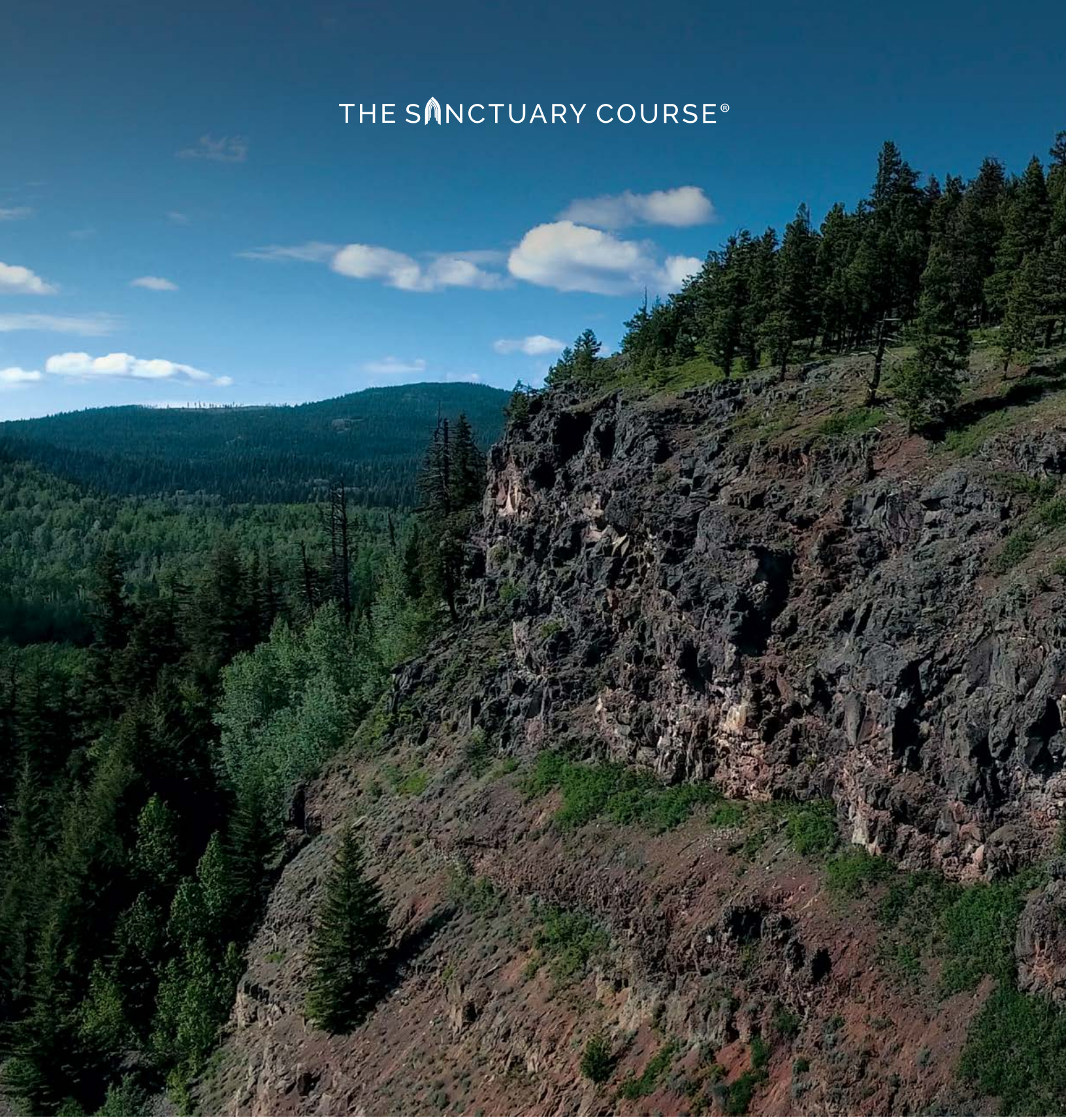

SESSION 5

COMPANIONSHIP

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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)

SESSION OVERVIEW

In this session you will:

- ✔ Explore the need for community
- ✔ Define and examine the practices of companionship
- ✔ Reflect on the nature of biblical community and the gift of personal presence

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.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the Participant's Guide it was stated that this course was designed to strengthen communities. After all, the New Testament makes some very significant claims about the importance of community. Christ told his disciples that they would be known by their love, and the apostles had a lot to say about the way that we treat one another. From the very beginning, it seems that Christian community has been at the heart of the proclamation of the gospel.

