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Changing tables

BY ELIZABETH HUNTER

SHE SAT ALONE at a cafeteria table. Taller than anyone else in our third-grade class, the new girl peered out from behind thick glasses. Some of the boys at our parochial school had already poked fun at those glasses and her old-fashioned saddle shoes. I watched her take slow bites of a strong-smelling, liver-sausage sandwich. When a few kids began to complain about the smell, she started to silently cry.

She needs a friend, I thought. I knew Jesus wanted me to love my neighbor. But what if my friends didn't understand? I glanced at my best friend—one of the most popular girls in school—chattering happily at our full table. I knew what to do. But I hesitated.

Why? It's usually the same answer, regardless of age: fear. It could be the fear of judgment, of not having enough or of missing out. It could be fear of not being significant. Fear of failure. Fear of being alone. Fear of dying. Fear of dying alone. We can be terribly short-sighted sometimes.

"We are all dying, all the time," Anna Madsen writes (p. 12). "We have much to fear, all the time. But as Christians, we believe that Jesus is risen from the dead. This faith knowledge of resurrection does no good if it isn't trusted."

In this issue of *Gather*, Bible study author Kit Kleinhans encourages us to sit with the stories of Biblical ancestors who were called to serve (p. 20). There's no getting around God's call. Piety alone won't serve, Kit warns: "The way to love God above

all else is not through our religious rituals, but through loving the neighbor whom God has given us" (p. 21). To those who think some neighbors are better ignored, Martin Luther insists the neighbor is anyone "who needs our help...even one who has done me some sort of injury or harm...the commandment of love remains in force" (p. 22). We're called to love and serve neighbors "because of who we are in Christ," Kit says.

That long-ago day, I finally walked over to meet Lorena, sit with her and listen. It was one of the better things I've ever done, although it cost me something over the years. My new friend had already been so wounded—by a world that hadn't made her feel utterly loved and precious—that our friendship was not always easy. And my best friend was still my BFF, although for a while she would ask, "Tell me again why you have to be friends with her too?"

Changing tables changed us. I began noticing the ways my other friends braved their fears and served. Lorena moved to our table. One of the teasing boys who plagued Lorena was the first of us to welcome several new students who were Hmong refugees, watching over them and gently repeating English words for them. Seeing him walk the new students around our faith-based school changed us too. We were young children, but we got the message. We could trust God to make more than enough room—at our tables, in our friendships, in our hearts—for everyone. 🌿

gather

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Editor Elizabeth Hunter
Associate editor Sarah Carson
Art direction 2COMMUNIQUE
Cover art Liz Rowland

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Editor, *Café* Elizabeth McBride
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gather@campbeywest.com

Gather Editorial Office

For editorial feedback, magazine promotion questions or article suggestions write or email:

Gather Editorial Office
Women of the ELCA
8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631-4189
800-638-3522, ext. 2730
gather@elca.org, gathermagazine.org

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Shanley and Associates, LLC.
Patrick Shanley, 312-919-1306
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God calls us to love our neighbors, caring for their need as if it were our own.

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ON THE COVER: Based on Matthew 25: 34-40, this vibrant image reveals the beauty of ordinary ways neighbors serve each other. Liz Rowland, a London-based illustrator, uses gouache and digital techniques to capture the most subtle human connections.



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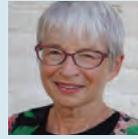


— Contributors —



serves as pastor.

LINDA POST BUSHKOFSKY (p. 39) is executive director of Women of the ELCA. She's a member of United Lutheran Church, Oak Park, Illinois, where her husband, Dennis,



addicted and/or lonely.

THE REV. SUSIE GAMELIN (p. 32) and her husband, Tim, live in Colorado. A retired ELCA pastor, she understands that her call is to wash the feet of those who are weary, confused,



with her family, walking in the woods and kayaking along rivers where a quiet peace can be found.

ELIZABETH HUNTER (p. 1) is editor of *Gather*. A lifelong Lutheran, she enjoys sharing stories



THE REV. ANDRENA INGRAM (p. 16) has spent the last three years recovering from a heart condition. She is currently on leave without a conventional call, yet she ministers to folks in her daily walk and remains focused on heart care and being a long-term HIV thriver.



the sake of dear relationships and interests.

THE REV. CATHERINE MALOTKY (p. 40) is an ELCA pastor, retired from full-time paid work for



Chair in Lutheran Heritage and Mission at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa. She is the editor of *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans* (Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

THE REV. DR. KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS (p. 20) holds the Mike and Marge McCoy Family Distinguished



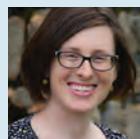
the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission. She is pursuing a nursing degree, in hopes of returning to Madagascar to work in public health.

ANNIKA JOHNSON (p. 34) recently served in Madagascar with



Las Cruces, New Mexico.

THE REV. DR. CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN (p. 6) has served Lutheran churches around the world through ELCA Global Mission. She currently pastors Trinity Lutheran Church,



website is kimberlyknowlezeller.com.

THE REV. KIMBERLY KNOWLE-ZELLER (p. 5) is an ELCA pastor, writer, mother of two and spouse to Stephen, also an ELCA pastor. She lives with her family in Cole Camp, Missouri. Her



enjoys seeing the occasional moose and bear in the woods.

THE REV. DR. ANNA MADSEN (p. 10) is a freelance theologian and proud mama to daughter, Else, and son, Karl. She works with OMG: Center for Theological Conversation (omgcenter.com) and



ELCA worshipping community called The Table.

VENICE R. WILLIAMS (p. 14) is executive director of Alice's Garden Urban Farm and The Body and Soul Healing Arts Center, both in Milwaukee. She is also the developer of an



THE REV. JULIA SEYMOUR (p. 28) serves Big Timber Lutheran Church in Big Timber, Montana. She enjoys her flannel and denim-clad life with her husband, Rob, their two children, Daniel and Victoria, a dog and a rabbit.

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For the sake of our neighbors

BY KIMBERLY KNOWLE-ZELLER

I USED TO BELIEVE I was good at service.

By “good,” I mean I was a pro at organizing group service projects. I delighted in seeking out opportunities to offer a helping hand. In college I helped coordinate fundraising volunteers for a Habitat for Humanity chapter, as well as a service project for our campus chapel. In short, I knew a thing or two about giving back.

During one college fall break, our campus ministry group took a service-learning trip to Washington D.C., to see how the church not only provides immediate, short-term services to neighbors in need, but also creates long-term solutions by impacting public policy on behalf of justice and peace. I couldn’t sign up quickly enough, even if it meant visiting D.C. just weeks after the 9/11 attacks impacted the Pentagon.

As many Americans who lived through that time remember, our souls, values and trust had been shaken. Our campus group wrestled with whether it would be safe to travel. After conversation, prayer and discernment, we decided to continue with our plans. As a 19-year-old college student I didn’t think much of the ramifications of our going to D.C. so soon after those tragic events. But now, all these years later, I realize what it meant for us to go. We went unsure of what could happen, aware that we weren’t in control of how our experience would turn out. We went to learn, serve, love and show up in the face of fear. We went reflecting the love of Christ for our neighbors and for the world.

During the trip, we served our neighbors by



painting and cleaning up an apartment complex. We also learned about the work of Bread for the World, an organization that urges lawmakers to act to end hunger in America and abroad. More importantly, we put our trust in the God who overcomes any form of darkness with light. We sang, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty” at worship. We knew

deep down within us that God would continue to overcome death and bring us to new life.

I’ve come to see that we engage in service not because we learn about our neighbors (which we do), or because it makes us feel good (which it often does), or because we’re called to love our neighbors with all our hearts (which we are). We serve one another because in doing so, we see a reflection of God in Christ, who walked this earth knowing our pain and joy. Engaging in service compels us to know God more deeply. God’s love is reflected when we hear someone’s story and share ours. We know God’s grace when we share a meal and break bread together. We see God’s hope when people of different backgrounds and beliefs hold hands and sing.

I used to believe I was good at service. I still may be. But these days I’m more concerned with opening my eyes to God’s light all around me and searching for the ways I can meet God in my neighbor—through conversations, listening, sharing a meal and singing songs. Today it’s not about me and what I do. Today I remember that it is God who is good. 🌿



To serve with love

Walking with
neighbors is a
Lenten practice.

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

IT'S THE SEASON OF LENT, which means I'm trying to listen to the Lord a bit more.

Sometimes I catch myself thinking: *You want me to love WHO, Lord? And serve them too? Lord, if working with your people weren't so hard to do, I could be much better at it!*

This was my not-very-pious prayer as I attempted to help Helena, who told me she was looking for a ride to Albuquerque for herself and Rosie, her parrot. She also wanted to know if she could park in our church parking lot for a few days. Plus she would need transport for her 1994 Ford Aerostar, which she and Rosie called home. This old white van had stopped being highway-worthy about a decade ago. *Seriously, Lord?*

Members of our congregation soon began noticing that van parked in our lot. I assured everyone, including Helena, that we would have her on her way very soon. When that didn't happen—because it turns out to be complicated and expensive to transport a barely functioning vehicle and a woman and her parrot—I found myself growing perturbed.

I attempted to get Helena to ditch the van, or to sleep inside the church where it was warmer, or better yet, go to the nearest food kitchen or homeless shelter. These ideas were all met with testy resistance.

“Rosie’s my family,” she explained. “And the van is specially outfitted for her home. We’ve been together for 25 years. I’m not going to give her up now.”

I’d thought of myself as kind-hearted, but I became short-tempered and downright hostile with this implacable woman who met me nearly every morning by complaining about how uncharitable our church was. “Why can’t anyone help me out?” she asked. “What kind of Christians are you?” I did not respond with love.

WE CAN GET BETTER AT THIS.

Someone once asked Pablo Casals, who was in his 80s and arguably the best cellist in the world at the time, “So why do you keep practicing for hours and hours every day?” He answered, “Because I think I’m making progress.”

