

Exploring Faith, Hope and Love

Recommended for Common Lesson Three Year B

“Life in Christ” is a broad topic, and in one sense it is the focus of the entire program. The common lessons with this heading are particularly intended to strengthen the seminar group with ideas and exercises from ascetical theology so that group members can support each others’ ministries. This lesson examines the possibilities and limitations of the group in terms of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, while exploring some resources for deepening and expanding these virtues in the wider social context.

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he sets out what it is to be part of the “body of Christ.” It is a life of faith, hope, and love in a context of partial knowledge.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:12-13)

We use this framework to look at the strengths and limitations of the seminar group as a context in which to nurture “Life in Christ.” In what ways can we look for the seminar group to deepen our faith, kindle our hope, and extend our love in a world where we see only partially and dimly? What limitations are built into the seminar group’s ability to share in Christ’s ministry of peace, freedom, and justice in the wider social context to which we belong? What resources can we draw on to transcend these limitations?

In the eleventh chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, we find faith described as follows: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (v. 1). This assurance is not that we will always get what we want, but that God will always be there to meet us. Faith is trusting in God to be there for us, it is claiming God’s faithfulness in relation to us. The chapter gives example after example of people acting by faith. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go” (v. 8).

Deepening Our Faith

Some of the qualities of faith suggested here may sound strange or even disturbing. Traffic might well avoid a truck with the bumper sticker FAITH IS NOT KNOWING WHERE YOU ARE GOING. “That may have worked in Abraham’s day,” I may say to myself, “but there is no way I can live my life not knowing where I am going.” Our ability to trust in “things not seen” is shaken as the hard realities of life press in on us. We have

learned to look for assurance in what we have under our control. “Now I know in part,” says Paul, but we want to understand fully. After all, it is now that I have to live my life, cast my vote (if I am enfranchised), get along with my family (if I have a family), manage the pressures of work (if I have a job). If I do not understand fully, how can I decide what to do, how can I live my life?

In the letters to the Hebrews and Corinthians, the answer to the question “How do I live my life?” is clear: Abraham went out, not knowing where he was to go. He went out by faith. The seminar group can be a context which is tremendously supportive of this ability to go out in faith. The ongoing activity of reflecting on incidents in the lives of seminar group members, drawing connections with the Christian tradition, can be a vital element in becoming willing to live with partial understanding and to rely faithfully on God in our uncertainty.

This willingness increases as members share times when their actions did not work out as they would have wanted. As the group refrains from the temptation to give good advice, and members take on the discipline of identifying with one another, it becomes increasingly clear that uncertainty and partial knowledge are not defects which need to be carefully concealed.

That we “know in part” and “see dimly” becomes a commonplace assumption of the life of the seminar group. Finding that others share the same uncertainties, questions, and fears can be an enormous relief. We can learn to look at the intimate concerns which often trouble us, not as a sign that there is something terribly wrong with us, but as an integral part of the human condition. So we are able to notice that our faith in God grows as we support one another and step out into life, trusting that God will be with us.

Kindling Our Hope

Hope is knowing that in the end, there is God, that nothing can separate us from the fullness of life that God has prepared for us. The boldest expression of hope in the New Testament is Romans 8:38-39:

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The challenge for us is to live out of this confidence in the dark times, pretending neither that the times are not dark nor that we can cope on our own, but trusting that the love of God is the most powerful reality in the world. We acknowledge that we “see dimly,” and we hope to see “face to face.” We admit that we “know in part,” and we hope to “understand fully,” even as we “have been fully understood.”

One way that the seminar group kindles the hope of its members is in the sharing of the spiritual autobiographies. As the members share their stories, their lives can become living witnesses to the possibility of hope. Hearing how some have found God in and through very difficult circumstances can be a source of hope to others whose lives are weighing heavily. “That nothing can separate us from the love of God” takes on new meaning as members share their own encounters with the “heights, depths, principalities, and powers.” Just as faith becomes a willingness to go out “not knowing where I am going,” so hope becomes trusting that at the end of my “going out” there is God.

