

Study Guide – *Just Women* *Summer 2014*

Introduction

Welcome to *Just Women!* We hope this leader's guide will help you plan meaningful study sessions using the *Summer 2014* issue of *Just Women*.

The focus of the Summer 2014 issue is grace. We are the recipients of God's grace, empowered to live grace filled lives moving toward wholeness in our own lives and facilitating wholeness in the lives of others. Mary E. Jacobs in *Seeing with Eyes of Grace*, reminds us that God's grace is the starting point for healthy relationships for it is through God's grace that we see ourselves and others as worthy. Seeing with grace filled eyes does not mean that we believe that we are perfect, or see others as perfect. Grace filled eyes allow us to practice acceptance, forgiveness and gratitude which in turn serve as a solid foundation on which to build wholeness in our lives and in our world.

This study guide contains four sessions which encourage us to look with grace filled eyes.

Preparation

In preparing for the study sessions outlined here, have an individual subscription for each woman in your group. If you need more magazines, go to <http://www.discipleswomen.org/Just-Women-General> and click on "Subscribe online" in the center of the left column.

This study guide will ask your group to open the door of God's grace into their own lives and then allow that grace to flow out into our relationships with others. It will seek to root us in the understanding our common worth comes from the reality that we are all children of God. The sessions will remind us that grace filled lives result in intentional choices and hard work as we partner with God for the work of justice. As Mary E. Jacobs states, "In the God scheme of things, to put in such time and effort opens the eyes of our hearts to see where God's KIN-dom might happen in our midst."

Turning our attention to our four study sessions, in the first session, Tanya Tyler focuses on the ministry of Magdalene as reported by in *Adventures in Mission: Magdalene is a Movement About Women's Freedom* pages 4 – 5. The second will

encourage participants to see through the eyes of grace as Monique Crain Spells urges us to claim blessed lives over woundedness in *The Walking Wounded*. Mary Alice Do's *Ask the Counselor: Helping People with Mental Illness* will lead us to consider how we might be agents of grace and supporters and partners with individuals as they seek recovery from mental illness. And, the fourth session will consider how cultures that different from our own may be doorways to grace as we study the articles written by participants, Carol Devine, Karon Alexander, and Tammy Simpson, in the 2013 Women-to-Women Worldwide journey to Mexico that are found in pages 14 – 17.

Ask your group members to read the article that you will be focusing on before your meetings, so that everyone will be prepared to participate in the study.

Session 1

“Magdalene has taught me to try fearlessly, because the only thing we need to fear is not being able to love at all.”

(Find Your Way Home: Words from the Street, Wisdom from the Heart, The Women of the Magdalene Community with Becca Stevens)

Supplies

Bible, Summer Issue of *Just Women*, a copy of *Find Your Way Home: Words from the Street, Wisdom from the Heart, The Women of the Magdalene Community with Becca Stevens* (you may want to make this book available for the women in your congregation to read or even consider a book study as a follow-up to this lesson), a hand mirror.

Opening Prayer

Pray the following prayer by Benedict of Nursia.

Father, in your goodness grant me the intellect to comprehend you, the perception to discern you, and the reason to appreciate you. In your kindness endow me with the diligence to look for you, the wisdom to discover you, and the spirit to apprehend you. In your graciousness bestow on me a heart to contemplate you, ears to hear you, eyes to see you, and a tongue to speak of you. In your mercy confer on me a conversation pleasing to you, the patience to wait for you, and the perseverance to long for you. Grant me a perfect end – in your holy presence. Amen.

Background Information

In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia became disillusioned by Roman society. Following the example of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Benedict left his studies in Rome and chose the life of an ascetic monk as a way of pursuing personal holiness. Initially living in a cave, Benedict soon began to attract disciples. In 529, he founded the monastery of Monte Cassino. There he and his disciples followed a shared rule that Benedict subsequently wrote down near the end of his life. This rule provides structure for daily living that can be summed up in the motto *ora et labora* (pray and work). Seventy-three chapters in length, The Rule provides a moderate path which facilitates an understanding of the relational nature of human beings with God and with others. It is rooted in fidelity, hospitality, reverence, and love for all humanity. The Rule provides for regular intervals of individual and

communal prayer, sleep, spiritual reading, and manual labor all done for the glory of God.

