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The Unity Issue | Volume No. 1 | Issue No. 2



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WHAT DREAM ARE YOU CALLED TO BIRTH?

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Letter FROM THE Publisher

Unity. What a heavy topic to try to tackle. It's a topic that brings up many emotions, memories, ideologies, and assumptions. As this issue is being written, the entire world is in the midst of battling COVID-19. In this season, we are unified as we navigate the same pandemic, and yet we all experience it from different angles and perspectives. A popular phrase has been "We are in this together," and while this is a true blanket statement, the reality is each individual carries the consequences of the virus differently. We may feel, think, and live through this shared experience very differently than our community of friends and family, depending on our circumstances.

What is unity, really? What are we unifying to? What should it look like, and how do we actually live it out? The lens through which we view unity will affect how we approach the topic. As a start, it's helpful to dissect the emotions we feel surrounding unity. For example, emotional hurt and pain are not the same as disunity. These emotions are valid indicators of an experience that caused impact to your heart. Likewise, unity is not the same as feeling happy and euphoric all of the time. Let's be honest, that isn't realistic.

Not all conflict is bad. A life without any form of friction would leave us without the capability to feel deeply. Indeed, conflict and pain can be an opportunity to grow deeper and connect to the heart of God. I want to acknowledge that some readers may have gone through horrific experiences or abuse, or suffered emotionally because of another's view of unity. Perhaps even within the Christian church. For that, I am incredibly sorry, and in no way do I want to dismiss your pain. We see you and want you to know that this is a safe place to heal as we seek the ultimate Unifier together.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can approach situations with a heart of compassion. It's time we seek unity with understanding rather than justifying our assumptions. God's ultimate goal is to unify all of creation to himself. In the very beginning of Scripture, Adam and Eve acted in a way that was contrary to the



boundaries God had set for their protection. God didn't shame and condemn them, but instead, his first response was to ask questions (see Genesis 3). From there, his great rescue plan was placed in motion to reconcile us to him once again. Jesus is the one who unifies. We are all in a process of working through life's circumstances, and seeking unity is an opportunity to help ease someone else's burdens and reveal the love of Christ.

I'm going to be up-front with you. This issue of *Truly* won't have all the answers to the questions you probably have. We can't possibly address the depth and breadth of information that it would require in our page count. But what I can promise you is that we have prayerfully approached this topic from a variety of perspectives with hope that the Holy Spirit will fill the gaps and speak to you personally.

The following pages contain articles and stories of hope, exploration, and biblical teaching, as well as practical resources you can apply to your life today. My prayer for you is that you are able to open your mind to understand unity with fresh perspective. It's not possible for us to approach topics or themes at the same emotional or experiential level; therefore, we must seek to go deeper in our own exploration of assumptions. Unity requires patience and asking questions. It is with this heart of unity that we invite you to explore how we can live in harmony with each other and glorify God with one mind and one voice (see Romans 15:5-6).

May we unite under the banner of his love,

Lindsay May
LINDSAY MAY
PUBLISHER & FOUNDER

When Conflict Gets Personal

WRITTEN BY *Krystal Gail*
PAINTING BY *Ashtyn Sibinski*

We've all experienced a difficult interaction with another person: a situation that left us hurt, a conversation that made us angry, a betrayal that damaged trust. The hurt and loss that conflict often leaves behind can be bewildering.

Years ago, a close family member, someone I cared for deeply and looked up to, said some incredibly abrasive things that hit me where it hurt most. This person attacked my values and questioned and rejected my foundation of living a life after Jesus. The words were condemning, condescending, and confrontational. My heart began to race as my body started responding to the conflict before me. Those painful words punctured my heart like an arrow and left me with an ache in my chest. Tears that seemed to hold the heat of the sun trickled down my cheeks, making me even more angry. This happened a long time ago, yet I can still hear the piercing words and picture the patronizing smirk that accompanied the tirade as if it was yesterday.

I wrestled with the hurt and did my best to squelch its burn as quickly as I could. I grieved as my ideal of this family member turned to a pile of ashes. Everything I thought I knew now seemed wrong. Consumed by my own thoughts, feelings, and actions, I became blind to the path toward healing. I grasped in the darkness to find the quickest and easiest ways to relieve the pain, and I became paralyzed by it, accepting the identity of "victim." Maybe you're a bit like me and you've done both. I painted myself the victim to my closest friends and allowed their empathy and concern to fuel my anger. So how do we move forward

when our emotions are running wild and the conflict never feels resolved?

Mark 6:11 says that there are times when we need to "shake the dust off our feet" and move on, trusting God to pick up the pieces and put them together in perfect position.

Moving on for me was a temporary physical and social distance from this relative in order to allow my emotions to settle and to bring the truth of who this person is, no matter how disappointing, to the surface. Accepting this truth helped me to understand the premise of our relationship, set better boundaries, and develop emotionally intelligent strategies to maintain my own well-being amid disagreement. I now spend quite a bit of time with this person, and the conversation is rooted in common ground, which preserves peace and unity between me and other family members.

God is the only one who can change the hearts of other people, and he invites us to place our pain and healing in his hands. In our darkest hour, our greatest mess, and our most embarrassing moments, God's unwavering love shines bright like a beacon, calling us to trust him. ■

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Growing in Friendship & Community

WRITTEN BY *Micah Kennealy*



Growing Your Community

What comes to mind when you hear the word “unity”? Perhaps it is enjoying a delicious meal around a table with your favorite people. Maybe it is seeing the world come together with every color and race. It could be an orchestra melding together the sweet melody of percussion, woodwinds, brass, and strings.

I think of the word “community,” where “come” and “unity” collide. Every woman desires a place where she can come as she is while being unified with friends who are like family. Every human heart longs to love and be loved, to hear and be heard, and to live in community with friends they love.

There is nothing more intimidating than walking into a room and feeling like the friendless stranger. I remember praying for Christian women of faith to come into my life when I was in a season of despair. I cried out to the Lord for friendship and the courage to learn how to make friends after college. And the amazing thing is that God heard and fulfilled my prayer. I started attending church and a women’s Bible study, and then ended up building good friendships and started leading my own Bible study. I realized I had to put myself out there and become uncomfortable to experience the breakthrough in making new friendships. I am sure you have been there too. Begin praying for deep, meaningful community and friendships. God will begin illuminating people, locations, and conversations when you are out and about.

Keep in mind that not every friendship will last forever. Everyone has seasonal and situational friendships influenced by life changes such as getting a new job, moving to a new city, attending a new church, or becoming a parent. It seems that friendships form when people are in similar stages of life. Whatever stage you’re in, healthy relationships are built on a solid foundation where both parties feel loved, encouraged, and challenged to become better versions of themselves.

1. Initiate: Be vulnerable and initiate conversations, friendships, and collaboration. Start a book or cooking club with your neighbors or co-workers, ask a neighbor to go for a walk, or bake cookies and deliver them to someone going through a hard time.

2. Invite: Host someone in your home. Inviting strangers over can be challenging for us women sometimes. But I want to encourage you that your home can be a blessing to a stranger; it measures up and does not need to look like an HGTV renovation. All your home needs to be is a safe, fun, and inviting space open for friendship and conversation. Prayerfully open your door to a new friend and see what happens.

3. Involvement: Join a group, club, book study, gym, or community outreach program that regularly meets in person. Increase your exposure to new people and a new community.

Jesus initiated conversation, invited followers, and involved people in his ministry. He was the prime example for how we can build our community. Read more about Jesus’s ministry in Acts 2. ■

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Peace Is an Inside Job

WRITTEN BY *Karen Hagan* | ILLUSTRATION BY *Krista Dumire*

It's curious that I'm writing this article on shalom, which means peace and tranquility, during such turbulent times. Because of a global pandemic, significant job losses, racial inequities coming to light along with the tensions of an election year, we are concerned about our present and future. So how do we find peace in the midst of chaos?

In John 14:27, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you." He gave us the spirit of peace to lead in our everyday lives. I learned this the hard way. I believed people were seeing my deficiencies before my value. This ugly cycle robbed me of self-confidence and kept me fearful. I understood the concept of peace, but I didn't understand how to make it work in my life. Peace comes from the inside.

When you open the door to fear in your life by listening to negative thoughts or reports, it doesn't arrive alone. It develops a whole host of thoughts and emotions that leave you bewildered in doubt and distressed with worry. I allowed fear to manipulate my emotions and decision-making, which left me hesitant in my relationship with God. I found it difficult to step out in faith and be obedient to his direction. Desperate, though, I began to seek help from God. He revealed to me that peace is the presence of Someone, not the absence of something. His presence (peace) that is in me has the power to dispel fear. This was like electricity going through my spirit. I am a peace carrier! I bring peace with me wherever I go. Suddenly, my eyes were open.

I found emotional stability by understanding God as Jehovah-Shalom, which means "Yahweh is peace." I

stopped asking God to replace fear with peace, and I began to command peace over my heart and mind. This transformed my life. Now I had to change my thinking.

I started looking up verses on peace and wrote them in my journal. Meditating on the verses helped me learn how to apply them to my life. Like meditation, I needed tools to direct my mind, so I put Post-it Notes on my mirror and flash cards in my car. I committed to checking my thoughts at least three times a day and surrounded myself with people of faith. These steps helped me see the truth and grow in my newfound freedom.

- "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:15).
- "The fruit of the Spirit is . . . peace" (Galatians 5:22).
- "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you" (Isaiah 26:3).

Consider the tools you can use to experience a new surge of peace in this season. When being lured by the enemy to overstate what's in front of you and understate what's inside of you, step back and rediscover what you carry. God's promise still holds true. Command peace over your heart and experience shalom. ■

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UNITY IN DIVERSITY: Interwoven *and* Inseparable

WRITTEN BY *Brianna Dickel*

Back when I lived in Morocco, one of my favorite things to do was visit the medina and watch people working on the looms. In the dusty heat, their feet working the age-worn treadles, weavers expertly moved the shuttle of brilliant yarn back and forth—click-clack, click-clack—crafting together a vivid tapestry of vibrant colors and patterns with their hand-dyed threads. These weavers worked one row at a time, a painstakingly slow and intricate process that resulted in a magnificent display of patterns and colors. Their handiwork lined the mudbrick walls of their shops, displaying their masterful art from floor to ceiling.

Would the finished product of these tapestries look as beautiful if they were identical in color and design? Possibly. But what struck me about those shops in Morocco was the beauty in variation of texture, color, and pattern craft-fully interwoven.

In my meditation on the topic of unity, God brought my mind back to those weavers in Morocco. The tapestries displayed—as with human unity—true beauty in the harmonious dance of contrast.

God, the expert Weaver, is creating for himself a great tapestry built not of thread but of people, people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Diversity interlaced and unified, built from the children he created. A symphony of ethnicity and culture, maximizing his glory, because unity in diversity is more beautiful and more profound than the unity of uniformity.

