



Treasure in clay jars

Opening hymns

God is Here, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 526

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy, *ELW* 588

Theme verses

“When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart” Jeremiah 29:13.

Opening prayer

Gracious God, you are as near to us as our next breath. Assure us of your presence, most especially when we disagree. You have entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. Teach us, heal us. We pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

Seeking God in conflict

“Seek God in everyone and everything, every day of your life.” –Chant from the Benedictine Sisters of Our Lady of Grace Monastery, Beech Grove, Indiana

For many years now, Our Lady of Grace Monastery has been a comfortable and safe landing place for me. There is a spaciousness there to pray and listen. Benedictines are known for their gift of hospitality, and guests are invited to morning, noon and evening praise.

The pace is easy but deliberate. I find my seat, close my eyes and wait. I hear the soft and familiar sounds of sisters and other guests as they take their seats. “Seek God in everyone and everything, every day of your life,” everyone recites together. The sound rises and falls beautifully and clearly on the ear. The chant carries my attention aloft to God. It is powerful. Everyone chants and reads the Psalms with one voice.

In the act of worship, not only do they seek God, they build community. Chanting, singing and reading with one voice require that they are mindful of one another. In order to do any of this in one voice, one must listen to those around them. They must listen to and in the community. Despite differences or disagreements, they listen to each other and they listen for God.

The liturgy gives us the same opportunity to listen to God and one another. This is particularly important when we find ourselves disagreeing with one another. Our ability to listen and truly hear what the other is saying moves us along the path of reconciliation. If we seek God in the beauty of worship, in the wonder of nature or even in hardship, why not seek God when we are bewildered by conflict? God also promises to be present in the person of Jesus Christ. “Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the age,” Jesus says in Matthew 28.

“I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” *ELW* 325, a song of lament, recognizes the journey is difficult. This song emerged out of the crucible of American chattel slavery. My ancestors were making the radical assertion that Jesus was quite present and was well aware of the sin of slavery. Moreover, God was effectively moving them toward freedom. The struggle continues. As Lutherans, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We also find ourselves in bondage to that which immobilizes us.

We must learn to remain present in the conflict. This is counter-intuitive because most of us find it easier to walk away. Our personal lives are jam-packed with joys and challenges of our own. We may say to

ourselves, “I don’t have room in my life for this,” as we head for the nearest exit. In our minds, the church should be the refuge, the oasis of peace. God is our refuge in whom we have peace. Church is where we seek God in worship.

But God does not abandon us in conflict. When we feel that God is distant, God is most present. It is then when we must insist on seeking God all the more. Conflict in the church is debilitating. The tendency is to believe that God is not present because of shame which is associated with conflict. It centers on the conflict rather than the source of our faith. But Psalm 34 tells us, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”

God’s enduring presence

1. **READ ALOUD: PSALM 46:1–11.** God is very present.

The sacrament of baptism draws us into Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Like the sacrament of Holy Communion, we are drawn into Christ’s very presence, not for ourselves alone but for the very sake of community. Think of a time when you felt God’s presence in your life.

2. **Exercise:** Get a sheet of paper. Fold it into four columns.

Each section will represent four years from 2001–2016. On one side of the paper list significant, inspiring or perplexing events in your life. Note how God was present during those times. Then turn the paper over and do the same for your congregation. Share with the group to the extent that is comfortable for you.

3. **READ ROMANS 6:3–5.** What comes to mind when you think of being “united” with Christ in “resurrection”?

What does this mean for your life?

Whenever there is a baptism, it is a joyous day. Parents beam. Sponsors smile. Pastors parade the newly baptized like Rafiki presenting Simba to the masses on Pride Rock in *The Lion King*. Thunderous applause

erupts from the gathered community.

In baptism, we are yoked to Christ’s death and burial. This is the part we minimize on that great day. We focus on the resurrection piece along with the pictures that follow at the end of worship. Through baptism, though, we have walked through Christ’s death, burial and resurrection so that as he is present to us, we become present to others, walking in the “newness of life” as Christ’s ambassadors.

Death and burial bring to mind grief and mourning. We would rather hear about resurrection and new life. Paradoxically, we walk in the newness of life in the world where life can be difficult and even hurtful. Life can and often does wound us. The resurrected Christ arose bearing the wounds of crucifixion. By this we know that healing is possible.

