

# gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION JULY/AUGUST 2021



*Bible study:*

## **Just truth, just hope**

**Ananias all along**

**Let it bee!**

**The opposite of radical generosity**



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# Why do we need leader guides?

BY ELIZABETH HUNTER

**I AM THE ONE WHO READS THE INSTRUCTIONS** at my house. You know the saying, “Measure twice, cut once”? As a teenager, I learned from both plywood and fabric what happens when one takes up saw or scissors without measuring carefully enough.

When I got married, I learned that my spouse, on the other hand, favored more of a “just go for it” approach. Admittedly, he was better at eyeballing distances and measurements than I was. He would look at the pieces for a while, and then go confidently forth. Nothing wrong with trying it out, especially if you have time, but if he got stuck, back he’d come to me, asking me for the instructions. So I would oblige, and try to look at the instructions alongside the work. Did this or that piece really belong there? If it did or didn’t, what should happen next? Did each step really have to happen in that particular order?

Each time I’d think, and sometimes I’d say, “Wouldn’t it be easier to read the instructions at the beginning of the process? And then maybe, just possibly (actually, not really, because not following the directions would make me more anxious) adapt from there?”

Maps, instructions, recipes and guides help me to see the pieces and parts as a whole. Missing a part, attaching the wrong fastener or cutting material incorrectly could result in an epic fail. I’ve been there, when the muffins I made look magazine cover-worthy but taste awful, because somehow, I forgot one tiny, essential teaspoon of salt. I’ve seen faith the size of a mustard seed move mountainous tasks. And I’ve seen the lack of just a small pinch of salt fail to move muffins.

Instructions and guides have a role to play. If

nothing else, they help us to plan and prepare, so that we can be more present in the moment. Given this, the *Gather* staff want to provide you, our readers, with helpful Bible study leader guides (see pages 28 and 42). Past authors have used many different approaches. In this issue, Bible study author Angela !Khabeb wanted to provide a leader guide that worked for her Just L.I.F.E. Bible study sessions. She also worked hard to provide helpful tips for Bible study and group discussions in general. This was her idea, and I think she does a bang-up job.

Leader guides help me not just because I like knowing what I’m getting into. They also help because sometimes when we read Scripture, we can get lost or stuck for too long on a particular part. We may miss seeing something important for group dynamics. We may wonder how it all fits together. The *Gather* leader guides are there to help us see the Bible as a whole and to help us gain a fuller picture of the body of Christ, as we work our way (albeit imperfectly) through getting to better know God and Scripture, to better love and serve God and neighbor, and to joyfully, bravely put our faith into action. And if you’re like me, as you do so, you may appreciate a gentle voice of wisdom calming any anxiety about how it’s coming together, reminding us that God’s grace is really the glue holding all of it, and all of us, together.

Are there things or elements you would like to see us consider including in *Gather* leader guides? Please consider sharing your thoughts about leader guides (even if you do not serve as your group’s leader), by sending an email to: [gather@elca.org](mailto:gather@elca.org)

Thank you for your partnership in ministry. 🌿

# gather

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God's Holy Truth leads us to love, justice and transforming the world into God's Beloved Community.

## *Bible study*

### 22 **Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)**

SESSION TWO

Just truth

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

### 28 LEADER GUIDE

### 34 **Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)**

SESSION THREE

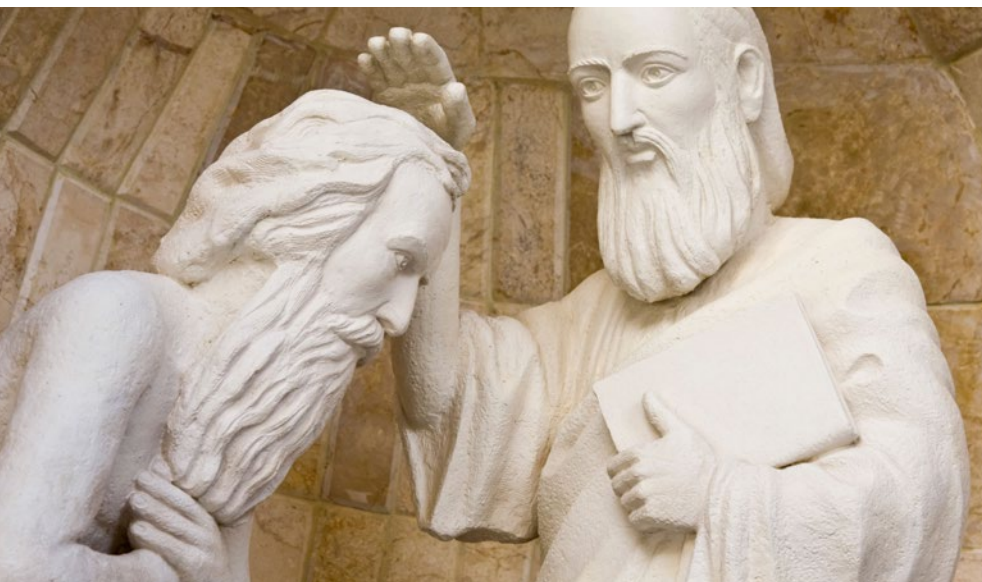
Just hope

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

### 40 LEADER GUIDE

ON THE COVER: Lisbon, Portugal-based artist Sena Runa uses a quilling technique to create one-of-a-kind paper sculptures. Here, the word hope dances like bright sunshine on a page.



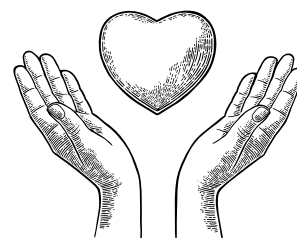


## departments

- 1 **Welcome**  
Why do we need leader guides?  
BY ELIZABETH HUNTER
- 5 **Give us this day**  
Window of hope  
BY JENNIFER HACKBARTH
- 18 **Earth wise**  
Let it Bee!  
BY VENICE R. WILLIAMS
- 47 **Grace notes**  
I began to journal  
BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFISKY
- 48 **Amen**  
Removing scales, softening hearts  
BY CATHERINE MALOTKY

## features

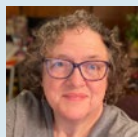
- 6 **Ananias all along**  
The conversion story that I hadn't even noticed.  
BY JULIA SEYMOUR
- 10 **A letter in the mail**  
The labor of love flows out in ink.  
BY MIHEE KIM-KORT
- 14 **On the knees, off the chest**  
Becoming aware of the presence of God  
BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP
- 20 **Doing dishes differently**  
Unloading life lessons is no simple chore.  
BY JENNIFER M. GINN
- 30 **Dear God, thank you for...**  
Look! A bird!  
BY ANNA MADSEN
- 42 **The opposite of radical generosity**  
God doesn't call us to hoard, but to serve in times of crisis.  
BY BECCA ERLICH



**CORRECTION** In the May 2021 issue, on page 38, the last paragraph of "Relationship: The root of intergenerational collaboration," by the Rev. Tiffany Cheney, contained an error. Find a corrected PDF online at <https://www.gathermagazine.org/category/community/>

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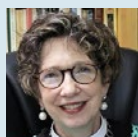
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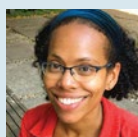
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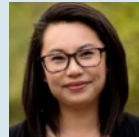
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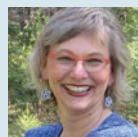
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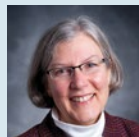
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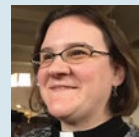
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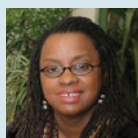
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# Window of hope

BY JENNIFER HACKBARTH

EACH AFTERNOON DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR families walk past my church office window on their way home from the school next door. Kids skip and run, throwing snowballs in winter and stomping in puddles every spring. My favorite walkers are the family dogs who proudly trot home next to their kids. For several years, I've delighted in seeing a shaggy golden retriever meet her kids. She seems to grin as she ambles home next to them, tail swishing. I've often wondered if it's her favorite part of the day.

In March 2020, the after-school strolls abruptly stopped. I shifted to working at home, and when I finally returned to my church office, I barely noticed the absence of cheerful chatter and kids meandering behind school crossing guards each afternoon. Maybe I didn't allow myself to miss those everyday routines. Maybe the empty sidewalk was more than I could bear.

Early on, I didn't fully grasp the deep hopelessness felt during this pandemic. For many months, we didn't know if or when we would have a vaccine. Many of us put our heads down and simply survived day by day. Only now, as vaccines roll out and communities begin to cautiously open up again, am I able to see the daily struggle it took to keep hope alive in my heart.

This spring, after a year-long wait, I glanced out my office window and saw my favorite golden retriever, looking a little older and stiffer, smiling up at her kids. As she walked the children home from school, they absently patted her head. Alone in my

office, I burst into tears. It was a sign of hope—one I hadn't even known I needed. Seeing that familiar fluffy tail gave my imagination permission. I began to envision other reunions, such as hugging my best friend, holding a new nephew after missing his first five months of life, and playing with a toddler niece who was four months old when I last held her at her baptism. I could finally see myself in the same room with people I love, people who will look a little older when I see them in person again.



For more than a year, I'd forgotten how to hope. Yet somehow hope was still alive inside me, waiting to be released. Welcoming that hope felt like welcoming an old friend, one I had missed desperately. I remember thinking, "There she is." I'm not sure if I was thinking about God, the dog or myself; probably all three. Like the women who ran to tell the

disbelieving disciples about the empty tomb, I was surprised by resurrection. Even though I'd worked to keep both congregation and home life moving forward in a pandemic, the moments of new life had escaped me. It took a golden retriever to break me open to the work of God's kingdom. Now I can once again "rejoice in hope" (Romans 12:12).

*Loving God, remind us of the new life we find in your resurrection—not only on that first Easter Day, not only during Easter season, but every day of our lives. And even when we can't find it in ourselves to hope, bless us with your promise that we will one day hope again. Amen. 🌿*







# Ananias all along

The conversion  
story that I hadn't  
even noticed

BY JULIA SEYMOUR

*In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias.*

*The Lord spoke to him in a vision, "Ananias!"*

*He answered, "Yes, Lord."*

*The Lord instructed him, "Go to Judas' house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight."*

*Ananias countered, "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. He's here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name."*

*The Lord replied, "Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."*

*Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*

*Instantly, flakes fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. After eating, he regained his strength. He stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days.*

(Acts 9:10-19, Common English Bible)

IF YOUR EXPERIENCE of Christianity is anything like mine, you have likely been taught to think about Saul/Paul as the follower of Jesus with the ultimate conversion story. Even if you've been led to understand that he remained Jewish (in ethnic practices), Saul's faith in Christ and Christ's salvific purposes gave his life a very specific direction following his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9).

I've always accepted this. Over the years, I've thought about this story to discuss the significance of other vocations, since Paul wasn't making his own clothes or planting and tending crops. While Paul's work mattered for the spread of the gospel, the work of other believers' daily lives also made that evangelism possible.

Lately, however, I have been rethinking that story. Was Saul's change of heart really the greatest change in Acts 9? Was the road-to-Damascus experience really the conversion experience to which all new Christians (or all Christians, period) are meant to aspire?

### A STRANGER IN DAMASCUS

As I look at the book of Acts afresh, I am struck by what is required of Ananias. He believes in Jesus, but now Jesus asks him to welcome a man into his home. Ananias knew this man to be a threat to his family, his friends and himself. This man had harmed or witnessed the

killing of people Ananias knew, maybe even loved. Prior to Jesus' request, at best Ananias would have crossed to the other side of the market if he saw Saul there, if not actually hide away until Saul left town.

Now Jesus is expecting something of Ananias, for Saul. Ananias does not want to do it. He would like to say no. He tries to explain to Jesus what's happening. But Jesus doesn't change his tune.

So Ananias must experience his own conversion, his own continued growth in faith, a further step in sanctification, a greater yielding to the Holy Spirit. He must prepare to welcome Saul into his home, and he's going to have to tell other people that he's doing it.

It's not like he's going to be able to keep Saul a secret. It seems likely that Ananias has a household. How will they respond to his revelation: "Jesus told me we need to bring that guy we were all just panicking about into the house"?

If conversion represents a change of heart, a change of behavior, a change of attitude, an application of ethics amid stress and strain, then Ananias is the conversion story we should have been paying attention to all along.

Most Christians, especially those of us who are life-long Christians, may have a hard time identifying with Saul of Tarsus, but we have a lot in common with Ananias. Instead of assuming or expecting a road-to-Damascus experience, we are called to be on

the lookout for a stranger-in-Damascus experience. And we are meant to be the ones to welcome that stranger for Christ's own sake.

We are meant to open our homes to someone whose life experience is not like ours.

We are meant to show hospitality to someone whose history is frightening to us.

We are meant to welcome the one who differs from us greatly and yet whom Christ loves and for whom Christ died.