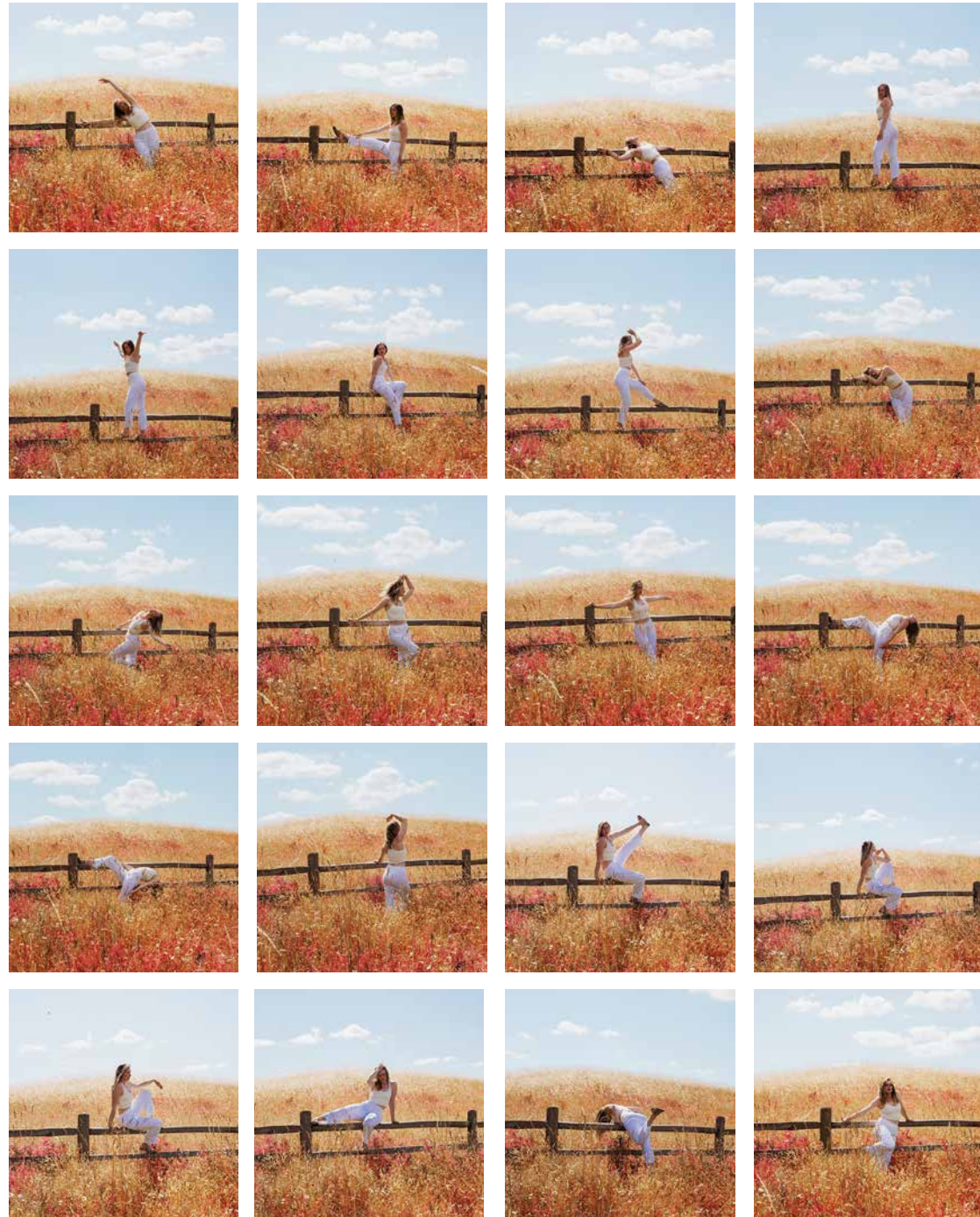
Reflect with me what the song of heaven will sound like one day, a multitude of believers singing joyous songs of praise, each with their unique voices and songs. Songs played on instruments, sung in various different languages,

with different tempos and pitch, blending together in praise of the King. All of this precious unity blood-bought by the Lamb, the ultimate design for his people. One diverse body. One chosen race. One royal priesthood. One holy nation. One treasured possession. One family.

*All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to
the Lord, and all the families
of the nations will bow down
before him. —Psalm 22:27*

So let us each continue to prepare our own hearts to celebrate the diversity of all the families of the earth, unified in the heavenly worship of the Lamb by learning to embrace here and now our brothers and sisters from across cultures, linking arms just as the threads of fabric interlock among each other to create a brilliant masterpiece, a garment of praise. ■

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SELF-PORTRAITS BY *Hanna Voxland*

Breaking the Comparison Spiral: *Stop Missing God's Best for You*

WRITTEN BY *Julie Fisk*

Clothed in only a swim cap and bathing suit, I sat on the YMCA bench feeling chubby and out of place. I wriggled slightly, regretting the enthusiastic Julie of six months ago who signed up for the indoor mini triathlon. I'd done it for a number of seemingly good reasons, the biggest of which was sitting next to me. Marissa had invited me, and wanting to know her better, I agreed to the fun adventure, not fully comprehending that I'd be wearing a bathing suit on a bench with the svelte women lined up alongside me.

As a woman to my left leaned over with a question, my eye caught the sparkle of her enormous diamond ring, and I mentally cataloged her: *beautiful, thin, wealthy*. Already insecure, I was suddenly emotionally transported back to seventh grade, with her in the starring role of Cool Girl.

I immediately felt the Holy Spirit's whisper across my thoughts: *Julie, she is lonely*. With the spell of insecurity broken, conviction and regret flooded through me, and I silently prayed for forgiveness. Once I saw her without the lens of comparison, compassion for her loneliness trumped my insecurity, and we engaged in friendly chatter throughout the entire event.

While the rest of that experience has thankfully faded into a hazy memory, the stomach-churning intensity of my feelings on that bench and the Holy Spirit's gentle rebuke mid-conversation have remained etched in my mind with startling clarity.

I have a tendency to compare my secret worst with the public best of women around me, resulting in unfair comparisons that leave me feeling insecure, lacking,

and unable to be used by God. I know I am not the only woman who falls into this trap. Satan loves to play upon our secret insecurities, wounds from female relationships, and impossible cultural definitions of success. He keeps us preoccupied with comparison and insecurity so that we remain divided, vulnerable, and neutralized. We become believers who aren't able to fully see or do what God has called us to.

Jesus's last recorded prayer (prayed in the garden of Gethsemane) was for his disciples, and his first petition on their behalf was for unity—that they would be united in an intimacy similar to the oneness shared between Jesus and the Father (John 17:11). He then prayed, "May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me" (John 17:23 NLT).

Linger on that thought for a moment. God's glory and love were revealed through the unity of the disciples. This call for unity was not only for those first disciples, though. The New Testament is replete with calls for harmony and unity as critical elements of Christian living among believers because God knew cultural norms—across generations—routinely push us toward division.

Comparison is so deeply embedded in our American culture that we often engage in it without conscious thought. Sometimes the resulting feelings—either smug superiority, paralyzing insecurity, or something in between—are easier to identify than the process itself. But Jesus's words are true. When we view others through

the lens of comparison, constantly keeping a silent score of how we stack up against the women around us, we will not attain the harmony and unity Jesus has called us to. We won't reveal God's glory and love to the watching world.

How can we be women who reveal God's love instead of living our lives through the lens of comparison? Here are some ways to reset your thinking when you start to compare.

1. Recognize that we often compare our secret worst (marriage troubles, parenting struggles, career concerns) to others' public best. Notice when you are starting to unfairly compare your worst to someone's best and ask the Holy Spirit to redirect your thoughts.
2. Post Scripture wherever your eyes will regularly see it, and remind yourself of God's truth in areas where you struggle. Hebrews 12:1 resets my perspective when I'm starting to spiral into unhealthy thoughts. The description of heavenly witnesses cheering as we run our faith-races reveals God's unity of purpose, encouragement for those around us, and the reminder that God has called each of us uniquely. Practice cheering for women around you instead of tearing them down. Be an encourager in your words and actions instead of being an obstacle, either publicly or privately.
3. Ask God for a daily assignment, and be willing and obedient for whatever adventure he takes you on. If our eyes are set on him, not the other women on the bench, our lives can be used for eternal impact. ■

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MAY THEY EXPERIENCE
SUCH PERFECT UNITY THAT
THE WORLD WILL KNOW
THAT YOU SENT ME AND
THAT YOU LOVE THEM AS
MUCH AS YOU LOVE ME.

—JOHN 17:23 NLT



Change Your Clothes

WRITTEN BY *Lindsay May*

STITCHING BY *Josie Groves*

Since the first man opened innocent, clay-formed eyes with awe and wonder, God has given glimpses of himself and revealed his nature through creation (see Romans 1:20). Brilliant, pure light of day, the bread and wine of Communion, and eternal life-saving mercy through altar sacrifice are only a few examples in Scripture that represent God's covenant with his people and reveal who he is. Discovering these realizations in Scripture is like a treasure hunt for my heart. So what about unity? In a world that feels so polarized and passionate, how can our hearts understand unity and extend it to others?

In Scripture, a significant and well-known symbol of unity is marriage. First described in Genesis 2:18–29, the union of man and woman is an obvious example of uniting together. At weddings, one of the most common Scriptures recited is Ecclesiastes 4:12, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” This symbolizes God's miraculous unification of man and woman entering a covenant relationship with him as one. We also see unity represented in the triune of God, the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit united together as one God (this has always baffled my human mind).

How amazing to get a glimpse into the unified Godhead and the symbolism of unity in marriage. Yet we know that not everyone experiences marriage in their lifetime, and sometimes marriages look like the furthest thing from unity (let's be honest, sometimes marriage involves a lot of clashing). So what is another example that can represent the unity that everyone can experience? Surely experiencing unity isn't just for a select group.

What if we looked at unity through the perspective of what we put on and what we wear? Just as the style of clothes we wear today reveals a lot about who we are, such as our occupation, personality, and culture, so it did for the ancients. Throughout history, people groups are represented by different clothes, banners, and even colors. Clothing can unify us, but it can also represent disunity, division, and loss.

For example, one Jewish tradition was to tear one's robe when faced with intense grief. In 1 Samuel 15 we read about Saul's rejection as king. In this particular story, Samuel—a priest, prophet, and judge—prophetically revealed to King Saul that God had ripped his kingdom away as a result of Saul's sin. This was represented through Saul grasping and tearing the hem of Samuel's robe. Later, we see the prophet Ahijah rip his cloak into twelve pieces, representing a tearing of the kingdom of Israel from Solomon as a result of sin and dividing the nation into two separate parts (see 1 Kings 11:30–31). Again with the robes! Meanwhile, we read in Leviticus 21 that the high priests, who wore seamless white robes, were never to tear their garments. A torn garment was never to be repaired, and it disqualified the high priest from serving in the temple because he no longer represented the wholeness of God's image.

There is another robe mentioned in the New Testament that made me pause and reflect on the robes mentioned in the Old Testament. Described in John 19:23, Jesus went to the cross wearing a seamless tunic, woven in one piece from top to bottom—one that was never torn. Jesus wore the uniform of the high priest to the cross, where he laid down his life for you and me. Just as Jesus's valuable, symbolic robe was transferred to the undeserving, murderous Roman soldiers who put him to death, he extends the same offer to us: grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love threaded together to cover our mess and exposed wounds of hurt.

Jesus took the place of the ultimate High Priest through his crucifixion, tearing the temple veil in the holy of holies that previously prevented people from entering the presence of God (again with the fabric!). He tore down the barriers and restored direct access to God. Followers of Jesus are part of this “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9); therefore, let us also wear this spiritual robe of Christ.