Now there’s a grand reason for us to practice serving one another with love during Lent. Lent is a journey with Jesus. It’s an opportunity to learn from Christ’s human path to the cross, in the company of saints and sinners.

Walking with Jesus, we can get better at this “serve one another” business. Can’t we?

My friend Don May, a seasoned swimming coach, says, “Be careful. Practice doesn’t make perfect; practice makes permanent.” Don says he has seen many swimmers become really good at swimming badly, using a stroke pattern that’s “just slowin’ em down, but it’s the pattern they’ve practiced and practiced.”

Could it be that we Christians sometimes practice the wrong “stroke patterns”? We’ve become efficient with spreadsheets for committee work; skilled with medical equipment and building projects; successful at setting up food distribution and social service networks. But are we getting better at serving with love?

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). These biblical words ring in my ears accusingly. But then I remember I’m not alone in this. I’m walking with Jesus. “Watch and listen,” the Spirit says to me, kindly.

CALLED AND CAJOLED

“Don’t wait for people to sign up!” I admonish our

congregation committee chairs as we hope and plan for participants in Lenten worship, soup suppers and service projects.

“Don’t wait for volunteers! We aren’t a volunteer organization; we’re a collection of people who’ve been called to serve!”

They are skeptical, and I understand. It’s easier for most of us to design a colorful sign-up sheet than to patiently, persistently call or text a list of potential soup servers or worship assistants.

Here’s what gives me comfort: Sometimes Jesus seems to need to be called and cajoled too. I’ve noticed in Scripture how hesitant Jesus often is to jump in and help. Then I consider that Jesus was both divine and human as he lived among us. Sometimes we humans see what needs to be done and do it, and at other times, we ask, “Who, me?” Could Jesus be more like us than we realize?

Consider that wedding at Cana, when his mom says (rather sharply, I imagine), “They have no wine!” In other words, “Do something, son!” Only then does Jesus (magnificently!) pitch in to help (John 2). Then there’s the Canaanite woman with a tormented daughter. She calls to Jesus no less than three times—and won’t take no for an answer—before the Lord heals her little girl (Matthew 15:21-28). A blind beggar shouts louder and louder so that Jesus notices him, and gives him sight (Luke 18:35-43).

SERVICE IS COMPLICATED

“Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,” St. James writes in his letter (James 1:2). Easy for a saint to say! So often trials come in the form of people, don’t they?

Jillian tells our *Gather* group how hard it is to practice what Jesus teaches. During a recent trip to the grocery store, a woman in a wheelchair asked Jillian to reach for cheese from the refrigerated section. Even though she was tired from work and hoped to get through her shopping quickly, Jillian was practicing to be extra loving in Lent. She grabbed the cheese for the woman. And then the woman said, “Oh, and get me some eggs too.” The third thing she asked for was milk, and then, Jillian says, “I kinda felt like saying, ‘Well, look, lady, I didn’t come to the store to be your helper for the day.’”

It’s like the old saying, “You can tell how you are maturing as a Christ-like servant by how you react when people treat you like one.” My reactions aren’t always so great; how about yours?

Or as another person in our group observed: “Practice and theory are the same in theory, but different in practice.”

WHEN LOVE WINS

Sometimes, though, service with love just wins.

Last Lent we welcomed three families to the congregation, refugees who had made it through the first part of a harrowing journey

from Guatemala, trying to save their own lives and those of their young children.

Carlos, one of our guests, said it took him and his young son 22 days by foot, bus and truck to finally arrive at the border. They spent five days sleeping on the crowded floor of a cold detention center, where they were each given one thin Mylar blanket. Carlos covered his son with both of them, rather than use one for himself. “When we came here,”

We can get better at this “serve one another” business.

he said, “we travelled from hell to heaven.” As he patted the blankets and cots our church members had felt called to provide, his tiny son hugged the giant panda given to him by one of our congregation’s grandmas.

Dozens of servers, from all points on the political spectrum, humbled themselves to try and speak *un poquito* (a little) Spanish, set up those cots, fix beans and salad, wash tables, do laundry, fetch diapers and entertain children with games.

That first night, my husband and I also stayed on cots in the fellowship hall—not because I wanted to or had signed up, but

because my husband couldn’t find anyone else for night duty. I was a reluctant servant.

In the middle of the night, that young dad, Carlos, got up. I was uneasy; it was dark, and I didn’t really know these people. Carlos almost brushed my cot as he walked to the other side of the fellowship hall, turning my unease into fear. What was that man doing? When he knelt down, I understood. He was a Christian. This was a church. He was praying. My fearful and unloving heart melted.

The next night was our regularly scheduled Wednesday intergenerational program. The dozen or so church kids who gathered were shy and standoffish when they saw the refugee families. Then who should come in from the cold? Helena and Rosie. All of the children, Americans and Guatemalans alike, suddenly gathered around Helena, who allowed them to admire Rosie. Spontaneously, Helena and her green Amazon parrot were at the center of a miraculous, holy circle.

The three refugee families? Greyhound buses took them to their next destination the following day. Helena? One morning soon after, the van, Helena and Rosie were gone. I never heard whether they made it to Albuquerque.

The Holy Spirit breathes in us. With practice, we are getting better at walking with Jesus. This Lent, we watch, listen and learn to serve better, with love. 🌿





OUR RESPONSIBILITY

What is our vocation in times of crisis or need?

BY ANNA MADSEN

A FEW YEARS BACK, my family and I made the move to northwestern Minnesota for a number of reasons.

One key reason was that the state we'd called home since 2004 provided very little support for people with special needs and their families. We'd heard rumors that Minnesota was more committed to helping people like my son, Karl, who has lived with a number of disabilities following a traumatic brain injury. So we pulled up stakes and moved.

This relocation has been an incredible boon to our family: We received state support to purchase a ceiling lift that protects my back (and protects Karl) when lifting him from his bed to his wheelchair. The state also provides full coverage for Karl's

many medical needs, more than 100 hours a week of help from personal care assistants, and, once he hits 18, a provision that I—even as his mother—can be paid to care for him. This little detail gives us financial security, which is not a bad thing when the primary income-generator in our family is a freelance theologian.

In order to access the best care for my son, Karl, and provide the most security for our family, it behooved me to move. My vocation as mama, especially as a single mama, compelled me to do what is best for Karl, who is vulnerable on any number of fronts, and for my daughter, Else, affected by the countless implications of the accident which caused Karl's injury and the death of her father.

But as often as not, I feel no small amount of guilt. We left behind friends and acquaintances with a range of disabilities. I think of Olivia, a dear friend of ours with an intoxicatingly sweet smile, who Karl adores. I think of those whom we never knew by name, but we knew existed. To varying degrees, they needed more care than the state was willing to provide.

Part of what keeps me awake at night is that for any number of reasons, we *could* move. Most others cannot, or at least not easily.

In addition, our move to save ourselves simultaneously abandoned those who could have used our convictions. We weren't exactly known for being quiet about our concern for the Least of These. When we left, we took our advocacy, letter-writing, politician-calling and support-giving with us. People with disabilities and their loved ones have more obstacles to advocacy than one might realize, including the pressures of time, accessibility hurdles, challenges to expression and strained financial resources. I'm not saying that my family alone could have changed it all. But voices and presence matter. Solidarity matters.

What, then, was the right thing to do? Leave to protect my family, or stay to help protect all families?

In 1527, Martin Luther wrote "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague" to Pastor Johann Hess. In the essay, Luther ponders what a Christian is called to

do in the face of a plague: flee to protect one's self and loved ones; or stay to comfort and care for those afflicted.

Luther recognized that neither question nor answer were easy. To make that case, he turned to Scripture. For example, although the Bible calls us to tend the ailing, even at the potential cost to one's own life (Luther references Matthew 25:41-46, "I was sick and you did not visit me" [*Luther's Works*, 739]), Luther can't help but notice heaps

...there will be neighbors in need wherever you are, if you have eyes and heart to see them.

of scriptural examples of God-fearing people who fled death without apology—people like Abraham, Jacob, David, Uriah, Elijah and Moses (*LW*, 740-41).

There is holy precedent both for staying and for fleeing when death is in the sway.

But before we breathe out a "whew," and count ourselves good either way, Luther up and pulls out the example of Jesus. "This I well know," Luther says, "that if it were Christ or his mother who

were laid low by illness, everybody would be so solicitous and would gladly become a servant or helper. Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come running (747)."

If that doesn't transform a faithful person's "whew" into a gasp for breath, then I don't know what could.

He's right, of course. Too frequently, not least of all in these polarizing days, we forget: Jesus is not just *with* those who suffer. Jesus *is* those who suffer (Matthew 25:41-46). It's easier to avoid visiting or writing the sick or imprisoned if we've forgotten that they are Jesus too. I think it's also easier to, say, build a wall to keep out someone we don't know—than to keep out Jesus, whom we say we do.

What do we make of our responsibilities in times of crisis and need? Three themes come to mind: vocation, neighbor and trust in resurrection.

UNIQUE VOCATIONS

Douglas Shuurman, a professor of religion at St. Olaf College (Northfield, Minnesota), wrote *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*, a book in which he dives into some of the theology that undergirds an understanding of vocation. It's a worthy read.

Shuurman considers the uniqueness of vocation. He calls attention to how Reformed theologian Karl Barth mulled the concept of vocation and referred

to “places of responsibility.” According to Barth, such places inform what we are called to do, based on who we are in our concrete circumstances. Just a short step from this idea, Paul uses the framework of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

We are given various gifts. But we cannot do it all.

