

Station 1: Ash Wednesday – Being Humble

Gather the participants around the sandbox. Tell them that the only rule for this learning station is that they do not throw the sand. Also encourage them to do their best to keep the sand from spilling out of the box. Now instruct them to run their hands through the sand as you offer some thoughts and reflection questions.

Ask the participants to share with you some of the thoughts and feelings that come to mind as they run their hands through the sand.

Most participants will share stories of beach visits. Affirm their sharing and then ask them to quietly listen to what you have to say next.

Remind them that sand is part of the earth. It is found in the soil all across the earth.

Invite the participants to quietly think about the soil and all the wonderful things that come from the soil. Give them about 15 seconds to think quietly. You may invite participants to name a few things that came to mind.

Suggest to them that almost everything we use begins as part of the earth. Almost everything we use starts out as soil. Give them another 15 seconds to think about that.

Now ask the following question:

What comes to mind when I say the word humble?

Invite a few participants to share their thoughts.

As you proceed with the remainder of the reflection, invite the participants to use their fingers to draw in the sand any images that come to their minds as you offer the reflection. Speak slowly to give them time to form their images.

The word humble is closely related to the word soil. There is another word for soil that sounds like humble... humus (not to be confused with the food, hummus).

Humus is soil. Being humble is sometimes phrased as being "down to earth." A humble person is a down-to-earth person. A humble person stays close to the humus, close to the earth. Why? Because the earth is like a mother to us. We humans came from the humus. Both our faith and science teach us that we came from the soil.

Listen to how the Bible teaches about the first human.

"In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens..., the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground..." (Genesis 2:1,7)

On Ash Wednesday, we sometimes hear, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This is a reminder that we humans are called to be humble for we come from the humus.

Humble people are comfortable with who they are. They don't need to pretend to be any more or any less than who they are. What does that mean?

When humble persons see someone with a great talent, they don't become jealous. They admire and enjoy how that person expresses his/her talent and they are confident that they have gifts and talents of their own, maybe not as dramatic as the one they admire, but theirs are equally dignified gifts and talents. Being jealous of someone else's talent is like being a dandelion and wishing we were a marigold. It's kind of silly not to be humble... not to be comfortable and at peace with who God created us to be.

Give the participants a minute to finish their sand drawings. During the time that remains, invite a few of them to share what they drew in the sand.

Station 2: First Sunday of Lent – Alone, not Lonely

Welcome participants as they take their places at the table. When everyone is settled, ask them if they can recall a time when they wanted to be alone just to think about things. Invite a few participants to share the time they are remembering.

Ask if they think there is a difference between being alone and being lonely. Invite a few responses.

Continue with these or similar words:

While it is never a nice experience to feel lonely, it is important for each of us to find time and space to be alone to think about things and to pray about things. This alone time helps us make sense of the many things that happen to us during our busy days.

Alone time also helps us prepare for important things that will happen in our lives. Here's a very short story that we will hear during Lent about Jesus using alone time to get ready for his important work of teaching and healing. This happened right after he was baptized by John the Baptist:

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:12-13)

Ask the following questions and invite a few participants to share their responses:

- Why did Jesus need to be alone?
- Why do you think Jesus was not lonely?

Distribute a piece of blank paper and some crayons to each participant. Tell them that you are going to give them some quiet time to be alone with their thoughts. Invite them to think about something important that is going to happen to them in the coming day or week. It could be something as simple as getting ready for bed or as complex as having a job interview. Allow group members time to discuss their important events so that everyone has at least one thing for which they can prepare in silence.

After each person has identified one important event that is going to happen to them in the coming day or week, tell them that they will now have time to prepare alone and in silence for this important event and you will suggest some steps for how they can prepare:

Step 1: Draw a picture of what your important event will look like.

Step 2: Draw the face of or write the name of any person who might help you with this important event.

Step 3: Draw a symbol of God being present and guiding you through this important event.

Step 4: Look at your picture quietly and thank God in your heart for being with you even when you are alone.

