



Touchstones Project

Small Group Discussion Guide

Hope

Preparation: (Read *Touchstones* and the questions.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: “We hope, we despair, and then we hope again — that is how we stay afloat in the cosmos of uncertainty that is any given life. Just as the universe exists because, by some accident of chance we are yet to fathom, there is more matter than antimatter in it, we exist — and go on existing — because there is more hope than despair in us. *Maria Popova*”

Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake), adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the following wisdom story. *The Raspberry* by Touchstones

Gerda was born in 1924 in Bielsko in southern Poland. It was a small town on the west bank of the Biała River, surrounded by mountains known for skiing and hiking.

She lived with her father, Julius, a manager in a manufacturing company, her mother, Helena, and her brother, Arthur, who was five years older. Life was good. In the summer of 1939, Gerda and her mother were on a vacation at a resort when they had to return home because her father suffered a mild heart attack. In September 1939, the Germans invaded Poland. Gerda and her family were concerned because they were Jewish, and the German army was oppressing Jews. In October, her brother had to go register with the Nazis, and he never returned. Gerda received letters from him postmarked in Russia, but they eventually stopped.

German soldiers forced them to sell all of their possessions to non-Jews and live in their basement, which was flooded. In April 1942, Gerda and her parents had to move into a small ghetto with the remaining Jews in the town. Their living quarters were quite cramped. Then, they were forced into work camps. Gerda and her mother had to sew military uniforms.

In June, soldiers put her father on a transit train. Then Gerda and her mother were told they would go to a new work camp. When they gathered to depart, soldiers put Gerda in one group and her mother in a different one. Her mother yelled to Gerda, “Be strong.” This was how her family was swept up in the Holocaust, a terrible Nazi program designed to persecute the Jewish people.

Gerda, separated from her family, was fortunate to be taken to a transit camp with her best friend, Ilse. In July 1942, they were transported to the work camp at Bolkenhain, where Gerda and Ilse operated looms in the textile factory making cloth for military uniforms.

In August 1943, Gerda, Ilse, and some others were sent to another work camp, the one at Merzdorf, where the conditions were much worse. Gerda was filled with despair because her supervisor forced her to work 18 hours a day. She then remembered her promise to her father to never to give up. This gave her the strength to continue.

Mercifully, a while later, a kind supervisor, Frau Küger from the Bolkenhain camp, had Gerda and Ilse transferred to the work camp at Landeshut to make the cloth used for parachutes.

In May 1944, Gerda, Ilse, and some others were sent to the work camp at Grünberg. It was an awful place with terrible conditions. Gerda had to work in the spinning room to make the thread used to make cloth. It was a terrible job. In September, Gerda was lucky because she got a new job counting fabric bundles. Now, working during the day, she was able to get more food to share with Ilse.

One morning, Ilse was walking along a path when she saw something red on the ground. It was a raspberry! Ilse picked it up and put it in the pocket of her dress. She was careful all day so she wouldn't squash it. That evening, she found a leaf as she was walking into the building where they slept. Ilse approached Gerda and gave her the red raspberry on a green leaf. It was the most beautiful thing that Gerda had ever seen. She was so grateful to Ilse for her incredible generosity.

In January 1945, all the girls and women in the camp were forced to march almost 500 miles to Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic or Czechia). It took five months. Gerda was separated from Ilse during the march, which pushed her into deep despair. The memory of Ilse's gift, that beautiful, luscious raspberry, helped her go on.

The first person she met when she reached Volary, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic or Czechia) was Kurt Klein, an American soldier. He was so kind. Gerda couldn't believe that she had reached safety. She was hospitalized for several months, and Klein would visit whenever he could. They would eventually marry and move to the United States.

They had three children, eight grandchildren, and 18 great-grandchildren. And Gerda told each one the story of the gift of a raspberry, a symbol of hope in a terrible time.

She was grateful to Ilse for the rest of her life. In 2010, President Obama gave Gerda Weissman Klein the Presidential Medal of Freedom. No one knows whether or not she gave President Obama a raspberry in return.