4. What steps can you take to “soften those edges” the next time you are confronted with an uncomfortable idea. How can you remain open and listen to those with whom you disagree? How can you “step toward the middle”?

The newness of life does not shield us from the “messiness” of congregational life and human relationships. Our liturgy, confession and forgiveness call for self-examination and an honest acknowledgement that we are captive to sin. God forgives, frees and releases us from sin’s grip. When the pastor announces forgiveness, we are strengthened to go out into the world to repair and heal. Conflict presents us with an opportunity to engage in the ministry of reconciliation.

Real Life Lutheran Church: A fictitious case study

I have served as an intentional interim. As such, I have helped congregations across denominations move toward reconciliation. The following scenario is an amalgamation or “mash-up” of various congregations.

Once upon a time there were congregations. They could have been rural, urban or suburban congrega-

tions. They could have been small, mid-size or large congregations. They could have been congregations with rich and long histories. They could have been new church starts or pub-churches. In any of these settings, the gospel of Jesus Christ was proclaimed in word, deed and sacrament. The pastor delivered great sermons. People received the Eucharist with joy. Pews, chairs and even pubs were teeming with people. Children and adults were baptized regularly. Sunday school and Christian education classes were full of children and adults. The youth group became a hangout for the teenagers from the neighborhood. Guest worshippers came regularly. Worshippers were often seen witnessing to the love of Christ by volunteering in the surrounding community and meeting the needs of others. People in the town, city or suburbs looked favorably on this congregation. Overall, congregation members were content.

For many years, all was well in these congregational settings. These congregations were beacons, calling people to the luminous light of Christ. Then society began to shift. Change began to happen. At first, it was barely noticeable. Children became teenagers; then young adults. And then, for various reasons, they moved away. Members began to age. With age, some joined the Church Triumphant. The congregation began to shrink. What once was a vibrant congregation began to decline in membership. People remembered with nostalgia and a bit of grief the halcyon days of church. It was a time everybody attended worship because that just was what you did—before soccer practices, music lessons, increased work schedules and any number of things that compete with Sunday morning.

Discontent began to creep into the congregation. Low grade anxiety gave way to fear. Petty annoyances were magnified and before long, church members who were longtime friends began to squabble. Trust began to erode. People questioned each other's motives. A typo in the church bulletin became a lightning rod for unexpressed frustration. Some congregation members

could not stand the discord and left; others stayed. Joy left the building. Despair took its place. Fault-finding became the order of the day.

"It's the pastor's fault!"

"No, it was the quilter group's fault that the congregation stopped growing."

"They ran the new people away, you know."

"If only the custodian would trim the bushes."

"We've never done it that way before!"

Their purpose for being a congregation shifted from serving the Gospel to survival mode. The bright hope of Christ dimmed in the hearts of the people and consequently in the hearts of the community at large. Hope dimmed, however, is not extinguished, and God can reverse the situation. But God works through us. We mature in faith as we develop and habituate reconciliation.

5. Where do you see God moving in your own congregation?

When fears have arisen, where have you seen God at work?

What happens when fear sets into the life of the congregation? We become overly focused on the perceived cause of conflict. Fault-finding and blame give way to anger.

It starts subtly with rejection rituals. Rejection rituals are deliberate behaviors that exclude an individual or a group of people. You may recognize some rejection rituals as a snub or a refusal to extend God's peace during worship. Rejection rituals can escalate in full blown conflict that can rend a church. Binary thinking develops in those who once got along. Now they square off into factions. It is "us" against "them" now. If allowed to continue in this downward spiral, the inevitable result is a church split.

6. READ ALOUD PHILIPPIANS 2:1–11. What advice does Paul seem to be giving to those struggling with conflict?

What aspects of this passage speak most to you?

Talk-show host Dr. Phil often poses this question to his

guests who are working on tenable solutions: “Do you want to be right, or do you want to be in relationship?” The writer of Philippians calls us to this kind of humility. What appears as a poem in verses 6-11 is referred to in other places as the “Christ Hymn.” Oddly enough, Christ “wins” by losing: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.”

Jesus was more interested in relationship with us than his righteousness. Paul says this, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). As to our own righteousness, Lutherans teach that we are absolutely lacking. This alone breaks open our hearts so that we can listen deeply and discern what is happening when we disagree.

