

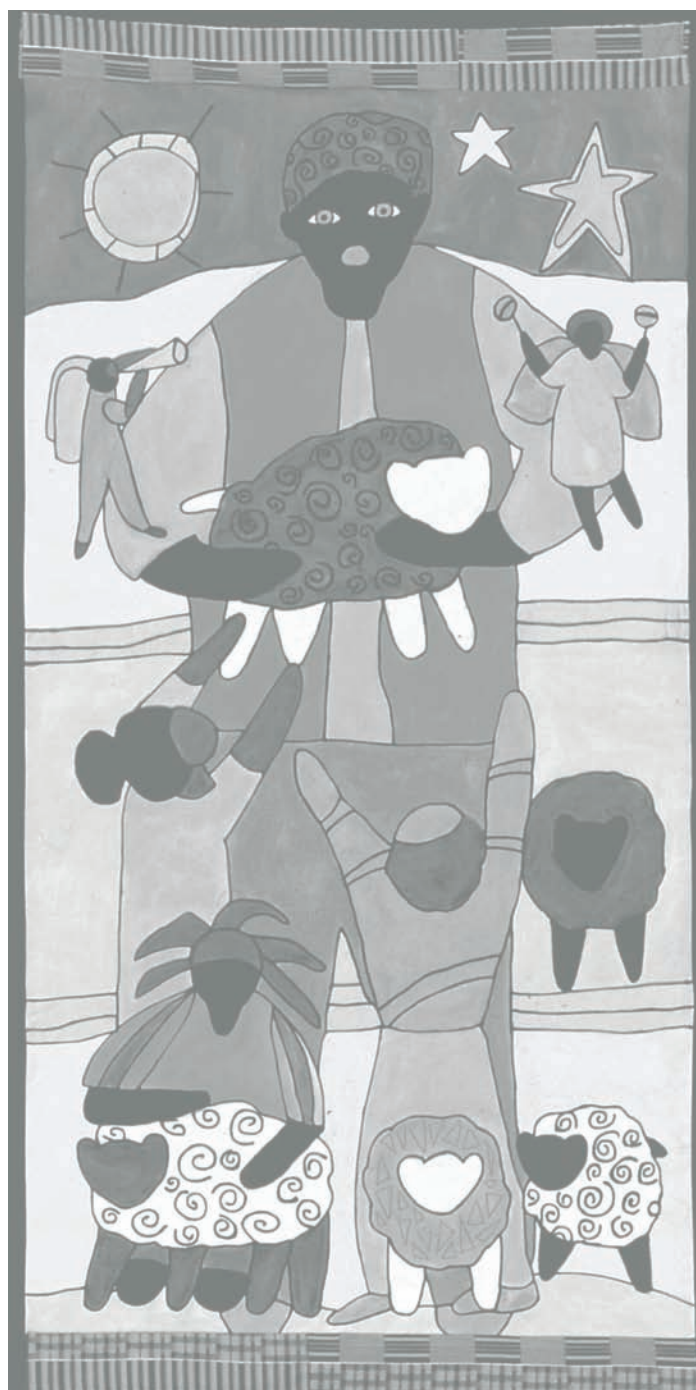
This Season... Pentecost 2

As we enter the second half of the Season after Pentecost, we continue to explore what it means to live as disciples of Christ. This continues to be a growing time for us, symbolized by the use of the colour green. Readings from the epistles are prominent in this season. The early Christian churches were beginning to realize that Jesus Christ was not going to return soon. They needed, therefore, to find ways to live together in community, supporting and encouraging each other. Jesus' message, which we also explore in some stories from the gospel of Luke, called them to live in a way different from the standards of the world around them. What is faithful living? Leaders, like Timothy, sought advice about how to deal with problems and questions from an experienced pastor. The question of what it means to be the church is as important today as it was in the first century. These texts still speak to us today as we explore what it means to live as disciples of Christ in everyday life. We can be confident through the challenges we face, knowing that God is already present in every situation we encounter.

In this season, we also remember our ancestors in the faith, those who have been our teachers and mentors, guides on our journey. We reflect on the ways in which we are mentors and guides for others, and are encouraged to share the faith with others. We rejoice in the hope that God is bringing about a reign of peace and justice for all people, and we celebrate that God's loving care is for all.

The art images this season are bright and colourful. Light breaks in at unexpected angles and in surprising ways. People support and care for each other. There are possibilities for transformation, moving from shadow to light, from isolation to community, breaking free of structures that confine.

