconcile all people through re-creating the Image of God in their lives that in the beginning was defaced by choice.

Adam and Eve, while they were deceived, chose to ignore God's command not to eat the fruit from the Tree of Good and Evil. The image and likeness of God they were made in allowed Adam and Eve to unite with God in mindfulness, understanding, and response. After they chose to do their own thing, they didn't lose their likeness; however, it was disfigured and defaced. Because of the Fall, man lost the ability to be in a whole, fully integrated relationship with His Creator. Thus, every aspect of his humanity was violently separated from perfect communion with the divine Kingdom of God and landed in the natural, now vandalized, earthly kingdom. A kingdom, because of the Fall, which began to decay.

One result was that they were made aware of things like their nakedness, and because of the distortion they were no longer able to relate with a pure or God-intended way to each other. This negatively impacted the whole of sexuality. Lust consumed the intimate and holy uniting intended to create life by becoming one flesh.

Because of original sin the gift of sexuality is now corrupted. Instead of seeing the other's naked form with the untarnished mind, understanding and will of God, mankind sees sex as a means to serve self. This self-serving focus gave birth to narcissism where mankind put his needs before God and others. Herein lies the risk. If God were to leave Adam and Eve in the Garden they would have access to the fruit from the Tree of Life. If they were to eat that fruit they would live forever in their disfigured self and never be able to relate to a Holy God and others in a

*It's God's grace
they were
displaced.*

right way. Their communion will always be emotionally and relationally fractured apart from God. We see this in how we relate to each other today. God in His great love for Adam and Eve and for us needed to set them free. It's an odd thought. Set them free. Especially, because Scripture calls sin bondage. It says we are all held captive by our sins. (Proverbs 5:22)

Discuss

Describe how Adam and Eve were displaced. Besides the obvious command to leave their physical home in the Garden, how was their relationship with God after the Fall similar to losing their home?

Prayer

Lord, in Your mercy You care for our lives. Knowing what You originally intended, You saw our first day and You know our last day. You were there when You brought us into a world disfigured by sinful man. You were there when we were hopeless and blind and afraid of being put out of all that we knew to be safe, all that we thought home should be. Thank You that You never left us alone. You left the Garden with us, and through Jesus, Your Son, set in order a plan for our return home. In Your mercy You acknowledged we were broken and chose to not leave us there. In Your love You fought to restore life and take away the penalty of death. We commit all that we are to You and ask for Your continued blessing, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Spirit. Amen.

What we are going to learn

- God had a divinely ordered plan for mankind, both male and female, to live an abundant life and live it to the fullest. (John 10:10)
- God in His mercy chose to separate Adam and Eve from the Tree of Life so they would not live eternally disfigured in memory, understanding, and will because they would eat fruit from the Tree of Life.
- Mankind was given a heart monitor, a looking glass, and an instruction manual to start his journey.
- Living in the world requires the presence of Jesus to see clearly and not be continually deceived.

Text: Genesis 3:21-24

And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever—" therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Reading in Context

In this passage, God has done two things. Let's start with the ending first and then move to the beginning. At the end of our reading God removes Adam and Eve from the garden. He displaces them, transferring them from their birth home to a place outside, to an unfamiliar and uncertain future. With this movement He removes any form of predictability from their lives and He concretely demonstrates to them that they are not in control. Any authority they thought they had was lost. Any freedom of will they had was now bound to the shock and decay of sin.

Perhaps you can imagine in part the emotional reaction they must have experienced. Have you ever had your freedom taken away because of a bad decision? Yeah... it was like that... but totally world ending. Typically speaking, when people go through something like this they feel a sense of isolation or ambivalence about how they feel, and people tend to see this as a never-ending problem. This must have been so traumatizing that it affected them to their very core. Their choice to disobey God their Father distorted everything. Displacement deprives people from an ordinary source of identity development, and it leaves the person to deal with the feelings of rejection and grief.

Discuss

- Why would a loving God not keep Adam and Eve home to restore them?

God knew this would happen, so He initiated a profound intervention. Before they were displaced, He took an innocent life, some other created thing, and sacrificed its life to cover their naked selves. This gracious act of mercy would cover their shame and would provide a way for them to approach God. Their own tarnished view of relationship showed its first signs of disintegration when they tried to hide their own shame with leaves. God's act demonstrated how in our best effort we couldn't fix what sin had corrupted. Verse 21 is the foundation for the sacrificial system in the Old Testament and it is the second time we meet the explicit Gospel in these early chapters of the Bible.

In order for God to cover the offense of their rebellion, God chose to shed innocent blood to atone and provide a way home for Adam and Eve. This would be the pattern for people who sin and offend God. It is the salient love of the Father who fights for us that does not leave us where He found us. He makes a way out. It is the way of the Cross. But all the sacrifices of the Old Testament would not be enough because they were done by humans. God made the first sacrifice in human history and He made the final sacrifice as well. In Jesus Christ, He, though not created, but God Himself, came in the person of Christ to settle our account. The debt for all humanity was washed clean with His

Leader's note: Allow youth to discuss. If they're having trouble with this, remind them that the Tree of Life was also in the Garden. If Adam and Eve ate the fruit of that tree, they would have lived forever in sinful brokenness with no hope for reconciliation with God.

suffering, His shed blood, His death. He became the innocent sacrifice lifted up on the tree at Calvary. Which ultimately for us is the Tree of Life that brings us home and in right relationship with God. Jesus was the promised one of Genesis 3:15 who reversed this curse for you. Hence, God drove them out, but He did not leave them without grace. He covered them and gave them with what they needed to live by faith through Him.

Questions

- What in your experience is the difference between being set free and being driven out?
- In our text, God made a choice to protect Adam and Eve. What does that say about who God is?
- How does God continue to set people free today?