Source:

<https://journeythroughtheholocaust.org/items/show/10?to ur=2&index=0>

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“We bang and bang on the door of hope, and don't anyone dare suggest there's nobody home.” Barbara Kingsolver

“Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.”
Václav Havel

“Hope is one of our duties ...part of our obligation to our own being and to our descendants.” Wendell Berry

“If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.” Jim Wallis

“Hope ...which whispered from Pandora's box only after all the other Plagues and sorrows had escaped, is the best and last of all things.” Ian Caldwell & Dustin Thomason

“Hope, unlike optimism, is rooted in unalloyed reality.... Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see—in the individual's eye—a path to a better future. Hope

acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path. True hope has no room for delusion.” Jerome Groopman

“They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for.” Tom Bodett

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.” Howard Zinn

“Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between.” Maya Angelou

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” Charles Dickens

“She felt worthless and hollow. There was no hope of fixing this. And when hope is gone, time is punishment.” Mitch Albom

“Hope like that, as I thought before, doesn’t make you a weak person. It’s hopelessness that makes you weak. Hope makes you stronger, because it brings with it a sense of reason, ...a reason for you to live.” Cecelia Ahern

“Hope. It’s like a drop of honey, a field of tulips blooming in the springtime. It’s a fresh rain, a whispered promise, a cloudless sky, the perfect punctuation mark at the end of a sentence. And it’s the only thing in the world keeping me afloat.” Tahereh Mafi

“Hope ...is an active, determined conviction that is rooted in the spirit, chosen by the heart, and guided by the mind.... Hope is the foundation of action.” Mark Hertsgaard

“No. Don’t give up hope just yet. It’s the last thing to go. When you have lost hope, you have lost everything. And when you think all is lost, when all is dire and bleak, there is always hope.” Pittacus Lore

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us. And the world will live as one.” John Lennon

“I suspect the most we can hope for, and it’s no small hope, is that we never give up, that we never stop giving ourselves permission to try to love and receive love.” Elizabeth Strout

“Wishes are false. Hope is true. Hope makes its own magic.” Laini Taylor

“One lives in the hope of becoming a memory.” Antonio Porchia

“This new day is too dear, with its hopes and invitations, to waste a moment on the yesterdays.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.” Maya Angelou

“There is nothing so cruel in this world as the desolation of having nothing to hope for.” Haruki Murakami

“There was a moment in my life when I really wanted to kill myself. ...But even in my most jaded times, I had some hope.” Gerard Way

“...All hopes for a better world rest in the fearlessness and open-hearted vision of people who embrace life.” John Lennon

“...Love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair.” Henri Nouwen

“Hope was a dangerous, disquieting thing, but he thought perhaps he liked it.” Nora Sakavic

“Hope is a powerful thing. Some say it’s a different breed of magic altogether. Elusive, difficult to hold on to. But not much is needed.”
Stephanie Garber

“I learned that the world didn't see the inside of you, that it didn't care a whit about the hopes and dreams, and sorrows, that lay masked by skin and bone. It was as simple, as absurd, and as cruel as that.” Khaled Hosseini

“At what point do you give up—decide enough is enough? There is only one answer really. Never.” Tabitha Suzuma

“Ask yourself these three questions ...and you will know who you are. Ask: What do believe in? What do you hope for? What do you love?”
Paullina Simons

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Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: “The kind of hope I often think about ...I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don’t; it is a dimension of the soul; it’s not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.” *Václav Havel*

Living the Questions

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. What, for you, is the difference between hope and optimism?
2. How have you experienced hope in your life?
3. Describe a time when you felt hopeless. What was the impact? What helped in

- overcoming this?
4. How does being hopeful add to your sense of meaning and purpose in life?
5. Is hope a natural personal inclination, a spiritual practice, whistling in the dark, or something else?
6. How has your sense of hope changed over time?
7. As you look to the future, what do you hope for?
8. Where and from what do you draw hope?
9. François de La Rochefoucauld wrote, “We promise according to our hopes and perform according to our fears.” Do you agree? How does fear affect hope?
10. With Maria Popova, is there more hope than despair in us? If yes, why?
11. How is hope anchored beyond our horizons?
12. How can your congregation help cultivate hope in you, others, and the wider community?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person for the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice (Elizabeth Selle Jones)
We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words

Rev. Philip R. Giles

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*