

Treasure in clay jars

Theme verse

2 Corinthians 4:7

Opening hymns

Come Now, O Prince of Peace (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 247)

In Christ Called to Baptize (*ELW* 575)

Healer of Our Every Ill (*ELW* 612)

“The Heart of the Matter” by Don Henley or India Arie

Prayer

Gracious God, nothing happens apart from your knowledge. You are mindful of us and mindful of those things that delight our hearts as well as those things that trouble them. Teach us the way of your Son’s forgiveness. Thank you for entrusting us with your ministry of reconciliation. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Introduction

Years ago when the reality show genre was beginning to take shape, there was a show called *Forgive and Forget*. The talk show’s host was aptly called “Mother Love.” Guests appeared on the show to seek forgiveness from someone they’d wronged, and after describing the hurtful incident in great detail, guests would be asked to open a door to see if the offended person was open to reconciliation. At Mother Love’s urging, they would “kiss and make up.”

After a season or so, the show struggled and ratings fell. A more confrontational format was introduced, and eventually the show was cancelled. The idea of

forgiveness is always a good one; however, the gentle work of forgiveness seemed to be too large and too loving to be stuffed into the rude sensationalism of a half-hour reality show.

As Christians we know we are called to the hard work of forgiveness. We hear words like “love” and “reconciliation” preached from our pulpits, sung in our hymns and spoken throughout our churches. They are healing words. There is beauty in them.

But what happens when the reconciliation we need is with our sisters and brothers inside the church? What happens when we leave church at the close of Sunday’s worship to find anything but God’s peace?

‘The Heart of the Matter’

A classic song, “The Heart of the Matter” by Don Henley, offers a bit of insight. “The Heart of the Matter” details the slow work of forgiveness. Henley sings meaningfully about a relationship that has gone horribly wrong—about regret, remorse and finally “the heart of the matter,” which is forgiveness.

Though he is singing about a love lost, we suffer loss any time there is a rift in one of our meaningful relationships. When lifelong friendships wane, the grief can be unbearable. The discomfort of families torn asunder by perceived slights and insults can be devastating. Workplace tensions are dispiriting. In our various relationships, this song resonates powerfully.

Henley sings of a “graceless age” which might be best described by free floating, low grade anxiety. It can be hard to put your finger on it, but it’s there. It’s

a nondescript dissatisfaction. We see it in how we are unkind to one another. We see it when we are sometimes short with the bagger at the grocery store or perhaps we cut off another driver. We are given to draw lines hard. More than ever, it seems, we are willing to be divisive. Added to all of this, current events mirror our unkindness whether the reporting is local, national or international. It's a malaise of the soul. The song asks the larger question, "How can love survive in such a graceless age?"

Free floating, low grade anxiety and dissatisfaction can send us on a quest for answers. In Henley's case, the singer figures out that getting to the heart of the matter, though broken and weak, hinges on forgiveness. Jesus demonstrates this powerfully from the cross as he pleads forgiveness for us, at the point when humanity reached its absolute nadir, the lowest of the low points in human history. Although we are joint-heirs with Christ, we are not him. Forgiveness is not our default stance. Everything we have learned about forgiveness has come at a cost. We hurt others and have been hurt by them. To give and receive forgiveness is an act of God. Through Christ we become forgiving. When we forgive we are most Christ-like and living into our baptisms. The capacity to forgive is truly divine.

1. **What is your experience with forgiveness? Is it easy for you to forgive others? Do you find it easy to accept others' forgiveness?**

Our interactions with others give us the opportunity to become more loving and forgiving, most especially when we disagree. Our deepest joys and sorrows occur in community. In that space, we learn practical ways in which we live out our baptismal covenant to "live among God's people." Families, workplaces and even congregations are "learning labs" for reconciliation. They are places where we learn to live with each other. Our interactions with others give us the opportunity to become more loving and forgiving, most especially

when we disagree. When we have been hurt or hurt others, we learn to confess, repent, give and receive forgiveness and heal relationships.

Whether it is a simple disagreement or full-out war, conflict is a part of our human story. In Genesis, we read the first conflict was between God and humanity through Adam and Eve's sheer disobedience. Jacob and Esau fought in Rebekah's womb. The psalmist regularly cried out before God in the midst of conflict at the hands of an enemy. Many of Paul's epistles addressed conflicts in a very young church's attempts to follow the way of Christ.