It's only through Jesus Christ that we are truly unified to God. Jesus has done the eternal work of unifying us to himself. Perhaps the robe is a visual reminder to put on Christlike clothing (see Romans 13:14). In your marriage, let his strand secure you and your partner close when there



PHOTO BY *Heather Stokes*

is nothing left to hold you together. In times of strife, let his robe be our uniform and identify us as peace-bringers, extending grace to others. Are people recognizing Jesus because you're bearing his thread well?

The point: What's the garment you are wearing? Are you displaying the priestly robe that Jesus gave you spiritually to claim you as his own? The robe of jealousy dissects and tears others down. The robe of comparison divides. The robe of pride builds walls of superiority and assumptions. The robe of people-pleasing weighs you down with the thoughts of others. But the robe of Christ brings compassion, forgiveness, unity, and love. Perhaps it's time

we understand our role as reconcilers through our clothes. Let's examine labels we wear and replace them with the robe of Christ, bringing light, peace, compassion, and love to our brothers and sisters. ■

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Navigating Culture with Hope

WRITTEN BY *Micah Kennealy*



My personal friendship began with Elisabeth in 2017 when she arrived at my house to attend a Bible study. I remember meeting her and immediately knowing we would become great friends. She was a little shy back then but has become a dear friend who displays a powerful lioness spirit with depth, zeal, and knowledge beyond her years.

Have you heard the saying “God works in mysterious ways?” The day I asked Elisabeth if she’d be interested in talking with me for this article, I happened to interrupt her prayer time. She had been seeking the face and will of her heavenly Father and had just felt the Lord prompt her heart, “Elisabeth, you need to start sharing your story.” I think God does work in mysterious ways!

Due to COVID-19, we were not able to meet in person and share our usual cup of coffee together. Instead, we met over Zoom. As I sat in my three-season porch and she sat in the comfort of her home, we longed for normalcy in our world and friendship.

I geared up to ask my first question, and she leaned in with eager anticipation—I knew she’d answer my questions honestly. She was so excited to share her story; it was like she was dying to tell me a secret! So I asked, “If you could describe yourself in three words, what would they be?” Without hesitation she said, “I am creative, consistent, and friendly.”

And that’s the truth. Elisabeth uses her creativity to renovate old furniture and bring out the beauty in things that seem old and worn out. She consistently reaches out, encouraging me and asking how she can be praying for me. Before our friendship began, God brought her from Ethiopia to America through an amazing sequence of life events that have shaped who she is today. To Elisabeth, it’s important to be consistent and friendly, not only as a foreigner in a new country but also as a friend to someone who is arriving in a new country.

Elisabeth was born into a family with challenging dynamics, and her story is one that shows God’s protection, provision, and redemption. Before she was born, Elisabeth’s mother had a prearranged marriage that ended in divorce. She fled to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, where she wed Elisabeth’s father. Elisabeth was born and raised in Addis Ababa, where she lived with her father, mother, and two younger brothers. At eight years old, she discovered the love and relationship of Christ through a neighbor who played worship music so loud that it flooded the streets and her heart.

When Elisabeth was young, her parents divorced, which is looked down upon in Ethiopian culture, and it left her

wondering why her upbringing was unlike that in other Ethiopian families. The divorce set off a domino effect that a young girl never dreams of living. Her father became blind and turned to begging. Then her mother fell ill and was unable to provide for the family, leaving Elisabeth as the primary caretaker. It wasn’t long before her mother passed away, leaving eleven-year-old Elisabeth to raise her siblings by herself.

For a year she was able to provide for and take care of her brothers, ages nine and four, because a family friend they called “Mom” paid for their food and an apartment. When this woman could no longer provide for them, she connected the siblings to a local orphanage.

One night in the orphanage, Elisabeth’s nine-year-old brother had a dream of a tall white man, a short white woman, a red van, and a driver who took her and her brothers away. It was only hours later that her brother’s dream became a reality. Elisabeth remembers seeing the red van pull up at the orphanage, and out stepped a tall white man with his short white wife. As the leader of the orphanage approached the couple, Elisabeth heard the word “adoption,” a word that every child longs to hear while waiting for a family to invite them into their home.

That man and woman are now Elisabeth’s parents, Lalie and Steve Wilke. Prior to Lalie’s first mission trip to Ethiopia, the Wilkes had zero intention of adopting. They had already raised a family and were planning for retirement, so adoption was the last thing on Steve’s mind. In fact, knowing Lalie’s heart for missions and love for children, Steve had jokingly said, “You better not come home with any kids.”

But after meeting Elisabeth and her siblings at the orphanage, Lalie knew those children were going to be her

SHE HAD BEEN SEEKING
THE FACE AND WILL OF
HER HEAVENLY FATHER
AND HAD JUST FELT
THE LORD PROMPT HER
HEART, “ELISABETH,
YOU NEED TO START
SHARING YOUR STORY.”

kids very soon. So when Lalie returned home, she shared with Steve the picture taken of Elisabeth and her brothers. With tears in his eyes, he also knew those kids were going to become a part of their family tree.

Little did Steve know that he would appear in a young boy's dream, be an answer to prayer, and become a father to three Ethiopian children.

Elizabeth said, "My adoption is definitely a gift from God. Only He could align everything perfectly"—"Mom" providing for them, the orphanage giving them a place to stay, a dream, the adoption, and Elisabeth now loving missions and foreigners.

The Wilkes smothered Elisabeth and her siblings with hugs and love, but as they loaded into the van and set off across the world to Wisconsin, Elisabeth felt stripped of everything, including her culture, her community, and her friends. The only thing holding her together was God's peace and being with her brothers. She realized life would never be the same.

Arriving on a cold, wintery day, Elisabeth recalls the frigid foreign air filling her lungs and overwhelming her senses. She'd never seen snow before. Emotions flooded her mind—she felt loved, overwhelmed, scared, blessed . . . and had a longing to go back to Ethiopia.

Since her adoption and living in America, Elisabeth has experienced everything from cultural tensions to learning English to discovering her God-given passions. Being a woman of a different background, she has adapted very quickly and says, "I feel extremely blessed to have been adopted and to live in America. I know God's hand of provision was upon the process and my life."

She continues, "Take into consideration the fact that many immigrants miss their culture, food, weather, language, and people. We as foreigners want to understand the language and grammar, get a job, and make new friends. Also, don't assume. If you have a question, you are welcome to ask about my race and where I have come from. Please don't assume I grew up in America, understand

grammar, and feel confident in my speaking and reading abilities."

I asked Elisabeth about her personal goals. "I want to go back and visit my hometown," she said. "I can only imagine the Ethiopian heat beating down on my bare skin, the authentic smell of food flooding the marketplace, and large crowds swarming the streets."

Elisabeth has a heart to enlighten people about her culture and family legacy. She cooks Ethiopian food, shares stories, and encourages others. "Food is the best way to experience Ethiopia from afar." As a foreigner, she encourages everyone to share their stories, to be open and vulnerable, because stories matter.

Elisabeth's family story was marked by divorce, death, and despair. But now she is living a vibrant love story with Christ. She has experienced redemption, revitalization, and relationship in Christ. Like her, we can all be adopted into a family and have a personal relationship with God. He saved her, and he can also save you. Because of her relationship with God, Elisabeth developed a passion for missions and ministry and loves seeing people come to Christ.

By the end of our interview, Elisabeth was beaming with joy over the fact that she had faithfully shared her story with me. Three words I'd use to describe Elisabeth are strong, authentic, and contagious. She continues to be a bright light in all the dark places, leaving individuals wanting more of God, and she is constantly pointing them to Christ no matter where they have come from. Anytime I have a conversation with Elisabeth, I am encouraged, inspired, and challenged to pursue God more, and I desire a greater zeal for life and culture. ■

*MICAH KENNEALY IS A PASTOR ALONGSIDE HER HUSBAND, AS WELL AS AN AUTHOR, LEADER, AND SPEAKER. MICAH LOVES SEEING WOMEN DISCOVER THEIR PURPOSE IN LIFE, INFLUENCE THEIR WORKPLACES, AND GROW IN RELATIONSHIPS. @MICAH_KENNEALY

Faith Stories

"UNITY HAPPENS WHEN I DON'T OVERRULE WHAT GOD IS TRYING TO DO IN ME AND INSTEAD I ALLOW HIM TO BE THE FINAL WORD ON JUSTICE. WHEN I CHOOSE TO LET GO OF MY RIGHTS AND MY WILL, GOD CAN BRING ME TO A PLACE OF WHOLENESS, FREEDOM, AND UNITY."

JULEE GESSINGER, AGE 50, SHAKOPEE, MN

"DIVISION CAN BRING SPIRITUAL HEAVINESS. IT IS HURTFUL AND DOESN'T BEAR FRUIT. BUT WHEN I CHOOSE UNITY, EVEN WHEN IT'S HARD, I'M CHOOSING OBEDIENCE. CHRIST BRINGS HEALING TO OUR LIVES WHEN WE GROW IN OUR LOVE FOR HIM AND OTHERS THROUGH UNITY AND OBEDIENCE."

HANNAH MALCOLM, 32, EDMONTON, ALBERTA, CANADA @H.J.MALCOM

"HOW HAVE YOU SEEN GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE WHEN YOU CHOSE UNITY OVER DIVISION?"

"UNTIL I STARTED PRAYING FOR SOMEONE WHO VISIBLY AND VERBALLY MADE IT CLEAR THEY DIDN'T LIKE ME, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT PRAYING FOR YOUR ENEMIES REALLY MEANT. OVER TIME, GOD STARTED HEALING MY HEART FROM ANGER AND RESENTMENT TO GODLY LOVE. I ALLOWED HIM TO MINISTER TO ME AND BEGAN TO PRAY THAT HE'D MINISTER TO THIS OTHER PERSON TOO."

JENNY HUDDLESON, 26, BURNSVILLE, MN @JENNY_HUDD

"GOD HAS BEEN STRENGTHENING MY RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS SINCE I STARTED CHOOSING TO BE PRESENT AND TO SET ASIDE SELFISH TENDENCIES. HE'S HEALING WOUNDS I DIDN'T KNOW I HAD. CHOOSING UNITY OVER DIVISION IS OPENING THE DOOR TO NEW FRIENDSHIPS."

AMANDA ARTZ, 21, NORTHLAKE, TX @AMANDAAARTZ

SHARE YOUR FAITH STORY WITH US ON INSTAGRAM. #TRULYFAITHSTORY @THETRULYCO

An *Unlikely* Missionary

WRITTEN BY *Havana Clark*

PAINTING BY *Lily Yarran*

When I told family and friends that my husband and I had applied to be missionaries to the Arab World, there was a consistent response: “You’re the last person I thought would do this.”

I couldn’t deny it. How many times had I panicked when a missionary spoke at our church, praying God wouldn’t call me overseas? To me the word “missionary” conjured up images of digging wells, eating strange foods, and living in squalor. That didn’t sound appealing to me; I had worked hard for my journalism career and was quite content with my life, thank you very much.

But in 2015, just a few months after my husband and I got married, our calling began exactly that way—through a visiting missionary. He didn’t tell us anything new, necessarily, but this time God stirred our hearts and convicted us of the reality that billions of people have never heard the gospel.