The Magdalene community was formed as an intentional community where women who had survived lives of violence, prostitution, and drug abuse can live rent free for two years as they seek healing and wholeness for their lives. The Magdalene Rule consists of the following 24 principles:

The Rule of Magdalene:

1. Come Together
2. Proclaim Original Grace
3. Cry with Your Creator
4. Find Your Place in the Circle
5. Think of the Stranger as God
6. Take the Longer Path
7. Make a Small Change and See the Big Difference
8. Let God Sort It Out
9. Stand on New Ground and Believe You Are Not Lost
10. Forgive and Feel Freedom
11. Unite Your Sexuality and Spirituality
12. Show Hospitality to All
13. Laugh at Yourself
14. Consider the Thistle
15. Listen to a New Idea
16. Lose Gracefully
17. Remember You Have Been in the Ditch
18. Walk Behind
19. Live in Gratitude
20. Love Without Judgment
21. Stay on Point
22. Pray for Courage
23. Find Your Way Home
24. Leave Thankfully

Ice Breaker

In *Find Your Way Home: Words from the Street, Wisdom from the Heart*, Becca Stevens writes, "In the Magdalene community, we start each day by gathering in a circle where we read a meditation, prayer, and make sure everyone is all right. We share stories and wisdom. We tell the truth."

As you begin your meeting, you may want to share "Proclaim Original Grace" (or another story from *Find Your Way Home* which is available through Amazon or your local library). After reading the story have each woman look in the mirror. Ask them to describe what they see. As they conclude their description have them add, "I see a child of God."

Scripture Focus

Read John 7: 53 - 8: 1 – 11

Read the article *“Adventures in Mission: Magdalene is a Movement about Women’s Freedom”* by Tanya J. Tyler, pages 4 – 5.

Presenting the Scripture

Some scholars suggest that this passage was a later addition to the gospel of John. Literary evidence including style, syntax and vocabulary suggest that it is non-Johannine. Further, the setting and form of the passage are more similar to the synoptic controversy stories than stories in John. While there is much to suggest that this was a later addition, the story’s placement within scripture provides important context for the interpretation of the passage. The story provides an example of the conflict that is identified in John 7 – 8. It also illustrates the difference between judging between appearance and Jesus’ right judgment (7:24). Thus, the story is best read as a story about Jesus’ relationship to the law and the religious leaders rather than as a morality tale.

The story itself begins in verse 2 following two transition verses. The scribes and the Pharisees initiate the action by bringing the woman to Jesus. There are several irregularities in the scribes and Pharisees presentation of the woman. First, they offer no witnesses. Second, they focus only on the woman ignoring the requirements of Mosaic law regarding the fate of the man who was also “caught in the very act.” Mosaic law states that both stand under the death penalty. In historical context, the Mosaic law is not concerned with modern day understanding of the morality of adultery. It is fundamentally concerned with the protection and stability of men’s property that would have included their wives and offspring. Thus, the way that the woman is presented validates the gospel’s claim that the scribes and the Pharisees are not interested in Jesus’ interpretation of the Mosaic law. They are interested in trapping him.

Jesus responds in a two-fold manner to the scribes and the Pharisees. The first is non-verbal as Jesus writes on the ground. This writing is indicative of Jesus’s refusal to be engaged with the question as posed by the scribes and Pharisees. It is not the content of what Jesus writes but the act of writing itself that is important. In the ancient Mediterranean world of the first century, the act of writing would have been recognized as an act of refusal and disengagement.

As the scribes and the Pharisees continue to press Jesus for an answer, Jesus responds verbally. He moves beyond the legal argument and more broadly engages the issue of sin. While the gospel of John typically links sin with the refusal to recognize Jesus, here sin is linked with actions. The scribes and the Pharisees are held accountable for their past actions and hence their own relationship to the law. After making this connection, Jesus returns to the writing. In doing this, Jesus

indicates that he is finished with the interaction. The withdrawal of the scribes and Pharisees makes it clear that even the most senior members of the community are not without sin.

