

OPENING HYMN

“God, We’ve Known Such Grief and Anger” by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (see Leader guide, p. 27)

THEME VERSES

John 11:1-6, 17-36

OPENING PRAYER

Holy One, we thank you that you are a God of love and a God of justice. In this time together open our hearts, minds and spirits to the wisdom of your word, that we might receive new insight for our lives and a new way forward in times of conflict and challenge. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Copies of opening hymn

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.

Just love

Session one

In the family: What’s love got to do with it?

BY CHRISTA COMPTON AND GLADYS MOORE

INTRODUCTION (3 minutes)

Theologian and public intellectual Dr. Cornel West once said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” Christians often imagine that if we had enough love, we would be able to solve the world’s problems. But love by itself has been insufficient in eradicating the many forms of injustice that keep our world from being what God wants it to be.

We hear a lot about justice in Scripture. The prophets are vigilant in reminding us about God’s vision for a just world, one in which we welcome the stranger and feed the hungry and make sure no one suffers from poverty, war or violence. Amos chastises God’s people for pushing aside the needy (5:12) and gives us a breathtaking image of God’s justice: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). Micah tells us exactly what God expects of us: “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8).

How do justice and love shape each other? It’s not a simple question. Justice born out of love is more than a detached sense of morality or an objective pursuit of what is right. It is visceral and personal. Over the next three sessions we will look closely at three stories that embody God’s love for humanity and God’s longing for justice in the flesh.

Session 1 begins close to home. For better or worse, most of us first learn about “just love” in our families. This session will explore what happens when a loved one has disappointed us. How do we hold each other accountable for loving in just ways within family systems?

In future sessions we'll expand our scope. Session 2 will consider just love at the level of the community. Using the story of Zacchaeus, we'll examine what happens when people who have harmed the community turn in a new direction. Are we able to embody just love in response to that transformation, or do we cling to old resentments and recriminations? Session 3 lifts up the story of midwives Shiphrah and Puah in the Book of Exodus and grapples with just love at the level of our nation or world. What risks does just love require of us, and what do we do when our understanding of justice differs from the demands of those in power?

Taken together, these sessions flesh out a deeply relational vision of just love, toward the flourishing of all people—in our families, in our communities and in our world. As we grapple with God's Word we look to Jesus, the One who became flesh and lived among us, to show us what just love truly is. The cross is the deepest expression of just love—a love that would rather die than retaliate, a love that is powerful enough to defeat death itself.

SECTION 1: EXPECTATIONS (12 minutes)

Being part of a family brings expectations. Parents, for example, expect children to do their best in school and help with household chores. Children expect their parents to provide food, clothing and often entertainment. Family values can be expectations: "Our family looks out for each other" or "In this family we tell the truth." Some expectations we welcome; others we may find to be a burden.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. What are some of the expectations of a family to which you belong—the family in which you grew up, the family to which you belong now, or a family you have chosen along the way?

2. How are those expectations communicated?
3. What happens when people fall short of those expectations?

Our biblical text for this session is a familiar one, focusing on the events that lead up to Jesus' raising of Lazarus in John 11. Here we encounter a family in crisis. Lazarus is seriously ill, and his sisters Mary and Martha are desperately looking for a way to help him. So they send for their friend Jesus.

Read: John 11:1-6

We can see in this passage how close Jesus is to this family. Much of what we remember about Mary and Martha comes from Luke's Gospel (Luke 10). Many of us have struggled to reconcile the tension between Martha's busy hospitality and Mary's quiet stillness. Even as we flinch when Jesus chastises Martha for being distracted by many things, we recognize that it requires a certain closeness to speak in that way to another person. Here in John's account we are reminded that Mary has anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair, an act that reflects the tenderness and intimacy they share. The sisters refer to Lazarus as the one whom Jesus loves. There is clearly a history here, a history born of love.

Put yourself in the position of Martha and Mary. They expect some kind of response from Jesus. Their message isn't the kind you send every day. Surely Jesus will come when he realizes how desperate the situation is and how worried they are. As the sisters take turns tending to their dying brother, perhaps they also take turns standing at the window, gazing into the distance as they wait for Jesus to show up. They wait, and then they wait some more.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. What expectations might Mary and Martha have for Jesus in this situation?
5. What do you think motivates Jesus' delay?
6. As one day and then another unfolds without Jesus showing up, what do you imagine Martha and Mary say?

SECTION 2: IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE... (15 minutes)

📖 **Read:** John 11:17-27

Share aloud or reflect:

7. Martha does not wait for Jesus to arrive at the house. What do you think is going through Martha's mind as she goes out to meet Jesus on the road?
8. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." How do you imagine Martha saying those words to Jesus? What is the tone and volume of her voice? What does her face look like? What is the posture of her body?

Some families lean in to confrontation; others are conflict-averse, pretending everything is fine even when it isn't. Whatever Martha might be feeling in this moment, it's hard not to imagine her words in a spirit of confrontation, even anger: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Martha knows that her relationship with Jesus is strong enough to withstand her criticism. Her challenging statement ("If you had been here...") is a faithful one. She believes in what Jesus is able to do in the most dire circumstances. She communicates her frustration that he hasn't yet done anything more than delay his arrival. And she doesn't

leave it there. "But even now..." she adds, revealing that even now, even in the face of death, she believes Jesus can intercede on behalf of her family. She trusts that Jesus can bring hope in the midst of despair.

Note that Martha is the one who confesses: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah." However much she might be stewing in her frustration and disappointment, she remains steadfast in her proclamation. Anger does not negate her faith. Martha invites us to consider that it is possible to be at once angry at God and to trust in God. It is in the relationships of deepest trust that we are sometimes able to express anger in safe and productive ways.

Of course we don't always express anger directly. We often swallow it, turning it inward, which can eventually become despair or depression. We let resentments fester over time until they burst forth in unexpected ways. We are sometimes afraid to speak from a place of anger because we fear rupturing a relationship, even though we know that relationships can be strengthened when people trust each other enough to share what they are feeling and to hear what others are feeling in return.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. How are you with conflict or confrontation? What has shaped your approach?
10. Can you imagine confronting Jesus in the way that Martha does?
11. Have you ever been angry at God? How did you express that anger—or did you?