Connective Learning

Watch the Science of Pornography Addiction (SFW)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ya67aLaaCc>

- What stood out to you?
- When the illustrations pointed out how using pornography reprograms the brain to not desire reality, how does this relate to other expressions of sexuality? (promiscuity, pedophilia, homosexuality, transgenderism, incest, etc.)
- How does it relate to God's intent for re-creating and restoring fallen mankind?

Challenge

Read Ephesians 2:4-10

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

This week, reflect on and journal about God's great love for you that gives you new life in Christ.

How have you been made new in Christ?

Session 2: Love Not Hugs

Opening Questions

- Have you ever felt tolerated but not really loved? Give an example.
- Why do you think some people confuse tolerance with love? In other words, why do some think they mean the same thing?

Introduction

Have you ever told someone you loved them and then heard in return, "I tolerate you?" Yes, it sounds odd. Almost to say, "I'll put up with you." Pushing in on that thought, it is important to take a clear look at how culture experiences love, and in turn what God's intent is for love. While it is true that God intends us to endure and long-suffer with others, there is a clear difference between two very different approaches. One being love and the other tolerance.

Consider the life of Mary Magdalene. As a prostitute her sins were public. Giving herself away time and again to others, her soul ached to be loved and not just tolerated. Her greatest and legitimate need to be unconditionally loved connected her to the very moment mankind's relationship with God was broken. Mary's thirst and hunger to be unconditionally loved testifies to our greatest need. As we read the story of Mary it is clear that the life she lived was not providing her with life at all. In fact, it was the opposite of life; it was death. The holiness of her creation was devalued and violated over and over again until the moment she cried out to be set free. She needed more than acceptance. Her reason failed her. Turning from God to others she believed ultimately that she would find life in community. Spending the most holy currency she had been given, her sexuality, she sought lasting intimacy.

God's love goes beyond the Fall of man to acknowledge the need every man, woman and child has for relationship. To be fully seen, fully known and fully loved. The power of God's love crucified the sin that divided the soul and turned mankind away from God. In this fractured state, we see Mary feasting on others just like herself, marred by the Fall and unable to give pure, unconditional love, Mary was exhausted. Her thirst and hunger turned her back to God.

There she met Jesus. Her need so great, her intent so resolute that she was willing to expose herself to the scorn of the Pharisee sitting next to Him. Throwing herself at Jesus' feet she grieved the years of separation, the years of earthly love. She longed for the eternal. In this holy moment of repentance Jesus acknowledged her return. As she washed His feet with her tears, He remained. Her grieving was a holy journey. In the

Love is more than tolerance.

presence of Jesus she would know a love that would remain after seeing her worst and most shameful self. In His perfect love for her she was more than tolerated. Jesus didn't just give her a hug and send her on her way. No, He blessed her offering, her broken and defaced life. He then returned mercy. A mercy and love so courageous that He didn't leave her in her fractured state. Not at all! Jesus' love transformed her from a prostitute to a bride. He loved Mary so much that He wasn't willing to leave her the way He found her. This is the profound difference of love.

Love is not synonymous with agreement. Love is not threatened by the truth. In fact, true love invites us to acknowledge our need for God. Tolerance turns away to find life in lesser things. God's capacity to dissolve strongholds and destroy fear is immeasurable. His love is intimate and holy. It gives life to the most hopeless. It's jealous for all humanity; it goes beyond the boundaries of tolerance and faces off with the deception that this life is all there is and shows the way to an eternal communion with Him. He has prepared a place for us beyond the grave of this life.

Prayer

Dear Father,
We acknowledge that You love beyond tolerance and make a way for us to return home. Thank You for sending Jesus to renew our hearts and minds to see the unconditional love You offer. Thank You for loving us so much You won't leave us the way You found us. Your love is not bound by our unbelief. It is not hidden from us. Thank You for never giving up on us and taking our rebellion, self-righteousness and fear to the Cross. Show us how to love in a world that doesn't know You and instead hopes to just be tolerated. We ask for wisdom to know the difference. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit. Amen

What we are going to learn

- All people live in need of being unconditionally loved. This is a legitimate need.
- Tolerance implies that happiness in this world is good enough and ignores God's plan for eternity.
- God has a plan to restore all that was lost in the Fall and knows that humanity cannot find life by its own pursuit. (Luke 17:33)
- God plan for our life is to forgive and restore the relationship that was lost in the beginning.

Text: Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Reading in Context

One of the key ideas in Luke's Gospel is that Jesus is for the marginalized and outsiders. In this account you see that this woman is both. She is an outsider because she is known publicly as a sinner and she is marginalized because of her gender. Jesus' response shows the power of the Gospel to transform her life. Given this, we need to focus on a few details in the text that magnify the drama and really get at the gospel.

First, in the first century good "church going folk" (like the Pharisees thought they were) are not allowed to invite unclean sinners into their homes. It would have been seen as condoning their sin. It was also a self-preservation move on their part. If she, an "unclean" person, came over she would make everything around her unclean. This was their scandal with Jesus. By allowing her to touch Him he is at risk in their eyes of becoming unclean. Likewise, if He were truly a "holy man," He would never have allowed her to touch Him. She would have been rejected and separated from Jesus as the Pharisees have so clearly tried to do.

Now it is important here to note that Jesus accepts her, but not out of tolerance for her sin. No, He names her a sinner. So, He is not doing an "I'm okay, you're okay, we're okay" kind of thing. Here He sees her for who He created her to be—a woman intended for more than the disfigured life she reflects. He doesn't leave her a sinner, a prostitute. Jesus forgives, reconciling the brokenness in her life, and sets her life back in order, giving her a new identity and status.

She through Christ is made clean! This scandalizes the crowd because only God can change people that way. Jesus is declaring in that moment that He is God with us, sent to restore all that was disfigured in the Fall.