Yet even with the testimony of scripture, we are startled when we find ourselves in conflict. When we encounter conflict, what is it about us that makes us want to deny or avoid it? We do not relish conflict because it is stressful, downright nerve-wracking and even painful—producing anxiety and fear. There are various conflict responses. Perhaps we are fearful of saying the wrong thing. For some, the very idea of conflict is immobilizing. Some people avoid it completely even at the expense of healthy relationships. So how can we faithfully speak about reconciliation when our hearts are conflicted and fearful?

Let's talk about conflict

2. **Rub your hands together vigorously for about 20 seconds then stop. Notice the sensation. Notice the color. Are your hands red? Are they warm? Friction created the warmth. Imagine if you were asked to rub your hands together vigorously for an hour. Your hands would probably burst into flames at some point! Too much friction results in conflict which is unpleasant. We are reluctant to engage in it.**

What is it about conflict that frightens us?

The origin of the word "conflict" comes from the Latin "conflictus," which is the act of striking together. Conflict by its very nature involves a contest where

there are winners and losers. Conflict is a disagreement or struggle between two or more opposing individuals, groups or collectives where there is potential for gain or loss. The potential often collapses into black and white or binary thinking. If it is not *this*, it must be that.

Love calls for a “third way” in which everyone gains. What do we gain? We recover our humanity and that of others. We build up the community of faith and all of creation. Love is the foundation for everything we do as disciples of Christ and children of God. Love overcomes fear.

I have served as an intentional interim pastor or consulted in congregations where conflict was nearly intractable to the point of members intimidating each other. For the most part, when congregations are embroiled in conflict, the focal point is winning, not God. But Psalm 46 tells us that God is a “very present help in trouble.” God does not abandon us in conflict. The more tense the situation, the more I lean into this scripture.

READ ALOUD: 1 JOHN 4:7–21. John gives us a concise guide as to how to navigate conflict based on love. He assures us that God lives in us, and we live in God. John also tells us that we cannot love God if we hate our sisters and brothers.

- 3. What does abiding in God look like in your life?
How can we authentically disagree in love?**

READ ALOUD: ROMANS 7:14–25. We encounter every level of human experience. Paul knew this well as he grappled with his own conflicted heart. Listen to Paul’s inner turmoil: “I do not understand my own actions.” He is confused and driven to despair. Like Paul, we feel conflict when our actions do not align with God’s grace.

- 4. How has Paul’s predicament shown up in your life or in the lives of others? How did Christ ease Paul’s inner conflict? In what ways has Christ eased yours?**

My current congregation, King of Glory Lutheran Church, Dallas, Texas, purchases its communion ware from a local potter. One day I happened to be in the neighborhood and stopped into the potter’s shop. He and his wife were hospitable and friendly. His work was stunning, but I noticed several bowls that had holes in them. They were not sieves or colanders. I asked, “What kind of bowls are these?” He told me they were berry bowls. The holes are there so the air can circulate and keep the berries plump and fresh. Through those holes you can see the berries.

Looking at the berry bowl, I thought about how God is inside of each of us and shines through the holes in our lives: “We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

The potter also had an “oops” shelf of pottery that was flawed. He explained that each piece had minor defects but was still usable. Like the pottery, each of us has flaws, yet God’s extraordinary power dwells in us. This is not unlike the Japanese art form called *wabi-sabi* where broken pottery is pieced back together with molten gold. Its imperfections become the focal point of beauty. In some instances, depending on how the pottery is pieced back together, it has the capacity to hold more than it once did. I imagine God the potter, piecing us back together with the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation and then filling us with the power of love.

- 5. What experiences in your own life have left a mark in your “clay”? How have these experiences made you better? Have they left you with a capacity to “hold more” than you once did?**

A clay jar’s capacity to be a receptacle of God’s power is humbling. This is what we hold onto when we engage in the work of reconciliation. Reconciliation stands flat-footed and toe-to-toe with conflict in love. It is not a contest or struggle with a winner and a loser. In love everyone gains. Love allows us to stand in the

presence of conflict even when we are conflicted and fearful ourselves. When we find ourselves embroiled in conflict, it is helpful to remember that God's power is available to us in that moment—not as a conquering presence but a loving one.

We have our own inner conflicts and struggles in and with our families, at our workplaces, in our congregations and anywhere people gather in groups of two or more. For example, my mother had a stroke last August. Now my brothers and I share the responsibilities of caring for her. It didn't take long for us to begin to act out our birth order. Sooner or later, the most basic of conflicts appeared: sibling rivalry.

Now in caring for our mother, we are becoming increasingly mindful of how we communicate with one another as we remember Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." This is not "tone policing" but rather a standard of accountability in how we treat one another, and, as St. Benedict of Norcia, says "safeguard love."