To this point in the story, the woman is only an object for the scribes and the Pharisees. After all withdraw, Jesus stands and engages her. His words are a counterpoint to the accusations of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus moves beyond past actions and points her in the direction of a new future.

Questions

- Summarize the background information that was provided about the gospel story. In this passage, Jesus' authority to forgive and offer freedom from the religious authorities' defined categories of life and death is seen. The scribes and Pharisees seemed to view the woman as an object. How does our society objectify women? How does our society objectify women who are caught in human trafficking?
- What are your reactions when you hear that someone is/ has been a "prostitute?" What are society's stereotypes of prostitution? Based on the article would you say those stereotypes are accurate? In this passage, Jesus point to the possibilities of new life. How does Magdalene offer freedom from contemporary authorities' defined categories of life and death?
- Sexual violence does not respect age, ethnicity, or economic status, it can occur to anyone. However, there are factors that make one more vulnerable to sexual violence. What factors are identified in this article? How do the social barriers that are identified prevent people from reaching faith nets?
- Describe the typical history of a woman that you might find at Magdalene. What do the women who stay at Magdalene receive? What are the underlying principles of the community at Magdalene?
- What are identified as the key goals of Magdalene?
- Summarize Shana's story.
- In addition to the factors that were discussed in the article, what contributes to a culture in which tolerate the "buying and selling of women"? What contributes to attitudes that encourage women to be seen and treated as commodities? What can we do to change these attitudes and impact this culture?

Closing Prayer

Close with the Disciples Women's Benediction or a prayer led by someone in your group.

Alternative Option

As noted in the article, Magdalene community receives no government funding. It relies on gifts, grants and the sale of Thistle Farm products. For those who live in the Middle Tennessee area, you may want to consider having a home party of Thistle Farm products as a part of your group meeting. For those outside of the Tennessee area, Thistle Farms will be happy to arrange a Skype party. Just go to thistlefarms.org for further information.

Session 2

Supplies

Bible, Summer Issue of *Just Women*, Blessing Boxes for participants who may not have them.

Opening Prayer

Pray the prayer that is found on page 9 of *Just Women*

Ice Breaker

If your women do not participate in the discipline of the Blessing Box this would be a good time to introduce them to the practice. To find out more about the Blessing Box visit <http://www.discipleswomen.org/Blessing-Box>.

If your participants practice the discipline of the Blessing Box ask them to share some of their blessings.

At the end of your sharing time distribute Blessing Boxes to those who may not have them.

Scripture

Read Romans 12: 3 – 21

Read the article “*The Walking Wounded: Seeing Ourselves and Others Through the Eyes of Grace*” by Monique Crain Spells, pages 6 – 9.

Questions

- How would you differentiate between perfection and wholeness? How does Spells define “walking wounded?”
- How does Spells differentiate between strength and pride? Do you agree or disagree? Why? Have you experienced a time when pride got in the way of your ability to be strong? Spells also differentiates between suffering and sacrifice. What is the difference? According to Spelling what can be helpful with healing and achieving wholeness? How does your congregation encourage sacrifice while working to alleviate suffering?
- What makes it difficult for us to be vulnerable – with others? With God? What does Spells identify as reasons we hide our concerns and problems from others?
- Spells indicates that the church can be a place where people are wounded as well as assisted in being made whole. Have you experienced pain inflicted by the church? Do you know of someone who has? Have you experienced the

church as place that encourages you or others to hide pain? How does this occur?