I am not saying we are meant to knowingly endanger ourselves or our families, but we are meant to take some risks for the sake of the gospel. We are meant to be open to people who are different. We are meant to have conversion experiences in our lives, again and again. These experiences are the ones in which Jesus speaks to us, moves us, compels us to do the thing that surprises us and yet is absolutely necessary for the sake of the world.

It is what Ananias did. It's his conversion story from which we are meant to learn how to be followers of the Way of Christ.

To adapt a verse of the hymn, "There Is a Balm in Gilead":  
*"If you cannot preach like Peter,  
if you cannot pray like Paul.../  
Like faithful Ananias,  
you can show grace to all."* 🌸



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A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a person's hands and arms. They are wearing a grey, textured knit sweater. Their hands are resting on a dark wooden desk, and they appear to be writing on a piece of paper. The background is out of focus, showing what might be a lamp or other desk items. The overall mood is quiet and focused.

# A letter in the mail

This labor of love flows out in ink.

BY MIHEE KIM-KORT

**ONE OF THE BEST THINGS EVER** is getting a letter in the mail. During our summers apart while in seminary, my spouse, Andy, and I wrote letters to each other. My dear friend, Ellen Wu, a historian, and I send little cards and notes to each other. She, too, has an appreciation for letters. Her uncle once sent her a box of letters he'd received from her late father. Inside, my friend found letters her father had written in the early years after they had immigrated to the U.S. With tears in her eyes, she told me how amazing it was to read these letters—written in English, with perfect cursive and

endearingly formal language—and how his enthusiasm and hope still poured out from the pages.

I don't have a hoarding bone in my body, but I try to keep my correspondence with friends, heroes, mentors and even strangers. They fill little archives, and I always carry at least one with me. It is a physical reminder that someone was thinking about me, and a little trace of a loved one's day. It also carries remnants of the life around them—the kitchen or coffee shop in which they wrote it, on a sunny or a gray and rainy day. It may hold the echoes of kids nearby or the bustle of a

city street. I can almost feel the quiet imprint of their hands and fingers on that paper, and always, the love flowing out in ink.

I can feel this love in Paul's letters too. First Thessalonians is one of the earliest New Testament manuscripts, a letter from Paul that is probably even older than the written accounts of the synoptic gospels. From the very beginning, we glimpse Paul's burgeoning relationship with the Thessalonians, and their fondness for one another:

*To the church of the  
Thessalonians in God the Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ:*



*Grace to you and peace.*

*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and*

*of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he*

*raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)* Who are the Thessalonians? We get a little backstory in Acts 17, which describes how Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. Thessalonica, a Roman provincial capital in Macedonia, was a “free city,” meaning that it had local autonomy and had retained its indigenous law. Located on a major eastern imperial trade route, this port city would have been prosperous. It was a city with a legacy of a beneficial relationship with the Roman Empire.

New Testament scholar Amy Peeler writes in a commentary at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) (October 22, 2017) that those who heard Paul's message and converted to Christianity would have previously participated in the many cults of this bustling city, including the worship of Roma, the embodiment of the ideals of the Roman Empire. Accepting the call to worship the God of Israel alone would have meant not only questions but rejection and persecution. At the very least, family and neighbors would likely pressure them to act more normal for the sake of the larger community's best interests.

This was a community that had received Paul's teachings over a short period of time. The book of Acts tells us that Paul preached to them three times in the synagogue. Then they had to make their own way, with one visit from Paul's protégé, Timothy.

Imagine suddenly not doing all the things you regularly did, day in and day out, with neighbors, family and friends. Today that's something easy for us to understand, due to the pandemic. But then imagine the questions, the judgments, the looks and the whispers. Imagine knowing that because you now follow this Jesus, something has shifted within you and changed everything, even though the world around you is the same. What you wouldn't give for a little word or reminder, anything so you wouldn't feel crazy or alone in

this.

Paul's tone in this letter to the Thessalonians is noteworthy. It's not the tone of later letters—that of an exasperated parent frustrated with the Corinthians' constant bickering or the Galatians' being easily swayed by other teachings. And it's not the tone he uses in writing to the Romans, laying out clear theological and doctrinal tracks. Here, Paul writes with a kind of fondness, with patience, understanding and a gentle nudging, conveying his trust that they are making their way. He encourages them to keep going, to not give up or give in. His letter seems to say, "I see you...and I am with you."

Paul writes about "constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." He remembers who the Thessalonians are, how they came to the faith and how far they've come. He remembers their courage, their joy, their generosity. And he believes in them. He believes God is working in them, giving them energy and imagination to live out this new life in Jesus. What is central is the "labor of love"—labor, a word that in Greek doesn't imply physical work as much as it does "going to a good deal of trouble."

That's because love is less like work and more like paying attention—seeing, listening, remembering and telling. Love is less like fixing and more like

fixating—watching and following. I remember when my son, Ozzie, was just a baby, and his twin siblings were almost 3. Ozzie loved them so much. You could tell because he was always watching them and trying to imitate them. In fact, mimesis, or "imitate," is the word Paul uses to describe the Thessalonians' faith, love and hope.

There are days, especially now, when we need someone to tell us, to reflect back to us, who we are. When we feel weighed down by the fraught circumstances of the world (the politics, the pandemic, the police brutality, the pollution, the everything), when we feel lost because things are coming apart and we need someone to catch us and bring us back, it is love that saves us.

The ministry of love goes both ways. Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest in Los Angeles, founded Homeboy Industries, the largest gang-intervention, rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. While many news reports have shared how this ministry saved numerous people from incarceration, violence and more, Father Greg himself told interviewer Krista Tippett during an On Being podcast: "The truth is, it's mutual ... I think that's where the place of delight is: that I've learned everything of value, really, in the last 25 years, from precisely the people who you think are on the receiving end of my gifts and talent and wisdom — but quite the opposite: It's



mutual.”

There’s a radical kinship here—in Father Greg’s words and in Paul’s letter—a commitment, belief and trust. You can feel it in the delight that pours out from them.

There’s another story about letters and mutuality. It’s about the correspondence between two of the most influential philos-

publicly repented. Essayist Maria Popova wrote about Arendt’s and Heidegger’s love letters in an April 25, 2016, article for the Brainpickings website: “That [Heidegger] should fall in love with a Jew though exposes the complexity and contradiction of which the human spirit is woven, its threads nowhere more ragged than in love.”

and the kinship that emerges is our becoming what we love. We can feel this love across time and space. It transports our very selves, our commitments and our faithfulness. Even today we can feel the force of love in letters, just as in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians. We can feel the gratitude poured out, the faith and the hope.

Someone once wrote to me after a Bible study:

*I found today’s Bible verses soothing and helpful, and picked up my well-worn high school Bible to read. It is held together by masking tape, and has notes tucked in it along with small cards of traditional pictures of Jesus, and notes from friends with religious messages, and such. I found it comforting, too, a sign of God’s enduring love and our continuing attempts at enduring faith.*

Enduring faith and love remind us of the kinship we have with God and one another. We are reminded of our kinship through simple, small gestures and words like “I see you,” “I’m with you” or “I’m thinking about you constantly.” May it keep us going for another hour, another day, another week. And as we work in faith, labor in love and live in steadfast hope, remember: God also labors in love, in delight, for you. 🌿

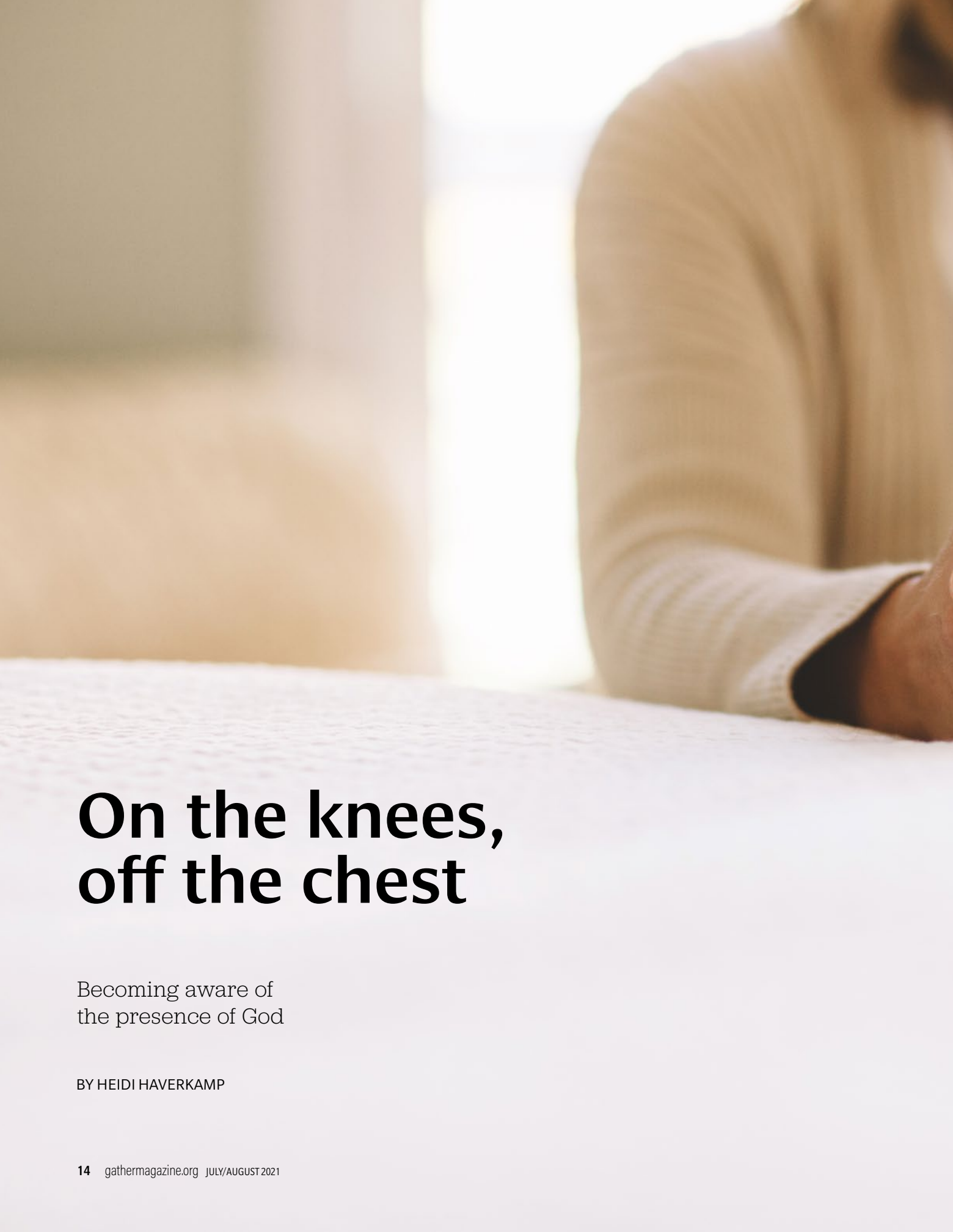
*...love is less like work and more like paying attention—seeing, listening, remembering and telling. Love is less like fixing and more like fixating—watching and following.*

ophers of our time. The great German writer and political theorist Hannah Arendt possessed one of the most piercing intellects of the 20th century. But even Arendt wasn’t immune to the youthful impulse of relinquishing reason for its counterpoint. When she was a 19-year-old university student, Arendt fell in love with her 36-year-old married professor, Martin Heidegger. A philosopher as influential as he is controversial, Heidegger made monumental contributions. He also joined the Nazi party and took an academic position under Nazi favors. Although he resigned a year later and stopped attending Nazi party meetings, he never

At one point Heidegger writes to Arendt:

*Why is love rich beyond all other possible human experiences and a sweet burden to those seized in its grasp? Because we become what we love and yet remain ourselves. Then we want to thank the beloved, but find nothing that suffices. We can only thank with ourselves. Love transforms gratitude into loyalty to ourselves and unconditional faith in the other.*

Theirs is a story about the fragility of human relationships, but also the transformative power of love and how, in that vast and mysterious space between “others,” mutuality and mirroring are all the more compelling,



# On the knees, off the chest

Becoming aware of  
the presence of God

BY HEIDI HAVERKAMP



**I KNOW A LOT OF CHURCH GEEKS** who like this catchy Latin phrase: *Lex orendi, lex credendi*. In English, it's less catchy: "What we pray is what we believe." In other words, the way we pray (or worship) can speak more loudly about what we believe than a creed or mission statement. The way we pray also teaches us (and our children) what we believe; we

learn a certain theology through our actions played out week after week, whether we realize it or not. So it might be worth our time to sit and think about how we pray and what that might say about what we believe—about prayer and about God.

When I was little, my parents taught me that the time to pray was right before I went to sleep.



My mother and father would take turns on alternate nights, sitting on my bed and reciting a children's prayer with me. Then we would name as many people as we could think of for God to bless: Mom, Dad, my brother, my grandparents and my aunts, uncles, cousins, classmates and teachers at school, friends, people at church... It might seem as though I was trying to keep my parents from leaving my bedroom, but mostly I remember that I didn't want to forget someone—would God then forget them, too?

