

UNITED AMERICA

WAYNE BAKER

Bible Study Guide

by Beth Miller

Read The Spirit Books



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A United America **discussion guide**

How to Organize a Bible Study with Dr. Wayne Baker's book, *United America*.

This is the first in a series of discussion guides that readers may want to use while talking about Dr. Wayne Baker's book, *United America*. This guide describes a series of up to 10 weeks that can be organized in a church group or Sunday school. Other upcoming guides in this series will describe one-time activities that any group—religious or secular—may want to use to engage readers with the important insights in this book. Look for future discussion guides to be added at the book's website: UnitedAmericaBook.com.

Dr. Baker's book is written for everyday reading in all settings, including schools, library groups and other secular organizations. Many small-group leaders in churches have expressed interest in adapting the book for use in their congregations. Specifically, they have asked for a Bible study guide with references from scripture that group leaders can include in conversations about the 10 core values identified in Dr. Baker's book.

This discussion guide was developed by veteran teachers and writers, experienced in developing Bible study materials for mainline congregations: Beth Miller, who has written a number of small-group books for Abingdon Press, and the Rev. Megan Walther, a United Methodist pastor serving in Michigan. They have organized this guide into 10 short parts, related to the book's 10 chapters. In every case, they recommend a Bible passage. Then, they offer sample questions. Miller and Walther both advise: "Don't feel you have to cover everything. You're free to add your own Bible references. Choose the questions that are best suited to your group. And, feel free to write your own questions. This guide is your starting point, not a rigid set of rules."

The biblical passages recommended in this guide are not intended as blanket endorsements of all the 10 core values. Some Bible stories raise provocative questions about these values which help good discussions unfold in your group. Remember that Jesus himself often upset the status quo in his society, 2000 years ago. In his book, Dr. Baker often points out that our American core values conflict with each other. Talking about how our faith interacts with our American core values is the real benefit of hosting a Bible study series on United America.

Please email the staff of our publishing house at ReadTheSpirit@gmail.com if your group finds some helpful additions to this guide. We would be pleased to let our readers know about good ideas that emerge as more groups discuss United America.

Bible Passages for Reflection on United America's 10 Core Values

Respect:

1 Peter 2:17, Genesis 1: 26- 31 and Genesis 2:4-9, Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 and Luke 10: 27, Matthew 8: 5-13

Symbolic Patriotism:

Psalms 33:12, Exodus 25:1-22, Hebrews 9: 1-10 ,1 Kings 8: 1-11, Joshua 4:1-9, 20-24, and Luke 1:35-37, Mark 1:21-24, John 1:29-34

Freedom:

John 8:32, Exodus 6: 1- 13, Luke 4: 16 -21, and Galatians 5:13-26

Security:

Psalms 37: 3, Psalm 46:1, Ruth 3: 1-18, Ruth 4: 1-17, Micah 4: 1-4, Matthew 8: 23-27, Philippians 4:4-9 and Matthew 26: 51- 56

Self-reliance and Individualism:

Proverbs 3:5, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Esther 4: 10-17, Matthew 25:1-13, John 6: 1-14, John 15: 1-17, Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35

Equal Opportunity:

Matthew 5:45, Galatians 3:28, Leviticus 19:9-10, Matthew 20: 1-16 and 1 Corinthians 12

Getting Ahead:

Jeremiah 29:11, Deuteronomy 8: 1- 20, Matthew 6:19-33, 2 Corinthians 9: 6-15 and Luke 12:13-21

The Pursuit of Happiness:

Psalm 34:8, Proverbs 3:13-18, Luke 15:11-32 and Matthew 5:3-11.

Justice and Fairness:

Amos 5: 24, Micah 6: 1-8, Deuteronomy 16: 18-20, Matthew 18:21-35 and Philippians 2.

