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GIVE

*What does it feel like to receive a gift that was personally chosen for you?
What does it feel like to give a personally chosen gift to someone else?*

This week, we're focusing on giving. Often, when we think about giving we think about presents, charity, or giving money to the poor. This type of giving is important, but the most meaningful giving often requires sacrifice – someone putting extra thought and effort into how they show their love and appreciation.

Sometimes the greatest gifts don't even cost money – but instead include us giving of ourselves.

What about giving meaningfully to God? Worshipping God can be an experience that is as unique as you are. He chose your unique qualities just for you. How can you worship God with the passions and gifts he has given you?

We each have unique interests, things we care about, skills, and talents. These qualities are gifts from God. But God did not intend for us to just keep them for ourselves; he meant for us to share them with others.

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells the story of three servants who are given bags of gold so that they can grow their master's wealth. This parable has multiple interpretations of its meaning, but for this week we are focusing on God's desire to use the gifts he has entrusted us with.

(read Scripture: Luke 4:1–13)

The master is pleased with the servants who multiplied his gifts but angry with the servant who did nothing to invest what was given to him.

Using our gifts for others can be scary and requires risk, but when we use what God has given us to demonstrate his love we experience the fullness of life he intends us to.

Use the activity attached to this week to help you think through your gifts and how they interact with our world.

The Parable of the Bags of Gold

Matthew 25:14–28

14 “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. 15 To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

16 The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. 17 So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. 18 But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

19 “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20 The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

21 “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!’

22 “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

23 “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!’

24 “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

26 “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27 Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.’

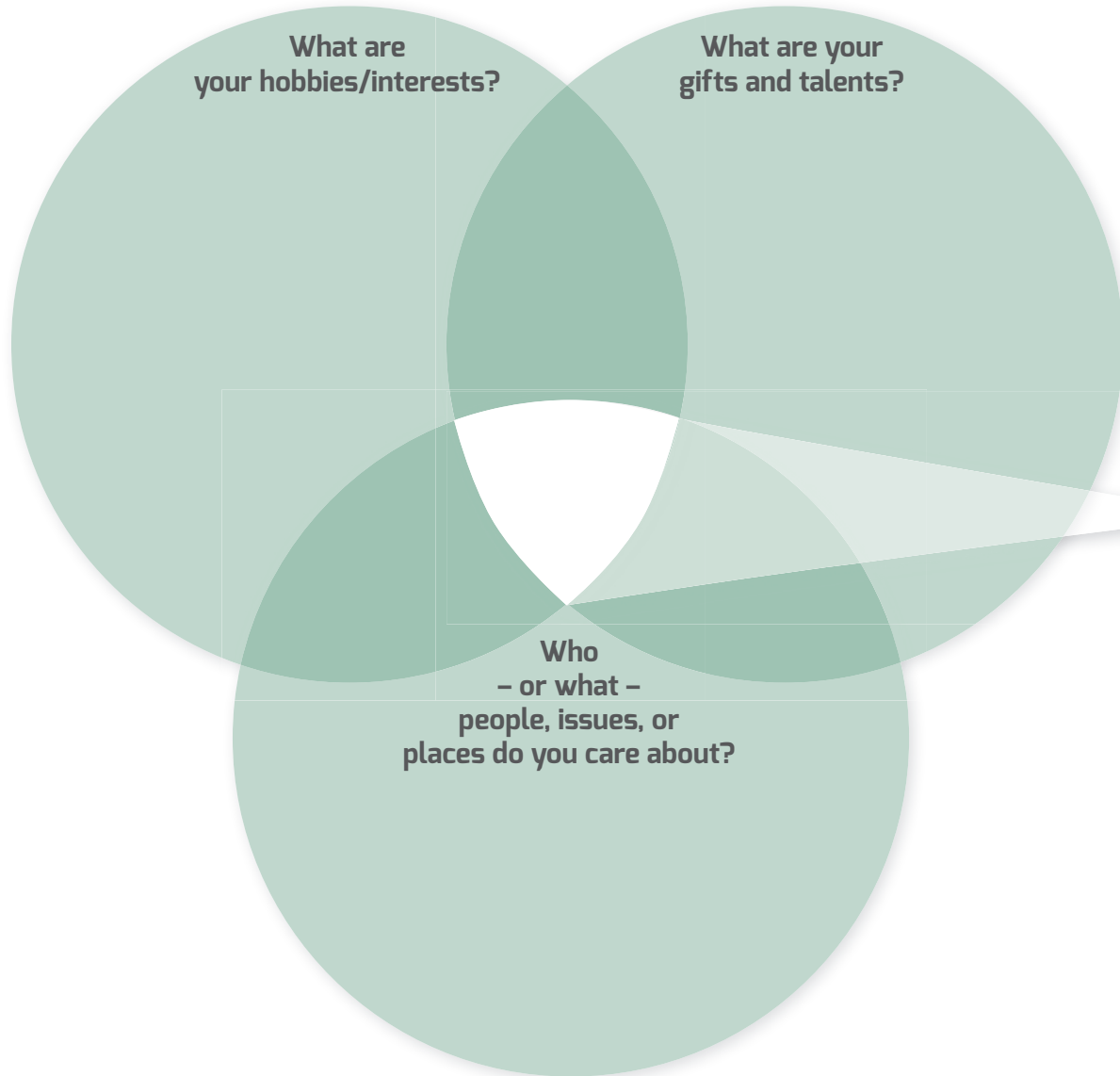
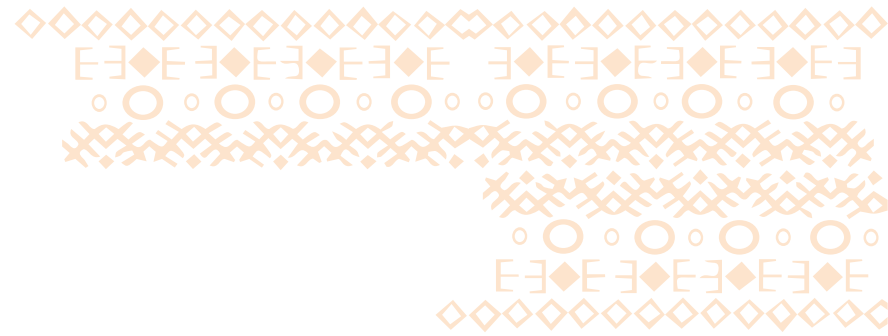
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GIVE – Activity

