

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Advocacy as Discipleship: A People Called to Witness



by **Blair Moorhead**

Office of Public Witness



Introduction



Using This Resource

Four weeks of reflection. How do you want to use this time? You might take intentional study time during the four weeks of Advent; you might choose four weeks of Lent to spend in reflection; or you might find you want to use it as a centering exercise in the middle of summer. You may also want to share this study with a group at your church or home. Whatever the season, and whether alone or communally, this guide will help you think about the links between Christ's witness and our own call to be advocates as disciples for God's justice in the world.

This devotional is set up with an in-depth reflection on Day One of each week to introduce the topic for the week. Days Two through Seven will feature centering quotations, questions, and opportunities for contemplation. On Day Four of every week, a short story will help you or your small group reflect on how the subject of advocacy touches your own lives. This resource will use the Bible, our Confessions, and Presbyterian writings—including materials from the Office of Public Witness—alongside resources from beyond our denomination to help us think about how God is calling us into action and reflection today. You may want to have a journal handy to write about your thoughts on each day's reflection. Take a few moments at the beginning of the day to use this resource, or draw a busy day to a close with contemplation in the evening.

The format of this resource can also be modified to fit a group or Bible study. Each week's reflections can be compressed into one longer study to accommodate a weekly group. Or you may break up the weeks' reflections into parts (Day 1–3 and 4–7, e.g.) to suit a longer period of study such as Lent. You may also wish to pick and choose reflections from among all four weeks to create a one-time adult Sunday school class on the topic of advocacy as discipleship.

However you choose to use this study, thank you for taking the time to explore the relationship between our Christian calling and the task of social witness.

I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. Psalm 119:15–16

The Theme: Advocacy as Discipleship

This study is published by the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness (OPW), the voice of the Presbyterian General Assembly to decision makers in Washington, DC. The OPW seeks to challenge the nation with the church's deep convictions about justice and peace, and to challenge the church . . .

to advocate, and help the church to advocate, the social witness perspectives and policies of the Presbyterian General Assembly. The church has a long history of applying these biblically and theologically-based insights to issues that affect the public—maintaining a public policy ministry in the nation's capital since 1946.

In 2012, the Office of Public Witness launched a publication under the title of *Advocacy as Discipleship*. This issue-focused periodical helps the PC(USA) learn about justice ministries and discover how concerns like the US federal budget or conflict in Congo are significant topics requiring faithful responses from Presbyterians.

So what does it mean to believe that advocacy is intrinsically related to discipleship? This claim takes seriously the work of Jesus Christ as one who reached out to strangers and friends, offering of himself to heal bodies and spirits. “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). Both in Christ’s day-to-day ministry and in his saving grace that touches our lives now, Jesus offers a model of advocacy.

Christ shows that to care about your neighbor to the point of social action is our calling. We do not advocate in order to speak for others, but we listen to the voices in our communities—near and far—and join our sisters and brothers in the cause for justice. Jesus’ ministry touched the lives of his society’s outcasts, as well as their ruling politicians. His words and deeds rattled the halls of power in his day, attracting the attention of religious and political authorities who sought to arrest him. We follow Christ and accept his call to love our neighbors with a passion that reflects his own.

Finally, in this introduction let’s look at one of the resources to be used in this text study—a 1966 PCUS document called “The Theological Basis for Christian Social Action,” which provides a grounding for faithful advocacy in our tradition:

If we bear witness and serve the Lord, then, as a church and as individuals, we have a clear responsibility to concern ourselves with the social and political sphere also. To say nothing and to do nothing in this sphere is to deny our own Gospel. It is to say that there are at least some areas in the world and in our lives where God is *not* Lord.

Our faith is rooted in the work and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We, as people trying to live into the call of discipleship, must take our faith outside church walls by getting involved in pressing issues today.

Because God through Jesus is Lord of every area of our life, let us join heart, mind, and body in the study of advocacy as discipleship.

About the Author

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Theology of Naming

Week 1



■ Day 1

Not just one way to name

It all starts with a name. The first chapters of Genesis are full of naming. And from those pages to the final chapters of Revelation, the act of naming holds great significance for creation. People are named, nations are named, Jesus is named. The process of naming, of speaking aloud about a specific person or action, brings it out into the open. Naming can highlight an injustice that would otherwise go unnoticed by many. Naming can lift up the story of an unsung hero—singing it into the world so others might hear. Naming brings transparency, it brings attention. It is the starting point of advocacy.