Critical Patriotism:

2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 7: 5-15 , John 1: 19-28, Romans 13: 1-5 and 1 Timothy 2: 1-3

Core Value: Respect

*Honor everyone. Love the family of believers, Fear God.
Honor the emperor.*

1 Peter 2:17

Opening questions:

- What examples of respect can you think of in our culture or our country?
- What examples of respect can you think of from scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of respect? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of respect?

Scripture Prompt: Created in the Image of God

Read Genesis 1: 26-31 and Genesis 2:4-9. Most cultures around the world have creation stories. For the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—creation stories are found in the first two chapters of Genesis. These two chapters offer slightly different accounts of creation, but they both offer profound truths about the nature of life.

These creation stories lay a foundation for how we view humankind—and how we treat others. Genesis proclaims that God created humans “in the image of God”, and that God saw what he had created and called it good. In Genesis 2, it is the breath of God himself that gives humankind its life. Each human has value, because we were made in the image of the creator.

- What is your response to these scriptures? In what ways do these scriptures change or inform the way you view and treat not only yourself but also others?
- What does it mean that God “created humans in his image”? In what ways do we reflect the image of God?
- What does it mean if our souls come from the “ruach” or breath of God? How do you treat everyone as a person of “soul” or sacred worth?

Scripture Prompt: Loving Our Neighbor

Read Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 and Luke 10: 27. The passage from Deuteronomy is known as the “Shema” or declaration of faith in the one God. When asked to name the most important commandment, Jesus quoted the Shema and added the phrase “and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the inquiry, “who is my neighbor?” The parable is found in Luke 10:30-37. Today we have “Good Samaritan” laws and the term has found its way into common usage in our language. As you read the story, keep in mind that in Jesus’ time and culture, Samaritans were not well-liked. This was a contentious and provocative story.

- How does this parable inform our understanding of the way we should treat those who are vastly different from us?
- If we were telling the parable today, who would be the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan?
- Considering this parable, what is Jesus saying about respect for those of different faith, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds?

Scripture Prompt: The Faithful Centurion

In Matthew 8: 5-13, we find the story of Jesus Healing a Centurion’s Servant. Centurions were professional officers in the Roman military. In many ways, this story is about respect.

- What do you know about Roman centurions?
- How does the centurion show respect for Jesus? What is the significance of this?
- How does Jesus show respect for the centurion? What is the significance of this?
- Describe a personal situation or experience similar to this story.

Core Value: Symbolic Patriotism

Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

Psalms 33:12

Opening questions:

- What symbols of our nation elicit strong emotions for you, personally?
- What symbols of faith elicit strong emotions for you?
- Has there been a time when you felt greatly moved by a symbol of our country or of your faith? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of symbolic patriotism?

Symbols point to something beyond. They are representations that have gained significance over time through use, practices, significant events and history. They can mean different things to different people. The universal symbol of Christianity is the cross. There is a joke that goes like this: A woman entered a jewelry store to buy a necklace with a cross. The salesperson asked “Do you want a plain one or one with the little man on it?” Christians share this symbol, but our interpretation of the cross reflects our differing traditions and beliefs. Catholic crosses are customarily crucifixes, revealing a focus on Jesus’ death. Most Protestant traditions prefer “empty” crosses, revealing a focus on Jesus’ resurrection. Other traditions, including Mormons and Amish communities, do not allow crosses.

Scripture Prompt: Ark of the Covenant

Symbolic patriotism involves valuing a symbol that represents the nation. One loose parallel in the biblical world is the Ark of the Covenant, which became a symbol of the people of Israel. In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant was the primary symbol of God's presence within the nation of Israel. Moses was given directions for its construction on Mount Sinai. Originally, it held the Ten Commandments.

There are many scripture references to the Ark of the Covenant. Choose a few portions to read (or include all of them). Exodus 25:1-22 offers instructions for building the Ark of the Covenant. Hebrews 9:1-10 is a New Testament reference to the Ark and its contents. 1 Kings 8:1-11 is a narrative of King Solomon assembling priests to bring the Ark to Jerusalem.