The second detail is Jesus' feet. This woman is not looking for sympathy and a hug to say she's ok. We know this because she washes and kisses Jesus' feet. In the Ancient Near East a person's feet were the most disgusting part of a person's body both hygienically and socially. Masters would not ask their slaves to wash their feet. It would be too humiliating. If they did have them wash their feet it was a sign of their extreme displeasure. When kings would conquer other kings, they would make them lay down in front of them so they can put their feet on their face. It was a sign of extreme humiliation. When you washed your feet in Jesus' day you were doing a very private kind of washing.

So, to have this woman wash Jesus' feet is a portrait of extreme humility and humiliation. It is shockingly low. **Here, Jesus uses this to demonstrate the power of the Gospel. This is how low God will go.**

His presence is unshakable and immovable, allowing people like her and us to receive His love. He will condescend from heaven to the very depths of earth and find the lowest and those posturing themselves at His feet. He forgives them and lifts them up, changing them forever. This love doesn't tolerate a sentence of death and will go so far as to allow His enemies to pound nails through His feet and His hands.

He will suffer and even die with the lowest, the marginalized, the outsider and the prostitute so that in three days He can give a new way back to God. Love that restores a perfect union with a holy Father and a new cleansed, once unclean and alienated humanity.

Questions

- What did you learn about tolerance that you had not considered before discussing the story of Mary Magdalene?
- God grieves the separation original sin created and made a plan for all mankind to be with Him for eternity through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. What is the destination for this kind of love versus the destination of a love fashioned by man?

Connective Learning

WATCH THE VIDEO DON'T WORRY BE HAPPY by Bobby McFerrin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UChJnMqOLa8>

Pay close attention to the lyrics

- What did you like about this song? What didn't you like?
- What stood out to you about the message of the song and how it relates to our discussion?
- How could this mislead people and present a false Gospel?

Challenge

On an index card, write this verse: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.
Romans 8:1-2

Place this card where you can see it several times every day...on your mirror, in your locker, in your daily planner, etc. Every time you see, it pause and read it slowly. See if you can commit it to memory.

Session 3: Who does He Say I Am?

Opening discussion

- If there was one thing you wish were different about you, what would it be? Have you ever wondered if God made a mistake?

Introduction

How we see ourselves has a direct influence on how we relate to God and each other. When my five-year-old son recently encountered a man dressed like a woman, he asked why the man was pretending to be a wife. "Only girls can be a wife," he told the man. In his short five years of living in this world he was able to discern the difference between male and female roles. His context for discovery is his home where father and mother live whole-enough integrated lives as male and female. There, clearly defined roles are known by watching his mother and me. My wife and I were grateful he was able to clearly articulate the difference and connect gender with a specific functional role. This is not always the case in light of today's rapidly increasing gender fluid, gender non-conforming, and gender confused society.

In creating art, whether it be making pottery, designing a dress or building furniture, one of the principles of development is that form follows function. In other words, if it doesn't function it doesn't matter what it looks like. Have you ever built something that looked great but fell apart? In a sense it's like what's going on in our relationships today. It is easier to clean up, dress up or fix up the outward appearance, covering up one's true identity. When we do this, is it any wonder why relationships fall apart and people divide? If a person goes against God's original plan and try to function contrary to His original intent for love, no matter how convincing one may be on the outside humanity won't be able to love as God intended. At best we may be able to counterfeit the concept of love but it will always remain just that—a counterfeit. Eventually, what's on the inside, the heart, will betray us.

From dust the Triune God gave Adam form. He took part of Adam and formed Eve and called His creation very good. Every part of their humanity was created purposefully. In our passage today we read a passage of Scripture that is familiar. To some it is so familiar that it becomes background noise. Been there done that. The fascinating thing is when we take a second look at the three men's roles in context to their ethnicity we discover something exciting.

In the story of the Prodigal there is more than one prodigal. It's a given that there is one, hence, "the prodigal." We may have even heard that the older brother was one, as well, but have you ever considered

*Getting into
heaven was never
about what you
did or did not do;
it was about
something
Someone else did
for you.*

that the Father could be a bit of a prodigal as well? I'll unpack this in the next session, but for now let's suffice to say there are three unique functions each man plays in Jesus' story. In the story of our lives we, too, are intentionally created to fulfill a unique role in God's perfect plan. We were not a mistake or accident. Everything God intended us to be was carefully created and known, birthed first in His mind and formed in our mother's womb.

It is understandable that, after birth, as we grow up in a home and culture with many ethnic diversities, discovering our functional roles can be somewhat confusing. The messages about gender non-conforming alone are disorienting. So where do we turn for truth? Who do we trust? I would propose three places: ourselves, society (this includes our families, teachers, and our communities both physical and virtual) and our Triune God. Each have ideas but only one is infallible. In the case of the Prodigal son, he defined himself and, as a result of what he believed, made choices that affected the people closest to him. His brother and father did, as well. Jesus tells this story because it reveals a deeper truth. He wants us to be clear about who we are and who God the Father is in relationship to His children. It is important that we know who He says we are. When our best plans fail us, when we think we know but get it wrong, when we listen to others and discover they, too, were not reliable, we acknowledge God. In Him we find our form. In Him we find our definition. In His Word He says we were created in His image and likeness as male and female and it was "good."

We learn that we are His children and He is our father. We learn that we are made new in our Baptism and brought from death to life. We discover in His Word that we are alive only because of what He did to restore what was lost in the Fall. We learn that regardless of our rebellious unbelief He knows who He created us to be in Him and loves us with an everlasting love. We then lean into His arms and find comfort in His truth. We no longer grope in the dark; we look up into the light of Christ and see our reflection perfectly defined, perfectly intended, and perfectly loved.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank You for never leaving me alone to figure it out. Your mercy and love follows me all the days of my life. When I wake You are there and when I lie down You are there. In You I am known and loved. Grant that I would walk in this courageous love to bring the hope that lives within me by the power of Your Son Jesus to a hurting and disfigured world. Remind me never to forget the image I bear. Renew a right spirit within me; search me to know if there is anything in me that would keep me from following You. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What we are going to learn

- God has created all mankind and given them form and function.
- There is often disorder and confusion as a result of rejecting God's Word and turning to our own reason and the reason of others.
- God has a plan for restoring fallen humanity that renews a life once disfigured by sin by showing us the way home to Our Father through the life, death and resurrection of His Son.
- Who God says we are aligns both form and function.