Think about your own name. What does it feel like when someone calls your name unexpectedly? A jolt, a wave of recognition, the knowledge that you have been noticed. The Lord says, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine” (Isa. 43:1). What comfort! The God who redeems us knows us by name. Naming reminds us that we each have significance in the eyes of the Lord; all of our humanity here on earth matters to God.

God’s children have found many ways to name throughout history. The prophets spoke to kings and peoples, warning them of the consequences of their actions. Jesus named the sins he saw in the Temple when he overturned the moneylenders’ tables (Mark 11:15–17). The Reformation, a vital part of our heritage that led to the existence of a Presbyterian church, started with Martin Luther naming ways (95 ways to be exact) to be a more faithful church. Within the Presbyterian church’s history, we have created confessions to name what we believe to be faithful tenets of the church and to name destructive practices in the world around us. ***The tradition of naming goes all the way back to the early days of the creation story, and we continue that tradition today.***

Consider our denomination’s Brief Statement of Faith (1983), which discusses explicitly the need to name all that goes against God’s will for creation:

“In a broken and fearful world

The Spirit gives us courage

To pray without ceasing,

To witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior

To unmask idolatries in Church and culture

To hear the voices of peoples long silenced,

And to work with others for justice, freedom and peace. (10.65–71)

With the Spirit’s courage, let us set about the task of naming, and thereby unmasking, that in our world that threatens the abundant life of all.

Prayer

God who knows my name,
Give me the strength and courage to name injustices
In the world, in this society, and in my own life.
Grant me new vision to see your work here on earth.
Grant me new ears to hear the voices of all your children.

As I learn, grow, and am fed in your spirit,
Lead me to new understanding and compassion.
Help me speak the truth of your righteousness
In all that I say and do.

In the name of the One who named justice in his life and resurrection, I pray,
Amen.

■ Day 2

Listen before naming

“We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness.” (John 10:10) Accra Confession, World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Listen

When starting the journey of naming, you may not have to be a voice alone in the wilderness. Hear the voices of those most affected by justice issues. Are you concerned about the rights of tomato farmers in Florida? Hear the voices and experiences of those who are organizing on the ground through the Presbyterian Hunger Program¹. Hear the voices of those already witnessing. When we work together, we increase our effectiveness and live into God’s beloved community.

Who in your community is crying out? How can you open your hearts and minds to hear these voices more clearly?

■ Day 3

Remembering names

Barbara Brown Taylor encourages naming out loud—in particular, she writes about naming those who have died in war. *“To say these names out loud, in the presence of God and God’s people, is not a matter of being for or against the war. It is a matter of remembering that our lives are bound up with all other lives in Christ, as we keep count of those who are worth more than many sparrows.”* 2007, *Christian Century*.

When we say the names of people who are gone, their memory lingers with us. Naming is a way to say, “I won’t forget. I will lift up your story and your importance.” The Christ who knows the name of his sheep (John 10:3) remembers us and knows our stories. Let us also name those whose stories live on through our memory. **Today, think about and name those whose lives have touched yours. Remember their voices and their stories.**

1. presbyterianmission.org/ministries/fairfood

■ Day 4

When it's hard to name

Story: *The First Day of School*

Use the story as an opportunity for reflection: Do you see yourself in this story? Where? What would you do in this situation?

Greta watched as her children skipped up and down the sidewalk with their neighbors, filled with the anticipation of the first glimpse of the yellow school bus. On this first day of the new school year, excitement trumped any sleepiness or boredom that might settle in as the school days continued. The children were also busy comparing new shoes, backpacks, and shining pens and pencils. One young child stood apart, waiting for the bus alone by the large oak tree that shaded the bus stop. Greta caught his eye and smiled. He returned a quick smile and then looked away—glancing at his classmates before looking down at his own shoes that were not at all new. He had a backpack, but Greta didn't notice any new supplies or witness in him any of the excitement that his classmates felt.

“On my own street, children return to school without all the new, shiny supplies of the school year,” Greta thought. Would I ever have guessed? Do I know this child's family? Greta knew her children's school provided free and reduced lunch, but she and her children never spoke about it. They didn't have to. The bus pulled up, and the children eagerly climbed on, including the young boy who was still on Greta's mind. She felt pulled to help this child who did not have all the things that her children did. But how?

“To say and do nothing because no single solution is perfect is not to take a Christian position, but silently to support whatever status quo happens to prevail, or to leave change entirely to others—and thus to refuse altogether to try to bring the will of God to bear on the life of the world.” The Theological Basis for Christian Social Action, 1966, General Assembly Minutes, 165.

