



connect

soul crafting: 5 spiritual practices
to grow your life of faith



COVENANT
presbyterian church



Dear Friends,

I am happy for you to be involved with our Connect series. I am glad for the connections that have already been established and which will continue to be established: among your Connect group friendships, your relationship with God, and the connection you build within yourselves.

This Connect series focuses on “Soul Crafting,” creating and adopting practices which help us grow as spiritual beings and create space for God to work within us and our very being. The practices highlighted in this series are not an exhaustive list but rather a good list.

And, they are just that, a list of spiritual *practices*. Whenever I do a rehearsal for a wedding I always say, “this is for practice, not perfection.” I remind the bridesmaids, readers, and parents of the couple that mistakes are ok, that surprises will happen, and this time is to help us all feel prepared so we can be more present in the ceremony.

Spiritual practices are not spiritual expectations or spiritual bragging points. Rather, they are things that when we do (practice) regularly, help us to be more comfortable, confident, and engaged in our lives of faith. The five practices we will be exploring are shared to be practiced. Will you miss one from time to time? Yes. Will we struggle to see the point in one? Probably, Will we find these hard to do? Definitely. The point is to bring them into our lives and to try, to earnestly try, to make them a part of our lives.

You’ll notice that these practices are not tasks, but rather ways of living and being. It is my hope that as we explore and attempt these practices together they will become a part of the way we live and will help us to live more boldly as people of faith.

In Christ,

Grace

Grace Lindvall



Soul Crafting Study Schedule

An open-to-all option meets Wednesdays from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. in Fellowship Hall 207 for anyone not able to commit to weekly meetings. Come once or every time as ministers offer reflections which will be recorded for group use.

Date (of live recording)	Theme	Scripture
Session One November 6	Practicing Sabbath	Leviticus 26:3; Exodus 16: 22-26
Session Two November 13	Building an Intentional Prayer Life	Romans 8: 26-27
Session Three November 20	Practicing Gratitude	Luke 17: 11-19
Break for Thanksgiving		
Session Four December 4	Confessing	Psalms 32
Session Five December 11	Boldly loving thy neighbor	Matthew 25: 31-46



Sample Outline of Gathering Time for Small Groups

Check-in (10 minutes)

What joys are happening in your life? What challenges are you experiencing?

Read Scripture passage together (5 minutes)

Ask a participant to read the Scripture passage for the day.

Ask (5 minutes)

What words or phrases stood out in this passage?

Watch video (15 minutes)

The video can be found at CovenantPresby.org/connectgroups or via the Covenant mobile app on your smart phone or tablet.

Discuss questions (25 minutes)

Questions are found in your Connect book.

Prayer requests (5 minutes)

How can we lift up one another and our neighbors in prayer?

Close in prayer

A group member can pray or you can use the following prayer each week:

Gracious God, we give you thanks for gathering us here, for moments shared in conversation, in laughter, and in questions. We give you thanks for each person gathered here tonight and for the ways they influence our lives, helping us to grow closer to one another and to you. Move your Spirit among us that we may recognize your presence in our daily lives, that we may see you in new ways, that we may serve you in love. Help us to take our conversation and allow it to transform our lives, our being, and our action. Hear our prayers now in the silence, and hear us as we lift up to you the names of those who are close in our hearts.... Be with us all until we meet again. Amen.



Session One – Sabbath

Leviticus 26:2

You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord.

Exodus 16:22-26

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.'" So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none."

Nate Stuckey is the Director of the Farminary project at Princeton Seminary and a former professor of mine at Princeton Seminary. Nate wrote his dissertation (and a great book) on sabbath as both a gift from God and a challenge. He shares about how he has asked groups in the past to keep a 7-day time diary, what you do, for how long, and so on. After completing the time diary, take note of what is there and what is not there. For many people, rest is no where to be found. I, like you, am not the least bit surprised by this. Rest has come to be thought of as an after-thought, something to do if I get everything else done. It is most likely the first thing to go if our calendars fill up with soccer games, work meetings, weddings, family events, and time to catch up with friends.