As we move towards the end of the season and church year, we begin to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus the Christ, anticipated in Advent and celebrated at Christmas. In the birth of Jesus, God breaks into human history and creates a new heaven and earth. How will we recognize the new thing that God is creating? These are



the challenges the Pentecost season brings. We are encouraged by God's promise to be with us on our journey.





This Season So...

Welcome to the second half of the Season after Pentecost! This longest season of the Christian year extends from the Sunday after Pentecost through the last Sunday of the church year, observed in many traditions as Reign of Christ, or Christ the King, Sunday. This extended season gives us time to explore what it means to be a disciple. As we are sent out in ministry, what does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean to support and encourage one another in our discipleship? Green is the colour of this season, suggesting our growth in discipleship.

Several focus passages this season are from the epistles. They record the concerns of early Christian communities as they coped with the realization that Jesus the Christ was not going to return soon. They sought, therefore, ways to live together in community, supporting and encouraging each other. They learned how to solve problems of governance and practice that were emerging in the community. These texts speak to us today as we reflect on our place in the community of faith, and as we continue to learn what it means to be the church.

Take a moment to read the articles “The Pastoral Epistles” (p. 100) and “Being Church Together” (p. 99), which offer additional background for these sessions. You may want to share parts of these with group members.

Your meeting space

Create a welcoming space for your group to meet. Place comfortable chairs in a circle, so that all can see and hear each other. An area accessible to folks who need the assistance of walkers or wheelchairs is also important. Name tags are a good idea for the first few sessions if people may not know each other.

Set up a worship area to use during the Gather and Bless portions of the session. Or place a table in the middle of the circle and set on it a candle, fabric the colour of the season, and other symbols of the day. You may wish to have tables for writing or craft projects.

Remember that your job as leader of the group is not to provide all the answers. Adult learners bring with them a rich experience of life and a great variety of knowledge and background. As leader, your job is to

get the session started and to help focus the discussion on the biblical passages and themes for the day. Think about how you can help your group to feel comfortable in exploring their questions about the scriptures and about their own experience of the Christian faith. Some questions may need to be noted, and taken up another day when the group has had more time for research and reflection.

Season Images

The materials for this season include six posters: *Breaking Free*; *First Steps, after Millet*; *From Darkness*; *The Good Shepherd*, *Interior of the Buurkerk, Utrecht*; and *Solace*. These images are used in many ways during the sessions. Plan how posters can be displayed in your space.

Behold: Arts for the Church Year (Logos Productions) is a 28-page arts resource that explores themes of the season through a diverse and beautiful collection of images, writings, and scripture. Individual copies are available for use as a devotional preparation or as a way to enhance your teaching ministry. To order, contact your curriculum distributor for information.

Basic supply kit

You will need these things in most sessions. Gather them in a basket or box to make it easy to bring them each week. These items are not referred to in the “Prepare” sections of each week’s materials.

- Bibles, including several translations
- Newsprint
- Markers in several colours and widths
- Pens and pencils
- Several pairs of scissors
- Plain paper
- Tape or removable adhesive for hanging posters
- Glue sticks
- Several pads of sticky notes
- Stapler
- Matches or lighter



Freed to Be

What does it mean to be the church? Jesus and Paul call us to embrace both the cost and promise of living in a faith community shaped and transformed by the gospel. Because God is already present in every situation, we can work with confidence through the challenges we face, helping one another to live as faithful disciples.

Focus Scripture: Philemon 1–21

Paul wrote many letters of encouragement and advice to the small communities of Christians throughout the Mediterranean world. But this letter is different. It is a personal letter, written primarily to Philemon, though the letter mentions other Christians who meet at Philemon's home.

Paul, writing from prison, has a request for Philemon. In prison Paul has met Philemon's slave, Onesimus. Perhaps Onesimus is in prison as a runaway. Perhaps Philemon has sent this slave to minister to Paul in prison. However this slave happens to be in prison, through Paul's teaching Onesimus has become a Christian. Onesimus (meaning "useful") once seemed useless to Philemon, but now is beneficial to Paul and to the community.

Paul is sending Onesimus back, asking Philemon to forgive him and to receive him as a brother in Christ. Paul gently reminds Philemon that he owes Paul a debt, and suggests obliquely that Philemon might even consider freeing this slave.

Slavery was customary in New Testament times, and Jesus tells stories of servants and masters. But here we see how the gospel message from its earliest times is beginning to disrupt and transform accepted social structures. The early Christian communities had to face some challenges. Is it right to own slaves? What happens when the slave of a Christian becomes a Christian, too? Paul's word to them and to us is that, slave or free, we are all children of God. We are brothers and sisters in the faith, and equal in worth.