We live in a world of ambiguity—the waters are murky, and we often struggle to decipher if there is a clear wrong or right that we should speak out about. Greta wondered how she should get involved, or if there was even a concern she needed to address. She probably wondered, how can we name when we aren't sure we are naming the right thing? Constant indecision can lead to an excuse for inaction. Even without a single, perfect solution, we move forward faithfully rooted in God's gospel. Especially when we've done the groundwork of listening to those most affected by the problem we witness. God's word and unconditional love for all creatures of the world provides us a grounding from which to name: does this action affirm humanity as beloved? You might also pray and speak with others to discern the best way to start your witness of naming. But waiting for someone else to come up with the magic solution without action is not a faithful response. **Name an issue that has caught your attention. How can you learn more? How can you join voices in speaking out about it?**

■ Day 5

Name yourself

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3).

Let’s shift our gaze inward. What are some ways that we can work to live more just lives? Is it taking time to assess our carbon footprint²? Or looking up the trade practices of the places where we shop? Or where our food comes from? We name the systems in which we are complicit not in order to wallow in guilt, but rather to discover more about our choices and perhaps change some of our actions. Such change does not have to be incredibly expensive; for example, we would save money shifting from bottled water to tap water. And there may be changes we can’t make at this point in our lives. But whatever steps we can make, we start to use our whole lives as witness. **Think about your own choices you may be able to change in your own life. Try to make a change for one day, one week; are there sustainable changes you would like to make?**

■ Day 6

Which name do we use?

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:40)

This quote is often used to encourage Christian outreach to people living in poverty. Yet, when we call those of us living in poverty “the least of these,” we turn financial status into a single defining characteristic. In the biblical Greek, the author of Matthew first names the recipients of care as family members in this passage; then he moves on to describe that the people he is talking about do not have many possessions. Bonds of family first, economic status later.

What are some ways we create distance between ourselves and our sisters and brothers in Christ?

How can we name our neighbors more justly?

■ Day 7

Naming the good stuff

“God saw everything God had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31a)

Take time to celebrate God’s creation! Revel in nature, take heart in the compassion of a good friend. Remember to name the good that you see, the good that you do, and the good that God is working throughout the world. God took time to notice that creation was good; God provides the example for us to pause and name goodness. Celebrate when campaigns for justice make progress. Recognize the good work that others are doing. These moments will sustain us on the journey and will help us remember God’s steadfastness in the midst of our social witness. **Take a moment to recognize the goodness in God’s creation around you. Who or what do you think of? What good work is being done?**

2. Check it here: epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/ind-calculator.html

Keep Up the Witness: The Persistent Widow

Week 2

■ Day 1

And will not God grant justice?

“Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to God’s chosen ones who cry to the Lord day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Humanity comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:1–8)

This passage stands as one of the clearest examples of public witness in the Bible. Jesus uses the widow as the model of prayer—an active, unrelenting force for justice. Jesus calls us to have perseverance like the unnamed widow. Our persistence in the face of injustice is the model of the faith God wants to find on earth.

Take a moment to consider:

Who are the unjust judges in your community?

Who are the widows?

How can we be as tireless as the widow in our own faith?

As we join with past generations of the church in asking, “where is the theological basis for social witness?” the widow from Luke guides us toward an answer. She shows us prayer in action, prayer that refuses to stop just because the political climate is too unjust. We may think no advocacy gains can be achieved when all we hear about Congress is story after story of political gridlock. This fear of a difficult struggle must not stop us. For how much more just is our God in whom we put our trust?

In a 2009 article, PC(USA) Stated Clerk Rev. Gradye Parsons, told us more about the lifestyle of a persistent widow. He described the witness of Francis Makemie, one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church in America, who was imprisoned in 1707 by the governor of New York. In a letter, the governor described Makemie as “a preacher, a doctor of physic, a merchant an attorney . . . and . . . worst of all, a disturber of governments” (“Presbyterians and Politics: Disturbers of Governments,” *Biblical & Theological Perspectives*).

Disturbing governments is in our DNA as Presbyterians, from the Gospels all the way through the social witness that thrives in faith communities today. Let us not shy away from that heritage now, even when speaking truth to power can seem like a hopeless task. Our Gospel tells us to keep coming continually to the lawmakers and to keep up the faith through witness. We still have avenues to reach out to our

representatives and make our voices heard. And don't forget that our heritage also values community—we engage in this work together, encouraging one another along the way. Let us gear up for the work of coming continually with our faithful petitions to the unjust judges of the world.

Prayer

Steadfast God of Creation,
Who asks that I pray without ceasing,
I pray that I might take my prayers into the world as the widow did.
That I might bring the witness of your unfailing love into the halls of power.
That I might take your spirit of peace into a world of turmoil.