The following activity asks you to reflect on who you are, your hobbies, what you are passionate about, and areas of our world you are interested in serving.

STEP 1: Fill out each circle honestly and one at a time.

STEP 2: Look at how your answers relate to each other, what can you actively do to use these together in order to give or serve in your community?



Do you see similarities between your answers in each circle?

Your answers most likely resemble ways you can incorporate your interests, talents, and passions to impact your community.

How can you combine these gifts to bless others in your community?

GIVE – Story

The youth in Kayole, Kenya are using their talents to share the love of God and engage their community around important issues. They use different skills and gifts such as dance, writing, creating art and acting to share what they are passionate about with others.

Many youth in the community formed groups based on their different interests. The groups develop their skills together and organize events within the community to share their talents. They have organized fashion shows, dance competitions, art performances, and singing competitions, all created by the youth. The groups do not just highlight skills, but provide opportunities for students to serve others with activities like cleaning up the community and working in a children's home.

Specifically, two theater groups have been created involving many of the youth. These groups perform in high schools and at other community events. The plays are more than just entertaining; they have messages to help their peers learn about topics such as HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. Through the creativity of the performances, the actors connect with the audience on a different level and start discussions about issues that might often be difficult to talk about.

The theater groups also perform in orphanages. When spending time with the children at the homes, the older youth become role models to the younger children. This encourages the children to discover their own talents as well. As the group gives their time and energy to serve the community with their passions for acting, singing, and dancing, the youth are bringing hope and change to their neighbors in Kayole, Kenya.

Other youth from around Kenya are participating in similar performance groups to engage their community through their talents.



GIVE – Action & Share

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

Practice using your gifts to serve others. Using the earlier activity, give of yourself – what you love to do, what you are good at, and to the people you feel called to serve.

Do you love playing a sport? Serve youth by hosting a skills clinic.

Do you enjoy cooking? Volunteer at a kitchen for homeless communities.

Can you knit? Make hats and scarves for people who may not be able to afford one otherwise.