- What do we know about the use of the Ark of the Covenant?
- Considering the building plans, the use, and the travels of the Ark, what can we surmise about its importance and meaning?
- The contents of the Ark included a jar of manna, Aaron's staff and Moses' stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. Why these items? What did they symbolize? What do they mean to you?
- If your faith community was to assemble articles to put in an Ark, what would you include? Why? This is an opportunity for participants to identify objects that are symbols of their particular faith communities. Think of things that evoke feelings of pride, loyalty and identity.

Scripture Prompt: Stones

Joshua leads the people across the Jordan River and into the land that God has promised. During the crossing, he asks representatives from each of Israel's twelve tribes to take a stone from the river bed, and they make a pile on the far bank. The

stones do not have value in themselves: they are a symbol to remind the generations to come of what the Lord has done. Read Joshua 4:1-9, 20-24.

- How do we use stones as symbols and markers today?
- Are there objects (or symbols) that our own children ask questions about? What stories can we tell based on the symbols we display as a country (or as people of faith)?
- The stones are a marker intended to remind future generations of what the Lord has done. Do you have any personal symbols that remind you of what God has done?

Scripture Prompt: Jesus in the Roman Empire

Jesus has many names in the bible. Read Luke 1:35-37, Mark 1:21-24, John 1:29-34.

Scholar John Dominic Crossan reminds us that many of the titles we use to describe Jesus were first “symbolic” titles from the Roman culture:

Before Jesus ever existed, there already was in the first century Mediterranean world a human being whose titles were Divine, Son of God, God Incarnate, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, Savior of the World. Those were the titles of Caesar the Augustus, that is, Caesar the One To Be Worshiped. What happens when the titles of the Emperor in Roman Imperial Theology are taken from Caesar and given to Jesus?

- For Christians, Jesus is at the core of faith. The names we use symbolize the various roles God plays in our world and our lives. Do you have a favorite name for God or Jesus?
- Does your understanding of Jesus’ identity change, knowing that many of the names we use for Jesus

today were at one time titles that people used for Caesar? Explain.

- By using Roman titles for Jesus, Christians gave them new meaning. Can you think of symbols or practices from other cultures that have been given new meaning by Christians?

Core Value: Freedom

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

Opening questions:

- What examples of freedom can you think of in our culture or our country?
- What examples of freedom can you think of from scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of freedom? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of freedom?

Freedom stories abound in the Bible. In the Old Testament, over and over again we find the chosen people physically in bondage, removed from their land, and enslaved to other nations. In the New Testament, the emphasis is on freedom from sin, freedom to be whole, freedom through grace to be in relationship with God. Jesus spoke about freedom of the heart, mind and soul, a distinctive understanding of personal freedom differing from our cultural understanding.

- When have you experienced a sense of divine freedom that calls you to actions you might not choose for yourself?
- How has faith and identity in Christ set you free? How have you changed as a result?

Scripture Prompt: Exodus

Read Exodus 6: 1- 13. In one of the great freedom passages, God assures Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

- What inspires you in this reading?
- Have you personally ever experienced a journey of freedom? Do you know anyone who has?
- Human trafficking is a form of modern day slavery. What other forms of slavery are you aware of? Where, today, are people literally enslaved?
- What is our role as people of faith regarding these issues?

Scripture Prompt: Luke

Read Luke 4: 16 -21. Jesus declares his intentions for his ministry in this account. Today we might say he was delivering his “mission statement” to the people.

- How do these scriptures inform your understanding of freedom?
- What actions are associated with freedom?
- How are you working for the freedom Jesus describes?

Scripture Prompt: Letter to the Galatians

Read Galatians 5:13-26. Paul offers specifics about how to live as a free person.

- Why is it easy to use freedom for self-indulgence?
- Is your freedom limited by your faith?
- In what ways does faith set you free?