SECTION 3: COME AND SEE (15 minutes)

📖 **Read:** John 11:28-37

Here we find Mary surrounded by a community that has gathered to console her. Their presence might

very well be a comfort, but it does not take away her grief. Mary's response to the death of her brother is a tearful one. Her companions follow her, thinking that she is headed out to the tomb to cry some more. Instead she, like her sister before her, goes out to confront Jesus. She does so with tears running down her face, but she uses the same forthright words that Martha has already offered: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary's tears are surely tears of sorrow. She is feeling that grief in its most raw and disorienting form. But what else might her tears reveal? Perhaps they indicate her disappointment in Jesus. Perhaps she is angry at his inexplicable delay. He had not been there when she and Martha needed him the most. What was just or loving about that? Why shouldn't she be angry?

Notice how Mary's tears are contagious. They lead the people around her to weep. They cause Jesus to weep too. Her vulnerability and her open expression of her grief invite others to join her in expressing anguish. We hear that Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."

In the end Mary's tears are both a catharsis and a catalyst. They provide a release for the depth of what she is feeling, but they also seem to provoke Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead. Mary and Martha demand a just and loving response from Jesus, and Jesus in turn brings life out of death.

Notice that Jesus does not turn away from Mary's feelings. His own response is one of deep empathy—understanding not only what she feels, but entering into it, as evidenced by his tears. That kind of empathy is foundational to the pursuit of just love. We cannot begin the process of healing without first understanding the situation from the perspective of someone we feel has wronged us. Let's be clear: Such empathy does not mean that we seek to justify or excuse abusive behavior. Sometimes we have to set clear boundaries for our own safety and the safety of people in our care, including children. But in Jesus' interactions with

Mary and Martha, we see that he meets us in our suffering. Jesus receives whatever we are feeling. He walks with us as we find a way forward and seek outcomes that are both just and loving.

Share aloud or reflect:

12. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." How do you imagine Mary saying those words to Jesus? What is the tone and volume of her voice? What does her face look like? What is the posture of her body? In what way, if any, do you imagine her delivery of the line to be different from Martha's?
13. What causes you to cry? Do you ever cry when you're angry? How do others respond when you do?
14. What situations can you recall in which one person's anger or anguish brought people together and/or led to a more just, more loving outcome?
15. Think of a person with whom you have been in conflict. To what extent can you empathize with that person? What kind of pain might they be carrying that has caused them to behave in hurtful ways?

Before we can pursue just love in any situation, we must first be able to understand how people are hurt or suffering. Sometimes it's hardest to grasp the suffering of those who are closest to us. But for just love to unfold in any situation, we must first weep with those who weep. We must have empathy for those who suffer from injustice. Richard Rohr has written: "I think your heart needs to be broken, and broken open, at least once to have a heart at all or to have a heart for others" (*Wounded in Spirit*:

Advent Art and Meditations by David Bannon, p. 25; quoting from Rohr's *Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*). While we wish there were a different path to such empathy, it is true that our own grief and anger can often help us access the grief and anger of others.

Share aloud or reflect:

16. What injustices in your family, close circle of friends, or community disturb your spirit and greatly move you? What about those injustices might lead you to weep?
17. How might you respond to those injustices with a spirit of just love? Who might need to hear your anger and frustration? How could you communicate those feelings?

SECTION 4: RIGHTEOUS ANGER (15 minutes)

In 1981, writer and activist Audre Lorde delivered a powerful address at the National Women's Studies Association conference. Her keynote, titled "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," lays bare her anger at what women of color have experienced and challenges white women to be stronger allies in the fight against racism (blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1981-audre-lorde-uses-anger-women-responding-racism/). Lorde also acknowledges that women's anger is judged differently than men's anger. Women are often made to feel that our anger is inappropriate, should make us feel guilty and should be held back.

In the pursuit of justice, Lorde reminds us, we cannot be afraid of anger. It is a necessary part of the honest communication that will help us see what needs to be done and find a way forward together. She says, "Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the

use of anger. This discussion must be direct and creative because it is crucial. We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty." Lorde goes on to remind us that anger can be transformative: "The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth."

More recently Rebecca Traister's 2019 book, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, traces the role of anger in many social movements that have sought more just and loving outcomes for women, including the right to vote and the right to a life free of sexual harassment and assault. She also examines how society condemns and attempts to restrict women's anger. In the book's introduction Traister writes:

We must come to recognize—those of us who feel anger, who have in our lives taken pains to disguise it, who worry about its ill effects, who rear back from it and try to tamp it down in ourselves for fear that letting it out will hurt our goals—that anger is often an exuberant expression. It is the force that injects energy, intensity, and urgency into battles that must be intense and urgent if they are to be won. More broadly, we must come to recognize our own rage as valid, as rational, and not as what we're told it is: ugly, hysterical, marginal, laughable (*Good and Mad*, pp. xxvii-xxviii).

Most of us have not considered anger as "an exuberant expression," nor are we always comfortable with the idea of going into battle. But as we will explore in the next two study sessions, just love sometimes demands taking risks to make our communities stronger and safer for all people, including the most vulnerable among us.

Think back to Mary and Martha. We don't know enough to determine whether their willingness to confront Jesus was typical for them or a departure from their usual behavior. What we do know is that they loved their brother, and they loved Jesus, and from that place of love, they did what they had to do to find justice.

Share aloud or reflect:

18. How might Mary and Martha respond to these ideas about the power of women's anger?
19. What gender stereotypes and expectations have you observed that we attach to anger?
20. How do you see the role of righteous anger in the pursuit of just love? To what extent do Lorde's and Traister's assertions support, challenge or unsettle your understanding of anger?
21. What situations of injustice make you mad? Within systems of oppression, who do you see as most misunderstood or marginalized?

SECTION 5: CRYING OUT TO GOD

(Optional, 20 minutes)

On your own, or with one or two others, try writing your own psalm of lament to demand God's attention to a situation in need of just love. Use your psalm(s) of lament as a closing prayer.

1. Decide what name you will use for God. Address the psalm to God using that name. For example: *O God...Lord... Creator God... Our refuge and strength...* or another name.

2. Identify an *injustice* that has affected people in your families, schools, communities, country or world.

Use vivid details and descriptions.

- *You have made us the taunt of our neighbors...a laughingstock among the peoples.* (Psalm 44)
- *The nations...have defiled your holy temple...[and] have laid Jerusalem in ruins.* (Psalm 79)

3. Add the *lament*: Tell God how you feel about this injustice. Be honest about your emotions—anger, sadness, despair, etc.

