

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Kate Bowler and John Swinton on The Art of Presence

Send to the group before hand:

<https://katebowler.com/podcast/the-art-of-presence/>



WHO:

Duke Professor Kate Bowler is an expert in the stories we tell about success and failure, suffering and happiness. She had stage IV cancer. Then, after many years of living scan to scan, she didn't. And since then, all she wants to do is to talk to funny and wise people about how to live with the knowledge that, well, everything happens.

In this conversation, Kate talks with John Swinton who is a theologian, professor, and ordained minister. He worked as a nurse for 16 years in the field of mental health and learning disabilities and later became a pastor and chaplain. He is now the founding director of Aberdeen's Center for Spirituality, Health, and Disability in Scotland. John has become a leading figure in disability theology. If that isn't enough, who couldn't love his awesome Scottish accent?!



INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS:

1. Think about the people closest to you. What qualities do you appreciate about them? Are there any qualities they have in common?
2. Who are a few people in your life who have leaned-in during good times and bad? The people who have shown up in your lowest moments? The people who listen to your hard questions? What have these friendships taught you about love?
3. If you were able to listen to this conversation between Kate and John before our time together, what stood out to you most? What insight will you carry with you?

SCRIPTURE: Read John 15:9-17.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants,

because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

This passage is part of Jesus' farewell discourse before facing the cross, some of the last words and final lessons that Jesus will share with his disciples. Jesus speaks of love, friendship, and mutuality that is to be shared with all. Jesus explains that love is what makes this all possible (verses 12-13). Jesus, the creator and savior of the world, is placing himself in intimate, reciprocal relationship with those who share this love and friendship with others. Jesus says, "I no longer call you servant but friend."

DISCUSS:

1. When we read John 15:9-17, what phrases or words speak to you about what mutuality, friendship, and love meant to Jesus?
2. Thinking about the rest of the Gospels, what does friendship look like to Jesus? Who would Jesus call friends? How did Jesus interact among his friends?

WATCH: (5 MINS)

The Heart of Belonging and Christlike Friendships with John Swinton



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lwuiF-42cg8>

DISCUSS:

3. John Swinton mentions that our internet friends tend to be similar to us. Think about the people you are friends with on social media or in real life. In what ways are they like-minded, or not?
4. How radical is it that Jesus calls us his friend? What does that mean to you? What are the implications of no longer being called servants, but Jesus's friends?
5. How does this radical extension of friendship prepare the disciples for creating a church of Jesus' friends? What precedence is Jesus creating for what it means to be a follower of Christ?

“The thing that’s startling about the friendships of Jesus is that they are not marked by the principle of ‘like attracts like,’ but by the principle of grace that like attracts those people that are unlike you. So tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes. Not reformed tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes. And it’s through that friendship that they begin to encounter who Jesus is.”

—JOHN SWINTON

6. John Swinton speaks about a “principle of grace” which attracts people who are unlike you. How does grace invite us to see beyond prejudice and disagreements? How does someone having a disposition of grace affect how you feel when around them?
7. Why do you think it is so hard to form a community with people who are different from one another? Why do you think the Church has struggled for years to make congregations welcoming across difference?
8. There are many people (maybe people in this room!) who have felt the sting or rejection from not experiencing a sense of belonging in a faith community. How might dialogue about those hurts allow the church to learn more about grace, healing, and spiritual belonging? (For more on this specific topic, check out our Support Guide for when Church Hurt Happens: <https://katebowler.com/guide/church-hurt-happens/>)



“The heart of belonging is recognizing that we are, as a church, a community of the friends of Jesus and that Christ-like friendship doesn’t look like the kind of friendships we’re used to. And that’s the radical edge that we have to offer to the world in terms of belonging, because people really can find a space through that kind of relationship.”

—JOHN SWINTON

9. How does your idea of friendship change when you think of it in terms of not similar likes or attraction, but in terms of belonging to one another?

Kate points out, *“When we belong to each other, it’s a lot of work.”*

“But there is great power in small things, isn’t there?” John replies, “We’re not called to transform the world. That’s God’s job. But we are called to transform ourselves. And oftentimes transformation comes through these small gestures of hope that enable us to find belonging”.

10. Think of a time when you felt you really belonged. What do you think made the difference? Spend a few minutes brainstorming how you can foster a community of belonging in your context (ministry? workplace? neighborhood?), even through “small gestures of hope.”

READ:

Blessing for Belonging

Blessed are you who feel
the comfort of being known.
You who can pinpoint yourself on a family tree
or in that friend group or in that faith community
where you know exactly whose you are.

Blessed are you in the loving and being loved.
May this love create ever-expanding circles
of belonging and inclusion as we practice
being friends of God.

And blessed are you when you don’t belong.
The different, the suffering,
the lonely, the incomplete.
You who feel the sting of rejection.
Lost—with nowhere to fit-in.
Blessed are you who can’t explain exactly

how you ended up here,
outside of what was acceptable,
but longing to fit in nonetheless.

Blessed are you in the alienation and the fear.
The where will I find my people?
The confusion or anger or
the still woundedness from unbelonging.
In this new landscape, may you practice
the courage to find others who make space for you.

May we all learn to celebrate one another’s joys,
and honor our differences.
May we all feel our worthiness, our belovedness.
May we find ourselves wrapped in a story larger
than the one you can trace.
Blessed are all of us here in this family of God.