7. READ ALOUD PHILIPPIANS 4:2–3. Consider what Paul might mean when he urges Euodia and Syntyche to be “of the same mind.” How can we be “of the same mind” with our sisters and brothers even in times of disagreement?

Clearly there was a disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche. Paul asks them to come to some accord. Also he turns to the community of faith to help these co-workers in the Gospel to work through their differences. Their point of agreement was Christ.

Christ helps us take that middle step toward one another. We do not know the outcome of Euodia and Syntyche’s bone of contention. Clearly, the community of faith had an active part in healing rifts before they could “leaven” and spread throughout the congregation. There were no church councils or committees to delegate this act of care for the faithful ones; however, Paul makes his appeal to the community to mediate the disagreement. Sometimes we feel that “problem solving” is not our job. As society shifts and cultures change and evolve, it is critical that we grow into the ministry of reconciliation.

A job for “Anybody”

The following cautionary tale teaches us in yet another way that we are to communicate, listen to each other and seek ways to engage one another.

There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry, because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized Everybody wouldn’t do it. So Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

We are the Anybodies who are the peace-makers. So what’s a body to do? Here are some ideas:

- Develop a habit of praying for your congregation along with the pastor(s) and the ministries of the church. The Rev. Bill Leshar was president of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago when I was a seminarian. In casual conversation, he mentioned that he and his spouse had a white board in their dining area where they kept their prayer list. Over a meal they would pray for people. Through the years, I’ve adopted that practice. Prayer affords us an opportunity to listen for the inner stirrings, or as some would say, “the voice of God.”
- Reread the “Practical tips for clay jars” from last month’s study. Ruminant on them. The best time to study reconciliation is when you are not in the middle of conflict.
- Accept that disagreement and conflict are a part of the human condition. They vary in intensity. They are not sinful in and of themselves. We can choose to respond in love. We respond in love by setting appropriate boundaries and regarding each other respectfully. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the question is asked, “When did we see you, Lord?” When communicating with people in situations of conflict, prayer becomes, “Help me to see you, Lord.” As you find common ground,

the only absolutes are “God is love,” “Jesus is at the center of reconciliation” and “the Holy Spirit is God’s presence in the world—the stuff of our credal formulations.”

In the midst of congregational conflict there is hope for resolution. God poses this question to Jeremiah, “Is there anything too hard for God?” In answer to God’s question, we say, “Nothing is too hard!”

So that squabble over the color of the pastor’s study has precious little to do with the true unity of the church. Whether communion is served by tables or intinction is immaterial as well. “We’ve always done it that way” does not preserve the unity of the church because Christ is head and center of the church. Article 7 allows us to speak across different traditions and ways of being church. For those of you who remember, Article 7 is among the considerations that brought our predecessor church bodies—the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America—to form the ELCA.

What does reconciliation look like?

Years ago, I took a yoga class. In one session we were learning headstands. I was excited. I listened to the instruction, got into position, then hastily shot my legs straight into the air. I fell quickly and injured my shoulder. I went to the doctor, and he told me no head stands for 6 months. I waited 8 months. I was very mindful during my second attempt; I cupped my hands, positioned my head. I lifted my body so that I was in half headstand. It looked like a headstand in a fetal position. Then little by little I began to move: first the hips, then the legs. I was able to stay there for about 2-3 minutes without falling over. Reconciliation is not a technique or a canned response to a conflict. It is a posture and a way of living in this world. It is mindfulness in Christ as

we listen to one another. We can cultivate and strengthen this posture.

Reconciliation does not mean that we control the outcome of the process. Remember, we will never know how Euodia and Syntyche resolved their disagreement. As we move through the process of healing through reconciliation, we let go of the outcome.

- 8. READ ALOUD: 1 CORINTHIANS 13.** This passage of scripture is often heard at weddings. How does it apply to living in community with one another? How have you applied it as you interact with your sisters and brothers in Christ in your congregation and the world?

There are times when reconciliation does not look as expected. Outside of Simeon, very few people thought the consolation of Israel would appear as an infant and die a death of humiliation. In Acts 15, we find that the same Paul who counseled others to help Euodia and Syntyche resolve their differences had a disagreement with Barnabas in which they parted company.

- 9. READ ALOUD: ACTS 15:36–41.** What was their sharp agreement about? How did their disagreement impact the church? When can a difference of opinion be a good thing? How has diversity of thought served your congregation?