Parents and Sunday school teachers often teach children to pray in the form of a list: We are invited to remember people, thanksgivings, things we are scared of, things we want. Sunday morning worship in most churches includes prayers that take the form of a list, too. Many adults grow up and continue to conceive of prayer as a list: of people, thanksgivings, things we are scared of, things we want. Praying in the form of a list is not wrong, but if it is the only way we pray—and the only way we pray with children—it's a practice that can end up limiting our beliefs about prayer and about God. Or it can end up teaching something we don't believe (for instance, that leaving someone off a prayer list can be harmful).

We are also taught that prayer means talking to God. Kids often listen to a Sunday school teacher or youth leader

pray aloud, talking to God for the group. We listen to our pastors or other leaders praying out loud, speaking to God on behalf of the church or the people assembled. We encourage kids to pray to God when they are alone, to ask for what they need and to talk to God as they would any friend or parent. We teach older kids to pray by writing in a journal, or to pray out loud together in small groups during retreats, confirmation classes or youth group meetings. In college, I was part of a weekly prayer group where we took turns praying aloud, speaking to God as we would a close friend. Offering our voices and words to God in this way can be powerful.

But what belief are we expressing by talking to God as we pray? We may be teaching that only a leader or a "professional" is equipped to say a prayer. We are teaching that prayer means sharing our thoughts and feelings and asking God to listen. I know that God treasures the opportunity to listen to us, but if this is the only way we pray, are we missing out? We may be teaching that prayer does not mean listening to God in return. Perhaps we are even teaching that we do not expect God to respond at all.

What does it mean to "listen to God" when what we will hear in response will likely not be spoken words or even a "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12)? What are we listening for? The campus minister at my college began all her extemporaneous prayers with

words I loved: "Let's become aware of the presence of God." Then she would pause a second or two before continuing.

Becoming aware of the presence of God is a kind of listening: stopping for a moment (or more) to notice the presence and closeness of God around us. We may not hear a voice, but we may sense an assurance, receive an insight, or just feel invited to "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

Some Christians practice listening to God in a more formal way, as with meditation or centering prayer. But listening for God or becoming aware of the presence of God can also be simple. Are there ways you notice God in the ordinary details of your daily life and surroundings?

Perhaps you notice God in the greetings of your family members or pets, a glimpse of nature, the weather, a meal, a news story or something you are grateful for. Or it might simply happen in pausing for a moment, in the shower or while waiting for the microwave, in your car or while looking out of a window, or in taking a breath and knowing God is right there with you. We are also invited to pay attention to God's wisdom and help, which sometimes seep into the corners of our lives in ways we might not expect. For instance, you might consider: Is there something God is inviting me to learn about in the events of my day today? Or are there ways God is already responding to my

prayers for the people I love?

I wonder if we are born already knowing how to pray like this. Children have a capacity for wonder and amazement at their surroundings that comes naturally. As an adult, it's harder. We may have heard that "God is everywhere" and "God is always with us" so many times that we take it for granted. We may have gotten bored with the forms of prayer we know. Or we may have experienced disappointment that God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we hoped. We may have seen that God doesn't stop all suffering, even when we ask, and that God doesn't completely protect the people we remember in our intercessory or bedtime prayer lists. And so, as adults, it can be hard to believe that the presence of God can have much power in our lives. For some, it may even be hard to believe that God exists at all anymore, if prayer doesn't seem to "work."

And yet many of us feel led to pray, even when we are full of doubt. In my work as a spiritual director, I have found that even when people are bored or frustrated with their prayers, they still long to connect with God. Even if they find they don't believe that God is as simple as they thought when they were children, or if they are angry with God, or feel there may be reasons God shouldn't love them, they feel a pull to something bigger than

themselves. It may be that part of being human is to long for God—to long to connect to this power and love that seem to be alive and all around us in creation.

Sometimes it's easy for long-time churchgoers to lose touch with God's presence, too. God can feel like an old friend and our religious life like a comfortable jacket. Sometimes people who struggle with doubt, or who see faith more as a journey of exploration, are more open to being surprised by God and more open to trying new forms of prayer or spiritual practice. What if, sometimes, we were to take off the comfortable jacket and risk a chill but also the fresh air of a new experience of God?

There is power in the presence of God, a power we may forget or even doubt. Years ago, in a healing prayer service at seminary, I came before one of the chaplains, an Anglican priest from Ghana whom I'll call James, for what I thought would be a quiet moment of prayer for my cold and sore throat symptoms. But when he set his hands on my shoulders, he shocked my mainline Midwestern sensibilities as he prayed: "Sore Throat! You will bow before the power of King Jesus and trouble this daughter of God no more!" James believed in the power of Jesus in a way I realized I hadn't. My throat was not miraculously healed, but my soul felt different. James' belief and the power of his words changed

how I thought about God's power. Maybe there was something about God I had been ignoring.

When we pray, do we believe God will answer? Do we believe God can transform us? What if becoming aware of the presence of God isn't just comforting, but risky? In *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (Harper Perennial, 2013), writer Annie Dillard famously puts it this way:

*Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*

Prayer may be boring to us because we have stopped believing God has power like this. Of course, if prayer can disrupt our lives so that God "may draw us out to where we can never return," it makes sense that we would avoid it.

But as Christians, if we believe God's disruptions are meant to increase love, joy and healing, isn't this a risk worth taking? 🌿

# Let it bee!

BY VENICE WILLIAMS

“I REALLY HOPE YOU SHOOK out your hair before coming to the dinner table! Mom, you be bringing a whole ecosystem home in your locs,” one of my children would say. “We have to watch creatures emerge from your hair while we are trying to eat!”

Whichever child of mine made this smart-mouthed comment would then try not to roll their eyes at me as I sat down to dinner.

It was often true. After I’d farmed or done programming at Alice’s Garden Urban Farm for 6 to 10 hours, an assortment of multi-legged friends might have hitchhiked home with me, snuggled in the roots of my hair. Throughout the growing season, my former loctician (hairedresser), would retighten my Sisterlocks, and ask, seeming puzzled, “Why does your hair grow so much in the summer months?” I would respond, “My hair gets fertilized by creatures that would cause most of your other clients to go screaming and running.” I don’t think she ever really believed me. I am guessing that cosmetology and hair stylist courses do not teach about insects and hair growth.

In general, insects get a bad rap. Even in the Bible, we don’t find the most encouraging and supportive images of our creepy-crawly and low-flying Earth companions—not in the stories that linger most in our memories. This is especially true of the book of Exodus, in which God attempts to reason with

Pharaoh regarding the freedom of the Israelites.

Over and over, God has Moses and Aaron try to convince the Egyptian ruler:

*Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. (Exodus 8:17-18, ESV)*

*Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand. (Exodus 8:21, ESV)*

*Dense swarms of flies poured into Pharaoh’s palace and into the houses of his officials; throughout Egypt the land was ruined by the flies. (Exodus 8:24, NIV)*

*Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, so that they may come upon the land of Egypt and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left.” So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind had brought the locusts. The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. (Exodus 10:12-14, ESV)*

I’m really itching now, aren’t you?

Another biblical moment related to insects has also remained with me, and surfaces every time I hear a sports news story connected to the Charlotte Hornets:





*And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. (Exodus 23:28, ESV)*

What can I say? A mighty team they must “bee.”

I have always had a healthy relationship with insects, long before they became my hair jewelry. Growing up in the small steel mill town of Homestead, Pennsylvania, when I wasn’t digging for worms on the hillside behind our apartment building, I was crafting a story in my mind about what the ants were all doing before I accidentally disrupted them. Having dinner? A family reunion? In English class? I turned over large rocks, fascinated by the flurry of life beneath them. Until age 7, I didn’t fully understand why the stones never crushed them. And if I came across a piece of decomposing wood? That was like insect Christmas! Fireflies were my favorite. When I was much older, I learned that the very lights I removed from their bodies to make my decorative rings were there to ward off predators. I apologized to these beetles. Yes, fireflies—or lightning bugs as we called them—are actually beetles and not part of the fly family at all. Did you know there are 2,000 varieties of fireflies?

In my “never a dull moment” mind, when I imagine God creating and birthing in the book of Genesis, I see God with a symphony conductor’s baton. When it came time to create insects, that baton must have been swirling madly! I can just picture the colors, the buzzing and the frenzy of billions of species emerging. *And God said it was good.*

What would Earth be without insects? Could Earth be without insects? Nope. Indeed, just like us, they have purpose and meaning. If they weren’t nicknamed “bugs” and “pests,” would we understand them differently? I try very hard to not kill these creatures. It is very easy to live into this value system when I am outside. I do not always succeed when I am at home, but I try my best. I will confess, centipedes gross me out, perhaps because they appear so suddenly and scurry so quickly. I pray that none are down the drain each time I pour boiling water or bleach to cleanse the pipes. I also pray that none

will emerge in the days to come. Then there were the fruit flies of 2020 that resembled a modern-day plague in our kitchen. They. Had. To. Go.

In the gardens I am clear. So many insects are plant allies and therefore, human allies. I cultivate plants that attract beneficial insects. There are predator insects that eliminate the pests we do not want by eating them. Welcome ladybugs, green lacewing larvae, and praying mantises into your garden. We know many of the pollinators, although we still fear some of them: bees, butterflies, some moths and many flies. Then there are the parasitic insects that lay their eggs on or in undesirable bugs. Once the egg is hatched, it feeds on the host insect, destroying it. The parasitic wasp is a gardener’s friend.

Mostly I practice companion planting to keep away critters I do not want. Nasturtiums to deter aphids, squash bugs and pumpkin beetles. I grow borage to impede tomato worms. I have an abundance of rue, which discourages Japanese beetles. You will see thyme planted with cabbage to ward off cabbageworms. Lots of mint to unnerve those white cabbage butterflies that always want to munch on my mustard and collard greens. Sage frightens carrot flies. Calendula averts the intentions of more harmful insects than can be named at this time. The list is long, and the resulting Earth’s bounty abundant!

I remind myself that Scripture contains positive and non-itching mentions of insects. One of my favorites is: “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise” (Proverbs 6:6). May we all be students of the ant! 🐜



# Doing dishes differently

Unloading some life lessons isn't a simple chore.

BY JENNIFER M. GINN

**DURING A VISIT TO A PARISHIONER** in a rehabilitation facility, I heard someone say: “That dishwasher was 50 years old when it died!” That comment was followed by others’ differing takes on the pleasures of having an automatic dishwasher. One person said she liked best unloading and putting clean dishes in their places. Another individual voted for loading and the pleasure of not washing by hand.

This sent my mind racing. First, to my own preferences: I’d much rather load than unload. I enjoy trying to get every last cup or Pyrex bowl in there, moving these puzzle pieces around till everything fits, then closing the door and starting the machine. Done!

Next I thought about the dishwashers in my family and my spouse Loyd’s family. Loyd’s parents washed dishes in the sink, hardly ever a one-person job. I loved watching the two of them—Edna and Charles (or Mama Nee and Pop-Pop, as their

grandchildren named them)—washing and rinsing and drying together. It was an art, and truly, they preferred to do it themselves, between the two of them. No dishwashing tub needed—a double sink would do fine. They delighted in filling both sinks, then scrubbing and rinsing and placing each dish “just so” on the drying board. They didn’t have much money and even less time, but they could do this small thing their way.

My family’s version was completely different. My dad was hardly ever involved. Not because he didn’t offer to help, but because my mother wanted the dishes done her way. She did them herself, donning rubber dishwashing gloves and drawing the hottest water possible for the dishwashing tub. She would never have washed in the sink without that tub to go inside it! She rinsed each dish under hot running water, carefully placing each one in its spot on the drying rack. The frequently used dishes

lived right there on that rack, rarely finding their way back to the cabinet. I always knew exactly where to go for my favorite dish or cup.

My in-laws, more accustomed to living in the pastor’s parsonage than a home of their own, rarely had a dishwasher. My family did have one installed during a kitchen renovation when I was in college, but it turned out to be entirely unnecessary. My mother simply didn’t trust it to get her dishes clean. She did the dishes by hand because she could.

Remembering my two families’ dishwashing habits made me smile. But it also reminded me of something I wouldn’t have said about them years ago, when they were still “keeping house” and cooking for their families. Now I can say it (and it’s important to do so): The choices that my mother and Loyd’s mother made about how they washed dishes were made out of privilege.

It’s true that both were born into families that did not have

wealth or easy lives. My grandparents and my parents—Loyd’s, too—had to work hard to support their families and give their children a decent chance for their own lives. But they had advantages. They lived in a culture that assumed their good intentions, their worth and their right to make a life for their families. They found jobs. They worked the land. They got an education and were able to hope and dream about offering an even better education to their children. They were taken seriously as farmers and even, in my grandfather’s case, as an oil-field worker. When they came back from serving their country in the wars, they received financial help from their country to buy homes and start their lives over again. They didn’t live in the best neighborhoods—true for both sides of our family. But if they’d had the money to do that, no one would have kept them from it.