- *Why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?* (Psalm 74)

4. Add a *plea* for help: How do you want God to respond? Suggest what could be done to improve the situation.

- *Give victory with your right hand, and answer us, so that those whom you love may be rescued...Grant us help against the foe, for human help is worthless* (Psalm 60)
- *Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.* (Psalm 44)

5. Conclude by *thanking or praising* God for hearing you and being present in this situation.

- *We, your people, the flock of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.* (Psalm 79)

CONCLUSION (10 MINUTES)

Just love thrives when it is built on foundations of faith, courage and community. Just love in the

context of our families and closest relationships often demands an extra dose of courage, especially when someone has left us feeling betrayed or angry.

Consider Phyllis and Marty. Early in their marriage, Phyllis discovered Marty's alcoholism. His behavior grew increasingly erratic when he had been drinking, and as things got worse, he became verbally abusive. Phyllis reached a point where she had to confront Marty about the consequences of his drinking. She made it clear that she loved him, and she also made it clear that they could not continue to live together unless he committed to a recovery process. Marty found a local 12-step group. Though it took time and involved several relapses, he eventually was able to maintain his sobriety. Meanwhile Phyllis joined an Al-Anon group and found mutual support among others whose loved ones were struggling with addiction.

The story of Phyllis and Marty is one of just love. Because of her love for Marty, Phyllis held him accountable for pursuing recovery. Because of his love for Phyllis, Marty used the resources available to him to get sober. Many stories of family conflict do not have such a happy outcome. Sometimes they remain unresolved and cause ongoing pain to those enmeshed in the struggle. In those situations, faith can be an especially vital source of hope.

As we've seen in the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus knew what it was like to be challenged by his closest friends. He also knew what it was like to be betrayed by his closest friends. Despite the agony of betrayal, he refused to distance himself from those whom he loved. This is ultimately what the cross is about: arms outstretched on a tree, our sins nailed forever into Christ's flesh in order to forgive and save us; and arms holding us in love, embracing the whole world with God's justice. For us, justice would have meant revenge. For Christ, just love means empathy, compassion and hope for our reconciliation with God and with each other. Our human relationships don't always reflect the just

love Jesus offers, but our faith compels us to keep pursuing it when possible.

What will you carry with you from this time of Bible study and reflection? Share those reflections with each other. If time permits, pair participants up and have partners share with each other one tangible step that they hope to take in support of just love within their families or other circles of close relationships. Promise to pray for each other as you take those steps and to check in with each other later to see how it's going.

Remember that you are never alone as you seek to make your corner of the world reflect God's vision of just love. God is with you always. 🌿



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OPENING HYMN

“God, We’ve Known Such Grief and Anger” by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (carolynshymns.com/god_weve_known_such_grief_and_anger.html)

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- Explore the close relationships among Jesus, Mary and Martha, and the ways strong emotions like anger shape those relationships
- Reflect on the role of anger within family systems
- Discuss the implications of women’s righteous anger as an aspect of just love

MATERIALS

- White board/flip chart and markers
- Laptop and/or projector for viewing movie clips

Just love

Session one

In the family: What’s love got to do with it?

BY CHRISTA COMPTON AND GLADYS MOORE

OVERVIEW

This three-session Bible study invites readers to consider how justice and love intersect. What does “*just* love” look like? How is it more than a sentimental or sanitized emotion? How is it love-in-action that dismantles the various systems of sin that damage God’s creation and harm God’s people?

PREPARE

It is often said that the gospel afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. We Lutherans like to call this the law/gospel dynamic. The aim of this Bible study is to proclaim the gospel—God’s unconditional love for the human family and all that God has created. Nevertheless, it might be hard to “hear” the gospel if one is feeling uncomfortable.

While leaning into discomfort is generally a helpful catalyst for growth, it may also lead to some anxiety. Try to create an atmosphere where participants feel safe enough to share their thoughts. Help your group come up with simple discussion guidelines, such as:

1. Be authentic by using “I” statements. Speak from your own perspective. (Use statements like “I feel...” or “I think...” when expressing your own opinion rather than assuming an opinion is shared with the whole group).
2. Listen and let others finish before you speak.
3. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
4. Honor silence.

5. Respect the confidentiality of what people share in the group.

For more ideas, the Center for Courage and Renewal (developed by Parker Palmer) has a list of helpful “touchstones” (couragerenewal.org/touchstones).

Each session in this series can also be used as a stand-alone session, if necessary. Leaders will find it helpful to review each session ahead of time and think about their own responses to discussion questions.

As a leader, also consider: In a world in which “justice” is most often seen through a legal lens, and “love” is most often seen as romantic, how do we as Christians understand the connections between justice and love? How do justice and love shape each other? Pray for clarity and an open heart as your group ponders these topics.

OPENING

Have participants introduce themselves. Together go over the discussion guidelines (described above). Help to build the level of trust between group members, encouraging appropriate vulnerability as people share their experiences and insights.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES:

1. What is “just love”?

As a warm-up activity, write the phrase “Just love” on a whiteboard or flip chart. Have participants brainstorm their associations with this phrase.

2. Screen time

Consider showing your group selected film or TV scenes of family conflict or emailing links to film excerpts for group members to watch before the day of your Bible study. If your Bible study must take place via a phone conference call or video conference call (via Skype or Zoom, for example), the scenes can be described for any who could not see the film/TV clip. For example, the cemetery

scene in the 1989 movie *Steel Magnolias* shows Sally Fields’ character expressing many difficult emotions, including anger, in the aftermath of her daughter’s death. It also reveals a community of women coming together to support their friend amid her anger and grief. This scene offers another way to think about the power of love in the face of a deeply unjust situation.

The television drama *This Is Us* also negotiates the emotional terrain of just love within family systems. Season 1, Episode 15 (“Jack Pearson’s Son”) showcases a Valentine’s Day fight between Jack and Rebecca, in which they try to make sense of what’s behind their anger toward one another and to communicate what they both value. Regular viewers will know that these two characters love and support each other; their marriage is strong.

Search *YouTube* for “Steel Magnolias cemetery scene” and/or “This Is Us Valentine’s Day fight.” Consider the emotions in each scene. What family dynamics do you see? Do they remind you of anything from your own life? How are love and justice expressed or shared?

3. Role play

After reading the biblical story of Mary and Martha in Session 1, assign participants the roles of Mary, Martha, Jesus and Lazarus. If you can’t meet in person, but must meet by phone or video conference call, turns playing the roles. Say: Imagine a dinner is held right after Lazarus returns to life. What do you imagine Jesus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus might have felt and said to each other? 🌿

OPENING HYMN

Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling
(ELW 608)

FOCUS VERSES (LUKE 19:8-10)

⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

EDITOR'S 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.

