



Treasure in clay jars

Opening hymns

“We’ve Come This Far by Faith” *ELW* 633

“How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” *ELW* 620

Theme verse

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” 2 Corinthians 5:17–19.

Over the years at the annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Gatherings, I have joined with others, clasped hands, right hand over left and sang and swayed to the heartfelt strains of “We Shall Overcome.” This was, according to common folklore, Dr. King’s favorite song.

Dr. King knew the heart of reconciliation as reflected in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” He wrote in response to a letter penned by his clergy colleagues who insisted that the civil rights movement “slow down” and inch along on the promise that equality will come “eventually.” Dr. King had a broader view not only for African Americans in this country but the whole of humanity which was centered in the reconciliation that God purposed for us in Christ. “The end is reconciliation,” he wrote. “The end is redemption; the end is the Beloved Community. It is this kind of spirit

and this kind of love that can transform opposers into friends.” He understood the ministry of reconciliation in ways that a backward look in history now reveals. We say, “Oh, that’s what he meant! Now, I get it!”

Reconciliation can bring us to a place and a way of relating to one another that Dr. King described as the “Beloved Community.” For him, the Beloved Community was not some idyllic place that only exists in our imaginations. It is a reality rooted in faith and love and the hope of Christ. The Beloved Community is committed to a way of being where violence of any sort has no place, and all are fed. Conflict and struggle are not the undoing of community. Rather conflict gives rise to creative tension, and the community works in love to solve problems.

At the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Gatherings, we commemorate Dr. King by reciting his “I Have a Dream” speech and gathering to sing, “We Shall Overcome.” I confess there were years when I attended these gatherings and did not rise to sing the obligatory song. I just did not understand how we can sing of one person’s capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation but at once be reluctant to invite that in our own lives. We have a tendency to locate extraordinary qualities in people like Dr. King, Mother Teresa or any saintly person. We place them on a pedestal as if to say, “Oh, I can never be like them.” At the close of those celebratory services, “Go in peace, serve the Lord” sounded more like “As you were.” I’m confident that God wants more than that for us.

1. **READ ALOUD JOHN 20:19–23.** Attempt to envision yourself as disciples in the locked room hiding when Jesus appeared among them. How would it would have felt to receive Christ's peace and the Holy Spirit given the disciples' abandonment?

Picture how the disciples must have felt when Jesus appeared among them in a locked house after the crucifixion. They were cowering in fear, hiding. Imagine when they realized it was him. They were well aware that each of them had denied and abandoned Jesus at Golgotha. Before shame and guilt could set in, Jesus said, "Peace be with you." He did not excoriate them. No recriminations. No reminding them that they left him "hanging" literally and figuratively. He did not, as Paul would say, "count their trespasses against them." Jesus did not so much as wag a finger. Instead he offered them peace a second time. Then Jesus commissioned them and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not only were they were forgiven, they were entrusted with a ministry that would change the life of the world for ages to come.

Like the disciples, we are clay jars and earthen vessels who carry a life-changing ministry to the world: reconciliation. It is powerful and at once lovingly subtle. It does not knock down locked doors. It is not jarring. It evokes no startle reflex. It comes among us lovingly, gently and sometimes barely noticeable.

The gift of Jesse

In my first congregation a young man ambled through the doors one Sunday from a nearby half-way house for people with mental illnesses. His name was Jesse. In Hebrew it means "gift."

Jesse was a beautiful man. He was thin and stretched to about 6'2" with skin that was as smooth as obsidian glass which was enhanced by too generous a dollop of Vaseline he would slather all over his face.

Jesse and I came from the Black church tradition which meant you made an extra effort to clean up for Jesus. Vaseline was a part of the regimen. I remember shining like a copper penny on Sundays. He had not forgotten what the old Black church folk call "home training." He began to come to church regularly. He was diligent with his offering envelope. He always had his Bible.

He was welcomed with coffee and donuts at the coffee hour after church. It did not take long for members to figure out that sometimes he had auditory and visual hallucinations. He knew this about himself, and for the most part he spoke little.

One day, the congregation was having a particularly contentious meeting. As it was beginning to tip toward the negative, Jesse stood up and looked around the room at everyone, gently opened his palms and said, "God is love." Those three words, spoken by an "unlikely" earthen vessel called the congregation to its better self. Subsequently, the meeting went into a more positive direction. Jesse appeared among us, and in that moment he was living into the ministry of reconciliation. He carried God's extraordinary power in his open palms and sat it in the midst of us. Afterward, people marveled at Jesse. He might have been quiet in his demeanor, but he was aware. He lived into his name at the moment. He was a gift.

