

Discussion Guide

Study: Freeing Jesus

Week 7: August 6 – August 12

Chapter: Presence

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: Jesus shows up in our lives in very ordinary and unexpectedly extraordinary ways. Jesus is here among us; Jesus has been present all along for those with eyes to see.

Icebreaker: Who is the most famous person you have ever met? What was it like to be in that person's presence?

Opening Prayer: Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, that I may see Jesus, and as I see Jesus more clearly, help me to simply enjoy being in Jesus' presence. Amen.

Scripture Reading: And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Freeing Jesus Reading: It started innocently enough, during Lent when she was two. I taught in the religious studies department at Rhodes College, in Memphis. Our family attended a local Episcopal church, and she went to a church day care. Religion, church, preaching, alters, pulpits – this was the stuff of her toddler world . . . One day, as we headed to the store, a tiny voice came from the car seat: "Mama, where is God? Where does Jesus live?"

I replied, "Jesus lives in your heart." For some children this would have settled the matter, but not for my daughter. For weeks on end she asked everyone the same question. My husband replied, "Jesus is in heaven." Most of the adults offered similar answers – Jesus is "with you" or Jesus is in heaven.

The answers reveal a tension and a bit of a theological rift in Christianity. The tension is between what is called "immanence," the idea that God is close by and "transcendence," the opposite notion that God is far off. Some churches emphasize one more than the other.

. . . As much as Christians have claimed immanence and transcendence, humans are notoriously bad with paradox, and immanence has typically been pushed aside for transcendence. The very idea that God is present in and with us, known where two or three are gathered, kicking up whatever dust is in the way, well, that kind of God is wild, unpredictable, and uncontrollable . . . Thus, the institutional church has always preferred a transcendent God, the One in heaven, safely distant from sinful whims and human meddling, and in need of a mediating, sensible, organized polity and an obedient priesthood (p. 228-229).

Discussion Questions:

1. Where does Jesus live? Are you more at home with the idea of Jesus living within each person (immanence) or in heaven (transcendence)? Has your understanding changed over time? If so, how?
2. We can learn a lot about Jesus, but we should also think of Jesus as mystery (see p. 251 – 256). What are some of the ways in which you understand Jesus as mystery? Are you okay with this aspect of Jesus' identity or do you long for less mystery and more certainty?
3. Where is one place in your life that you really want or need to see Jesus? How might Jesus show up?
4. Diana Butler Bass shares her experience in a church that “used inclusive language, referring to God as Mother in some of the prayers” and recognizing that “the man Jesus also embodied the sacred feminine.” She also mentions Julian of Norwich who called Jesus “our true Mother.” How does understanding Jesus in this way help or hinder your ability to connect with Jesus?
5. Where do you sense the presence of Jesus most clearly? In worship? In Scripture? In nature? In community? In service? In silence? In community? Elsewhere? Why?

Reflection: Jesus is more complex than what's presented in the creeds, more mysterious than many people are comfortable with, and more present than we often recognize. Where is Jesus? Right here.

Closing Prayer: We have gathered in Jesus' name and we have been reminded of Jesus' presence. May we go from this place aware that Jesus goes with each of us and that Jesus will always be right here. Amen.