



## The Soul of Land June 29, 2020

Dear friends,

We humans are built for community. During this time of social distancing, it's crucial that we remain connected, holding one another in love and support. It's for this reason that **each week during the COVID-19 crisis, we'll be sending you a short resource** to use in a virtual meeting held over the phone or via video conferencing. This weekly resource is a great tool to stay connected with your current and past JFM small groups. It is also a great resource to use individually, or with groups of friends or family to stay connected and engaged in a meaningful way. These reflections will provide a time to pray together, check in with one another, and have conversation around a short passage.

In the meantime, we're offering tips and tools for facilitating all of our current programs through videoconferencing. While we hope that this weekly resource will spiritually sustain your community while in quarantine, [now is also the perfect time to start one of our regular programs](#). The call to seek justice is just as important now as ever!

Last but not least, generosity is, at its core, a benefit to everyone. When you donate today, your gift helps us sustain individuals committed to making the world better. [Click here to help out](#). Also, please feel free to [forward this resource](#) to friends and family!

Thank you for continuing to care for one another during this time of heightened anxiety. Know that we are praying for you!

Stay well,

The JustFaith Ministries Staff



## Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 minutes)

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When everyone has dialed in, begin your time together with these or similar words:

Welcome, friends! It's so good to be with all of you, despite that we can't be together in person. Today we'll begin with prayer and spend a few minutes checking in with each other. Then we'll have some conversation around a short reflection before closing in prayer. Most importantly, though, this will be a time to care for one another and to be the community we're called to be.

Let's take a few seconds of silence to pause, to listen to our breathing, and to be present in this space.

*Pause for 30 seconds before beginning the opening prayer.*

Lord,

I planted strawberries this year.  
I watched them grow.  
I cared for them.  
I waited patiently to pluck them.  
I was eager to taste them.  
But lo! Would you believe,  
One of your unruly, wild critters came along!  
It feasted on my strawberries,  
Belly full, it ran away to burrow and nap.  
Injustice!  
My garden which I tended is now empty.  
I was frustrated.  
I was angry.  
Why hadn't I placed a fence around my garden?

Then you reminded me,  
Birds do not sow or reap,  
They do not fear, because you feed them.  
Flowers do not toil, you sustain them.  
The strawberries which I planted,  
Were not meant for me,



But the least of these.

So now I plant strawberries,  
For unruly, wild and sacred critters.  
I am grateful that I am the hands which  
Provide your blessing.  
In turn,  
I am blessed.

Amen.

## Check-In Time (10 minutes or so)

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Ask these open-ended questions. If you're by yourself, journal about them.

*Note: If you're with a group, these questions have the potential to take up a lot of time. Some weeks may require more check-in time than others, depending on the needs of the group. To provide a shorter yet meaningful check-in time, choose ONE of the questions below, and ask participants to share a ONE sentence response.*

- **Before we begin this week's reflection, let's take a few minutes to check in. How is everyone feeling?** (It will be a bit more difficult via phone to know if someone is being talked over or is trying to get a word in.... Be sure everyone has a chance to speak).
- **What is something you're struggling with this week?**
- **Where have you seen a sign of hope this week?**

*Other optional questions include: What is something you've learned about yourself during this time of social distancing? Where have you experienced a "thin place" in the last week? Where have you seen beauty this week? What is one new behavior you'd like to continue doing when the virus has passed us by?*

## Reflection (15 minutes or so)

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*Read aloud the reflection below.*

The story of Nehemiah begins with the exiled Jews returning to Jerusalem and recognizing the importance of rebuilding their sacred space. What will begin as difficult work will end in shared celebration and joy in restoration.

### **Nehemiah 2:17-18 (NIV)**

*Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.*

*They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.*

### **Nehemiah 12:43 (NIV)**

*And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.*

When we read a biblical narrative, like the book of Nehemiah, we can dig deeper and ask ourselves what God is revealing to us. When we think about our relationship with nature and others, what understanding do we come to from this passage? Is it possible that there is an intersection between our relationship with people and our relationship with God’s creation?

In 2014, the Festival of Faiths (Louisville, Kentucky) featured an essay from Peter Forbes titled *Another Way of Being Human*<sup>1</sup>. Forbes shared stories that exemplified the power that land conservation has in not only preserving nature, but bringing people together and creating a culture of care for creation. He writes that protecting small urban plots are entwined with preserving the largest tracts of wilderness - that these spaces are not only worth protecting in themselves, but also recognizes the sacredness of all that inhabits those spaces - humankind and nature itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Forbes, Peter. *Another Way of Being Human*. Sacred Earth, Sacred Self. Festival of Faiths. Center for Interfaith Relations. 2014. Page 77 - 84.