Station 3: Second Sunday of Lent – The Connected Step

Introduce this learning station with these or similar words:

Connections to other people, especially connections that include healthy doses of affection, are very important for our health and well-being. We have a couple of special beliefs about being connected. One is the communion of saints. We believe that we are connected to each other by God's love. The communion of saints also means that we are spiritually connected to people who have died. And we are connected in this way because God's love dwells inside all of us and it holds us together like a big hug from God.

I'm going to read a special Bible passage from the Second Sunday of Lent that brings Jesus in touch with his close friends, with two people from the past and with God. Listen for how they are all connected in this story and how God affectionately talks about Jesus at the end.

"Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'" (Mark 9:2-7)

Ask the participants to share about how they think Jesus felt as a result of this experience. Affirm their responses and encourage them to consider that he probably felt very loved and cared for by God. God called him "the Beloved." This is a very affectionate way to speak about someone.

Ask the group to think about what the cloud might mean in this passage. Invite responses and affirm them. Encourage them also to consider that the cloud is a sign of God's presence. We might even consider it a sign of God hugging everyone in this story. You might even suggest that clouds have a very cuddly look to them when they are white and puffy, and since white is the color mentioned in this story, it is appropriate to think of this cloud as a soft, white, puffy, huggable cloud.

Offer a short presentation about the importance of feeling connected to those we love. We need to express our affection for each other appropriately in our families. Touching each other affectionately, like hugging for example, is a great way to express affection. It's also a very healthy thing to do.

Dr. Karen Grewen, Ph.D., of the University of North Carolina, discovered some interesting things about hugging in a research project she did:

- She had a number of couples discuss several topics that would make them angry. Some of the couples hugged while they talked and the others did not touch each other. The heart rates among the people who did not touch each other increased a full 10 beats per minute, while the heart rates of the hugging couples who had the same discussions only rose five beats per minute.

- Couples who hug increase the levels of the hormone oxytocin (the “pleasure” hormone) in their bodies so they feel better and happier than couples who don’t hug.
- Levels of the so-called stress hormone, cortisol, which can have damaging physical effects, dropped among men and women who hugged in her studies.
- The blood pressure of subjects who didn’t hug each other rose significantly more in the experiment than that of those who hugged when they were told to hug.

-Adapted from <http://www.rewireme.com/journeys/hug-therapy-high-touch-healing-high-tech-world/>

Share the YouTube video about two boys who are disciplined with a hug. Introduce the video by informing the group that these boys had been arguing with each other all morning. Watch how the dad brings the fighting to an end:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnOB_LRqUGI

Introduce the next activity with these or similar words:

Every person likes to experience affection, but not everyone likes it the same way. It is very important to respect the way another person likes to receive affection. Let’s talk about and practice various ways to express our affection with hugs.

Invite participants to brainstorm a variety of ways to hug. Ask each family to talk about various methods of hugging and to practice the methods. For example, there is the side-by-side hug, the bear hug, the back-patting hug, the hug from behind, etc.

After a few minutes, invite each family to demonstrate one or two hugging styles.

Close by asking each person to pick his/her favorite way(s) to be hugged. Then invite each family member to pledge to offer only those kinds of hugs out of respect for each other.

Station 4: Third Sunday of Lent – The Zealous Step

Introduce this activity with these or similar words:

I'm going to assume that you have all heard the word anger before. Am I correct? But the word zeal is a word that is not used as much. What do we mean by the word zeal?

Invite a few responses and then continue with these words:

Someone once said that anger is the emotion that supports evil attacking good and zeal is the emotion that supports good challenging evil.

Display the Anger/Zeal poster that you prepared ahead of time. Ask the participants to comment on the key differences they see in the two definitions.

Suggest to the participants this additional clarification about the difference between zeal and anger:

Zeal is when we passionately work for something good.

Anger is when we are only focused on what we are against because we are afraid of how it may hurt us or may be hurting us.

Encourage the group to think about these definitions as you read a short story about Jesus feeling the power of zeal.

Read John 2:13-17

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Inform the participants that the money changers and the animal sellers were dishonest and were cheating their customers. In the other three versions of this story, Jesus says they have turned the temple into a "den of robbers." The money changers were supposed to be helping people worship God with purity. Their dishonest behavior, among other things, was staining the pure worship of God.