Paul's words set a standard of behaviour, reminding disciples to be inclusive, hospitable, and forgiving. Disciples are called to exceed the demands of the law in hospitality. Belonging to the Christian community will

cost Philemon something, but obedience to the gospel will bring a new freedom for him and for Onesimus.

Accustomed structures and customs are being transformed by Christ, and disciples are freed to respond to God's call. The crowds described in **Luke 14:25–33** follow Jesus because many think he is on a victory march to Jerusalem to reveal himself as Messiah, God's anointed saviour. But Jesus tells them the high cost of discipleship. Following Jesus means giving up possessions. It means putting first things first and giving as much attention to the gospel message as to business or politics.

God's people face choices about how they will respond to God's leading in their lives. In **Deuteronomy 30:15–20**, Moses speaks a word from God (Deuteronomy 29:1–30:20), telling the Israelites that God's will for them is summed up in the choice between "life" and "death." To choose "life" is to choose faithfulness to the ways of God's law. To disregard God's ways is to choose "death." The words of **Psalm 1** echo the importance of choosing to follow God's ways.

Moses and the psalmist implore God's people to let their lives be shaped and formed by God's will. As Onesimus and Philemon are transformed by the gospel, as the disciples are set free to serve, so are we shaped as we follow Christ.

• • • • •

There is both cost and promise in following Jesus. As we continue in our discipleship, God is present in our lives, shaping us. Through our choice to follow God's leading, transformation comes to the Christian family and to all those communities of which we are part. How can we help one another be good and faithful disciples?

September 9, 2007

Focus Scripture
Philemon 1–21

Additional Scriptures
Deuteronomy
30:15–20
Psalm 1
Luke 14:25–33

God, you know us inside and out. You created us, and you continue to shape us. Be present with us as we learn what it means to be faithful disciples, and help us respond to the transforming power of your love. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Use user name *spirit* and password *linking*.



From Start to Finish

Ideas for building community, and suggestions for setting up meeting spaces and integrating technology can all be found in the booklet *From Start to Finish*, available from your Christian Education Coordinator and/or on the Seasons website.

The Focus for Adults

Adults in the group may live in families where one person is an active church member and others are not, or they may know of families in this situation. This dynamic may set up tensions within families, as schedules and priorities compete. In a similar vein, a transforming faith experience may make it difficult for an adult to return to a group of colleagues or friends whose values or priorities are now at odds with that person's new vision of life. The texts this week remind adults that belonging to the Christian community may come with a cost. Disciples today still know the challenges of being called to account or asked to do something that is difficult, and they claim the same

joys. In preparing to lead this session, pray for group members by name, that all may be able to embrace the costs and promises of discipleship with joy.

The season after Pentecost is a long growing season in which we explore what it means to live out discipleship in our everyday lives. Many focus passages in the materials for this season contain advice for Christian communities, emphasizing that the Christian faith is not just a matter of individual actions. It is lived in community with other believers, who work together to build a common life. As group leader, find ways to embody these ways of living together as your group meets.

September 9, 2007



PREPARE

Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures — Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1–21; Luke 14:25–33 — and biblical background material on page 9.
- ❑ If you have access to the Internet, visit www.spiritseasons.com and use the password *linking* to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Bring *information* that might inform this week's session.
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see p. 2), and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 5*, and *CD player*.

Gather

- ❑ Set the worship space with *green fabric* and a *large candle*.
- ❑ Bring *song "Servant Song"* (p. 92, also #7 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Engage

- ❑ Bring *copies of "A Letter from Prison" resource sheet*.
- ❑ Bring *copies of "Cost and Promise" resource sheet*.

Respond

Choose one or more options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **A letter to the church:** *copies of "A Letter from Prison" resource sheet*
- ❑ **Clay symbol:** *poster "Breaking Free," play dough or modelling clay*

Bless

- ❑ Bring *resource sheet "Responses for Bless"* (p. 93).
- ❑ Bring *song "Rise Up, Stand Firm"* (p. 86, also #2 on *Seasons Music CD*).
- ❑ Bring *copies of biblical background for September 16*.

Visit the seasonal online activity in the Action Zone at www.spiritseasons.com.



Freed to Be

Scripture

Philemon 1–21

FOCUS To explore the cost and promise of belonging to the Christian community.

GATHER

1

Welcome the group to the Season after Pentecost and introduce any newcomers.

