

# 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](http://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](http://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](http://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.



# Treasure in clay jars

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## 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 Leshner 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).



# Treasure in clay jars

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## 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.

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