Hope includes an element of protest. If St. Paul were perfectly content to “see dimly,” he would not hope to “see face to face.” The seminar frees its members from pretending that they enjoy fullness of life now. Members become more able to share the pain which sometimes accompanies each person’s journey. Openness to experiencing and sharing the pain of existence can increase openness and desire for fullness of life. Hope is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of the Spirit conforms our pain to the pattern of Christ’s own suffering. The pain that is or has been in one’s life can become the very means of compassion for another. As this begins to happen in the seminar, hope becomes a protest not only of the circumstances of one’s own life, but also of the human condition as a whole. Longing to see “face to face” becomes not a solitary longing, but a sharing in the “groaning” of all creation. Our hope becomes a strong desire for the coming of God’s reign over all the earth.

The New Testament leaves no doubt that love is at the heart of the Christian life. We have noted already that St. Paul’s conviction that faith, hope, and love are enduring aspects of our life in Christ. Jesus’ own summary of the law, “the greatest of these is love,” also places love at the center:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. (Matt. 22:37-40)

What does it really mean to love your neighbor as yourself? While any definition is likely to be inadequate, Scott Peck provides a starting point for our discussion. Peck says that love is “. . . the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (p. 81).

One of the attractive features of this definition is that it offers an understanding of love that does not depend on our feelings. The challenge is to be willing to extend ourselves so that both our neighbors and ourselves may “grow spiritually.” Often this does in fact happen in the seminar groups: through sharing, reflecting, and praying, members gain courage to let love be more nearly the central reality of their lives. This

Extending Our Love

process is not likely to be smooth, however. Difficulties will be encountered along the way.

In the beginning, the group can have differing expectations of what it means to love each other. For some of us it may mean being nice to one another and giving each other our support; for others it can mean being willing to take significant risks in the sharing of our lives and our theology; for still others it can mean a willingness to challenge one another and look at our differences. In this situation, our very differences are the one thing that can call us into new ways of loving one another and of discovering our need for God.

As the life of the group continues, we can discover significant differences in our opinions and values. Loving may mean being willing to explore our differences so that we can understand not only our surface differences but what values lie underneath these opinions. This kind of love can take great courage, especially when we come from a culture that tells us to “mind our manners” and “keep smiling.”

As the seminar group progresses, members can come to know one another very well. We know one another’s faults, our limitations both within the group and outside it. We can now choose to be “for” one another in a new way. This requires that we let go of our expectations of one another and accept those aspects of one another that are not changing as we would wish.

These times in the life of the group are all opportunities to grow in love of neighbor and love of God. As we acknowledge a lack of warm feelings, we can still choose to act in loving ways. We can compromise and stretch in the ways we express and receive care. We can choose to face our disagreements and share our deeper values, accepting those aspects of one another which we cannot change.

At times, however, this “choice” may seem beyond us. We do not always know how to forgive someone who has hurt us, or how to act loving when a fellow member intimidates us, or how to get enough nerve to challenge lovingly the person who continually dominates the group’s life. Then we are called to acknowledge our limitations and to ask for God’s empowering grace. These are times that can deepen our relationship with God as they prepare us to extend God’s love to those in our group and beyond it. This is when we discover that love is often not possible by our own strength. For even the will to extend ourselves depends on having at least some space and freedom from intense preoccupation with our anxieties and resentments. Here our willingness to open ourselves to God in prayer is the foundation for growth in love. We are called to love God and neighbor. We can love neither until we know that we ourselves are loved. “We love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Reflection Questions

Now that I have read about some ways that an EFM seminar group can enhance faith, hope, and love, how do I perceive the extent to which our seminar group:

- deepens faith?
- kindles hope?
- extends love?

The seminar group is a place which provides opportunities to grow in faith, hope, and love as discussed above, yet the limited range of group membership may limit the ways in which our life in Christ is deepened and extended. Some limitation is inevitable; the human condition is too varied to be exhaustively represented by a small group. Some shared characteristics of language and expectation are necessary for the group to be able to do its work at all. Other characteristics are shared by some seminar groups but not others: for example, same denomination, same congregation, or same sex. While there are certain advantages to each of these limitations, it is important for a group to notice the possible distortions of understanding its limitations of membership and to attempt to transcend them.