Text: Luke 15:11-32

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Discuss
Have you ever had a difficult time getting along with a family member and as a result decided to cut them out of your life?

Reading in Context

At first glance this parable is easy. Son betrays father. Father waits for son. Son gets his act together and comes back. The father accepts his humility and the older son needs an attitude adjustment. However, the socio-cultural nuances and background of this parable are very much lost on our western culture.

In his work *Poet and Peasant*, Kenneth Bailey unpacks the ancient near eastern perspective of this parable, and as a result magnifies God's grace in this parable. First, when the son asked his father for his share of the inheritance before he died, he is basically telling his father that he wished he was dead and wanted what was coming to him. He was cashing out. We know that inheritances are usually transferred to children after the death of their parents. Because of his request, the son brought shame on himself. More significantly, it brought shame on his father. Everybody in town would have known what the son did, and worse, what the father did. He actually chased out his son...in love. This "overly generous" act makes the father the first prodigal we encounter.

Discuss

- Imagine if your father gave you everything you wanted. How could that potentially be harmful for you?

Then the son goes and throws away his money by being "overly generous" in his lifestyle. See the generational influence? This makes him the second prodigal. When he loses all his money he has to work a job that no church-going boy would do. Additionally, his appetite for the sweet things in this life fueled his addiction. The pods the pigs ate were carob pods. Carob pods, when you break them open and eat the seeds, taste, get this, like chocolate! He was hardly remorseful and lamented his decision to leave home. However, he was in a pinch and out of money to sustain his appetites, so he decides to earn his way back in with his father.

He knows his dad pays his workers. He knows the family business. Therefore, he comes up with a "business plan" and decides to pitch it to his father. These are hardly the actions of a penitent child. He is, in fact, by this attitude planning to insult his father A SECOND time.

When the father sees the son, he runs to him. In the ancient near-East, respectable men NEVER run! At first, this would have most likely made the townspeople feel even worse for him. Until, they saw who he was running towards. When they saw the son, they most likely assumed the father was going to get retribution and beat the son in public, redeeming his honor. The community might have cheered him on. Seeing the cheering and jeering of the people, the lost son now realizes that he may be in a bad spot. Can you see him wince as his father, who never runs, gets near? Expecting a beating and not even able to get half of his sales pitch out, he is nearly tackled by his father...who hugs him, holds him and weeps over his return. His son's return was an answer to a prayer, which he prayed and waited for every day since he left.

The son is overwhelmed. The crowd is flabbergasted. The lost son is found! He was dead and now he is alive again! The father re-inherits him not out of reciprocity for proper attitude and posture, but out of pure fatherly goodness. The feast that has been waiting to happen is now commanded to begin. This is amazing love! This is amazing grace!

Finally, there is the older brother, who is noticeably absent from the party. Here is where it gets interesting. The older brother doesn't even call him a brother. He labels him "that son of yours." He is distant from the father and the son because he believed he was worthy because of his loyalty and good works all those years. The lost son labeled himself "worthy" throughout the whole parable until the end. In the beginning, he felt worthy enough to "cash out." When in need, he felt worthy enough to return on his own terms. However, the only important identification comes from the father. The father labels both of them his sons. They are his children. That's all that matters.

The older one cries out that the younger wasted his life in sexual immorality and selfish indulgence. The father still names him son. The younger one wishes his father dead and shows nothing but contempt. The father still names him son. The older believes he is worthy because of his works. The father says he can come to the table because he was invited, in love, by the father. You see the important thing in the parable was the generosity of the Father. His love is the important thing. The important thing is who He said they were, not who they made themselves out to be.

*God has a plan
for restoring
fallen humanity
that renews a
life once
disfigured by
sin by showing
us the way
home to Our
Father through
the life, death
and
resurrection of
His Son.*

Questions

- What did you think about the son's responses in today's parable? Why did the Father not turn him away for not being repentant when he came home?
- What can we learn from this discussion about who God says we are? What does His Word say about who we are? List the Scriptures that come to mind.

Connective Learning

Watch the short video clip about Ryan Pittman
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LreAoD89p3U>

- What did Ryan know about God and himself?
- Where does Ryan find his identity?
- Why is it a mistake to define someone by their outward appearance?

Challenge

Read Psalm 139:13-18

- For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
- ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
- ¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, ^[a] God!
How vast is the sum of them!
- ¹⁸ Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.

Reflect and journal on what it means that YOU are created in God's image. How does this shape your identity?

Session 4: Gender...What's The Big Deal?

Opening discussion

- What would you say to a person who says, "I was born gay or in the wrong body?"

Introduction

Gender takes on an interesting persona when we place it in the context of today's America. I acknowledge this can provoke many unique conversations—all valuable—but for this discussion we will endeavor to approach gender from the perspective of God the creator revealed through His infallible Word to mankind. In other words, we will start at the beginning when God created mankind in His likeness, both male and female. There are unique and intentional differences in how they were formed and intended to respond to God and to each other. The ramifications of the Fall as it relates the difference of one's own gender is significant. So significant that the distortion of gender and loss of relationship between man and woman takes on many forms including, but not limited to, promiscuity, homosexuality, transgenderism, addiction to pornography, exhibitionism, sexual abuse, and the list goes on.