In his letter to Pastor Hess, Luther said that those who were called with the gifts to be doctors, pastors, judges, law enforcement, and others with skills directly necessary to the tendencies and consequences of the plague could not leave; but if you did not have these relevant gifts, then bring them elsewhere, for there will be neighbors in need wherever you are, if you have eyes and heart to see them.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS

We do what we can do, where we can do it. It could be awfully easy to use this as an excuse to be apathetic to pleas and plights that don't affect us personally or immediately. The trouble is, the gospel isn't just for me and mine. How could me and mine be more God's children than they and theirs?

Just as tempting—and just as damaging—is tokenizing our support of those who suffer in places far away, by dropping in on them, but then dropping out again. Mission trips, for example, can be well-intentioned, but almost

voyeuristic (and not the deeper engagement we're called to) if we go to serve in places of need, while avoiding the underlying question of how our way of life might contribute to the system that creates others' way of life.

One response to an underlying question might be to acknowledge the abundant, competing truths within it.

For example, my family was hurting under the system of our former state. We now live in daily gratitude for the relief and support we receive in our new home. We no longer reside in the state where others in our situation are suffering. But we can be stewards of both our former and our present reality, to help make the world a better place both there and here, as best we can.

Through advocacy, supporting legislation and simply drawing attention to disparities, we attend to the call to love and serve our neighbors far away, and the call to love and care for our children.

In this way, I can bridge my vocation as a mama who tends to her children, and my vocation as a Christian who tends to my neighbor...the identity of whom is revealed in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10.

Spoiler alert: It's everyone.

TRUST IN JESUS

Lastly, there is the matter of trust. Luther acknowledges that some examples he uses of biblical figures fleeing death are leaving not because of plague

but because of persecution. To that, in classic Luther candor, he writes, “Death is death, no matter how it occurs” (741).

We are all dying, all the time. We have much to fear, all the time. But as Christians, we believe that Jesus is risen from the dead. This faith knowledge of resurrection does no good if it isn't trusted.

When do we trust the resurrection most? When we acknowledge that death is real, but life—including the life in Jesus' name that we offer our neighbors, as fully as we can—is even more real. Our vocation is to serve Jesus by being Jesus to our neighbor. And our neighbor is everyone. But we have different gifts and different circumstances, so we serve differently and as best and fully as we can, given those distinct “places of responsibility.”

We can trust that even if—and when—we die, death will not have the last word. 🌿



FOR MORE STUDY:

Luther, Martin. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague (736-755). (Fortress Press, 1989).

Schuurman, Douglas J. *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*. (Eerdmans, 2004).



We need Earth advocates.

BY VENICE R. WILLIAMS

“FROM AN ECOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW: We cannot save the planet. In fact, that is part of the mentality that got us into this existential crisis—our need to fix, to be the saviors, to come up with the solutions to this mess. There is no humility in that. It continues to place the human at the helm, ready to steer the big ship of global change. It won’t, and it cannot, happen that way.” These are the words of Margaret Swedish, Director of the Center for New Creation. She also happens to be my friend, a sister-gardener and a member of the ministry where I serve, The Table: a first-century-style community in the 21st century.

I have an incredible circle of amazing women who are passionately living a life of caring for and about the Earth and her creatures. From Psalm 24:1 we know that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” The women in my circle work diligently to help maintain the fullness of God’s good earth. They encourage us to veer from the path of destroying soil, air, water and all that sustains us. They invite others to become involved with

ecological initiatives, as Earth allies. I like to call these women Earth advocates.

Every March, for National Women’s History Month, we honor the women who came before us. This March, I am grateful for the women who are still here, living among us. Several of these women have helped to make me a more Earth-awakened human. I would like to introduce you to them.

Cheri Johnson uses the “eye” God gave her to capture and frame the beauty of creation through a camera lens. It is hard to have reverence for or to consciously co-exist with that which you do not notice. Cheri’s photos help us to notice the butterflies and birds who seem to strike a playful pose just for her. She is able to share these glimpses with us because she moves gently and quietly, called to keenly observe the life around her.

Cheri is the Spiritual Caretaker at Alice’s Garden Urban Farm. She is also an ELCA pastor, serving at Reformation Lutheran Church (Brookfield, Wisconsin).

Cheri’s photos stir up in me an appreciation for God’s imagination. They also remind me of my

responsibility to be a steward of the Earth, to lessen my carbon footprint, and to live a cleaner ecological life so that all creatures may live.

August Bell, part of the younger generation of advocates, serves as founder and CEO of Cream City Conservation. Originating from Consolacion, Cebu in the Philippines, August constantly prods my Milwaukee community, our nation and even world leaders to recognize youth and young adults for their skills, talents, energy, commitment and potential when it comes to caring for creation. Cream City Conservation trains and employs young adults aged 15 to 25, who are traditionally underrepresented in the environmental industry. August reminds me that we can nurture diverse leaders and share opportunities to serve.

Again, the voice of Margaret Swedish: “We cannot save the planet by putting ourselves on top of her or the pyramid of life. However, if we stop trying to save and fix...if we are prepared to commit to the radical challenge of a swift scaling down of our exploitation of the planet for our own gain and comfort so that the destruction of extraction and contamination stops immediately, while the Earth still has time to heal and regenerate, then maybe she will allow us humans to continue to dwell here.”

Of course, the work of healing the Earth must include the soil itself. When my path overlaps with Renee Scampini, she is most often in overalls, wearing rubber boots, with a five-gallon bucket in hand. Renee is part of Kompost Kids, Inc., a volunteer-operated organization in Milwaukee that educates the public, individuals, businesses and institutions about the benefits of compost. Renee’s group is called to help us to reclaim organic materials from landfills to become soil for community-based agriculture projects. Renee is a “trash hero.” She saves life’s scraps (mainly from kitchens); mixes them with fallen leaves, mowed grass and garden weeds; and brings them together

so they can become rich soil. I can’t put eggshells in my vegetable beds, or fold banana peel clippings into the soil around my roses, without thinking about Renee.

My list goes on and on. Dozens of women in my life faithfully live into the calling of Earth Advocates. When I reflect on their work, I am reminded of 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” Caring about, advocating for, and raising our voices (or cameras) to shine a light on both the beauty and sabotage of the Earth, is Spirit-driven work.

I encourage you, each of you, during this month of honoring women, to seek out the Earth Advocates around you. You don’t have to look very far. They head up the recycling efforts at church and school. They own the resale shops in our communities. They organize neighborhood clean-ups, plan our Earth Day celebrations, travel to the state capitol to demand more Earth-friendly laws and pick up the trash in the neighborhood park once each week. You never see them with a plastic water bottle. They care about what we are leaving behind for our grandchildren’s grandchildren’s children. They are our farmers. They are our friends.

As women, we have a sacred connection to the Earth. Our energy connects us to the phases of the moon, the turning of the seasons, and the rhythm of sunrise and sunset. We cook from the Earth, weave fabric from the threads of the Earth, return some of our children, too soon, to the Earth. We are in the Earth and the Earth is in us. Advocating for the Earth is the same as campaigning for our own human existence.

“We cannot save the planet,” my friend, Margaret, emphasizes, “But if we are lucky, and in time, the planet just might be able to save us.” 🌿



Heart
of



Servers

NATIONS

Can the church be a place of hope for those with HIV/AIDS?

BY ANDRENA INGRAM



B

Y THE TIME the month of March blows in, many of us are more than ready for the end of winter. But we could also use a reminder that March 10 is National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. Of the

1 million people in the U.S. diagnosed with HIV, nearly 1 in 4 are women.

How is the church being called to serve women and girls—both those who are living with HIV/AIDS and those who desperately need the education to prevent this disease?

Considering my traumatic childhood, what can I, a grown woman living with HIV, tell my younger self? What can I tell women about being aware of who they are, about treasuring and respecting their bodies and teaching others to do the same?

More to the point, what can I, a religious woman living with HIV, do to help the faith community reach out and serve the women and girls living with this disease? What can I share with you about how to better prevent them from contracting this disease in the first place?

I believe this Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day can be an opportunity to live into our Christian calling. The work of educating others about HIV/AIDS is something Christians are called to do. This is a humanitarian issue which needs the help

and communication from all faith communities.

The church is a place where we hear about God's grace in troubling times. Where some of us once went to church to hear sermons centered around the stories in the Bible, now we also hear the stories of current events: mass shootings, kidnappings, the reasons for the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of our LGBTQIA siblings in Christ, and more. I believe that the church, an institution which proclaims the expansiveness of God's love, mercy and grace, should not shy away from sensitive subjects. It is in these spaces we should learn about sanctuary and acceptance.

It was difficult for my mother to have the "talk" with me. I recall getting my period and coming home to a book on my bed about my changing body. While I did get a stern talk about not playing behind the garage with boys (with whom I frequently played innocent games of hide and seek), my mother said nothing about the birds and the bees or how to protect myself (just in case). She certainly didn't say anything about HIV.

I did have a neighbor, however, who pulled her daughter and me to the side and informed us that our bodies were a beautiful "gold mine" we were sitting on. We laughed, because at the ages of 12 and 13 we just thought it sounded so funny. What gold

mine? What was she talking about? She told us we wouldn't understand then, but one day we would. In her own way, she was trying to let us know how valuable we were and to take care of ourselves.

We must find ways to talk with our daughters, sisters, mothers, spouses and grandmothers. We can teach compassion and self-care in our homes. Unfortunately, many young people do not receive required

We must find ways to talk with our daughters, sisters, mothers, spouses and grandmothers.

sex education at home or at school (and some parents object to sexual health being taught in schools at all). Where are they to get this information?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the church could be a supportive place to encourage and empower women? Of course you would need people learned in the subject matter. This is the month to begin that learning!

There's an African proverb

which states: "It takes a village to raise a child." And it does. Raising girls begins in the home, but unfortunately in some communities, children are being raised by single moms working two or three jobs in order to feed, clothe and keep a roof over their heads. Some women suffer domestic violence in their homes and have no sense of self-esteem. Many of these women are frightened to death to take an HIV test. I have walked with women and girls as they got tested. These women and girls need our help.