In response, my husband and I started a group to pray for the unreached people across the world. We believe powerful things happen when we pray, even if we don’t tangibly see or understand how God is moving.

As our group prayed that God would send more missionaries to reach more people, we started seeing passages in the Bible where Jesus talked about the cost of following him (see Luke 9:23), and we began asking ourselves a scary question.

Is God asking us to be those missionaries? Are we willing to go?

Like our family and friends, I assumed I was the last person to do this. Personality tests repeatedly confirmed who I was: perfectionist, achiever, introvert—traits I believed weren’t compatible with the mission field. But

looking back years later, I see I had it wrong. Being a missionary is exactly who I was created to be. I just couldn’t see past my own labels.

Despite some apprehension, my husband and I were approved for a two-year missionary term and landed in Cairo, Egypt, in January 2017. Neither of us had ever done extended missions work, and we’d never been to an Arab country before.

Throughout our time serving in Cairo, God showed me that my personality was compatible with the mission field if I trusted him to use me. He stretched my introversion and showed me the joys of Arab hospitality—overflowing and unrestrained. He took my perfectionism and made me a diligent Arabic student. And he took my fears of scrutiny and showed me the freedom that comes with godly accountability and openness.

Over and over again in the gospels, Jesus says that if we try to save our life, we will lose it, but if we lose our life for his sake, we will find it (see Matthew 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25). Reaching those who have no access to Jesus is not comfortable; whether it’s giving financially to missions, praying devotedly, or physically moving, our commitment to serving Jesus *will* cost us something.

People won’t hear the gospel if we aren’t willing to pay the cost.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible reveals that God’s heart is to see people from every corner of the world reunited to himself. The question is, what comfort, labels, and excuses will you lay down to see people reconciled to God?

Whatever the cost, it will be worth it. ■



HOUSE ON THE RED EARTH BY THE ROADSIDE | EAST AFRICA

*HAVANA CLARK (NAME CHANGED FOR SECURITY). SERVES AS A MISSIONARY TO THE ARAB WORLD ALONG WITH HER HUSBAND AND SON. THEY AIM TO PLANT CHURCHES AMONG UNREACHED MUSLIM PEOPLE GROUPS.

*LILY YARRAN (NAME CHANGED FOR SECURITY) HAS SERVED IN EAST AFRICA FOR NEARLY TWENTY YEARS. SHE IS MARRIED WITH THREE KIDS AND ENJOYS PAINTING AND CREATING ARTWORK OF THE PEOPLE AND PLACES AROUND HER.

Active Listening Builds Healthy Relationships

WRITTEN BY *Jenni Kahmeyer*

Good communication skills are essential for engaging in productive conversations, but in a world where opinions can be triggering and advice abundant, we can easily get distracted by the noise around us and our own thoughts.

Most of us know how to hear what is being said, but do you know how to listen? How do you really listen to what the other person is saying in the midst of all this extra noise? Listening isn't passive—it's active! Honing this skill will not only help you become a more effective communicator and guide you in determining how to respond, but it will also help others feel understood and that their opinions matter.

SHOW THAT YOU'RE LISTENING

The first step in active listening is showing that you are listening. We can do this in many ways and often do it unconsciously with our nonverbal actions. Nonverbal communication shows the speaker that you are interested and want to understand what she has to say. This can be accomplished by the following:

- maintaining eye contact
- nodding along as she speaks
- leaning forward in your chair
- keeping your arms uncrossed (crossed arms can imply that you're closed off)

If you are talking on the phone, audibly show that you are listening through brief encouraging comments such as "Go on," "I see," or "Mm-hmm" as she shares with you.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Have you ever been in a conversation and felt like an afterthought? As I mentioned above, the world is busy all around us, and carving out time to have a good conversation

can be a challenge. When you are practicing active listening, notice what is drawing your attention. You might be dealing with something difficult in your own life and find yourself distracted by thoughts and worries. There may be things that require your immediate attention or that you can't get away from. Always be honest with the person when you're in a conversation together. Let her know that what she is saying is important to you, explain that you are distracted, and then offer a different time to talk when you will be able to focus on what she would like to share. Better yet, offer to take her out for coffee, where there will be even fewer distractions.

REFLECT WHAT YOU HEAR

As you listen, you will be taking in a lot of information. You might find that you are having trouble following along and need to clarify some of the details. Rather than assuming or pretending you understand, offer a reflection of what she has shared with you. Start by saying, "What I heard you say is . . .," and then offer a brief summary. She can then acknowledge that you're both on the same page or clarify what she intended. This is also a great opportunity to demonstrate that you are doing your best to understand and empathize with her along the way.

BE AWARE OF YOUR BIAS

Everyone has her own opinions, values, and beliefs. This creates a "lens" through which we see the world. Bringing awareness to your own bias and opinions can help you understand where you might make assumptions as you listen. A problem for you might not be a problem for someone else. This awareness can also help you determine what the speaker is hoping to get out of the conversation.

Rather than eagerly offering your solution to the issues discussed, consider what she might be looking for at that time. It can go a long way to simply ask, "Are you looking for advice, or for someone to listen?" This will help show your interest in empathizing versus fixing things that don't need to be fixed.

DEFER JUDGMENT

It can be easy to engage in conversation and use all of the skills listed above when we agree (at least for the most part) with what the other person is sharing. It becomes a challenge when we don't agree or get caught up in hot-topic issues like politics and religion. When you find yourself rushing to judgment or criticizing the other person, consider the following:

- How are my own thoughts about this issue triggering my emotions?
- How are my opinions distracting me from listening?
- How would I want to be treated at this moment if I were the one sharing my viewpoint?

Deferring judgment doesn't mean you're setting aside the things you stand for or believe in, or that you agree with everything she has to say; instead, it offers a safe place for both of you to connect. In fact, you might find yourself gaining new insights or ways of thinking you hadn't considered before! ■

*JENNI KAHMEYER (MA, LPCC) IS A WIFE AND NEW MOM FROM EAGAN, MINNESOTA. SHE WORKS AS A MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR IN THE TWIN CITIES AND ENJOYS PUZZLES, THEATER, AND TIME WITH FAMILY. @JENNIKAHMEYER



PHOTOS BY *Anna Marum*

CULTIVATING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

WRITTEN BY *Lucrecia Slater*

Have you ever heard or said, “It’s not you, it’s me”? I’ve said those words a lot, mainly as an excuse to dodge confrontation or a nasty conclusion to an already messy situation. While this phrase can be seen as a cop-out, there could also be some validity to it—especially in the realm of having boundaries.

When you think about the word “boundaries,” I’m sure a lot of definitions and thoughts come to mind. I used to think boundaries were for the other person—to control someone else, in a sense. How wrong was that thought?! Boundaries are for my protection and to keep me well-balanced.

The Bible tells us that Jesus set healthy, firm boundaries that were driven by his motives and purpose. He knew when to retreat (Luke 5:15–16) and when to stay awhile longer at the request of the people (John 4:40–41).

The most recent boundary I’ve had to set in my life is limiting how much time I spend talking on the phone with one particular friend. Several times lately, I’ve been lenient with her and it’s become a challenge. She can talk for hours, and even when I make comments that I need to end the call because my daughter is vying for my attention, my friend continues as if she hasn’t heard me. Finally, I had to explain that as much as I love talking with her, I couldn’t do it as often as she wanted. Since then, we’ve had a couple conversations about it to be sure everything is good between us. Reinforcing that boundary has kept our friendship healthy.

My friend has the choice whether to respect my boundary or not, but it’s also my choice whether to give in or to stand firm on what I’ve decided is healthy for my life. Establishing healthy boundaries is a practice that grows and becomes effective as long as we tend to them. ■

Here are some ideas to help you establish and tend to your own boundaries:

- **Ask God to help you create better boundaries.**
- **Write down the boundaries you’ve made for yourself.**
- **Determine if you’ve compromised any of those boundaries.**
- **Write out how healthy boundaries will impact your life and behaviors in positive ways.**
- **Reinforce your boundaries with others.**

Our boundaries help us stay centered on God and attentive to our soul and purpose. We can be more readily available to others and our God-assignments when we have healthy boundaries in place.

*LUCRECIA SLATER IS A VETERAN TURNED PUBLISHED AUTHOR AND BLOGGER. SHE LIVES IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE WITH HER AMAZING HUSBAND AND TWO DAUGHTERS, AGES 19 AND 7. @LUCRECIASSLATER



SELF-PORTRAITS BY *Nicole Flack*

Fragmented Vision

WRITTEN BY *Brooke Peterson*
PHOTO BY *Hanna Voxland*

Recently, my mom brought over and unloaded six plastic bins that comprised my life. Yearbooks, photos, artwork, even my old preschool T-shirt with my face on the front! In one sitting, I saw bits and pieces of my past, beautifully woven into the mosaic of my life.

What took me by surprise was not my outrageously big hair in my prom picture, but the twenty years worth of journals that I started thumbing through. I noticed that a common theme in my journal entries sounded something like, “God, what’s my purpose?” Gaining clarity to that question seems to nag every human heart.

My pile of penned dreams, struggles, prayers, and life snapshots reminded me that the simplest way to identify my purpose in any particular season is to identify the thread of the Holy Spirit’s whisper throughout the fragments of my past. Those whispers and clues lead to clarity on what my future might hold.

Perhaps you don’t have twenty years’ worth of journals or prophetic words to help you identify clues about your God-given purpose, but each person has a beautiful story made up of divine fragments.

ASSEMBLING YOUR LIFE MOSAIC

When we identify the thread of his whisper throughout our lives, we’re empowered with clarity and invited to gloriously expand the kingdom of heaven through our unique purpose.

During the apostle Paul’s ministry, he planted many churches with a team. Paul mentored Timothy, a passionate Christ follower, for many years, and the two traveled together. When an influential church in Ephesus started to spread false teachings, Paul sent Timothy to confront the leaders and to restore order in the church.

This was no small task for a thirtysomething young man! Paul’s wise counsel for Timothy’s successful purpose? “Hey, Timmy! Whatever you do, remember the word of the Lord that was spoken over your life through those men and women of God!” (see 1 Timothy 1:18–19). Timothy’s mom and grandma are mentioned in the Bible as being faithful believers (go moms!). Long before Timothy was ever charged with this great task, there were whispers of destiny over his life.

The same holds true in our lives today, when we identify, remember, and hold fast to the threads of God’s voice spoken throughout our lives.

Take a moment today to mentally thumb through your divine fragments (or dust off old journals).

1. How has God revealed himself to you? What common prayers or Scriptures surfaced?
2. What strengths and passions emerged? What common denominator is present in your desires?
3. What patterns do you notice in your story, and how might they reveal what you’re called to in this season of life? What unique expertise have you honed through your story that could add value to others’ stories?

Life often looks fragmented day to day, but your Father takes great delight in uniting all your hidden moments and turning them into something extraordinary. ■

*BROOKE D. PETERSON IS THE FOUNDER OF WELL WOMEN CO. AN AUTHOR, AND A PODCAST HOST LIVING IN MINNEAPOLIS. SHE ENJOYS SEIZING ADVENTURE IN EVERYDAY MOMENTS WITH HER FAMILY, AND HER MISSION IS EQUIPPING WOMEN TO TURN PURPOSE INTO PROSPERITY. @WELLWOMENCO

MY FAVORITE Mess

WRITTEN BY *Brianna Gray*

Some time ago, my husband and I had some good friends over for dinner. The four of us lingered around our dining room table together until the late evening hours enjoying lasagna and warm, buttery bread. Our time spent around our table that night was filled with laughter as we reminisced about old stories—the shared experiences that built our friendship.