Scholars have written many books in an effort to help us understand the function of male and female and how they can live life together. God formed male and female and gave definition to their unique genders, intending them to be a gift to one another. They were created to be in perfect relationship so much so that in their joining, in their becoming one, they would fulfill the mission God intended for all humanity. To reject this opens the door to rejecting a holy and perfect gift. God—Three in One—purposefully created man and woman to live life together. Their unique genders share the same but different aspects of the image of God.

When we reject either the magnificent gender that God gave us or refuse to see the good and wonderful expression in the "other" opposite from us, we have catastrophic problems.

Is it any wonder that divorce is so common or that abuse continues to separate families and divide homes? When one has reasoned that our form and definition is subject to our experience and reason and not from original design and purpose then we are free to be anything our appetites desire. This would include even desiring to eliminate one's own gender to be the other in form or function. This natural way of reasoning was the problem with the church in Corinth. As a result, much of the relational horrors we know that existed then still exist today.

The gift of Other (rejection of the "other" gift) is Narcissism. We are called not to bear our image to the world, but we are called to bear an- "other" image. Christ to the World. God Himself took on other in incarnating in Christ.

These created an unstable and divided community, not least of which showed up in how they treated one another. In one such instance it appears in a man and a woman concluding that even though the man is her son by marriage their sexual desire for each other should be blessed and allowed. Without the Spirit of the Triune God, humanity is left to their own sinful and faulty understanding.

The lens they view life through has been so tarnished by the Fall that near as they can see and reason, humanity's design can be changed to suit their needs. This includes their bodies and minds devoid of the Spirit of God. Had they received the fullness of God's Spirit, acting outside of His will for male and female would be utter insanity. In America we so disregard the Spirit of God that it is more reasonable to offer a scalpel and medication to resolve one's conflict with their gender than to receive the truth of God through His divine plan for creation. In this insanity we turn inward and reject the counsel of a loving Father and separate from the good of the other. We choose another way contrary to God's intent for form and function.

In some cases, the expression of the legitimate need to be loved unconditionally seeks out the same gender to do only what God's intended union with the complement was created to do. Male and female were intended to fulfill different and purposeful roles. Two very holy reflections of the image of God.

When we act outside of this plan for oneness between the male and female, we cut off a significant part of the image and likeness of God. At best we can only imitate that which was cut off and reject an important gift to mankind. It is important to note here that how we relate to the opposite gender does not isolate its purpose to sexual union alone. This impacts parent-child, teacher-student, employer-employee, brother-sister, and all other male-female relationships. There is a holy and intentional design for how God created us to be in fellowship with each other, male and female.

Imagine how confusing it would be to a child who was born one gender and hears that their biology doesn't determine their gender role. In other words, their personhood has no set role or function. Furthermore, imagine the conflict of choosing something different from his or her birth gender and going through puberty where their very biology testifies to a God-given design. Drugs and hormones can only change the outside but the DNA would always be male or female. Given the risk of confusion, it is all the more important to acknowledge that God revealed Himself through His incarnational presence in Christ to tabernacle with His beloved. Because of His Spirit and truth, mankind has hope that what was fractured because of sin would be made whole.

*Discussion:
Today's discussion describes gender as a gift. How have your experiences caused you to see the opposite gender as a gift? How have your experiences prevented you from seeing the opposite gender as a gift?*

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,
Thank You for loving me and creating us in Your likeness, fully male and fully female. Thank You for the unique a holy gift made to live in complementary relationship with one another. We acknowledge that only in You do we find purpose in our form and function. Beyond our appetites for the counterfeit, we find strength in Your saving grace. Teach us to know Your will for our lives as it relates to walking in unity with our brothers and sisters. Guide us as we walk in a gender confused world. Give us tender hearts towards the broken hearted so that Your power will set captives free. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What we are going to learn

- God gives us form and function and intends our gender to be lived out in a holy relationship with God and with each other.
- The Fall of man has confused and disrupted God's divine plan for humanity. As a result, mankind has been divided and, in some cases, rejected the good of their gender.
- The Spirit of God who chose to tabernacle with us bringing us to new life through our Baptism guides and reveals the Truth through His infallible Word.

Texts

Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So, I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:10-16

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 5:1-5

Reading in Context

The Church at Corinth was a "big deal" church. They wanted to be a big deal, and that caused them to have a big deal attitude. In today's terms they would be considered an "attractional church."

First, they wanted to have the preachers who carried with them the reputation of being above the others. The well-known and popular ones. Individuals who would attract large crowds with their oratory skills and practical wisdom. This was a very Greek virtue. However, these preachers, though rhetorically fantastic, would compromise truth to win the favor of the people. Their distortion or choice to not adhere to proper Christian doctrine would gain for the church a reputation of cheap grace. When it came to holding the congregation accountable for sin and proper teaching in the community they would overlook their life choices. Instead, they would say only what would garner people's attention and stop there.

No big deal, right? Except when it came to a public and very real scandal in the church. A sexually immoral couple were free to live in their immoral state. This created conflict within the congregation and made it difficult for people to see Jesus—a Christ who was just as well as merciful. In their fellowship they didn't know how to proceed when it came to reading and believing biblical doctrine.

Their attitude was: Hey, it's "no big deal."

But it was. this behavior put something between a believer's conscience and their ability to understand basic biblical teaching and authority. When it came to being a part of that community their natural reasoning failed to sustain healthy, whole enough, integrated and pure relationships. What the Bible says and its authority in the church is a "big deal." It's not just what you take from God's Word for your life that matters; it's understanding what it says about your life that's important. How you live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ being crucified with Him in death and raised to life in His resurrection and now a living witness.

Questions

- What from today's discussion stood out to you about God's intent for male and female?
- What solution does Scripture offer for gender confusion?

Connective Learning

Make a list of the attributes or characteristics that you believe God intended man and woman to possess. Keep in mind His intent to create them in His likeness and Image as a good gift.