Just love

Session two

In the community: From tree to we

BY CHRISTA COMPTON AND GLADYS MOORE

Session 2 views the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) through the lens of restorative justice. We will examine what it means to make amends for the harm we have caused and consider how Jesus invites us to reconnect to the communities from which we have been alienated.

INTRODUCTION (6 minutes)

In Session 1, our theme of “just love” was examined from a familial perspective. Our ability to express or suppress feelings, particularly more difficult ones such as anger, is often learned within the home. Martha and Mary both shared their feelings of disappointment and perhaps even anger with Jesus regarding his response to their brother Lazarus’ sickness and subsequent death. As a result, something shifted for them all. Just love—the kind of love that both speaks and listens to truth—led to resurrected life for Lazarus and for the relationships among Mary, Martha and Jesus.

In today’s session we’ll reflect on the story of Zacchaeus and how “just love” enables this alienated outsider to repent—to turn in a new direction based on honesty and care for the community he has harmed. Will the community be able to respond to Zacchaeus’ transformation in kind, or will their anger and accusations prevent them from creating new relationships?

For some, the story of Zacchaeus evokes fond memories of Sunday school, where young disciples

sang about “a wee little man” who climbed into a sycamore tree, “for the Lord he wanted to see.” For others, the name Zacchaeus is completely unfamiliar. Nevertheless, he is the main character in our Bible study, and what a wonderful character he is! Zacchaeus recognizes his sinfulness, repents of the harm he has caused, and is restored to the community of the faithful by Jesus.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. When in your life have you longed to experience the presence of Jesus? What was going on in your life at the time?
2. What for you is riskiest or hardest about following Jesus?

TRYING TO SEE JESUS (12 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Luke 19:1-4

¹He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

Early on in the story we learn two important things about Zacchaeus: He was a tax collector and he was rich. Tax collectors are referred to several times in Luke’s Gospel and are typical examples of the types of sinners with whom Jesus associated. Jesus was mocked as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34).

But Zacchaeus was not simply a tax collector; he was a “chief tax collector.” These men had been contracted by Roman officials to collect the prescribed taxes and customs fees in their designated

geographic regions, and they had to pay the contracts in advance. They, in turn, would hire others to collect the taxes, expecting a profit from what had been received. This system was often abused. Assumed to be dishonest, Jewish people who collected taxes for the Romans were despised by their Jewish kinfolk for being complicit with their Roman oppressors.

If lower-level tax collectors were disliked by their Jewish peers, imagine how much more animosity would be directed toward someone like Zacchaeus. After all, he had cheated his own people and acted unjustly within his community. For him to get rich off the backs of those who were impoverished was an affront to them and to God. In other words, the way Zacchaeus performed his profession was the antithesis of just love.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. The text says that Zacchaeus was “trying to see who Jesus was.” Does Zacchaeus want to catch a glimpse of Jesus or is he seeking something more?
4. For someone of Zacchaeus’ status, climbing a tree was probably humiliating. To what lengths would you be willing to go to have an encounter with Jesus?
5. The crowd was an obstacle, keeping Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus. Have obstacles in your life ever prevented you from seeing Jesus? If so, what were they?

WHO’S SEEING WHOM? (10 MINUTES)

📖 **Read (silently):** Luke 19:5-6

⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down;

for I must stay at your house today.”⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

What is not mentioned in our text is that Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem, where his fate of crucifixion awaits him. On the way, he passes through Jericho. Perhaps he intends to spend the night there, but given the urgency of his mission, it's likely that he planned to keep going. That is, until he spots Zacchaeus in the tree.

Zacchaeus could have tried to shove his way through the crowd in order to see Jesus. Instead he climbed a sycamore tree. Clearly he was so eager to see Jesus that he was willing to literally go out on a limb. As Zacchaeus looks down, hoping to see Jesus, Jesus is also looking up, trying to see Zacchaeus.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. Why do you think Jesus was looking for Zacchaeus? How might he have known Zacchaeus' name?
7. How might Zacchaeus have felt about being seen and known by Jesus?
8. In what ways is Jesus' recognition of Zacchaeus an example of just love?

GOING TO THE HOME OF A SINNER (15 minutes)

Ask for a volunteer to introduce the crowd's response. Ask everyone else to speak the crowd's part.

 **Read:** Luke 19:7

⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

In *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Multnomah Books, 1990), author Brennan Manning tells the story of a

man whose public sin had caused him to be excommunicated from his church. Repenting and wanting to be restored to right relationships, he told God: “They won't let me in, Lord, because I am a sinner.” The Lord responded, “What are you complaining about? ...They won't let Me in either.”

It's hard for those who think the church is for perfect people to accept the reality: The church is a sanctuary for sinners, not a haven for those who consider themselves to be wholly holy.

Sometimes in our relationships, when a friend or family member has offended us or upset our sense of what is fair or right, our response to them might be similar to that of the grumbling crowd in our text. The breach is amplified when it happens within a family, and even more so within an entire community. For example, a congregational treasurer who embezzles money from the church's offerings harms not only himself or herself, but the entire congregation. Members feel confused, betrayed, hurt and angry. Unless the whole congregational system is somehow addressed, the rupture will never fully heal.

“A Raisin in the Sun,” a play by Lorraine Hansberry, paints such a picture. In a brilliant soliloquy, Mama Younger speaks to her daughter, Beneatha, after Beneatha's brother, Walter, has lost the family's insurance money in a bad investment deal. Just love presents a real challenge to Beneatha.

Beneatha: *Love him? There is nothing left to love.*

Mama: *There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. ...Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done*

whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.

—*A Raisin in the Sun (Act III)*

Although Mama Younger loves both of her children, she upbraids her daughter for failing to think about all that her brother Walter has been through in his life. It wasn't any easier to be a Black man in this country in the mid-20th century than it is today. Indeed, it was even harder. Mama is urging Beneatha to consider the full story of Walter's life that led him to do what he did.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. What "hills and valleys" might Zacchaeus have gone through that led him to cheat his community?
10. In what ways is Beneatha's rejection of her brother similar to the crowd's grumbling about Zacchaeus?
11. What might just love look like in these situations?