A basic limitation likely in most seminar groups is that of similar social class. Not many groups will have a member who has experienced the grinding poverty, hunger, or oppression which is the lot of a large number of the world's people today. This uniformity of class may limit the understanding of faith, hope, and love beyond one's own experience, therefore limiting the scope of the ministries in which one is involved.

The danger is that the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed may continue to lie outside the context of the life and ministry of most seminar members. Life in Christ calls us out of the comfortable intimacy with those who know us into the wider social/political context. It also calls us to look beyond our own experiences right where we are, so we might help one another break out of the oppression of silence which often keeps the abused spouse or child, perhaps sitting next to us in church, from asking for help. Each of us is called to share in Christ's social compassion for those most in need. We may have different ways of living out this call, but it is the task of the seminar group to support one another as we struggle to discover the particular shape this call may take for each of us.

Limitations of the Group

Reflection Questions

As I look around myself at work, at home, in my neighborhood, at church:

- Whose voices am I not hearing?
- Where do I find oppression and hunger on my own daily path of life?

We turn now to an examination of the essential place of social compassion in our following of Christ, and look at both the Christian tradition and some factors which may influence the group's understanding of life in Christ.

Hearing the Challenges of Our Tradition

For centuries the prophets reminded the people that to know God was to do justice and that the people of God were responsible for the well-being of the poor, the needy, and the stranger. Jeremiah spells it out as follows:

...Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. (Jer. 22:3)

In St. Luke's Gospel we find Jesus carrying forward the prophetic message by introducing his ministry with the words of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Lk. 4:18-19)

Jesus' whole life demonstrated that God's love draws us into freeing people from everything that binds them and keeps them from their true humanity.

Jesus continually turned his attention to the "little ones" of his society. The gospels refer to them as the poor, the blind, the lame, the crippled, the lepers, the hungry, the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the demoniacs, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the rabble who knew nothing of the law—the least, the last, the lost sheep of the house of Israel. We hear over and over again that in response to their suffering, Jesus was moved to compassion. Matthew 9:36 is one such example: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." In his society their condition was shameful. Jesus' response to these outcasts was to free them from whatever oppressed them. His compassion was such that it called them to reclaim their health and their dignity. "Take up your bed and walk." "Your faith has healed you." "Neither do I condemn you."

Jesus also challenged the norms and structures which oppressed these people. One of the causes of oppression, discrimination, and suffering in his society was the religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The burdens and oppression of the Jewish multitudes depended much more on the ruling theology in these groups than on the Roman Empire. Jesus spared no feelings in his condemnation of these men of religion. When he met the church's oppression of the people in not allowing healing on the Sabbath, he challenged it. When he met the oppression of people in allowing the abusive system of money changing in the Temple courtyard, he challenged it.

In all of this healing and challenging, Jesus was embodying his central message of the reign of God. He demonstrated that it was a dynamic relationship of deep trust in God and loving solidarity among people. He made no distinction between the spiritual and physical or social needs for healing. The salvation he brought was a freedom for the whole person which brought his disciples into community with others in a new way. This community was motivated with such compassion that its members held their material resources in common. People outside the community commented, "Look how they love one another," as a response to the new creation which Jesus had begun in their midst.

We are called to represent this new creation, bringing good news to the poor and setting at liberty those who are in bondage. How any particular Christian shares in this ministry will depend in part on personal circumstances and gifts. As seminar members build their group into a learning community, their task includes helping one another to discern how God is calling each of them to share in Christ's ministry to the poor and oppressed in their own historical situation. This is a very challenging task.

Reflection Questions

As I look around myself in the community and world in which I live:

- What are the cultural patterns of life and belief which make it hard to act out my responsibility for the poor and oppressed?
- How can I be an instrument of faith, hope, and love in my own community?

Normally we do not encounter those most in need unless we intentionally set out to do so. Our society separates us along economic lines, insulating us from the poor, although this is changing with the increase of homeless persons on the streets of many of our cities and towns. There are a number of assumptions, often held by many, that encourage our separation from one another.