Thank you for your care of this world
And for your unfailing justice.
May I continue to disturb injustice where it lies,
Encouraged by your ever-present spirit.

Amen.

■ Day 2

Intercession as witness

“Intercession is spiritual defiance of what is, in the name of what God has promised.” Walter Wink, 1992, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*.

What is the widow doing, if not defying the status quo and calling for the justice God would want for the world? We remember God's promises of faithfulness and fullness in life. These are the intercessions, the petitions we bring without ceasing, day in and day out. **What is your intercessory prayer life like? What “is” in this world that you can lift up to God in prayer?**

■ Day 3

God before government

“But in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to [God].” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4, 20:32

Even when people live under the jurisdiction of their government, God still gets our primary allegiance. Calvin was a staunch defender of governments and civil service; yet he knew that when governments disobey God's will, God's will trumps earthly rulers. If we see governments harming God's creation or people, we need to witness to God's will for wholeness. Calvin cites Daniel's defiance in the face of a decree against prayer to God (Dan. 6:10) as an example of this witness. Daniel put his faith before his civic duties. **Have you ever had to make a stand like Daniel? Who are some witnesses who have stood up to governments in this way?**

■ Day 4

Witness within community

Story: Not in My Pulpit

Use the story as an opportunity for reflection: Do you see yourself in this story? Where? What would you do in this situation?

Standing at the church's door, Pastor Luisa shook the hands of her parishioners and friends as they exited the sanctuary. Soon there was only one person left in the sanctuary, walking down the church's center aisle hesitantly. Luisa recognized Paul, a long-time member of the church. He approached her, and instead of reaching out his hand to shake her own, he continued wringing his hands with great anxiety.

"Pastor Luisa, I have appreciated your messages in the few years that you have been at this church, but today's sermon just seemed . . . well, wrong. How can you use the pulpit of this church to preach about voting? About voting rights? I mean, talk about politics from the pulpit! That's not what we're about here." Luisa nodded, listening. While writing her sermon, she wondered if she might hear this response from parishioners.

"Paul, I know that we have a lot of views in this church, and we don't consider ourselves very political. I spoke this message today because I think it's what our text from Exodus was getting at, that all people deserve justice (Exod. 23:1–10), and that they deserve a chance to be heard. Honestly, I wrestled with whether or not to talk so specifically about voting rights, but the news about voting restrictions this week tipped me over the edge. I thought we needed to talk about it."

"You're the Bible scholar, and I do appreciate your going deep into the text. But I come here to escape the news, to avoid the politics that surround us every day," Paul said, making eye contact with Pastor Luisa.

Pastor Luisa now took Paul's hand, which had recently stopped its wringing. "The stories of the Bible took place in the real world and confronted the issues of the day. This is one step for our congregation—to think about doing the same. We address concerns through our peace offerings and our volunteer work. This is just one more way."

"It still doesn't feel right. It feels like the wrong mix." Paul said this thoughtfully and without malice toward his pastor. He gave her a slight wave and walked outside, still wondering if his church was turning in a direction he didn't like. Luisa watched him walk away and wondered if she had alienated her friend and parishioner.

"The separation of Christian life from public affairs creates an artificial boundary between the church and state; it also makes an artificial boundary between our faith and the world. Christianity is not an individualistic faith; rather, Christians are called to live in community and to be active in the world in ways that witness to our faith in all areas of our lives." Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, 2008. *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*, xix.

This passage reflects a theme that weaves through faithful advocacy: the political sphere is not a separate aspect of our lives, an aspect with which God is unconcerned. How would this message relate to the conversation between Paul and Pastor Luisa? Is there a message here for both of them? The writers of *To Do Justice* help us understand that it is our communal faith as Christians that draws us into social witness. Our elected officials may often seem very distant from us in many ways, but they too are children of God,

and we reach out to them in the same way as all our brothers and sisters: we speak truth in love. **Have you ever written or spoken to your representatives in Washington, DC? If you're not sure how to get started, we can help. Visit our website at pcusa.org/washington or sign up for PC(USA) Action Alerts to learn about issues and opportunities to contact your senators and representatives: capwiz.com/pcusa/mlm/signup.**

■ Day 5

Reflecting Christ's righteousness

When we work for justice, *"it is similar to the moon reflecting the sun's light—in this case, we reflect [Jesus'] light and righteousness."* Suba Priya Rabindran, 2009. "Justice in the Gospels: What Does the Good News of the Kingdom of God Have to Do with Justice?" in *The Justice Project*. Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber, eds.