GIVING IN? GIVING BACK? (10 minutes)

Ask for three readers (a narrator, Jesus and Zacchaeus) to read this text aloud.

📖 **Read:** Luke 19:8-10

⁸ *Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."*

⁹ *Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has*

come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Earlier (verse 6), Zacchaeus "was happy to welcome" Jesus into his home. But the joy of being seen and summoned into a new relationship was not Zacchaeus' only response to Jesus. Just love produced more than Zacchaeus could have imagined. It issued forth from him in acts of confession and repentance.

Note that Jesus has required neither faith nor repentance from Zacchaeus. Nevertheless, Jesus' love for him moves Zacchaeus to change. He not only gratefully *gives in* to Jesus' overwhelming love for him, but also acknowledges his sin and offers to make amends by *giving back* to those whom he has cheated. What's more, he offers to give away *half of his possessions* and give back *four times* as much as he has swindled from those who are poor. His remorse seems to evoke a generosity of spirit.

Share aloud or reflect:

12. How does Zacchaeus feel about the injustice he's committed? How does just love re-orient him?
13. Zacchaeus offers to restore what he's stolen and in turn gets restored by Jesus. Do you think the community will receive him? Why or why not?
14. Jesus doesn't put any conditions on Zacchaeus; he simply invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. For love to be just, should there be any demands on the one who has offended?

JUST MERCY/JUST LOVE (Optional, 20 minutes)

"Just Mercy," a film based on a memoir of the same

title, tells the stories of criminal offenders who are on death row. Some are there deservedly; others are incarcerated because they've been wrongfully convicted. Far too many of these men are either Black or Brown. They are defended by lawyer Bryan Stevenson, who sees their humanity and takes time to get to know who they really are. He listens and empathizes with them because of the way so many of them have suffered in their earlier years.

Stevenson recalls his grandmother often saying: "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close." In the *Just Mercy* memoir (Spiegel & Grau, 2015), Stevenson writes about what he has learned from defending prisoners who are on death row:

This book is about getting closer to mass incarceration and extreme punishment in America. It is about how easily we condemn people in this country and the injustice we create when we allow fear, anger, and distance to shape the way we treat the most vulnerable among us (p. 14).

Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done...The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned (pp. 17-18).

Although the stories of these men and women are radically different than Zacchaeus', all reveal the importance of getting close enough to recognize others' humanity, and the emotional cost of isolation from one's community.

Share aloud or reflect:

15. What might have led Zacchaeus to cheat his community?

16. How might Zacchaeus' profession have isolated and affected his family?

17. Do you know anyone who is or has been incarcerated? What effect has their imprisonment had on themselves and their families?

18. So often we make assumptions about criminals and other offenders without knowing their stories. How might we react if we knew their stories?

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

In the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus gets "close" to him. He sees Zacchaeus, stays at his house, and restores him to his faith community. Our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is learning how to "get close" to those within the criminal justice system.

In 2013, the ELCA adopted "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries," a social statement that affirms such essential principles of the U.S. criminal justice system as due process and the presumption of legal innocence. It also acknowledges the brokenness of our current legal system and underscores the importance of just love—of hearing the cries of both victims and perpetrators and responding with compassion. Here is an excerpt:

The ELCA is prompted to speak and to act because so many cries of suffering and despair emerge from the criminal justice system—from victims, the incarcerated, their families, communities, those wrongly convicted, they who work in the system—and have not been heard. Drawing from Holy Scripture, this church holds up a vision of God's justice that is wondrously richer and deeper than human imitations and yet is a mirror in which justice in this world,

God's world, must always be assessed (p. 3).

One of the ways our church seeks to manifest just love is through a practice known as restorative justice. The social statement describes this as well:

Restorative justice focuses on crime as an offense against human individuals and a community rather than simply as against "the state." ... Restorative approaches seek to bring together the victim, offender and other members of the community harmed by crime to develop a plan to try to repair that harm. ...These responses include victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing, circle process and community reparative boards. (p. 32-33)

Many resources are available to assist you and your congregation in learning about restorative justice and discovering ways to participate in its practice. One such resource is *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* by Howard Zehr. As a starting point, visit www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Criminal-Justice to study the ELCA social statement, "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries." Listen to the cries of those who are lost, isolated from their families and communities, and seeking the healing love of Christ. Listen and see where the Spirit leads you. Listen, as God calls you to just love.

CONCLUSION (5 minutes)

Just love enables us to be seen as we really are and loved nevertheless. It frees us to be truthful about who we are, but also opens opportunities to become who we were created to be—God's beloved children. Jesus saw Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree. Somehow, he knew Zacchaeus' heart and that he was longing to be a better person. But Jesus did more than see Zacchaeus. He visited his home, stayed with him and his family, and brought them

the gift of God's saving and healing love. Jesus restored Zacchaeus to the community of the faithful, calling him "a son of Abraham." And then Jesus made clear his mission: "to seek out and to save the lost."

In baptism, we too are called to reach out to those who are lost or alienated from the body of Christ and do our best to restore them to communities of healing and new life. Just love demands as much. It may not be just in our human eyes, but God's love is beyond human measure. It's just love in the deepest, broadest sense—love nailed to a cross for us and for our salvation; love raised from the dead, not just for us but for the whole human race.

HYMN

Just as I Am, without One Plea (*ELW 592*)

CLOSING PRAYER (ATTRIBUTED TO ST. FRANCIS)

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

(*ELW p.87*) 🌿

Just love

Session two

In the community: From tree to we

BY CHRISTA COMPTON AND GLADYS MOORE

OPENING PRAYER

God of abundance, you have poured out a large measure of earthly blessings: our table is richly furnished, our cup overflows, and we live in safety and security. Teach us to set our hearts on you and not these material blessings. Keep us from becoming captivated by prosperity, and grant us in wisdom to use your blessings to your glory and to the service of humankind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(*ELW* p. 80)

THEME VERSES

Luke 19:1-10

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- Examine Jesus' radical acceptance of Zacchaeus and the grumbling of the community in response to that welcome.
- Identify people who are judged and excluded in our own time and consider how Jesus calls us to respond.
- Understand practices of restorative justice and how they embody just love.

MATERIALS

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Television or internet access for viewing

OVERVIEW

This session on Zacchaeus widens our understanding of “just love” beyond the family to the community. Before the session, consider how your communities (church, school, work, etc.) have responded to those, like Zacchaeus, whose actions have harmed the community in some way. To what extent have

these offenders been ostracized? Ridiculed? Talked about? How might the way we treat offenders affect their families, as well as the families and communities of those who have been hurt by their actions? Pray for guidance as you prepare to lead a discussion about the complex ways in which “just love” might respond to all those affected by criminal behavior and other kinds of wrongdoing.