Opening ritual

As you gather in the worship space, light the candle. Sing or listen to “Servant Song” (p. 92, also #7 on *Seasons Music CD*), then pray together the prayer on the biblical background page.

Moving into the theme

Ask group members to recall a time when they had to ask a favour.

- How did you ask? What made it easy or difficult to ask?
- What was the result of your action?

ENGAGE

2

I am appealing to you

Note that today’s focus reading finds Paul in prison in Rome, and writing to Philemon and the members of the Christian community who meet in one of their houses. It is a private letter to Philemon, but also involves the wider community. Hand out copies of “A Letter from Prison” resource sheet and allow group members a few minutes to read the information. Then invite a volunteer to read aloud **Philemon 1–21**.

- What is the tone of the letter? From the language used, what sense do you get of Paul’s relationship with Onesimus? With Philemon and his community?
- What is Paul asking Philemon to do? What arguments does Paul use to persuade Philemon?
- What thoughts and feelings do you imagine Onesimus will have when he learns the content of the letter?
- What thoughts and feelings do you imagine Philemon will have when he receives the letter? How easy or difficult do you think it will be for Philemon to agree to Paul’s request?

The cost of discipleship

Jesus says that following him will cost something. Invite a group member to read aloud **Luke 14:25–33**. The crowds thought that Jesus was on a victory march to Jerusalem to declare himself the Messiah who would free them from Roman oppression.

- Do you think Jesus’ message is what the crowd expected? Why or why not?

- What does Jesus say about being a disciple? What do you think it means to “carry the cross”?
- In what ways do you experience Jesus’ words as demand? In what ways might you read them as a vision of a new way of living?

Jesus urges the crowds to consider the cost of following him. Give as much attention to the gospel as to business and politics, Jesus says.

- What does Jesus say the cost will be?
- What in this passage is difficult for you to hear? What raises questions for you?

Jesus calls disciples to put the demands of the gospel first – to respond quickly and to be prepared to undergo suffering.

- How do you think your Christian community lives up to Jesus’ expectations today?
- Where do you experience the tension of living in the world and also responding to God’s call to discipleship?

Choose God’s way

Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Deuteronomy 30:15–20**, part of a covenant speech that God commands Moses to give to the Israelites.

- What do you learn from this speech about God’s relationship with the Israelites?
- What is the role of the people’s choice in how they will be shaped as God’s people?



■ **What do the words of Psalm 1 add to your understanding of this choice?**

Hand out copies of “Cost and Promise” resource sheet. In pairs, complete the chart. As a group, discuss:

■ **What do you learn of the cost and promise of choosing God’s way from these texts?**

In the readings today Moses, the psalmist, Paul, and Jesus call God’s people to account.

■ **Within your Christian community, what standard of behaviour is expected of members? In what way would you like to see this transformed?**

■ **How do we hold others accountable in loving and constructive ways?**

■ **How does society call the church to account?**

Transformation

Recall briefly the texts for today.

■ **How do these passages speak of transformation? What is the cost and promise of such transformation?**

■ **In what ways do you feel you are being shaped by your choice to follow God’s way? What is the cost and promise of this experience of being formed as a disciple?**

3
RESPOND

Choose one or more of the following options:

□ **A letter to the church** Paul wrote many letters to the Christian community, supporting, teaching, or correcting them. What hopeful message would you like to give to your church community today? Using the format of Paul’s letter, found on the resource sheet “A Letter from Prison,” write a letter to your congregation. What words of support and encouragement do you want to say? What vision for the future would you like to share? Consider putting some of the letters in the church newsletter.

□ **Clay symbol** Moses called the Israelites to choose between “life” and “death.” Reflect for a moment on the poster *Breaking Free*. How does it speak to this choice? What is exciting about choosing? What is painful?

Think of images that describe where you are now in your faith journey. Using play dough or clay, create a symbol of your own journey of discipleship. Place the symbols in the worship area and share with each other what your symbol represents.

□ **Litany of call** What might be our prayer as we consider the cost and promise of responding to God’s call? Write prayer petitions that bring before God questions and hopes about the call to discipleship, using this three-part format: God calls me to... / The cost may be... / But God’s promise is...

End each set of petitions with the phrase, “O God, be with me in my choosing.” Write the prayer on newsprint for use during Bless.

4
BLESS

Gather again in the worship space and invite group members to share new insights about the cost and promise of belonging to the church. Reflect together: “What might God be calling you to do this week that will cost you something? What promise will sustain you?”