Jesus was zealous for pure worship. He wasn't just acting against the money changers out of misguided anger.

Distribute a handful of modeling clay and a pencil to each participant and ask them to flatten the clay on the table like a pancake.

Invite participants to think about one thing that upsets them on a regular basis. It should be something that they have responded to with anger in the recent past.

Invite each person to use the pencil to carve an image in the clay of their angry response to whatever it is that upsets them. After each person completes the drawing, invite family members to share what they have drawn. If there are singles in the group, they may join a small family for the discussion.

Now ask the families to discuss how a zealous response would be different from their typical angry response. Remind them that the zealous response would focus on using their strong emotions to do something good about the situation, rather than just acting against something or someone with anger.

When they have a clear picture of how a zealous response would look for them, invite them to create a sculpture with their clay that represents their zealous response. Talk to them about how the angry reaction that they carved into the clay will disappear as they create the sculpture of the zealous response.

Close by encouraging them to work on replacing anger with zeal in the areas they discussed. Also tell them that they may take their sculptures with them as reminders of how they will respond with zeal rather than anger to things that upset them.

Station 5: Fourth Sunday of Lent – The Healing Step

Introduce this station with these or similar words:

Have you ever heard anyone say anything like...

- The world is a very bad place!
- There is no hope for that person!
- I hate my life!

These are phrases that express little or no hope. They are phrases that condemn. They don't sound like phrases filled with love or healing.

Listen to this reading from the 4th Sunday of Lent from the Gospel of John:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."
(John 3:16-17)

God loves the world. God wants to save the world, not condemn it.

Condemning the world is believing that the world is so bad it can't be fixed.
Condemning a person is believing that he/she is beyond help.
Condemning myself is believing that my life is useless or meaningless.
We condemn when we have no hope.

God does not condemn. God loves! God heals! God saves!

Distribute two sticks (one 12" long and the other 24" long), one piece of rough twine (about 12" long), and several 3x5 notecards cut in half, cutting in the middle and parallel to the short edge so that you end up with cards that are 3x2.5.. Have crayons, single-hole punches and yarn available for the group.



Instruct each family to tie the two sticks together to make a cross. See photo to the right.

When each family has a finished cross, continue with these or similar words:

The cross is the sign of God's love, God's healing and God's saving.
Even though humans condemned Jesus to death, even though humans believed that Jesus was worthless and beyond help, God loved Jesus; God healed Jesus; God saved Jesus. And God wants the same for us, we who are the body of Jesus Christ. God saved the body of Jesus from the cross, and God will save this body of Jesus Christ (point to all gathered) by healing our tendency to be hopeless in the world, hopeless in other people, and hopeless in ourselves.

Invite families to come up with at least one way we are tempted to lose hope in the world, one way we are tempted to lose hope in people we know and one way we are tempted to lose hope in ourselves. They are welcome to come up with more than one for each category if they want.

Instruct them to write their examples on one side of the card and to also draw a cross on the same side of the card.

Instruct them to come up with ways that they can overcome the temptation to be hopeless for each example. Write the hopeful ideas on the other sides of the cards and also add a picture of a rising sun, a flower or another hopeful symbol on that side of the card.

When the cards are finished, they can punch holes in the cards and tie them to the cross with yarn.

Suggest that they take the crosses home and display them in a family prayer space to remind them to be hopeful in the face of the temptation to condemn the world, others and self.

Station 6: Fifth Sunday of Lent – The Dying Step

Begin this station by inviting participants to share a story about how they or someone they know overcame a significant challenge in life. Give them a few moments of silence to think of a story and then ask for a volunteer to share.

After you hear a few stories, select one or more of them to illustrate how people have to give things up or let things go in order to overcome challenges in life. For example, if someone's challenge involved learning something new and required a lot of practice, the time devoted to practice meant that a lot of other things had to be sacrificed - or let go - in order to make time for practice. The desire to do those other things had to die so that the practice time could live.

Use these or similar words to continue the reflection:

On the Fifth Sunday of Lent, you will hear Jesus speaking about his death. He will talk about his temptation to walk away from this great challenge, but he chooses to face the challenge directly and let go of the easy way out.

"Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.'" (John 12:23-24;27)

Jesus understood that if he remained faithful to his plan, God's plan, he would die, but his death would produce eternal life for everyone.

We also face challenges in our lives. If we stay true to our plans to overcome challenges with God's help and the help of people who love us, great things can happen in our lives.

Invite the families to discuss one significant challenge their family will be facing in the near future. You can help them begin their discussions by providing a few examples of typical family challenges such as aging parents, moving, starting school or a new school, new jobs, construction projects, etc.

Then ask them to think of things that they will have to let go of or sacrifice in order for them to successfully face the challenge. In other words, what has to die in order for new life to spring forth from the successful navigation through the challenge?

Distribute a piece of flash paper to each family. Instruct them to write with pencil the things they must sacrifice to overcome their challenge.

Close the session with a simple ritual. Invite the families to gather around the candle.

Light the candle and remind the participants that fire represents the light of Christ who guides us through all of our challenges. He died and rose from the dead and he promised that if we let selfishness die in our hearts, we will also come to new life in all of our challenges.

Call each family forward one-by-one according to the following ritual:

1. We ask God's blessings upon the _____ family as they face their challenge.
2. Invite the family to name their challenge.
3. Let us all pray silently for the _____ family.
4. Jesus said that if a grain of wheat dies, it will produce abundant life. There are things that will be sacrificed as you face your challenge.
5. Take the paper with the list of sacrifices on it. Hold the paper over the flame of the candle with the tongs. The flash paper will ignite and disappear without leaving any trace of ashes behind.
6. Repeat steps 1-5 for each family.

If time permits, invite the participants to share how they felt as they watched their sacrifices burn in the light of Christ.

Station 7: Palm Sunday – The Victory Step

Use these or similar words to introduce this station:

Palm Sunday kicks off Holy Week, the week before Easter.

Palms are a symbol of victory. They are a symbol of winning something. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, some people thought he came to win a war against the powerful Roman Empire, but that wasn't the kind of victory Jesus had in mind.

He wanted to win over the hearts of people. He wanted to help people become winners over their own selfish ways. He wanted love to be the winner! Jesus wasn't hoping that there would be winners on his side and losers on another side. He wanted everyone to win by becoming more loving and less selfish.

Disciples of Jesus at the close of Lent are challenged to rethink their notions of victory. What does winning mean to you? How can you win in a way that doesn't produce losers? Your victory step should not be a crushing experience for anyone because the kingdom that Jesus ushers in is one of loving relationships. In this kingdom, we all win!

In our community, we do lots of things that end up with winners and losers. Sports, video games, school and business are things that often produce winners and losers. We probably can't change this, but we can change how we end up with winners and losers. Let's play a game and see what happens.

Divide the participants into two intergenerational teams and lead them in a guessing game.

The teams will be guessing a phrase from the Palm Sunday reading. The phrase is *Hosanna in the highest heaven*. Write the spaces of the phrase on a piece of newsprint for all participants to see as follows:

Here is the procedure and rules for the game:

1. Each team takes turns guessing letters (consonants or vowels) in the phrase.
2. Allow one member from one team to guess a letter.
3. If the team member correctly guesses a letter that is in the puzzle, add the letter on the appropriate line on the newsprint.
4. The team then huddles to see if they can guess the phrase. If the team cannot guess the phrase, play passes to the other team.
5. If the team member does not correctly guess a letter, play passes to the other team.
6. The teams continue taking turns until one team solves the puzzle.

Use the following questions for discussion after the game is over:

- How did it feel to win this game?
- How did it feel to lose this game?
- What helped making losing this game more tolerable?
- What did your team gain by losing this game?

- What could your team have done to gain more even though you lost?
- How could the winners have helped the losers lose more gracefully or in a way that didn't offend their dignity?

Close this session by urging participants to think about victory and loss in new ways. Winning and losing can be two sides of the same coin that buys unity in our community rather than division. If we win with humility and lose with a spirit of gratitude for what we've learned, then winning and losing feel more like a shared effort rather than a war.

Offer a brief prayer of thanks to God for the Easter promise of the victory of love in our hearts.