- Spells speaks of Jesus's ability to step aside from his ministry for times of rest and renewal. What makes it difficult for us to step aside? How do we encourage the minister and other leaders of the congregation to take time for rest and renewal? What do we do to discourage the minister and other leaders from taking time for rest and renewal?
- Bayard Rustin shared, "The proof that one truly believes is in action." Do you agree or disagree? Why? How is your faith, the faith of your congregation, expressed outwardly?
- Spells states, "The exchange of love between one another seems the most Christian action we can accomplish." How can you, your congregation be more loving?
- The article concludes: "Walking wounded is a choice. We can deny ourselves that option and choose blessed assurance instead." Spelling speaks of humbling ourselves as a way of moving from woundedness to blessings. How does humbling ourselves assist in the healing process? How does choosing blessed assurance relate to our ability to forgive others? To forgive ourselves?
- Read Romans 12: 3 – 21. What are the characteristics of a life transformed by God's grace? How does God's grace shape the nature of our relationships?
- Based on what you have read and discussed how would you describe "the blessed life"?

Closing Prayer

Close with the Disciples Women's Benediction or a prayer led by someone in your group.

Session 3

Supplies

Bible, Summer Issue of *Just Women*, 3x5 cards for each woman, several sheets of newsprint and markers in two colors

Opening Prayer

Throughout his life Henri Nouwen experienced depression. His struggle provided insights into the human experience that adds depth and richness to his spiritual writings. Below is a prayer from *A Cry for Mercy; Prayers from the Genesee*. Henri Nouwen New York, NY: Doubleday, 1983.

Pray this prayer together

Thank you, O Lord, for this day. I did not feel your presence, I did not hear your voice, I did not see your gentle face, but the raging fear of yesterday was gone, at last for many hours. Thank you for the quiet hours in the bakery, the quiet hours in my room, and the quiet hours in the church. I could think, read, and pray a little, and I even had a moment in which I could imagine that I might one day feel peace and joy again. Thank you, O Lord for these good things. I read about "knowing you," about the ways one comes to a knowledge of you and I pray that what I understand with my mind will descend one day into my heart and give me inner light.

I call to you, O Lord, from my quiet darkness. Show me your mercy and love. Let me see your face, hear your voice, touch the hem of your cloak. I want to love you, be with you, speak to you, and simply stand in your presence. But I cannot make it happen. Pressing my eyes against my hands is not praying, and reading about your presence is not living in it.

But there is that moment in which you will come to me, as you did to your fearful disciples, and say, "Don't be afraid; it is I." Let that moment come soon, O Lord. And if you want to delay it, then make me patient. Amen.

Ice Breaker

On one side of a sheet of newsprint write the word ***People who are mentally ill...*** On the other side write the word **RESOURCES**. Post the newsprint where only one side can be seen by those who will be gathering.

As the women gather ask them to respond to the following, “When I hear that someone is mentally ill, I....” Then ask them to respond to, “Our society believes that mentally ill people....” Record their responses as they are made. After the group has had an opportunity to respond to both go back and consider their answers. Ask the women to identify the responses that reflect stereotypes about mental illness. Circle these with a marker of a second color.

Scripture

Read Psalm 139: 1 - 12

Read the article *Helping People with Mental Illness* by Mary Alice Do pages 24 – 25

Questions

- Prior to the session visit the websites that are suggested in the study guide, be prepared to summarize the information provided on these websites.
- According to the article, how many people in our society have been diagnosed with a mental illness? How are individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses stigmatized in our culture?
- What has contributed to higher rates of recovery of individuals with mental illnesses? What are the four criteria that define a person’s recovery from a mental illness? What impacts a person’s ability to recover?
- What are the five stages of recovery from a mental illness? How can we help a person as they move through these stages?
- Do speaks of the importance of hope and vision in the recovery from mental illness. How are both of these essential if a person is to recover. The article speaks of ways of promoting hope for recovery? What are these? Brainstorm additional ideas that might be helpful in promoting hope? How can supporters help empower individuals in the recovery process?
- Who in your congregation may benefit from your support and encouragement as they seek to recover from mental illness?
- Return to the newsprint. Ask the women to reconsider their responses would they identify any additional response as Stereotypes. If so circle these. After you do this, turn the newsprint over to the side that has RESOURCES on it. Ask the women to identify congregational and community resources for individuals that are recovering from mental illness.
- Read Psalm 139: 1 – 12 as a group. What does this Psalm say about us as human beings? What does this Psalm say about our relationship with God?
- Return to Henri Nouwen’s prayer. How does this reflect the struggles of one who is experiencing mental illness? Where is the hope? How does this prayer reflect times of struggle in your life? In silence, provide participants time to

write their own prayer reflecting on their experience with God at this time in their lives.

- Hand out a 3x5 card to each participant. Ask them to write the names of individuals who are experiencing mental illness. Let them know that the names they are sharing will not be shared aloud. After a few minutes of silence, collect the cards. Ask a member of the group, or be prepared, to lead the group in prayer for these individuals.

Closing Prayer

Close with the Disciples Women's Benediction or a prayer led by someone in your group.

Session 4

Supplies

Bible, Summer Issue of *Just Women*, two copies of the Mexico insert, a prepared recipe *Pozole de Pollo*, recording by Mexican Institute of Sound (if desired), Jamaica (Hibiscus) water, cornbread, candle, colorful scarf or table cover

Opening Prayer

Pray the following prayer written by Karon Alexander

Lord of the universe, may I always be mindful of the power of the Holy Spirit and its presence in the midst of believers. Thank you for your word. It is true. It is relevant yesterday, today and forever. Amen.

Ice Breaker

In the center of your gathering space, create a worship space that will be used for communion. Cover a small table with a colorful scarf or table cloth; add a large pillar candle, Jamaica water in a pitcher, a plate of cornbread, and a communion cup.

Post both sides of the insert on Mexico in your gathering space. Prepare *Pozole de Pollo* to sample as you gather. If you would like play music such as Mexican Institute of Sound, a group that fuses folk and traditional music with modern sounds, in the background during your gathering time. Summarize the information that is presented about the covenant between the three Mexican denominations and the information that is presented in *Mexico by the Numbers*.

Scripture

Scripture Matthew 28: 16 – 20

Read the articles *Mexican Food* by Carol Devine, *Transcending Words* by Karon Alexander, and *Hermanas en Cristo* by Tammy Simpson, pages 14 – 17.

Questions

- When you hear the word “Mexico” or “Mexican” what comes to mind?
- Before traveling to Mexico, Carol Devine thought she knew what Mexican food tasted like. How did her experiences on the Woman-to-Woman journey change her mind? Have you ever had an experience when you thought you “knew” about a culture only to learn that you were inaccurate?
- Devine states, “From a young age we are taught that, when we are guests, we should eat whatever food we are given, with gratitude.” How is this a sign of

- gratitude? What have you been taught about gratitude? How is gratitude and hospitality related? Even though you knew it was the right thing to do, have you ever had a difficult time being grateful?
- Summarize Pastor Nohemi Bravo's story about Disciples missionaries. What do you believe Devine means when she says, "the food of a culture contains the spirit of the people and when we refuse it, we refuse them." How do your communion table and practices reflect the spirit of your congregation?
 - Karon Alexander speaks of her initial frustration with not being able to understand what was being said around her. Have you ever been in a situation where English was not the primary language spoken? If so what was that like for you? What helped Alexander to gain understanding?
 - Alexander writes, "The language of God's word is universal. It can transcend barriers and manifest through the Holy Spirit." How is God's word universal? How is it manifest through the Holy Spirit? How does meaning go beyond words?
 - Summarize Lisania Martinez's story. What are her struggles? What makes it difficult for us to recognize the wisdom and insights of those who belong to a different culture? Generation? How are we enriched when we are open to this wisdom and insight?
 - What are the lessons that were taught by the Huasteca women? How do these lessons stand as a counterpoint to many of our cultural norms? How are these lessons important for our culture?
 - Based on the experience of these three women on their trip to Mexico, how has your understanding of hospitality grown? Of blessedness? Of grace and grace filled lives?
 - Read Matthew 28: 16 – 20 as a group. How do these three articles help shape your understanding of what it means to be a disciple? To make disciples?

Closing Prayer and Communion

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11: 23 – 26

Light the candle in the worship space; have a participant read the 1 Corinthians 11: 23 – 26 (if you have someone who is bi-lingual in Spanish have them read the passage a second time). Offer a prayer for the elements and share communion as a group.

Close with the Disciples Women's Benediction.