Man

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Woman

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Put a star by your top three

Put a star by your top three

- What did you notice the most about what the girls chose as their top three characteristics?
- What did you notice the most about what the boys chose as their top three characteristics?
- How will this exercise help you in your relationships with the opposite (the other)?

Challenge

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-16

How can you "spread the fragrance of Christ" this week in your relationships? Identify one person to whom you can speak God's love and forgiveness, and then do it!

Session 5: Leaving The Grave clothes in the grave

Opening question

- Has anyone ever forgotten your name or called you by the wrong name? Describe that experience and how you felt.

Introduction

This conversation may be one of the most challenging for the Body of Christ. The term "gay Christian" is growing more and more widely accepted in today's culture. When we look at the speed at which the laws in America and around the world are being written and enacted to protect LGBTQ rights, the response from some faith communities have been surprising.

A personal excursion – Several years ago I attended a conference for pastors and lay leaders aimed at outreach and missions. Speakers from within the denomination and all over the country and beyond were invited to shared their missional work and philosophy. An Anglican Priest stood up and leaned over the pulpit to address a large audience, many of which were Lutheran. He started by saying, "Some of you are going to be surprised that there will be Catholics in Heaven." Not appearing to have received the response he may have hoped for, he leaned in with another declaration. "Some of you will be surprised that there will be Homosexuals in Heaven!" In that moment my heart sank. You see, the statement pressed in on a very painful part of history in my own life. That was once my story. I once identified as a homosexual.

To understand the impact his declaration made on me, we have to consider the implications of what he proposed. More importantly what does God's Word say? I met with him after his presentation to ask him where he got the idea that homosexuals will be in heaven. His response was, "Well, we have gay priests." Being as sincere and sensitive as I could, I shared with him that having come out of that broken life myself, out of that grave, I would never wear my grave-clothes into the Marriage Feast of The Lamb. I would never carry an identity other than the new one Jesus gave me in Him. Because of the transforming power of God through Jesus, I was made me completely new in my Baptism. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The freedom I now have is in knowing I am no longer clothed in death and separated from the life-giving presence of a God who saves and sets free His beloved. How often do we error in our relationships with others in the Body of Christ by seeing them as they once were and not as they are in Christ? Yes, we are both sinner and saint and live in the

Why is Gay Christianity accepted in our culture? The tendency to glamorize an offense (an ungodly appetite is confused for the reality of substance) Not a throw away not the last pick.

tension of the struggle against flesh and blood. We may even walk with a limp bearing the marks of where we came from but that is not our identity in Him! We are a New Creation and as such bear more fully His image because of His transformative power who took that which was disfigured in the Fall and made it new.

Like the lepers in our text today, God doesn't just heal the natural afflictions for mankind, He goes to the heart. He sees the deeper need is to know Him and be made pure so that we can come back into holy communion with a Holy God. To join Him as a pure bride we need to be cleansed and renewed.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready. She has given clothing of fine linen, bright and pure.

Revelation 19:7-8a

Discuss

How is referring to a person as a "gay Christian" limiting or confusing their true identity? Have you heard other labels used to describe fellow believers such as alcoholic, divorced, adopted, old, immature, felon etc.?

Prayer

Dear Father,

You are Holy and just, full of love and mercy. In Your mercy you heal us and set us free from the law of sin and death. Washing our sin stained garments you ready us for the Marriage Feast. Thank you for not holding our sins against us. You were there when we were formed and knit together in our mother's womb. You were there when we were born into this world and You will be there when we will leave it behind. You know all that You intended us to be in You and remain faithful to what is true even when feet may stumble. Grant us wisdom and discernment when we are tempted to forget all that You did so that we might live one day eternally in Your heavenly Kingdom. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What we are going to learn

- When we are Baptized we have been recreated and made new. Having been taken from death to life we no longer are clothed with death and decay but the righteousness of Christ.
- The fullness of who we are in Christ in this life sets the course of how we view ourselves and others in the Body of Christ.
- Understanding the significance of the Cross in God's plan to save and set free mankind is to walk by the Spirit and not by the Flesh. (Gal. 5:16)

Text: Luke 17:11-19
On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

Reading in Context

Microbacterium Leprea. we know it as leprosy. This is not the disease where random body parts fall off; it is the disease where you lose your ability to feel. Can you imagine losing the ability to feel? Numb and unable to experience one of the five senses, unable to feel the sensation of touch. So numb you wouldn't notice if you cut your hand except that you see the blood and what was lost. You wouldn't feel the fever of the wound, the infection and decay that takes hold of your body and arrests its very life. You wouldn't feel it if you died.

In this passage Jesus heals ten lepers. Leprosy probably meant that they already felt dead—the living dead walking around hoping for someone to have mercy on them. In Jesus' day lepers did not live with people in town because they were contagious. They had to live between places. They had to live on the margins of community, always seeing but never invited in. This is why Luke mentions "between Samaria and Galilee."

They lived between places. In living between places they had to wear a bell so others knew when they drew near to avoid them. Loved ones could leave food and other packages for them without fear of coming in contact with them. They were people on the edge; they were the truly marginalized. Here in this public isolation, Jesus meets them. He answers their cry and changes them. He heals them and makes them new. Their physical body is renewed. They no longer embody the death that once covered them. They are alive!

It must have been profound to see the transformation and regain the sense of feeling. To feel the coolness of the air, the flush of their faces and the heartbeat in their chest. They were dead and they were alive again.

What does Jesus do? He sends them to church. Straight to the church. First, to bring the good news of Jesus there, and second, to demonstrate to the community that there is one who can change their lives and indeed bring the dead back to life.