*Below is an abridged excerpt from Forbes' writing - a story and reflection around one woman's response to nature and caring for her community. Continue reading aloud to your group, or ask a volunteer to read.*

The work of saving land also takes us beyond ourselves...Conservation is the tangible, highly visible expression of our own *ethics of enough*. Land conservation is helping communities to address racial tensions, to plan more effectively, to learn more about one another, and to strengthen local economies...I call this the transformative power of land conservation: showing us how protecting what we love can change who we are and how we live.

Classie Parker is at the center of such a transformation. She lives in Harlem just a few blocks from the hospital where she was born. For many years, Classie felt stuck on a street where no one knew anyone else and drug dealers ran everything. She especially feared for her father, who was growing old and needed a way to stay active and get outside. She worried that he would die alone in a building where nobody noticed. In 1992, Classie's apartment stood adjacent to a 3,600-square-foot vacant lot that was crowded with crack vials, needles, abandoned cars, and garbage of every kind. When Classie got the idea to create a garden on that lot for her father to work in, she recruited her brother and a Hispanic couple who lived nearby and their five children to help her. Classie had a vision for a place where the old and young could work together. Today, the thriving garden there is called "Five-Star," in honor of the five adults and five children who started it.

...With two large town houses protecting either flank, the garden itself was (is) plain bold and beautiful. A dozen discarded lawn chairs have been retrieved and organized loosely around leaning tables and empty crates as if a card game or a good meal had just been finished. I could see rows of corn, plots of vegetables, climbing snap peas, grapevines, fruit trees, and a dogwood. I could hear birds. Men and women of all ages were hanging on the chain-link fence talking to friends on the street and then turning back into the garden with a hoe or a laugh.

Five-Star is breathtakingly beautiful and heavy with life. It is stewardship and wildness wrapped together and dropped down on 121st Street. Classie produces food, beauty, tolerance, neighborliness, and a relationship to land for people throughout her part of Harlem, all on less than one-quarter of an acre. Five Star Garden is almost absurdly small, but for the people of 121st

Street -- who, for the most part, never leave Harlem -- the garden is their piece of land, to which they have developed a very deep personal attachment. As Classie says, “There’s love here. People gonna go where they feel the flow of love. There is a difference. You come in here and sit down, don’t you feel comfortable with us? Don’t you feel you’re free to be you? That we’re not going to judge you because you’re a different color or because you’re a male? Do you feel happy here? Do you feel intimidated? Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?”

What can conservationists learn from Classie Parker and Five Star Garden?...*The new guiding principle is relationships.*

The enduring value of relationship to the land might be best measured by the extent to which it evolves beyond self-interest.

...What we are “saving” is not so much the piece of land, but the quality and integrity of the relationship to the land so that what we will and *will not do* is preserved in perpetuity. If we’re lucky, the land will evolve and change forever, but it’s our human attitude, -- our values -- that most need to be “protected.” Our laws protect land from us when we are at our worst rather than keep us together when we are at our best.

...This aspiration for land conservation will be reached not solely by how much nature we can put aside, but by how much love and respect for the land we can engender in the greatest number of people. Our greatest achievement is not being able to say “We saved this place,” but being able to say, instead, “You belong here, you are home.” Land conservation can become the story of how the soul of the land is the soul of our culture, signaling over and over our place in the world.

**Let us pause for silent reflection.**

*Pause for 30 seconds.*

Then ask:

- **What connections can you draw between the story of Nehemiah and Classie?**



- Where do you see caring for creation intersecting with caring for humankind?
- Where have you “saved” space and where have you “shared” space?
- Like Classie, who will you invite to be a part of your rebuilding creation?
- What actions can you take today to conserve land and community?
- How can you advocate for endangered land and endangered or vulnerable communities?

### Closing Prayer (10 minutes-ish)

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Then say: Before we join in the closing prayer, let us pause to acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is as close as our very breath.

*Pause for 30 seconds.*

Let's pray.

Lord hear our prayer,

Forgive us for having used the world and it's resources excessively.

Forgive us for having not shared its bounty equally.

Teach us to love not in word, but in deed.

Teach us how to till the soil and our souls,

So that the richness of life may thrive in us, and around us.

Show us the way of Sabbath, for our spirit and the earth.

Amen.

Then, in these words, invite any participants who have a prayer, a concern, or a request to briefly share it:

**We are disciples on a journey.**

**We are the body of Christ, broken for the world.**

**We hold one another as we carry the concerns of our neighbors.**

**If you feel moved, please share your prayer aloud.**

Leader: We pray also for the members of the JustFaith community across the country.  
Unite us through the power of your Holy Spirit, that together we might



participate with you in the building of your Kingdom, in order to create a more just and peaceful world. Amen.