PREPARE

The story of Zacchaeus' transformation might be uncomfortable for some. Be sensitive to those who have experienced strained relationships within their families, congregations or other communities and to those who have incarcerated friends or relatives. Encourage as many participants as possible to discuss, using the guidelines below or the “touchstones” at couragerenewal.org/touchstones:

1. Extend and receive welcome.
2. Be authentic by using “I” statements. Speak from your own perspective.
3. Listen. Let others finish before you speak.
4. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
5. Honor silence.
6. Respect confidentiality in the group.

As you read the material for Session 2, note any places where participants are asked to share their personal experiences. Considering your own responses to the questions can help you anticipate which topics will be more challenging.

OPENING

Ask participants: In what ways have you been thinking about “just love” since your previous gathering (or conference call or online meeting)? What new ideas have emerged?

Invite participants to share: What associations

do they have with the character of Zacchaeus? Are those associations more positive or negative?

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. “HEARING OUR CRIES” VIDEO

Dr. Ryan Cumming is program director for hunger education, ELCA World Hunger. He served on the ELCA Task Force on Criminal Justice. Dr. Ulysses W. Burley III is the founder of UBtheCURE, LLC—a consulting company addressing how faith, health and human rights intersect. He previously served as program associate for the ELCA Strategy on HIV and AIDS. In a 15-minute video from the ELCA social statement on criminal justice, “Hearing Our Cries,” Ryan describes his brother’s arrest and subsequent incarceration for murder. Ulysses shares a terrifying encounter with police. Ryan and Ulysses reveal how the injustices within our systems of mass incarceration and law enforcement can reverberate in ways we rarely acknowledge. As a group or individually, view the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koSBON3IGZk&feature=youtu.be>

congregation and consider beginning a letter-writing ministry. You can also check out the website of Prison Congregations of America (<https://www.prisoncongregations.org/>), an initiative begun by late Lutheran pastor Ed Nesselhuf. 🌿

After watching the video, discuss:

- What are your initial reactions to these accounts of the criminal justice system?
- How did his brother’s arrest and incarceration affect Ryan’s family initially, and over time?
- What specific injustices do Ryan and Ulysses highlight?
- As people of faith committed to “just love,” how are we called to respond to the injustices in our criminal justice system?

2. WRITING LETTERS

Ask if anyone has corresponded with incarcerated persons. What was this experience like? Alternatively, locate the prison nearest your

HYMN

We are Called (ELW 720)

FOCUS VERSE

Exodus 1:17

But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you are with us in birth and in death and in all the days in between. Strengthen our hearts with your holy word so that, empowered by your strength and purpose, we might transform places of suffering into places of hope and seek your vision of just love for all people. Amen.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

EDITOR'S 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.

Just love

Session three

In the nation: Giving birth to justice

BY CHRISTA COMPTON AND GLADYS MOORE

Session 3 challenges readers to examine what “just love” requires when injustice occurs at the highest levels of government. In the book of Exodus, the midwives Shiphrah and Puah defy Pharaoh to save the lives of Hebrew babies. This session draws on understandings of formal and informal power and how we can use the power God has given us to effect change.

INTRODUCTION (3 minutes)

In Session 1, we examined “just love” within a family system as Martha and Mary confronted Jesus over his delay in coming to help their sick brother Lazarus. Their willingness to share their anger in a loving, honest way opened the door to new relationships among these sisters and Jesus and led to their brother Lazarus’ restoration to life.

In Session 2, “just love” led to multiple restorations. Through Jesus’ recognition and acceptance of Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector was restored to his community. In turn, Zacchaeus restored to his neighbors the proceeds from what he had unjustly earned and gave half of his wages to the poor. Just love is often costly, especially when we seek to make right those relationships that have been harmed by our unjust actions.

In this third and final session, we will examine the lesser-known story of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah in the Book of Exodus as we grapple with just love at the level of our nation and world. In

particular, we'll explore: What risks does just love require of us, and what do we do when our understanding of justice differs from the demands of those in power?

RUTHLESS OPPRESSION (12 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Exodus 1: 8-14

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

There is a new king in Egypt—an unnamed Pharaoh, one in a long line of rulers who held limitless power and were worshiped as gods. This king “did not know Joseph”—a reference to a lingering storyline from the book of Genesis. You may recall that a young Joseph had been sold off to some traveling Egyptians by his resentful brothers, who had also faked his death and devastated their father with that lie (Genesis 37). Rather than getting rid of Joseph as his brothers had hoped, their deception eventually led to Joseph's rise to power within the Egyptian hierarchy. With Joseph in place as Pharaoh's right-hand man, Joseph's Israelite family

ultimately benefits from his access to power. In an ironic twist, Joseph saves the very brothers who had betrayed him years before.

But power that comes from political access is almost always fleeting. As the book of Exodus opens, time has passed, and this new ruler of Egypt has no sense of loyalty to Joseph or any of his descendants. Pharaoh and his henchmen seek to weaken the Israelites with their cruelty, but even in the face of unrelenting hardship, the Israelites persevere. Here we catch our first glimpse of defiant hope. Babies continue to be born; the Israelites continue to grow in number. New life emerges even as Pharaoh's power reigns supreme.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. The mention of Joseph's history in Egypt reminds us that God can bring hope out of hopeless circumstances. Can you think of other biblical examples of hope amid hopelessness? Where have you witnessed unlikely hope in your life or the life of another?
2. The more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. What do you think gives people the courage to have children in times of hardship? In what other ways do people defy oppression with acts of love?

THE MIDWIVES' DEFIANCE (15 minutes)

📖 **Read:** Exodus 1:15-17

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl,

she shall live.’¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

This is both awful and predictable: When the powerful feel threatened, they oppress groups of people whom they perceive as different or “other.” That oppression often turns to genocide. In a horrific development, Pharaoh orders Shiphrah and Puah to kill all newborn boys born to the Hebrew women. Note that baby girls are allowed to live, a clear reminder of the ancient world’s assumptions about gender and power. As Megan McKenna points out in *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (Orbis Books, 1994):

Power starts with children, according to this story. But male and female were used for different reasons. The boys must die, because boys grow up to fight, to be soldiers; they were the most obvious threat to the empire. Girls, however, were allowed to live. Why? Girls don’t fight, at least in that culture. Girls were used as slaves and for entertainment; the Egyptians intermarried with them. Girls were needed for the gene pool... The boys, however, were dangerous, and had to be dealt with immediately and violently (p. 41).