That’s privilege. It was theirs because they did not face obstacles of race, ethnicity or religion. They were American-born, white and—I’m gonna say it—Protestant Christians. In all kinds of ways throughout the generations of my family and Loyd’s, opportunities came to them that did not come to others. I am grateful, of course, for the sacrifices they made to give me a good life. I am also sorry that it took so long for me to see their privilege and, on a much larger scale, my own.

Knowledge of these truths is a step toward putting my faith into action. Though I’m still learning, I know enough now to heed God’s call and change. In my best moments I can move beyond the immediate question of: “What can I do in a system so rigidly constructed to lift me up and put others down?” I know I can do some things, even if they are small. I can speak warmly to those of God’s children who are different from me—not with my head down, but with my eyes gazing toward theirs. I can make efforts to engage people whose paths I cross in the grocery store or at the gas station, especially those with whom the media and others have warned me not to engage. And again, I’m gonna say it—African American young men

in hoodies, yes; but also cashiers, and moms with little ones, and older couples pushing buggies in the parking lot. The people I encounter are Black and white and Latinx and multiracial; of European and Asian and African and Indigenous descent; and Jewish, Muslim and Christian.

Sometimes people may be just as reluctant to engage with me as I am to engage with them. But I am trying, really trying, to give myself a chance to be generous in that way with everyone. To intentionally put aside my past tendencies, suspicions, fears. To wash the dishes differently from my parents or my in-laws. To change because I want to. And because I can. I’ll let you know how it goes. 🌿



### OPENING PRAYER

God of wisdom and new life, we thank you for your faithful presence and unyielding grace. We rejoice in the gift of your Holy Spirit, who leads and guides us into all truth. Help us continue to follow your Spirit, even through the rocky terrain of challenging revelations. Liberate us through your steadfast love, and empower us through our baptismal call, so that we may walk in your justice. Teach us to live in hope of your beloved community. Amen.

### FOCUS VERSE

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12-13)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- *All Creation Sings: ELW Supplement* (ACS)
- Mirror or compact

# *Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)*

## Session two

Just truth

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

### OPENING HYMN

"Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace" (ELW 716)  
*To become more familiar with this hymn, watch a YouTube video introduction by Robert Morehead from Hymn of the Week. Feel free to sing along as you watch. The song begins at 3:30 minutes. <https://youtu.be/3UCVnr5758k>*

### DEFINITIONS

**Just** /juhst/: Acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good: **RIGHTEOUS**

**Truth** /trōōTH/: 1. The body of real things, events and facts: **ACTUALITY**; 2. the state of being the case: **FACT**


### WELCOME

Welcome to "Just Truth," the second session of the series titled Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!). In the previous session, "Just Wisdom," we discussed the uncommon, ancient wisdom that comes only from God. The word that the biblical Greek uses for Wisdom is Sophia. Wisdom (Sophia) was present with God at the time of creation and even now guides God's people to just truth, God's truth.

In this session, we'll listen to Jesus' words about sharing truths that are difficult to receive. Jesus



tells his followers, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Jesus then goes on to explain that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth. Together we will see how hard truths are challenging but necessary for spiritual growth and maturity. Spiritually mature disciples help to fulfill Jesus’ dream of a united, beloved community. But have no fear: Through God’s baptismal waters we were (re)born for this.

 **Read:** Luke 4:14-30 (printed below)

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in*

*your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

Imagine being at the synagogue in Nazareth, where Jesus is preaching on the book of Isaiah, and watching as this religious crowd abruptly changes from an audience of attentive worshippers to a murderous mob.

Perhaps you’ve heard the saying “No one is a prophet in their hometown.” That saying originates from this biblical passage, where Jesus visits the synagogue in his hometown and begins to preach about Isaiah 61: 1-2a. Our Savior intentionally chooses this passage from Isaiah. Initially, the hearers are impressed and shower him with praise! But then Jesus attempts to reveal to the people a deeper understanding of God’s activity in and among humanity. When Jesus tells them what “the truth is,” God’s truth infuriates them. What truth is this, exactly? Jesus boldly proclaims the truth that the Good News extends beyond the people of the original covenant. Said another way, Jesus is declaring that other lives matter. And this proclamation morphs the righteous worshippers into a mob that immediately attempts to execute our Savior.

Can you see how the Good News was a message of inclusivity and diversity? This apparently

enraged the religious people of Nazareth. And this same gospel message, a message of inclusivity and diversity, continues to be met with conflict from within some congregations today. We can see this sobering, but not surprising, tension when we resist the urge to romanticize our understanding of Jesus. If we present Jesus as only a sweet savior or tender shepherd or even a babe who is meek and mild, we are forgetting that Jesus is controversial, and at times, downright scandalous. After all, Jesus later asks his disciples, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (Luke 12:51).

In the lead-up to Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, a young lawyer tries to negotiate with Jesus the exact terms of salvation. Christians today are still trying to negotiate this. Let’s read the story of the Good Samaritan.

 **Read:** Luke 10:25-37

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. Why do you think Jesus answers the young lawyer’s questions with a question and a story?
2. Do you think that Jesus’ ways of asking deeper questions and listening to stories are good ways to engage with difficult situations or challenges? Why or why not?
3. How has asking deeper questions or listening to a story helped you to consider (or reconsider) a difficult situation or challenge?

Notice in this passage the way the lawyer asks Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25).

Jesus does not give an easy answer, but asks a

question of his own: “What is written in the scriptures?” The lawyer answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart... and your neighbor as yourself.”

But here’s where the lawyer gets into difficulty. It seems he believes (and wants to confirm) that he is essentially a pretty good person. He asks Jesus a clarifying question, one that attempts to set parameters on God’s love: “Who is my neighbor?”

Once again Jesus does not give an easy answer, but a story—the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of this parable is to teach us that God’s love knows no boundary or nationality. God commands us to care for the foreigner just as we care for ourselves. Yet we as Christian individuals and congregations today still struggle to accept the inclusivity of the Good News. The gospel truth, it seems, is a difficult truth.

Consider how, in the current climate of racial tensions amid many challenging national events, we strive to maintain an open posture to God’s wisdom revealed through the Holy Spirit. Keeping our posture open to God’s wisdom helps us receive the Good News even when it feels uncomfortable. But seriously, how many of us read a parable of Jesus and simply assume that we are like the ones in the parable who’ve gotten it right? How many times do we take it for granted that we’ve made the ethical choice or believed the proper thing, so we are receiving the affirmation or blessing?

Here is where remembering that the Good News is also the gospel truth can help us journey faithfully—even when we, like the people in Scripture, encounter difficult or even destabilizing revelations. For example, we may recognize the role we have intentionally or unintentionally played in a modern-day version of the Good Samaritan story. Or perhaps in the account of Jesus preaching at the synagogue in Nazareth we suddenly recognize a little of our own resistance?

Certainly, we would never want to hurl Jesus

off a cliff, not even figuratively! However, perhaps there are some of Christ's teachings that cause us discomfort; some teachings that, if we had a say, we might opt to toss out? Perhaps extending welcome to strangers? Or forgiving the sins of others? I confess that while I'm thrilled that God forgives our sins, I've also sometimes wished that forgiving other people was optional!

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Which of Christ's teachings do you think were most controversial in biblical times? Why?
5. Which of Christ's teachings are challenging for our church community today? In what ways do you see some congregations or groups addressing those challenging teachings?
6. Which of Christ's teachings are challenging for you right now?
7. Have you witnessed or read about how the church reinforces systems of sexism, racism, ableism, ageism and other forms of exclusion or discrimination?
8. Have you witnessed or read about how the church is inviting, including and lifting up the gifts of all people? Share an example.

 **Read:** Acts 9:1-22

It's hard to fathom that the apostle Paul, the person credited with writing nearly two-thirds of the New Testament, was once the villain of the story. But yes indeed, Paul was once Saul, a respected leader who "imprisoned and beat those

who believed" in Jesus (Acts 22:19), while declaring that he was acting on the highest authority in the land. Enraged by the early church, Saul pursued Jesus' followers, seeking out the early Christians and persecuting them. Saul believed he was on a mission from God. He was absolutely certain that he was doing the right thing. But he was absolutely wrong. God had to physically stop Saul from continuing in this violent direction. Jesus interrupted Saul's vision of what was right by preventing him from using his physical sight. Then God worked through Ananias, a member of the very people Saul wanted to oppress, to bring him healing. God used the person who was oppressed to open the eyes of the oppressor. And Saul became Paul. What was true for him as he began his journey to Damascus was no longer true by the time he arrived.

The writer of Acts informs us that "something like scales fell from [Paul's] eyes and his sight was restored." Removing the scales from his eyes was an act of divine healing. This healing was both physical and relational. Not only did Paul get his eyesight back, but now he could see the world and God's people in new and holy ways. This was a sign of God's grace! God's saving action changed Paul's very identity. Paul now belonged to Christ! His very existence now spoke to God's desire for radical transformation for the sake of the Good News!

**THE REFLECTION OF GOD**

When we consider our own motives, biases and mistakes, we may wonder if we are truly capable of such a radical transformation as Paul's. But we, like Paul, are made in God's image (a concept that theologians call *imago Dei*). Don't believe me? Look into a mirror.

As you gaze into the mirror, inhale and exhale deeply once or twice. Now close your eyes and inhale and exhale deeply a few more times. Each time you exhale, say: "God, open my eyes to your truth." When you feel ready, open your eyes and

trace the sign of the cross on your forehead. Say aloud: “I am a beloved child of God.”

As the apostle Paul learned, God calls us beyond our comfort zones. God loves us, empowers us and makes us bold so that we as Christ’s followers can do difficult things and face hard truths. When we look for characters with whom we can identify in this biblical passage, wouldn’t we like to see ourselves always serving in the role of faithful Ananias?

Yet oftentimes we are more like Paul before his conversion. We are often unable to see the ways in which good religious people might be complicit in injustices against God’s creation, people living at the margins of society and anyone we deem “other” or unworthy. “Scales” can prevent the church from seeing Christ’s vision of a united, beloved community.

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

9. Did you know that within the ELCA, female pastors are often paid less than male pastors? There’s a name for this: “the stained-glass ceiling.” If you have a female pastor, do you know if her salary and benefits are equal to the average salary and benefits for a male pastor with a similar position in your synod? If you don’t know, designate someone to ask your pastor or church treasurer, and to find compensation guidelines on your synod’s website.
10. In what ways has God been gracious to you in removing “scales” from your eyes? Is there something you now see differently, thanks to God’s intervention? Or is there still something God may be trying to help you see? What holy work might the Holy Spirit do through you if you could “regain your sight”?

11. Journeying toward truth can be uncertain and uncomfortable. Reflect or write about a time God changed your course in a way that forced you to surrender, leave your comfort zone and rely on others.

📖 **Read:** Acts 22:17-24

In this reading, when Paul returns to Jerusalem and shares the Good News, also saying that he is being sent to the Gentiles, he is attacked and eventually imprisoned.

12. Why do you think the people attacked Paul? What do you think causes people to completely dismiss a message and even attack the messenger when they disagree with the content of the message?

#### **LET’S GET REAL NOW, Y’ALL**

The biblical accounts of Jesus’ proclamation in his hometown and Paul’s radical conversion still speak to the current realities of life. Today many people are connecting in virtual spaces for community, work, worship and education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we and/or our loved ones have juggled home, family, job responsibilities and virtual meeting after virtual meeting. Over the last year, many of us have set up video-conferencing devices in nontraditional spaces in our homes—kitchens, bedrooms and even front porches! I jokingly say that I have a state-of-the-art home studio. But it’s not really. It’s just an odd room in our house that’s too big for a closet and too small for an office. It has no windows and no door, but you wouldn’t know it if you saw me at some point in the last year on *Good Morning America* or *ABC News*. You would only see a lovely, perfectly staged background. However, if you were to pan one centimeter in any direction, you might just see the messy truth of my life.

I’m pretty sure I’m not alone in using selective



video-conferencing presentation. Many of us feel pressured to portray a polished image to the public. We hide our dirty laundry, unmade beds and piles of dishes just outside of web-camera range. So if many of us are doing this, maybe our history books are doing it too. Perhaps the picture-perfect nation that you and I have learned about actually more closely resembles our own homes. Yes, my country, the United States of America, is arguably the greatest country on Earth. But what would we see across the landscape of this country's history if we panned the proverbial camera widely? The hard truth is that the history of our United States, much like our own virtual backgrounds, is less than perfect. Married to our glorious accomplishments and noble ideals, we also find broken treaties, blankets infected with smallpox, a Trail of Tears, chattel slavery, sexism, Japanese internment camps, voter suppression and, sadly, much more.