I interrupted our dinner conversation announcing that I’d made dessert earlier in the day, and briefly left the table to put together four bowls of brownies topped with vanilla bean ice cream. Eager to get back to the stories, I poured coffee into four mugs and tossed a spoon into each bowl before rejoining the fun. I served the brownie bowls on top of our messy lasagna plates and the hot coffee next to our empty water glasses. We nibbled on the rest of the bread until the night was over.

I always feel more connected to my people after meaningful times together, just like with our dinner with friends that night. True connection happens when we invite others into our story, regardless of the season we find ourselves in. Sometimes those moments together mean telling old stories and laughing about shared experiences. And other times those dinners are spent

with tears flowing down our cheeks and a shared Kleenex box between us. In the good and in the messy, we’re seen, known, and valued. There is undeniable joy when sharing life, the good and the hard, over lasagna, bread, and brownies.

After our friends had gone home, our kids were tucked in bed, and the house was quiet, I blew out the candles and my husband and I cleared the table, stacking dirty dishes, silverware, glasses, and mugs on the countertop next to the sink. And there on the kitchen island was the melted vanilla bean ice cream that I forgot to put back in the freezer in my rush to be with my friends. Messy piles. Melted ice cream. Visible evidence that real connection took place that night. When it neared midnight, I stepped up to the sink, turned on the hot water, and smiled at my favorite kind of mess. ■

*BRIANNA GRAY LIVES IN THE TWIN CITIES WITH HER HUSBAND AND THREE KIDS. SHE LOVES FAMILY DINNERS, DRINKING AMERICANOS AT COFFEE SHOPS WITH FRIENDS, AND TAKING SUMMER DRIVES WITH THE WINDOWS DOWN AND THE MUSIC UP.

Baking and Breaking Bread

Memories are made together in the kitchen and around the table.



PHOTOS BY *Anna Marum*

Rustic Bread

RECIPE FROM *Ariel Gugudan @ariel_joy*
*PICTURED ON THE LEFT

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups flour
- 1½ cups warm water, divided
- 1½ teaspoons yeast
- 1 teaspoon sugar (or honey or agave nectar)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Use 4 tablespoons of the 1½ cups of water and combine with the sugar. Once combined, let them hang out together for 10–15 minutes until a nice fluffy sponge has formed on top.
2. In a large bowl, combine the remaining ingredients. Once you have a rough ball, knead the dough for 10–15 minutes until it is soft and pliable.
3. Allow the dough to proof for about an hour in a warm place (like in front of a sunny window). It should double or triple in size.
4. Once the dough is finished with its first proof, you need to “knock it back.” Give it a good punch, and then give it a few kneads to reshape it into a pretty ball. Allow it to proof for another 20–30 minutes. It should again double in size.
5. While the dough is doing its second proof, preheat your oven to 450°F and warm your cast-iron Dutch oven for 10 minutes before you bake your bread.
6. With a sharp knife, make slits in the dough so that steam has a place to escape as it bakes. You can do a simple cross in the middle, or you can have some fun and make a nifty design.
7. Put the dough in the preheated Dutch oven, put the lid on top, and bake for 30 minutes. Remove the lid and bake for another 15 minutes.
8. Let the dough rest for about an hour before digging in.

Gluten Free Vegan Bread

RECIPE FROM *Melanie Pitts @hopeskitchen*

INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups gluten free flour mix
- 2 teaspoons xanthan gum
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon dry yeast
- 2 teaspoons coconut oil (melt before measuring)
- 1½ cups + 2 tablespoons warm water

**Make sure dry ingredients are at room temp. before starting*

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Grease and dust an 8" × 4" loaf pan with gluten free flour. Heat oven to 200°F.
2. Combine gluten free flour mix, xanthan gum, salt, sugar, and dry yeast in a medium-sized bowl and whisk together. Set aside.
3. In a mixing bowl, combine the coconut oil and warm water together, and then add the dry ingredients. Mix on high for 2 minutes; this activates the yeast. It should resemble a thicker cake batter.
4. Pour batter into prepared pan and cover with a tea towel. Turn OFF the oven and set the covered bread in the warm oven to rise. Carefully shut the oven door.
5. The bread will take about 30 minutes to rise to just below the top of the pan. Take the bread out carefully and set aside. Preheat your oven to 400°F.
6. Return bread to the preheated oven and bake 45–55 minutes. After the first 10–15 minutes, tent aluminum foil over the bread for the remainder of the baking time to prevent the crust from darkening too much.
7. Test the bread with a toothpick—it should come out clean. After you've removed the bread from the oven, immediately rub the top with butter (or to keep it vegan, try a little melted coconut or olive oil). Remove loaf from the pan to a wire rack to cool.
8. Let cool completely before cutting. This makes a big difference in how well it will slice and stay together.

The Fragrance of Unity

WRITTEN BY *Portia Allen*
ARTWORK BY *Ashtyn Sibinski*

How truly wonderful and delightful to see brothers and sisters living together in sweet unity! It's as precious as the sacred scented oil flowing from the head of the high priest Aaron, dripping down upon his beard and running all the way down to the hem of his priestly robes. . . . For from this realm of sweet harmony God will release his eternal blessing, the promise of life forever! —Psalm 133 TPT

Today's culture would have you believe that unity means agreeing with everything someone else stands for or says about a topic or situation. As individuals, however, we aren't designed to agree on everything or contribute the same way as everyone else. Unity isn't an abandonment of our individuality.

God's Word would not speak about unity being a delight if it could not be accomplished. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul tells us that as people who follow Jesus, we are part of one body, the body of Christ. This body has many different members, just as the human body has different parts. In both, the unifying goal is to keep the body well. When your body is healthy, you're able to have a pleasant life. In the same way, you have a unique role as a member in the body of Christ, whether it's on your team at work, in the classroom, or at home. How will your individuality contribute to the body?

Psalm 133 compares unity with the sacred scented oil used to anoint the priests of God for service in the temple. Notice the oil is not simply dabbed on the priest's robes, but is poured over them the same way the Holy Spirit is poured over us when we protect unity. The oil was so fragrant that the priest's presence would be known even after he wasn't physically present anymore. Imagine the fragrance you'll leave behind when you operate from a mindset of unity.

What would happen if we started to work toward unity? The Holy Spirit's power is what allows us to head toward the same common goal without abandoning our individuality and preferences on how to get there. Imagine the shift that might happen in our spheres of influence and in our culture. Things happen when people are unified. Let's be people willing to bring the pleasant fragrance of unity into our spaces. ■

*PORTIA ALLEN IS A SPEAKER AND WRITER WHO IS PASSIONATE ABOUT EMPOWERING WOMEN. HER GOAL IS TO REMIND OTHERS OF GOD'S LOVE. SHE HAS SERVED IN MINISTRY FOR TEN YEARS ALONGSIDE HER HUSBAND. @PORTIAALLEN

Unity isn't an abandonment of our individuality.



PHOTO BY *Anna Marum*

Favoritism: A Raw Deal

WRITTEN BY *Rachel Smith*

A surprising parenting heartache came when my children entered the world of their peers. Suddenly the sweet and fun became dog-eat-dog over a spot at the front of the line, a certain special toy, or who got picked for which kickball team. And the absolute worst was when an adult was blind to the wonder that is intrinsic in my kid.

I wanted to shake some adult shoulders and say, “They are worth it! Do you know how amazing my kids are? Have you talked with them? Can you look a little past the immaturities? Please?” (As an Enneagram 8, my mama bear instinct is strong. Like, really strong.)

I prayerfully asked Jesus, “Why can’t everyone see my children the way I do? Or maybe even a little of what I see? Why isn’t everyone willing to put time and love into them?”

And he whispered to my heart, “Why don’t you see all of my children that way?”

That heavenly whisper spotlighted my tendency to pick which of God’s children are easy to love and to dismiss those who are not. I am quick to reach out to those who are more like me, who I understand, who I find interesting. And I subtly leave behind those I can’t quite click with or who rub me the wrong way. My heart makes easy choices and I follow, accidentally rejecting God’s children.

In the New Testament, James, the half-brother of Jesus, writes in his book about the dangers of favoritism. In his typical no-nonsense way, he says, “If you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law” (James 2:9 NLT). Even though

this comes from the New Testament, the writer isn’t saying anything new about behaviors that anger God. In the Old Testament, Malachi says to the priests, “You have not obeyed me but have shown favoritism in the way you carry out my instructions” (Malachi 2:9 NLT).

Somehow in 500 BC, there was priestly power-brokering in Jerusalem, giving preference to some over others. The result was a complete breakdown in the interactions between the priests (God’s representatives) and the people. God was using the prophet Malachi to let the priests know that their behavior was absolutely inappropriate.

Why is God mad in the book of Malachi? And what gets a one-line throat punch from James? Favoritism. If God was going to send a special “Knock it off” message to people, I would not have picked favoritism as deserving attention. Growing up, I thought a major offense was getting a tattoo, cursing, or drinking—or dating boys who do.

Knowing what makes God metaphorically get up out of his chair is part of how we develop our relationship with him. For example, you always know what makes someone you love irritated. As a teen, I knew that it made my dad crazy if we brought Coke cans into the basement. Now that I’m older and have a better grasp of how principles are underneath directives, I would tell you that it made my dad upset when we disregarded and disrespected the property he had provided for us. Also, ants.

So if the action of favoritism is a no-no, what is the underlying principle? Malachi hits squarely between the eyes when he asks rhetorically, “Are we not all children of the same Father? Are we not all created by the same God?” (Malachi 2:10 NLT). Favoritism speaks to anyone within earshot, *Some people are better than others, some people deserve better treatment, and some people are not worth the effort.* Favoritism divides between us and them. And if you are wondering if favoritism really communicates loudly, ask anyone who has ever felt like a “them.”

It’s as if God is saying, “Do you know how amazing my kids are? Have you talked with them? Can you look a little past the immaturities?”

I like to work with my friends as much as any girl. It’s easier and fun, and they just get me. But easy and fun

isn’t the name of the game. By always choosing friends and teammates who I naturally gravitate toward, I’m inadvertently playing favorites—overlooking the people God may be placing in my life while also disregarding the value God has on their lives. The boat ride of favoritism is fun for everyone inside, but it leaves a big wake, invoking cynicism and eroding trust for those on the outside.

Favoritism is about moving the needle in your favor by trading in flattery or social alliance. This is about an inner circle that rotates honor within itself. It may feel like we are above this kind of behavior, but it’s one of those issues that’s hard to see in the mirror. I’m asking myself these days if I have chosen particular friends because they are easy and fun. I am looking around for those who are not naturally favored and asking myself why. I’m looking at elder boards and wondering if they reflect the populations they serve (in median socioeconomic status, gender, and color). Imagine if the Christian community was known for unity, for being a place where people are promoted or comforted, cared for or honored regardless of any worldly measurement? If rules, standards, and discipline within a congregation were universally held, no matter who a person was related to or how much money they gave?

