

Story Time

Welcome to Connect!

A Connect Bible Study is a small group who meet regularly to explore faith and life, growing in the things of God together as we go. Anyone can host one using these materials and contact us for support and guidance. Online or in-person, our heart is that they offer a relaxed space for faith, friendship and fun.

We hope the resources and discussion points encourage, inspire, and invigorate you on your walk with God.

It might be the conversation follows the discussion as laid out or heads in a different direction, both are wonderful and we hope the outline we offer here is flexible and supportive to engage with the Bible and our faith in fresh and vibrant ways as we make our way in the world as 21st century disciples exploring the wonders of life with Jesus!

What is involved?

Each week begins with an introduction and a 'seed to sow' conversation starter. These are open-ended prompts to inspire creative responses to the themes. Perhaps they will inspire you to write a song or a poem, or to paint, draw, move or explore! (We would love to hear how you get on with this!) We imagine the material for each week would work for 90 minute sessions but feel free to adapt to your group!

Additional Resources

This booklet includes a poem and prayer to reflect upon. You will find a page on how to run a Connect Group, to walk you through the steps if this is your first time.

Each week has an online corresponding page in both our app and on the website where you can get the questions and videos.

Enjoyed this material? Why not dive in further? There are more songs, videos, podcasts and blogs linked to this theme on the Sanctuary First **website** and **app**. Have fun exploring it all!

Story Time

Jesus loves using stories.

In the Gospel of Luke he uses humour, irony, shock, surprise and sudden twists to invite people into the adventure that is following him, joining the Kingdom. He knew the deep, elemental power of stories, both to hook us in, and to work on a slow burn...

This month we are going to rediscover the parables of Jesus, relayed to us in the gospel of Doctor Luke, and reflect on the power of stories to help us understand our faith. We will re-read the parables, re-appreciate them, re-imagine them and re-contextualise them to celebrate their timeless power to stir us, challenge us, and invigorate us.

Jesus **used** stories.

Jesus **uses** stories.

Jesus uses **our** stories...

Weekly overview

- The power of a story
- A feast of stories
- Sensational headlines from a family saga
- Tuning into home

Thanks to James Cathcart and Albert Bogle for developing this material.

Reflection and Prayer

An un-scattering

A scattering,
Chaos and clamouring,
Heading off in as many directions as there are items.
Thrown, jostled, hurt, bruised...
Dislocation, confusion and disarray
As tiny,
Once loved items fall in between floorboards and cracks,
Skyting under furniture and skirting...
And there they settle,
Time shifts,
Dust gathers around them...
All seem forgotten...
Until...
What was done is undone...
And what was scattered, un-scattered.
Remembered,
Sought,
Located,
Found,
Brought in,
Reunited,
Returned.

Not one left out,
Not one unfound,
All returned,
Cherished,
As one by one
All marvelled at and remembered,
Gathered lovingly in.

Seeds, marbles, coins, sheep...
You and me...
No matter the cracks we fall between,
No matter what dust settles...
No matter where we are scattered...
There is one who seeks us,
Knows us,
Remembers us...
And who longs to find us and gather us in...
Un-scatter us,
Make us whole
And restore us to the place where we belonged all along...

Let us pray:

Un-scatterer,
Gatherer,
Re-maker...
You gather up the broken, scattered shards of my life,
And in you they are re-made,
Re-configured,
Re-membered...
Put together so that I am whole again...
Thank you!
Thank you for the love that remembers me,
Seeks me,
Finds me,
And lovingly scoops me up,
Gently moulding me back together,
Restoring me to life.

Amen.

Amanda MacQuarrie

Running A Connect Group

Follow the Spirit and do what works for your group!

Our Connect material is intended to be flexible and you are encouraged to adapt it to suit your needs and where the Holy Spirit takes you. Below is a completely optional rough outline of how we envision the material could be used in a 90 or 60 minute weekly session. As a leader you are free to shake things up (either as you prepare, or on the fly) responding to the discussion as it unfolds. Our experience of small groups is often the fascinating stuff happens 'off topic' when a group has gone on a tangent and ended up somewhere new. Go as the Spirit leads you and don't feel like you have to cover every reading or topic in each session.

If you are a pre-existing group/community you may have already have a format that works for you. Perhaps you always begin with a song, maybe you read a short liturgy aloud, share a meal together, have an informal catch up before diving into the reading, break for tea and coffee in middle and so on. If so that's great, just weave our material into that.

