

Study Guide for
Grounded in Love: Ecology, Faith, and Action

by The Rev. Nancy Roth

Designed to accompany *Grounded in Love*, a book published by LeaderResources and available for purchase at www.LeaderResources.org/groundedinlove (free shipping on orders over \$25; call for discounts on more than 10 copies). You can also buy the book on Amazon, but both the publisher and author make more if you buy directly (Amazon takes 70-75% of what you pay). Also consider supporting your local bookstore. They get 35- 40% of what you pay.

This study guide may be printed and used free of charge. It was prepared for parish and group study by the author.

This study guide is divided into five sections. It is practical for use in a variety of contexts, such as book study groups, Sunday adult forums, retreats, or conferences. While not strictly seasonal, since it concerns an issue that is relevant all year round, *Grounded in Love* would be an especially appropriate text to consider for use during Lent, since it is a season of self-examination and reflection or during the new Season of Creation (fall).

Each section of *Grounded in Love*—Love, Concern, Ethics, Action, and Hope—begins with an introductory page explaining the theme of the chapters within that section. If you are a group leader, I suggest that you use the descriptive paragraphs primarily for your own edification, rather than reading them to the group at the beginning of each session. I hope that the process of moving from love to hope, through the themes of concern, ethics, and action, will be an organic one, based on participants' own thoughts and experiences. The "introductory" paragraphs can be especially useful as signposts for each stage of the journey if you read them at the end of each discussion.

Each chapter in the book begins with an epigraph. As a means of centering and focusing at the beginning of each session, I suggest that you read either the introductory epigraph or an epigraph from one of the chapters within the section, and invite participants to take some time for quiet. The chapters each end with an exercise, which can be anything from an approach to prayer to a practical action.

I have listed the exercises in each section so that you can choose which ones to use within the group meetings, and which might better be accomplished at home between sessions. Some of them may also be used as short "liturgies" with which to begin and end a session. Finally, I suggest some discussion questions for each session. These are only suggestions, for I invite you to make use of your own creativity, style, and enthusiasms, as you and your group share the thoughts in this book.

INTRODUCTION

You may wish to take some time at your first meeting to summarize--or even read together--the book's foreword and introduction. They are the groundwork on which the remainder of the book is built. If you would like to combine some right-brain activity with each session, I would suggest that you teach the Shaker Dance, "Simple Gifts" (found in the final chapter, p. 239), at the very beginning of the first session. Read my comments on the words of the song, and explain them in your own words, if you wish. This dance can serve as recurring exercise or simple "liturgy" to set the tone each time you gather. Most people know the tune, but, if they do not, it can be learned easily. (In the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982*, it is Hymn 554.) Sing it first together, then teach the dance, phrase by phrase.

About the Shakers

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, known as the Shakers, is a Protestant religious sect. Founded upon the teachings of Ann Lee, the group was historically known for their sexual equality. All authority in the church was hierarchical, with women at the top level of that hierarchy, though at each level women and men shared equal responsibility. This is especially evident in the fact that God was perceived by the Shakers to embody both female and male aspects. Outside of the church, Shakers followed traditional gender work-related roles. Their homes were segregated by sex, as were women and men's work spheres.

The Shakers embraced four virtues: celibacy; Christian communalism (goods held in common); confession of sin, without which none can become Believers; and separation from the world. The communalism of the Believers was an economic success, and their cleanliness, honesty and frugality received the highest praise. They were known for a style of furniture, known as Shaker furniture which they built for themselves and sold to others. It was plain in style, durable, and functional.

The Shakers considered music to be an essential component of the religious experience. Shakers composed thousands of songs, and also created many dances; both were an important part of the Shaker worship services. In Shaker society, a spiritual "gift" could also be a musical revelation, and they considered it to be important to record musical inspirations as they occurred. Scribes, many of whom had no formal musical training, used a form of music notation for this purpose: it used letters of the alphabet, often not positioned on a staff, along with a simple notation of conventional rhythmic values. This method has a curious, and coincidental, similarity to some ancient Greek music notation.

Most early Shaker music is monodic, that is to say, composed of a single melodic line with no harmonization. The tunes and scales recall the folksongs of the British Isles, but since the music was written down and carefully preserved, it is "art" music of a special kind rather than folklore. Many melodies are of extraordinary grace and beauty, and the Shaker song repertoire, though still relatively little known, is an important part of the American cultural heritage and of world religious music in general.

The most famous Shaker song is "Simple Gifts", which Aaron Copland used as a theme for variations in *Appalachian Spring*. The tune was composed by Elder Joseph Brackett and originated in the Shaker community at Alfred, Maine in 1848. Many contemporary Christian denominations incorporate this tune into hymnals, under various names, including "Lord of the Dance," adapted in 1963 by English poet and songwriter Sydney Carter.

LOVE

Epigraph

I pray that...God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Ephesians 3:16-17)

Theme

How do we “ground in love” our relationship to the earth which is our home? It begins, I believe, with tending the “inner being” of which the writer of the Epistle to the Ephesians speaks. This requires taking time to truly see, whether we are looking at an infant cradled in our arms, the starry night sky, a bright snowscape, or the iridescent body of a beetle. As we lose ourselves in such contemplation, we find ourselves as well, for we are coming home – both to our childhood as creatures of earth, and to our Origin: the Creator of all that we gaze upon.

Exercises

- Page 5. Picture the world a child you love will inherit.
- Page 11. Remember your own childhood connection with nature.
- Page 16. Meditate on Psalm 104 and compose your own verses.
- Page 21. Meditate on our “common creation story.”
- Page 28. Picture a place in nature that has been important to you.
- Page 35. (Ideally outdoors) Observe the insect world (the “microcosmos”).
- Page 40. A “body-meditation” on weight and breath.

Discussion Ideas

- Have you ever experienced God through nature? Where? When?
- Compare your childhood connection to nature to your experience of nature now. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Does awareness of your body influence your ideas about the natural world?
- Do you want to deepen your present awareness of the natural world? How might you do so?

CONCERN

Epigraph

Answer me when I call, O God, defender of my cause;
you set me free when I am hard-pressed;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer....

Many are saying, "Oh, that we might see better times!"

Lift up the light of your countenance upon us, O God.

--(Psalm 4: 1, 6, The Saint Helena Psalter)

Theme

We all know that a relationship grounded in love has the capacity to give us pain. Caring and compassion cause us to become vulnerable: hence both love's blessing and love's danger. When we love God's creation, we cannot help but mourn nature's losses. When we recognize that we are implicated merely because we live in a society that has too too long ignored the well-being of the natural world, we can become burdened with guilt. But God calls us to cast off the burden of guilt and to move forward. We take our sorrow and our repentance before God, ask forgiveness, and seek to lead a new life. We do this both as individuals and as communities. And, indeed, like good compost, our sorrows and repentance can be transformed into new life for ourselves and for the world in which we live.

Exercises

- Page 55. A prayer of contrition.
- Page 62. Meditate on the healing of blind Bartimaeus.
- Page 68. Consider "urgent/not urgent, important/not important" use of your time.
- Page 74. Reflect on the vocation of "believers" to act on behalf of the planet.
- Page 79. Reflect on the place of love as a catalyst for action.

Discussion Ideas

- Have you ever grieved for the loss of something non-human in the natural world? What was it? Did the loss change any of your attitudes or behavior?
- To what extent has recent news about the state of the planet disturbed you? Give examples of what caused your distress, and how you reacted.
- Discuss various ways people might react to such feelings (for example: becoming depressed, seeking distraction, feeling paralyzed, feeling called to act.)
- Have you ever turned to God in prayer because of such concerns? How have you prayed?

ETHICS

Epigraph

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12: 9-18)

Theme

Nurturing the new life we seek requires new knowledge, because we face issues unheard of in the times when our moral codes were first recorded. People of many faith traditions give us insights about how traditional ethics taught in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples can be expanded to include our relationship to nature. All have one goal: to discover how love of God and neighbor can be embodied in ordinary daily life in this world. Thus, our moral decisions themselves, whether they concern how we vote, what we buy, how we treat one another, or our attitude toward a forest, a river, or an ocean, are grounded in love. In this section we will begin with a comparison of two different lifestyles, one the expression of a morality that includes the natural world, and one that does not. We will then hear some of the voices of today's faith communities, as they seek to frame a theology that will guide them in the endeavor to be good stewards of creation. Finally, we will discover how one particular ethical code, the Ten Commandments, formulated by a desert people over three thousand years ago, might serve as a series of guideposts to help us respond to today's particular call to love God and our neighbor.

Exercises

- Page 86. Consider the good environmental stewardship—or lack of same—on an institution you know.
- Page 93. Pray the prayer for shalom of St. Francis of Assisi.
- Page 93. Pray St. Teresa's prayer: "Let nothing disturb you...."
- Page 103. Reflect on Job 38-41.
- Page 109. Reflect on Isaiah 43:18-19.
- Page 115. Take a "sabbath walk" outdoors.
- Page 121. Consider the many ways of praying with Creation..
- Page 127. Pray for endangered species.
- Page 134. Take a "census" of your housecleaning supplies.
- Page 139. Discover your ecological footprint.
- Page 144. Pray for courage to speak out.
- Page 149. Cultivate gratitude.

Discussion Ideas

- Discuss specific ways in which you are already responding to an expanded vision of ethics--one that includes the natural world. (An example is feeling guilty when you throw in the trash something that is recyclable.)
- Why do you think that the ethics of environmental stewardship was not included in the Ten Commandments or in Jesus' teaching?
- What do you think Jesus would say now about our care of Creation?
- Can you think of ways Jesus would teach us about this aspect of faithful living?
- If you were to design a new set of moral precepts or "commandments," what would they be?

ACTION

Epigraph

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

(James 1:14-17)

Theme

How do we practice what we preach? How do we live what we believe? This section provides a few examples among the many that are available in other sources. We begin with a chapter on ecological design, the common thread that weaves together all our efforts. We will then consider how the following can be examples of ecological design: a building, a furnace, a car, a meal, a light bulb, the contents of our garbage can, and our willingness to speak out about what we believe. How can these even become sacramental: outward expressions of our inner beliefs?

Exercises

- Page 157. Lakota prayer for the healing of creation.
- Page 162. Consider the "message" of buildings you know.
- Page 169. Investigate an energy audit for your home and/or church.
- Page 175. Keep a log of your car trips. Walk as a spiritual exercise.
- Page 181. Eat a meal mindfully.
- Page 187. Take a census of your garbage can.
- Page 193. An approach to "greening" your home.
- Page 200. Ways to become involved politically.

Discussion Ideas

- This chapter contains only a small sample of ideas about ways to live lightly on the earth. Share others with which you are familiar.
- If you have taken some of the steps in the preceding chapters--or similar ones--what has your action felt like? A bother? A duty? A way of showing solidarity with other human beings? A gesture of respect to the natural world? A response to God? Other?
- Which actions do you think contribute the most to the healing of the earth? If you could choose one or two as most important, which they would be?

HOPE

Epigraph

The singers and the dancers will say, "All my fresh springs are in you."

Psalm 87:7, *The Saint Helena Psalter*

Theme

Our hearts and spirits need to be nourished throughout this journey. Our final chapters will suggest a few of the resources that can inspire and support us. We will discover that this venture is not new, but that we stand as part of a long lineage of prophets, saints, and theologians who understand God's deep passion and care for Creation. We will pay homage to those Celtic peoples who were so attuned to daily life that every action was lifted to God in prayer.

A painter and a composer will serve as examples of the way the arts can inspire, enlighten, and strengthen us. We'll cast our eyes upon those beacons of hope for the future: our children. We will discover ways of praying that include the new and pressing issues facing the planet. Finally, we will dance, in movements that symbolize our search for the "place that's right," as we seek to contribute to a world that will be once again a valley of love and of delight.

Exercises

- Page 210. Meditate on "the Body of God" and your own embodiment.
- Page 217. Compose your own Celtic incantation.
- Page 223. List the artist/musicians/etc. who have most influenced the way you experience the natural world.
- Page 231. Take a child on a nature walk.
- Page 237. Meditate on a natural object.
- Page 243. Dance "Simple Gifts."

Discussion Questions

- What are your own sources of hope?
- Does your faith help sustain you when you feel daunted by the challenges ahead?
- In what ways can you use your gifts to sustain the courage of others?
- Do you have an art form (music, writing, the visual arts, etc.) in which you can express your own sense of being "grounded in love" of God and of God's Creation?
- Discuss the statement, "The Glory of God is the human being fully alive." (Irenaeus of Lyons, 2nd century) What does it mean in terms of our savoring each moment of life? What does it mean in terms of our not shrinking from life's challenges? What does it mean in terms of sustaining our joy in life? What does it mean in terms of our kinship with all other creatures, whose fullness of life is also the "glory of God."

Postscript by the author:

I would be very interested in hearing about the discussions inspired by your study of Grounded in Love: Ecology, Faith, and Action. As I continue to develop my thoughts on the issues in the book, I would welcome input from my readers.

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