As a small community, brainstorm ways you can combine your passions and serve together. The most important part is that you use your gifts for the benefit of others this week!

Take photos and write down stories of your experience. On our global sharing platform, **share** what you are going to do by creating an action. Then come back and update the action with things you learned or pictures from your giving throughout the week.

THANK

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In the summer of 2012, runner Usain Bolt of Jamaica took the Olympic Gold Medal in the 200m, becoming “the fastest man in the world.” Even though Bolt is showman with a big dazzling personality, when leaving the medal stand, he humbly pronounced his deepest thanks to his coach, his coaching team, and to God, saying “nothing would have been possible without Him.” Even in the midst of our greatest achievements, we still know that it is the investment of many that gets us to those high achievements.

This week, we’re going to explore how we experience life to its fullest through our connections and relationships with others.

We each have had people in our lives – parents, family members, teachers, friends, mentors, and even strangers – who have influenced who we are and the opportunities we have. It’s through these people that we better understand and experience God’s goodness and His love.

It can be easy to take these people for granted and not fully recognize the impact they’ve made in our lives. Hopefully, their contributions in our lives have influenced how we now love and serve others.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of two sons; neither fully understands their father’s unconditional love. As you read this passage, consider those in your life who have demonstrated unconditional love.

(read Scripture: Luke 15:1-32)

The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

11 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

13 “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 20 So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

(TNIV)

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THANK - CONTINUED

The younger son neglects to see the goodness of his father and squanders his inheritance. When he returns, his father celebrates and demonstrates unconditional love. Rather than feeling happy for his brother, the older son is angry, because he fails to recognize that his father's love is unconditional and does not need to be earned.



**Who in your life has
demonstrated God's goodness
and unconditional love?**



Next week, we are going to practice sharing life in all its fullness by serving people or places in the margins of our community. But first, we are going to reflect on how we have experienced life to its fullness by identifying those who have demonstrated God's goodness and love in our own lives. Use the Activity on the next page to guide your reflection.

THANK – Activity

Next week, we are going to practice sharing life in all its fullness by serving people or places in the margins of our community. **But first**, we are going to reflect on how we have experienced life to its fullness by thanking those who have demonstrated God’s goodness and love in our own lives.



STEP 1: Write things you are thankful for – these can be events, moments in time, and opportunities you are grateful for.

STEP 2: Write down the name of a person who contributed to each of the things you wrote in Step 1.

STEP 3: Identify and write down how each person reflects characteristics or attributes of God.

STEP 4: In the story, the son seeks to reconcile with the father for his actions. Are there people in your life who you need to reconcile with because you or the other person feels wronged?



THANK – Story

Project Gratitude
Singapore

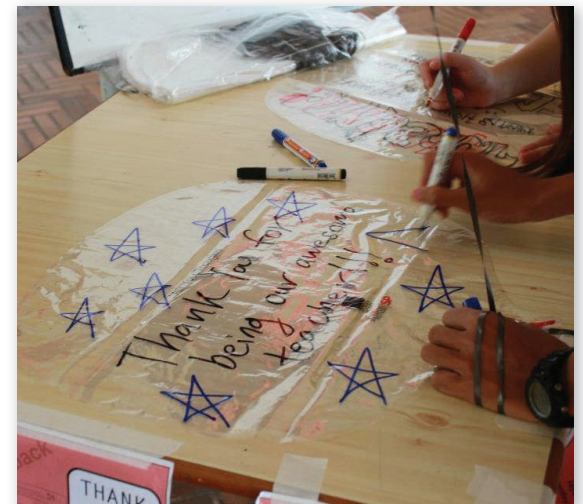
In 2011 a group of students from the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) in Singapore started Project Gratitude, an initiative to spread thankfulness across their campus. The students wanted to express their appreciation to people whose actions may be overlooked on their university campus; the woman in the dining hall who makes your favorite dish, the bus driver who shuttles people to and from classes, the security guard who keeps everyone safe at night.

The initial idea was simple: students would buy a piece of fruit, attach a note of thanks to it, and give it to a university staff person who had been a blessing in their daily lives on campus. Even though it was a small act, the students of Project Gratitude hoped it could spark conversations, which would develop into relationships and hopefully bring the university community closer together.