In seminary, I went on a mission trip to South Africa. When I asked our host, Nomsa, if my medication could be refrigerated at our host site, she recognized the HIV medication. Then she told me about daily HIV support groups for women and girls. Nomsa and I decided I would remain behind that day to bond with other women and girls who also had HIV. Because I came from the United States, they looked upon me warily at first, but eventually warmed up to me. We found we had so much in common. We spent that time learning from one another.

It's how the church has operated since the book of Acts: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (1:14).

The church community has groups for everything. We love a good "God's Work. Our Hands"

Sunday. Lutherans are known for their service to others, for working to help others live a good life. What if we used the month of March to invite women and girls to a temple talk about HIV/AIDS awareness before or after church? How about honoring the subject by teaching some aspect of it? Let's talk about it, learn about it, and assist in the ministry of helping women and girls. One way to combat this disease is to get tested. Know your status. If you already know your status, and can disclose; do so. It will give strength to another. You can partner with organizations in your community, and also learn more about the work the ELCA already does in this area at elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/HIV-AIDS-Ministry.

We are God's divine people. God calls us to be in healthy, loving relationships with one another. It is our calling to care for each other, for creation's sake. We must take away the stigma, shame and fear that women and girls face when they attempt to get the help they need. We can't fight this disease if we are afraid of being shunned or not accepted. We need a circle of love surrounding us. We are one another's gold mines. We are the wealth of humanity.

Learn about HIV/AIDS, teach others about HIV/AIDS. It's important. We can be healers of our nations. Go in peace, and serve each other. 🌿

EDITORS' NOTE

This Bible study offers time estimates for each section. While some groups will complete the entire Bible study, others meet for a shorter period of time and may appreciate the flexibility to designate some sections for individual use at a later time.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*ELW*)

THEME VERSE

- Mark 12:28-34
- Luke 10:25-37
- Romans 13:8-9
- Galatians 5:14
- Genesis 41-45
- Esther 2-4

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, open our minds and our hearts to your word that we may learn together and grow in faith. Open our mouths to your word that we may share the good news of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet. Open our arms to your word that we may show our faith through our actions. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

We are called!

Session three

Called to serve

BY KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS

INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

At the beginning of this four-part study of vocation, we looked at the call stories of several Old Testament prophets. Then in session two, we reflected on the experience of being called by Jesus, looking at the call of the disciples and of Paul before considering our own.

In this third session, we will discuss what we are being called to do. In particular, we will see how God's call is a call to serve others, and how the call to love God is linked to the call to love our neighbors. We will examine Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of the call to respond to individual need. We will look at Joseph's stewardship in Egypt as an example of the call to respond to community needs. Finally, we'll revisit the story of Esther as an example of the call to respond to political need.

THE TWO GREATEST COMMANDMENTS

 **Read:** Mark 12:28-34

For sharing aloud or reflection:

1. What do you think is the relationship between the two commandments Jesus identifies as the greatest?

The first time the commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" occurs is in the Old Testament, in Leviticus 19:18. When we read Leviticus 19:9-18, we see that verse 18 functions as

a kind of summary of the previous verses. First, the author of Leviticus provides several specific examples of how to deal constructively and justly with our neighbors. He concludes by stating a general principle: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The two greatest commandments are also reported in Matthew 22:34-40. What’s distinctive about Mark’s account of this conversation is the scribe’s response. In verse 33, the two great commandments are contrasted with offerings and sacrifices—typical religious rituals directed toward God. This seems to make clear that the way to love God above all else is not through our religious rituals but through loving the neighbor whom God has given us.

THE PARABLE OF THE SAMARITAN: AN INDIVIDUAL IN NEED (20 MINUTES)

📖 **Read:** Luke 10:25-37

2. How does the Samaritan respond to the specific needs of the victim in this parable?

This is a familiar story for many of us. It is often referred to as the parable of the Good Samaritan, although the scriptural text does not use the word “good.” At least one commentator refers to this as the story of “the helpful Samaritan” instead. The idea of a “good Samaritan” would have struck Jesus’ first hearers as an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Samaritans were considered false believers by the Jews; as a result, they were religious and social outcasts. That a priest and a Levite (someone who assisted the priests at the temple) walked past the person in need while a despised Samaritan stopped to provide aid would have been met with surprise or even disbelief. However we are so used to hearing the phrase “good Samaritan” that it has lost its shock value for us.

Clarence Jordan, a New Testament scholar,

founded an intentional, interracial Christian community called Koinonia Farm in rural Georgia in the 1940s. (*Koinonia* is the Greek word for community or fellowship.) In the 1960s, Jordan published *The Cotton Patch Gospel* and several epistles—a translation from the biblical Greek into the vernacular and worldview of the Jim Crow south. In the Cotton Patch version of this parable, set on the road from Atlanta to Albany, Georgia, it is a white preacher and a white Gospel singer who pass by the beaten man while a black man stops to help him. For Jordan’s audience, this contextual retelling of the story would have captured the shock value of Jesus’ original parable.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

3. If you were retelling this story for your context (local, national or global), who would be the unlikely protagonist whose identity would surprise people? (It might help to imagine yourself as the victim at the side of the road. First your pastor and then your council president or Bible study leader or choir director come along. You expect that they will stop to help you, but they see you and walk right on by. Who would you least expect to stop and help you? What would you think and how would you feel when that person approached you?)

The parable of the Samaritan is actually a story within a story: Jesus tells this story in the middle of a conversation he is having with a lawyer. In the biblical context, “lawyer” does not mean “attorney.” A lawyer was one who studied the Torah, or the Law. A lawyer was a religious expert. (Torah is the Hebrew name for what Christians call the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.)

📖 **Re-read:** Luke 10:25-29, 36-37

It is clear from the text that the lawyer already knew the answer to the first question he asked Jesus. The word used here to describe the lawyer's attempt "to test" Jesus is related to the word used to describe Jesus being tested or tempted in the wilderness after his baptism. To put it in everyday language, the lawyer wants to know if Jesus really "knows his stuff," and if Jesus is "for real."

Just as Jesus responded to each of his three tests in the wilderness by quoting from the Torah, here Jesus turns the test question back on the lawyer by asking him what the Law says; the lawyer responds by quoting the two greatest commandments. However, the lawyer's next question suggests that his answer was head knowledge rather than heart knowledge. He knew about the centrality of love of God and love of neighbor from his study of Torah, but apparently he didn't grasp the full implications of the answer.

Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan and the crime victim as a response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" In doing so, he shifts the focus of attention from neighbor as object to neighbor as subject. The lawyer wants to know who (out there) is his neighbor. Knowing the definition of neighbor will help him understand the scope and limits of his responsibilities. By implication, if some people are my neighbors, other people are not. Jesus holds up a mirror on the one asking the question: "Neighbor" is not about identification but about action. The question is no longer "Who is my neighbor?" but "Who acted as a neighbor?" The question is no longer "Who is my neighbor?" but "Am I being a good neighbor?"

 **Read:** Romans 13:8-9 and Galatians 5:14

In these two passages, Paul identifies "Love your neighbor as yourself" as the summary of God's law. Like Jesus, he is not defining who our neighbors are. He is describing how Christians should live in relationship to others.

In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther offers a powerful response to the question "Who is my neighbor?"

Now our neighbor is any human being, especially one who needs our help, as Christ interprets it in Luke 10:30-37. Even one who has done me some sort of injury or harm has not shed his humanity on that account or stopped being flesh and blood, a creature of God very much like me; in other words, he does not stop being my neighbor. Therefore as long as human nature remains in him, so long the commandment of love remains in force ... (LW 27:58).

Like Jesus and Paul, Luther points out that God calls us to meet the needs of others. It doesn't matter who they are. We are called to love and serve others because of who we are in Christ.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

4. Who do you think of when you hear the word "neighbor?"
5. How might you broaden your understanding of "neighbor?"

JOSEPH IN EGYPT: A SOCIETY IN NEED (15 MINUTES)

The parable of the Samaritan presents a clear case of a neighbor in need: An injured man needs help. The story of Joseph in Egypt presents a more complicated situation of a family and a community in need; in this story, responding to the needs of one's neighbors requires discernment and planning.

More than a quarter of the book of Genesis is dedicated to telling the story of Joseph. In Genesis 37, we learn that Joseph's older brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery and then lied about it to their father Jacob. In Genesis 39,

we learn that Joseph was unjustly imprisoned after being falsely accused of sexual misconduct by his master's wife. We pick up the story after Joseph has been in prison for more than two years.

Read: Genesis 41:15-57

For sharing aloud or reflection:

6. Why does Pharaoh need Joseph at the beginning of this passage?
7. What deeper need does Joseph discern through Pharaoh's dreams?
8. What does Joseph do to meet the needs of the community?

Pharaoh recognizes that Joseph's ability to interpret dreams and respond with appropriate action comes from God. Instead of asking Joseph to pray to God to stop the famine from occurring, Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of preparing for the coming famine. In his *Interpretation* series of commentaries on books of the Bible, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that this is evidence that there is no "conflict between God's creative power and human management." God provides food for the people abundantly during the seven years of plenty; it is Joseph's administrative abilities that ensure that God's gift of food continues to sustain the people during the seven long years of famine. In this case, the call to serve one's neighbors is vast both in the number of people affected and the extent of the problem.

PUTTING COMMUNITY FIRST (OPTIONAL, 10 MINUTES)

Read: Genesis 42:1-6; 43:1-2

For sharing aloud or reflection:

9. Why do Joseph's brothers come to Egypt the first time? Why do they come a second time?
10. Why do you think Joseph recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him?