As a Black woman, a pastor, a mother, a wife and a community leader, I have a hard truth to share with you: Racism is alive and well, including in the church communities you know and love. What do I mean by racism? Well, while any group can experience racial prejudice or discrimination, racism is the prejudice and discrimination that are unfairly baked into society's power structures.

And there are other hard truths too. One can be nice and act in racist ways at the same time. One can be nice and benefit from a system that gives white people greater access to power and resources than people of color in the same situation.

Racism isn't rare. For every story of racism you hear from a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous or Person of Color) Christian who speaks out, there are hundreds more stories that remain unspoken.

Many of us good churchgoers advocate for ending racial injustice. But we can't hug away (or quilt away or bake away) racism. And if the majority of white Americans wanted to dismantle institutional racism, they would.

We can commit to learning more about racism

and white supremacy. We can recognize that denying the existence of racism may be driving out the prophets in our church who are speaking the truth. As Christians, facing the sins of oppression can be a painful, difficult process for us, yet doing so can remove "scales," uncover truths and lead to holy, amazing transformation. After all, each week we confess together that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. Yet God is faithful! Jesus tells us that "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). We are called to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us with wisdom into all truth. As church together, we have a responsibility to educate and equip ourselves for this life-giving work. Hopefully, this Bible study session is one small step in that direction.

## CONCLUSION

Sisters and brothers, receiving a hard truth is difficult. If you were seeking a Bible study session that affirms your goodness but does not challenge you to let the scales fall from your own eyes, you are probably less than pleased right now. Please do not hurl this author off a cliff. I am inviting you to come with me on the often-uncomfortable journey of allowing the gospel truth to transform our faith life. God's wisdom, around and within us, guides us to God's truth. Even when these truths are difficult to embrace, as in the days of the early church, we still have hope, and hope is an act of faith because "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Next month, the third and final session in this Bible study will explore "Just Hope."

## CLOSING PRAYER

As a closing prayer, sing, say or listen (visit <https://youtu.be/cJdwOYF3OTs>) to the words of a new hymn, "Ask the Complicated Questions" (ACS 1005). Write down the verse that most resonates with you, and reflect on it throughout the week. 🌿

# *Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)*

## Session two

Just truth

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

Welcome to our second session together, Just Truth. Please know that this session will undoubtedly pluck some heartstrings for participants in momentous and challenging ways. We will directly address issues of systemic oppression including racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.

### KEEP PARTICIPANTS IN MIND

Let participants know that because this Bible study addresses oppression, some Biblical texts and contemporary connections may cause varying degrees of discomfort for participants. Tell participants that although some topics may feel uncomfortable at first, discussing these together is an opportunity for us as Christians to broaden our understanding and grow beyond our comfort zones. For this reason, it's also important to have all participants agree that your meeting space, whether in person or online, will be a judgment-free zone where all participants understand that God's grace always abounds.

### CREATING A WELCOMING SPACE

Remember that the people who come to Bible studies and other congregation-related events come from many different backgrounds and experiences. Some have been hurt by churches; others may have little or no previous experience engaging with church, the Bible or the topic at hand.

Our role as Bible study leaders is to create space for people to wrestle with and listen to what the Spirit is saying to them through Scripture. We do this in community by engaging with the scriptural texts and topics, asking open-ended questions and inviting people to deeply consider how Scripture intersects with the current state of their lives.

To help create a safe and welcoming space:

- Share some introductions at the beginning of the session—say a few brief words about your church, your group and how engaging with the Bible through group study can help us to know God, love God and participate in God's work in the world.
- Use common language (instead of church-insider language, such as abbreviations) and explain churchy words like disciple (“a follower of Christ”) and stewardship (“living as people or stewards who recognize that everything we have belongs to God”).
- Create some ground rules for all to follow.
  1. We will practice active listening (listening to understand, not to reply or rebut).
  2. We will treat all comments made as confidential, not to be shared with anyone outside of the circle of attendees.
  3. We will ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak.
  4. We will neither interrupt nor monopolize the conversation.
  5. We will agree to keep comments to a time limit (perhaps two minutes each), so everyone can participate.
  6. We will use respectful language (no derogatory words or harmful references).

Remember: Christians are not a monolith. It is OK if we disagree. At times, group participants may become offended or defensive. During these instances, your response as a leader will set the tone for how we live into the Beloved Community, even

when doing so is messy.

After you have laid this foundation for your time together, begin with prayer and the opening hymn. Or feel free to reverse this order and begin with the song if this speaks best to your context.

### TIPS FOR LEADING THIS DISCUSSION

1. Recognize that it may be difficult for people to remain open to different perspectives when they are feeling disconnected from themselves and others. Disconnection can naturally lead to a feeling of hopelessness.
2. Model and hold openness to different perspectives for them until they can join you. (When you are able to believe in the person's ability to overcome their current disillusionment, frustration or anger and to build something new, you hold space for openness.).
3. Guide group members to think about connection. Throughout your time together, remind participants that your space is sacred, you are held together as the body of Christ and you all are surrounded and supported by God's abundant grace.
4. Consider different ways of moving through the discussion questions. You may want to discuss in small groups of three. Or if space allows, write the discussion questions on a whiteboard or jumbo sticky notes posted on the walls, then invite everyone to write their answers on these. Or perhaps you might have participants journal their responses to questions. Invite some people to volunteer to share their responses, stressing your group's agreement on confidentiality.
5. Tie connection to belief. Since you have the perspective to know that God is present in both our current circumstance and our tomorrow, hope is possible. As a leader, you can be the keeper of hopefulness in this moment and in the time to come. Be prepared to receive feedback without judgment. You may hear people speak from a

place of pain, anger or disbelief. Be careful not to take any negative comments personally. If the discussions become especially heated, move to the water bowl exercise. Feel free to reiterate at any time and as often as needed that we are beloved children of God. God loves us when we agree and when we disagree. As a leader, you can help participants to connect with the emotional and spiritual wholeness that is not only possible, but inevitable when our connection is restored with others and more importantly with God. Thank you for your boldness!

### "WASHED CLEAN" EXERCISE (FOR USE WHEN NEEDED)

Materials: Large bowl, water, precut strips of paper, pencils or pens for writing.

Ask participants to write their laments, sorrows, anger, etc., on precut strips of paper.

Have people ball up the papers holding their written words and throw them into the large bowl of water.

Tell participants they no longer carry this heavy baggage. Say that God has washed them clean in the water of forgiveness. (Remind them that baptism connects them to Jesus and each other.) Invite them to dip their fingers into a little water and trace the sign of the cross on their own heads.

Before or during your session: Considering lighting a candle now if you have not already done so, as light is often a symbol for wisdom, truth and hope for the future. Or, instead of a candle, as a sign of wisdom, truth and hope, consider bringing in small containers, each with a young plant seedling that is sprouting. 🌱



# Dear God, thank you for...

Look! A bird!

BY ANNA MADSEN





**I AM THE WORLD'S LOUSIEST PRAYER-ER.**

Never been good at it. I've gone to workshops, consulted with spiritual directors and even tried praying about it. Didn't work. Partly, it's because I get lost in thought during the actual prayer.

Sometimes I go into so many other thought-lands that I can't find my *way* back. Sometimes I actually forget that I was praying.

In seminary, I took a personality inventory called the Myers-Briggs that determined I was at that time (this can change throughout your lifetime) an ENFP type (for Extroverted, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceiving).

A classmate brought in a Prayer Profile based on Myers-Briggs evaluations. Under ENFP, there was a little cartoon of a stick person earnestly trying to pray. The thought bubble went something like this: "Dear God, thank you for ... Look! A bird!"

It's still like that. "Dear God, thank you for all that you have given our family: love, a home, food ... Wait, we need groceries. Where's my list?" And so it goes.

I've gotten to the point where I have stopped saying, "You're in my prayers," because that optimistically suggests that I will pray. I *want* to pray. I *should*

pray. But I only say this if I am absolutely positive that I can and will do it right then and there. I will say, however, “You are in my thoughts,” because that is undoubtably true.

Some have tried to console me by saying that there are different forms of prayer, and that thinking about someone, or fixing meals for those in need, or writing blogs, or reading theology, or teaching is also a form of prayer. I appreciate the thought, but to me, it’s cheap grace. I just need to own that I am a terrible, lousy, pray-er.

That’s the first confession.

The second confession is that sometimes Scripture makes me angry. I don’t mean that it makes me angry when I hear something in it that is too challenging or uncomfortable. I mean that words in Scripture sometimes seem so out of touch with reality, so simplistic, that it ticks me off.

But I have rolled up my sleeves and wrestled with Jesus’ words about prayer in Luke 11:1-13. What most irked me?

*“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches find, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to*

*give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* (Luke 11:9-13)

It’s interesting to read the range of ways in which theologians try to come to terms with these words.

Some commentators say that if you just pray hard enough, all that you ask for in God’s name will be true. That, friends, isn’t necessarily the case. This can be a set up for disappointment and anger and feelings of being betrayed by God. How many of us have prayed to God for healing, for reconciliation, for hope or for faith, only to be answered with a deep and echoing silence? Or we might even “receive” the exact opposite of what we believe to be right and good in God’s name.

Other commentators say that God *does* answer our prayers, but just not in the way that we expect or want. That’s sophistry, an argument born out of a need to make sure that Scripture is literally true, more than a need to attend to the real and justified feeling of being abandoned by God in a moment (or several strung-together moments) of deep need. It seems we are sometimes afraid to acknowledge a very real feeling experienced by our biblical ancestors, as reflected in several of the psalms and other scriptures.

It also is a thinly veiled way of suggesting that everything that happens must be because God wants it that way. How many

people prayed for Hitler to stop, for the civil rights movement to succeed? How many pray for wars to end, for hunger to be sated, for hate to evaporate, and yet such atrocities persist, and even grow? Do we really want to say that God answers our prayers by letting war and hunger and hate run rampant?

So, no. It is not satisfactory to say that when we don’t get our prayers answered in the way we want, what we get clearly must be what God wants.

In fact, some say that the reference to snakes and scorpions gets exactly to that point: Fishermen sometimes caught a sea snake instead of their needed fish, and a scorpion, when curled up, could look like an egg. It would be a cruel joke for anyone to arrange things so that one gives something painfully other than the thing it was promised to be. God does not play these sorts of perverse games.

Instead, hope comes in Luke 11:13: “If you, then, who are *evil*, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Ah. Breakthrough coming. The word “Holy” defines what Jesus has in mind: the *Holy* Spirit, the *set apart* Spirit, the *hallowed* Spirit.

Remember that the whole context of this passage is that of the disciples wanting Jesus to teach them to pray. It was

customary that each rabbi (which is what Jesus was, of course—a Jewish rabbi) had a defining prayer, a prayer that was not only unique to him, but an encapsulation of this rabbi's essential teachings, of who this rabbi *was*. So when the disciples asked him to teach them to pray, they weren't so much asking Jesus to teach them in the way I've tried to learn (through classes and monasteries and prayer workshops). The disciples were asking Jesus to tell them who he was, what his vision of God was and what his vision of those who followed him was.

"Teach us to pray" could just as well have been: Teach us to align ourselves with you. Teach us who you, in the name of God, are.

With that in mind, we look differently both at the *end* of this passage (v. 13), where Jesus promises that if we pray for the Holy Spirit, it will be offered to us, and at the *beginning* of this passage (vv. 1-4), where Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer.

We see that both have something to do with the Holy Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit has something to do with God, and that the Holy Spirit has to do with community, even the community of those whom we do not know or do not like.

The prayer isn't about my wishes or your wishes. It is about God's wishes for *us*. It's a prayer in the plural. Give *us*. Forgive *us*—as we forgive those indebted to *us*. Do not bring *us* into trial. It's a prayer for the community,

by the community, to the God of community.

Notice that the in-between verses are about expansive hospitality, even hospitality at the cost of annoyance to some people as it is brought into being.

Here is where my anger at this text abates. Some years ago, I was invited to go to a Sioux Falls Professional Women's Organization meal. The journalist Lisa Ling was the presenter there. Almost as an afterthought, at the very end of her speech, Ms. Ling told the audience that she was agnostic, but that she had married a dedicated Christian. One day, after a particularly rough series of news stories she had done on trauma and hardship and violence done to "the least of these" across the globe, she said in exasperation, "I do not understand why this God of yours doesn't do something about these situations!" And her husband looked at her and said, quietly, "God did. God sent us you."

This prayer—that Jesus taught his disciples and still teaches us—is a communal touchstone, a grounding point for aligning us with God's vision and God's agenda for the world. All should be fed. All should be forgiven sins and debts. All should be protected.

It is a prayer that is powerfully political: God's kingdom is not ours, and yet it is, in fact, defined by our feeding, our forgiving, our protecting and our

welcoming.

Let *that* kingdom come.

That sort of inbreaking and action takes breath.

It takes holy breath.

It takes Holy Spirit.