We were created in love by God and for community with one another. Although we endeavor to love our neighbors as ourselves, we love imperfectly. When we seek God together as a community of faith, we can depend on Jesus’ presence to accompany us. When reconciliation seems long coming, remember, Christ is faithful.

Next session

The ministry of reconciliation: Practical tips.



Treasure in clay jars

Materials needed

Blank sheets of paper and writing utensils for everyone in the group; 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.

God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Grant us, we pray, to be grounded and settled in your truth by the coming of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. That which we know not, reveal; that which is wanting in us, fill up; that which we know, confirm; and keep us blameless in your service; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (*ELW* p. 86).

Seeking God in conflict

For many of us, seeking God is not a new idea. We seek God each week in worship, in our Bible study circles, when we pray or in our own private devotional rituals. But how often do we seek God in conflict? We might pray to God for help to *end* a rough patch in our relationships, but do we seek God to help us *learn from* the conflict? In this session, encourage your group to think about how conflict can be a place where we find God.

God's enduring presence

1. Select a volunteer from the group to read aloud Psalm 46:1–11. After reading, the study asks you to “Think of a time when you felt God’s presence in your life.” As a group you may do this

activity silently, or you may share with one another as you feel comfortable. Refer back to the passage, and identify any commonalities between the ways God is present in the Psalm and God has been present in the lives of the members of the group.

2. After your discussion of the psalm, provide a blank sheet of paper and writing utensil to each member of the group. As the group lists the “significant, inspiring or perplexing” events in each column, remind everyone to not leave out times of conflict. Encourage your group to consider where God was present in the difficult times as well as the good.
3. Select another volunteer to read Romans 6:3–5. Consider the image of baptism in this passage. What does it mean to be “united” with Christ in “resurrection” when we struggle through a disagreement or moment of tension? How does this passage remind us to seek God in difficult moments?
4. The ability to remain open and present in a conflict is essential to reconciliation. While anyone can easily walk away from a conflict without resolving it, Christ calls us to live into our disagreements and use them to grow. Doing this can be difficult. It requires that we put aside our own feelings and seek to understand above seeking to be heard. As your group considers how you might “soften” your edges and “step toward the middle,” acknowledge the difficulty of doing so. This is uncomfortable work, but it is the only way to truly become united in Christ.

Real Life Lutheran Church: A fictitious case study

Conflict in the church is nothing new. From the first days of the church, Christians have disagreed about issues big and small. In some cases, these conflicts have caused rifts between factions in the church; in other cases, these conflicts have caused lasting, positive change. The key to healthy conflict is our willingness to learn, grow and reconcile.

5. Think about the life of your own congregation. Are there any changes happening? Have any of these changes brought about conflicts, tensions or disagreements? Perhaps there is something about which you've heard others disagree—or perhaps you've been involved in a discussion like this yourself. Where could God be moving in this space? Is there anything members of your congregation seem to be afraid of? How could reconciliation take place in that fear? Share with your group if you are comfortable and encourage others to do the same.
6. Ask another volunteer to read Philippians 2:1–11. Paul's advice in this passage reads like a handbook for those in the midst of conflict. If time allows, provide some space for silent reflection after your group reads this passage. Give the group time to contemplate which of Paul's advice speaks most to them and why. Allow others to share as they feel comfortable.
7. Have another volunteer read Philippians 4:2–3. As the Bible study notes, we don't know a lot about the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche, but we can learn from the way Paul urges them to be "of the same mind." Paul's reliance on the community around these two women to help them reconcile can be a call to us to do the same in our

congregations. How can a community of faith help those who disagree? How can we work toward reconciliation together?

What does reconciliation look like?

8. **READ 1 CORINTHIANS 13.** You may select a volunteer to read aloud or consider reading it in unison together as a group. As your group answers the questions in the Bible study, urge everyone gathered to reflect on the role Paul's advice to the Corinthians can play in reconciliation in our congregations, communities and society as a whole.
9. Select a volunteer to read Acts 15:36–41. Despite all of the advice we've read thus far that Paul gives to others in the church, here we see Paul becoming embroiled in conflict himself. As your group answers the questions in the Bible study about conflict in the church, consider what this might mean.

Closing prayer

As you prepare to close your Bible study, do so in a way that will be constructive for your group. You may use the following prayer or create one for your context.

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen (*ELW* p. 76).