Have you heard the expression "Charity begins at home"? In common usage, it suggests that we should help our own families before reaching out to help others. This can sometimes be good advice, as when the flight attendant instructs passengers to put on their own oxygen masks first before assisting others. But sometimes the expression has the effect of discouraging charity toward others, as if we can't or shouldn't help others unless and until all our own needs are met. With that way of thinking, charity begins—and ends—at home!

The Joseph story reverses this direction. Initially, Joseph's actions don't benefit his family. He is made responsible for ensuring the food supply for the whole country. The long famine affects the region beyond Egypt, and Joseph's careful stewardship allows Egypt to meet the needs of hungry people in other countries, too. It is because Joseph has acted to provide for the needs of *all* that he is also able, when the time comes, to meet the needs of his own family.

GOD'S WORK. OUR HANDS. (OPTIONAL, 10 MINUTES)

Read: Genesis 45:3-11

For sharing aloud or reflection:

11. How does Joseph explain how God has been at work in his family story?
12. Consider the ELCA tagline: "God's work, our hands." How was God at work through the hands of Joseph's brothers?

How was God at work through Joseph's hands?

13. Does the fact that God was able to work for good through what happened to Joseph excuse Joseph's brothers from responsibility or their actions?

ESTHER: A POLITICAL CRISIS (25 MINUTES)

Many people are uncomfortable when religious conversations seem to become "political." It is important to point out that the word "political" is related to the Greek word *polis*, which means a city or a body of citizens. The Greek root word is still evident in city names such as Minneapolis or Indianapolis. In its original sense, the word "political" meant participation in public life and concern for the common good. What was "political" was what benefited the *polis*.

In our society, the word "political" carries a different connotation. We tend to think of partisan politics, in which strong support for a particular political party or position takes precedence over concern for the welfare of the whole community. As Christians we can be political—speaking and acting for the well-being of our society—without falling into partisanship.

The Old Testament prophets were political. They were critical not just of individuals but of political leaders and of entire countries when they failed to carry out God's will for the welfare of all.

The book of Esther is also political. Its setting is political: The Jewish people had been conquered and were living in exile in Persia. Its tone is political: Commentators interpret the book of Esther's elaborate description of the officials and the procedures of the Persian court as a satire of an ineffective king and his government. And at the heart of the story is a political crisis: the threat of genocide.

God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. Nevertheless, the book of Esther is a powerful story

of how God's people respond to political crisis. The command to love our neighbors goes beyond helping an individual in need (the parable of the Samaritan) or responding to a natural disaster (the famine recorded in Genesis). It can also call us to action within complex political situations to work for the well-being of all.

📖 **Read:** Esther 2:1-4, 12-14

For sharing aloud or reflection:

14. What do we learn about the status and value of women from these verses? What are the similarities and the dissimilarities in how our society values women?

It's easy to celebrate Esther as the heroine of this story. It's important to recognize Esther not only as an individual but as a woman living and acting within a particular social context: a culture where women's beauty seems to be their most valuable asset; a culture where one queen can be set aside because she refuses to parade herself in front of her husband's friends and allies; a culture where the next queen risks death if she approaches her husband without being invited.

📖 **Read:** Esther 3:1-11

For sharing aloud or reflection:

15. How might one best love and serve one's neighbor in this particular context?
16. How is pride a contributing factor in Haman's actions toward his Jewish neighbors? How does Haman appeal to the king's pride in his vendetta against the Jews?

17. What implications does the command to love our neighbors have for Christians in a global society, especially in situations of horrific violence?

Take a moment to reflect on how individual pride and prejudice can escalate, generating wide-ranging consequences.

📖 **Read:** Esther 4:8-17

When Esther was first taken to the king's court, her guardian, Mordecai, told her to keep her Jewish identity hidden. We might characterize this advice as “flying under the radar” or “going along to get along.” Now Mordecai is calling upon Esther to identify herself as a Jew and to take action to save her people from genocide. There is a double risk for Esther: She risks death for approaching her husband uninvited, and she risks death by identifying herself as a Jew when genocide against the Jews has been commanded.

📖 **Re-read:** Esther 4:14

Read this verse aloud two or three times. Allow some silence for reflection between readings.

18. Why do you think that Esther decided to act despite the risk? What role do you think her faith played in her decision to act?

We learned in the first session of this four-part Bible study that Jewish tradition recognizes Esther as a prophet, even though the Scriptures do not use the word “prophet” to describe her. We also saw in the first session that prophets speak a word from God in very specific historical and political contexts.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

19. Do you think Esther was a prophet? Why or why not?

CLOSING (10 MINUTES)

In Mordecai's appeal to Esther, he twice uses the phrase “such a time as this.” In one of the optional activities you may have done in our first session in January, you were invited to identify your specific context, as the biblical prophets often did, and to think about what God is calling you to say or do in your context.

Hear Mordecai's words addressed to you personally: “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

For sharing aloud or reflection:

20. How would you describe “such a time as this” for you? You can think about this on a personal level, on a communal level, or both.
21. What new insights do you have about what God might be calling you to do at “such a time as this”?

CLOSING HYMN

“Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service”
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 712)

CLOSING PRAYER:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 317) 🌿

We are called!

Session three

Called to serve

BY KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand God's call to serve the neighbor
- To recognize the importance of discerning and responding to the specific needs of particular neighbors
- To reflect on what God might be calling us to say and do in our own particular contexts

“LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF”

You might be interested to know that the command “Love your neighbor as yourself” occurs seven times in the Bible:

Leviticus 19:18

Matthew 19:19

Matthew 22:39

Mark 12:31

Romans 13:9

Galatians 5:14

James 2:8

The ELCA's 2019 Churchwide Assembly adopted the social statement “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action.” You can find and read the social statement on the ELCA website at elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements.

One of the important emphases of the social statement is that love of neighbor is expressed concretely through justice for the neighbor. As theologian Cornel West has said, “justice is what love looks like in public.”

MORE ON ESTHER

You may recall that the *Gather* Bible study for June, July and August 2019 focused on the book of Esther. This month's study focuses on only a few specific passages from Esther. You might wish to review the summer 2019 Bible study to remind yourself of the larger story and context of the book of Esther.

A MUSICAL REFLECTION

Contemporary Lutheran church musician Jonathan Rundman has written a simple yet powerful song based on Esther 4:14. Rundman personalizes the verse and focuses it back on us, as individuals and as a church community. The lyrics are:

*Could it be that we are called
for such a time as this?*

*Could it be that you are called
for such a time as this?*

*Could it be that I am called
for such a time as this?*

*Could it be that we are called
for such a time as this?*

You can hear the song, “For Such A Time As This,” online at [youtube.com/watch?v=19SgJ7DcWEO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19SgJ7DcWEO)

Words and music by Jonathan Rundman © 2015.

LOOKING AT LUTHER

This session contains a quote from Martin Luther that powerfully, unconditionally defines “neighbor” as “any human being, especially one who needs our help ... Even one who has done me some sort of injury or harm.” Unfortunately, Luther didn't always live up to his own best understanding of loving our neighbors. He said and wrote incredibly harsh things about Jews, about the pope, about “the Turks” (which is how he referred to Muslims), and others.

It's important to remember that Lutheran theology isn't determined by everything that Luther said, did or wrote, but by the Lutheran Confessions, theological writings that emphasize the centrality of justification by grace through faith.

Luther described Christians as living simultaneously as "saint and sinner"—sinful in ourselves but justified, or made right with God, through faith. Luther was a sinner just like the rest of us. His definition of neighbor is one Christians can still strive to live up to, even if Luther himself often failed to do so.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

In *Gather's* summer 2019 Bible study, we learned about how Esther's advocacy for her people saved them from grave danger. The situation described in the book of Esther is not unlike what many countries still face today.

If time allows on p. 25 (question 17), add the following reading to help your group consider the implications this text has for our Christian calling today.

Read: Esther 3:12-15

What is being commanded in this text is genocide: the annihilation of an entire group of people—men, women and children—in a single day. The New Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament translates the final word in verse 15 as "confusion." Some other translations use the word "perplexed" or "bewildered." But the Hebrew word conveys more than just a mental state. It is also used to describe situations of public unrest and even anarchy. Worse yet, in this situation the anarchy is state-sponsored: The lawful government has authorized one group of people to exterminate another group of people.

Unfortunately, genocide is not just ancient history. The last century has seen many genocides: against Armenians, Kurds and Rohingya; in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur; and, of course, the Holocaust of World War II. 🕯

Call to convention

Notice is hereby given that the Eleventh Triennial Convention of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will be held in Phoenix, Arizona at the Sheraton Grand Phoenix, July 14–16, 2020.

Voting member credentialing will begin at 7 p.m. Monday, July 13, 2020. Voting member orientation will be held at 10 a.m. Tuesday, July 14, 2020. The convention will open at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, July 14, 2020, preceded by worship at 9:00 a.m.

All are encouraged to attend triennial convention plenary sessions where the business of the

organization will be conducted.

All are also encouraged to attend "Just Love," the 2020 Gathering, set to follow the convention. Opening worship for the gathering will be held at 4 p.m. Thursday, July 16, 2020. Closing worship for the gathering is scheduled for 9 a.m. Sunday, July 16, 2020.

—**Freddie L. Jordan**, secretary
Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church
in America, churchwide executive board

MORE A lesson from the woman who loved TO THE STORY

BY JULIA SEYMOUR

I LIVE A LIFE OF FLANNEL shirts, sweaters and jeans. My Sunday clothes are knit clergy shirts, so comfortable I can forget I am wearing them, and soft, relaxed skirts. Usually I wear leggings and flats, but I can occasionally be coaxed into fully footed tights if the weather is cool enough.

When I see other women dressed carefully in sharply put together outfits, fancy shoes and matching purses, I feel admiration. It's like they have a skill that I do not possess. I do not live in a space that requires those things—nor do I find pleasure in that style—but I can understand that some people do. I get my own nails done regularly, and I get my

eyebrows and lip waxed as well. There are women who don't need or want to choose those habits.