Sing or read together “Rise Up, Stand Firm” (p. 86, also #2 on *Seasons Music CD*). Close by praying together the “Litany of Call” written in Respond or today’s reading from “Responses for Bless” resource sheet (p. 93).

Distribute copies of the biblical background material for September 16.

REFLECT

Where do you see God’s transformation at work in the lives of group members? How can you and the group members continue to

encourage each other in facing the challenges of discipleship?

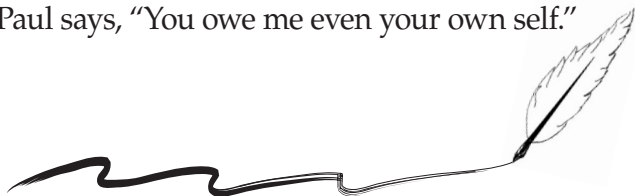


A Letter from Prison

Paul and Onesimus

While in prison, Paul meets Onesimus, a slave owned by a Christian master, Philemon, whom Paul has met earlier on a visit to Philemon's community. We don't know how Onesimus ended up in prison. Perhaps he had run away from Philemon and was sent to prison as punishment. Perhaps Philemon, worried about how Paul was managing in prison, sent Onesimus there to look after Paul.

While in prison, Onesimus becomes a Christian. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back and forgive any wrongdoings. The name Onesimus means "useful." This slave was once useless to you, Paul says to Philemon, but now Onesimus has indeed become useful – both to Paul and to Philemon. Paul would like to keep Onesimus with him, but wants Philemon to make his own choice voluntarily. Perhaps, Paul hints, Philemon might even consider freeing Onesimus and welcoming him as a brother in Christ. After all, Paul says, "You owe me even your own self."



Letters in New Testament times

Letters followed a particular pattern: salutation, thanksgiving, request, and greetings and blessing. The verse numbers in parentheses below show how the verses of Philemon fall into this pattern.

Salutation (verses 1–3)

Paul greets Philemon and other workers in the Christian community who are meeting in a house church.

Thanksgiving (verses 4–7)

Paul thanks God for the work and witness of the Christians.

Request (verses 8–22)

Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ. At the end, Paul asks Philemon to prepare a room for him as Paul hopes to visit soon.

Greetings and Blessing (verses 23–25)

Paul's companions in prison send greetings to other Christians. Paul prays that the grace of Jesus Christ may be with all at Philemon's house.

Cost and Promise

There is both cost and promise in following God's ways. Consider what cost and promise is expressed in today's readings. For each person listed at the side of the grid, write down some words that describe the cost and promise to them of being faithful to God's call.

For this person or group	The cost of following in God's way	The promise of following in God's way
Philemon		
Onesimus		
Paul		
Jesus		
Jesus' disciples		
The crowds following Jesus		
The Israelites		
The psalmist		
Me, a Christian living in 2007		



Of Great Value

The God we follow showers us with blessing and forgiveness each day. Through a lost sheep and a lost coin, Jesus teaches about God, who can be trusted to seek us always, pursuing us with steadfast love. God's intention is to save. God's people are called to live within this treasure and gift, rejoicing as the faith community grows.

Focus Scripture: Luke 15:1–10

In chapter 14 of Luke, we learn that large crowds were following Jesus to hear him teach. Among them were tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes. As chapter 15 opens, we hear grumbling among the Pharisees and the scribes: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus responds to their complaint with parables. Imagine the response of the crowd who listens to these stories: Who puts 99 sheep in jeopardy to risk that one might be found? No one who is trying to run a livestock business! Who turns the whole house upside down – lighting a lamp and using precious oil – to search for a small amount of money and then, when it is found, throws a party? No one! But we might hear in these parables how God acts. God can be trusted to seek us and love us. Through these parables, we sense that the flock of sheep and the set of coins were not complete until the lost members were found.

The Pharisees and the scribes perhaps understood, in keeping with many in first-century Middle Eastern cultures, that wealth and good fortune were signs of God's blessing and that poverty was a sign of a person's sin. Jesus upsets this understanding. In the parables God first is cast in the role of a shepherd, a class of labourers held in low esteem within first-century Jewish culture. Then, even more shockingly, God is cast as a woman, the least powerful group in their culture. No wonder the gospel that Jesus proclaimed was seen as good news to the poor (Luke 4:18).