And so Jesus seems to be saying at the very end of this passage that when we pray that prayer, we are praying for the Holy Spirit to come and fill us so that we can be ambassadors of feeding and forgiving and protecting and welcoming.

When we pray it, God promises that the Holy Spirit will come.

Let us recall that the only reason we are still paying attention to this prayer is because these very same disciples believed that Jesus is risen from the dead.

That means that life, not death, is God's agenda. Life is a mark of God's reign.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we become disciples too—disciples of God's reign, agenda and vision.

Praying the Lord's Prayer, then, is dangerous stuff... freeing stuff... powerful stuff... communal stuff—for those we know and don't know, for those we like and don't like. It invokes the Holy Spirit, which I don't advise doing lightly. It's a wily strategy on Jesus' part too.

Even I can remember the Lord's Prayer and follow it through all the way to the end.

I do see a bird occasionally, though, when I pray it. It looks remarkably like a dove. 🕊

### OPENING PRAYER

As an opening prayer, sing, say or listen to the words of a new hymn, “Let Us Enter In” (ACS 985). Write down the verse that most resonates with you, and reflect on this throughout the week.

### FOCUS VERSE

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*
- *All Creation Sings: ELW Supplement (ACS)*
- Notebook or journal

# *Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)*

## Session three

Just hope

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

### WELCOME

Welcome to “Just Hope,” the third and final session of the Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!) Bible study. Session 1, Just Wisdom, explored God’s gift of Wisdom (“Sophia” in biblical Greek). Sophia/Wisdom is different from all other knowledge, for it can only be revealed to us by God. Sophia/Wisdom was present from the beginning of creation and is present with us today. Jesus promised that the Spirit of Wisdom would guide us into all truth, which led us into Session 2, Just Truth. In Session 2, we explored Jesus’ words to his disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Even as the disciples struggled to embrace difficult understandings, God’s Spirit of Wisdom would help them to face even what they could not bear to hear. We, too, are called to open ourselves to God’s challenging revelations of truth even when they shake us up—revealing to us or reminding us of areas where something else may have gotten in the way of our accepting God’s just and loving way. Ultimately, truth is necessary to help us mature spiritually so that we, as the body of Christ, can usher in the reign of God.

### BODY AND BONES

As I was writing this Bible study, there was one week when radio, television, print and online news



seemed to offer precious little in the way of hope. Tornadoes and other severe weather ravaged parts of the United States. A subway overpass collapsed in Mexico City, killing dozens. During a religious celebration in Israel, at least 45 people were trampled to death and hundreds were injured. The COVID-19 infection rate and death toll had reached staggering proportions in India and Brazil. In the US, acts of violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) increased. And Black, brown and Indigenous communities continued to work to dismantle deeply rooted forms of oppression that had only recently become more visible to the broader population. Yet despite the news cycle, it was and still is the perfect time for hope, and not just any hope.

We can know from our very bodies, from deep in our bones, that this is a time for hope in Christ. We can consider Paul's description of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). We can travel through the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). And in considering both the body and the bones, we see how we are revived by the power of the resurrection breath of God's Spirit.

## **BODY ACHES**

📖 **Read:** Corinthians 12:12-26

Most of us know what it feels like to experience suffering in our bodies. For some of us, aches and pains show up temporarily after a long hike or a weekend of gardening. All it may take is a hot bath, some ibuprofen and a few days of recovery to return to normal, pain-free living. But for others of us, those aches and pains are our constant companions due to arthritis, injury or other long-term medical situations. Strangely enough, when bodily pain becomes a more frequent presence in our lives, we may become more adept at hiding or ignoring that pain. Knowing how we sometimes mask our pain,

I invite you to reread verse 26 and consider the body of Christ imagery, including "If one member suffers..."

We can sometimes ignore bodily pain or discomfort for quite a while, can't we? Or we might just delay our yearly physical, our annual mammogram or our next scheduled visit (or visits) to the dentist, figuring that we can put these off. We reason that it's not urgent yet, because we feel okay or the pain is only intermittent. But then our back goes out, or we find a lump, or a tooth sends out shooting pain. And then we realize that ignoring one part of our body has caused our whole self to suffer.

How we treat our body is connected to the way we treat the body of Christ. The apostle Paul writes that when one part of the body suffers, the other parts suffer with it. When we ignore the part of the body of Christ that is hurting, we might limp along (or function without noticing the pain much) for quite a long time before we realize how deeply the suffering affects the whole body of Christ.

What if we could be more tuned in to the whole body of Christ? What if we began to recognize and faithfully act when a part of our body is hurt and requires caring, focused attention and resources? What if we listened as the Great Physician explains that the way we are walking and the shoes we are wearing are unnecessarily hurting not just our soles, but our souls? What if some parts of the body did not have to suffer as long and as deeply because the rest of the body became more responsive? What if the apostle Paul is calling the church, not just then but also now, to listen for opportunities to help restore the parts of the body of Christ that are suffering?

## **EARS TO HEAR**

My friend Dawn shares a story about her father, Dean. Dean began to experience hearing loss almost two decades ago. Dawn remembers the onset of this condition, when she began to realize that she

needed to repeat some things, speak loudly, enunciate more clearly and make eye contact with her dad when they spoke. Her father tried a few hearing aids (and sometimes lost them), but these never seemed to give much help.

The pandemic further compounded the effects of his hearing loss. Due to mask wearing, Dean, like many others with hearing impairment, could no longer rely on the usual conversational and facial cues.

Last year, during a family visit, Dawn scheduled an appointment for her dad to see a licensed audiologist. After a complete audiological exam, this doctor programmed state-of-the-art hearing aids for Dean. When Dean placed these devices in his ears, his world changed. So did Dawn's. Dean's hearing was enhanced beyond their hopes. He could now hear normal conversations. No need to repeat words. No need to yell. Their family continues to marvel at his restored hearing.

According to this audiologist, many people start noticing hearing loss 7 to 10 years before they request a comprehensive hearing exam. Even though hearing loss leads to suffering—including challenges in social relationships and difficulty with daily functions—the rest of the body will continue to compensate for the loss until one finally seeks relief from suffering.

### **Share aloud or reflect:**

1. How might life be different if a decline in hearing or walking were addressed much earlier?
2. Imagine what would happen if part of a human body suffered without restoration. Now imagine what happens when part of the body of Christ suffers without restoration. Share how this can happen with a physical body. Then share how

this can happen to the body of Christ.

Jesus desires unity for the body of Christ. Unity requires intentionality. Even when we are tempted to ignore members of the body whom we might label as lesser, we are called to resist that urge and tend to the healing of the whole body.

Sometimes the members of the body become disjointed and out of alignment with each other. Once, while I was preaching a sermon at a suburban congregation, I mentioned the names of several Black people who had died while in police custody. Some members were outraged and severed their memberships. One person was so incensed that I had “read their names” that she made an appointment with me to tell me that I was raising my children to be thugs. Not only would she transfer her membership, she said, but she would also withdraw her financial support to the congregation *immediately*. It was clear that part of the body of Christ was suffering violence. But it was also clear that suffering was a pain that other parts of the body thought could be ignored.

At other times, the body suffering together can be a powerful testimony to our unity in Jesus Christ. In 2005, Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Racine, Wisconsin, gave us a wonderful baby shower. That day it dawned on me that the word “shower” means more than “party” or “small festive gathering.” I had never before made the connection to actual gifts “raining down” upon people like a shower. That day we were showered with so many baby presents that we could barely fit them all into our car! Our church family overwhelmed us with their cheerful generosity and kindness. Tragically, about two weeks later, our baby girl was born early and still. The following Sunday, when Pastor Tracy shared the news of our stillbirth, some members of the congregation wept openly in the pews. Our faith community's abundant joy at the baby shower was followed by a deep, communal lament. It was just as Paul encouraged

the early Christians: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

Our Savior’s has since closed its doors, yet this tender memory of how our church family embodied the teachings of Paul is engraved on my heart forever. They rejoiced with us. They suffered with us. You know that popular adage, “It takes a village to raise a child”? It takes a village to mourn a child as well. These are the ways in which we can be the body of Christ for one another.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

3. Have you ever had a health issue or pain in your body that you ignored or overlooked? What happened?
4. Are there parts of the body of Christ that we overlook?
5. Share about a time when the body of Christ comforted you.

**HOPE IN OUR BONES**

Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian exile. The Babylonian army had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, leaving the people impoverished and facing multiple crises. God’s people were experiencing an identity crisis, a physical crisis and a spiritual crisis. Their trauma was so deep that it brought God’s very faithfulness into question.

📖 **Read:** Ezekiel 37:1-14

Now reread verse 11: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” When all hope is lost, God uses the prophet Ezekiel, bringing him to the valley of dry bones where he is surrounded by the skeletal remains of a mighty people now defeated. Don’t you wonder what was going through the prophet’s mind in these moments?

**Confusion? Fear? Trauma?**

When God poses a preposterous possibility, “Can these bones live?” (v. 3), Ezekiel doesn’t dare offer his own answer. He does the equivalent of shrugging his holy prophet shoulders. He says simply, “O Lord God, you know.”

I have to say that what happens next in the Ezekiel story gives me strength to face even my most challenging days. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones. The dry bones come together and stand up, but there is no life in them. Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath, saying, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (v. 9). So Ezekiel calls for the Great Breath to come and breathe on the dry bones. And those dry bones live! They actually live!

The Great Breath imagery hearkens back to the creation story in Genesis, where God’s Spirit broods over the waters, and the Creator blows the breath of life into humanity. Not only does Ezekiel’s prophecy reach all the way back to creation; it also reaches ahead to Jesus and his disciples in the upper room, where Jesus breathes on them and says: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). No matter how severe our valley or how dry our bones, we are never without hope. Neither are we cut off (Ezekiel 37:11). Jesus Christ is our hope. Jesus Christ will bring to life what was once dried, hopeless and forgotten.

It’s important to remember that God is greater than societal expectations and greater than human traditions. God is not limited by our narrow definitions. God isn’t even confined by our assumptions. Because of this, the hope we have deep in our bones is far beyond a fleeting wish. Our hope in Christ is real. For people of faith, hope is life-giving oxygen. It is necessary for life—as essential as food, clothing and shelter.

All of us experience times of discouragement. It is part of the human condition. Sometimes our situations obscure our vision, and hope is difficult to

discern. In these bleak moments, I encourage you to look again. Hope is there.

It can be easy to recognize hope in the rainbow after a violent storm or in the sunrise after a long, cold night. Perhaps you've held hope in your hands as you gazed into the face of a healthy newborn baby. Or maybe you experienced hope during a time of career or financial growth.

It's not as easy to see hope when tears are flowing in a hospice room or when you've been laid off from work, with no health insurance, during a global pandemic. Hope may seem absent when your marriage is falling apart or the home you've lived in for 30 years is in foreclosure. Thanks be to God, through the gift of the body of Christ our hope is bigger than our human situations.

Hope is the divine presence in our lives. Hope is dynamic, indomitable, ever-present and—like the air we breathe—it is everywhere. There is hope in the bones of life, even when they are dried up, dusty, lying in death's valley.

Through joys and sorrows, confidence and fear, scarcity and abundance, belief and doubt; in adventure or fear, unemployment or job promotion, good credit or bad, marriage or divorce, baptisms or funerals; on the mountaintop and in the valley, God breathes hope into the body of Christ—all the way down to our bones! Hope is our oxygen, so let's inhale deeply!

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. Have you ever experienced a time of "dry bones," when a situation seemed helpless? Share a little about that time.
7. How was God faithful to you? How did God breathe hope into your dry bones? Can you also think of a Bible verse or story that breathes hope into your life?

**Now discuss with others or journal quietly about the following topics:**

8. My Faith: What aspects of your faith make you hopeful?
9. God's Presence: Where does your personal story show signs of God's presence during times of trouble?
10. Dry Bones: Has anything in your life ever stolen your hope for a time? How did you get it back?
11. Family of God: How do others support hope in your life?
12. My Hope: What do you hope for today that is not yet reality?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

God of hope, thank you for your steadfast presence that strengthens, supports and guides us into all truth. Teach us to live as the body of Christ, extending and receiving unconditional love. Encourage us and help us to encourage one another in times of tragedy and uncertainty, relying on your divine hope that abides deep in our bones. Send us forth into the world to act with your compassion and grace. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**CLOSING HYMN**

"The Lord Now Sends Us Forth" (*ELW* 538) 🌿

## UPCOMING BIBLE STUDIES

This month we are finishing up our three-session study on Just L.I.F.E. Interested in what's next? Here's what we have in store:

### FALL 2021

#### **The gift of the Spirit**

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

Celtic Christians likened the Holy Spirit not to a dove, but to a goose. In this three-session study we will go on our own divine Wild Goose chase. We'll track the Holy Spirit's actions throughout the Bible and throughout our lives. We'll explore how the Spirit moves God's people into adventures and lives we would never dare risk on our own.