Optional outline for running a session:

1. Welcome — introducing yourself as the group leader and asking others to do the same, you could share briefly what interests you/draws you to the theme this month/week
2. Brief summary of the overall theme and Sanctuary First/and or specific organisation running individual group
3. An opening prayer, inviting God to travel with us as we explore the Bible
4. Introducing the theme of the week — reading the theme introduction aloud and/or tailoring to your group context, allow space for comments and initial impressions if any
5. Point to videos, podcasts, Daily Worship etc on the Sanctuary First site that links in (there is a short video to accompany each week in the Connect section)
6. Share the Seed to Sow for the week and perhaps return to it at the end of the discussion
7. For each section begin by inviting someone to read the Bible text aloud. Then the leader begins the discussion, reading the prompts out to the group and then throws it over to them to respond. (As a leader you may wish to adapt/expand/edit, for instance only focusing on two readings etc or changing the order, or expanding reading ranges etc). The discussion prompts are designed to go in a number of directions. It can be helpful to ask general questions about what stood out for people in the reading, what questions, insights or personal responses do they have to the text? And then you can link those responses to the topics in the material.
8. A closing prayer led by the leader or the group leaving space for intercessory prayer as the group develops and gets to know one another
9. Telling people about the next session's topic and pointing them to Connect resources on the Sanctuary First website.

Week 1: The power of a story

Introduction:

We are storytelling creatures. One of our most fundamental, essential qualities as humans is our ability to link events together and draw meaning from them. Stories are crucial to language, history, critical thinking, scientific experimentation and theological imagination. This first week of our theme we think about the power of stories to encourage us, inspire us, challenge us and change our mind.

Seeds to sow:

What's your favourite story? What do you like about it? What has it meant to you over the years?

Read Luke 5: 33-39

Up-cycling or recycling old wineskins...?

For most of us reading this parable it's hard to even picture what a 'wineskin' looks like, but it would have been a common sight in that time and place. We could imagine Jesus saying "Nobody tries to run a new app on their old Windows 95 desktop."

Q: How do you think the Pharisees would have reacted to what Jesus is saying here?

Q: And how do we respond to Christ's challenge, to not force the next generation to wear the clothes of the past? Discuss how it could be time to wrestle with this teaching and what we can do to continue to store the new wine of the kingdom in a way that is accessible to all.

Read Luke 7: 36-50

The power of a story

The woman in this reading is going above and beyond and breaking established social rules. Meanwhile, Simon is following the etiquette but doing the bare minimum. It's striking how Jesus is gentle with the person of low social status (the woman 'who lived a sinful life') whereas he's much harder on the high status Pharisee. It's Simon's house, his food, his rules but he's the one who finds himself out of his depth. So Jesus tells him a story.

Q: How might this story and a 'forgiveness mindset' have changed Simon's life?

Q: And how does our forgiveness mindset affect how we express ourselves to others and God?

Read Luke 8: 16-18

No one puts a tarpaulin over a lit neon sign

Imagine a church making a huge neon welcome sign, switching it on, and then covering it in a big tarpaulin... The straightforward daftness of going to the bother to make a light only to hide it away helps us to explore the much more complex issue of the push and pull of our relationship with God.

We have been given a gift, a bright light to illuminate and guide us, to draw others, to help us to help others... and sometimes we accidentally or intentionally cover it up. We both welcome God in our lives and try to push God out of our lives.

Q: How does this story affect how we think about humanity's relationship with God?

Q: Discuss how our churches could be more effectively advertising the place forgiveness plays in changing and transforming individuals and also society.

Week 2: A feast of stories

Introduction:

This week stories about cultivation, food, and sustenance as we reflect on what we are planting, growing, and investing in...

Seeds to sow:

What's the story behind the best meal you've ever had in your life?

Read Luke 13: 6-9

Fruitless endeavour...?

Jesus dramatically engages us. This parable is somewhat ominous — there's an axe waiting in the wings! On one level this parable can be read as a galvanising story about realising life is short and the value of a second chance. And that's it, it's a *story*, not a systematic theology flowchart. God is not an axeman waiting for us to hit productivity targets! Jesus is not the vineyard keeper obsessively checking us and ready to call in the chop. And we are not trees judged only on how much fruit we can produce with our assigned soil.

Parables work both as quick hooks and as slow burns. They are not overly literal PowerPoint sermons. In some ways God *is* like a vineyard owner who longs to see his plants flourish and Jesus *is* like the groundkeeper wanting to give every tree its best chance. And yes we are a bit like those trees, but these are not direct 1:1 comparisons. Rather we are being drawn into a scene — that stimulates our imaginations.

Q: Take time to picture the scene Jesus is describing, what do you see? How do you picture the vineyard owner, the groundkeeper, and the fig tree?

Q: Then open up a discussion about the role of expectation in our lives: how or our own expectations and the expectations of others can have a powerful effect on us?

Read Luke 14: 7-14

Wedding of the year?

Sometimes we try to use hospitality to our own advantage. As guests we think tactically about how to position ourselves to get the most prestige and kudos, to be part of the 'in-crowd.' And as hosts we invite people who will return the favour, ideally richer people that we can use to climb the social ladder.

And so, Jesus here is giving us a parable as sitcom. Many TV storylines are based on the premise of someone trying to blag their way into the inner circle/top table only to come crashing back down to earth when it backfires cueing much embarrassment

and hilarity. It's such a recurrent trope because status anxiety is a universal human experience.

