

Leader's Guide

Facilitation tips are provided throughout in green. These do not appear on the participant handout.

Study: Freeing Jesus

Week 1: June 25 – July 1

Chapter: Introduction

For the first few weeks of every new study, include time for welcome and introductions to ensure that newcomers have the opportunity to get to know everyone. Also, review your small group covenant or the shared expectations held within your group around confidentiality, valuing the wisdom and contributions of all participants, and providing a safe space.

Study Big Idea: Freeing Jesus is an invitation to meet Jesus again for the first time by encountering many Jesuses. Regardless of your religious (or non-religious background) you'll be inspired to get Jesus out of the unhelpful confines you (or the religious traditions you've experienced) constructed for him. Allow yourself to rediscover Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence.

Chapter Big Idea: Nearly everyone has an opinion about who Jesus is. Each person's perspective has been shaped by multiple life experiences and, often, deeply informed by their church experiences. This is your invitation to think about the ways you currently understand Jesus and to determine if there are images or understandings of Jesus that are incomplete or unhelpful.

Icebreaker: Invite one member of your group to pick an age between 1 and 50. Then, invite someone in the group to answer the question, "Who did you understand Jesus to be when you were ___ years old?"

Repeat this activity until a variety of experiences across several decades of life have been explored.

Opening Prayer: Jesus, we often pray in your name yet if we are honest with ourselves there are many ways in which we don't really know you. Open our hearts and minds that we might free you from our own limited understandings and be ready to meet and follow you today and every day. We ask this in some of your many names - Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence – Amen.

Scripture Reading: Who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:15)

Freeing Jesus Reading: My knees hurt. The cushion at the marble altar almost did not matter. I could feel the cold in my legs, the ache of unanswered prayers. "Where are you, God" I asked. Silence.

I looked up at Jesus in full triptych glory, surrounded by angels, robed in cobalt blue against a gilt background, shimmering sanctity. The small chapel in the great cathedral was one of my favorite places to pray, mostly because of this Jesus. Today, however, I was restless as I gazed intently at the massive icon of Christ. Usually, the image drew me deeper toward God, and the railing where I knelt was a place of awakening and wisdom. “Where are you, God?” I asked again. Silence.

“God?” A quiet plea, really, the most incomplete of prayers.

“Get me out of here,” a voice replied. Was someone speaking to me? I looked behind, around. “Get me out of here,” the voice said again. I stared up at the icon. “Jesus? Is that you?” “Get me out of here,” I heard again, more insistent now. “But Lord . . .”

The chapel fell silent, but I knew I heard a divine demand for freedom. I was not sure what to think, but I also did not want to tell the priest who was wandering up the aisle. I doubted the Washington National Cathedral would take kindly to the Son of God looking for the exit. And I was not sure what to do . . . I got up and neatly bolted out, all the while envisioning how I might rescue Jesus from the cathedral. I felt bad leaving him behind.

Discussion Questions

1. The title of the book is *Freeing Jesus*, and the book opens with a story of Diana Butler Bass hearing what she felt was the voice of Jesus asking to be sprung from the cathedral she was in. What do you think Jesus needs to be freed from?

The idea of “freeing Jesus” may be new to some people and may be outside of some people’s comfort zones. In the United Church of Christ, we are not a creedal people and don’t require folks to use the same language for their understanding of who Jesus is. Encourage participation and affirm that Jesus is bigger than any single name or idea and that the specific names and understandings that are helpful to one person or in one phase of life may not be for another person or for the same person later in life.

2. The author shares three different terms for understanding Jesus: (i) Jesus of History, (ii) Christ of faith, and (iii) Jesus of experience (see p. xvii-xx). Which one of these are you most familiar with? Which one of these do you find most helpful? Why?

Don’t get caught up in the technical definitions of these terms or nuance within any one of them. Instead, consider each as meaningful ways to understand who Jesus is.

3. All images of Jesus are not particularly helpful. Diana Butler Bass states this succinctly: “There is no denying Christians often speak of Jesus badly – in exclusive, hurtful, and triumphal ways” (p. xx). Share one of your experiences when Jesus was used by another Christian in a way that was anything but loving or helpful. How did this impact your feelings about and/or understanding of Jesus?

This question may elicit strong emotional responses. Encourage the use of “I statements” as people talk about the hurt they’ve experienced. Jesus has been used against many of us,

including those who understand God's love to extend beyond Christianity and those in the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, the repeated usage of exclusively blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesuses to remake Jesus into one particularly white and historically inaccurate image has done great harm to BIPOC people.

4. At Cathedral of Hope United Church of Christ, we talk a lot about Jesus. Tell us about a time when Jesus was particularly real or reflect on a time when you felt a strong connection to Jesus in worship or through another CoH ministry.
5. Reflect on your own life experience. How has your view of Jesus changed over time? Has someone been particularly helpful to you as you've come to better understand who Jesus is? What are some of your current understandings that feel incomplete or limiting or simply don't work for you in the same way they once did?

Some people have had similar understandings for a lifetime while others are in various phases of deconstruction, exploration, reconstruction, or may just be starting to discover Jesus for the first time. Honor all experiences and let folks know their sharing may be the key that unlocks growth for someone else in the group.

6. Each week for the next several weeks we will read a new chapter that focuses on a different name for Jesus. Which of the five names (Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence) do you find yourself most interested in? Why? Is there a name on the list that is unfamiliar or uncomfortable or particularly likely to challenge your current view of who Jesus is?

Take note of responses here and consider incorporating elements of them during the relevant week or weeks.

Reflection: Meeting Jesus again for the first time is complicated. We all have significant baggage and don't always recognize how strongly we hold certain views unless or until they are challenged. Freeing Jesus involves understanding how we've come to our present understanding of who Jesus is, engaging with new ideas and experiences, liberating Jesus in whatever ways are needed, and intentionally and consistently building a relationship with Jesus.

Each lesson concludes with a reflection. Even if you don't have time to discuss all of the questions in the guide, be sure to end with the reflection to help people connect with the session's big idea.)

Closing Prayer: The Lord's Prayer (from New Zealand Prayer Book)

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen.

One of the first prayers most Christians learn is the Lord's Prayer. Just like thinking about who Jesus is in new ways can be freeing, so also can praying Jesus' most known prayer using new language.