



ZIMZUM DISCIPLESHIP VIDEO LESSON #3: CREATION JUSTICE

SMALL GROUP SESSION 2 - PRACTICING PARADISE

GATHERING

Opening Prayer:

O heavenly Father, who has filled the world with beauty: Open our eyes to behold your gracious hand in all your works; that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness; for the sake of him through whom all things were made, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Begin with brief check-ins and the opening questions below:

Opening Questions:

How has it been practicing zimzum discipleship and creation justice? Which of the spiritual practices associated with creation justice have you engaged in?

Reading: Revelation 21:22-22:5

John the Divine said, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

- Use *lectio divina* ("divine reading") for this passage
- Read the text slowly aloud. Sit for a time and notice where your heart takes you
- Meditate on a word or phrase that has caught your attention. Or imagine taking on a role in this narrative and playing it over again in your mind
- Pray the passage aloud slowly again, or simply pray the word or phrase that has taken your attention
- Quietly consider how this passage might lead you to live more faithfully as a disciple of Jesus, and let the Spirit guide you as to next steps for contemplative living

Content Study

- Below find selections from *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* by **Douglas E. Christie**. Read them aloud.

"The Christian tradition has long cherished a vision of the world as paradise, a simple, harmonious whole made manifest in creation and renewed in Christ. From the garden in Genesis to the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah to the heavenly city in the Book of Revelation, one encounters recurring images of this unbroken whole that is paradise. But what kind of place is it and where is it to be found? Is it part of a world that once was but is no longer? Is it part of a dream that can only be realized in the world to come? Or does it perhaps exist here and now, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear? The persistent presence of violence, suffering, and death makes it difficult if not impossible to believe in the idea that in the world as we know it, "everything is in fact paradise." It seems more honest to acknowledge that paradise is simply lost to us, that if it exists at all it must be as part of a future hope, never to be fully realized in our current existence. Still there is a recurring dream that, in fact, paradise is somehow knowable, graspable, inhabitable in the this present reality. ...

"Is the dream of paradise, still mysteriously present and alive to us even in the midst of suffering and loss and grief, necessary to the work of healing the broken world? Must we be able to imagine the world as whole in order to learn again to inhabit it with tenderness and care, to contribute toward its renewal?

"I would argue that it is indeed necessary—for the sake of our own happiness and well-being and for the sake of our increasingly threatened world—for us to be able to imagine paradise. What is more, I would suggest that we must learn to practice paradise, to learn how to incorporate an awareness of this mysterious reality into the heart of our contemplative practice. Learning to do so can have a profound transformative effect on the life of the person who undertakes such a practice; but it also has the potential to effect a wide and deep transformation in society and the world." (313-314)

"At its root, the idea of paradise expresses the conviction that one can learn, through assiduous spiritual practice and openness to grace, to overcome the anxieties and fears (our condition outside of or beyond paradise) that prevent us from opening ourselves to simple, open loving relationship with God and with all beings (human and non-human). But there has always existed a strong conviction within the paradise tradition of Christianity that the personal work of reimagining and reinhabiting paradise has the potential to effect a transformation that touches every dimension of the cosmos. The hope for a final integration or transfiguration of all living beings—often expressed in the language of... the renewal of all things—is a critical part of this paradise tradition." (315)

"The language of paradise has been frequently employed, after all, to express very different and often diametrically opposed ideas about what it means to live in the world—supporting not only the hope of a more whole, reciprocal way of living, but also an acquisitive, exploitive, and destructive ethos that seeks a paradise that leaves the world and those living in it diminished. The contemplative practice of paradise will need to retain a critical awareness of and response to the tendency to seek a paradise that serves only our needs. Only such a critical retrieval of the dream of paradise will be sufficient to help us heal our own increasingly fragmented world." (316)

"'Life in Christ,' the gift given to every Christian through the resurrection and in baptism, is life in paradise. And while it is deeply personal, it is not merely personal. It touches on and includes everything, every fiber of the cosmos, every person living and dead, everything. To inhabit paradise is to feel oneself participating deeply in this mysterious whole, living in it, loving it." (317)

"Learning how to live in paradise: it seems like an almost unimaginable prospect at the present moment. Yet it is also difficult to imagine how we will be able to participate in the work of repairing the world without seriously grappling with the question of what kind of world we hope to discover and live within—without reimagining paradise. Too often we have imagined ourselves as living in and creating a paradise of our own making that only serves our own narrow concerns; this has resulted in a chronic and pervasive alienation from the living world and has had disastrous effects on the living world itself.

"But we can (and must) learn to imagine paradise differently. The contemplative tradition, with its careful attention to the art of moral and spiritual transformation that enables us to understand ourselves as participating in the life of a larger whole, can contribute significantly to this work. In particular, it can help us see paradise not as a realm separate from (and superior to) the earth, but as woven deeply into everything that exists. The contemplative practice of learning to become detached from the grasping, acquisitive habits of a corrupt, materialistic culture and live with a simple awareness of the heavenly character of things can help us recover a sense of the enduring value of the palpable things of this world. But it seems increasingly clear

that whatever personal meaning such renewed awareness of paradise may have for us as individuals, it will also need to inform a larger and more encompassing transformation of our spiritual, political, and cultural values. ... A contemplative vision of paradise, whether it is rooted in a particular spiritual tradition or in a simple awareness of the world's beauty, is always grounded in the the hope that we might yet learn to retrieve and learn to live within an unbroken whole. Even amidst our continued and frenzied assault upon the living world, we dream of the whole. The tenacity of the dream itself has healing power." (347-348)

Reflection Questions

- The bookend stories of creation and the new heaven in Scripture (beginning of Genesis and end of Revelation) are centered on paradise. Cristie describes it as "a simple, harmonious whole made manifest in creation and renewed in Christ." The belief of paradise imagines a world healed fully. Describe what you imagine when you contemplate paradise.
- Cristie asks, "But what kind of place is paradise and where is it to be found? Is it part of a world that once was but is no longer? Is it part of a dream that can only be realized in the world to come? Or does it perhaps exist here and now, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear?" How would you answer his questions?
- There's a shadow side to paradise. Christie writes, "The contemplative practice of paradise will need to retain a critical awareness of and response to the tendency to seek a paradise that serves only our needs. Only such a critical retrieval of the dream of paradise will be sufficient to help us heal our own increasingly fragmented world." How has marketing, acquisitiveness, consumerism, and focusing on your own needs—or wants—impacted your view of paradise? What might you need to alter in your
- own life to transform the powerful messages of our culture?
- Chrstie says, "A contemplative vision of paradise, whether it is rooted in a particular spiritual tradition or in a simple awareness of the world's beauty, is always grounded in the the hope that we might yet learn to retrieve and learn to live within an unbroken whole. Even amidst our continued and frenzied assault upon the living world, we dream of the whole. The tenacity of the dream itself has healing power." What does your dream of an unbroken world include? How can you see that vision more fully and faithfully in your daily life? How might you practice paradise?

Final Reflections

- What has captured your heart or your imagination in today's discussion?
- Where have you seen God—or Love—recently?
- What might you intentionally do over the next 2-4 weeks to bring you closer to God?

Closing Prayer

Almighty and Eternal God, you sacrificially withdrew from a place within yourself in order to create the entirety of the cosmos so that you might be in relationship with us and all of creation. Help us to embrace zimzum discipleship and make space in our own lives, that we might more faithfully follow in the way of Jesus who gave of himself for the salvation and healing of the whole world. All this we ask in the name of the Risen Christ, who dwells endlessly with you and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*