Imagine yourself in the shoes of Shiphrah or Puah. They have devoted themselves to the sacred duty of ushering life into the world. The Pharaoh has just ordered them to become murderers—to take the very lives they have promised to protect. And make no mistake: Should they fail to carry out this order, they could be killed.

Pharaoh underestimates the power of women—especially that of Shiphrah and Puah. The biblical story captures their bold decision in one sentence: “But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the

boys live.” Following God’s way was more important to these midwives than following Pharaoh’s way.

Shiphrah and Puah remind us that disobedience can be a holy choice. Just love sometimes demands defiance. When we know in our hearts that the mandates of the powerful will do harm, especially to the most vulnerable among us, God calls us to a different path. When unquestioning obedience leads to injustice, it’s time to try something else.

History is filled with examples of people who have defied the orders of the powerful in support of the vulnerable. We don’t know most of their names, but they join Shiphrah and Puah in the ranks of those who choose the riskiest kind of just love. Think about the people who sheltered runaway slaves despite the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required that slaves be returned to their owners, even if those slaves had escaped to a free state. Or the people who hid their Jewish neighbors in Nazi Germany. Or the people who were arrested and brutalized for sitting at lunch counters in the Jim Crow South where segregation was legal. Those people, like the midwives of Exodus, chose to follow God’s way and reject the ways of human cruelty.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. How do we see assumptions about gender and power play out in our own time?
4. Consider other times in history when those in power used genocide to control those they sought to oppress.
5. What might it look like in our own time to follow God’s ways of just love in support of those who are oppressed? What would you be willing to risk on behalf of people who are endangered by unchecked human power?

6. Think about a time when you disobeyed your parents, teachers, spouses, or other powerful figures or institutions in your life. What moved you to disobey?
7. What did it feel like to go against what you had been taught or directed to do?

DIVINE DISOBEDIENCE (15 minutes)

 **Read:** Exodus 1:18-22

¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?”¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

Pharaoh eventually catches on to the fact that the Hebrew baby boys are still very much alive. He summons Shiphrah and Puah to account for this development, surely perplexed that his order could have been disobeyed. Instead of giving in to the Pharaoh’s next power play, the midwives double down on their defiance by telling an outright lie. They pretend that the Hebrew women have been popping out babies so quickly that all these births have taken place before the midwives even show up. It’s a lie that only works to fool someone who knows nothing about childbirth.

Biblical scholar Wilda Gafney observes that the midwives also cleverly exploit Pharaoh’s built-in cultural biases. In *Womanist Midrash:*

A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), she translates the word of the midwives in verse 19 in this way: “The Hebrew women are brutish, animalistic, *chayoth*—not refined, like Egyptian women. Their babies just plop out of them” (pp. 90-91). Gafney argues that because Pharaoh sees the Hebrew people as inferior to the Egyptians, he is easily deceived by the obvious lie of the midwives.

God looks kindly upon Shiphrah and Puah, rewarding them for their courage and faithfulness. Meanwhile the Hebrew people continue to multiply and grow strong, but so does Pharaoh’s cruelty. All Egyptians are summoned to participate in the genocide, setting the stage for the birth of Moses and, eventually, the Israelites’ escape from slavery and from Egypt.

As Gafney writes:

The liberation of the Israelite people in Egypt begins with Shiphrah and Puah. They are the mothers of a revolution waged by women. They likely enlisted untold numbers of birthing-women and expectant mothers in their resistance movement...their act of resistance sets the stage for those to follow. Shiphrah and Puah become the first deliverers in the book of deliverance (p. 91).

Historically, this kind of disobedience is rarely rewarded and often ends disastrously. The Lesser Festivals and Commemorations section of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (15-17) lists courageous disciples throughout the centuries, including martyrs of the faith who refused to obey human laws and were obedient only to God. Here are a few:

Perpetua and Felicity

In the year 202 the emperor Septimius Severus forbade conversions to Christianity. Perpetua, a noblewoman, Felicity, a slave, and other

companions were all catechumens at Carthage in North Africa. They were imprisoned and sentenced to death. Perpetua's father, who was not a Christian, visited her in prison and begged her to lay aside her Christian convictions in order to spare her life and spare the family from scorn. Perpetua responded and told her father, "We know that we are not placed in our own power but in that of God."

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in Maryland and remained a slave until about age thirty when, fearing she would be sold and moved farther south, she escaped with the help of the Underground Railroad. After that, she helped about three hundred others to escape until slavery was abolished. After the Civil War, her home in Auburn, New York, became a center for women's rights and served the aged and poor.

In the case of Perpetua and Felicity, disobedience led to death. Their love for their Lord far surpassed their concern for the emperor's edict forbidding people to be Christians. Just love for them meant the highest sacrifice one could make—giving up their own lives.

Similarly, Harriet Tubman, who was enslaved until age 30, refused to comply with an unjust system of chattel slavery and those who had the power to perpetuate it. Not only was she disobedient, but like the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, her defiance saved the lives of hundreds of other escaped slaves. As the most famous "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, Tubman made 19 trips into the South during the time of slavery. Over a 10-year time span she escorted 300 enslaved Africans to freedom. She proudly pointed out to Frederick Douglass that in all of her journeys she "never lost a single passenger" (See pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html).

Share aloud or reflect:

8. In what ways are the stories of Perpetua and Felicity and Harriet Tubman similar to that of Shiphrah and Puah? How are they different?
9. Shiphrah's and Puah's actions have been described as "divinely defiant." Can you think of a time in your congregation or within the ELCA when people have been divinely defiant? What was the result?
10. Just love sometimes confronts injustice through breaking civil laws (i.e., acts of civil disobedience). Those who commit such acts understand that they are responding to a higher law, God's law. Under what circumstances might it be important to practice civil disobedience?

REVOLUTIONARY INTEGRITY (10 minutes)

The unnamed pharaoh or king at the beginning of Exodus represents the many rulers of this world who wield tyrannical power, sometimes over their own people, but even more over those who are enslaved. He embodies old patterns of domination or "power over"—fear of the other, physical oppression and ruthlessness. In this system, wealth and security are more valuable than justice and human dignity.