#### SESSION 1:

##### SPIRIT OF GOD: REVEALER AND RESOURCE

The Holy Spirit might be the most misunderstood or mysterious member of the Trinity, but the Spirit of scripture is not shy. Together we'll uncover the bold, truth-telling Spirit active in our lives. After a quick review of the mystery of the Trinity, we'll read parts of Jesus' farewell discourse, and hear how the Spirit continues to reveal the truth of Jesus to us and to the world. We'll discuss how the gift of the Holy Spirit is a resource for God's people, giving us power we need to do God's work.

#### SESSION 2:

##### BREATH OF GOD: REVIVER AND REFORMER

The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, giving life and building community. Beginning with the breath God gave that first human, continuing

with the breath that made dry bones dance, God's Spirit continues to revive us. We will see the ways that the Spirit gives life—not just to us as individuals, but to our communities, reconciling us and forming us into life-giving communities, even in our diversity.

#### SESSION 3:

##### WIND OF GOD: REFINER AND RE-ROUTER

The Holy Spirit is the wind of God, moving us into deeper faithfulness and more authentic love. We'll see the ways in which God's Spirit moves us to bear good fruit in the world and refines us into our truest selves. We will also follow the Spirit's movements through the early church to see how the Spirit re-routes God's people, guiding us into transformed lives and renewed communities of faith.

### DECEMBER 2021

Advent devotional/study

### JANUARY-APRIL 2022

#### **The kingdom of God**

BY MARK ALLEN POWELL

A four-session study on the kingdom of God will kick off the new year with a look at Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, a present and future reality. Together we'll look at Jesus' parables, and other scriptures about the present, the future and eternal life.

*Visit [gathermagazine.org](http://gathermagazine.org) for more exciting updates in the coming months!*



### OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

If you wish to provide another entry point for people, before the session begins, post three reflection questions on a whiteboard or three large pieces of paper. If you are meeting online, post these reflection questions in the chat. Here are the questions: 1. What is hope? 2. Why is it important? 3. Where does it come from?

If you are meeting in person, leave some blank space around these questions. As participants arrive in person (or join an online meeting), invite them to respond by writing one or two words per person under each question.

Later in the meeting, during a short stretch break, take a couple of minutes to share/read aloud the questions and short answers. You might say, “When you all first arrived, I invited you to share some of the basic ideas we bring to a discussion of hope. As I read aloud your written responses, what do you notice?”

After you’ve read their responses consider saying: “Now I invite you to think about not only the answers you heard, but how those answers might or might not change if you were unchurched... or unemployed... or experiencing discrimination because of your race, age, sex or gender identity... or living in a situation of domestic violence... or dealing with a major health diagnosis or life transition. How do we hope when it is most difficult?”

# *Just L.I.F.E. (Liberation Is For Everyone!)*

## Session three

Just hope

BY ANGELA T. !KHABEB

When we as leaders enter our study group’s meeting space, we are present not only as leaders, but as intentional learners who expect to learn and hear God’s voice from other participants. In other words, when we lead, we are also students! Approaching our Bible study discussions through this lens supports a key principle of Christian education: that learning and growing are always ongoing.

As you prepare to explore “Just Hope,” review the session material you plan to cover. Note the questions participants will be asked, and as a way of preparing, consider your own responses to these questions. For example, participants will be asked to consider what aspects of faith make them hopeful, whether they have ever felt hopeless (as if their hope was stolen for a time), how people of faith support hope and where they’ve seen God’s presence in their own life story. Spend some time exploring your own thoughts about these questions. Understand that people may have different answers to these questions, depending on their life experiences and faith.

As you review the session material, make a list of thoughts and ideas that come to mind, and prepare a brief story you can share from your experience that aligns with the material. This helps participants see how they, too, can make personal connections to the content. It may also help some more reticent participants feel more comfortable with sharing. Make a special note if you experience

any disconnect or dissonance anywhere, as this may also be a point where participants may express discomfort. Be prepared to receive and to listen to critical feedback and offer supportive space.

## WELCOMING ALL

Participants need to know that the Bible study setting is a safe, brave space, grounded in sacred love and community. To create an environment that communicates this safety and love, you might decide to set up a prayer station or light candles or play soft music as people enter the space. You might also consider setting up chairs or tables in something close to a circle. Circular seating is a way to physically indicate that everyone is included and all voices are valued.

As discussed in previous leader guides, do not forget that participants come from many different backgrounds and experiences. Some have been hurt by the church, while others may have little or no previous engagement with the church, the Bible or Bible study. As a leader, be ready to provide basic background information about the church and use common language (not abbreviations). Before the session begins in earnest, offer a quick recap of previous sessions for newcomers or others who may benefit from a quick refresher. Doing so will help to keep people actively engaged in the discussion.

You will also want to outline some ground rules, as with previous sessions. You can do this informally, by listing rules on a whiteboard or presentation slide or in the chat if you are using online videoconferencing.

Here are some potential safe space rules:

1. We commit to active listening (listening to understand, not to reply or rebut).
2. We understand that all comments made are confidential, not to be shared with anyone outside of the circle of attendees.
3. We will strive to not interrupt, and limit speaking time (perhaps to 1-2 minutes) to

ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak.

4. We commit to using respectful language.

Although people may attend Bible study for different reasons, leading Bible study is not about being right or providing the correct answers. Our role as Bible study leaders is to create safe, brave space for participants to wrestle and listen as they discern what the Spirit is saying to them through these holy texts. We do this by asking open-ended questions and actively listening to participants' responses. We also encourage participants to deeply consider just how the Scripture or topic intersects with the current state of their lives. Finally, while it is important for groups to share aloud, opportunities for journaling or writing responses help those who need more time to process and reflect to participate in a meaningful way.

Remember: It's okay if we disagree. Jesus desires unity, not uniformity. Christians are not a monolith. We are on a faith journey together, yet participants may become offended or defensive at times. In these instances, your response will set the tone and serve as an example for living into beloved community, even when doing so is messy.

It may help you to picture the opening and closing prayers as bookends for our Bible study sessions. Beginning and ending with prayer centers us and reminds us of our purpose: to grow to know more about the Triune God and God's inspired Scripture, and to put our faith into action.

Thanks be to God for stirring your spirit to lead! As leaders (who are also students), we are bound to make some mistakes, forget some points or miss some cues. Grace abounds! In your grace-filled space, encourage people to lean on God and each other as they navigate concepts and discussion questions. Trust that the Holy Spirit (the primary actor) is already present and moving in the hearts of all participants, and that all are receiving what they need. And that includes you! 🌿

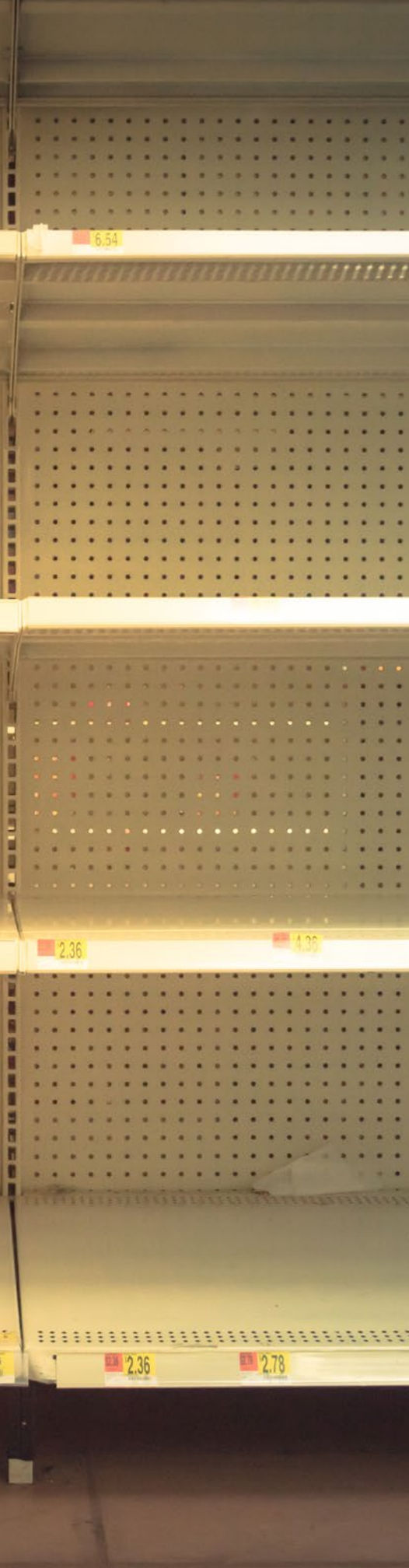


# *The* OPPOSITE of RADICAL GENEROSITY

God doesn't call us to hoard,  
but to serve in times of crisis.

BY BECCA EHRLICH





**AFTER AN EIGHT-DAY FAMILY VACATION** to the Caribbean, we returned home March 15 to the stuff of post-apocalyptic movies. The coronavirus (COVID-19) had spread to the point that we were unsure if we were actually going to make it home. When we did, we were terrified that we wouldn't be able to feed ourselves...or get toilet paper. Or hand sanitizer. Or cleaning wipes. Or cold and sinus remedies.

Why were we so scared about not being able to get food or toilet paper or cleaning supplies or medicine? Because the minute some people heard about the pandemic and imminent self-isolation, they ran to the stores (both in-person and online) and bought as many of these things as they could. Other people, when they saw those people hoarding, followed suit. A good chunk of Americans became hoarders and there was nothing left. We came back to almost completely empty shelves.

Trying to buy what we needed after the locusts had descended was a total nightmare. We had almost no food in our house because we had been away for over a week, and finding food in Philadelphia was extremely difficult—let alone toilet paper or cleaning supplies or medicine. It was incredibly frustrating knowing that these supplies existed,

but they were stockpiled in other peoples' homes. The worst part is that people continued to hoard as the pandemic continued.

When I talk about hoarding, I'm not talking about the actual psychological disorder of hoarding. I'm talking about stockpiling in the face of uncertainty. This kind of hoarding is detrimental to us and our neighbors. Jesus warned us against hoarding and why it hurts us: Hoarding perpetuates fear. One big emotion motivates those who run to hoard in the face of the pandemic—fear. People are afraid of not having enough. So they buy everything they can get their hands on in order to quell the fear and feel like they have control in the face of the uncontrollable. This feeds a vicious cycle of fear, in which people continue to become more fearful and continue to hoard, rather than actually dealing with the fear directly.

Fear is a normal part of being human, especially in a situation over which we have no control, like this pandemic. Jesus's disciples were also afraid when they were in their boat in the middle of terrible wind, and saw Jesus walking on water (Mark 6:45-52). Jesus told them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then Jesus got into the boat and calmed the wind. And they were no longer afraid.

We don't have to hoard things in an effort to quell our fears. In fact, hoarding only feeds our fears. Jesus calms the chaotic wind around us and reminds us not to be afraid. We may not be able to control the pandemic, but we can control our response to it—with Jesus's calming help.

Hoarding illustrates lack of trust in God. We also resort to hoarding when we don't trust that God will do what God promises—to provide for us. We don't trust God, so we attempt to take care of it all ourselves. We can look at Jesus's parable often called "The Rich Fool," about the man who hoarded and built bigger and bigger barns to hold all of his stuff. He was feeling pretty good about himself until:

God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God (Luke 12:20-21).

When we hoard, our behavior becomes a stumbling block to our relationship with God. We stockpile rather than trusting in God to provide. And God does promise to provide. After the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus gave an important reminder:

*And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows*

*that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom* (Luke 12:29-32).

We don't have to hoard things and worry about having what we need. When we seek God, God promises to provide us what we need. And we do not need piles and piles of toilet paper.

Hoarding keeps supplies from others. Perhaps the most disturbing way hoarding hurts us and others is that when we hoard, these supplies are not available to others who need them. We are not the only ones who need things. If everyone bought a normal amount of supplies, everyone would have what they needed. There are plenty of supplies to go around. But rather than just buy a normal amount, a good number of people hoarded, leaving others who need things without a way of getting them.

The minute we put our own wants and gains before the well-being and lives of our neighbors, we miss the call of Christ. We are called as Jesus's disciples to share with each other, and make sure everyone has enough.

Even in the middle of a global pandemic, Christian minimalists aim to live the life Jesus wants for us by focusing on the aspects of life that matter most and intentionally removing everything else. Hoarding is the antithesis of Christian minimalism.

Hoarding hurts all of God's children, including ourselves, and Jesus warned us against it.

We are called to be Jesus to others and see Jesus in others. We are called to live simply and buy only what we need so that others may have what they need. We are called to break the cycle of fear and trust that God provides. And we are called to live into radical generosity by making sure others have access to food and other necessities.

### THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

One of the major reasons that many Christians hesitate to live out radical generosity and serve others is a pervasive American heresy called the "prosperity gospel," which proclaims that wealth and health and success are all a sign of God's favor. Connected to the prosperity gospel is the idea that has been coined "name it, claim it" as in, if we name what material possessions, health, wealth and success we want from God, we will be able to claim those things and have them for ourselves. The prosperity gospel is extremely hurtful, both to those who practice it and to those who come into contact with it through subscribers.