Humility is helpful in neutralizing conflict along with developing a healthy sense of curiosity. When we are unclear, we ask questions for seeking a better understanding. When we are under stress, this can be challenging. Each one of us is a clay jar through whom God's power is at work.

6. **Form groups of three. Recall a conflict among your family or friends. What was your personal response? How did you contribute to it? Looking back on it, how was God's power present in that situation? Discuss.**

A conflict in the body of Christ

As a church that values the multicultural identities of our nearly 4 million members across the United States and Caribbean, the ELCA is no stranger to the sometimes difficult discussions that come with being a part of a society that is still struggling to provide equality and justice for all.

But when Dylann Roof, an ELCA Lutheran, killed nine African Americans in a racially motivated attack on members of Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina, it was easy to be at a loss for words.

We strive to be a multicultural church, and as such we have to query ourselves about the ways in which we fail each other. We cannot be sure, but somewhere along the way something happened which allowed Dylann to ignore his baptism and those of nine people who died at his hands. His parents made specific promises at the font. The gathered community spoke for the whole church and promised to nurture him in the faith. It is painful to me to imagine that Dylann targeted people who look like me. I must insist on God's power to strengthen all to reach for reconciliation. It is a process that cannot be rushed. It will take prayer, patience and—at some point—action.

The murder of the Charleston nine has the potential to tear us asunder. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton acted swiftly, distributing a pastoral statement on the Charleston shooting (See bit.ly/1WMKUtK).

It was unnerving to be sure, but Bishop Eaton dealt with this tragedy openly. It was too important to ignore. However Bishop Eaton must have felt, clearly she trusted God more. Weeks later, I watched the Rev. Clementa Pinckney's funeral on television in deep grief. I watched, despairing of the senseless loss of life. On the dais sat bishops from the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Some of you would have recognized Bishop Vashti McKenzie, a keynote speaker at one of our Triennial Gatherings. There among the AME bishops sat our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. My heart knew that Bishop Eaton was actively pursuing reconciliation and healing.

7. **All too often, it seems, we hear about conflict and tragedy between those of different races, religions or belief systems. In what ways can the church engage in the important work of forgiveness and reconciliation in our communities and in the world?**

Bishop Eaton has called for our church to engage in conversations at every level around the unavoidable topic of racism in our country. To date she has hosted two conversations which are archived on www.elca.org.

Some would rather we not discuss this racism in the church. But if we are to achieve the grand vision of unity in Christ Jesus, we must see each other as children of God—as siblings to each other—and push past the fear. Perfect love casts out fear, and who is God? LOVE. As difficult as this is to grapple with, again we must rely on God’s presence, grace and power to move us forward as a church.

READ ALOUD: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17–21. God has entrusted each of us with the ministry of reconciliation. In Christ’s incarnation, he became one of us, so that we can live resurrected lives. As Christ reconciled us to God and each other, we have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation by God. Rather than shrink from conflict, we are empowered by God to resolve conflict and bring about reconciliation. Each one of us is an ambassador for Christ and a minister of reconciliation!

8. What does being a minister of reconciliation mean to you?

How do you live as an ambassador for Christ? How does God appeal to the world through you? What does it mean to be a new creation?

Reconciliation in our daily lives

Here is a list of practical tips for clay jars engaging in the ministry of reconciliation in daily life:

1. Remember God is love, active and present (1 John 4:16b).
2. Know that you are a Child of God.
3. Act as an ambassador for Christ and minister of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:20).
4. Ask God for a spirit of humility. Outdo one another in showing honor.

5. When you feel fear rising, stop, pray and breathe. The breath is God’s constant gift to us. A good breath oxygenates the brain and brings clarity. When we are angry or fearful, we tend to breathe and think shallowly.
6. Remember that God’s majesty is present in the messiness of conflict ordering our chaos, much in the same manner as God brooded over the waters at the dawn of creation (Psalm 46, Genesis 2:1).
7. As angry as you are at a person or a group of people, remember God created and loves them just as God created and loves you (1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:20–21).
8. Speak the truth in love, but speak the truth. Set ground rules for respectful communication. Each person must take responsibility for their words and actions (Proverbs 15:1).
9. Cultivate curiosity. Ask questions. Ask, “How did we get to this point?”
10. Pray for one another in sincerity.
11. Remember wisdom is conflict’s shadow gift. Experiencing a conflict and emerging from it teaches us how to disagree in love.

