

# *Transformation Begins and Grows in the Heart*

## **Cycle # 1 – Session #1 (1 ½ hours)**

### **Transformation Begins and Grows in the Heart**

**Text:** Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Lev. 19:18, Matthew 22:34-46

For this first session the time suggestions are based on a group's initial meeting so you may want about 30 minutes on the gathering and get acquainted portion, followed by about 40 minutes on the study itself and the rest of the time on the closing. Note in other sessions, you may want to make it briefer. As a new group begins and plans to spend some weeks together, building community is crucial, hence the longer beginning.

### **Gathering**

Invite people to get better acquainted with each other. Even if they know each other well, there are always new things to discover and one of the goals of your time together will be not only inviting people into a deepening relationship with God, but also with each other.

Spend some time talking about how the group will be structured and what some of the guidelines may be.

- 1) If you want people to feel safe to say what they are thinking or feeling, it will be important for people to agree to keep what is said or done in the group confidential unless otherwise agreed.
- 2) Invite people to make a covenant with each other. This might come at the end of the first session and might include a covenant of prayer for one another and for the church, a commitment to being present at group meetings, a commitment to participate.

**Welcome One Another.** Since this is the beginning of a new adventure for this session you are invited to begin with a time of welcoming each other. Other weeks this will follow the opening worship. Invite people to get better acquainted with each other. Even if they know each other well, there are always new things to discover and one of the goals of your time together will be not only inviting people into a deepening relationship with God, but also with each other. (See resources in Appendix) Spend some time talking about how the group will be structured and what some of the guidelines may be.

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3) Review the “rules” for small groups (See Appendix)

## Opening Worship

**Light a candle** as a reminder of God’s presence or if you want to give each person a candle to use during the weeks of this session, you will want enough for each person. After the center candle is lit, invite each person to light his or her candle using a taper or candle lighter.

**Song:** Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God -- #354 Chalice Hymnal

### Litany

This is the place and this is the time;  
Here and now God waits to break into our experience  
**To change our minds, to change our lives, to change our ways;**  
To make us see the world and the whole of life in a new light;  
**To fill us with hope, joy, and certainty for the future.**  
This is the place, as are all places; this is the time as are all times.  
**Here and now let us praise God.**

*Worship Book*, World Council of Churches, 1987

### Getting Started

You’ve already spent a little time getting to know each other. Before you move into the time of study and reflection, spend some time sharing with one another your hopes both for yourself and others.

## **Cycle # 1 – Session # 1**

### **Scripture**

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.\* <sup>5</sup>You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. <sup>6</sup>Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup>Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup>Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, <sup>9</sup>and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

### **Leviticus 18:19**

<sup>8</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

### **Matthew 22:34-46**

<sup>34</sup> When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup> and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' <sup>37</sup> He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

## Dwelling in Scripture

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:34-46

1<sup>st</sup> reading – Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard. Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2<sup>nd</sup> reading – Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

## Behind the Text

Deuteronomy is the 5<sup>th</sup> book ascribed to Moses. Its name means “Second Law.” It might better be called “*A Book of Instruction*” or “*How to Relate to the Lord our God.*” If you spend much time looking at these first five books you will notice they are filled with history and teachings which have been passed down for many generations. You will particularly notice that many of the laws, including the one on which this study is focused appear several times. So you will come across commandments in ***Exodus*** and as more of the story unfolds, they show up among the narratives of ***Leviticus***, ***Numbers***, and ***Deuteronomy***.

Each time the wording is slightly different, but it is clear these words, usually referred to as the *Shema*, lie at the heart of Judaism. They were no doubt engraved on Jesus’ heart, and have been passed on to us. Anything which is repeated that often must be important.

