



Focus verses

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command:

Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

1 John 4:20-21 (NIV)

"Again, this is God's command: to believe in his personally named Son, Jesus Christ. He told us to love each other, in line with the original command. As we keep his command, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us. And this is how we experience his deep and abiding presence in us: by the Spirit he gave us."

1 John 3

(The Message)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:16 (NIV)

Teaching Leaflet G
"Next Steps"

LEGACIES OF CARE

LESSON SIX: LOOKING FORWARD

Opening prayer

Listen!

*Something strains to be born
to shake itself free:
something brand new trembles
at the far edge of our minds:
the shape of a world to come
conceived in our present labor and pain.*

– "The Shape of a World to Come" by Catherine deVinck,
Poems of the Hidden Way

Introduction to the lesson

The "Legacies of Care" unit has given us a more comprehensive understanding of systemized responses to providing care and to the individual, religious or political reasons that have motivated care for those in need. Knowledge doesn't always translate to action. In this final lesson, let us see if, as deVinck writes, "something brand new trembles at the far edge of our minds."

Last week's challenge

Share from the challenge you chose to do during this past week.

The Gospel message

There are many ways to care for individuals and families in times of need. We show that we care by taking time to be with someone or by offering a meal or by praying for someone during a difficult time.

It is often harder to know how to care for groups of people. How do we make a meaningful difference in the lives of people who are homeless, who have immigrated here from another country, who are hungry or poor, illiterate or unemployed? Such life circumstances seem overwhelming and often cause us to leave their care to someone else – the government, nonprofit agencies or missionaries, for example.

The gospel makes clear, though, that caring for one another is personal and is not optional (Luke 10:25-35; 16:19-31). God's commandment is unequivocal and all inclusive: Love one another as I have loved you.

» Getting into the act

Following are three short scenes that each require three readers. After each scene is read aloud, respond to these questions:

- Do you see care being shown in this scene? By whom? How?
- What motivations, if any, do you see in those suggesting or providing the care? (Possible answers might include compassion, empathy, fear of change, ownership, caution, wisdom.)



The Holy Spirit writes
no more gospels
except in our hearts.
All we do from mo-
ment to moment is
live this new gospel
of the Holy Spirit. We,
if we are holy, are the
paper; our sufferings
and our actions are
the ink. The workings
of the Holy Spirit
are his pen, and with
it he writes a living
gospel.

– Jean Pierre de
Caussade,

- If you were in this scene, describe what your actions would be.
- Scriptures tell us Jesus lives in each of us; describe the Jesus you see in each of the characters in the scene.

Scene One: Doing Our Part

Narrator: George and Bill are two elderly men who have attended church all of their lives. Both have lost their wives within the past three years. This Sunday morning, they are on the way to the Men's Bible Class when they stop to read a poster on the church bulletin board.

George: What do you think this poverty class is they're promoting?

Bill (with a chuckle): I hope it's to tell us how to live on a fixed income!

George: Look at this. Did you know most people in the world live on less than \$2 a day? Maybe we should look into this class.

Bill: Nah, that's for the young folks. Let them fix the world's problems. We've already done our part.

Ask the questions above.

Scene Two: The Food Pantry

Narrator: Mary Elizabeth has run the church's food pantry for many years. She goes weekly to buy supplies for it, and attends every service committee meeting to make a report. She arranges for volunteers to staff the pantry, and if no one can come, she staffs it herself. She's sitting in a committee meeting now.

Pastor: The church believes we're being called to expand our food pantry ministry to reach a larger group of people in the community, and today we're going to discuss that option.

Mary Elizabeth: But we already serve some 20 people a week. We can barely provide for them. How could we expand it?

Pastor: Well, we might look at partnering with other church food pantries in the area – combine our resources to offer more food, more volunteers, more visibility to get the word out.

Mary Elizabeth: But this is our ministry. I don't think that's a good idea.

Ask the questions above.

Scene Three: Strangers Among Us

Narrator: Charlie and Maria Atkinson are a young married couple who joined the church two months ago. Maria is an immigrant from Colombia whom Charlie met in college. They have a heart for others who have come to the United States and are trying to get their citizenship and establish a new life. The Atkinsons are meeting with their pastor to discuss this issue.