This king works in direct contradiction to the just love for which God stands. God is a God of life; the new king sought to kill. God lifts up the lowly and supports the weak and oppressed. The king's xenophobia led him to inflict increasingly harsh labor on the enslaved Hebrews. The power imbalance between the king and the midwives Shiphrah and Puah is vast, yet the two women remain steadfast in bringing new life and light into the world.

In a dazzling sermon that includes the story of

Shiphrah and Puah, Ada María Isasi-Díaz celebrates the way that the midwives use their apparent lack of power in support of their cause. Her contribution to *The Book of Women's Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other's' Voices* (Riverhead Books, 1999) describes how women often undermine oppressors by feigning submission while acting in subversive ways:

When Shiphrah and Puah reenter the scene they have to face an angry pharaoh, but they are ready for it. Their task was to bring new life to light (the Spanish for 'birthing' is dar a luz, to bring to light). They are not going to allow him to pervert that, no matter how powerful he is. So we have this wonderful scene of these two women making fun of the pharaoh, telling him that the Hebrew women were so strong that they gave birth before the midwives could arrive. These two seemingly submissive women are now victorious. Every time I get to this point in the story, I want to give Shiphrah and Puah a standing ovation (p. 170).

Isasi-Díaz states that the actions of Shiphrah and Puah have “revolutionary integrity”:

The word of God says to us today: Resist obliteration, resist death, struggle to hope for tomorrow, struggle to live. The word of God calls us today to be clear that to struggle for life is to do the will of God and that to struggle for life often requires of us revolutionary integrity: commitment to life, disobeying oppressive and unjust authorities, oppressive religious structures and religious authority. Revolutionary integrity is about living the life that is given to us by God, even if we have to struggle to live fully with every ounce of our being (p. 173).

We are called to seek life and light for all people, even when that work means struggle and risk.

The pursuit of just love will not be welcomed by oppressive authorities who seek to maintain their power at any cost, but the Bible is full of the surprising and subversive victories that God's just love makes possible.

Share aloud or reflect:

11. According to Isasi-Díaz, submission can be a survival strategy. How have you seen this to be true?
12. In what ways have women you have known brought life to light despite difficult odds or in defiance of those in power?

CONCLUSION (10 minutes)

It is significant that even as the “new king” in our text is not named, Shiphrah and Puah are. They were so important that, unlike thousands of women in scripture who went unnamed, their names were recorded for posterity. Imagine what it must have meant to successive generations of midwives and other ancient women to hear the names of Shiphrah and Puah spoken—to have women considered to be of “lower” status lifted up as leaders and liberators of their people.

Without these daring and defiant women, there would have been no Exodus. Indeed, if Pharaoh had had his way, Moses would not have been born, and the Hebrew people would have remained in bondage. Shiphrah and Puah may not have known what the future would bring either for them or the nation of Israel, but their courage enabled life. They eventually bore children of their own, and the Israelites were freed from their enslavement.

Share aloud or reflect:

13. Given the numbers of nameless women

in the Bible, why do you think Shiphrah and Puah were named?

14. Who are the women in your life that have been examples of just love, who have helped free you or others from various burdens or bondage?

CLOSING HYMN

“For All the Faithful Women” (*ELW* 419, verses 1-2)

Just love

Session three

In the nation: Giving birth to justice

BY CHRISTA COMPTON AND GLADYS MOORE

OPENING PRAYER

Holy One, we thank you that you are a God of love and a God of justice. In this time together, open our hearts, minds and spirits to the wisdom of your word, that we might receive new insight for our lives and a new way forward in times of conflict and challenge. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

THEME VERSES

Exodus 1:8-22

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- Engage with the story of Shiphrah and Puah and consider why these midwives took such dramatic risks
- Reflect on opportunities for divine defiance in our lives
- Consider how civil disobedience can be a tool in support of “just love”

MATERIALS

- White board or flip chart and markers
- “Just love” brainstorming notes from Sessions 1 and 2
- Copies of “Whose side are you on?” a poem by Lucille Clifton (optional)
- Notecards, envelopes and stamps for letter-writing (optional)

OVERVIEW

In our final session, we consider how “just love” moves us beyond family and community to injustice at a nation’s highest levels. We see the courage midwives Shiphrah and Puah had in saving the lives of Hebrew babies. Where do they find the courage to stand up to Pharaoh? How might we exhibit such courage today?

PREPARE

This session is challenging since it examines how we live out our faith in public. What does it mean for us to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven and of our country? For more productive discussions, review the helpful “touchstones” from the Center for Courage and Renewal (couragerenewal.org/touchstones) as well as these guidelines:

1. Extend and receive welcome.
2. Be authentic by using “I” statements. Speak from your own perspective.
3. Listen. Let others finish before you speak.
4. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
5. Honor silence.
6. Respect the confidentiality of what people share in the group.

Reflect as you prepare: What insights have you received about yourself? About how the word of God shapes us? How might you live out your faith more fully? At the end of the session, invite participants to reflect on those questions too before closing with the hymn and prayer.

OPENING

Ask participants how they have been pondering the meaning of “just love” through all the sessions. What additions do they have now? What questions have come up since last time? How would they describe the concept to someone hearing the phrase for the first time?

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. WHOSE SIDE?

Poet Lucille Clifton (1936–2010) was well-known for capturing the ways people endure life’s challenges. Her work often highlights resilience in the lives and experiences of African-American people. Her poem, “whose side are you on?” invites us to answer that question (Read it in print in *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton* [1965–2010], BOA Editions, 2012, or online at <https://poetrysociety.org/poetry-in-motion/whose-side-are-you-on>).

As people of faith, we know that God is always on the side of the least powerful and most vulnerable. Whose side are we on today? On whose behalf

are we willing to exercise our divine defiance? For whose safety and well-being would we risk our own lives? Read the poem aloud and invite participants to write (and share, if they’re willing) their responses in prose or poetry.

2. WORDS OF GRATITUDE

Ask participants: Whose courage have you admired? Invite them to take several minutes to write a brief note to a woman whose divine defiance inspired them and to mail the notes if the woman is still alive. You might bless the notes and letters with a prayer:

God of strength and purpose, give us power to defy the forces of evil that seek to harm your children. Thank you for the courage of these women who have inspired us by their example and taught us to be both brave and bold. Be with us now as we follow in their path. Help us to follow the One whom you sent to teach us what “just love” looks like, our Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen. 🌿