In these parables we can glimpse God's way, God's searching love. The Pharisees and the scribes have been shocked by how Jesus seeks out those whom they perceive to be of little value. God, however, is persistent in love for all. The reign of God that Jesus proclaims

is an upside-down world where one sheep is worth spending the energy normally reserved for 100, where one coin is worth domestic disruption and expenditure, and where one repentant sinner is cause for rejoicing. Jesus' parables challenge all who listen to grow in understanding of what it means to be foolish, to be wise, to be lost, to be found, and to be renewed in relationship with God and others.

When the Israelites turn from the way of God's law, Moses trusts that renewal is possible. In **Exodus 32:7–14**, Moses implores God to forgive those who created the golden calf and give them another chance to live as God's people. Even though these people had broken their relationship with God, God listens to Moses and does not give up on them.

In **Psalms 51**, traditionally attributed to David in the time after his adultery, the psalmist calls out to God: have mercy, wash me, teach me, hide your face from my sin, put a new and right spirit within me. These penitential words flow with trust that human sin will not have the final word in God's reign.

Paul knows that he has received undeserved mercy, and gives thanks for this blessing in **1 Timothy 1:12–17**. The good news for all is that, like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and a woman a lost coin, God can be trusted to seek, to save, and to love.

• • • • •

From Jesus' teaching, we learn that God's determination to seek us and to love us is beyond what humankind would consider wise or even rational. Jesus risked all to reach those in need of God's saving grace. When have you felt most "lost" and most "found"? In what ways might you and your church be as relentlessly forgiving and loving as God?

September 16, 2007

Focus Scripture
Luke 15:1–10

Additional Scriptures
Exodus 32:7–14
Psalm 51:1–10
1 Timothy 1:12–17

We praise and trust you, O God, for your gift of relentless and everlasting love. Kindle in us the zeal to guard the treasure of faith you have given, and to reach out to others with joy. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Use user name *spirit* and password *linking*.



From Start to Finish

Ideas for building community, and suggestions for setting up meeting spaces and integrating technology can all be found in the booklet *From Start to Finish*, available from your Christian Education Coordinator and/or on the Seasons website.

The Focus for Adults

Adults know what it means to feel “lost,” either physically, emotionally, or spiritually. The texts in this session will challenge the adults in your group to expand their understanding of what it means to be foolish, to be wise, to be lost, to be found, and to be renewed in relationship with God and others. Encourage reflection on how these experiences shape one’s life of discipleship. When in your life have you experienced feeling “lost” and “found”? Jesus risked all to reach those in need of God’s saving grace. Pray for group members by name, that all may experience anew the joy that comes from God’s salvation.

Jesus’ parables about lost and found likely will evoke memories of when adults have

searched for something that was lost – a child, an important document, a pet, or even the joy that had gone out of a relationship. They may have searched alone or with a group for the lost item or person. Challenge the group to consider these parables from the other perspective and reflect on how experiences of being lost, and then found, have helped to form their faith. What role did others play in this process?

One Respond activity this week invites group members to write a personal response. As a group, come to agreement about when responses will be shared or not shared, and about keeping as a confidence any responses that are shared with the group. You may want to provide small notebooks for these kinds of activities.

September 16, 2007

PREPARE

Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week’s scriptures — Exodus 32:7–14; Psalm 51:1–10; 1 Timothy 1:12–17; Luke 15:1–10 — and biblical background material on page 15.
- ❑ If you have access to the Internet, visit www.spiritseasons.com and use the password *linking* to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Bring information that might inform this week’s session.
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see p. 2), and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 5*, and CD player.

Gather

- ❑ Set the worship space with *green fabric* and a *large candle*.
- ❑ Bring song “Come, O Holy Spirit, Come/Wa, Wa, Wa Emimimo” (p. 83, also #10 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Engage

- ❑ Bring *copies of “Story Background,” one of the resource sheets for this week*.
- ❑ Print the questions in “Jesus teaches with parables” on *newsprint*.
- ❑ Bring *poster “The Good Shepherd.”*

Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Welcome:** *invite a greeter or other person who welcomes newcomers to your church*
- ❑ **Faith journey:** *copies of “Labyrinth,” one of the resource sheets for this week; quiet listening music, such as “Voice Tones” (#35 on Seasons Music CD)*

Bless

- ❑ Bring *poster “The Good Shepherd.”*
- ❑ Bring song “Never Give Up/Bambelela” (p. 81, also #9 on *Seasons Music CD*).
- ❑ Bring *copies of biblical background for September 23* (p. 21).

Visit the seasonal online activity in the Action Zone at www.spiritseasons.com.



Of Great Value

Scripture

Luke 15:1–10

FOCUS To internalize the assurance of God’s searching, restorative love.

