

Compelling Vision

Together, as the Church of the Brethren,
we will passionately live and share the radical transformation
and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood
engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and
equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Bible Study Series

Session 10
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Session 10 *Life-Changing Relationships*

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Focus Question

How does the example of Jesus Christ challenge us to build life-changing relationships with our neighbors?

Scripture Texts

Jeremiah 29:4-7, John 1:14, Luke 19:1-9

Focus Statement

Jeremiah sends a message from God to the exiled community in Babylon: build houses, plant gardens, have children. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you. . . for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7). Years later, John tells us that God has seen fit to put on flesh and dwell among us. In Jesus, we see Jeremiah’s words come to life as Jesus seeks the welfare of the people he meets. Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus shows us how to extend faith, hope, and love with our neighbors. Jeremiah and John’s words and the actions of Jesus motivate us to engage more deeply with our neighbors and become communities eager to be “full of grace and truth.”

Supplies

- Large poster paper
- Sticky notes
- Pencils or pens

Media Suggestions

- **Article:** [“The Quiet Liturgy of Fred Rogers”](#) by Ryan Pemberton, *Christianity Today*
- **Video:** [Waco’s Church Under the Bridge](#) (YouTube)
- **Songs:** “Brothers and Sisters of Mine” by Kenneth Morse and Wilbur Brumbaugh; “Strangers No More” by Kenneth Morse and Dianne Gingrich
- **Art:** JESUS MAFA. [Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus](#) from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Reflecting on the Texts

I am sure you have watched TV shows about home renovations where you see the before and after pictures. It is impressive to me that contractors and designers can see the potential of an old house and then transform it into a homeowner's dream. You have most likely seen social media pictures of folks who change their image with new hair color, diet, or exercise. I believe we have an intrinsic need to become better in many areas of our lives. Most of us desire better health, a better attitude, a better life, a better ministry, a better heart, a better faith, a better relationship with God, a better relationship with our kids, or a better relationship with people in our community.

A man named Zacchaeus had one of those quick "before and after" experiences in his life. He was a chief tax collector and wealthy. As such, Zacchaeus had access to a lot of money with very little accountability. From my Sunday School teaching, I recall that he was a sinner who became rich by stealing as he collected taxes from his neighbors. Much hate existed towards these "traitors" or "tax collectors."

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus has much to teach us about how we reach out to our community. In my experience as a Hispanic pastor at Principe de Paz Church of the Brethren, I know that Hispanic families have a deep sense of spirituality. Faith, hope, and love is what I have in me and is what I believe our communities need. Jesus saw Zacchaeus, whose name in Hebrew means "pure" or "innocent," as someone needing *faith* to believe in God, *hope* to become the person God wanted him to be, and *love* to belong and be accepted by his community.

As John writes, Jesus became a man and lived among us (John 1:14). He was just like us, hungry, sleepy, tired, upset, yet full of faith and prayer. Luke's writer does not say what type of meal or conversation Zacchaeus had with Jesus. I am sure the conversation was uplifting and filled with grace because I have seen what grace produces in our community, and it is similar to the action Zacchaeus took with his community. Once grace is received, it produces beautiful actions. Jesus himself said, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:9).

The prophet Jeremiah tells the Israelites exiled in Babylon to seek the welfare of the city where they are—build homes, plant gardens, and have children for "if it prospers, you too will prosper" (29:7 NIV). In our congregation, we have a ministry called "Blessed to be Blessed," where our neighbors and our community receive food, clothing, and financial assistance, all donated by our congregation. This creates an environment of engagement where everyone can serve, get involved and share faith, hope, and love with our community.

Even though Jeremiah and Jesus lived years apart, their message is the same—build relationships and engage one another in conversation so that faith, hope, and love might flourish. What do you think Jesus wants to talk about in your community and with the Church of the Brethren in general? At Principe de Paz, we feel that our community loves to hear Jesus speaking about faith, hope and love. One thing is certain, Jesus wants to talk to many of us, no matter who we are or where we are. His grace declares us "innocent" and his loving words lead us to a better way of life.

Gathering

Choose one of these options to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—Read Jeremiah 29:4-7. If possible, use The Message version of scripture. Imagine being an exile in Babylon. What would have been your reaction to Jeremiah's message? How easy is it for you to "make yourself at home" in a new situation, with new people?
- *Option 2*—Place a large sheet of paper in the front of the room with Jeremiah 29:7 written on the top and John 1:14 written on the bottom. Give each person a sticky note and ask them to write on that note a concern they have for their community. When everyone has written their concern, have them stick the notes on the large sheet of paper.

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine themselves as a long-time resident of the small town of Jericho. Guide them in this imaginative exercise with the following narrative.

You are excited today because you've heard a rumor that Jesus, the Teacher, is coming through town. Everyone wants to see Jesus, and everyone hopes that he will stop so you can hear him teach. Along with other town residents, you find a good place along the road to sit down. Out of the corner of your eye, you see Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. It looks like he's climbing a tree! You could care less—he's a cheat—you just want to see Jesus. Off in the distance, you see a crowd of people coming down the road. Could Jesus be coming?

Read Luke 9:1-19.

Reflect silently as you return to the present. What did you see and hear along the road? What did you smell as you walked by Zacchaeus' house later in the evening? Did you overhear his conversation with Jesus?

Pause and ask participants to share their reflections if they wish.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the texts using these questions.

- Read John 1:14 using The Message version, if possible. Where might you find Jesus in your neighborhood? What would he be doing?
- How does Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus reflect the idea of renovation or renewal? What was Zacchaeus' life like before he met Jesus? What was it like after he met Jesus?
- What do you understand about faith, hope, and love and their part in Jesus' relationship with Zacchaeus?
- Where else in scripture do you see Jesus building relationships with people? What does he do that enables him to connect with people so easily?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Divide the group into pairs or triads. Give each group one of the following passages where Jesus models relationship-based neighborhood engagement or teaches about it. Allow about 10 minutes for each group to discuss how Jesus builds relationships and engages people in conversation in their assigned passage. Gather as a large group and discuss the following questions.

- What do we learn from Jesus about building personal relationships as we live out the gospel message?
- Give one example of how you might take this lesson about the importance of relationships and apply it in your life or the life of your congregation.

Luke 10:38-42 [Mary and Martha]

John 6:1-14 [Feeding the Multitude]

John 2:1-11 [Wedding at Cana]

Matthew 28:16-20 [Great Commission]

Matthew 25:31-45 [Sheep and Goats]

John 4:7-26 [The Samaritan Woman]

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—If you used the sheet with the sticky notes at the beginning of the lesson, go back to that sheet and review the observations written on the sticky notes. Discuss ways you can apply what you have learned from Jesus about building relationships to these situations.
- *Option 2*—Watch the video “Waco’s Church Under the Bridge.” How is this church meeting the needs of people in their neighborhood? Who needs faith, hope, and love in your community? What would it look like for your congregation to go where Jesus is in your neighborhood?

Sending

Sing one of the hymns listed in Media Suggestions. Close your time together with a prayer for the welfare of your neighborhood and a challenge to engage with those who are waiting for a message of faith, hope, and love.