

An Altar in the World
Chapter Six
The Practice of Encountering Others

This study guide is formatted for a small group gathering. If you choose to use it as a small group leader or as an individual, feel free to adapt it in whatever way seems meaningful to you. Enjoy!

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Lesson prep:

Just as Barbara Brown Taylor's students visited other places of worship, consider if you would like to invite someone of a different religion to share one of his/her rituals with your group (on your own turf or on theirs).

Set out Bibles and song sheets.

Print out homework slips.

Quotes and ideas worth repeating:

We have just enough faith to make us hate one another, but not enough to make us love one another-Jonathan Swift

Walk joyfully on the earth and respond to that of God in every human being-George Fox

The Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to 'love the stranger.'

Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain

The nature of the encounter is not important. What is important is that at least one person is willing to treat it as holy.

Related Scripture:

Genesis 18:1-15 Abraham and Sarah's visitors

Matthew 25: 34-40 When did we see you hungry and feed you?

Genesis 32:22-32 Jacob wrestles stranger

John 6:1-15 Feeding of 5000

Luke 7:36-50 Jesus anointed at Bethany

Luke 11:38-42 Mary and Martha

Introductions:

Report back on homework-

Give impressions of taking detour or offering empathy to someone in a new place.

Gathering Activity:

Getting to know the details of one another: Break into pairs. Look at each other without speaking for 30 seconds. Then have each person describe the other without looking, using details that would help find this person if he/she went missing. You may want to make a game out of this by keeping pairs secret from someone and have that person guess who each person is describing.

Reflection/discussion:

Are you an introvert or an extrovert?

How does that affect how you deal with community at church?

Is it easier for you to love humanity in general from a distance or someone in particular at closer range? To help someone far away or someone in your own family?

Have you ever volunteered for something and come home tired and dirty, but also oddly refreshed, with more lift in your heart than you could have gotten from a day at the beach? Share about your volunteer experience. If nothing comes to mind, seek out a service opportunity. Suggestions at FUMC: Alpha House (contact for volunteers is Beth Lipton) or LOVE thy neighbor (volunteer coordinator is Chris Nelson)

Hospitality in Greek is *phil* (love) and *xenia* (stranger).

Why should we love strangers?

Barbara Brown Taylor answers: because you know what it is to be a stranger yourself.

because the stranger shows you God.

because God does.

Read the scripture passages listed above. You may want to split into small groups to save time or allow more people to share.

Discuss 1: What did the people who showed hospitality give up?

2: What did they gain?

3: Does this scripture illustrate any of Barbara Brown Taylor's answers about why we should love strangers?

Rabbi Sacks claims "the supreme religious challenge is to see God's image in one who is not in our image," for only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror to the God we did not make up.

Have you ever expanded your view of God by encountering someone unlike yourself?

Is this part of the value of mission trips?

Read the passage on pages 104-105 (starting with *Once, when some robbers came into an elder's cell...* until the end of the chapter). Have you ever had a similar encounter

that changed you? Have you ever been the thief or the holy person? Share your comments.

Closing:

Sing: They'll Know We Are Christians

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
They will know we are Christians by our love

We will work with each other, we will work side by side
We will work with each other, we will work side by side
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
They will know we are Christians by our love

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
They will know we are Christians by our love

Homework:

The great wisdom traditions of the world agree: the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed.

This week try to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself.

Ponder this bit of wisdom from the Desert Fathers and Mothers we read about in this chapter:

The nature of water is soft, that of stone is hard; but if a bottle is hung above the stone, allowing the water to fall drop by drop, it wears away the stone. So it is with the word of God; it is soft and our heart is hard, but the one who hears the word of God often, opens her heart to the fear of God.