The small ways of expressing gratitude were contagious and inspired a group of law students at the same university to plan an appreciation dinner for the campus staff. The dinner celebrated how the work of the staff makes the school a better place for all who attend and it sought to thank them through sharing a meal.



All the students noted that these actions of gratitude required taking a personal risk. Some worried that staff wouldn't attend the dinner, or that there would be awkward silences when building relationships with the staff. Despite these fears the dinner was successful. Later one of the students talked about the impact of gratitude saying, "Human interaction, when approached sincerely, transcends boundaries and that was an immediate observation from the heartfelt conversations that ensued." Ultimately, sincere appreciation and thankfulness towards others brings joy to all those involved and is well worth the risk.





THANK – Action & Share

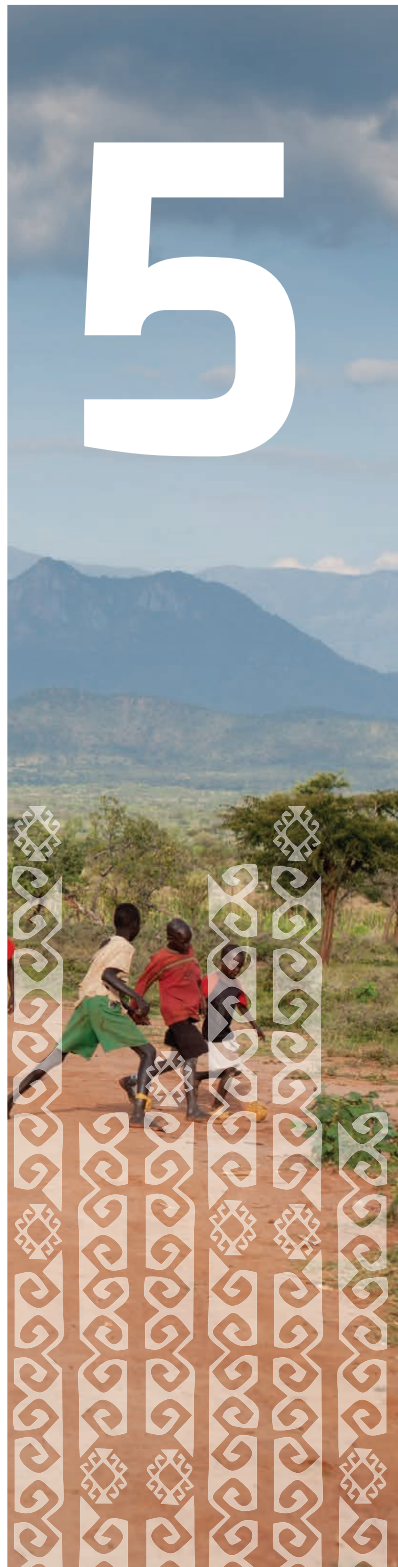
THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

Think about what and who you wrote down as being thankful for in the activity you completed earlier. **Show appreciation to at least one person who you wrote down that are thankful for** – someone who has helped you experience and understand what it means to live life to its fullest.

Write a letter to that individual, sharing how they have contributed to your life and thanking them for the ways God has used them to guide you.

The prodigal son greets his father by taking responsibility for his actions; and the father responds with unconditional love and a joyful heart for celebration. **Think of one person you need to reconcile with-** who do you need to forgive or seek forgiveness from? Do this with unconditional love as shown by the father and a genuine desire to take responsibility for your actions as shown by the son.

Lastly, **create an action** on the global sharing platform to share your thankfulness. Also share who you wrote your letter to and why.



SERVE

We live in a world that is constantly telling us to put ourselves into categories. There are first class seats and then there's coach. General admission or VIP passes. Upscale shops or bargain stores. Degrees from universities you brag about versus the degree you were just happy to get. These outward definitions can become the way we see ourselves and others; "value" coming from the desired categories you can get into.

It's not always easy to treat everyone as valuable. Standards set by our society or culture often tells us that some people are not as valuable as others because of certain qualities or where they come from. These judgments cause us to assume the character of someone before knowing their story. Judgments interfere with living into a full life by convincing us that we are somehow more valuable than another person.

The way God sees us is completely different though. He sees us through His lens of a loving Father. What if we could begin to see others through such a lens? But what if you valued everyone in your community the way God does? Is that evident in how you treat others in your daily life?