One assumption is the perspective of scarcity, instead of a perspective of abundance, which becomes an organizing principle of our lives. We fear there is not enough to go around. Henri Nouwen describes this assumption as follows:

**Obstacles to
Life in
Christ**

... this sense of scarcity makes us desperate, and we turn to competition, hoarding, and a kind of parody of self-preservation. This greed extends not only to material goods but also to knowledge, friendships, and ideas. We worry that everything we possess is threatened. This is especially true in a society that grows more affluent, experiences more opportunities for hoarding and more fears of losing what has been stored, and in the process creates enemies and wars. (Edwards, p. 17)

Sometimes we are so influenced by the assumption of scarcity that we lose touch with knowing “the-world-as-gift.” We slip into a perspective that makes us the creators by the sweat of our brows. But in doing this we create our own insecurity, sensing the precariousness of this self-made world. This worldview of scarce resources keeps us locked in competition with one another.

Faith, in this context of anxiety and insecurity, is the willingness to trust in God despite our uncertainty about survival in a world of scarcity. Faith in the broader social context is the willingness to enter into the grey areas of our public life together expecting God to meet us in the ambiguities of active social concern. Faith calls us to deepen our view of the world as gift, as held together in the abundance of God’s love. Faith is the same process of trusting in God and being willing to risk in uncertainty, whether we face the darkness of a broken marriage or the uncertainties of a broken world.

A second assumption which has the potential to create an obstacle, keeping us from a full life in Christ, is repressed despair or denial. We hear or say, “It’s too horrible to think about. I just block it out.” “Everything I do seems pointless. It could all go at any time.” “I don’t think about world hunger or acid rain, because there is nothing I can do about it.” “I don’t read the newspapers anymore, I don’t want to spoil the time I have left.” As we look at our world today, we are aware of the threats to our environment, such as a progressive deterioration of our life-support system with toxic thermal, chemical, and radioactive pollution, destruction of topsoil and forestland, water reserves, and the disappearance of entire species of plant and animal life. There is growing misery and starvation among many of our planet’s people.

Often our confusion and anguish in this situation is deepened by the sense that it is shameful to be in despair. Joanna Rogers Macy has this to say:

In a culture that prizes optimism and admonishes us to “keep smiling,” we tend to hide our despair like a secret shame, fearing that we will fall apart if we let ourselves fully experience it and be ostracized if we openly express it. For Americans, citizens of a nation built on utopian hopes, it can seem even unpatriotic to entertain feelings of despair. For Christians, it can seem tantamount to a lapse of faith. (Edwards, p. 119)

These assumptions can result in a repression of our despair which blurs our thinking and drains us of energy urgently required for a creative response.

The hope which Christ offers us does not allow us to push away our pain for the world, claiming that God “won’t let it happen.” Rather, it is that hope which allows us to acknowledge and share our pain and fear and to have it transformed into an active compassion that knows God’s love as the most powerful force in the world. We cannot produce this hope; like faith and love, hope is a gift. What we can do is acknowledge the obstacles we put in God’s way and ask for the healing we need. The process of owning and expressing our pain and fears for the planet can release us from isolation. It also permits us to make certain discoveries about our true nature as human beings. As we accept and move through our pain, we come to its source, which is caring. There we discover our intrinsic interconnectedness and our God who is willing to suffer with us in our struggle to become fully human. There we discover a hope that is not purged of the pain but rather integrated with it, ready to let it widen and transform our lives.

An assumption that suffering is bad and should be avoided at all costs can also be an obstacle to faith, hope, and love. Joanna Rogers Macy writes as follows about her view of suffering as a Christian:

As a Christian, I learned that the willingness to suffer pain on behalf of others—and on behalf of the whole of which we are a part—is a measure of willingness to engage in life.... It widens the heart while bringing to light the causes of this suffering in greed and injustice. In a sense, it *redeems* the suffering by letting it tell us what we most need to know. Instead of holding aloof from grief, this movement of entering and opening to grief turns it into a kind of resource. This biblical understanding found its fullest expression in Jesus—in what he said and in the way he died So we learn or are asked to learn—to be unafraid of the dark, to pass through it as we share the pain of the world so that our interconnectedness can be realized—reborn—afew. (Edwards, p. 122)

Life in Christ opens up the possibility of facing the world’s pain and being empowered as we go through it to the compassion which is God’s love. Love is not a sentimental wishing the best for others but a real entering into their situation and a willingness to do what we can to remove their suffering.

