

Level: Middle School

Bible Verse: Matthew 14:28-33, *Christ Walking on Water*

Overview:

- Opening Prayer for Missions
- Icebreaker - Would You Rather
- Activity #1 - Read Matthew 14:28-33
- Activity #2 - Story from the Mission Field
- Activity #3 - Read and discuss the life of St. Photini
- Activity #4 - Assemble OCMC coin boxes and offer the prayer to St. Photini

Objective: This lesson seeks to help the youth understand that when we seek Christ and form a connection or relationship with Him, we connect with our neighbor.

Materials: Copies of Instagram Post Activity, Coin Boxes.

Note to Teachers: This past year, we have faced many challenges and seen our world become divided. We've suffered the loss of friends, family, and felt disconnected from our communities. At times when we feel that we are alone, it is easy to lose sight of what is truly important. Yet, it is through our connection and love for Christ that we find healing, strength, and unity.

This is because we are ALL called to unite ourselves with Him. Christ is everything. He is the source of hope. The beacon of light. The reason for joy. He is simply love.

Have your students think about what it means to have a connection with Christ. To connect with someone, we open ourselves to them. We find time for them. We listen to what they have to teach us. And for Christ, we connect best when we find time to pray and go to church, when we fast, and when we offer ourselves to serve and love our neighbor - because we cannot love Christ if we cannot love our neighbor.

The Orthodox Christian Mission Center sends out living witnesses to help connect the world to Christ. These witnesses are OCMC missionaries and volunteers who offer their lives as examples for others to follow. They go out to different countries and connect with others to teach the Good News, to share Christ's love, and help lead them to salvation. Their stories are examples of how a fixed gaze towards Christ, draws us closer to one another.

Opening Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, we pray for all people from all nations that they may come to know You. Help us to care for the spiritual and physical needs of others around us and around the world. Teach us how to show Your love and peace to others. Grant us the courage to answer Your call. Amen.*

Icebreaker: Making Connections!

This icebreaker will help the students see that they can connect to one another while having fun. As we are all united in Christ, we are connected to one another through what we have in common.

- Gather the students together in a circle and ask one volunteer to stand in the center of the group.
- Have them share one or more statements about themselves, for example: "I like to play soccer." When someone from the group hears a statement that they have in common with the first volunteer, they are invited to link arms with them.
- The second person now shares something about themselves, and so on. Continue this process of sharing and linking arms.
- To complete the icebreaker, invite the last person to join the chain of connections with the first volunteer by sharing something you have in common with them.
- During the icebreaker if more than one person happens to have something in common with each statement, have the first person that answers go next, but allow everyone to share.

Modifications: Make the necessary changes to maintain social distancing guidelines within your community. For those meeting in-person, consider having the students pass around a spool of string to whoever is next when in the circle. See how far the connection stretches. For those experiencing virtual Sunday School on programs like Zoom, ask the students to turn off their cameras except the first volunteer. When someone has something in common with each statement, have them turn on their camera to share that connection. The first person to be seen goes next. If there is more than one student, it's up to the teacher's discretion to decide who's the next person. You can also have other students share their answers. Make sure everyone has a turn.

Remind them that when we are connected and love each other, we are also connected with Christ.

Activity #1: Read Matthew 14:28-33

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Discussion:

- Why did Peter call out to Christ?
- Did Peter walk on the water by his own accord?
- As Peter was making his way towards Christ, what feeling made him begin to sink?
- When have you been afraid or doubted something in your life? Did you overcome it?
- Who can we ask for help?
- How did Peter help the disciples connect with Christ? What can we do to connect others to Christ?

Activity #2: Story From the Mission Field - Searching For Paradise

Read about OCMC Missionary to Guatemala, Dn. Thomas Manuel, to your group. Discuss how he was able to connect with the community in Paraiso and how they were able to find Christ.

Discussion:

- How would you feel if your community didn't have a priest every Sunday?
- Would you still feel like you have a connection to Him? What can you do to maintain your connection to Christ?
- What obstacles did Dn. Thomas and company face when searching for the community? What are some obstacles that keep us from going to church?
- Imagine being at the first Divine Liturgy in Paraiso. What do you think it was like? How do you think it looked, sounded, and felt?
- How did the community connect to Christ and the Church? What can we do to connect people around us to Christ?

Activity #3: Read the life of St. Photini

Read aloud or allow the students to take turns reading portions of the life of St. Photini. Reflect on how her life is an example we can follow.

Discussion:

- What does the name Photini mean? How does this describe the saint?
- What good works did St. Photini do for the glory of God?
- What difficulties did St. Photini faced?
- How did St. Photini maintain her connection with Christ?

