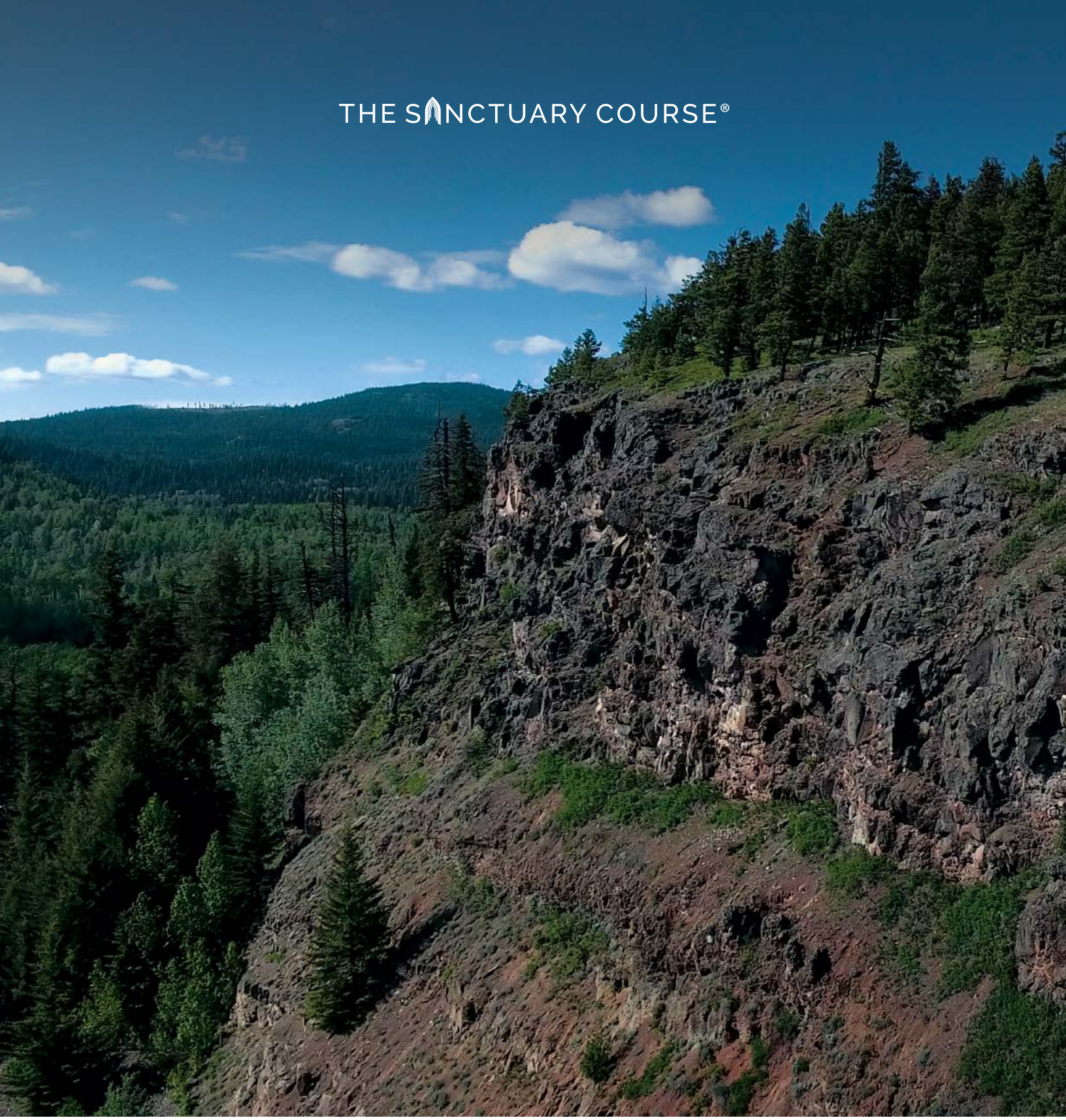

SESSION 5

COMPANIONSHIP

OPENING PSALM

> *When shall I come and behold*
> *the face of God?*
> *My tears have been my food*
> *day and night,*
> *while people say to me continually,*
> *"Where is your God?"* (Psalm 42:2b-3, NRSV)

The cry to behold the face of God captures the longing of the human heart for relationship. In these verses, the loss of homeland and temple is magnified by the grief of broken communion with God. Exile has removed Israel from the very presence of God, and now the psalmist's tears have become prayers. This session deals very directly with the significance of relationships and the power of presence in the human experience.

Discussion Question

- *Think about a friend who has played a significant role in your life. What are a few words that describe this friendship?*

➜ Remember, these questions are not mandatory; they are simply invitations. Any member of the group is free to decline an invitation at any time, and the group as a whole may decide to skip over a question if it seems unhelpful.

VIEW FILM

Today you will meet Cheryl, who lives with anxiety.

Anxiety disorders are characterized by significant and persistent fear and stress, as well as a range of physical symptoms. Some disorders are also characterized by panic attacks.

Discussion Question

- *When you consider Cheryl's experience living with anxiety, what stands out to you?*
- *Were there elements of Cheryl's story that surprised you or resonated with you?*

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the film, Cheryl speaks movingly about Chuck and Julia, a couple who pastored the church she attended a number of years ago. This church was a place of deep healing for Cheryl, and she attributes it to Julia: "Julia just loved me. I didn't do anything to deserve her love, and she just loved me." Friendships like this can play a significant role in shaping our identity and helping us develop a positive sense of self-worth. They remind us that we are valued for who we are, and that a diagnosis or mental health challenge does not define us. Ultimately, these relationships affirm our fundamental worth and humanity. The gift of friendship is one of the greatest gifts we can offer to individuals with lived experience.