In Deuteronomy you will also find a running narrative which summarizes the story of Israel’s life in the wilderness and puts the law into that perspective. Because of its style and cohesiveness writings from Deuteronomy are easily recognized. It seems likely it was written by a particular group of writers, possibly preachers and reformers. Their purpose appears to be to provide “*a comprehensive guidebook for Israel to live as the people of God.*” ( *NIB, Ronald E. Clements, p. 272*)

The first five books of the *First Testament*, are referred to as the *Penteteuch* and are considered the most foundational part of the canon. Even the prophets, the Psalms and other wisdom literature are not as revered as these five books which set the standard for theological understanding and basis for living as people connected to God by covenant. Israel has a unique relationship with God and as such they have unique responsibilities for life in the world.

While the book is ascribed to Moses, it’s quite clear it was in fact written over a period of many years and includes material from a variety of earlier resources. While we like to think a writer sits down and writes at the time things are happening, very often writers write back into the past, weaving together both what has been, what is, and what may yet be. Every writer brings a particular perspective to his or her work.

In the years after the people of Israel entered the Promised Land, they struggled with how to be God’s people. Their story is one of covenant, broken covenant, seeking to be

faithful and turning their back on God. Through it all there are several themes. Two of the important ones are 1) *God is faithful to the Hebrew people and repeatedly calls them back when they stray* and 2) *Even when they are unfaithful, they are loved*. The writers of Deuteronomy provide a guide by which people are to live, not just as individuals, but as a society. It guided Jesus in his own time. And while we can see much that isn't relevant to us or our time the particular passage used in this study still provides a guide for our own living.

### **Observation – Leviticus 19:18**

This tiny verse seems to be tucked in to a much longer passage about how people are to treat one another as well as how they are to behave. If you look at the whole chapter you will see such things as how to treat parents, being faithful to God, the nature of sacrifices, how to treat strangers and poor people. You will also see elements of the Ten Commandments although not so succinctly stated as in other places. And then tucked in among all of those there is this single sentence – *“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.”*

### **Consider**

This sentence lies at the heart of Jesus teaching – Love God/Love neighbor as yourself. When you consider this line what goes through your mind? Have you experienced part of the phrase as having been more important than the other? What connection do you see between Loving God and loving others as well as yourself?

### **Observation - Matthew 22:34-46**

In accordance with the Deutonomist's admonition that children are to be taught this passage known as the Shema from their earliest childhood, Jesus would have learned these verses almost as soon as he could speak. They would have been mounted on the door frame of his house. They would have been a part of the ritual of prayer. But clearly they have become something more. It is also clear that he knew the words from Leviticus.

Each of the gospel writers brought a unique perspective and experience to their telling of the gospels. Much of their work is based on oral traditions of the early followers. At some point some of the sayings and stories began to be written down. These became a part of the process. Matthew is traditionally called the “Jewish gospel.” The writer of Matthew seems to be at some pains to link the life and ministry of Jesus to the history of the Jewish people.

It may be helpful to imagine history as an ever flowing stream. Events happen at distinct points in time, but they then become a part of the ongoing stream. In that stream the events are shaped and reshaped. They are looked at in the light of events both before and after. Matthew wrote for a particular time and people. As such he helped to interpret the history which led to the moment in time when Jesus lived. That in turn invited the

process to continue. So we still read the stories of Matthew and look for their meaning both at the time they were written and for what they might say to us in our time.

### **Consider**

At first glance, the setting of this story is one of conflict. The Sadducees have failed to trip Jesus up. In fact they have nothing more to say so the Pharisees give it a try. I wonder if they picked their most articulate young lawyer for this job, thinking that he would be smart enough and clever enough to best Jesus in an argument. Consider what might have happened if the young man had experienced this moment as life changing. How might he have been different? If you take it seriously, how might you become different?

### **Observation**

I suspect if the Sadducees and Pharisees were members of many of our congregations we'd feel pretty comfortable with them. They were well educated. They knew how things were to be done. The Pharisees had started out to bring good and helpful change. They must have studied and loved the laws of their faith and were seeking to live faithful lives. *But times had changed.* So one of the questions they faced was how to be faithful to the laws they understood God had given their ancestors and yet live in their own time. They wanted to keep the Sabbath, but how could one do that? But somewhere along the way, they became entangled in rules and regulations and forgot what was most important. The Sabbath was to be a day of rest. It was intended as a blessing for the people of God. Instead it became a burden surrounded by endless rules. Even when people are about doing something good, it's easy to lose sight of where we're called.