In other words, our work for justice reflects Jesus' own righteousness in the world. Because we live, move, and have our being in God (Acts 17:28), nothing we do is apart from God. Thus, our work for justice reflects God's radiance—we are not the source. We are not stars, like the sun. We are workers in God's vineyard, and we do our best to create a just world to reflect God's intentions. **Reflecting God's radiance is a tall order. What small steps can you take this day to be more Christlike in your witness?**

■ Day 6

Mary sings of God's equalizing power in her Magnificat in Luke 1:52–53a: *"God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things."* Scholar Traci West interprets: *"Mary's words offer a vision of God's power as having already been used unequivocally with regard to the pretentious human rulers and the lowly who have been degraded. Her speech provides a key ingredient for struggle: imagination. It preserves images of what political and socioeconomic justice that has already been achieved looks like."* *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*, 107.

Imagination lets us see God's work as ever-unfolding, even in the midst of unjust circumstances. **How does imagination fuel you each day? How can you imagine "justice that has already been achieved?"**

■ Day 7

Who, me?

"When did Jesus ever say, 'You may come to me if and when you become physically clean and morally pure, properly motivated, politically uncontroversial, socially conformist to the way of life around you.'" The Theological Basis for Christian Social Action, 1966. Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) General Assembly Minutes, pp.160–165

If this week has left you wondering, "Am I qualified to do this work?" then let this day's quote ease your mind. God has used unlikely characters for the work of justice all throughout the Bible. Think of Paul, who spent many years of his life hunting down Christians and persecuting them and then was called to help keep the early church together. Think of Jonah, who ran away from God but was used to share God's news. If your opponent seems too mighty to petition by yourself, maybe you can find a community to do advocacy together. You do not need a PhD, a career spent in advocacy, or millions of dollars. Instead, a willingness to keep on coming to the judge is all that is required. **Are there any barriers that seem to keep you from the mission of social witness? Brainstorm some solutions and opportunities to help continue your witness.**

In the Lord I Take Refuge: Restoration on the Journey

Week 3

■ Day 1

Returning to God

“What is your only comfort, in life and in death?”

“That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death— not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ . . . Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” Heidelberg Catechism, 4.001.

When asked what is our only comfort, the writers of the catechism did not say, “Advocacy!” or, “Social witness in the public sphere!” Advocacy is an essential branch of our faith, yet the deep roots of our belief are found in God through Jesus Christ. We know from our faith that the power to persevere comes from the roots; it comes from God. We may not always be able to gain sustenance from the branch of witness. If the advocacy work becomes difficult, or if we lose sight of why we are witnessing— we return to our refuge: the God who sustained our mothers and fathers in faith. In such moments of returning, we gain the wisdom to realize that God has always been and always will be present in our discipleship.

Paul exhorts his readers to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). Because advocacy is discipleship, then we can praise our Lord with every action. Yet, centering activities bring us back to God and increase the likelihood that we are doing advocacy in God’s name, and not in our own.

When you first learned about the Gospels, were you surprised when the seemingly nonstop action of Jesus’ miracles and adventures ground to a screeching halt for our Lord to pause and pray? (Mark 1:35, 6:46, and 14:35-9, ex.) While this may have seemed a jarring (or boring) plot point as a first-time reader, it now serves as a powerful reminder: we all need to stop and pray, even the Son of God.

Take a moment to consider:

When/where do you feel most connected to God?

When/where do you feel disconnected?

What helps you enter a place of mindfulness? (Deep breaths? Soothing music? Closing your eyes?)

Take comfort in God. God is our source of joy and strength, our rock and our redeemer (Psalms 19:14). God is the reason for advocacy, the reason for discipleship. It is easy to let our own agendas lead the way in our witness. But as we practice returning to God in all that we do, we will let God’s will be done, and not our own.

Prayer

(Start with silence)

Holy God of movement and stillness,

Help me to return to you every day.

You are our source, you are our reason to witness.

The challenges sometimes seem too difficult
And the road too tiring.
Guide us with your wisdom and strength.
So we may continue your work
And live into your will for us.
Amen.

■ Day 2

What is prayer?

“Prayer is at the heart of worship,” says the PC(USA) Book of Order. “In prayer, through the Holy Spirit, people seek after and are found by the one true God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ. They listen and wait upon God, call God by name, remember God’s gracious acts, and offer themselves to God” (W.21001).