Core Value: Security

Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

Psalm 37: 3

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Psalm 46:1

Opening questions:

- What examples of security can you think of in our culture or our country?
- What examples of security can you think of from scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of security? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of security?

Scripture Prompt: The Story of Ruth

Read Ruth 3: 1-18 and Ruth 4: 1-17. Ruth, the Moabite, chooses to leave the security of her land and her people upon the death of her husband. She follows her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Bethlehem. In Ruth 1:16, we read her beautiful pledge of devotion, “I will go where you go.” This is a story about forfeiting security and finding it in a foreign land and among an unknown people.

- What does this story teach about security?
- Why is security important to you?
- Have you ever had to give up security? It could have meant leaving a secure relationship or job.

Scripture Prompt: Micah the Prophet

Micah 4: 1-4 offers a poetic vision of peace and security. It is a vision of the Kingdom of God on earth. Read it out loud, either in unison, one person reading the entire portion, or a different person reading each verse.

- What phrase jumped out at you as you listened? Why?
- How does this passage inform your understanding of security?

Scripture Prompt: Calming the Storm

- Read Matthew 8: 23-27, the story of Jesus calming the storm.
- When you do feel (or have you felt) most threatened or insecure?
- When have you experienced the calming presence of God in your life?

Scripture Prompt: Paul's Words to the Philippians

Paul wrote to the Philippian church with advice on how to live. Read Philippians 4:4-9.

- How do Paul's words speak to you about security?
- What is most important to you regarding security?

Scripture Prompt: Jesus and the Sword

Read Matthew 26: 51- 56. In United America, chapter four (security), it was noted that America spends more on the military than the next ten countries combined. Obviously military security is a priority in America.

- Does faith shape our views on the topic of national security?
- How do you interpret verse 52, when Jesus says “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” or, put another way, “those who live by the sword will die by the sword”?

Core Value:

Self-reliance and Individualism

Trust in the LORD with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding.

Proverbs 3:5

Opening questions:

- What examples of self-reliance and individualism can you think of in our culture or our country?
- Are there references to self-reliance or individualism in scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of individualism and self-reliance? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of individualism and self-reliance?

Scripture Prompt: Ecclesiastes

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, about the value of a friend.

- How does this scripture challenge our cultural value of self-reliance and individualism?
- Do you know someone who is unable to admit when they need help?
- Are you able to ask for help from friends when you need it?

Scripture Prompt: Ten Bridesmaids

In Matthew 25:1-13 Jesus tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids.

- How does this parable address self-reliance?
- How does trusting in God, but also being self-reliant, balance itself in your life?

Scripture Prompt: Feeding of the Thousands

In John 6: 1-14 Jesus asks Philip to find bread for the large crowd gathered to hear him preach. Many Christians interpret this story as a miracle of sharing, rather than a miracle of “producing” food for the people. In Exodus, manna appears from heaven. In this story, Jesus appeals to the disciples to find the resources needed to feed the group. Simon Peter persuades a young boy to give up his two fish and fives loaves of bread. There is enough food to feed five thousand with baskets full of left-overs. Some have said that the real miracle was convincing a young boy to share his lunch. Others have suggested that most had brought food but were unwilling to share until they saw the generosity of the boy.

- Have you experienced a time when you had to rely on strangers for food or necessities?
- What are situations where you must rely on others rather than be self-reliant?
- Why is it more difficult to rely on others rather than on oneself?

Scripture Prompt 4: I am the Vine

Read John 15: 1-17. Jesus describes himself as the true vine and asks followers to abide in him in order to bear fruit.

- How do you abide in Christ? What does this mean to you?
- Share an experience when you tried to “bear fruit” or grow in faith when you relied only on yourself:
- Share an experience when you stayed connected to Christ, as a branch to a vine. What was the result?

Scripture Prompt: Acts and the Early Church

Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35.