John 8 challenges our tendencies to judge others with the story of a woman about to be punished for adultery. Her community judges her sins as worse than their own and wants to stone her to death because of it. However, when her community consults Jesus, his reaction to the woman contradicts the societal response. Notice how Jesus responds to the woman in the story.

(read Scripture: John 8:1-11)

Jesus reminds the community that each of them has also sinned in their own lives. By showing forgiveness to the woman instead of condemning her to be stoned, Jesus shows that we can all receive forgiveness for our sins. He also clearly illustrates that it is not up to the sinner to judge another sinner. In reality we have all stepped over the line of sin. It is not important how far over the line our sin is perceived to be because the only true response to any sin is receiving God's forgiveness and grace. God finds each of us valuable and does not see one sin as greater than another.

Adulterous Woman

John 8:1-11

1 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

(TNIV)

Jesus came to bring life to its fullest for everyone, and by accepting God's forgiveness and grace we can experience that life to its fullest.

SERVE – Story

Let's Create a Smile
Armenia

Liana was attending classes and participating in activities outside of school when she noticed a need in her community in Armenia to help children with disabilities. She says the number of children with disabilities in her community is continually rising, especially among those living in poverty. Without the proper funding and desire in the community to care for children with disabilities, they have become vulnerable to neglect.

In April 2011, Liana helped start an initiative called “Let’s Create a Smile” based on the idea that it is important to create more hope for those neglected in their community. Through “Let’s Create a Smile,” volunteers engage with both children and elderly people with disabilities. They participate in various projects such as art therapy, dance classes, and painting with the children. Other times, volunteers go to visit the elderly to help with chores around the house or just sit and talk.



The project is growing and adding more volunteers as well as serving more children and families. Currently, the project works with almost 100 children and 80% of the children have disabilities. Through this program, Liana and the other volunteers are reaching out to show love to the most vulnerable people in their community. Together they cross boundaries to care for the needs of children and elderly. More importantly, their actions show the children and elderly that each of them is loved and valued for whom they are.

But it is not just the children and elderly who are impacted. The volunteers themselves are being changed. “I feel like I learn a little more about life from every person I help,” says Liana. The group of young volunteers is setting an example to the community of how to love and truly value others.



SERVE – Activity

The action for this week is challenging us to meet someone new in our community that we wouldn't normally connect with. But before you run off to put your talents and passions into action, take time to answer these questions that will help you process the whole experience.

STEP 1: Answer the *before* questions to help you think about what you are about to experience and to take note of your initial thoughts.

STEP 2: Come back after your experience and answer the *after* questions to help you process.

Before

Who are you going to connect with?

How are you going to connect with them?

What do you hope to learn about the other person and about yourself from your interaction?

What is something you value about this person without really knowing much about them?

How is this person different from yourself?

After

What did you discover about _____?

What did you learn?

What misconceptions did you realize you had about the individual? How have those changed?

How are you and this person similar?



SERVE – Action & Share

Consider individuals in your community who are judged and treated as less valuable by yourself and others. Why are they perceived as less valuable? Now think of just one person and how Jesus would perceive that person. How could you appreciate and value the unique story and characteristics of that person even if societal judgments say otherwise?

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE:

Meet someone new in your community who you have judged as less valuable; someone whose characteristics, background, and story are different from yours.

But before you put run off to meet this person, take time to answer the questions on the next page. These will help you process the whole experience.

Then move forward with this challenge:

1. Meet someone new and ask about their story, seeking to understand who they are as a person created in the image of God.

– Who will you meet? It's likely there someone you encounter in your everyday schedule you could reach out to and meet. Maybe it's someone in your class who is quieter than other students, maybe it's someone who you buy coffee from every day, or maybe it's someone who is homeless in your neighborhood. If you need help deciding who to meet, consult your family, friends, or small group!

2. Then share your own story with them and consider the ways your lives are similar. Often, we have more in common with other people than we expect.

3. Go one step further and find a way to serve that person based on the relationship you have begun to develop with them.

– How can you show them how valuable they are? This should be an action, not just words.

4. Share about your experience with this person within your smaller community. Talk about how you learned about God, yourself, your community, and the value of others through this experience.

5. Create an action on the global sharing platform about your experience. Also share photos or other creative expressions about this.