At the same time we seek God in prayer, God finds us. The reciprocal relationship of prayer brings us closer to God and enfolds us in God’s care. This is the relationship that informs our advocacy. We return to God, we seek God, so that we can, in turn, make our “commitment to join God’s work in the world” (W.21001). **Next time you pray, remember that as you seek God, God is actively finding you.**

■ Day 3

The power of contemplation

*“Contemplation is the highest expression of [humanity’s] intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, an awareness of the reality of that Source.” Thomas Merton (1961), *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1.*

When reading the Bible, we do remember that we come from “an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source.” But do we always recall our belonging when we are out in the world? Contemplation is a practice that brings us back to our recognition of God and our life in the Lord. When we are secure in the knowledge of who we are, we can more faithfully be witnesses to justice. Taking the time to use a devotional like this is one such invitation to contemplation. **Take a minute now just to breathe and know that you belong to God.**

■ Day 4

Spirituality for witness

Story: Why Retreat?

Use the story as an opportunity for reflection: Do you see yourself in this story? Where? What would you do in this situation?

In the silent room with its large windows overlooking the nearby park, Terrance saw twilight fall. “That’s it,” he thought. “I can’t do this anymore.” He stood up from the prayer circle his youth group had formed and walked out the door. As he left, he angrily shook his head and wondered, “Why are we sitting here praying when we see violence, destruction of the earth, and so many other things going wrong everywhere in the world?” He stood alone for a moment until he heard another’s footsteps join him in the hallway. It was his youth group leader, Ben, who had noticed Terrance leave a few moments before.

“Hey,” was all Ben said. He could tell that Terrance wanted to speak, and so Ben invited Terrance to share by pulling up a chair and sitting down. Terrance sat down too, and sighed. “Do you ever feel like retreats are just a waste of time? I mean, shouldn’t we be *doing* something about the problems we’re praying about? Do you really think praying is going to un-melt the ice caps and give them back to the polar bears?”

“I hear you,” said Ben, choosing his words carefully. “It’s really tough. We want to be out helping, but let me tell you: we’re not going to make it very long in our daily work if we don’t stop and check in with God.”

“But I want to be out there helping, I don’t want to be holding hands and singing,” Terrance replied.

“The commitment you’re making to helping in the world is very important, but it can also be really tough. We don’t always see the changes we want right away, so we need someone else to sustain us. And we also have to remember *why* we want change, and that answer lies in God through Christ.”

“Well, I was just saying—I didn’t expect you to start preaching on it,” Terrance said, cracking a small smile.

“And you asked the right person, because I definitely know the power of prayer. How else do you think I could put up with you guys day in and day out?” Ben joked.

“If it works for you, I guess I can give it one more try,” and Terrance stood up to return to his youth group and chaperones. He paused at the door, took a deep breath, and walked in to join the circle.

“The word ‘spirituality’ can also be used to make the connection between one’s participation in justice-oriented ministries and the experience of God one recognizes in that work. In this case, spirituality is not a conversation that is disconnected from social action. Rather, it is the language used to point to the ways that people enact their faith in a world that seldom reflects God’s dream of justice, equality, peace, and love for the whole creation.” Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, 2009. “Through the Work of Our Hands and the Meditations of Our Hearts: Defining Spirituality for Contemporary Justice Seekers,” *Biblical & Theological Perspectives*.

When we pray and practice spiritual disciplines, we do not abandon our advocacy work. Instead, we strengthen it by seeking “the experience of God.” This is the lesson Terrance is beginning to learn in the story above. Spirituality and advocacy can coexist to sustain and deepen our earthly efforts. Many movements use public prayer vigils to name their cause and to re-energize their work through spiritual practice. They draw on the Spirit while drawing attention to their cause. Because God is the one we serve in all places in our lives, bringing prayer and spirituality into our work will help cement our commitments. **Where do you see opportunities to incorporate spirituality into advocacy work?**

■ Day 5

Praying in community: Worship

In worship: *“Recklessly, we let loose with music, and the words of hymns, the psalms, canticles, and prayers. We cast the Word of God out into the world, into each human heart, where, to paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, it needs to go to fulfill God’s purpose. Isaiah uses the metaphor of rain to convey this—rain that disappears into the ground for a time, so that we can’t see it working. And then, it bears abundantly.”* Kathleen Norris, 1998. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

Finding ourselves in God’s presence does not always have to be a solitary exercise. Our prayer together—through the song, word, and movement of worship—also reminds us in whom we have our being. Witness grounded in worship can be sustained much longer than advocacy without such a basis. **Think about powerful experiences you have had in worship; how do you praise God in community?**

■ Day 6

Be still

“Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations.” (Ps. 46:10)