➜ If you want to explore this topic further, here are a few good places to start:

- John 13:34-35
- Acts 4:32-35
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-26
- Ephesians 4:1-3
- Colossians 3:12-14

But community doesn't just matter to us as Christians. The past few sessions have highlighted research in the field of mental health that demonstrates the importance of relationships and social support in preventing mental health challenges and promoting mental wellbeing. This research shows that communities play a critical role in helping individuals cope with stress and implement recovery plans.[1] Furthermore, the last session noted that a positive sense of identity and meaningful connections with others are important elements of recovery. As you may know from personal experience, relationships with family and friends play a significant role in shaping identity, and meaningful connections happen in the context of community.

For this reason, many people with mental health challenges emphasize the importance of relationships in their recovery. One rehabilitation psychiatrist who has experienced episodes of psychosis shares that her illness made her question her own worth. It was only through relationships with others that she was able to rediscover a sense of personal value.[2] And her testimony does not stand in isolation. Relationships remind all of us that we are valued for who we are, and that a diagnosis or mental health challenge does not define us. Friendships affirm our fundamental worth and our humanity.

This is why effective mental health care requires the development of communities where individuals are supported as they engage in the process of recovering identity and relationships.[3] The rest of this session will be spent looking at some of the practical ways that you can offer social support to individuals facing mental health challenges.

Reflection Question

What stood out to you in the psychological perspective? Why do you think it stood out?

Relationships remind all of us that we are valued for who we are, and that a diagnosis or mental health challenge does not define us. Friendships affirm our fundamental worth and our humanity.

THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

Everyone needs a place to belong, peer relationships, support in moments of crisis, and a sense of personal worth. These needs are fundamental to human nature. As Session 3 mentioned, however, social isolation and diminished self-esteem are common experiences for individuals living with mental health challenges. Given these realities, how do we meet the fundamental needs of individuals living with mental health challenges?

Craig Rennebohm has devoted much of his career to answering this question. As a chaplain, he spent twenty-five years ministering to people experiencing homelessness and individuals living with mental health challenges. He realized that the idea of equality was critical when it came to building authentic, sustainable relationships. He then developed a model based on this idea and called it *companionship*.[4] While this model emerged from his work on the streets, it is helpful in framing the ways we think about relating to people in general, and people with mental health challenges in particular (regardless of their level of functioning). Ultimately, companionship is an alternative to relationships that perpetuate inequality, such as the professional/patient relationship or the rescuer/victim relationship. (These types of relationships, which are frequently experienced by individuals with mental health challenges, can lead to disempowerment, passivity, low self-esteem, and hopelessness.)

According to Rennebohm, companionship is formed around five spiritual practices. First, **companionship includes hospitality**. When you hear the word "hospitality," you might picture a cozy home with a fire crackling in the fireplace, a delicious meal laid out on the table, and a friendly face waiting at the front door. This image effectively captures the essence of hospitality. Hospitality means offering a safe and kind environment, sharing simple things like food or conversation, and treating others with respect. These simple gestures can profoundly impact individuals who have been isolated due to stigma.

Second, **companionship includes neighboring**. Neighbors are people who share common ground. In the same way, companionship encourages people to develop relationships by looking for things that are shared in common between them. This might mean taking the time to talk about the weather, or going on a walk in order to enjoy a beautiful spring day together. No matter how different our experiences have been, at the end of the day we are all human. The practice of neighboring encourages us to simply meet others in our humanness.

Third, **companionship includes adopting a side-by-side perspective**. In order to make space for the other person in the relationship, we must honor their unique experiences. The picture of two individuals standing next to one another and surveying the same landscape helpfully illustrates this practice. Neither person is in front dominating the view or asserting that their perspective is "better" or "right." Instead, they remain side-by-side, taking in their own views while acknowledging the different views of the person next to them.

Fourth, **companionship includes listening**. This is another important way that we honor the unique experiences of others. Research has shown that sharing personal stories can be empowering and liberating. When we listen to someone, we are giving them the opportunity to put the pieces of their life together in a meaningful way. The manner of our listening can also support recovery. The best listeners suspend judgment and are sensitive to the "soul" of the story—the elements that reveal the identity and the spiritual experience of the storyteller—while providing encouragement and affirmation.