The second thing Nate notices in his research is that most people when invited to rest find that rest actually makes them more anxious, not less. If our day and our lives and our culture are defined by all that we do and accomplish, then its no wonder we find it unhelpful to pause from the work and accomplishment. Everything around us tells us we are not doing enough, we are not enough, we have not seen enough, we have not accomplished enough. So when we stop doing, we become anxious about not being or doing enough.



And that's where sabbath comes in. Sabbath is a gift from God, it's a means of experiencing God's grace. Like all the spiritual practices we will talk about in this series, this isn't simply something you must do to get on God's good side, rather it is something you can do to experience God. Sabbath is indeed rest, its also a way of looking out for God, for placing trust that God is at work when you are resting, for noticing how God is at work in the world when you slow down.

Something to try:

- Keep a time diary – what are you spending your time doing?
- Put sabbath rest on your calendar first, before anything else. Make a promise to keep it.

Discussion Questions For Connect Group

- What do you struggle to “put aside until morning time” like the Israelites were commanded to do?
- How do you (or others) define you by what you do or accomplish?
- Why would God command sabbath?
- What about sabbath rest feels impossible to you?
- What about sabbath rest feels hopeful to you?



Notes From Session One



Session Two – Building an Intentional Prayer Life

Romans 8:26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Everyone's prayer life looks different. Perhaps you know someone, like I do, who wakes up early and does a 30-minute devotional followed by prayer. Perhaps you know someone in recovery, like I do, who reads from the Big Book of AA and NA on a daily basis with prayers to follow. Perhaps you know someone, like I do, who goes to bed at night and closes the day with prayer. And perhaps you're someone, like me, whose prayer life is haphazard and intermittent.

Our faith does not detail or dictate a certain time, place, or method by which we must pray. Rather it simply encourages us to pray. And yet, we forget, we struggle to find the words, we don't have the right place to do so, we feel uncomfortable or unsure.

Again, our faith does not detail or dictate when or how or where we must pray, we are simply encouraged to do so. There is no bad time to pray, no wrong place to pray, and certainly, no wrong way to pray or words that God cannot comprehend. So, how might our lives be shaped differently if prayer became an important and intentional part of our lives?

Anne Lamott who wrote the widely read book on prayer, "Help. Thanks. Wow." It says, ""Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up." "Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak in silence."

Prayer is more than a rhythm or set aside time, though it is often that. Prayer is time in conversation with God about whatever pains our heart, and whatever brings our souls great gladness. So, before we think of how and when and where we will pray, perhaps consider what and why.



Something to Try:

-During one mundane task each day (washing the dishes, folding laundry, getting ready for the day, walking into work) share a prayer concern or joy with God.

-Ask yourself in the morning what prayers you'd like to be mindful of throughout the day.

Questions For Discussion:

-Under what circumstances do you find it easy to pray? Hard to pray?

-What rhythm of prayer life have you found easiest to settle into for a period of time?

-Have you or how have you witnessed prayer supporting you or someone?

-How do you sense the Spirit working through prayers?



Notes From Session Two



Session Three – Practicing Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus[a] was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Numerous studies over the last decade have pointed to the positive health benefits of gratitude. A practice of gratitude can reduce anxiety, help with sleep patterns, ease depression, and lower blood pressure! What about gratitude is so healing in this way?

Perhaps because gratitude encourages us to see life as a gift. Rather than achieving life, or getting by with life, or earning life, it is a gift. That change in understanding might encourage us to enjoy life with more joy more happiness, and more praise for the one who created life, gave us life and sustains our lives.

President of Luther Seminary, David Lose, tells a story of a friend of his who always responded to the question "how are you?" by saying, "I am grateful." Rather than saying, "I am good" or "fine" as most of us do, she would say "I am grateful." Everyday, every time someone asked her, that was her response. What a way to be reminded that what makes you "good" is a gift from God – a gift for which we ought to be grateful.

Imagine how that might have changed her day, every day, to recognize in each passing moment with a store clerk, in the elevator, or passing a



co-worker, to be reminded that she is grateful. That life is a gift and one in which she is not passively receiving but receiving with joy!