- These early Christians lived very differently from how we live today in America. What can we learn from them?
- Have you ever lived in a group, as described by the scripture? What was the result?
- When would it be easier to share everything? When would it make it more difficult?

Core Value: Equal Opportunity

The rain falls on the just and the unjust ...

Matthew 5:45

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

Opening questions:

- What examples of equal opportunity can you think of in our culture or our country?
- What examples of equal opportunity can you think of in scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of equal opportunity? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of equal opportunity?

Basic to our understanding of the scriptures is vision for a world where everyone has their basic needs met. Most of us also accept that there will be social and economic discrepancies in any society. At the same time, feelings of “fairness” are fairly strong in America. How does a Judeo-Christian perspective inform these values?

Scripture Prompt: Gleaning

In Leviticus 19:9-10, the concept of gleaning is explained.

- How is gleaning a means of providing equal opportunity?
- What is the difference between gleaning and charity?
- Are there places in American society where you see the concept of gleaning practiced?
- What new initiatives might be developed based on the concept of gleaning to offer equal opportunities?

Scripture Prompt 2: Workers in the Vineyard

Have someone read Matthew 20: 1-16 to the group. This might be considered one of Jesus' most controversial parables, at least in American culture. The parable of the workers in the vineyard certainly challenges our concepts of fairness and takes equal opportunity to the extreme. It is interesting to note that in the context of the culture, all of Jesus' parables were highly provocative and contentious.

- Who did you most identify with in this story as you heard it read?
- What were your feelings?
- What do you think Jesus is trying to convey in this parable? Go beyond your first reactions and dig for deeper truths.
- What does this have to do with equal opportunity?
- If the concepts in this parable were widely practiced, what would change in our country?

Scripture Prompt: The Body of Christ

In 1 Corinthians 12, we read Paul's description of the believers functioning as the body of Christ. We do not all share the same gifts or talents, and yet we can all work together.

- What basic principles are presented about equal opportunities offered to all persons?
- How does your community of faith offer equal opportunities?
- How could your community of faith be more accessible, offering equal opportunities to everyone?

Core Value: Getting Ahead

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare (or for you to prosper) and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

Opening questions:

- What examples of “getting ahead” can you think of in our culture or our country?
- Are there references to “getting ahead” in scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of getting ahead? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of getting ahead?

TheSaurus.com gives the following definition for getting ahead: excel, succeed. More interesting are the synonyms offered: advance, be successful, climb, do well, flourish, out do, leave behind, make good, overtake, out maneuver, progress, prosper, surpass and thrive.

- Which of these words would you choose to describe your concepts about getting ahead?
- Which of these synonyms best define getting ahead by American cultural standards?

- Which best define getting ahead in relationship to your faith and beliefs?

Scripture Prompt: Instructions from Moses

Read Deuteronomy 8: 1- 20, where Moses gives instructions to the Israelites, as they prepare to enter the Promised Land after forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

- Moses describes a life of prosperity in the Promised Land. How does his description line up with your ideals about getting ahead?
- What cautionary advice is given for those living in prosperity? Is there anything that spoke specifically to you?
- What situations or experiences have challenged you regarding faith and success or getting ahead?

Scripture Prompt: Sermon on the Mount

Return to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount for life lessons. Read Matthew 6:19-33.

- How does this reading inform your understanding of getting ahead or prospering?
- Why does verse 21 tell us that where our treasure is, there our hearts will be, instead of the other way around?

Scripture Prompt: Letter to the Corinthians

Read Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 9: 6-15.

- Verse six offers wisdom on getting ahead: "the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." How would you apply this to your concept of getting ahead?

Scripture Prompt: Parable of the Rich Fool

Read Luke 12:13-2, where Jesus tells the parable of the Rich Fool.

- Do you find evidence in your own life and the lives of other Americans of “building larger barns?” What is the result of this pursuit? How has this impacted your life?
- How does this parable inform America’s quest of consumerism?