If you are interested in building unity in your team, your home, or your neighborhood, take the issue of favoritism as seriously as God does. Unity will never happen when some people matter less than others. Let the whisper of conviction push you to look beyond transactional relationships and see God’s children with fresh eyes. With your actions, communicate to the world: We are all children from the same Father. ■

*RACHEL SMITH LIVES IN MINNESOTA WITH HER HUSBAND, THEIR THREE HIGH SCHOOLERS, AND THEIR DOGS, GINGER ROGERS AND DORIS DAY. IN HER FREE TIME RACHEL CAN BE FOUND READING A GOOD MEMOIR (EITHER BY A FIRE IN THE WINTER OR ON A DECK IN THE SUMMER). SHE GEEKS OUT ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT AND CARY GRANT MOVIES, AND IS CURRENTLY PURSUING AN MDIV. @FIRMLYANCHORED

The Truly Co on Unity



BRIANNA



KRISTI



SHILOH

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WAY TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER?

INVITING FRIENDS OVER FOR DINNER, WHETHER WE SIT FOR HOURS AT THE TABLE OR IT'S PIZZA AROUND THE KITCHEN ISLAND.

DEFINITELY ANY FUN NEW ACTIVITY. PEOPLE EXPERIENCING NEW THINGS TOGETHER CREATES A UNIQUE BOND.

"FIKA" IS SWEDISH FOR COMING TOGETHER OVER COFFEE, TEA, PASTRIES, OR SANDWICHES. HAVING PEOPLE FOR A FIKA IS SUCH A JOY.

WHAT EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT YOU THE MOST ABOUT UNITY?

IN MY MARRIAGE TO MY HUSBAND AND FINDING VALUE IN THE UNIQUE WAYS OUR TWO FAMILIES ARE DIFFERENT.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS: IT TAKES WORK LAYING DOWN YOUR RIGHT TO CONTROL, BUT IT IS SO WORTH THE GROWTH.

MY SWEDISH-INDIAN MARRIAGE HAS TAUGHT ME THAT UNITY MEANS UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGING SIMILARITIES.

WHAT'S YOUR STYLE FOR DEALING WITH CONFLICT?

I HAVE TO PROCESS OUT LOUD AND TRY TO GAIN CLARITY BY ASKING QUESTIONS.

FIRST I GO TO GOD AND COVER IT IN PRAYER. THEN SEEK RECONCILIATION AND SET A COLLABORATIVE END-GOAL TOGETHER.

JESUS REASONS, CRITICIZES, GETS ANGRY, AND STANDS IN THE GAP, DEPENDING ON THE CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT. I WANT TO BE LIKE HIM.

WHEN DO YOU FEEL MOST CONNECTED TO GOD'S PRESENCE?

WHEN I'M ALONE, SURROUNDED BY GOD'S CREATION ON A WALK IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD, OR WATCHING THE SUNRISE AT THE LAKE.

WHILE SERVING OTHERS AND NOT FOCUSING ON MYSELF, MY CONNECTION WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT IS UNLIKE ANYTHING ELSE.

WHEN I'M REPENTANT AND DESIRE TO BECOME MORE LIKE JESUS AND LESS LIKE ME.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WAY TO CONNECT WITH GOD?

LISTENING TO LOUD WORSHIP MUSIC WHILE I'M DRIVING, COOKING, OR SIMPLY HANGING OUT AT HOME WITH MY FAMILY.

SETTING ASIDE TIME FOR QUIET RETREATS. GETTING AWAY FROM HOME AND LIFTING MY HEAD AND HEART UP IN PRAYER.

WORSHIPING IN MANY LANGUAGES, READING AND MEMORIZING GOD'S WORD, AND TALKING THEOLOGY WITH OTHERS.

WHAT DEMONSTRATION OF UNITY HAS INSPIRED YOU?

WHEN PEOPLE ARE CURIOUS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OTHERS' ART AND CULTURE RATHER THAN MAKING THEIR OWN VOICE LOUDER.

WHenever people decide to give up their need to be right, then lean into the unknown for the sake of new understanding.

THE BLM PROTESTS THAT STARTED IN MINNEAPOLIS TRIGGERED AN INTERNATIONAL OUTCRY AGAINST INEQUALITY AND INEQUITY.



MADI



NATASHA



LINDSAY

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WAY TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER?

MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION, LEARNING ONE'S STORY, FINDING COMMON GROUND, AND SEEING OTHER PERSPECTIVES.

FOOD. YOU CAN ALWAYS GET PEOPLE TO CONNECT OVER A MEAL.

INVITING FRIENDS OVER FOR A BONFIRE IN THE BACKYARD. CONVERSATION FEELS SO NATURAL WHEN YOU CAN STARE AT A FIRE!

WHAT EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT YOU THE MOST ABOUT UNITY?

CONFLICT BRINGS UNITY IN A LOT OF SCENARIOS. IN MY FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIPS, WE OPENLY TALK ABOUT OUR FEELINGS.

AT PEAK ISOLATION DURING THE PANDEMIC, I SAW SO MANY PEOPLE STILL FINDING WAYS TO COME TOGETHER (VIRTUALLY) TO DO GOOD.

SEASONS WHEN I'VE EXPERIENCED REJECTION AND DEEP HURT. WE CAN LEARN HOW NOT TO TREAT OTHERS.

WHAT'S YOUR STYLE FOR DEALING WITH CONFLICT?

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITHIN THE HUMAN? ASK QUESTIONS. SOMETIMES WE'RE HURT BECAUSE OF SOMEONE ELSE'S INTERNAL PAIN.

I ASK GOD FOR THE RIGHT WORDS, AND I PRAY THEY WILL BE HEARD IN THE SPIRIT INTENDED.

I STATE HOW I'M FEELING AND ASK QUESTIONS. I'M A PERSON WHO NEEDS SOME TIME TO PROCESS SITUATIONS.

WHEN DO YOU FEEL MOST CONNECTED TO GOD'S PRESENCE?

WHEN I'M MY TRUEST SELF. BEING CONNECTED PHYSICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY TO THE WORLD AROUND ME, WITH NO SHAME OR FEAR.

WHEN I'M FAITHFUL IN MY BIBLE READING AND DEVOTIONAL TIME.

I'VE LEARNED TO FIND GOD IN THE EVERYDAY MOMENTS, BUT I GET AN OVERWHELMING AWE OF HIM WHEN I'M STANDING BY AN OCEAN.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WAY TO CONNECT WITH GOD?

MEDITATION, SIMPLY BRINGING AWARENESS TO MY BREATH, PRAYER, SINGING. GOD IS ALWAYS WITH US!

SOMETIMES I NEED TO SHUT OUT ALL THE NOISE—EVEN GOOD NOISE LIKE WORSHIP MUSIC—AND JUST BE AWARE OF HIM.

PRAYING WHILE I'M ON A WALK, OR SINGING WORSHIP SONGS REALLY LOUDLY WHEN I HAVE THE HOUSE TO MYSELF.

WHAT DEMONSTRATION OF UNITY HAS INSPIRED YOU?

THE 2020 WORLDWIDE BLM PROTESTS. REVIVAL IS HAPPENING IN THE STREETS. I SEE/FEEL GOD IN THIS MOVEMENT OF UNITY.

FLASH MOBS! THE IDEA OF DOZENS OF STRANGERS COMING TOGETHER TO BRING JOY TO A CROWD GETS ME EVERY TIME.

I AM INSPIRED BY ANYONE WHO IS WILLING TO LISTEN AND LAY DOWN THEIR OWN ASSUMPTIONS.

Politically Homeless

WRITTEN BY *Shiloh Gideon-Sjostrom*

ILLUSTRATION BY *Tiffany Nobello-Winterowd*

“I am not altogether on anybody’s side, because nobody is altogether on my side.”

In this fractured world with deep political divisions, these words that Treebeard says in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* serve as a powerful and comforting reminder that no political party is ever altogether on my side.

Why do I draw comfort from these words? The simple answer is because I don’t fit on any side. Maybe that’s the case for you too. You may be too conservative for liberals and too liberal for conservatives. You are able to weigh political positions and understand that issues are complex and multifaceted. You can see the failings on all sides. If any of these statements resonate with you, then you, like me, may not have a true political home.

The profound nature of this hit me one evening soon after the 2016 elections. I was wrestling with where I stood in this deeply polarized world, and I felt like God clearly spoke to me. “You are pitching your tent in too deep.” One way I know the Lord might be speaking to me is that I’m driven to search God’s Word. I knew the phrase “pitching your tent too deep” had to do with the Israelites journeying across the desert on their way to the promised land. So I looked up the Old Testament passages that tell the story of what happened along the way. God’s presence appeared as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and led the Israelites through the desert. Numbers 9 tells us that when God’s glory settled, the Israelites pitched their tents; when it lifted, they packed up and set off. Sometimes, God’s glory lifted after just one night. The Israelites needed to be ready to go at a moment’s notice. This meant they couldn’t pitch their tents too deep. They couldn’t get too comfortable in the desert.

If this is a metaphor for our present time, we should ask ourselves these questions: Have I pitched my tent in

too deep on one political side? Do I feel so comfortable in my camp that I am willing to overlook and even defend injustices that should trouble me? Will I recognize when it’s time to move on?

C. S. Lewis, in his 1939 sermon “Learning in War-Time,” put it this way: “If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned.” I don’t want to be disillusioned. I want to be clearheaded enough to recognize when I am holding too tightly to any political ideology. I want my eyes attentive and my hands unencumbered so I can pick up the brokenhearted on either side.

The right to vote is a beautiful, hard-fought freedom, and we must participate in the electoral process. But I will not accept the invitation to build a permanent home in any political camp, and I won’t tell you how to vote. If, however, your political stance is fueled predominantly by anger, fear, contempt, or bitterness toward the other side, then ask the Lord to search your heart and replace it with love, courage, kindness, and joy.

I am learning to carefully engage in politics, keeping in mind that God has entrusted me (and you) with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). Prayerfully, I ask the Lord to guide me, knowing fully well that nobody in this world is altogether on my side. But I have blessed assurance from the One who is always *by* my side. ■

*SHILOH GIDEON-SJOSTROM HAS BEEN IN CHURCH MINISTRY FOR MOST OF HER LIFE. SHE IS PURSUING HER PHD IN INTERCULTURAL STUDIES FROM BIOLA UNIVERSITY AND ALSO TEACHES AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

“I want my eyes attentive and my hands unencumbered so I can pick up the brokenhearted on either side.”