Have you ever felt that you were too busy even to take time for sleep? That if you could just power through and skip those eight hours of “wasted” time, you could get everything done? Yet, those eight hours are the time that the body needs to restore and repair itself; it is not wasted time at all. In the same way, stillness is a challenge to a society constantly on the move. We may work multiple jobs, give our time to several projects, or take care of a number of family members. Discipleship does require a great deal of action—but this Psalm reminds us that God needs our stillness too. Stillness doesn’t have to take the shape a week-long retreat, but the moments of silence we take each day can also restore and repair—and give us time to know who God is. **Does stillness sound like a scary word? What (if any) are some of your fears of stillness?**

■ Day 7

Listen to the world

“Christians listen as well as speak to the world, learn from the world as well as instruct it.”

The Theological Basis for Christian Social Action, 1966, PCUS General Assembly Minutes, p.165. With a contemplative heart, we are more open to lessons that the world can teach us, to opportunities for enriched advocacy. We begin to notice that every day is a chance to become re-centered and deepen our roots in the love of God. Listening is a vital Christian discipline that brings us closer to God and helps us develop into more informed advocates for change. **Take time today as you go about your daily routine to listen to the world. What do you hear?**

Bear One Another's Burdens: Advocacy in Relationship

Week 4



■ Day 1

Advocacy as relationship

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

Paul writes to the Galatians to say that beyond their own personal duties, they have an obligation to be there for one another. They have the duty to fulfill Christ’s law of loving their neighbors as they would themselves (Matt. 22:39). These commandments provide a firm basis for advocacy. God calls us to care about our neighbors, near and far. We started our study with naming; then we saw the widow’s tenacity as a call for us, and we remembered our spiritual roots as advocates. Now we enter the last week of our study: understanding advocacy as an essential feature of our Christian relationships.

Let’s turn to another scriptural resource that helps us envision this relationship, the Beatitudes. *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6).*

The author of the 2011–2012 *Horizons Bible Study*, Margaret Aymer, takes on this passage, using the word “justice” in her translation, in the place of “righteousness”:

“Justice is a state of right relationship with God and neighbor. In Leviticus 19:9–10, 15, it means dealing as fairly with the poor as with the rich. In Deuteronomy 24:17–22, it means treating widows, orphans, and foreigners exactly as you would treat the married, those with parents, and citizens. In Matthew, Jesus charges his disciples to honor those who are famished and parched for justice, for the kind of right relationships between people and God that were the original vision of God.” Confessing the Beatitudes: 2011–2012 Horizons Bible Study, 32.

When we add the passage from Galatians and those in Matthew, what do we get? A call to right relationship. A call that carries with it the requirement of just action for our brothers and sisters. Thus, God invites us into advocacy as a sign of our discipleship. ***We know from our past reflection that advocacy means that we speak with and not for someone else. As we ground ourselves in those relationships through our reflection this week, stand together in mutuality to create meaningful change.***

Prayer

Creator of community,
Help me to move forward with right relationships.
As I seek your will,
As I seek to do justice,
As I seek to grow closer to your children across the world.

I thank you for the call to be a witness.
In gratitude I reach my hands out to the hands of all your people.
May our work today and in the days to come
Be a sweet offering to you.

Amen.

■ Day 2

True compassion for our neighbors

“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” Martin Luther King Jr., 1967. *Beyond Vietnam* speech.

When we develop true relationships in advocacy, we realize that compassion for our neighbors calls for more than a Band-Aid fix to injustice. We see that all God’s children—our sisters and brothers—deserve to live within systems that adhere to the call of justice. We commit to even more than charity; we commit to advocacy for system-wide justice. Serving meals and providing direct services to those who need them are a necessary part of our Christian call. Yet, we can deepen our commitment and our compassion as we move toward long-term solutions and change at the level of structures. **What is your definition of true compassion? How does it inform your Christian discipleship?**

■ Day 3

It’s not my job

“But now I can hear an objection from the other side. Is it our responsibility to help [someone in need]? Isn’t it God’s task to deliver the captives? . . . Nowhere in the Bible do we see anyone standing still. All the human agents of God’s will are working, not only hard but with almost superhuman effort.” Walter Wink, 1984. *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*.

Advocacy as discipleship is a heavy call. We may want to pray: God, can you please do your work without me? God can do more than we could ever imagine, but we know from the Bible that God calls on disciples to advocate for one another. And that means us. Yet, we also know that we share this call together; we can bear one another’s burdens while we continue the faithful work for justice. **Have you ever wished to shed the label of discipleship? Who or what helped you pick it up again?**

■ Day 4

Walk humbly together

Story: The Next Question

Use the story as an opportunity for reflection: Do you see yourself in this story? Where? What would you do in this situation?