Fifth, **companionship includes accompaniment**. This involves both practical and spiritual support. When we hold someone in our thoughts and prayers, we are accompanying them on their journey of recovery. We can also accompany individuals by going with them to important meetings and medical appointments, offering to buy them groceries, and providing other assistance as required. This is the element of companionship that reminds individuals that they are not alone. However, accompaniment should be about supporting and empowering others rather than simply doing things for them.

These are the five spiritual practices of companionship: providing hospitality, neighboring, adopting a side-by-side perspective, listening, and accompaniment. If you had to summarize these practices and identify how they 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. Rennebohm describes it in this way:

> *Our hospitality may be as simple as a nod or a smile, our neighboring the willingness to linger a moment nearby rather than pass by on the other side. We may choose to share the pew, or share the table at a meal program instead of remaining behind the serving line. We may follow up a hello with a "how is it going?" and a willingness to hear a person's story however they may be able to tell it. We may remember the stranger in our prayers, or help an individual add to their circle of care and support. In every congregation a small group of companions can meet regularly and share with one another this basic ministry of presence.*[5]

There is one final observation to be made concerning companionship. Rennebohm speaks of a group of companions, and this is not an accident. Companionship is not something that individuals should offer without the support and participation of a larger community. It takes many people to absorb and distribute the strain created by a mental health crisis or a lengthy recovery journey. When a community is filled with companions, individuals are free to step back if the demands of life increase or if they sense that a fresh presence is needed. This communal approach relieves the burden of care that often falls heavily on pastors, leaders, and family members; presents church members with the opportunity to come together as the body of Christ; and ensures that individuals with lived experience do not feel that they are over-burdening any one person.

Reflection Question

What stood out to you in the social perspective? Why do you think it stood out?

If you had to summarize these practices and identify how they 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.

THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

For many of us, words like "hospitality" and "neighboring" call to mind a particular passage in Luke. As you read the words of this familiar parable, look for the ways it may reflect the spiritual practices of companionship.

> *But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*
> (Luke 10:29-37, NRSV)

The Samaritan was motivated by compassion and a sense of shared humanity, and he also demonstrated hospitality and accompaniment in his care for the wounded man. But there is another interesting detail in the story. Did you notice that the Samaritan stayed at the inn on the first night in order to care for the stranger personally? He had the financial resources to pay others for the necessary care, yet he chose to remain and to offer the gift of his presence in addition to the gift of his resources. This is perhaps the most humanizing act of all.

The value of personal presence is deeply biblical. In fact, it reflects a profound truth about human nature. Many theologians have observed that people are created for relationships because they are made in the image of a relational God.[6] 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).

One thing to be avoided here is the assumption that companionship and burden-bearing can only be practiced by individuals who are flourishing in their mental health. According to Rennebohm's model, this is simply not the case. Anyone can learn to listen well, adopt a side-by-side perspective, and be an empathetic presence in the midst of a difficult season. Furthermore, these practices can promote greater mutuality and equality within our communities by reminding us that everyone has a story to tell, a perspective to share, and unique gifts to offer. For people living with mental health challenges, these gifts may include:

- greater compassion for others
- greater dependency on God
- greater trust in God
- a deeper revelation of the fragility of life
- the cultivation of patience and humility
- experiential knowledge of spiritual realities

As members of a single body, we move towards greater wholeness when we are present with and for one another, and when we receive the gifts that each person in the community has to offer. This beautiful reality is something we can all participate in, regardless of whether our mental health is languishing or flourishing.

Reflection Question

What stood out to you in the theological perspective? Why do you think it stood out?

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.

ENDNOTES

1. Ichiro Kawachi and Lisa F. Berkman, "Social Ties and Mental Health," *Journal of Urban Health* 78, no. 3 (September 2001): 459-460, accessed January 15, 2018, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11564849.

2. Chris Cook, Andrew Powell, and Andrew Sims, eds., *Spirituality and Psychiatry* (London: RCPsych Publications, 2009), 54.

3. John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a 'Forgotten' Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 58.

4. The following discussion is based on the principles of companionship outlined in Craig Rennebohm's book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God: Stories of the Search for Home and Healing on the Streets* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008). Additional information can be found in "The Companionship Series," a course that guides faith communities in responding to the challenges of mental health problems.

5. Craig Rennebohm, "A Call to Healing," The Christian Citizen 2 (2014), 5.

6. John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 44.