What's surprising to me is not how different we can all be, but how quickly we make assumptions about other people and their choices. It would be easy for someone to think that I'm just a sloppy dresser, instead of considering that I live in a rural area and am as likely to walk in a pasture for a pastoral conversation as to go to a coffee shop. Another person might judge that women who get their facial hair removed or shaped or their nails done are vain without considering that these services may be essential to one's self-presentation or care.



Snap judgments can get in the way of relationships. We might pre-decide that a person who looks one way or dresses another would not be a friend to us or perhaps we wouldn't be a friend to her. It is sad to think how quickly we make decisions to protect ourselves without having all the information.

It is when I hear one woman or a group of women whispering behind the back of another, especially about her choices or struggles, that I think of Michal, daughter of Ahinoam and King Saul, sister to Merab and Jonathan, first wife to King David, wife to Paltiel, and our biblical sister.

A WOMAN WHO LOVES

Michal (mee-HALL) has the distinction of being the only woman in the Bible reported to have loved a man. Sure, many women in the Bible may have loved men; in fact, they probably did. The Scripture, however, only records Michal's love for David (1 Samuel 18:20). Her affection for David not only gives her agency within the story, but it makes her one of the rare royal (or non-royal) wives to be mentioned beyond a list of her children or a note about her lack of children.

Michal is the second daughter of King Saul. Her older sister, Merab, was promised to King David as a wife, but Saul withdrew the offer of Merab and married her off to another man. Saul had hoped that David would

be killed in battle and then many of the king's problems would be solved. It was not to be.

David's best friend is Saul's son, Jonathan. David and Jonathan are very close, and Jonathan looks out for David, which means protecting his best friend from Saul, his own father. More than once, Jonathan chooses David over Saul, an unimaginable predicament for most people.

Jonathan's sister, Michal, also loves David. The Hebrew Bible does not use the modern idiom "fall in love." We do not know if Michal followed David around the room with her eyes, giggling if he looked over at her. We do not know if she watched him practice archery with her brother, swooning over his biceps and curly hair. We cannot know if she whispered to her maids about how handsome she thought David was and how she wondered what it would be like if he kissed her.

We do know that Michal loved David. Enough people in the king's house knew about her love for the shepherd-warrior-musician that someone told her dad. Saul is pleased to hear about this, even though he'd withdrawn his older daughter as a potential wife for David. Saul sets up a dramatic bride price for David to pay for Michal—a hundred Philistine foreskins.

We are not told what David thought about Michal, but we are told that he acquired what King Saul asked of him in order to marry her. David and Michal

are married, and we are reminded that she loves him (1 Samuel 18:28). Saul becomes concerned that the Lord seems to be on David's side and at least two of his children, Jonathan and Michal, love David more than their father.

When Saul makes a plan to kill David, Michal makes a counter-plan to help David escape. She lowers her husband out a window (1 Samuel 19:12) and hides a household idol in his bed. She even covers the idol with a blanket and a little goat hair to make it look like David is sleeping in the bed. She buys David getaway time; first by saying he is too sick to see the king and then lying to her father by saying that David forced her to do it. Michal's deception, rooted in her love for David, helped him escape Saul's plot to kill him.

A PLOT TWIST

It would be wonderful if David remembered Michal's faithfulness to him, her willingness to risk her own neck, and her relationship with her father, but things do not seem to work out that way. In 1 Samuel 25:44, we learn that Saul marries Michal off to a man named Palti. She is still referred to as David's wife in this verse. We learn about this change in her circumstances right after learning about David taking Abigail and Ahinoam (a different Ahinoam than Michal's mother) as wives.

Perhaps David's life as a soldier was too dangerous to send

for Michal to join him. Perhaps Saul was too angry with Michal to let her continue to live in the royal household. Whatever the case, the woman who loved David was married off to another man. We do not know what she thought about this before it happened or after.

Eventually David does remember her and sends a man to retrieve her from Palti's house (2 Samuel 3:13). Palti follows Michal, weeping, until he is told to turn around and go back home. Again we do not learn what Michal thinks of this. Maybe she is thrilled to return to David. Maybe she is devastated to leave Palti. Maybe she feels torn between the love of her life and the man with whom she learned to make a life.

Michal, David's first wife, returns to a royal household with her husband as the king. She's there with Bathsheba, Abigail, Ahinoam and many others. Some of these were first wives, like Michal, married for political expediency and relationships. Others were second wives, women of David's choosing because of their personal traits. Michal has been away while all this developed, and we can only imagine how she must have felt entering into this situation and trying to discern her place in all of this.

Finally, we hear from Michal one last time. David reclaims the Ark of the Lord from the Philistines. Without his armor, with only his essentials covered,

David danced before the ark as it came into the city. Michal saw this behavior and "she despised him in her heart" (2 Samuel 6:16). Later, she calls him out for what she perceives to be undignified behavior. He tells her that the Lord made him the king, and

When women speak ill or judgmentally about other women, I think of Michal.

he will be the king how he sees fit, including scandalous dancing. Because no matter what he does, he will still be the king that the Lord favored over her father. Our final glimpse of Michal is to learn that she had no children. The implication is that David did not grace her with his presence to make children possible, but we cannot know for sure.

WHEN OUR SISTER HURTS

When women speak ill or judgmentally about other women, I think of Michal. She was a woman who loved and acted bravely out of that love. Yet she was a pawn to her father, unfavored by her husband, taken from a man who loved her, and she died without her culture's perceived

primary blessing, children. We only know bits and pieces of her story, but we can relate to her pain, her struggles and her own determination.

I hope that Abigail and Bathsheba took her in and were friends to her. I hope they sympathized with the fickleness of kings and the heartbreak of losing a spouse. I hope that she was a favored auntie of children in the royal household and that the servants knew her as a kind mistress. I hope that she loved others and was loved in return.

Surely we want the same thing for the women (and men) around us. We want them to thrive, to be cared for, to love and be loved for who they are. What we want for Michal can be possible for each of us, if we remember that each person we see has a lot of story we do not know. We do not know why someone seems short-tempered, in a hurry, always late or a little distant.

Just like our wardrobes, personal habits and hobbies differ, our stories are our own. When we take the time to listen to one another, to be patient, to offer a smile or hold back a quick retort, then we may be the moment of peace our sister or brother needs in their day. We cannot offer one to our sister Michal, whose story is so much more than the words on the page. Let us offer understanding to others on her behalf, in the hopes of spreading the legacy of Michal, the woman who loved. 🌸

Framing the fire

BY SUSIE GAMELIN

ABBY AND KEVIN'S HOME BURST INTO FLAMES last August. Abby and Kevin weren't home when smoke and flames sent firefighters careening down the road of their mountain village. Lily, their cat, was inside the burning home. Now she has only eight lives left and leaps two feet straight up when loud noises startle her.

Once the fire had been put out, ugly pieces of roofing rested atop broken coffee cups, soggy photos, and charred and water-logged sweaters. A 40-year-old letter survived and peeked out from the rubble. The first photo I saw of the disaster showed Abby and Kevin standing in front of the mess, arms around each other's waists. Abby was grinning broadly. It was hard to tell if Kevin was smiling behind his generous beard. But the photo made it clear: Their survival left them rejoicing. I have seen a similar euphoria among people who were alive and unhurt after a hurricane.

But the elation doesn't last. It can't. The reality of what fire and wind and flood have done to a home—and all the meanings of home—can be crushing. Despair and depression come alongside mounting needs like finding a temporary nest, clearing out junk that had been precious treasures, completing complex and demanding insurance papers, and realizing that the availability of ready helpers dissipates with time.

That's when the frame becomes important—the frame of understanding what our lives are all about. Like a picture frame or the frame for a door or a window, it holds answers to questions that swirl in our minds and rock our hearts after a catastrophe: What is home? Who am I in the center of it? How can I manage if home disappears?

Sometimes people call these frames of meaning “paradigms.” For example, if we think our adult

children are incapable of managing their lives, even though they have the resources to do so, the frame we wrap around our progeny is one of suspicion, worry and frustration. On the other hand, if we believe that our grownup kids are resilient, courageous and independent, the frame in which we hold them is one of pride, gratitude and (sometimes) worry.

So what frame could fit around a fire-devastated home? Let's look at a few possibilities. Do any of these frames contain what is true about this disaster?

Frame 1: “The fire was God's punishment for the sins that Abby and Kevin committed.” We saw this frame put around the havoc Hurricane Katrina wreaked on New Orleans in 2005. Some believed New Orleans was a city of sin, wiped out by God, just like Sodom and Gomorrah. The God depicted in many, but not all, Old Testament accounts just might have done that. The God Jesus told us about? No way. Jesus proclaimed that God loves us deeply and profoundly and weeps with us when we, like Job, sit in the rubble. This first frame is “false.”

Frame 2: “God is testing my friends Kevin and Abby. How Kevin and Abby react will determine if they'll have earned God's favor.” So I ask: What parent, what Holy Parent, would do that to their children? Would a parent give a child snakes when they ask for fish? For this reason, I appreciate the “new” version of the Lord's Prayer, presented in the 1970s by the International Consultation on English Texts. It replaced “lead us not into temptation” with “save us from the time of trial.” Because God doesn't lead us into tests. God yearns for us to not experience the disasters and difficulties birthed by a broken world. And when climate change or fragile bodies or accidents or social injustice lead us into devastation,

God insists on being with us.

Frame 3: “You are too absorbed by material possessions, Abby and Kevin. So they’ve been taken away from you, like they were taken from the ‘rich fool’ in Luke 12:13-21.” This is the guilt frame. While it is true and sad that some people are owned by their possessions, Jesus’ solution for freeing ourselves is to give those treasures away to the poor. Don’t burn them up. Even if there *was* something to this idea, my friends’ modest, 80-year-old wood frame house doesn’t at all qualify as extravagant—especially when it’s owned by people who regularly give the shirts off their backs to help others.