1 GATHER

As you welcome group members, introduce newcomers and make any announcements.

Opening ritual

Gather in the worship space. Light the candle and sing “Come, O Holy Spirit, Come/*Wa, Wa, Wa Emimimo*” (p. 83, also #10 on *Seasons Music CD*). Pray together the prayer on the biblical background page.

Moving into the theme

Ask group members to recall personal experiences of losing and finding. Invite stories of

times when they looked for something or someone important that had been lost. What did they do? Did others help? Next, invite stories of times when they were lost. What happened? How were they found? What did they think and feel when they were lost and when they were found? How were others involved in their rescue?

Summarize your discussion by asking:

- **What have you learned from experiences of being lost? From experiences of finding something that was lost?**

2 ENGAGE

A crowd gathers around Jesus

In chapter 14 of Luke, we learn that large crowds were following Jesus to hear him teach. Among them were tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 15:1–2.

- **Who is present with Jesus?**
- **What is the concern of the Pharisees and the scribes?**

Hand out copies of “Story Background” resource sheet and read the material together, adding any additional information from group members.

Jesus teaches with parables

Jesus often taught with parables. Form two groups. Ask one group to look at the parable in Luke 15:3–7 and the other group to look at the parable in Luke 15:8–10. Write the following questions on newsprint for each group to consider:

- **What information from “Story Background” resource sheet adds to your understanding of this parable?**
- **Why do you think Jesus tells this parable to the scribes and Pharisees?**
- **Based on this parable, how would you describe the nature of God’s love?**

Bring the two groups together and ask them to share highlights of their discussions. Then discuss:

- **Who might be considered “lost” in our world today?**
- **In what ways can disciples serve as agents of God’s restoring love for these individuals?**

The Good Shepherd

Invite group members to view the poster *The Good Shepherd*, imagining that they are the lamb. Ask these questions to guide quiet reflection, pausing between each one: How did you come to be in the shepherd’s arms? Where is the shepherd taking you? What is your level of contentment with being carried in this way?

As a group, discuss:

- **Which details of this image speak to you of love and restoration?**

God’s restoring love

Form three groups. Ask one group to read Exodus 32:7–14, one to read Psalm 51:1–10, and one to read 1 Timothy 1:12–17. Allow a few moments for small groups to identify what the passages say about God’s love and human hope. Then discuss these questions with the whole



group, asking small groups to add insights from their readings to the conversation.

- **What is the nature of God's love?**
- **Which words in these readings bring assurance of God's forgiveness and abundant mercy?**
- **In what ways does God's love continue to shape the lives of disciples today?**

The good news for all is that, like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and a woman a lost

coin, God can be trusted to seek, to forgive, to save, and to love. Invite group members to recall the stories shared during Gather.

- **How have your experiences of being lost and being found shaped your lives as disciples?**
- **What assures you of God's forgiving and restorative love?**
- **In what ways might you and your church be as relentlessly loving as God?**

3

RESPOND

Choose one or two of the following options:

- **Welcome** We are called to extend a welcome to all, sharing the good news of God's searching and restorative love. Who is needed to complete your faith community? Who else do you need to welcome? Invite a greeter or a member of the committee responsible for welcoming newcomers to your church to join your group for a conversation about what your church does to make others feel welcome. Share stories about times you have visited other churches: What made you feel like a stranger? What made you feel at home? Together talk about what you might do to make newcomers feel more at home in your congregation.
- **Faith journey** Times of prayer and reflection

help disciples consider God's searching love and abundant mercy. Some Christians find that a labyrinth walk encourages reflection and invites creative thinking. Read more about labyrinths on "Labyrinth" resource sheet. Allow a few moments to complete the activity individually, quietly playing listening music such as "Voice Tones" (#35 on *Seasons Music CD*) in the background.

- **Parable response** Jesus' parables encourage us to consider the nature of God's love in multi-faceted ways. Imagine that you are the lost sheep or the lost coin. What does it feel like to be lost and then found? Work individually or in pairs to write stories or poems that flow from this perspective.

4

BLESS

Gather in a circle in the worship space. Consider again the poster *The Good Shepherd*. Ask group members to imagine they are the shepherd. Based on the readings for this week, what "lamb" is Christ calling you to seek out this week?

Form two groups to read **Psalm 51:1–10** responsively, alternating verses. Sing or read

together "Never Give Up/Bambelela" (p. 81, also #9 on *Seasons Music CD*). Then, go around the circle, with each person in turn taking the hand of the next person, and saying to her or him, "[Name], may the searching love of God renew your spirit."

Hand out the biblical background for September 23 (p. 21).

REFLECT

In what ways have group members assured each other of God's searching love and abundant mercy? How can you help your group to be a welcoming place for newcomers?



STORY BACKGROUND

What do you know about the different groups of people that Jesus encountered in his travels? As you read through this sheet, jot down other information that you or other group members are able to add.

DISCIPLES

The word *disciple* means “pupil, learner.” In Jesus’ day, the rabbis had disciples who were students of the Law. John the Baptizer also had disciples, some of whom transferred their allegiance to Jesus. In the gospels, *disciple* is used to describe both the small group of men and women who were close associates of Jesus, and also the larger crowd of followers who listened to Jesus teach. “The twelve” or “the apostles” are terms referring to the twelve men chosen by Jesus and named in the gospels. Paul called himself an “apostle” because of experiencing the risen Christ on the Damascus road. In Acts, the word *disciples* is used to refer to all those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

Notes from our group:

PHARISEES

The Pharisees were lay persons who were part of a large and popular movement of Jewish people devoted to an accurate description and strict observance of the Law of Moses. Pharisees strove to uphold the Law in their daily lives, particularly the food laws and other laws of ritual purity. Pharisees valued scripture highly, and were open to studying new interpretations of scripture. They accepted belief in resurrection. The Pharisees seem to have followed Jesus, for Pharisees are present on many occasions to listen to or argue with Jesus. Often they are depicted by the gospel writers as being critical of Jesus (in the gospel of Matthew they are described as Jesus’ chief opponents), but some accounts reveal a more friendly relationship (Luke 7:36, Luke 13:31).

Notes from our group:

SADDUCEES

The Sadducees were a powerful, conservative, and aristocratic group of Jewish leaders and priests in Jesus’ time. Sadducees opposed the Pharisees in many areas of belief. They held to a literal interpretation of scripture and believed in the primacy of the written Torah, and so did not believe in angels or resurrection since these beliefs had come later in Judaism through oral tradition. It is thought that the Sadducees collaborated with the Romans in order to maintain their social status. In Acts 4:1, the Sadducees oppose the preaching of Peter and John.

Notes from our group:

SCRIBES

The scribes were individuals who were trained in the Law. They were responsible for interpreting the Law, and worked closely with the priests. The word *scribe* comes from the Latin root for “write” as these people could read and write, skills that were not widespread in Jesus’ time.

Notes from our group:

TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS

The gospels use the term “sinner” to describe those individuals who deliberately broke the purity laws and did not repent. Certain ways of earning a living, for example, as a tax collector or a prostitute, involved breaking the commandments. Tax collectors were particularly despised because they acted as agents of the Roman force of occupation. They collected taxes from an oppressed people and earned their own living by keeping some of the money for themselves.

Notes from our group:



LABYRINTH

Labyrinths in history

The form of the labyrinth has existed almost 5,000 years, much longer than Christianity. As with many pre-Christian symbols, the labyrinth was converted for Christian use. Some think the Christian use of the labyrinth began in the fourth century, in the time of Constantine. At that time a labyrinth was placed in a church in North Africa. The centre was named *sancta ecclesia* ("holy church").

Later, many medieval pilgrims made pilgrimages to sites in Europe or Britain instead of to Jerusalem. In some cases the end of their journey was a labyrinth formed in the floor of a cathedral. The centre of the labyrinths may have represented Jerusalem for these pilgrims.

One of the best-known labyrinths was constructed in the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France in 1220. This labyrinth is formed around a cross – or cruciform – shape. The centre of the labyrinth is called the "the new Jerusalem" and the path is known as the "road to Jerusalem." Note the centre image of light and growth. The finger labyrinth on this page is modelled after the Chartres labyrinth.

Labyrinths today

Many retreat centres and churches have created labyrinths to aid meditation and prayer. You enter a labyrinth through "the mouth" and walk on the path to the centre. The labyrinth is not a maze, but a single path. The "walls" keep walkers on the path. When you reach the centre, you have gone half the distance.

Why walk the path of a labyrinth, or trace it with a finger? Those

who seek the labyrinth experience comment that it helps them to relax and feel at peace, helps them let go of their worries and concerns, encourages prayer and

reflection on problems being faced, and invites creative thinking. It is a way to experience God's presence and give thanks for the blessings of life.

Quiet your mind as you travel this labyrinth with your finger. For what will you pray as you follow the path?