Additionally, it's important to point out only one came back to honor Jesus with humility and thankfulness. We can mourn as we are invited into this moment with Jesus and the leper. We can relate as we remember the times that we received the unconditional love of Christ only to move on in life without remembering or honoring His gift. But what Christ bids us to do by the example of the one is to return to Him in humility and thankfulness for what He's doing to bring us from death to life.

Discussion
Jesus' mission for transformation involves more than just the natural; it is a Spiritual renewal. Describe what that means based on today's discussion.

Connective Learning

The story of St Damien of Molokai

When Damien de Veuster arrived in Hawaii in 1864, he found an island-community beset by infections. Over the years, travelers and seamen had introduced diseases like influenza and syphilis. Yet none were as bad as Hansen's Disease, more commonly known as leprosy.

Puritan missionaries became convinced that leprosy stemmed from the people's licentiousness. But Damien knew that wasn't true.

Eventually Damien overcame the distressing sights and smells. His superiors had given him strict advice: "Do not touch them. Do not allow them to touch you. Do not eat with them." But Damien made the decision to transcend his fear of contagion and enter solidarity with the Molokai lepers. He committed to visit every leper on the island and to inquire of their needs.

What surprised the lepers most was that Damien touched them. Other missionaries and doctors shrank from the lepers. In fact, one local doctor only changed bandages with his cane. **But Damien not only touched the lepers, he also embraced them**, he dined with them, he put his thumb on their forehead to anoint them, and he placed the Eucharist on their tongues. All these actions spoke volumes to the dejected lepers. They showed that Damien didn't want to serve them from afar; he wanted to become one of them.

Despite the idyllic community Damien had built through a decade of work, the moment he feared finally arrived in December 1884. One day, while soaking his feet in extremely hot water, Damien experienced no sensation of heat or pain—a tell-tale sign that he had contracted leprosy. The disease quickly developed, causing Damien to write to his bishop with the news:

"Its marks are seen on my left cheek and ear, and my eyebrows are beginning to fall. I shall soon be completely disfigured. I have no doubt whatever of the nature of my illness, but I am calm and resigned and very happy in the midst of my people. The good God knows what is best for my sanctification. I daily repeat from my heart, 'Thy will be done.'"

Soon, he also wrote home to his brother: "I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ." Even before contracting the disease, Damien spoke of himself and the people of Molokai as "we lepers." He identified closely with those he came to serve and thus, before and after the disease, offered a powerful, concrete expression of solidarity. And it was for that reason he became known not by his homeland, but by the island community he served—St. Damien of Molokai, patron of lepers.

- In what ways has culture created colonies of people isolated from others and labeled a threat?
- What was unique about Dameon's ministry to the lepers of Molokai?

Challenge

To the leader: provide rocks and markers for youth to write on. Ask the question below and have youth write one of God's promises on their rock. Play the song "Christ Has Set Me Free" by Rend Collective (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGqyi-WpHU4>) while they do this activity.

What promise of God concerning your identity do you need to hold on to this week?

- You are made in His image
- You are loved
- You are forgiven
- You have been set free
- You have been made new

Write a promise on your rock and take it home with you to put in a place where you'll see it every day.

Session 6: Now What - Loving without Compromise

Opening question

- What do you think is impossible for God to do? In other words, how does God exceed what you can think of or imagine?

Introduction

So now what? This often is the bottom line conversation and many times the most challenging. What does sharing God's truth look like to those I love who have same-sex attraction and may struggle emotionally and relationally? First, it's important to clarify that while we may have appetites for things that are outside of God's perfect will for male and female, the appetite alone does not define a person. In fact, those appetites as a result of the Fall initiate from an un-natural state. Created in God's likeness, mankind's original natural state before the Fall appetites were not yet corrupted.

This is important to understand, especially when it comes to self-awareness. We all carry with us appetites and desires. Some are life-giving and others are not. Our experiences shape our values and beliefs, impacting how we live life together with others. Because of this, biases and presuppositions influence how we receive information and respond. Knowing what you believe is absolutely essential to bringing the Good News to a hurting and divided person. As baptized, re-created children of God we acknowledge the moment everything went wrong in the Garden. This was the point sin passed through one man, separating him from God. Jesus through His blood covered the dividing sins of mankind, reconnecting a relationship previously corrupted. Thus, bringing God and Mankind together once again. This communion is on-going and transformative.

Having this understanding, we are then able to live among people and share in their holy discovery of the God who sees the totality of their life and loves the broken wounded. He gave One life for the lives of many.

Therefore, this journey of discovery requires a caution. Living among others and learning their story, we have to acknowledge it is HOLY GROUND. We may be invited into a moment or a season but we don't know its duration. That being said, we are to step carefully and reverently.

Discussion

- What is your biggest fear or concern when meeting a person who overtly demonstrates gender conflict, whether it be in appearance or in behavior?
- When someone disagrees with us, how does Scripture teach us to respond?

God does not need us in carrying out His plan for restoration in their lives. The very fact that He wants us in His service is a profound mystery and act of mercy. Revelation reminds us that we overcome (triumph) over death by the Blood of the Lamb AND the word of their testimony (Revelation 21:11). Therefore, as God calls us to walk alongside a person in their healing, we are mindful of two things. First, God's Word is infallible, and second, He is able to do more than we can think of or imagine.

The incarnational presence of Jesus is a profound necessity. It is His presence that tears down strongholds and sets captives free. But many struggle with wrong ideas and ungodly beliefs about God.

The God who is not afraid of acknowledging we have a problem is the starting point. Here we begin again. The challenge is we have to acknowledge it. Herein lies the conflict. How does that play out?

If we don't believe that God truly is able to go beyond what we have experienced or can reason, then we have a bigger problem. If we buy into the belief that people are not able to change or that suggesting they can change is abusive and cruel, then we appear phony and inauthentic.

Believing God's Word is infallible and that it does what God says it will do are essential. If we contaminate either with unbelief we eliminate the Gospel, the Good News that God loves you so much He will not leave you the way He found you.