Can you take yet one more frame? Here it is. Frame 4: “You two just didn’t have enough faith. You haven’t accumulated the number of Faith Points that would have kept you from disaster.” So...Jesus on the cross...not enough faith? Paul beaten, betrayed and imprisoned...not enough faith? Faith is a gift, the bruised and battered Paul tells us with joy in Ephesians 2:8. We recognize and respond to this gift of faith, sometimes vibrantly, sometimes less so. But faith isn’t fire insurance. And it doesn’t stand in a corner and shake its finger at people dying of cancer.

What frame would you choose for what happened to my friends? Author and professor Gary Harbaugh proposes that we discard any framework that encircles the idea of disaster as an “act of God.” Instead, he invites us to realize that we have an active God (*Act of God/Active God*, Augsburg Fortress, 2001). The active God framework holds us together through not only disasters and discouragement, but beautiful moments and surprising joy. Resurrection—both Jesus’ and ours—is real. When walls and blankets burn, God’s

love enfolds us, and strangers and friends show up to keep us warm and safe.

So how can *we* be love to those experiencing disaster—those who are sunk in deep pits of poverty, little ones separated from their parents at a border, the hundreds rocking in decaying boats on rough seas as they seek freedom, those wracked by addictions, the victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and those cursed by an “ism” that is hung around their necks? We are called to be Jesus’ heart, hands and feet to them now, not later.

How do we do God’s work? First, read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Then refuse

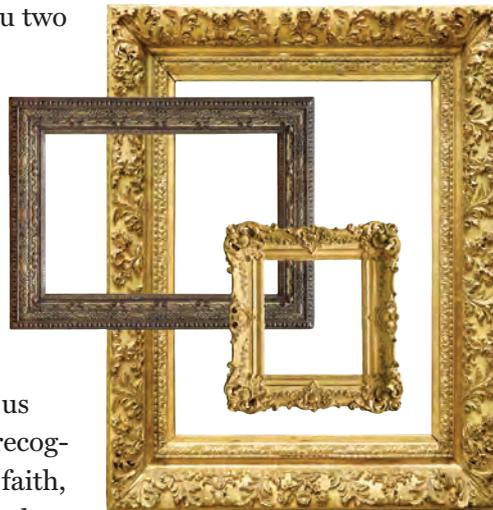
to let fear and doubt keep you locked up in your safe, secure frame of comfort. Get out. Get busy. Be love. Just love.

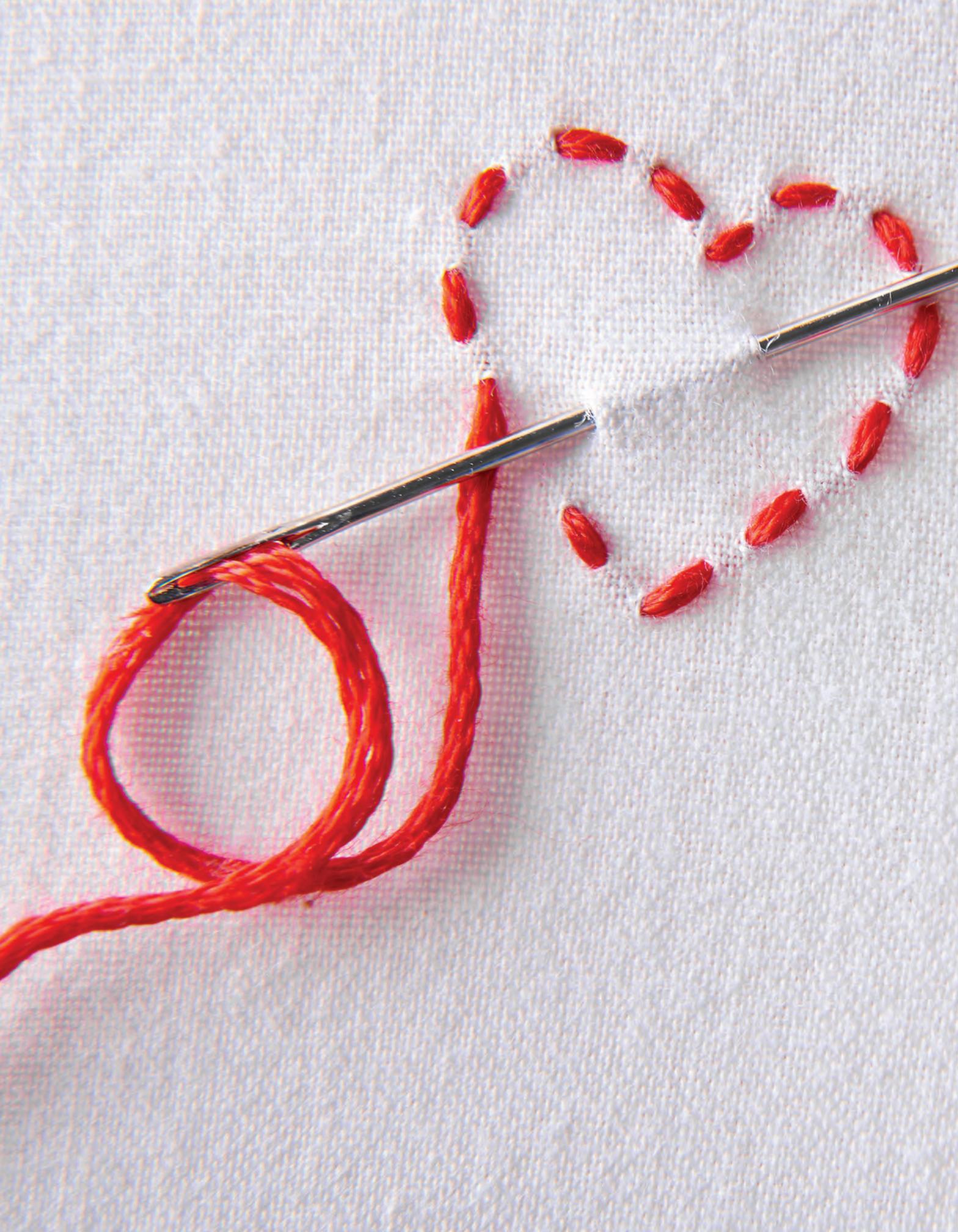
The fire didn’t change the frame around Kevin and Abby’s lives. If the frame were tangible, it might be made of the wood from a well-used church pew, adorned with flowers, hearts and rainbows painted by Abby.

Inside the frame are books about God, the universe, and other things, as well as tissue paper flowers made by the preschoolers whom Matt

teaches. Their frame also holds gauze, anti-bacterial ointment and a stethoscope for Abby’s community nursing. Their frame includes sheets of music for guitar, song, dance and prayer; and the faces of the folks who surround them.

Other things can’t be contained by a frame: a hammer for rebuilding, a quilt made by a friend, the welcoming scent of warm apple pie, bubbles of gratitude, and hands reaching out to help others. So what is the background for all that is in this beautiful frame? The warm colors of God’s love, mercy, hope and resurrection. 🌿







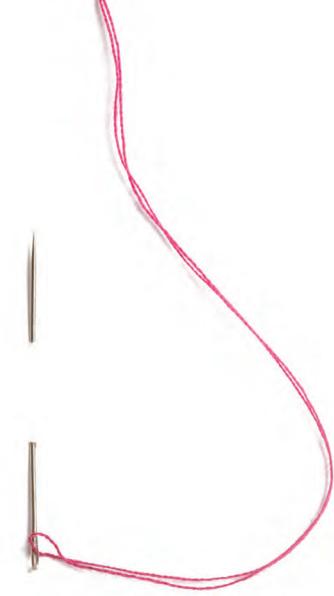
SEWING LESSON

We learn to love, stitch by stitch.

BY ANNIKA JOHNSON

I SAT ON MY BED, a sewing needle between my teeth. Either rainwater or sweat dripped down my face onto my army-green dress: the one I wore at least three times a week because it was my most versatile article of clothing, the one I scrubbed extra hard, the one that was no longer whole. It had been worn, dirtied, sweated through, scrubbed, torn and soaked in the Indian Ocean. I'd used it to wipe my hands after gutting fish, to brush dirt from my little host sister's face, to collect shells and crabs at the beach, to teach in, to pray in, to live in. Now there was a gaping hole in its backside. I sat, threading the needle in quickly fading daylight.

Small, wormy, winged insects entered my room through the open windows, but the power was out again, so I needed the sun. I also needed the dress, since most of my clothes still hung out on the clothesline, limp with rainwater from the last three days of downpour. Flipping the fabric inside out, I began a clumsy whipstitch. It wasn't pretty. But it would hold my favorite dress together.



As I pulled the thread through the worn cloth, I noticed a little tag sewn into a seam: Machine wash cold with like colors, gentle cycle. Tumble dry low, remove promptly. Cool iron if needed. Suddenly I was transported back to a world with not only washers and dryers, but gentle wash cycles, low settings on tumble dryers and cool irons. Whole machines that cost hundreds of dollars, specially designed to add flowery scents to clothes we barely use before they're discarded and end up on the shores of countries like Madagascar, where until last summer I served as an ELCA Young Adult in Global Mission. This happens a lot now, this jarring mental collision of my two worlds: one with its many houses full of appliances and one where the dishwashers are buckets, the microwaves are charcoal fires, and the washing machines are rivers. Things like dress tags pull both worlds together in moments of blinding transparency, making me feel—uncomfortable? That's

not exactly the right word. It's more that I'm reminded that these two worlds are not actually two worlds, but places on the same blue planet whirling through space, tied together by all our actions, for better or for worse.