Like Jesse, we can be gifts to one another through the ministry of reconciliation which God has graciously given us. Each of us is an ambassador of Christ. We wonder if we are worthy of God's trust of such an important mission and ministry. Like the disciples, we are forgiven, commissioned and trusted with this message for the world.

2. **Jesse wandered into worship and at a critical juncture lovingly and unexpectedly neutralized a conflict. That day he communicated God's presence to the congregation. How has God worked in unexpected ways and through unexpected people to communicate reconciliation in your congregation, at home or in the spaces you inhabit?**

John Newton, composer of the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace” was actively involved in the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. Years later he had a conversion experience which drove him to disavow slavery. He knew the depths of his sin when he wrote, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”

As a response to God’s grace, he wrote many other hymns. A lesser known hymn of his is “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds,” (ELW 620). The fourth stanza reminds us that we are God’s children and deems us worthy to bear God’s reconciling word to the world:

By thee my prayers acceptance gain
Although with sin defiled.
The devil charges me in vain
And I am owned a child.

3. **READ ALOUD: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16–21.**

What does it mean to you to hear that God has “reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation”? What does this mean for us in our congregations, communities, families and lives?

God is not angry with us. It seems that humanity is angrier with itself—more so than God will ever be. Our consciences can be brutal. 1 John 3:18–20 says: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.”

There is an erosion of civility that is reflected in our daily interactions with one another. We only have to look to the news cycle to be inundated with disturbing events. A simple drive can result in road rage or violence. The killing of unarmed Black men, women and children signals radical racial division. It blinds us to the fact that we are made one in Christ. Mass shootings occur with regularity. Our children have active shooter

drills in their classrooms in case a shooter decides to target schools. This election cycle becomes antagonistic as we draw closer to Election Day. Pervasive negativity finds its way into some of our congregations.

Like the prophet Habakkuk (1:3), we ask, “Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.” In the midst of the confusion, perhaps God is calling us to face the truth. God does not leave us to face these hard truths alone. Perhaps the better question is: “As God’s people, how are we to meet the world in our daily interactions as reconcilers and ambassadors for Christ?”

The hard work of reconciliation

Reconciliation is more than a warm, fuzzy, “churchy” word. As we said in the first part of this Bible study, it is among the healing words of the church. Reconciliation calls for more than mere intellectual assent. How do we live into reconciliation in our daily lives and in the spaces we inhabit? How do we live it at home, in the workplace and at school?

Clearly reconciliation comes from God. Reconciliation is God coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus saves us from the grip of sin and death and unites us together in community.

4. **Discuss the possibilities of reconciliation for us in today’s world and its implications. How is love surviving? Where do you see signs of hope? As Christ ambassadors, how do we speak to the times in love and reconciliation? What are obstacles to reconciliation in your context?**

Confession, repentance and forgiveness

Repentance and forgiveness are key elements in reconciliation. According to The Book of Concord, repentance is “to have contrition [grief] and sorrow, or terror about sin, yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is

obtained through Christ” (Kolb and Wengert 2000).

Repentance leads to sincere confession. Confession is the admission of sin or wrongdoing. It is possible to be confessant but unrepentant which is impenitence. Impenitence sounds like: “I did ‘it’ but so what?” Impenitence is the basis of the infamous “non-apology.” It sounds like this: “I am sorry you feel this way.” It rings hollow and is not an apology at all.

- 5. Anecdotally, confession is good for the soul. We have the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness as a regular part of our Sunday liturgy. Why is it important? Aside from the obvious, how does confession to a friend and in the context of the worship differ? How have you been freed in confession?**

Through repentance, sorrow for our sins, the promise of the gospel and absolution, we are driven to seek forgiveness from those who we have hurt through our actions. Some believe that as long as God has forgiven us, there is no need to seek forgiveness from those we have hurt. But it is important that we seek forgiveness to restore community. At the same time, when someone has hurt us, we are called to seek out that person and let them know. This is challenging but worthwhile. We together say the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness in the ELW, but sometimes we are not present in that experience even though we are in worship. Many congregations change the words of the Brief Order so that we can hear the words afresh.

When God imparts forgiveness, we are set free to forgive and obtain forgiveness. When we forgive, we become new creations, and we in turn restore and create resilient relationships. These are the fruits of repentance.