Surely, we all have much to be grateful for. Even in the midst of pain, grief, loneliness, and struggle, how might be receiving care. In the midst of daily life, what moments are sparking joy. In the throws of deep and unprecedented joy, there is much to be grateful for rather than proud of.

Something to try:

-Write a thank you note to one person who has been meaningful or done something meaningful with you recently.

-Spend at least one day responding to the question, “how are you?” with “I am grateful.”

Questions For Discussion:

- When do you feel particularly grateful?
- In what ways do you struggle to express gratitude?
- How might life have changed for the leper in Luke 17?
- Why do you think the other lepers did not turn back?



Notes From Session Three



Session Four – Confessing

Psalm 32

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up[a] as by the heat of summer.Selah*

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.Selah*

*Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;*

*at a time of distress,[b] the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.*

*You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.Selah*

*I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

*Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.*



*Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.*

*Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

Two of the things I have seen people struggle to say are: “I need help” and “I was wrong.”

The world around us and the culture we live in tell us that we are strong if we don’t need help. It says, “if you need help, you must be weak.” And so, we struggle to confess that we need help, even God’s help. Similarly, there is a narrative that is told around us which shows us that when we admit we are wrong, we will be punished or cast aside. But the gospel message tells us something much different and much more wonderful, it says when you are weak, you are strong. The gospel message says when you share your misgivings with me, I will forgive you and renew you with grace.

Despite hearing this beautiful gospel message, we often find confession to be challenging. We wrestle with admitting our own faults. We wrestle asking for God’s help or another’s help. We wrestle with seeing the wrong in what we have done.

And the challenge is, when we don’t confess our sins, we often are met instead with shame. Shame which can make us wither, which can force us to hide, which can drive in us hate and fear. So, confession invites us into that hard place where we admit what we’ve done wrong not simply because we should but because it sets us free.

Brene Brown, author and champion of a movement on vulnerability wrote, “Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy – the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.”

The confession in worship is always always always followed with words assuring us of God’s grace; because even when we struggle to believe we are



worth of God's grace, God is lighting a path forward for us to share the truth and step into grace.

Something to Try:

-Write your own prayer of confession

Questions for Discussion:

-Why do you think it is hard to admit when you are wrong?

-What does shame feel like to you?

-When do you struggle to ask for help?

-How might confession set you free?

-What do you hide from God or from others?



Notes From Session Four



Session Five – Boldly Loving Thy Neighbor

Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,[a] you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’

Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Perhaps you have heard it before, “love is an action word.” When I got married, the minister (my father) reminded us of this. He reminded us that on the day of the wedding we feel that love for one another, we have an emotion experience of love for one another. And, as time goes on, that feeling of love may become



dim for a period and that is where the action of love steps in. That is where love moves to extraordinary places, it is not simply a feeling but a way of being.

That is the kind of love I imagine we are encouraged to have for our neighbors. While the feelings of love for a stranger may be harder to come by, the love becomes extraordinary when we act on it even without a feeling. The love becomes extraordinary when we act on it without the hope of any return or good feeling.

Countless Sunday School classes reminded us of the importance of loving our neighbors. This was often a watered down message of kindness, being nice or polite to your neighbor. I understand why our Sunday School teachers help us understand the passage in this way, but it misses the mark a bit.

Boldly loving thy neighbor doesn't always mean being nice (that is good) but it often means putting yourself on the line or showing the love of Christ through your actions.

This may be the most inconvenient of all the spiritual practices we've shared. It invites other people into the challenge and it invites sacrifice on our part. This is a challenge but it is indeed the great commandment which Jesus shares with us.

Something to try:

- Find one missional activity that might encourage you to boldly love thy neighbor.
- Share with someone and ask them what "boldly loving their neighbor" looks like.

Questions For Discussion:

- In my life, how do I interpret who my neighbor is?
- When have you experienced or seen bold love?
- How have you seen love change between neighbor and stranger?
- What is the difference between "loving thy neighbor" and "serving thy neighbor?"



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