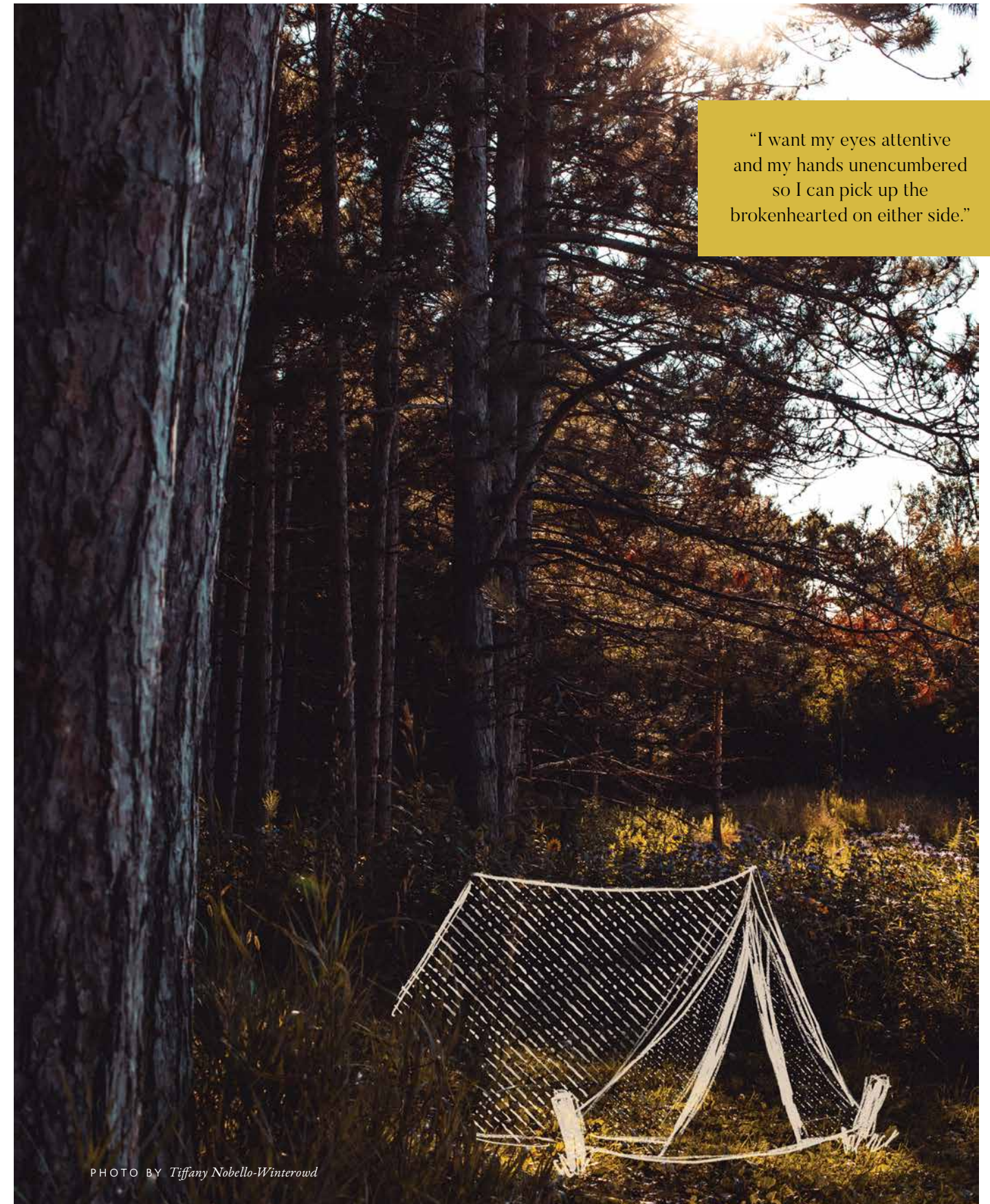


PHOTO BY *Tiffany Nobello-Winterowd*

Partnering with Our Creator

WRITTEN BY *Becca Groves*



PHOTOS BY *Lydia Toll*

When I walk out to my raspberry patch, I am never alone. Of course my kids are with me, eager to fill their bellies with juicy fruit. But there's also a buzz in the air with pollinators flying all around from blossom to blossom. Our flock of chickens peck at the ground, eating the low-hanging and fallen fruit as well as any bugs they can reach. It's a great service to us, eating the bugs before the bugs eat our fruit! And not only do the chickens serve as a very helpful and natural pesticide, but they also fertilize the soil, creating a more bountiful harvest of fruit.

This is a winning partnership. The pollinators are happy, the chickens are happy, and we are so very happy. With the help of the bees and chickens, we will end up with an abundance of huge raspberries, bright orange-yolked eggs, and pure, golden honey. Every creature has a part to play. In caring well for our animals, we are also well cared for.

These mutually beneficial partnerships are called "symbiotic relationships" in our biology textbooks—everything working together to serve a greater purpose. It is marvelous to experience. And it makes me think that when

God sat back and saw that it was good, he wasn't looking just at the individual parts, but at how they all worked together to create a balanced and beautiful whole.

We see these unified partnerships all over the farm. The sheep rotate from pasture to pasture, eating down the alfalfa and clover, stomping down the plant matter into protective soil cover until they are ready to move on to new grass. We will rotate them to a new part of the field, and the section where they just came from will look pretty beat up and trampled for a few days. But soon all of the fertilizer they had been dropping will give new life to that part of the field, and after some sun and rain, the alfalfa and clover will be a vivid green—the healthiest section of pasture on our farm. They get to eat from the field, and we end up with healthier, more bountiful hay.

As I write this, my husband and daughters are out in the barn, building an owl house. We have a mole problem: they are digging up our garden and lawn. So we are building a shelter for an owl that will hopefully take up residence on our farm. The owl can live rent-free in exchange for some rodent

control. That's a win-win for everyone. Except the moles . . .

The truth is, we've been given a great responsibility to participate in these remarkable partnerships. In Genesis 2, God tells us that it is our duty (and good gift!) to work and take care of the garden. That command makes me pause. Am I doing my part for the whole of creation to tend and keep all that he saw was good? It would be good practice for all of us to ask ourselves, "Am I giving more than I am taking? Am I doing my part to steward all that is around me? Am I working to care for the garden? How can I damage less and restore more?"

To be clear, you do not need a farm to help restore these partnerships! Take time to grow something that benefits all of creation. It will be work, but that is the command. Plant an apple tree in your yard or a few blueberry bushes or raspberry canes near the house. You will be glad and the pollinators will thank you. Plant a few vegetables in pots on your patio, in a raised bed, or in a community garden. Start a butterfly garden or build a birdhouse, and watch the beauty of creation appear in your own backyard. The harmony we find in creation will

leave you grateful that we have been invited to participate.

God alone understands how everything is to work together and how each plant, insect, and animal plays a part in the health of our land and food. It is our great joy to watch these relationships unfold as we delight in his garden—to remember this was how God intended it all from the very beginning.

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from His workmanship, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20 BSB). ■

*BECCA GROVES LIVES ON A FARM WITH HER HUSBAND AND FIVE KIDS. THEY HOST SUMMER DAY CAMPS FOR KIDS AS WELL AS ADULT EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS ON VARIOUS HOMESTEADING TOPICS. FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT THEGROVESTAD.COM.
@THEGROVESTAD

You Don't Have to Be Right

WRITTEN BY *Erika Opperman*

ILLUSTRATION BY *Krista Dumire*



I don't know about you, but when I scroll through social media, I'm bombarded by a world that is polarized with opposing perspectives. I've watched friendships, even relatives, crumble under the weight of differing opinions. We live in a culture that makes it all too easy to throw a verbal grenade from the place of comfort behind a screen. A ten-minute scroll through my feed one night left me thinking, *There has to be another way.*

In John 17:23, Jesus prayed that all believers “may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” He asked that we, as believers, would be joined together by what we have in common—Jesus Christ—and not allow our differing perspectives to divide us.

Is this a call to uniformity? No.

This is a call to unity—that despite differing opinions, we as believers love and honor one another. When we are at the height of passion in a “friendly” debate, it is more important to respect our fellow believers with our words and deeds than to win the verbal sparring match. We aren't honoring God's call to unity if we're also demolishing people and their ideas for the sake of being right.

We can love and honor those who may think, vote, or believe differently than we do when we remember to HARP on the right things.

Honor. When conversations with others, either online or in person, escalate, we have a choice to make. Will we

honor their individuality or put down their ideas for the sake of being right? We can honor people by affirming their passion even if we don't agree with their stance on a specific issue.

Ask questions. Are we willing to learn about someone else's perspective by asking questions, or do we lead with assumptions and judgments? Proverbs 18:2 says, “Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.” Consider how differently our conversations might go if we seek to understand before seeking to be understood.

Realize that the same God who died for you died for everyone. When I refuse to show dignity to those who disagree with me, I dishonor the God who designed them and died for them.

Pray. How different would our hearts and lives look if we followed Jesus's example and prayed for unity each time we ran across an opposing opinion?

So before we comment, publish, or share, let's **HARP.** ■

*ERIKA OPPERMAN IS A CONFERENCE SPEAKER, BIBLE TEACHER, AND WRITER. SHE'S ALSO A LOCAL CHURCH GIRL, WHERE SHE'S SPENT OVER A DECADE SERVING IN LEADERSHIP. ERIKA AND HER HUSBAND ARE RAISING THEIR TWO BOYS IN KANSAS CITY, WHERE THEY HELPED START THEIR CHURCH. @ERIKA_OPPERMAN

THE *Integrated* LIFE

FEATURE PHOTO SHOOT VISION BY *Madi Reimer*

Amid the isolation, frustration, and confusion of 2020, we have all been connected through this collective trauma. But it is possible to make something beautiful out of it. We have hope. We have joy. There is light and color within all of us. How can we balance two separate realities—despair and hope—one held in each hand? This is the beauty of the Spirit, our Creator. God holds these realities at all times, is so near to us, and knows each person intricately; there is safety and freedom in this promise.

How do we visually represent the *Truly* ethos of unity and the words written within this issue? Sometimes unity with ourselves, with others, and with God looks different from what has been imagined or what has come before. Ashtyn Sibinski's genius “mess” of a swirly painted

backdrop, using the color palette chosen by *Truly's* art director, Kristi Ellison, ignited the idea of juxtaposing one's ideal definition of unity (congruence and uniformity) with separation and action. The women represented in these images are all beautiful and have value, because they're made by our Creator. Each woman brings her own stories, strengths, and ideas. I don't believe we're created to be the same as someone else, or even who we've always been. We're created to grow, to learn from one another, and to be allies. Will we enter into the chaos to discover unity in new ways?

The colorful pulse within all of us, matched with the colors of the backdrop melting together with blur and movement, represents this integrated life: a blurry, beautiful mess.





PHOTOS BY *Mariah Brink*
 ARTWORK BY *Asbyn Sibinski*
 DIRECTION AND STYLING BY *Madi Reimer*
 MODELS *Shiloh Gideon-Sjostrom, Amanda Juul,*
Ariel Gugudan, Madi Reimer, Lyndsey Myers, Marie Charles.



RACIAL INJUSTICE *and the* CHURCH

An Interview with Portia Allen and Shiloh Gideon-Sjostrom

PORTRAIT ARTWORK BY *Sarah Nelson*

The Truly Co believes that God has given each of us a voice, and if we have air in our lungs, we are to be exhaling his Spirit to the world around us through our actions, words, and hearts. The Truly Co's theme Scripture passage is Philippians 4:8-9. If we are to live out our lives as followers of Jesus, we need to care deeply about the things God thinks and cares about, including justice for the oppressed.

The following is a glimpse into a conversation between three women with different racial backgrounds seeking to learn and understand. Our discussion was actually planned long before the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The events that followed across the country and around the world reinforced the importance of this conversation around racial reconciliation.

The police and emergency sirens we heard in the background of our Zoom call served as reminders of the reality surrounding The Truly Co's hometown. We are not called only to live out our faith in times of peace, but to wrestle with what it means to be Spirit carriers when tangible chaos is literally outside our front doors.