BEYOND CONCEPTS

I spent a lot of time before that year thinking about global challenges. I went from a conservative high schooler to a Christian feminist. I often thought about the word "fair," particularly around issues of wealth and poverty and the world's resources. Why in the world (the same world, mind you) would we not do more to help people living in such extremes?

It's all well and good to discuss in a classroom or lecture hall the issues of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, extreme power and extreme oppression, extreme excess and extreme insecurity (and yes, it is good to be informed about domestic and global realities), but to be perfectly honest, before I served with ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission, these concepts were just that: concepts.

The concept of poverty.

The concept of privilege.

The concepts of oppression and sexism and racism.

The concepts of all the other -isms that sparked heated discussions in my college religion and philosophy classes, but otherwise were things that I didn't really

have to think much about. My friends and I didn't have to, with our white skin and veneer of liberal ideologies.

Something changes when you live side by side with people who are up to their eyeballs in things that have never been merely conceptual. You learn what it means to sit together on skillfully-woven homemade mats, to eat together and to often carry their 2-year-old daughter around on your back. This little girl, once too shy to approach you, becomes one of your favorite humans in the world because she is still learning how to speak Malagasy too! You begin to see things differently after singing Hallelujah! while shoulder-to-shoulder with other believers on Sundays—and Mondays through Saturdays too. Even prayer means something different, once you're immersed in the prayers and needs of others.

It was good to know all my neighbors' names, even those of the children. They lived just across the rice field from me. I noticed when people stopped calling me *vahaza* (foreigner) and started calling me *namako* and *zandry* (my friend and little sister). I began to understand, more than before, what it means to be welcomed into and become part of a community. I learned the dances to the choir songs, multiple ways to comment on the hot weather, and how to grab my bucket and join a procession

of women and children balancing cargo atop their heads, even though I still had trouble not using my hands to support that precious, precarious load on an uneven road.

My host family taught me how to prepare food with a pot over a charcoal fire. At night, I'd join my host sister and grab a knife and a still un-gutted fish.

Things felt different and my perspective widened as I grew to know and love the people I lived among—people my textbooks had simply called “poor” and “citizens of the third world,” reducing identity to ideas of relative socio-economic status and power.

THE HOLE IN MY HEART

I learned from my host family and friends that the hard things still exist—hunger and malnutrition, river blindness and diseases that eat your toes and fingers. But what also exists are all the ways people live and love each other, serving their neighbors in authentic, tangible ways. It's not that people are living these saintly, other-worldly lives, but rather that people know how to love and serve each other without calling themselves good people. This is simply what it means to be people and to see life as an ordinary miracle.

My relationships in Farafangana came about, for the most part, by sitting with, and listening to my neighbors. During my year of service, I got to know so many people from different walks of life: musicians,

doctors, teachers, pastors, basket weavers, singers, dancers, composers, cooks, fishermen, car repairmen, rice growers, pus-pus drivers and bakers. I wish folks back home, when they think of this world with no gentle wash cycle, could instead see the people who populate it. Today my heart remains buried beneath the red mud and palm trees of southeast Madagascar. I left one home to find life and love in a new one. For the rest of my life I will have competing thoughts about where home is.

I was never an angry person by nature. My anger hardly ever makes it past my throat before it's caught and swallowed down again. But last year it sat there in my stomach, just south of my heart. I was suddenly angry that people would pledge money to help rebuild an old French cathedral, in a world where sometimes my students didn't have enough to eat. I was angry because my college education cost more money than any of my friends in Madagascar will probably make in a lifetime. I was angry when, by watching and listening to my friends, I saw how gender, blindness or the shade of one's skin often plays a role in how a person is treated. I was angry about classism everywhere, brought home by seeing a friend in Madagascar, the same age as my sister, treated like a lower class of human being just because she was a house servant. I was (and still am) mad about all of it.

CLOSING THE DISTANCE

That day, as I sat and added the last few stitches to my work, I realized how much my heart resembled that torn piece of cloth. I wished I could find a way to sew up the hole in my heart, too. That hole keeps growing with every new understanding of the ways of the world, widened by ambiguity and learning what's important and what's not. This hole represents what it feels like to love and serve others. It's not something that can be fixed with a needle and thread, with an answered question or with anybody's attempt at finding a justification for the lack of fairness.

But my heart-hole also reminds me that each of us have a personal stake in the systems or ways of the world, both good and bad. Most of the world doesn't have a gentle wash cycle for any aspect of this life. Because of Madagascar, my heart feels scrubbed, stretched and worn through.

While I can't close the chasm of systemic injustice by myself, I can close other distances. I can go to choir rehearsal. I can gut fish and carry water. I can learn a language. I can love by listening, learning, working, singing and praying alongside friends, family and people from all walks of life. I can't reverse all the oppressive, systemic sin in this world, but with God's help, I will build a bridge of green thread. Maybe you will too. We can pull our worlds, stitch by clumsy stitch, closer together. 🌸



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Seeds of support

BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFSKY

HAVE YOU EVER STOPPED TO CONTEMPLATE how we, as Women of the ELCA's purpose statement encourages, "support one another in our callings"? I regularly get that opportunity. Here's one such experience.

Some of you will remember Irene Lee, of Brimfield, Massachusetts, who served on the churchwide executive board from 1996-2002. Before that, she was president of the New England Synodical Women's Organization. Irene graduated from seminary in 1969. When the first Lutheran woman was ordained in November 1970, Irene was pregnant and ultimately did not seek ordination. Instead, as her daughter, Sarah Lee-Faulkner says, "She lived out her calling by teaching, leading and encouraging those around her." Sarah is an ELCA pastor currently serving Holy Trinity Lutheran in Irwin, Pennsylvania.

"When I was in high school, my mom attended a WELCA event about spiritual gifts," Sarah relates. "She had our whole family take assessments when she got home. From that time on, she wanted others to know the joy of serving with their spiritual gifts. She always encouraged me, but it is amazing to hear how she also encouraged others."

While Irene was on the board of the New England Synodical Women's Organization, she traveled from her Massachusetts home to Augusta, Maine, for a meeting of the congregational unit at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. Elizabeth ("Liz") Burgess, then an active member of that congregational unit, recalls being impressed that Irene made what was at least a four-hour trek each way to attend the meeting. Such was Irene's dedication to her faith and the organization.

During that meeting, Irene met Liz and saw in her something that Liz had not yet discovered in herself. Irene told Liz: "You are a leader."

This was just one of many faith seeds Irene planted. Fifteen years ago, Irene died of pancreatic cancer, but her legacy has lived on.

The leadership seed planted in Liz Burgess has borne much fruit. Liz went on to become active in her synodical unit, serving both as treasurer and president. She currently serves on the churchwide executive board. During the years leading up to the adoption of the ELCA social statement, *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action*, Liz was one of several Women of the ELCA participants who were process builders in their synods, promoting the social statement's development. In 2019 Liz participated in a Lutheran World Federation study event for Lutheran lay leaders, and now she's enrolled in the New England School of Lay Ministry.

At last summer's ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I was able to introduce Sarah and Liz. Though the two had never met, tears flowed as they shared their stories of Irene's influence in their lives. As Sarah says, "It is always a blessing to meet someone who knew my mom, and it was even more emotional with Liz, hearing about the influence my mom had on her life—especially her involvement in WELCA."

This March, as we celebrate Women's History Month, consider: Who in the history of your life has supported your calling? Whose calling have you supported? Celebrate that support by offering up a Thankoffering for those who have encouraged you and for the opportunities you have to encourage others. 🌱



Transcending our hesitance

BY CATHERINE MALOTKY

I CAN GET DISTRACTED, GOD, from your command to love my neighbor.

All kinds of questions intervene.

Like the lawyer in Luke 10, I can spend a good amount of time wondering who my neighbor is. I can't love the whole world. My resources—my time, energy, compassion and money—are limited. So if I'm going to distribute scarce resources, I need to decide where, or to whom. Doesn't that seem right?

I can wonder if this is the right time. Mordecai and Esther faced a clear crisis, with a date and time established, doom determined. I seem to live in a time of slow-moving disasters, like climate change. They say we have about a decade before we pass a point of no return and an escalation of change that will move us into unknown territory. We've known about this for decades, but now the timeline is surprisingly short before we leave an unknown mess to our children. (Maybe this isn't such a slow thing after all.)

I can wonder if I'm the right person. I don't have familial or professional connections to powerful people. I don't have the capacity to make transformational gifts. I don't have a big, public outlet for my persuasive forces, and I have an awful lot of white hair. Who would listen to me? I can empathize with Moses' resistance to being called (Exodus 4:10, 13). What difference can I make?

These questions seem so important, yet, might it be that you are the one who needs to answer these questions? Jesus told the story of the Samaritan, who reached beyond the cultural commands and constraints of the day to help an injured Jew. Jesus chose this story, these characters, in the midst of known, complex, cultural

rules. The Samaritan helped. The person and situation were surprising, but to help was the calling. You call me to the same.

Perhaps I need to spend more time listening than asking. *You* point me to the neighbor. *You* help me feel the poignancy of the need. *You* call me beyond my doubts and risk-aversion, and *you* call to me: Bring yourself, your own creative, compassionate, called self to the work of loving neighbors. You don't have to be everything, just be yourself. You don't have to work miracles, just love. You don't have to solve everything, just work on something.

*You call me beyond
my doubts and
risk-aversion...*

What might this mean for our lives, dear God? Can we trust your provision, that we will have what is needed? Can we trust your compassion, that any and all are our neighbors, worthy of your love as much as we are? Can we trust your power in us, that we can actually make a difference?

God, I am humbled by your confidence in me. You have created and redeemed me. You sustain me. In spite of the evidence all around me of your generous provision, I am still wary of upsetting others, tiring myself and getting into situations that I don't understand. Inspire me, God. Help me transcend my hesitance to answer your call to be of help, to respond with compassion to the needs of neighbors all around me. Now is always the time, for someone in need. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

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