Core Value:

The Pursuit of Happiness

O taste and see that the Lord is good, happy are those who take refuge in him.”

Psalm 34:8

Opening questions:

- What examples of the pursuit of happiness can you think of in our culture or our country?
- What references to the pursuit of happiness can you think of in scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of the pursuit of happiness? Explain.
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of the pursuit of happiness?

Scripture Prompt: Proverbs

Read Proverbs 3:13-18. Wisdom is often personified as a woman in biblical scripture. Proverbs suggests that wisdom is one of the greatest things we can achieve.

- Do you feel like you have gained wisdom throughout your life?
- Do you think you are happier, knowing what you know now, than you were at an earlier stage in your life?
- What does Proverbs suggest about happiness?

Scripture Prompt: Prodigal Son

The story of the Prodigal Son provides an interesting framework for considering the pursuit of happiness as a core value. Read this parable found in Luke 15:11-32. The prodigals' journey has become a classic example of the pursuit of happiness.

- How is the prodigal journey a typical pursuit of happiness story?
- How do you think the father and elder son would define happiness and how do they pursue it in the parable? What do the other characters in this story reveal about finding happiness?
- Which character do you most identify with and why?

Examining the prodigal's search for happiness, verse 17 reads:

But when he came to himself ...

- What does it mean to “come to” one's self?
- What have been your experiences of “coming to” yourself?
- What was the result?

Verse 20 reads:

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion ...

- When have you found yourself “far off” in your pursuit of happiness?
- Who was compassionate and waited for your return?

In response to the elder son's refusal to join in the celebration, verse 31 reads:

Then the father said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

- What is the father trying to teach the older son about happiness?

- How does this parable inform your faith and your concept of happiness?

Scripture Prompt: Sermon on the Mount

In Matthew 5: 3-11 we find Jesus teaching the crowds. This scripture has come to be known as The Beatitudes, and is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Most Bible translations use the word "blessed," but some substitute the word "happy." The Greek word, *markarios*, is an adjective that indicates God has conferred or extended benefits or advantages. The Beatitudes challenge our tendency to equate blessings with wealth, position and status. Rather, they describe the fortunate position of receiving God's grace. Carefully read the Beatitudes.

- Does reading this passage with the word "happy" instead of "blessed" change your understanding?
- What does this passage suggest about happiness?

Core Value:

Justice and Fairness

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5: 24

Opening questions:

- What examples of “justice for all” can you think of in our culture or our country?
- What examples of “justice for all” can you think of in scripture or your faith tradition?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of “justice for all”? Explain. How do you live your life based on “justice for all”?
- Hymns contain belief statements, praise and stories of faith. They reinforce our culture and core values as faith communities. Can you think of hymns (or other songs of faith) that address the core value of justice for all?

Scripture Prompt: Micah

Read Micah 6: 1-8.

- Why is this scripture important in regard to justice?
- How do you act out justice in your personal life? In your relations to others?
- What is the role of the people of faith regarding acting out justice?
- Where do you see faith communities advocating for justice for all?

Scripture Prompt: Deuteronomy

Read Deuteronomy 16: 18-20. Deuteronomy is a book of laws and precepts for the nation of Israel.

- What insight does this scripture offer regarding justice?
- How would you compare this definition of justice to our current judicial systems?
- Why are systems of justice important?

Scripture Prompt: Unmerciful Servant

Read Matthew 18:21-35. Jesus tells the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

- How does this parable guide our choices regarding justice?
- Have you ever experienced a similar situation? How did it feel?
- Why are we sometimes tempted to have different standards for others than we do for ourselves?
- Who are the people in our country who have been treated using different standards? What is the effect of this?

Scripture Prompt: Letter to the Philippians

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he offers instructions for living together in community. Read Philippians 2: 1-18.

- This portion of scripture refers often to being of "one mind" or the "mind of Christ." How do you interpret this?
- What is Paul saying about justice and harmony in regard to community?
- How does this play out in the communities you participate in?
- What does this look like in your life?
- What would need to change in your communities to truly practice Paul's advice?