Discussion Questions

- *In what ways do friendships affirm our dignity and value as individuals?*
- *Why might friendship be particularly important for people living with mental health challenges?*

THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

How do we meet the fundamental needs of individuals living with mental health challenges? After twenty-five years spent ministering to people experiencing homelessness and individuals living with mental health challenges, chaplain Craig Rennebohm identified five key spiritual practices that offer a way for us to develop authentic, mutual, and sustainable relationships with one another. Together, these practices are known as *companionship*.

The five spiritual practices of companionship include: providing **hospitality**, **neighboring**, adopting a **side-by-side perspective**, **listening**, and **accompaniment**. In identifying how these five practices differ from other models of relationship, you could say that companionship offers presence, rather than solutions. In companionship you do not need to have all the answers, provide a diagnosis, or resolve every problem; you simply need to make space and time for another person.

➜ For a more detailed description of these practices, see pages 83-84 in the coursebook.

It is important to note that different cultural contexts may call for carrying out these practices in different ways. Cheryl presents us with a uniquely Indigenous expression of hospitality when she describes entering an elder's home and being offered bannock or fry bread. Hospitality may be expressed differently in your context, but the desire to offer a safe and kind environment and to treat others with respect remains universal.

Discussion Questions

- *Why do you think that Rennebohm calls them spiritual practices?*
- *Is there a particular spiritual practice of companionship that resonates with you?*
- *What does hospitality look like in your culture? What about neighboring, or accompaniment?*

COMPANIONS

Patricia Brintle

ART REFLECTION

Companions, by **Patricia Brintle**, depicts two Haitian women wrapped in a prayer shawl. The gaze shared by the women suggests comfort, security, and familiarity, while the shawl represents physical and spiritual accompaniment—all significant elements of companionship.

Discussion Questions

- *What does this piece of art evoke for you?*
- *In what ways do you see the spiritual practices of companionship reflected in this painting? (As a reminder, these practices are providing hospitality, neighboring, adopting a side-by-side perspective, listening, and accompaniment.)*

THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The parable of the good Samaritan offers us an excellent example of companionship (Luke 10:29-37). The Samaritan stopped and offered aid due to his sense of shared humanity (neighboring), he carried the wounded traveler to safety (accompaniment), and he arranged for the man's care at an inn (hospitality). If you examine this story closely, however, you may notice another significant detail. Although the Samaritan had the financial resources to pay others for the necessary care, he chose to remain at the inn on the first night in order to tend to the wounded traveler personally. He offered the gift of his presence in addition to the gift of his resources, and this was the most humanizing act of all.

The value of personal presence is deeply biblical. In fact, it reflects a profound truth about human nature. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in the mutual love of the Trinity, so we are designed to be fundamentally connected to those around us through relationships. And this connection is laden with mystery. In ways that we may struggle to express or fully comprehend, the simple presence of another person can help us release emotional burdens and receive spiritual comfort. We are able to feel with and for one another—something the New Testament describes as bearing one another's burdens and mourning with those who mourn (Galatians 6:2; Romans 12:15).

Discussion Questions

- *Have you ever received the gift of another's presence in the midst of a difficult or painful season? If so, what was that experience like?*
- *The gifts of friendship, companionship, and presence share many similarities while remaining distinct. In what ways are these gifts similar? In what ways are they different?*
- *Chaplain Colin Jay observes that inviting individuals with mental health challenges to share their gifts and experiences can be transformative for communities of faith. Why do you think this might be true?*

SIDE-BY-SIDE EXERCISE

In order to make space for others in our relationships, we must honor their unique experiences and refrain from asserting that our viewpoints are "better" or "right." Adopting a side-by-side perspective can help us in this endeavor. But what does adopting a side-by-side perspective look like? The following exercise and discussion questions are designed to help your group reflect more deeply on this spiritual practice of companionship. (If your group does not meet in person, you can skip the exercise and simply work through the questions.)

Exercise: Ask two volunteers to walk across the room in a straight line three times.

1. The first time, one of the volunteers should walk directly behind the other.
2. The second time, the volunteers should start on opposite sides of the room and walk directly toward one another.
3. The third time, the volunteers should walk across the room side-by-side.

Afterwards, ask the volunteers to share what they were thinking and feeling each time they crossed the room. Invite other group members to share their observations as well.

Discussion Questions

- *What does it feel like when you interact with someone face-to-face? What sorts of interactions take place face-to-face?*
- *What does it feel like when you interact with someone who is standing in front of you or behind you? What sorts of interactions take place in a line?*
- *What does it feel like when you interact with someone who is standing next to you? What sorts of interactions take place side-by-side?*
- *Why do you think that adopting a side-by-side perspective is one of the spiritual practices of companionship? How would you describe this practice to someone who was unfamiliar with it?*

CLOSING PRAYER

This prayer for peace is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. It is a beautiful expression of our desire to demonstrate the love of Christ to all around us. Feel free to add your own prayers for your community at the end.

> Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
> where there is hatred, let me sow love;
> where there is injury, pardon;
> where there is doubt, faith;
> where there is despair, hope;
> where there is darkness, light;
> where there is sadness, joy.
>
> O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
> to be consoled as to console,
> to be understood as to understand,
> to be loved as to love.
> For it is in giving that we receive,
> it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
> and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
> Amen.