Instagram Post Activity

Instagram is an interesting tool many people around the world use to connect to each other. For this activity, the class will pretend they are using Instagram to connect others to Christ. We can post pictures from our life that serve as examples for what a life dedicated to Christ could look like. On the worksheet, there is an Instagram template. Have the students draw/paste-in a picture with a caption of how our theme of Connecting with Christ, Connecting with Others can be seen in their life. They can use examples found in the above activities.

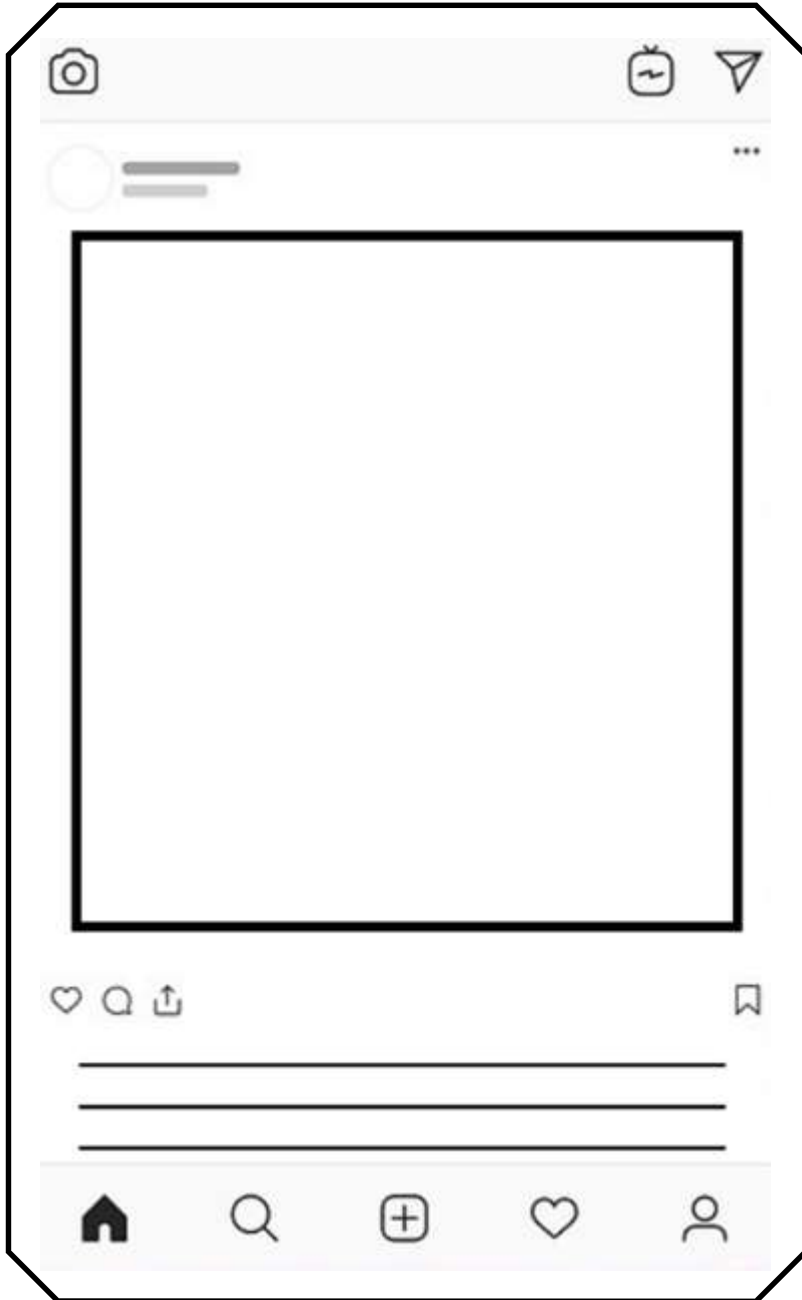
Activity #4: Assemble the OCMC Coin Boxes & Prayer of St. Photini

Discuss how these funds will be used to support the ministries of the Mission Center to send people who have answered God's call to help connect the world to Christ. Send the boxes home with the students and ask them to fill them and return the boxes at a time you decide upon. Encourage the class to pray for OCMC missionaries and mission priests regularly.

A Prayer to St. Photini

Illuminated by the Holy Spirit, All-Glorious One,
from Christ the Savior you drank the water of salvation.
With open hand you give it to those who thirst.
Great-Martyr Photini, Equal-to-the-Apostles,
pray to Christ for the salvation of our souls.

Draw/paste-in your Instagram image and captions that to you best reflect your thoughts about the theme. Using the space below, share your explanation of the chosen items with the class. For those online, share your paper to the class.



*Searching For Paradise*Story From the Mission Field

For priests in Guatemala and southern Mexico, visiting numerous parishes instead of serving at just one is the norm. Over one hundred and fifty Orthodox Christian communities are spread across the mountainous region with only five local clergy to visit them. This means that there is one priest for every thirty communities. OCMC missionaries and seminarians also find themselves traveling alongside the clergy on a regular basis to make most of the visit. For most communities, they are lucky to see a priest from once a month to once a year.

Dn. Thomas Manuel, an OCMC missionary in Guatemala, received a call to join a priest to visit a community who had recently joined the Orthodox Church. This community hadn't seen a priest since they had all become members of the Church. As usual for such visits, Dn. Thomas woke up before dawn and loaded up a well-worn Toyota van with a half dozen seminarians, fellow OCMC missionary Fr. Juvenal, and one of the local clergy. They left the highlands of Guatemala in the cool, dark morning to find this new Orthodox community called "Paraíso", meaning paradise. They were told that from the mountaintop village of Aguacate it would take about two hours to get to Paraíso.

The two hours quickly came and went, but Paraíso was not yet found. Dn. Thomas and his companions asked people at the villages if they knew where the Orthodox community was, but judging from their blank stares and confusion, they guessed that no one knew. So, they continued searching for Paraíso on a hunch. They drove on in to the hot and humid lowland villages surrounded by tropical jungle, banana tree orchards, and locals going about their daily morning routine. Lost, Dn. Thomas began think they would never find Paraíso, when out of the middle of the jungle appeared a fully built Orthodox Church complete with Byzantine style dome. The whole structure was built of concrete and was not quite finished on the outside, but there it stood, surrounded by the beautiful tropical jungle. The travelers were stunned to have encountered such an impressive and beautiful structure built by a community that had only recently become Orthodox.

For the first time in months, the community of Paraíso was able to celebrate the Divine Liturgy as Orthodox Christians. Everyone was filled with overwhelming joy to participate in the liturgy. They sang the hymns in their own language, and several children in the community were baptized. Following the Divine Liturgy, Dn. Thomas approached one of the lay community leaders and asked them how they were able to build such a beautiful and difficult church. The man told him about how they had been in communication with another community, St. John the Baptist in Ixcan. This community had been Orthodox for some time before them and had already built an impressive Orthodox domed church. In their search for the Orthodox Church, they spoke to a few members of the Ixcan community and were so inspired by the beauty of their church that they went ahead and constructed their own. Additionally, the man told Dn. Thomas how excited they had been to find "the Church" as he called it. They had been searching for the Kingdom, for paradise, and had finally come home.

*The Life of St. Photini, Equal to the Apostles***Commemorated: February 26, March 20, & the fifth Sunday after Pascha**

St. Photini lived during the 1st century first in Palestine, and later North Africa in what is modern-day Tunisia. According to Church tradition, she was the Samaritan woman that Jesus Christ met at Jacob's well, as recorded in the Gospel of John (4:5-42).

Shortly after Pentecost, the Samaritan woman was among the first to be baptized by the Holy Apostles. She was given the Christian name Photini meaning "the enlightened one." Along with her five sisters and two sons, St. Photini traveled across Samaria preaching the Good News of Christ and settled in Carthage (modern-day Tunisia). Their missionary journey took place when Nero, Emperor of Rome, began persecuting Christians. He made it a crime to preach about Jesus. So, when this and future events were revealed to St. Photini in a dream, she along with her followers sailed for Rome.

Upon her arrival, curiosity grew throughout the capital city. Everyone wondered, "Who is this woman?" "She came here with a crowd of followers and she preaches Christ with great boldness." Soldiers brought her and her companions before Emperor Nero who demanded that they stop believing in Jesus. Unafraid of the maddened ruler, Photini tried to convert even him to the Christian faith. Nero ordered them to be tortured, but they felt no pain. He even tried to use his own daughter to get them to deny Jesus. St. Photini, after connecting with Nero's daughter, converted and saw her baptized along with her slaves.



For three years, St. Photini and her followers were held in a Roman prison where she preached and converted many. After many efforts to force her to worship idols, the emperor had her thrown into a deep, dry well and then into prison again. One night, Jesus appeared to her and made the sign of the cross over her three times. Filled with joy from this vision, she sang and praised the Lord for many days. In the year 66 A.D., St. Photini fell asleep in the Lord.

She was a living example of how our connection with Christ can connect us to each other. She holds a place of honor with the title "Equal to the Apostles" for her great work in sharing the Good News and building up the Church through missionary work.

O, Holy Saint Photini, Equal to the Apostles, pray unto God for us!