9. What would the group add as ministers of reconciliation?

Closing prayer

God, our refuge and strength, you have bound us together in a common life. In all our conflicts, help us to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, to listen for your voice amid competing claims, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (*ELW* p. 76).

Session two: Seeking God

Next session we look at how congregations can seek healing and reconciliation in the midst of conflict.



Treasure in clay jars

Session goals

The scope of this Bible study is broad. We are dealing with expansive topics such as love, forgiveness and reconciliation in light of the fact that we are earthen vessels or clay jars.

All of us would agree that words like “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” are good words, like soothing salve and healing balm. But we do not care for what necessitates those words: conflict and broken relationships. This is a timely Bible study given where we find ourselves at this point in culture. Conflict touches us everywhere we go: in our homes, at school, in the workplace and even at church. The news reporting cycle give us much fodder for discussion, but we must not end the conversation with hopelessness. Nor should it end with naïve optimism.

Martin Luther in the Heidelberg Disputation says, “A theologian of glory calls a good thing bad and a bad thing good. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.” Sometimes it can be easy to value “being nice” at the expense of calling a thing what it is. Still, God trusts us with the ministry of reconciliation. We learn that even unpleasant truths can be spoken lovingly. Trust that the Holy Spirit is listening lovingly and approvingly.

Good leaders, pray for a spirit of openness and gentleness.

Preparation: Review the lyrics of “The Heart of the Matter” online or at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSLNYZ5rIEM.

Materials needed: Hymnals if you plan to sing the opening hymns; Bibles for everyone.

‘The Heart of the Matter’

As a group, watch or listen to Don Henley’s “The Heart of the Matter.” Read the introduction and “The Heart of the Matter” section together (silently or aloud).

1. **What is your experience with forgiveness? Is it easy for you to forgive others? Do you find it easy to accept others’ forgiveness?**
 - As you listen to the lyrics of “The Heart of the Matter,” ask the participants if they can recall any pop songs, movies or television shows that illustrate forgiveness.
 - Ask them what they would see as the heart of the matter as they experience conflict.

Some perhaps will be reluctant to share. Be comfortable with the silences after questions. Everyone processes things differently.

Honoring our stories

Share the discussion about personal experiences in conflict to the extent that participants are able. Perhaps poignant experiences of conflict and resolution will be shared. Honor those stories. Perhaps someone is in the throes of conflict. Honor that story too. Be clear that God is present in all situations.

Let's talk about conflict

Approach this topic with a spirit of gentleness, even humor. The first exercise is intended to get the point across with a hint of playfulness given a weighty topic.

2. Rub your hands together vigorously for about 20 seconds then stop.

Notice the sensation. Notice the color. Are your hands red? Are they warm? Friction created the warmth. Imagine if you were asked to rub your hands together vigorously for an hour. Your hands would probably burst into flames at some point! Too much friction results in conflict which is unpleasant. We are reluctant to engage in it.

Ask someone to read 1 John 4:7–21 and the paragraph following about John's guide to navigating conflict.

3. What does abiding in God look like in your life?
How can we authentically disagree in love?

Ask someone to read Romans 7:14–25 and the paragraph following about Paul's inner conflict.

4. How has Paul's predicament shown up in your life or in the lives of others? How did Christ ease Paul's inner conflict? In what ways has Christ eased yours?

Ask someone to read the narrative about the potter and his "oops" shelf.

5. What experiences in your own life have left a mark in your "clay"? How have these experiences made you better? Have they left you with a capacity to "hold more" than you once did?
6. Form groups of three. Recall a conflict among your family or friends. What was your personal response? How did you contribute to it? Looking back on it, how was God's power present in that situation? Discuss.

A conflict in the body of Christ

Read through "A conflict in the body of Christ" together. As a group ponder the following:

7. All too often, it seems, we hear about conflict and tragedy between those of different races, religions or belief systems. In what ways can the church engage in the important work of forgiveness and reconciliation in our communities and in the world?

- Allow conversation to "bubble up" about Presiding Bishop Eaton's presence at the Rev. Clementa Pickney's funeral. Place yourself in her shoes. What would you have done? How did her presence communicate reconciliation?

Ask someone to read 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 aloud.

Facilitate discussion around these questions:

8. What does being a minister of reconciliation mean to you? How do you live as an ambassador of Christ? How does God appeal to the world through you? What does it mean to be a new creation?

Reconciliation in our daily lives

- Review the "Tips for clay jars."

Closing Prayer

Ask a volunteer to read the closing prayer.