The prosperity gospel causes spiritual crises. If we believe that wealth, health, success and material possessions are all because of God's favor, when we do not have those things we assume that we no longer have God's favor, which can cause a huge faith crisis; if we



believe we no longer have God's favor, then we assume that God no longer loves us because we did something to lose God's love—and we must do something to earn back God's love.

Ephesians 2:8–9 tells us: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” God's grace is given unconditionally to us. God loves us, no matter what. The prosperity gospel can cause us to think otherwise.

The prosperity gospel also promotes conspicuous consumption. Those who subscribe to the prosperity gospel believe that material possessions and being economically well-off shows God's favor. If that is someone's starting point for thinking about wealth and possessions, then it will follow that one should show off one's wealth and possessions, which means buying more and more things and accumulating more and more wealth to show that one does indeed have God's favor. This combines Christianity and American consumer culture in a dangerous way; people are indirectly encouraged to live beyond their means and go into debt in order to live the way prosperity gospel preachers expect.

The prosperity gospel is in direct opposition to Jesus's teachings about money and possessions. Jesus lived among those who were economically poor, and invited those who were rich to

divest themselves of their riches and possessions and share with those in need, like Zacchaeus and the rich young man.

The prosperity gospel keeps us from sharing with those in need. If we believe riches and possessions are an indication of God's favor, we will want to keep that “favor” for ourselves and not share it with those who truly need it. It assumes that economic disparity is not only a given reality, but an act of God. God is against economic disparity and oppression, and invites us to work against them. We see this in Jesus's parable (about the rich man and Lazarus) in Luke 16:10–31; our actions around money and possessions have a wide-reaching effect and we are called to share with those in need.

The prosperity gospel is the antithesis of Christian minimalism. We are still loved and blessed by God, even when we do not have lots of money or wealth or possessions. In fact, Jesus loves us and is with us especially when we are not successful or wealthy. Jesus wants us to shed those things that keep us from being closer to him, not accumulate them. We are called to say no to the prosperity gospel and live the way Jesus wants us to live.

#### **SERVING OTHERS**

As followers of Jesus, and as Christian minimalists, we are invited by Jesus into a life of service. Jesus calls us to specific ways of serving others, using our

God-given spiritual gifts and skills. Let us pray about how God could be calling us to serve others in Jesus's name. Oftentimes the issues that we are passionate about end up being our service calling. We are called to serve others on many different levels:

**Locally:** What are some social justice issues in your local community and region? How can people be fed, clothed, housed? How can you donate money and possessions to help others around you?

**Nationally:** What could be ways you are called to point out and work towards ending economic disparity in our country? How can you be a person that works to tear down systems of oppression and inequality?

**Globally:** How can our world be more just and loving, like Jesus? How can you partner with others to be a force of good on a global scale?

Educate yourself and others on justice issues; stay informed and read news stories that aim to also shed light on injustice and inequality in our world. Know who your local elected officials are, and contact them about issues you are passionate about. As followers of Jesus, we are called to do what Jesus did: to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. 🌿



Your writers and illustrators have helped  
me learn about and connect with God,  
especially through trying times.

*Beth Jenson, Oak Harbor, Ohio*

I read my magazine cover to cover.

*Elaine Rodning, Tacoma, Washington*

As I read/study *Gather* magazine,  
the more appreciative I become...

*Diane Kamler, Lincoln, Nebraska*

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# I began to journal.

BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFSKY

**I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO KEEP A DIARY.** When I was in elementary school, I received a petite pink diary with a lock. I made a few entries, mostly about which boy talked with me or what I was doing in Girl Scouts. Nothing remarkable. Although that diary was long ago recycled, my desire to keep a diary didn't stop there.

I've tried keeping a diary several times since. I have the beautiful, albeit empty, journals to prove it. And when I thought that damage from carpal tunnel syndrome was keeping me from writing by hand (turns out, it really wasn't), I tried keeping a digital diary. That worked as well as the pretty journals.

It was me. Something in me thought I should keep a journal, but another something in me said no way.

Until the pandemic came along.

In April 2020 I began keeping a journal, recording what was happening in the pandemic. Sixteen months later, I am still writing. It's not a daily thing. But I'm into my third journal, recording things about how our lives changed during the pandemic. I've written about baker's yeast and toilet paper shortages, e-learning and worship via Zoom, gardening and grocery home deliveries. I recorded the death of my father-in-law and the cancer diagnosis of my husband, the January 6, 2020 attack on the U.S. Capitol and the extraordinary inaugural poem of Amanda Gorman.

Turns out I'm not alone in having kept a pandemic journal. There have been many encouragements along these lines from articles in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Time*

magazine. Such encouragements remind us that we are living through history, and future historians may look back on our writings—the writings of ordinary people—to describe what it was like to live through the pandemic. There are historic reasons to write it all down. And there are therapeutic reasons too.

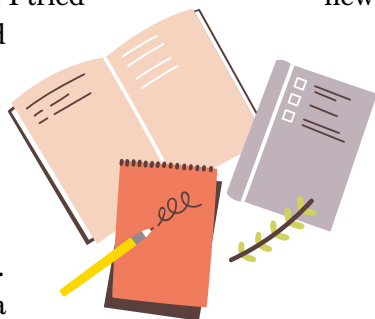
Writing down my observations, fears, hopes and more helped to reduce some of the stress and strain that came during the long months of the pandemic.

With the lines between work and family, private and professional lives blurring in all kinds of new ways, it's been helpful to have a place to sort it all out. Or at least try.

Are you interested in giving journaling a try? Women of the ELCA offers more than 40 free program resources, including "Journaling: Create your own sacred writings." If you're looking for program ideas, I recommend you visit [welca.org/resources](http://welca.org/resources). With so many varied resources, you'll be able to build even more meaningful experiences for the women of your unit.

If you're not part of a congregational unit of Women of the ELCA, you're still welcome to use the free resources produced by Women of the ELCA. Many are ideal for personal use. (Go to [welca.org/resources](http://welca.org/resources) and sort the resources using the "categories" feature.) You might like to invite some friends to explore a resource or two with you. Or suggest one or more of the resources for use in an adult forum in your congregation.

However you use our resources, they are intended as a free gift to help us all to grow in faith and engage in ministry and action. 🌿



# Removing scales, softening hearts

BY CATHERINE MALOTKY

**TEACH US TO SIT IN YOUR GRACE, O GOD**, and trust that you do indeed love us.

It is important to me to understand, God, to know and make sense of things. It is important to me to be a good person, one who follows you, who seeks your will, who aligns my life with your good purposes.

So when I am confronted with something damaging to others in your spectacular creation (human and beyond), something long-lived, deep and persistent, it brings me up short, at least inside.

Like when?

- When I realize that so many places I have lived in and/or loved were once the home of Indigenous people, whose land and way of living were nearly extinguished by our assumption that the land was ours to colonize...
- When I learn that yet another African American has the blood of a plantation owner in their DNA, and I think of the young slave he took for his pleasure...
- When I recognize that the fruits and vegetables I eat are picked by people who brave heat and poison to feed their children, and that the low prices I enjoy are only possible because they are paid a pittance...
- When I confront the reality that my neighbors with darker skin are stopped for minor infractions exponentially more often than I am, and that they too often die in the process...
- When I see Asian elders beaten in broad daylight without apparent provocation...
- When yet again I hear from Christians that

my beloved daughter and her wife are an abomination...

- When I see the wild lands burning and the coastlands degrade and the forests dying and the grasslands plowed...

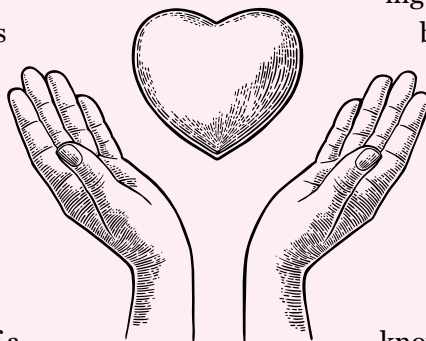
Such moments bring me up short. These truths are not consistent with my understanding of the world we have built. So I rush to defend, to say I didn't know, to ignore, to deflect or blame, to deny. It can't be, can it? Could my own forebears have

elbowed onto Indian land? Could I be enjoying wealth now, four generations in, because my people were advantaged by laws and assumptions that supported them while denying others? Could I harbor deep prejudices that have taken root simply by living in the world I inhabit?

I am learning to answer, "Yes."

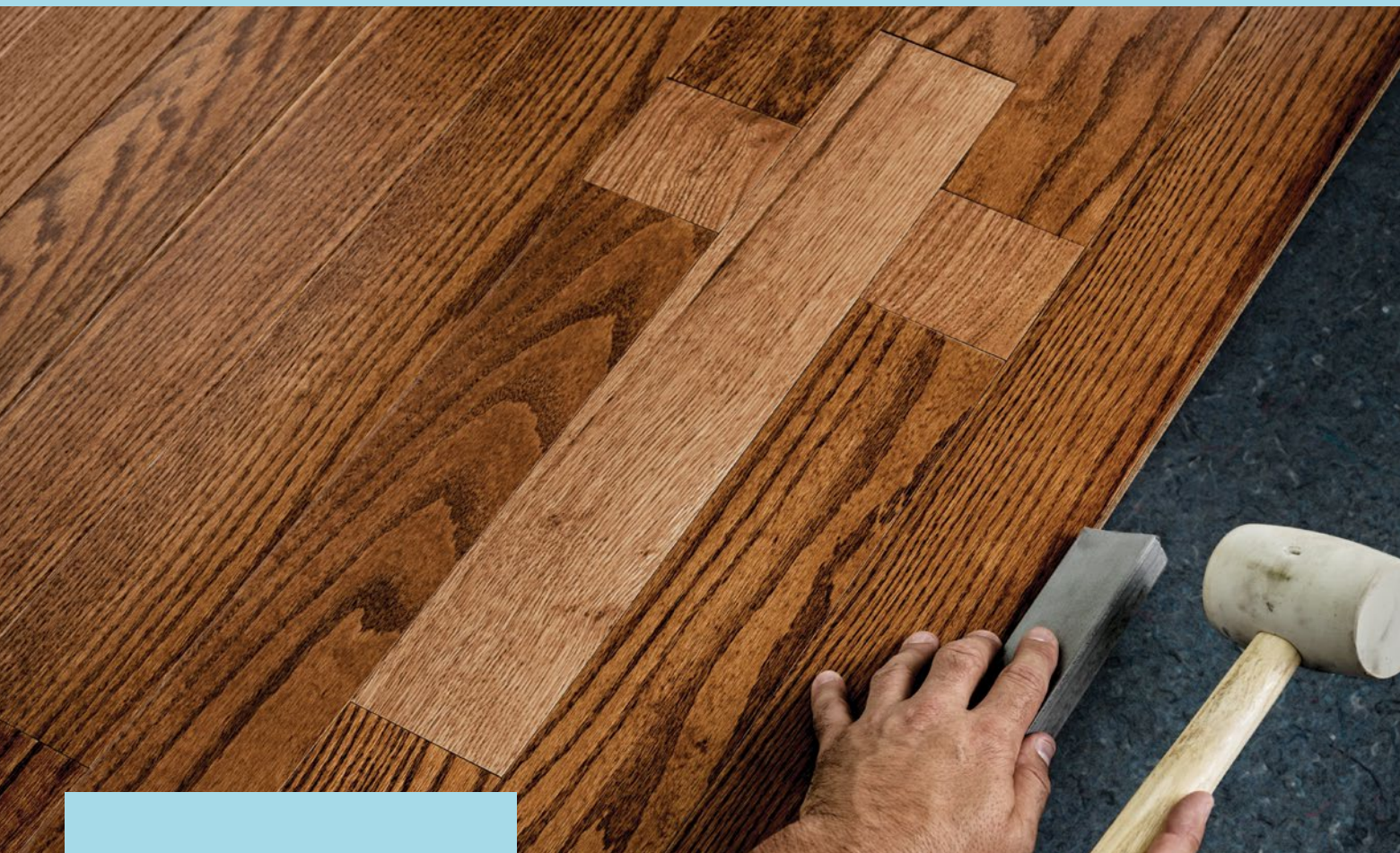
Then comes the discomfort of knowing these truths. I want it all to be tidy, to make amends, to solve it now! But "now" is not the timeline, except for my awareness. I am not the savior, but I am a player in the evolving reconciliation that so needs to be nurtured forward.

God of all nations, grant me grace. Forgive my cruel ignorance, my denial, my rush to justify. Teach me to love the truth, to walk with it, to learn. Show me the beauty of my humanity—my capacity to love and forgive, right alongside my devastating shortsightedness and scramble for survival. Let me lean into your grace and forgiveness. Turn my frightened face toward the world of love and abundance that you intend for all. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿





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