Q: Discuss how Jesus could have used tone, timing, and humour to tell this and other parables. How do you imagine Jesus's voice?

Q: Discuss the implications today of welcoming strangers into your circle of friends?

Read Luke 14: 15-24

Five yoke of oxen cancelled your dinner plans?

Q: What do you think the banquet in this story would have been like with such an impromptu guest list?

Q: Then discuss the significance of this parable for our church communities today. What place should food have when it comes to faith sharing? Are our churches empty because we've been inviting no one, or the wrong people?

Week 3: Sensational headlines from a family saga

Introduction:

This week we pull some sensational headlines from the ongoing family saga of the two sons...

Seeds to sow:

Jesus didn't sit and wait for people to come to him to listen to his stories — he went out and about sharing them. How can we carry our stories with us, ready to share?

Read Luke 15: 11-16

Wild Son Absconds With Family Fortune

Q: Imagine a 24 hour news cycle was reporting this tale of this wild son's wild antics... how would they cover it? What are the details they'd focus on? Who would they interview?

Q: As we travel through this parable let's reflect on these questions: How does this story help us to: see ourselves, see each other, and above all, see God?

Read Luke 15: 17-24

Wild Son Wildly Welcomed

The younger brother has hit rock bottom. It's a wake-up moment. Now, having rejected his father and decided to go his own way what's striking here is that while he is full of remorse he *still* wants to go his own way. He wants to come back — just as he left — on his own terms. He hatches a plan to go back and do penance, to do enough to get the minimum he needs from his father to survive.

Q: Do you think the younger brother reckons he has a lifetime of being a hired hand ahead of him, or do you think he is planning to gradually work back into his father's graces?

Q: Verse 20 says that the father glimpsed the son while he was still far off. What do you think this means? Is it a poetic coincidence that the father should be outside facing the road? Is it because since the son has left the father has been sitting waiting for him to return? Or do you think the father himself is only just returned having been out on the road looking for his son? Or perhaps he had recently heard a rumour somewhere of someone matching his son's description being spotted and he was out strolling aimlessly on the off-chance?

Read Luke 15: 25-32

Wild Family Feud in Reunion Bust-up

This story is often referred to as the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. But Jesus himself begins this tale by saying “There was a man who had two sons...” and this story is as much about the older brother as the younger brother.

The younger brother recklessly rejects his father, determined to go his own way. But the older brother, while more methodical, *a/so* rejects his father, wanting to go his own way. He thinks he’s earned his place in the family and his father owes him as a result. When the father welcomes back the younger brother with open arms it enrages him. He’s left thinking: What’s the point of having been good all this time? It was pointless and it got him nothing. The story ends with him on the doorstep, still refusing to go in.

Q: The story is intentionally left on a cliffhanger — will the older brother eventually go in or not? What do you think would happen next? If you were writing *Two Sons: The Sequel*, where would you take the story next?

Week 4: Tuning into home

Introduction:

Dreaming dreams and seeing visions as we tune into home.

Seeds to sow:

What does it mean to 'tune in' to God, and what helps you to 'tune in'?

Read Luke 16: 19-31

Lazarus and some nameless rich guy...?

Q: What words or phrases stand out at you from this reading?

Q: It's striking in this parable that Lazarus is named and the rich man isn't. What's going on there do you think?

This parable can make for uncomfortable reading — it's an existential jolt — it asks us how we are dealing with the challenges and responsibilities of living in a deeply unequal world. Rather than stepping over Lazarus, often nowadays we just change the channel or close the browser. It's easier to look away.

Q: How can this story inspire us to challenge injustice in the world today?

Read Luke 18: 9-14

Gratitude with attitude vs. a humble mumble.

Imagine you're a TV producer and you've been asked to film this parable as a short film.

Q: Who would you cast as the pharisee and the tax collector? How notes would you give the director? What would the filming location be?

Q: Then discuss how this parable makes us feel about our own prayers. Perhaps there's a bit of the pharisee and the publican in all of us!

Read Luke 19: 11-27

Active or passive, invested or abstracted....?

As we discussed in week 2, it is a mistake to think that all parables are straightforward allegories. It is not true that each story depicts characters that correspond 1:1 with God and ourselves. Rather, they are compelling tales about human and divine nature that don't just give us answers but lead us to ask new questions.

For instance, the master in this story surely makes for an uncomfortable stand-in for God. He is shown to be frightening, demanding, and greedy. Indeed when he is accused of being so he doesn't deny it!

It's a story about the cutthroat world of economics that has something to tell us about faith and love. Not because God is like a terrible overbearing boss — but precisely because he isn't!

As a stressed employee — with no reason to love your boss — it can make financial sense to invest what you've been given, to put it to work. So how much more should we want to invest the love and gifts our loving God has freely given us?

Q: How does this story provoke God's people out of complacency to invest and engage, to use our gifts and our passions to live out Christ's grace?

Q: What stories do we have of how God has used our gifts?