A fourth obstacle to our life in Christ may be the tendency to avoid problems that expose our limitations and inability to control our situation. We are a nation of doers. We value practical and effective problem solving. We do not like to put ourselves in situations where our limitations are obvious. As we face the complexity of our social, economic, and political structures

of oppression, we face our own limitations. Love in this larger context is the willingness to risk our involvement in situations which expose our limitations of power and understanding. It means being willing to be faithful without demanding success. Jesus persisted with this kind of love to the point of being a failure in the world's eyes, yet his faithfulness was enough to make this new kind of love present in the early church.

Finally, a fifth obstacle is our tendency to distort the love which Jesus calls us to have by equating love with intimacy. We cannot reach out and touch the problems of hunger, ecological destruction, and the threat of nuclear holocaust if we limit our love to the personal domain of family and friends. Yet as a culture we are afraid of the public domain, afraid of entering into the arena where conflict of interests must be resolved. As Christians we sometimes believe that we cannot follow faith in the often disappointing and brutal public sphere. In his book *The Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer cautions the people of God against the notion of the church as a family that becomes one more structure of retreat from the conflicts of our heterogeneous public life. He says:

The irony of the quest for intimacy is that it drives us apart. We try to cling to each other, and in clinging we distort the other person and ourselves through false dependencies, unreasonable expectations, unjustified hopes. With distortion our relations become strained, dishonest, and eventually self-destructive. But if we can approach each other through the God who is found at the deep center of our true selves, then we can come together not in distortion but in truth, not in self-interest but in compassion. . . . The ideology of intimacy not only ends up destroying the intimacy it seeks; it also denies the value of non-intimate relations, of relations in public which lack depth, duration, intensity. Indeed, by definition, such relations are no relations at all, according to the norms of intimacy. To the extent that we are influenced by understanding, we will spend our days cultivating the private and avoiding the public. But Christianity understands that the only authentic intimacy is with and through God, and in this intimacy the Christian is freed for a variety of relations in public, relations with the stranger, relations with persons whose needs and values are utterly alien to one's own. (p. 109f)

When we live our lives avoiding the contradictions and confusions of the public arena, we deprive ourselves of the chance to have our tight and cramped inner space pulled open to the inclusive and generous love which Jesus embodied.

Faith, hope, and love are difficult attributes to embody in the wider context of our social and economic structures. The obstacles listed above both cause and are caused by our separation from the most in need. Ultimately, faith, hope, and love are God's gifts, but we are called to open ourselves to these gifts.

Reflection Questions

As I reflect on these observations about obstacles to a life in Christ of faith, hope, and love:

- What are the obstacles that limit my own vocation and ministry?
- To what extent do the obstacles identified in this common lesson reflect my own experience of obstacles to a life in Christ of faith, hope, and love?

Reflect on the following questions and suggestions and make notes in the “Exercises” section of your journal:

What growth have you noticed in your faith, hope, or love since joining the seminar group?

How has the group contributed to this growth?

What support for your ministry do you want that the seminar group is not providing now?

Write your own definition of faith, hope, and love.

“Life in Christ calls us out of the comfortable intimacy with those who know us, into the wider social/political context.”

- How is this position supported or challenged by the Christian tradition as you know it?
- How is it supported or challenged by our culture?
- What aspect of your own life experience influences how you think about this issue?
- On the basis of these questions, what is your own position regarding the above statement?

Decide what you most want to share with the group from your reflections. One option is for an individual to arrange with the mentor to lead the group in a meditation from John 15:4f.

Share the aspect of your individual reflections that you most want to discuss with the group or choose as a group one or two questions which will focus your discussion.

If the seminar group is using Common Lesson Three at the time of year when you are also filling out the spring Group Status Report, what can we say about our life together as a learning community, about a deepening understanding of our ministry as baptized people of God?

Decide as a group if you wish to use any of the following suggestions for further exploration of life in Christ.

- Bring something which speaks of that aspect of the world's misery which is most pressing for you (e.g., a newspaper article, a reading from a contemporary prophet or saint, or a poem you have written).
- Arrange with the group to have someone who is ministering with the poor and oppressed come to share his or her sense of personal ministry.