Meet Portia (@PORTIAALLEN)

ORIGINALLY FROM DALLAS, PORTIA GREW UP AS A PASTOR'S KID AND IS AN "ARMY BRAT." BASED IN MINNEAPOLIS, SHE IS A SPEAKER AND WRITER WHO IS PASSIONATE ABOUT EMPOWERING WOMEN. SHE HAS SERVED IN MINISTRY FOR TEN YEARS ALONGSIDE HER HUSBAND AND HAS THREE BEAUTIFUL BOYS.

Meet Shiloh (@SHILOH.GIDEON)

AFTER GROWING UP IN DELHI, INDIA, SHILOH MOVED TO THE UNITED STATES DURING HER COLLEGE YEARS. SHILOH AND HER SWEDISH HUSBAND LIVE WITH THEIR TWO BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN IN MINNEAPOLIS, WHERE SHE TEACHES COMMUNICATION COURSES AT A LOCAL COLLEGE.



Meet Lindsay (@LINDSAYMAYPIX)

LINDSAY GREW UP AND LIVES IN A MINNEAPOLIS SUBURB. THE FOUNDER OF THE TRULY CO, LINDSAY LOVES TO LEARN AND HAS SERVED IN CHURCH MINISTRIES IN DIFFERENT CAPACITIES FOR THE PAST EIGHTEEN YEARS. LINDSAY IS MARRIED AND HAS TWO CHILDREN.

Lindsay: Portia and Shiloh, thank you for being willing to be vulnerable together as we thoughtfully discuss a topic that is both very personal and highly sensitive, and uncomfortable for many. Openness and vulnerability are crucial to healthy and constructive conversation.

Are there any fears in having conversations about racial awareness that you want to lay out on the table? For me, I am hesitant to feel able to add any value to conversations about racial injustice and reconciliation because I'm not a woman of color. I have not personally experienced injustice because of the color of my skin. I am here to posture myself to listen, ask questions, and learn from your stories today.

Portia: When people ask me questions about racial injustice, I sometimes fear that other people of color will feel like I'm not representing them well or that I am not going to talk about the very ugly things enough. I can only talk from my own experience and from the things I have learned and am still learning from the experiences of others. My motto is to speak from what you know, to speak from what you have learned from your walk with the Lord, because ultimately I'm a child of God first, I'm a woman of color second, and then I'm a wife and mother with multiple other roles to fill.

Shiloh: I teach college students about intercultural communication and we talk about things like identity formation. My students think of me as a minority. My experience with being in the minority was being in the small Christian population in India. I tell my students how I recognize my own privilege as coming into this country without having to carry the burden of racial injustice my Black brothers and sisters have to carry.

Lindsay: Can you share some examples of situations where you or your family have personally experienced racial injustice?

Portia: I was pulled over in college for speeding, and I remember how the officer talked to me. Yes, I know I was speeding and I know I shouldn't have been going over the speed limit, but the officer was being really rough with me and spoke rudely. I assumed he was annoyed with me as a person. I wondered what I did to be treated in such a way, but I didn't think much more about it other than knowing my father would be mad at me.

I know enough of my husband's stories to understand why he leans so much on his faith. He's had some really raw deals because of his ethnicity, and without the hope of Jesus, these experiences would leave us rough, sharp, and hurtful. Little Brown boys are super cute when they're little, but they grow up to be Brown and Black men. Our society will say, "Oh, you're so cute!" to those little boys, but when they turn into men, they become "dangerous." I know I'm painting a broad picture, but these are the things we face. I am subconsciously

always aware of this—it's built in. For example, I am aware of how loud my children are being when we're out, calling extra attention to themselves.

Lindsay: So, what is the solution? How do we as a society move forward and heal from the injustices taking place now and throughout history?

Portia: I don't have to have my life threatened to know it's a problem, but I know the solution and I firmly believe that Jesus is the answer and hope for the world. I wonder what would happen if we all asked ourselves: "Who am I holding at arm's length because I'm uncomfortable and don't understand their culture?"

We can legislate this problem, but we can't legislate what goes on in men's and women's hearts and minds. Legislation is important, don't get me wrong—vote wisely. But it's the condition of our hearts that will make the change for the long term.

Shiloh: I grew up with a sense of embracing "the other," and it took me a while to understand that other people don't have that same framework and worldview. It was harder to come to that realization than to accept that some people actually are racist.

It's important to recognize that we all approach this topic from different perspectives. Perhaps that is what makes it feel so messy. We're looking at these injustices through different lenses, and we approach them with different assumptions. A helpful question for every person to ask is, "What are my assumptions here, and how tightly am I holding on to these assumptions?"

Lindsay: I love that, Shiloh and Portia. We must be willing to lay down our assumptions so we are able to learn about others. We can learn so much when we approach individuals with a posture of curiosity and genuine interest to want to understand.

Let's shift to talk about racism and in-group bias in the Christian church. **What are the things we can be doing as a church to bring about healing and perhaps correct behaviors and "traditions" that have been doing harm?**

Portia: I believe that churches need to have conversations to take steps in the right direction. Just because your church doesn't have an issue, it doesn't mean there isn't an issue.

As far as bringing healing, I believe that sitting in grief and understanding the issues that have been taking place, recognizing the part we play in that, and repentance will ultimately bring healing. Again, it's a heart issue.

Shiloh: The reality is that if you look across the world, the people in the "in group" have had power and privileges that the people on the periphery have not. That looks different all over the world. If there is an in group and there is an out group, and the people in the in group have decided how much

power they wield and how much power they'll give, it's very likely that the people in the periphery, the people in the out group, have been left out of a lot of decision-making. If we can get to the point of understanding that those power structures exist, the next step is to ask what the power structures are (identify them) and determine whether we're blind to them. If you're in a position of authority and want to bring change, bring people alongside you to get diverse opinions. But your heart has to be genuine about this. It won't make a difference if your heart isn't willing to receive feedback or different thought patterns.

Portia: We want the growth, but we often don't want the pain. We want to reach nations, so we have to be willing to be uncomfortable. While it's not comfortable, I'm trying to be in a space to welcome correction, to welcome what feels difficult so that I can be more like Christ and reflect his nature and his character. It's hard. Change is hard.

Lindsay: We can see what is happening in our world, and the horrific situation that took place with George Floyd here in our own hometown of Minneapolis. **How do we talk about these things with other people and with our kids in our own homes, and how do we engage on social media?** We're witnessing explosions of emotions, righteous anger, and destructive behavior. How do we process all of this?

Portia: Because we don't live in a very patient society, I think we don't always give people the time and space to think and to process before posting to social media. We've seen so much fighting and conflict online. Grace is the answer to all of that. At the end of the day, I'm going to post something and somebody isn't going to like what I said. I don't rise or fall because of my post or how someone reacted to it. I ask myself what my motivation is behind my post. My hope is to encourage and give actionable steps toward healing and awareness.

Shiloh: Process things in your heart and ask the Holy Spirit about what you should do. Ask yourself what your motives are for posting. This is not just about George Floyd. This is about years of history of injustice. Not to mention, at the time of this interview, we're also in the middle of a pandemic. There are so many things playing into this season that add emotion, tension, and frustration.

We need more nuance in our everyday conversations. How do we embrace these shifts? We check our own perceptions. Ask, "Where did this thought come from? Why did I think that?" These are the questions we can ask in our homes and with our kids. I told my son, "Jesus knit you in my womb, and Jesus knit George Floyd in his mama's womb. He's wonderfully made, and you're wonderfully made."

Portia: When the majority culture talks about the issues of the minority cultures that are represented, things actually

change! If those who have all the perceived power have the conversations and show empathy, that's when the shift begins to happen. I am hopeful!

Shiloh: When we find ourselves on one side of any issue, we don't have a nuanced perspective, and we refuse to see good on the other side. Remember that we don't have to agree with everyone's beliefs, but when someone speaks in an ungodly way about an individual or group, I can still stand up for the marginalized.

Lindsay: As a Christian woman in the majority culture, what can I do that is impactful and not add to the existing problems? I know a lot of women who want to help but feel like posting on social media isn't enough.

Portia: Education is key. Step out of our bubbles and get someone else's perspective. Build relationships and invite others into your circle to gain different perspectives. Share things on social media that you've seen or read that impacted you. Really, it starts by checking your heart and checking your own perceptions.

We live in a culture of "dream big, go big," but there's so much value in checking yourself and your own circle first. Start in the small pockets that are right in front of us. You can make an impact where you are planted. Start in your home and work out from there. We share new information with others all the time, like when we make a new recipe, so share what we learn about this too! I've been reflecting on the book of Nehemiah and how the Jews were going back to Jerusalem to rebuild the broken wall. Everyone had their place to build in the massive project. Everyone had a responsibility.

Invite other people in to wrestle through this with you. Hang out on your porch, read a book with people. Invite someone to share their story. Ask yourself, "What is my lens? How do I step out to see beyond my lens?"

Lindsay: Do you have any recommendations of resources to help further the conversation and understanding?

Shiloh: I'd recommend *Naming the Elephant* by James W. Sire. It forces readers to think about their worldview and really examine what a Christian worldview is. Another book I'd recommend is by Howard Thurman called *Jesus and the Disinherited*. This book greatly influenced Martin Luther King Jr. and asks you to look at the gospel through the eyes of the oppressed and marginalized.

Lindsay: Our prayer is that beautiful fruit will begin to grow as a result of engaging in uncomfortable and vulnerable dialogue about injustice. The more racial injustice is addressed, the less it can be ignored and pushed aside as an issue of the past. The fact is, we are all imperfect humans who are only able to view the world through our own experiences and lenses. I thank you for your friendship and willingness to help us further the conversation. ■

Unifying Our Hearts with God

WRITTEN BY *Monica Ritchie*
ARTWORK BY *Krista Dumire*

My heart and mind often feel scattered, and my thoughts and desires sometimes bounce around like a Ping-Pong ball. I need an anchor for my soul. The Bible calls us to seek unity with the heart of God (Matthew 6:33). But making time to learn and be unified with God's heart doesn't happen without intention. Here are three practical ways to unify your heart to God. Let him be the anchor for your soul.

01

MAKE TIME

I realize this is easier said than done, but it does make a difference to set aside time on your calendar to meet with God. Picture a friend waiting for you at a coffee shop. You wouldn't cancel a coffee date with her. Treat your time with God the same. He's your friend and desires to meet with you.

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02

AFFIRM AND PRAY

God desires for you to know him. Get to know his heart by referring to the Bible, which is his revelation of himself to us. We can find him there. If you're unsure where to begin, start in the Psalms. Use your Bible or download a free Bible app. Read the words back to God as a prayer, and write down what you learn about him through your reading and praying.

03

BE STILL

Find a quiet moment, free from distractions, and take a moment to listen. Allow God the opportunity to give his heart back to you. It may be challenging to slow your mind, so focus on your breath, thank God for it, and ask him for clarity and stillness. Allow the Holy Spirit to move over and through you—much like a refreshing crisp breeze—as he reveals his heart and wisdom. As you sit and listen, you can be assured God is drawing near to you. God promises that as we draw close to him, he will draw close to us (James 4:8). ■

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BUT THE MEMORIES YOU MAKE IN IT.

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