### **Consider**

What in your own life of faith draws you closer to God? What has become burdensome and seems to get in the way of your experience of God?

### **Observation**

Sometimes people know things, but need to be reminded that they already know the answers to their own question. Both Jesus and the lawyer knew the answer to the lawyer's question ... You shall love the Lord your God ... And then Jesus takes it a step further ... These two commandments are not paired in the Hebrew Scriptures, and yet they seem to be two sides of the same coin. It's in the pairing, however, that they most clearly invite transformation both for the lawyer and for the larger crowd.

Jesus in his answer invites the lawyer to see old familiar words in a new way. It is at this point, I believe, we also are invited into the story and are offered a new way of understanding who as followers of Jesus we are to be. Matthew's Gospel was aimed at the early followers. The stories, the sayings, the actions of Jesus were directed to those who were learning what it meant to follow. We are still a part of that circle and are still being called to learn, to open our eyes, to see in a new way what may be so familiar that we hardly give it a thought as we rattle off the words.

## **Consider**

Spend some time with Jesus' words. Look at each of the phrases and consider how these two teachings are interlocked and what each piece of that means to you. Which of the actions called for in the passage seems easiest to you? Which is the hardest?

## **Observation**

Transformation begins with a change of heart whether you are a 1<sup>st</sup> century Pharisee, a new convert, or a part of a community 21 centuries later. The word heart, either alone or combined with other descriptive words appears more than 300 times through the two testaments. When the commandment is given to "Love God" with all your heart, mind, and soul, it is clearly about more than just a feeling. It is also about the way we live. This then feeds into the second commandment which Jesus has raised to a place of equal value.

No matter how much we say we love God or how regular we are in worship it is apparently not enough. There is more. Our love for God is reflected in how we treat both our neighbors and ourselves.

## **Consider**

There are always two sides to transformation – the internal and the external, the individual and the group.

- ▶ As you begin this journey – Start from the scripture. Imagine for yourself what each of the phrases might mean. How would you teach this to others?
- ▶ Where and how do you see yourself doing each of these things?
- ▶ Are there ways in which you might do this more deliberately?

## **Activity (Optional)**

Take your congregation's Bulletin for last Sunday and analyze it using these scriptures:

- ▶ What in it points to Loving God in each of the above ways, both in worship and in other facets of your congregation's life?
- ▶ What points to loving your neighbor?
- ▶ Who are the neighbors you love?
- ▶ Where do you see hospitality?
- ▶ What nourishes persons who are a part of the congregation?
- ▶ Is there anything going on which is more than ritual?

If you were to do one thing differently this week, what would it be? Are you willing to experiment with it and see what happens? It doesn't have to be something enormous. It might be as simple as doing a kind act each day for yourself and for someone else. Are you willing to make a commitment with other members of the group to report back next week?

## Practicing the Presence

- 1) This week use the scripture from Matthew as the focus of prayer. Each morning begin with these words. Spend a few moments reflecting on how this might be lived in your life today. At the end of the day take a few moments and reflect on how this might have been seen in your living. If you like to journal, you may wish to spend a few minutes writing.
- 2) Daily reflection on the text for the next session.

## Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1<sup>st</sup> Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

## Closing Worship

### Covenant of commitment

This might be formal or informal. Invite the group to design their own covenant. Include such things as their intention to be a part of the group and a willingness to commit to being present for the 7 weeks of the study, and a commitment to pray for one another. At the end of the session ask someone to take the list which has been created and put it into form so that at the next meeting each person will receive a copy. At the end of this session you may want to give each person a votive candle holder and tea light to use during the week as a part of their own ritual and study time.

### Blessing

Possessed of a vision of a greater world than we have known, let us go out to live prophetically, dreaming the dreams of a future in keeping with God’s will. Let us live with faith, and courage, and commitment, lives of integrity and power than will bring those dreams to life. In Jesus’ name.  
Amen

United Church of Canada

**Song:** Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal