Dear Class Member,
This installment of *The Wired Word*was inspired by a recent article by a Christian who admits that her relationship with God has never been "personal" in the sense of seeing God the Father or Jesus the Son as a close companion. Her account gives us an opportunity to consider what we mean when (or if) we say things like "I have a personal relationship with God" or "Jesus is my copilot." So that will be the topic of this week's discussion.



**'I Don't Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus,' Christian Writer Says
*The Wired Word* for the Week of October 25, 2020**

**In the News**

Debie Thomas is director of children's and family ministries at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California, and so when she wrote recently in a national Christian magazine that she doesn't have a "personal relationship with Jesus," it may have given some people pause.

But it's important to hear her explanation before dismissing her as someone who hasn't responded to the call of God. In her essay, she goes on to say that she feels a connection with God or Jesus through the community of the church. Thus, she's not saying she doesn't have a relationship with Jesus *at all*, but that she doesn't experience it as something one-on-one, personal or intimate.

Thomas tells that when growing up in the church, "a personal relationship with God" was the primary way Christians she knew described their faith. "The idea was everywhere in our Sunday morning music," Thomas says, "which often sounded like love songs. It was ubiquitous in sermons and in the favorite spiritual expressions of my fellow churchgoers: 'Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.'  'Jesus is my best friend.'  'God walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own.'"

Thomas also says that eventually she was "stunned" when she learned that the phrase "personal relationship" does not come from the Bible.

"Nor does the Bible ever instruct me to 'invite Jesus into my heart as my personal Savior,'" Thomas adds.

But before learning any of that, Thomas says, she spent many years "feeling spiritually deficient" because she didn't -- and still doesn't -- have a personal relationship with God.

"I've certainly hungered for the kind of intimacy I sang about so earnestly as a child and young adult," Thomas says. "But to claim that I experience a one-on-one intimacy with God that is truly personal would be a lie. God doesn't walk with me and talk with me and tell me I am God's own. I don't feel God's arms holding me close. Jesus is not my best friend."

Still, Thomas experiences God's presence and power in the shared worship, liturgy, song and prayer of the believing people of the church community. "My spiritual bedrock is not a personal relationship with God; it's the mystery of the incarnation, fleshed out in embodied community," she says. "It's in the faces, voices, hands, and feet of the body of Christ that I experience Christ.  It's in the laughter of other people that I hear God's joy. It's in the tears of other people that I see God's broken heart. It's in messy human connection that God's redeeming love streams into my life."

Despite her own experience, however, Thomas does not deny the claims of Christians who say they "enjoy deep, one-on-one intimacy with their Creator." And she acknowledges that even now, with all she has since learned, "it still feels scandalous to admit that I don't have a personal relationship with God."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[I Don't Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus. *The Christian Century*](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/i-don-t-have-personal-relationship-jesus)
[Christianity Is Not About a Personal Relationship with Jesus. *1517*](https://www.1517.org/articles/christianity-is-not-about-a-personal-relationship-with-jesus)[Answers. *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*](https://billygraham.org/answer/some-of-my-friends-talk-about-having-a-personal-relationship-with-god-but-what-do-they-mean/)

**Applying the News Story**

Debie Thomas is correct that the phrase "personal relationship" does not appear in the Bible and that the scriptures never instruct us to "invite Jesus into our heart as our personal Savior." There are, nonetheless, Bible passages that can be read as pointing in the direction of a personal connection (see our "Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope" section below).

Even with such Bible verses before us, however, we can ask whether the idea of a personal relationship with God or Jesus was intended to be understood literally or as something more like a metaphor -- or perhaps even some of both. It's certainly true that a personal God -- which is a clear biblical teaching -- is much easier to relate to than some impersonal "Force" that governs the universe. But it's also fair to ask whether given the vast diversity of human beings, it's even reasonable to expect that everyone can or even should relate to God in the same way. Or maybe we should reverse this: Given the vast diversity of human beings created by God, is it reasonable to expect that *he* should relate to each one in exactly the same way?

So an exploration of what is meant by "a personal relationship with God/Jesus" will be our endeavor in this lesson.

**The Big Questions**

1. Does God relate to everybody the same way? Does he expect everybody to relate to him in a personal, intimate way? Explain your answer.

2. Is knowing God on a personal level more a metaphor or an actual experience? Can it be both?  Can it vary from person to person? Explain your thinking.

3. Is Jesus your buddy? If your answer is "Yes," explain what you mean. If your answer is "No," explain why not. Is it possible that picturing Jesus as a close friend diminishes who he really is? How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?

4. What is the difference between *knowing about* God and *knowing* him? Might the latter be described as a personal relationship? Why or why not?

5. Is it possible that a person who experiences Christ in the laughter and tears of other people actually has a *more* intimate connection with God than someone who does not experience Christ that way?

6. From the "In the News" section above, read again the paragraph beginning "Still, Thomas experiences God's presence …," and say how nearly Thomas' words describe your own experience. In terms of being a follower of Jesus, is it *necessary* that your experience of God be personal and intimate? Why or why not?

**Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

**Hosea 2:19-20**
*And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.* (For context, read 2:14-23.)

The Old Testament book of Hosea is a good place to start exploring the idea of a personal relationship with God, because it tells of God instructing the prophet Hosea to take "a wife of whoredom" (1:2), which possibly meant that he was to wed a woman who was already a prostitute. It may have meant, however, that whomever he married would eventually seek illicit affairs. In any event, this woman, Gomer (1:3), subsequently bore three children in Hosea's home, but the way those births are described leaves it an open question whether Hosea was the biological father, especially with the second and third children.

Eventually, Gomer ran off in pursuit of other lovers, but her fortunes must have gone downhill, for she later showed up on the slave block. Hosea discovered her there, paid the money necessary to redeem her, and took her again into his home, demanding faithfulness from her.

That God told Hosea to love an adulteress suggests that God wanted the prophet to understand how God felt about Israel's faithlessness. Just as Hosea was the jilted lover of Gomer, so God was the jilted lover of Israel. Just as Hosea's heart must have ached, so too God's heart ached.

Subsequently, Hosea used what he had learned from his personal agony to call Israel to repentance. The verses above quote not Hosea, but God speaking to Israel, describing the nation as a people who were previously consorting with other lovers (idols) but who are now restored in faithfulness as a "wife" to God, the "husband."

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul adapted the God-as-husband metaphor so that the "wife" was not Israel but the church (see Ephesians 5:25-27). Obviously, with both Hosea and Paul using marriage as a metaphor for the divine-human bond, it's not a big step to think of one's connection to God as a personal relationship -- though in both cases, the biblical writers did not picture a solo human in the wife role, but rather a group: Israel in the case of Hosea and the church in the case of Paul.

**Questions:**Does the marriage-to-God metaphor work for you? Why or why not? Have you ever felt that God was "romancing" you?

**Galatians 4:4-7***But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.* (For context, read 3:19--4:7.)

In Galatians, Paul uses a different metaphor to describe the relationship that God wants with us: one in which God is the Father and we are his adopted children. Paul wrote this as part of a larger discussion in which he was explaining how followers of Jesus who were not Jewish came to be included in (i.e., "adopted" into) God's family where the "natural" children were the Jews.

Obviously, while different from marriage, a father-child relationship is normally a personal, one-on-one connection, and that is especially true with God as Father, a point Paul makes by saying that the "Spirit of his Son" helps us cry "Abba!" which indicates a deep personal relationship with a father or father figure." Some Bible scholars believe that the Hebrew word "Abba" is basically the equivalent of "Dad" -- not a childish "Daddy," but an indication of an adult relationship. In other words, "father" is biological or positional language while "Abba" is heart language.

**Questions:** If you address God as "Father," what do you have in mind? What other terms or titles do you sometimes use in prayer to God, and what do those terms suggest about the nature of your connection to God?

**John 14:21***They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.* (For context, read 14:15-24.)

Jesus made this statement to his disciples shortly before his death. Notice the intimacy implied in the words "loved by my Father" and "reveal myself."

**Questions:** What standard is Jesus stating here by which to determine one's love for him? Does one have to have a "personal" relationship to abide by that standard? Why or why not?

**John 20:28-29***Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"  Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."* (For context, read 20:24-29.)

This exchange occurred between the disciple Thomas and Jesus during one of the latter's post-resurrection appearances to his followers. Note that Jesus says that those who would come to believe in him without benefit of seeing him are "blessed." This would seem to suggest that the kind of relationship which is limited because there are no face-to-face opportunities is still enough for one to be a follower of Jesus.

**Questions:** Do you think Jesus was scolding Thomas in this encounter? Why or why not? If you could ask Jesus one question about your own connection (or lack thereof) with him, what would it be?

**For Further Discussion**

1. One TWW team member asserts that the line from the hymn "In the Garden," that says "And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own," sounds overly sentimental and far from the experience of many Christians. What is your reaction to that line? Why?
            Another team member noted that the line that follows this one is the one many people take even more exception to: "And the joys we share as we tarry there none other has ever known." Really? The hymnwriter is claiming that his relationship with Jesus is so unique that no one else could possibly understand it or experience something similar. What is your reaction to that line? Why?

2. Respond to this: In his book *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud*, author Philip Yancey tells about holing up in a cabin in Colorado to read the Bible cover to cover. Snow began to fall as he started Genesis, and it was still coming down when he got to Revelation -- 72 inches of new powder in all.
            In somewhat the way Yancey was buried in snow, he was also immersed in scripture. One impression he gained from reading the Bible in continuity is that God as portrayed on those pages is different from God as we commonly imagine him to be. Rather than meeting an impassive God marked primarily by great power and omniscience, Yancey encountered a God of deep emotions, who feels joy, frustration, pain and anger, a God who allows the behavior of his children to affect him.
            In particular, reading the prophets helped Yancey see the Bible as the story of God the Jilted Lover, one who deeply loves the people he has made and yearns to be loved by them in return. Even though God finds himself cuckolded by his created ones again and again, God goes to great lengths to woo humankind back to him. In that light, even the judgments that God eventually permitted to fall upon his people were not retaliations but attempts to clear the way to romance humankind afresh.
            The image of God as a jilted lover should change how we picture our own behavior. When we sin, we are not merely violating certain divine rules. Rather we are breaking the heart of one who loves us as a groom loves his bride. God gladly welcomes our vows of faithfulness, only to suffer heartbreak as we run off with some other lover. Still, God wants us back ...

3. Discuss this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "[Early in the Bible,] God established a personal relationship with Abraham in which Abraham felt empowered to challenge and argue with God and even doubt him, such as that whole thing with Eliezer of Damascus (Genesis 15:1-6), but every now and then the awe bursts in, like the re-covenant ritual with the torch (Genesis 15:7-21). Ditto Moses though awe and distance is displayed on Mount Sinai and in the partial revelation with the sheltering behind the rock (Exodus 33:12-23). Much of the time the relationship is lived through festivals when history is claimed through eating and joy in Passover, Purim, The Festival of Weeks and Booths. We experience a personal God through personal relationships with God's people. On the other hand Uzzah died getting too close to the ark (2 Samuel 6:1-11), which was the physical conduit through which the relationship was mediated.

**Responding to the News**

This is a good time to think about what you understand "personal relationship with God or Jesus" to mean and to consider whether you hear any call from God in your understanding of the phrase.

**Prayer**

O God, let my relationship with you be what you intend for me as I seek to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. In his name. Amen.

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Dear Class Member,
Our next lesson opens with the news that the World Food Program was recently awarded the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize. We take the opportunity to explore themes of hunger, food insecurity, Jesus as the bread of life, and our responsibility as followers of Jesus to feed the hungry.

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**2020 Nobel Peace Prize Awarded to World Food Program
*The Wired Word* for the Week of October 25, 2020**

**In the News**

On October 9, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced the World Food Program (WFP)  as the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. The humanitarian arm of the United Nations is being honored for its hunger relief initiatives that support stability and improve the chances that peacemaking efforts in war-torn regions of the world will succeed.

In its press release, Berit Reiss-Andersen, chair of the Oslo-based Norwegian Nobel Committee, said the WFP "plays a key role in multilateral cooperation on making food security an instrument of peace, and has made a strong contribution towards mobilizing UN Member States to combat the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict."

The WFP had argued that starvation as a method of warfare should be condemned. To that effect, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2417 in May 2018.

Last year, the WFP provided assistance to close to 100 million (out of 135 million) victims of "acute food insecurity and hunger" in 88 countries, including some of the hardest-hit nations, such as Burkina Faso, Nigeria, South Sudan, The Democratic Republic of Congo and Yemen. Of those millions of hungry people, nearly 50 million are severely malnourished children, 3 million of whom die every year.

The WFP estimates that it could see nearly a 100 percent increase in the number of hungry people in the countries where it operates -- up to 270 million -- by the end of 2020, due in large part to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a vicious cycle, hunger can trigger armed conflict, which in turn can cause conditions that lead to greater hunger, such as destruction and/or theft of property, crops, herds or flocks, plunging people into poverty, homelessness and ill health. Natural disasters, pest infestations and economic downturns also exacerbate such problems.

While violent conflict is the primary driver of larger numbers of people living with chronic and acute food shortages, the pandemic is increasingly a significant contributing factor that "threatens to double the number of severely hungry people this year," according to World Food Program USA.

David Beasley, WFP's executive director, said "Until the day we have a medical vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos. Without it, we could see increased social unrest and protests, a rise in migration, deepening conflict and widespread under-nutrition among populations that were previously immune from hunger."

Latin America and Africa have seen sharp rises in the number of people needing food assistance since the coronavirus outbreak.

According to Bread for the World, almost 16 million children in the United States, or one in five, is food insecure. Lack of adequate, safe and nutritious food is particularly hard on children. An estimated 2 billion people suffer from the "hidden hunger" of malnourishment due to the lack of essential vitamins and minerals, which can lead to stunted physical and mental development, impacting the ability to learn and to provide for themselves in the future.

[Feeding America](https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america) estimates that due to the pandemic, the number of children in the United States living in food insecure households jumped from 10 million to 18 million children, out of more than 54 million people total (up from 35 million who had limited or uncertain access to sufficient food in 2019).

Lauren Bauer, a researcher at the Brookings Institution, reported that about a third of U.S. families with children are suffering from food insecurity. Because of complications caused by the coronavirus, many families have difficulty accessing food, so more children are going hungry.

[The U.S. Department of Agriculture](https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/08/31/usda-extends-free-meals-kids-through-december-31-2020) has relaxed regulations through the end of 2020, so that any hungry child can be fed, without the usual red tape, according to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue. But in many parts of the country, the majority of the 30 million-plus children who qualify for free or subsidized school meals aren't getting them -- often because they can't get to them.

"This unprecedented crisis requires an unprecedented response," Beasley emphasized. "If we do not respond rapidly and effectively to this viral threat, the outcome will be measured in an unconscionable loss of life, and efforts to roll back the tide of hunger will be undone."

The WFP is modifying its response to hunger by delivering over half of its aid in cash and vouchers rather than product, which allows communities to access food from local producers, thus providing a stimulus to economies.

"I know I'm not deserving of an award like this," Beasley said, "but all the men and women around the world in the World Food Program and our partners who put their lives on the line every day [deserve it]."

Beasley has not indicated how WFP will use the $1.1 million award that comes with the Nobel Peace Prize.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[The Nobel Peace Prize for 2020. *nobelprize.org*](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2020/press-release/)
[World Food Program Wins Nobel Peace Prize for Hunger Fight. *AP News*](https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-donald-trump-health-oslo-russia-b6ea1ba3f7c8daed96ad2734f11c61cb)
['Children Are Going Hungry': Why Schools Are Struggling to Feed Students. *NPR*](https://www.npr.org/2020/09/08/908442609/children-are-going-hungry-why-schools-are-struggling-to-feed-students)
[World Food Programme to Assist Largest Number of Hungry People Ever, as Coronavirus Devastates Poor Nations. *wfpusa.org*](https://www.wfpusa.org/news-release/wfp-to-assist-most-hungry-people-ever-due-to-coronavirus/)
[Bread for the World. *bread.org*](https://www.bread.org/hunger-programs)

**The Big Questions**

1. Recall a time (if you can) when you were hungry, food insecure, or malnourished. What factors contributed to your situation? If you can't remember such a time, why do you think you never had that experience?

2. When, if ever, have you been involved in feeding the hungry, either as a person of faith or as a citizen? What motivates you to undertake such work?

3. What is the significance of the petition, in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread"?

4. What underlying issues exist in your community that exacerbate the problem of hunger, and what steps need to be taken to alleviate those concerns? How can your church help move the community forward to meet these needs?

5. Are there central food collection agencies in your area that your congregation supports in some way? If so, how do you support such projects? If not, why not?

**Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

**Isaiah 58:6-8**
*Is not this the fast that I choose:*
*to loose the bonds of injustice,*
*to undo the thongs of the yoke,*
*to let the oppressed go free,*
*and to break every yoke?*
*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*
*and bring the homeless poor into your house;*
*when you see the naked, to cover them,*
*and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*
*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,*
*and your healing shall spring up quickly;*
*your vindicator shall go before you,*
*the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*(For context, read 58:1-12.)

God decries the religious rites and festivals of God's people, when they are accompanied by mistreatment of the poor. God is not impressed with elaborate shows of religiosity, and is not fooled by fervent expressions of love for the Deity when those who are made in God's image are dishonored and unloved.

This sentiment is echoed in Jesus' own emphasis on the connection between the greatest commandment, to love God, and the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40).

Other scriptures also confirm this truth. 1 John 4:20-21 says that "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

The best way to "fast" or to worship God, Isaiah writes, is to set oppressed humans free, to share one's bread with hungry people, to house the homeless poor in your own home, and to clothe the naked (vv. 6-7).

When God's people act this way, they find healing, strength, light in the darkness, and discover that God is receptive to their cries for help, more than willing to guide them and to satisfy their needs, even in the "parched places" (vv. 8-11).

**Questions:**When, if ever, have you mistaken religious fervor for the kind of life God is really looking for? Or when have you seen great religious zeal in others that was not accompanied by genuine love for others? What needs to happen to transform outward expressions of religious rituals into Christlike character and behavior?

**Luke 2:4, 7***Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. … And [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*(For context, read 2:1-7.)
**Luke 22:19***Then [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."*(For context, read 22:14-20.)
**John 6:35***Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*(For context, read 6:5-13, 35-58.)
**Matthew 4:2**
*[Jesus] fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*(For context, read 4:1-4.)

We share these verses together to explore who Jesus claims to be, and what his experience tells us about his identity.

We know from the Luke 2 passage that Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, which, being translated, means "house of bread." Mary laid him in a manger, which was a feeding trough. Such language is suggestive of the Lord's Table (Luke 22:19), as Jesus offers his body as bread for the world.

John 6 records an incident found in all four Gospels, when Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000 men, plus the women and children who were with them, on five barley loaves and two small fish (v. 9). Everyone ate as much as they wanted until they were satisfied (vv. 11-12).

But even though Jesus had performed this amazing sign of feeding the hungry, the crowd wanted more proof that he was who he said he was, "the bread that came down from heaven" (v. 41). All they could see was his humanity, that he was the son of Joseph (v. 42). The claim that Jesus had come down from heaven didn't make sense to them.

Jesus said again, "I am the bread of life" (v. 48), even better than the manna in the wilderness, which the Jews' ancestors had eaten, because those ancestors still died later (v. 49). But Jesus claimed to be a qualitatively different kind of bread, of which one could partake and never die (vv. 50-51, 58).

Just before Jesus began his earthly ministry, he was led into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. After fasting for 40 days and nights, he was ravenously hungry (Matthew 4:2). We find that his hunger wasn't a one-of-a-kind experience, either. He knew hunger other times as well (see Mark 11:12 for an example).

**Questions:**How can the bread of life be hungry? How is it possible? What does it mean?

How is Jesus the bread of life for us? How is he both God's provision for us and also God With Us *in* our hunger?

**Mark 11:12-14**
*On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.*(For context, read 11:12-14, 20-24.)
**John 15:1-2**
*[Jesus said,] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."*(For context, read John 15:1-17.)

When Jesus first saw the fig tree, its display of leaves seemed to suggest that there might be fruit on the branches, but there was "nothing but leaves." The next day, when the band of disciples passed by the tree again, they found the tree withered down to the roots.

In John 15, Jesus spoke about God's desire that our lives produce more than "leaves."

The purpose of a fruit tree is not simply to preserve its own DNA, but to bear fruit so that others might live. Using this analogy, we can infer that the purpose of our lives is not simply to preserve our own lives, or even to pass our DNA along to the next generation, but to give generously of ourselves so that others might live.

**Questions:**Using the analogy of the fig tree or the vine, what would you say the leaves represent? What does the fruit represent?

When Jesus looks at our lives, what do you think he wants to see? What does Jesus hunger for, and how can we satisfy his hunger?

Have you ever gone through a season of "pruning"? What is the purpose of pruning in the life of the believer? What is it that God is cutting away? What is it that God wants to produce in our lives?

**James 2:14-17**
*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.* (For context, read 2:14-26.)
**1 John 3:17***How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

James wrote that we demonstrate our faith in God by the way we work to meet the needs of the naked for clothing and the hungry for food. In a similar way, John wrote that we demonstrate that God's love abides in us when we help a brother or sister in need. He goes on to say that we must love not just in our words and our speech, but "in truth and action" (1 John 3:18).

**Questions:**How does clothing the naked and feeding the poor strengthen the faith of those who are doing the clothing and feeding? How is the faith of the people being served strengthened when they are helped?

Share about a time when your own faith and love grew from a practical experience of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or being fed and clothed when you were in need.

**For Further Discussion**

1. Discuss this, from TWW team member Joanna Loucky-Ramsey: "In one downtown church where I served on staff years ago, overseeing our hunger relief program as well as the Christian Education ministry, our congregation was shocked when one of our children's teachers, an older single woman who lived alone, died of starvation. We had no idea that she was food insecure. She could have received assistance through our own food pantry, but, for whatever reason, she never accessed that service.
            "I'm not sure we ever adequately addressed what we might have done differently as a staff and as a congregation to reduce the sense of fear or shame that may have prevented this woman from asking for help. But even with all our focus on relieving hunger in our community, we missed the mark with one of our own. I will always feel that we failed her. And that makes me wonder how many other people slip through the cracks of any safety net, whose names we never know."

2. In 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul wrote: "And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Here is an example of a young girl who took on the task of caring for her younger siblings after the death of both parents.
            In 2013, Lisa Smith, died from cervical cancer, leaving her husband, Alexander Rodriguez, to care for their six children. But three years later, he died of lymphoma.
            The couple's eldest child, [Samantha](https://scoop.upworthy.com/21-year-old-taking-care-of-five-siblings-after-parents-death), 17, knew that her siblings could easily end up in foster care. So she decided she would be the adult they needed. She made sure Destiny, Bella, Michael, Brenda, and Milagros, ranging in age from 7 to 16, were fed, clothed, and educated.
            She took her brother and sisters to Orange County, Florida, to be closer to their grandmother, juggled her own schoolwork with her part-time waitressing job, "to set an example" for her siblings. "I can't tell them to be successful in school if I wasn't," she explained. "When I [graduated from high school] the kids were very proud of me."
            Rodriguez continues to care for her younger siblings while attending college and working part-time. The most important lessons she learned from her parents, she says, is "not to take anything for granted. ... At the end of the day, the material things don't matter. What's given can be taken away so fast. The only thing that really matters is family and love and support."
            "This is what makes me, me," the young woman said. "It makes me so happy to be with them and to be there for them."
            Normally, we wouldn't expect a teenager to shoulder such a heavy responsibility. What, if anything, should we take away from this story as we think about feeding the hungry?

3. Reflect on this: In ["A Rural Church Reimagines the Lord's Supper as a Farm Stand,"](https://baptistnews.com/article/a-rural-church-reimagines-the-lords-supper-as-a-farm-stand/#.X12E_mhJFPY) Rev. Justin Cox wrote about how his congregation, the United Church of Lincoln, Vermont, views feeding the hungry through a "Take It Or Leave It" farm stand as a kind of Lord's Table or eucharist, as a "new way to tell the Jesus story."
            "The farm stand encourages community and neighborliness through invitation and participation," Cox explained.
            When the church building was destroyed by a fire in the early 1980s, the community expressed a deep desire for a place of prayer and worship that would provide cohesion and common ground for all. In the end, the people moved a Methodist church building from higher up a nearby mountain to Lincoln, where it now sits on top of the old Baptist church foundation.
            Cox described the farm stand as "an access point that blurs the line of sacredness by offering a space where those uncomfortable with problematic symbols, like those of church steeples and altar tables, can still come and feel they are fully included."
            The pastor stated that this "is a community's attempt at reexamining the Lord's Supper, or ... reimagining what an open-table theology could really look like ... The farm stand is radical, bold and a new vision of an extended altar table, the bread and wine now replaced with tomatoes and squash."
            Cox described sharing coffee and chocolate chip zucchini bread made from an unknown donor's squash picked up at the farm stand with neighbors as a kind of communion through which "the kingdom of God or God's new day, has now been made known. It has come near. It is obtainable in the here and now."

4. More than two decades before [David Beasley](https://mtstandard.com/news/local/former-governor-s-faith-tested/article_e4579bdc-5808-11df-af3e-001cc4c03286.html) was appointed to head the World Food Program in 2017, he was the governor of South Carolina. Beasley had run on a platform to keep the Confederate battle flag atop the state house dome, where it had flown beneath the American and state flags since 1962.
            But in 1996, less than two years into his administration, in response to racial violence, he recommended that the Confederate flag be taken down and moved to a Civil War memorial on state house grounds. The South Carolina legislature rejected his proposal and Beasley's political base shrank. He was defeated when he ran for re-election in 1998.
            Two years later, the South Carolina legislature did move the Confederate flag from the dome to the Confederate Soldier Memorial on state house grounds, just as Beasley had proposed earlier.
            Beasley has stated that he changed his position, in part, because of his new commitment to Jesus, after searching through various world religions for a robust faith he could believe in and base his life upon.
            In the early 2000s, Beasley traveled through the Middle East in an effort to foster dialogue and bridge building between Christians and Muslims.
            To what extent do you think Beasley's spiritual journey may have led him to his current position with the World Food Program and to the Nobel Peace Prize? How has your own faith impacted the direction your life has taken?

**Responding to the News**

1. This might be the time to focus your tears and your prayers "for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street" (Lamentations 2:18-19).

2. When so many people are falling into poverty and food insecurity during the pandemic, discuss how you might assist those who are struggling to put food on the table. How can you find those whose need might be hidden? How can you support those in the community who are already engaged in hunger relief efforts? How can you advocate for hunger relief with elected and appointed officials in government? Resolve to take one specific action this week.

**Prayer**suggested by Psalm 107:4-9; Revelation 7:13-17

O God, even as we long for the day when we will know hunger and thirst no more, we follow the Lamb of God, our shepherd who guides us through dry, desert lands to springs of the water of life. We have not yet arrived at that oasis where the hungry are satisfied, but as we walk in Jesus' footsteps, inspire us to give of ourselves and our resources as generously as he has given himself to us and for us. And as we do so, fill our hearts with his love and the joy of the Spirit of God. Amen.

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