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THE MOURNERS AND THE MEEK

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
(MATTHEW 5:4, 5)

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

This study is structured on biblical stories. Each chapter features one narrative from the Old Testament and one from the Gospel of Matthew. There is extraordinary learning potential both in the telling and in the hearing of biblical stories. Thomas Boomershine of the United Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, has pioneered the art of biblical storytelling. He discovered, and you will too, that in the process of learning to tell Bible stories, *exactly as they appear in Scripture*, some wonderful things happen. Hearers are prompted to share stories of their own. The biblical stories seem to act like fishing lures that hook into forgotten—even hidden—incidents and bring them to the surface.

Sweat the Details

In the *Resource Book* summaries of biblical stories are provided. But that's only to prepare the ground for your examination of these stories *in detail*. In any group discussion, learn to "sweat the details." Don't settle for a summary of the narrative. Don't try to extract a concept from the story, as you might squeeze juice from an orange. Don't expect a moral, such as one finds at the end of Aesop's fables. Rather, see if your group can find the meaning of the story in the plot, in the characters, and in the details.

Take, for instance, the story of Jesus and the Canaanite Woman that is assigned for this session. Don't skip over Jesus' initial reluctance to deal with her. Don't deny that he put her off with what seems to be a racist saying. Enjoy her "topping" his quotation with a saying of her own. See what your group makes of the metaphor of the dogs and the crumbs under the table. (For example, Dorothy Gilliam, a black columnist for the *Washington Post*, has said that for many whites, black people are seen as hardly more than the dogs of society.)

What Makes a Good Story?

Once upon a time I was supervising editor for an ecumenical church school curriculum called "Interpreting the Word." We built the sessions for children and younger youth on biblical narratives. We were informed by a seminary professor, who had studied folk tales, that a good story has five elements.

1. It begins by putting the hearer at a safe distance from the events, so that he or she need not feel threatened. A child's story might begin, "Once upon a time..."
2. Some problem, some difficulty is introduced. Things are not as God wants them: There is famine, sickness, poverty, war, a quarrel between siblings, a death in the family, a split in a congregation.
3. Alternatives for resolving the problem are explored. Maybe God went to sleep and will wake up and fix things. Maybe there is a blessing hidden in the difficulty. Maybe there is something to be learned before the troubles are over.
4. There is an extraordinary event that solves the problem. In Scripture, the intervention is credited to God: Elijah is sent to the widow of Zarephath. Jesus casts out the demon. Ruth gets a husband.
5. Implications for future generations are projected: The future of those who are not Jews is open to new possibilities. Faith has a role in healing. Inheritances can have many meanings.

Those five parts of a well-told story can be used to devise discussion questions in your group:

Where and when did this story take place?

Who was in trouble and what was the nature of the difficulty?

What options did the characters have?

What happened to resolve the difficulty? Can you think of other biblical stories in which problems were resolved in a similar way?

How does the story suggest ways in which we might expect God to act today?

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Summarize the story of Ruth, indicating how her sorrow was transformed into joy.
2. Interpret the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28.
3. Cite examples of how the church might be a source of comfort and inheritance to the sorrowful and those who live on the margins of society.

Resources You May Need

Chalkboard and chalk or newsprint and markers

Copies of the questions about stories in Notes from the Author

Paper for writing journal entries

Hymnbooks

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Welcome and introduce any new members of the group.
2. Begin the session with a prayer thanking God for the revelation of the Beatitudes as a way of life.
3. Take 5-10 minutes for members of the group to report the results of their work on the items listed under "For Further Study and Reflection" in Chapter One. Ask participants if they have questions or items they want to raise for this session. List these on newsprint and decide when to respond to them.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Introduce the person who agreed at the last session to summarize the story of Ruth. As the report is given, you might offer to assist by noting key points or events on a chalkboard or newsprint.

Then ask the group to discuss how Ruth faced the following two challenges:

a. Coping with misfortune

How does Ruth overcome the threefold handicap of:

being a widow?

being childless?

being an alien when she travels to Bethlehem with Naomi?

How do both Ruth and Naomi meet the difficulty of being women alone and therefore persons of little status?

b. Embodying the promise of God

How is Ruth's trust in God rewarded in the story?

What does the story suggest about how we might expect God to act today?

or

Place the five questions about stories Mr. Purdy provides at the end of Notes from the Author on newsprint or a chalkboard. Ask the group to respond to these questions one at a time as a way to retell the story of Ruth. When you get to the last question, invite participants to share contemporary stories in which God has acted in ways similar to the divine activity in the Book of Ruth.

or

Divide the group into clusters of three persons and give each cluster a copy of the five questions from Notes from the Author. After 10-12 minutes convene the whole group and invite participants to share their responses to each of the questions.

2. Introduce the person who volunteered to summarize the narrative in Matthew 15:21-28. Once again, offer to note key items in the report on newsprint or a chalkboard.

and/or

Distribute sheets of paper to everyone. Invite them to imagine themselves in the role of the Canaanite woman. Then ask them to read Matthew 15:21-28 again from her perspective. Prepare the group for this activity by briefly reviewing the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and men and women in Jesus' day. As they read they are to concentrate on the emotions they experience as they plead with Jesus to heal their daughter.

At the end of the reading they are to create a brief journal entry (one or two paragraphs) that the Canaanite woman might have written following the conversation.

If they have difficulty getting started, suggest they concentrate on one of the phrases from the story, such as:

I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (15:24)

Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. (15:28)

After 10-12 minutes invite those who wish to share comments from their journals.

3. Place the following items on newsprint or a chalkboard. Ask group members to point out the parallels between Ruth and the Canaanite woman, using these categories:

- The vulnerability involved in being an alien and a woman in Israel.
- The need for courage, perseverance, and faith to overcome sorrow and anxiety.
- Meekness as a strategy

and/or

Take a poll of participants' reactions to the two stories, using a series of incomplete sentences, such as the following:

In the story of Ruth, I especially appreciated

I felt put off by

I identified with the Canaanite woman because

4. The stories of Ruth and the Canaanite woman both raise the issues of comfort and inheritance. On page 20 of the *Resource Book*, Mr. Purdy says these stories are also understood as "missionary stories." They affirm that the promise of God extends beyond the boundaries of Israel.

Mr. Purdy mentions sponsoring war refugees as an example of the church reaching out to offer comfort and acceptance. Invite members of the group to share examples of people finding comfort, solace and community in their families or a congregation.

or

Ask participants to identify persons or groups in the community who are suffering or forced to live on the margins of society. Invite suggestions about how the church can reach out to these people with hope, comfort and acceptance.

CLOSING

1. Sing a hymn which celebrates God's consolation in sorrow, such as "Be Still My Soul."
2. Offer a prayer asking God to enable the group to become sources of comfort and fellowship to others. Include references to or verses from the stories of Ruth and the Canaanite woman.

Looking Ahead

1. Encourage participants to work on the items listed under "For Further Study and Reflection" in Chapter Two of the *Resource Book*.
2. Ask a member of the group to open the next session with prayer.