As you consider a culture intent on creating God in their own image and likeness instead of acknowledging that He is the God who created mankind in His likeness, remember God is able. His plan for salvation didn't depend on us. The good news is we cannot mess it up. However, because we are broken ourselves and are capable of sinning against each other, we may offend others. Yet, that doesn't inhibit God's grace. We must remain sober minded, humble and be ready to apologize if we have sinned against others. We also must be careful to not assume responsibility for offenses that are not ours to own.

Emotional and relational brokenness takes on many different forms. Homosexuality is just one expression. Divorce, pornography, sexual

abuse, and promiscuity among others are also expressions of relational sin. Embedded in all emotional and relational brokenness is a kind of arrested or delayed maturing. We can grow up physically and intellectually but often when we are engaged in sexual and relational sin our reason can become childish. Because of this, individuals can become easily offended and narcissistic. Only viewing relationships as friend or foe.

1 Corinthians 13:11 speaks about this. As we are recreated in Christ through Baptism the hard heart that rejected the wisdom of God was renewed and softened to respond to the things of the Spirit. Because of this we are now able to respond relationally as God originally intended before the Fall. In other words, we begin to mature.

As we grow in understanding and wisdom through Christ, we put away childish reasoning. Knowing this about humanity allows us to be more patient as we journey with others in their discovery. God is the God who makes Himself known and He does this through His Word and mercifully through the Body of Christ as we bring His presence to a hurting and disfigured world.

If you are wishing this study ends with a list of steps or rubric on how to evaluate your ministry to the sexually broken you may be disappointed. However, for the sake of pastoral care I will suggest 3 things.

1. Know what you believe about God's design and intent for gender and sexuality.
2. Know what His Word says in regard to His intended identity for male and female.
3. When caring for those who portray an image other than God's—in other words they fashion themselves to look and appear different from God's plan for male and female—do not be afraid. Instead of being appalled by the "what," be intrigued by the "why." When we learn their story, it doesn't make it right but it does make it understandable, forgivable and correctible in and through the work of Christ Jesus.
4. Orient oneself according to the Gospel, remember God chose you to give the whole truth.
5. Establish an authentic relationship through abiding, listening, engaging and aimed towards eternity.
6. Interpret experiences through a confessional Christian perspective.
7. Allow space for grieving the losses caused by sin.
8. Celebrate blessings and growth of their true God given identity.

Prayer
Dear Heavenly Father,
We bless Your name
because You are the
God who saves and sets
back in order the things
that have become
disordered by sin.
Because of the life,
death and resurrection
of Your Son we are
made new through
Baptism. The separation
we once lived in, dead
in our rebellion, lost and
confused, we no longer
are aliens. Thank You for
never forgetting the
good You created and
the promise to restore
all that was lost. Help us,
guide us and give us
wisdom now and in the
days to come so that
we can bring the Good
News to a hurting world.
Bless those we
encounter with the
revelation that You have
come that they might
have life and have it
abundantly. In the name
of the Father and of the
Son and of the Holy
Spirit. Amen.

What we are going to learn

- What we believe impacts how we love in a sexually broken context.
- God's Word is infallible - 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."
- When caring for others, their stories are Holy Ground.
- We are living witnesses to God's transformative power. He is able to do exceedingly more than we can think of or imagine. (Ephesians 3:20)

Text

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:14-21

Reading in Context

Paul's prayer essentially consists of three petitions. His prayer here is directed to strengthen the new man in an effort so they would know more the magnitude of Christ's love resulting from a deeper knowledge of the fullness that is their inheritance as a child of God. Here we find the meaning of life as we gaze upon the Living Trinity. God is love and One Being. By His very nature He embodies the fullness of the whole integrated relationship between the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In Christ we are brought to life through the waters of Baptism to a recreated life one that is able to receive the fullness of the gift that God intended before the foundations of the world. Man fully alive in Christ receives by faith a new strength birthed out of his weakness. In Christ alone he discovers a love only possible and available for those who have been reoriented towards the Bridegroom. The economy of victory is experienced in a posture of humility and death. No longer is the old man with all their earthly weapons poised to fight alone. The true masculine is reformed to gain victory by laying his life down for another.

The true feminine's hardened heart is reclaimed and renewed to now fully receive. This is the strength that Paul is praying for, the strength of weakness. In this place we become fully human as God intended.

To be known this way is to understand better the great love of Christ. The Cross tells a story of love unimaginable to the man or woman dead in their sins. Through the Cross we join a story that goes beyond the boundaries of natural reason and understanding. We are redirected back to the Father who knows us and loves us unconditionally.

This opens the floodgates of heaven for every child of God. Paul prayed that "you would be filled with the measure of all the fullness of God." A God who created all, owns all, controls all and yet invites us to pray confidently with assurance that we are heard. The fruit of this communion is God's desire and ability to transform you. His love knows no bounds. He will not leave anyone the way He found them.

Questions

- Let's go back to our opening question. What do you think is impossible for God to do? In other words, how does God exceed what you can think of or imagine? Has our discussion today changed how you answer this question?
- How is what you believe about God's plan for relationships and sexuality important?

Connective Learning

Watch the Power of Vulnerability by Brene' Brown

https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

- As a secular researcher, Brene' Brown said that connection is what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Does this confirm what God's Word says? Why?
- Brown remarked that when you ask people about love they tell you about heartbreak, when you ask people to tell you about belonging, they tell you their worst experience of being excluded, and when you ask people about connection the stories they told were about disconnection. What does this say about God's purpose for mankind?
- How does being vulnerable bring us to the Cross of Jesus? How does it point to God's plan for restoration?

Challenge

Use Ephesians 3:14-21 to guide your prayers this week. Every day, commit to reading and praying these verses:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.