Everyone was dressed in bright holiday sweaters. From some of the youngest church members to the oldest, each person was engaged in a meaningful part of serving the meal this Christmas. Coffee and desserts made their way among the soup kitchen’s tables as its patrons ate and were served.

The regular volunteers recognized faces among those gathered for the holiday meal. Some they had seen for years and some were new. Some were single adults who carried large backpacks; some were young families who sat around tables together. Joe, who had scooped mashed potatoes every Christmas for years,

spoke aloud to his fellow church members: “What do you suppose people do when they leave this meal? Do any of you know what else our community offers people in need?” Then he paused and said, “How could I even begin to answer these questions?”

Those gathered behind the steam tables nodded sympathetically, their brows furrowed. Hadn’t they all wondered and prayed over the same questions themselves? “I guess it starts with this conversation,” said Robin, who taught Joe’s children in Sunday school. She turned to Joe and the other members of her church community and said, “I wonder what our next step should be.”

“The only way to really know what justice means in any given case is to walk together in the problem for a while . . . and walk humbly, acknowledging that no one person, society, or nation can fully grasp the complexity of the political, social, technological, ecological, economic, and spiritual systems that underlie poverty and injustice.” Tom and Dee Yaccino, 2009. “Just Beginning: What Are Some Good First Steps in Seeking Justice—for Both Individuals and Faith Communities?” in *The Justice Project*. Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber, eds.

We remember the call in Micah 6:8 to “*do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*” So did the church members in the story above. Now we consider that humility means walking so that we all tackle the tough issues together. We learn about the issues that need to be addressed, and we work together with stakeholders and our partners in faith. This makes the commandment of discipleship much more bearable, and it keeps any one of us from thinking we have all the answers to every problem. **Think of a time when working with others helped foster change.**

■ Day 5

Made in God’s image

“The call to resistance must be understood as a call not only to defy encroachments upon divine authority.. but also to resist the denial of human dignity and the degradation of all life, and thereby the distortion of God as the source of all life and goodness.” Kristine Culp, 2006. “Always Reforming, Always Resisting” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, eds.

Remember the last reflection of the first week when we reflected on God’s creation as good. When God finished the work of creation, God’s goodness was manifest in it. Anything less than goodness for all God’s creation is the distortion of God that the author discusses above. This emboldens us in our quest to seek justice in our midst: “God will quickly grant justice to them.” And thus we stand in opposition, in resistance, to anything less than this justice. **What gives you courage to continue struggling for justice?**

■ Day 6

The Golden Rule

“We are not doomed to an existence of selfishness, because we have the ability, with disciplined, repetitive action, to construct new habits of thought, feeling, and behavior . . . [The Golden Rule] is a method—and the only adequate test of any method is to put it into practice.” Karen Armstrong, 2011. *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, 113.

Remembering that we are all in this together doesn't only happen in the middle of rallies or in "official" advocacy capacities. It is a daily practice. Every time we treat others as we would have them treat us, we live into the relational aspect of witness. We create a foundation of mutuality that can inform our advocacy work. **What are some daily ways that you live into the Golden Rule?**

■ Day 7

Conclusion: You made it!

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Tim. 4:7)

You have traveled from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament, from the time of Christ to contemporary witness. You have indeed finished this race and kept the faith. Take this time to reflect on these past four weeks and your journey through examples of and calls to advocacy. Please refer to the passages and reflections in this devotional to gain strength for the races to come: Naming, Advocating, Finding Spirit, and Making Relationships. May these values live on with you as you continue your discipleship through advocacy. **How can you share your experience of the past four weeks? What kind of advocacy lies ahead for you?**

Theology of Naming

Keep Up the Witness: The Persistent Widow

In the Lord I Take Refuge: Restoration on the Journey

Bear One Another's Burdens: Advocacy in Relationship

For Further Reading and Action

Learn more about advocacy as discipleship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness: presbyterianmission.org/ministries/washington

Sign up for Action Alerts for updates on policy issues and opportunities to write to your representatives: capwiz.com/pcusa/mlm/signup

For more information about Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministries in the PC(USA): presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice

Read *Unbound, An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice*: justiceunbound.org/

Calculate your carbon footprint: epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/ind-calculator.html

Read Biblical and Theological Perspectives, published by the Office of Public Witness: presbyterianmission.org/ministries/washington/theology/

Join the fight for fair food with the Presbyterian Hunger Program: presbyterianmission.org/ministries/fairfood/

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