- 6. We are most like Jesus when we forgive. As the participants are comfortable, ask them to recall a time in which they had to forgive someone. Ask them to recall a time when they were forgiven. Describe both experiences.**

Living in the ministry of reconciliation as new creations

- Begin in prayer. Ask God for wisdom and insight.
- In worship begin to concentrate on the words of the Brief Order for Confession. Where do they resonate with you? Hear and receive God’s declaration of forgiveness as yours.
- Having received forgiveness and mercy, be quick to share it by speaking soft, kind words.
- Remember God has called you to this work. God had equipped you.
- Seeking reconciliation can be challenging. Use the practical tips for clay jars from the first session. Take full, calming, deep breaths. When we are anxious, we want to breathe shallowly; instead, oxygenate your brain.
- Where ever humans interact, know that there will be misunderstandings and conflict. God is not absent in this. God is very much in the midst of the situation.
- Be ready to take responsibility for mistakes.
- Repent and seek God’s forgiveness. Be liberated by it.
- An open, listening heart is helpful.
- When confronted with negativity, redirect the conversation. Remember the lessons of confirmation: “Put the best construction on a situation.”

Closing prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the chance to live in a world that is rich with ideas, experiences and opportunities. We are grateful to you that we can live with and learn from each other—even if that means we sometimes disagree. Help us to see that conflict and disagreements are just as much a part of your great creation as those things we love and cherish. Help us to understand that when we embrace conflict—rather than shy away from it—we become better. Help us recognize that by doing your work as reconcilers and agents of forgiveness and grace, we can make the world a more peaceful, compassionate place for all.



Treasure in clay jars

Materials needed

Hymnals if you plan to sing either of the recommended hymns; Bibles for everyone.

Opening

Open with prayer. You may use the following prayer or create one for your own context.

A prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen (*ELW* 87).

Beloved community

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often spoke of the “beloved community”—a place where all live in peace with one another and the community works in love to solve problems. As you work through this first section as a group, use the opportunity to underscore each person’s capacity for extraordinary forgiveness and reconciliation. Consider the following as you guide your group through each question in the study:

1. Select a volunteer from the group to read John 20:19–23 aloud. Help the group envision themselves hiding in the locked room before Jesus appeared. This scene takes place just after Jesus’ crucifixion. The disciples were afraid the authorities would come for them next. Instead, Jesus appeared with a message of peace and forgiveness? What were they likely feeling? How would you react?

The gift of Jesse

The story of Jesse illustrates how the most unlikely people can offer us the gift of reconciliation. If time allows, perhaps there’s a similar story from your life that you can share with the group.

2. Encourage the members of your group to think about the “Jesses” in their lives. A bit of time for quiet reflection may even be helpful.
3. Ask another volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. Consider Paul’s words carefully. How do we live as though we believe that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ?

Understanding that God has reconciled us in Christ means taking responsibility for our own roles as peacemakers. When we realize our own anger can have negative—even brutal—consequences, we free ourselves to hear God’s call to live as ambassadors for Christ in our daily interactions.

The hard work of reconciliation

4. Circumstances arise every day where we have the opportunity to live out our call as reconcilers. If time allows, ask your group to consider how we can live into reconciliation when:
 - Neighbors test our patience
 - We have a misunderstanding with a friend or colleague
 - We disagree with a teacher, politician or authority figure
5. Reconciliation definitely isn't easy, but signs of hope are all around us if we choose to see them. Encourage your group to consider what these signs look like. Where have you seen or heard stories of reconciliation—regardless of how small—in the news, in your neighborhoods, in your congregation or elsewhere?

Confession, repentance and forgiveness

The Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness is only one of our constant opportunities as Lutherans to reconcile ourselves to God and Christ. In admitting our sins, we acknowledge the areas in our lives where we can have fallen short.

As your group ponders the significance of confession in worship and in their lives, remind everyone present to connect this practice with opportunities for reconciliation. How does confession create space to resolve conflict?

Be encouraging as your group considers forgiveness in their own lives. Make space for those who might be uncomfortable sharing these experiences. For those who do desire to share, ask them to describe the role forgiveness played in resolving any conflict associated with the experience. Guide the discussion back to the importance of forgiveness in the process of reconciliation.

Closing prayer

As you prepare to close your Bible study, do so in a way that will be constructive for your group. You may pray the closing prayer together, ask a volunteer to read it aloud or create your own prayer for your context. As you join in prayer, be reminded of the important role God's grace and mercy plays in the lives—and in reconciliation.

APPSOLUTELY!



...you can get *Gather* on your iPad, Android, and Kindle Fire.

Download the app via iTunes, Google Play or Amazon.

All you need to access the articles is a print subscription.

Call 844-409-0576 or go to www.gathermagazine.org/subscribe to get started (\$15 for a year). Find out more at gathermagazine.org.