Core Value:

Critical Patriotism

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14

Opening questions:

- What examples of “critical patriotism” can you think of in our culture or our country?
- Can you think of examples of “critical patriotism” in scripture or your faith?
- Which influence, culture or faith, has more influence on your personal understanding of “critical patriotism”? Explain.

The work of the prophets in the Old Testament was, in a sense, offering critical patriotism to the nation of Israel. The prophets fulfilled a specific role of being the conscience of Israel, bringing God’s messages of repentance and restoration. They were not priests but rather stood alongside them. God used prophets to point out what was wrong and to offer another way of doing things. Note that the only prophet who was truly embraced by the king and community was Nathan, who confronted the great King David. Prophets were, generally, not very popular.

Scripture Prompt: Prophets

The words of Jeremiah the prophet, found in Jeremiah 7: 5-15, exhort the nation of Israel to turn from their wicked ways. Read this portion from the book of Jeremiah.

- Who are the prophets today (or groups that function in a similar role) who address oppression of others? Where do you find oppression in America?
- What would you identify as “abominations” in our society?
- Who speaks up against these “abominations”?
- Why is it difficult, challenging, problematic and complex to challenge what you see as wrong in our country?

The four books containing what is referred to as the Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel. Following these are the twelve Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. All of these prophets offered critiques of their culture in the hope of improving it.

- Who is your favorite prophet and why? What was their message? How does it influence you?

Scripture Prompt: John the Baptist

Read the mission of John the Baptist in John 1: 19-28. John is a NT prophet calling the people to repentance to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. John pointed out not only individual problems, but also societal ills.

- Who are the voices crying out “in the wilderness” today, who are addressing social ills in America from a faith perspective?
- What might they ask of Americans to “prepare the way of the Lord” in our world today?
- When and how do you feel compelled to address issues of justice and peace to build the Kingdom of God on earth?

Scripture Prompt: Letter to the Romans

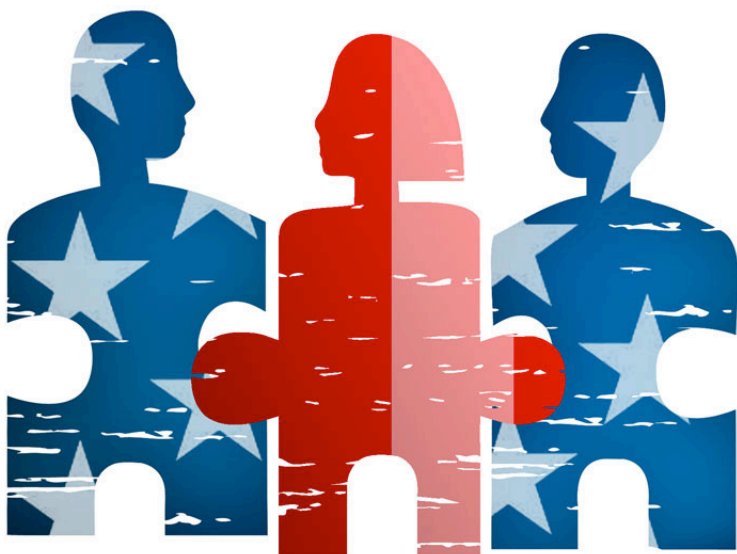
Read Romans 13: 1-5

- How do you interpret this scripture?
- How might it be interpreted as a “love it or leave it” patriotism, rather than our own critical patriotism?

Scripture Prompt: Timothy

Read 1 Timothy 2: 1-3.

- What is asked of the citizens of a nation?
- How can (or does) your community of faith offer critical patriotism to America?



UNITED AMERICA

The surprising truth about American values,
American identity and the 10 beliefs that a large
majority of Americans hold dear

WAYNE BAKER

Preface by Brian McLaren

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