Charlie: So, that's why we want to start an outreach program here at the church ... to begin an English as a Second Language class and to refer people to agencies in town that can help them with their legal papers. What do you think?

Pastor: Well, those are fine ideas, Charlie, but you're talking about a lot of work. Where would we do this – we don't have much unused space. How would we staff this?

Maria: There are ways if we just have faith! This ministry is needed now!

Pastor: Yes, but let's begin more slowly, do our research, meet with those interested in this issue in the church. Let's plan as well as pray so the effort won't collapse six months down the road.

Ask the questions above.

The Spirit's leading

Information only has value as we let it filter through our minds and into our hearts. It has often been said that the longest distance is the 16 inches from our minds to our hearts, yet Jesus tells us "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37; NIV).

What we've studied so far explores what we know about our neighbor, whether what we know is scripturally based or socially based, and where our own ideas and beliefs about caring for those in need may originate.

Many of our churches are filled with people like George and Mary Elizabeth and Charlie and Maria whose hearts are opened wide, who serve faithfully in the best ways they know, and who sincerely desire to model Jesus' teachings of compassion and mercy. All of us worship and serve among a great cloud of witnesses from ages past to the present day.

Yet, as we mature in our spiritual journey of faith, there will be moments when the "gentle and quiet whisper" of God, as *The Message* says in |Kings| 9, catches our attention. It may be a thought that won't go away or an idea that begins to take shape. We have purposely encouraged awareness of the Holy Spirit's leading throughout this unit of study. As Jesus taught us, it is first and always a person's relationship with the Divine that inspires obedience through action. The Spirit walks alongside us every step of our journeys.

Obedient to love

While we were sinners, undeserving of God's mercy, God chose to love us. God lives in us and that love is made complete in us. We are all one in the love of God, all "aliens and strangers on earth." Because we believe in God, we "are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 2:8).

Out of this joy and gratitude, we offer our hands and feet, hearts and minds to care for one another. This love is our offering of thanksgiving to the Living God of all. We step out in faith, knowing and relying on the love God has for us (1 John 4:16). It is not ours to know the end result of our actions; it is often not ours even to know the next step! The Spirit moves before us and informs us on a need-to-know basis. We trust the end results to God.



The church founded by Jesus is intended to be the embodiment, the incarnation, of who he is so that he might be seen, discovered, known, experienced in the local corporate life of those who have been invaded by him. I emphasize the word local. What would a true expression of Christ's body look like today, in the neighborhoods where we live, if it really embodied the essence of Jesus lived out corporately?

I think the central question for those of us who are in Christ and are eager to obey his "follow me" is how to be authentic church in the 21st century. How can we learn from our unfaithfulness to God's covenant in the past? How can we embody, incarnate, become the local expression of Christ's body now?

*N. Gordon Cosby,
Sermon*



Class exercise

Share your thoughts on what you've learned and experienced in the past weeks.

- Do you feel or believe differently in any way about helping the poor?
- What excites or frightens you about what you've learned?
- What confuses or inspires you?
- Do you feel challenged in a different way personally?
- Where would you like to see your church go from here?
- What would it take to get there?



Silence before God

Dream about next steps for the ministries of your church. What would they look like? What would be your role in them?

Next steps

Finish this unit by filling out Teaching Leaflet F titled "Next Steps" and returning it to your class leader.

Read this closing prayer together

*Lord, open our hearts wide
 may our compassion and capacity to care
 be far greater than we are,
 may our fears and concerns and hesitations
 evaporate as mist
 in the light of your Son.
 Lord, our lives are yours
 Lead us to give them away with abandon
 in your name and for your glory. Amen.*

–V. M. Kabat



When we come to a clear understanding that we are all brothers and sisters in the house of God – whatever our race, religion, or nationality – we realize that in God there is no distinction between haves and have-nots. We all have gifts to offer and a need to receive. I am increasingly convinced that one of the greatest missionary tasks is to receive the fruits of the lives of the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering as gifts offered for the salvation of the rich!

– Lifesigns by Henri J.M. Nouwen

