

### OPENING HYMN

“Lord of All Hopefulness” (ELW 765)

### OPENING PRAYER

O God, we thank you for times of refreshment and peace in the course of this busy life. Grant that we may so use our leisure for the renewal of our bodies and minds that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation; through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen (ELW, p. 80)

### FOCUS VERSES

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”  
(John 13:34a)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- paper and pencils or whiteboard (optional)

### CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank you for this time together. Teach us to pattern our lives following the life-giving way of Jesus. May we love and serve our neighbors following Christ’s example and, in so doing, provide a wider welcome to all. Amen.

# *Crafted in Christ*

## Session one

A summer of rest and renewal

BY KATIE HINES-SHAH

### INTRODUCTION

When I was young, most moms sewed at least a little—but not my mother. Once, a Christmas pageant director gathered all the moms to help make costumes, my mother included. Although my mother told the director she couldn’t sew, the director insisted: Everyone had some sewing talent. I remember that my mother failed to pin some burlap on a shepherd suit. In exasperation, she gestured toward a woman at a sewing machine, asking me to take the outfit “to that copier over there.”

They didn’t make her sew much after that.

This meant that as a kid I was intrigued by sewing. I tried my hand at making doll clothes and simple garments, but having neither innate skill nor a ready mentor, I never progressed much.

And then, not so long ago, I discovered quilting. As a lifelong Lutheran I had seen any number of quilts. My home church had quilted paraments. All the congregations I have served as a pastor had Lutheran World Relief Quilting groups. I had attended countless church benefits where quilts were raffle prizes or auction items. Quilts had been gifted to me over the years, particularly to mark milestone events like my wedding or the births of my children. Quilts were a part of my life, even if I did not yet make them.

I admired the quilts themselves. There seemed to be something intrinsically Lutheran about them. Utility and beauty, order and harmony, even the thrifty use of fabric destined for the rubbish heap—all were signs of resurrection.

As I came to know quilts, I came to know quilters and how much they enjoy gathering. Quilting groups proved to be as lovely and as useful as the quilts themselves. Communities of quilters provide ready ground for building friendships. Whether or not they are based in a church, many quilting groups make mission projects an important part of their work. In a time when so much divides us, quilting groups are a way we come together for the sake of the world, just as Jesus teaches us to do. Quilts and quilting circles are an apt metaphor for Christian life and community.

Last year, thanks to a generous grant from the Lilly Foundation, I took a summer sabbatical. Spoiler alert: I did finally learn how to quilt, and I reestablished and renewed a circle of friends along the way. As part of my sabbatical, the congregation I serve, Redeemer Lutheran Church in Hinsdale, Illinois, also made a quilt and discovered more about what makes their community unique.

You and your group can use this three-session summer Bible study to take time for rest and renewal and gain new insights about community. We'll also create something new, using the quilting process as our guide. Whether or not you sew (sewing is not required for this study), together we'll celebrate the beautiful, useful ways God works in our lives and the goodness of the "quilted communities" we are creating even now.

### CHOOSING A PATTERN

#### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Tell a story of a recipe that went wrong.
2. What is your favorite season—natural or church-year—and why?
3. Describe a favorite family tradition and why it is meaningful to you.

When I first wanted to learn how to quilt, I did the most obvious thing I could think of: I went to the quilt shop a couple of towns over from my own. It was a wonderland of fabric, machines, and extremely knowledgeable and, as I soon learned, patient employees. One woman noticed me standing dazed in front of a table. "Can I help you?" she asked. I explained that I wanted to learn to quilt, but I wasn't sure where to start. "What do you want to make?" she asked. "Once you know that," she continued, "then you can choose what pattern you want to follow."

A quilt is based on a pattern. The size and shape of a quilt, techniques for sewing, and fabric choice all rely on a pattern—even if that pattern is to have no pattern at all! Picking a pattern determines so much about what a quilt might be.

Patterns also mold and shape us and our communities. By paying close attention, we can see the patterns around us and either reinforce them or change them to become more in line with God's great pattern for our lives and for our communities.

### NOTICING PATTERNS

Let's look at what the author of John would want us to do. We'll take a few moments to consider what it might mean for us. Imagine a life here and now that you would want to last forever.

📖 **Read:** Genesis 1:1–2:3

#### Share aloud or reflect:

4. What patterns do you notice in this biblical story?

The first creation story is a kaleidoscope of patterns. For instance, we can see the pattern of the formation of the planet. First, there is light, then water, dry land, plants and animals, and finally people. Creation proceeds in a manner that would

be recognizable to any earth scientist—even if time is measured in days instead of millennia.

We see the patterns of days and weeks. Morning follows evening. One day follows another. The seven-day cycle we now know is set here, from the very beginning. A day of rest is set aside, separate from days of work, breaking the pattern and renewing it at the same time.

We also see a pattern reminiscent of our own liturgies. Each day's story is told following a distinct pattern, using the same or similar words. It's easy to imagine a congregation gathering to hear this reading as a litany and responding with key phrases at set times, in the same way that we might say the Kyrie, the Great Thanksgiving or the Lord's Prayer at a Sunday worship service.

When we read this Genesis text, we see a pattern to God's work, and a call to humankind to imitate this pattern ourselves. Created in God's image, we too are invited to create, observe our work and judge its worth.

We are invited to consider our patterns critically. What does this mean? Well, our lives follow patterns. There are daily patterns, weekly patterns, monthly and yearly patterns. Perhaps you work out, go for a walk or drink a cup of coffee every morning. Or maybe you watch a certain TV show or start the dishwasher every night. A couple days a week might be set aside for gardening or worship. Maybe there's a monthly meeting on your calendar—a book group or Bible study you don't want to miss. Or you might spend every Christmas with the same family or friends, and never miss a summer at the lake.

Churches follow patterns too. Some patterns are part of the liturgical year: Christmas follows Advent, Lent comes before Easter. Then there are milestone patterns: Baptism leads to communion leads to confirmation and beyond. Additionally, in the same way that people pass through youth, adolescence, maturity, decline and death, churches, too, pass through these cycles.

We're not always aware of our patterns. How many churches have a way that things "have always been done"? If we're not paying close attention, we might not even notice we've chosen to follow a pattern at all! This can be a challenge, especially when the expected pattern fails to be life-giving or even proves destructive. Even the best pattern can benefit from occasional reconsideration.

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

5. Many people think that being created in God's image means that human beings look like God. Have you ever considered that instead, it might mean that humans are created to be creators?
6. Think about your life as if it were a quilt. What do you want the quilt of your life to look like when it is done? What pieces are you working on now? What "is good" that you want to keep? What parts of your life aren't working for the greater pattern? What would it take to change them?
7. Now think about your congregation or worshipping community as if it were a quilt. What do you and other participants want the quilt of your congregation to look like when it is done? What pieces are you working together on now? What "is good" that you want to keep? What parts aren't working for the greater pattern? What would it take to change them?

### **A PATTERN OF REST**

 **Read:** Leviticus 25:1-12

**Share aloud or reflect:**

8. If you could either take a whole year off or have a debt forgiven, which would you choose?

Most of us are familiar with the concept of the sabbath. In Genesis 2:3 God ceases creating and blesses the seventh day, setting it aside as a day of rest for all people. This is so important that “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy” is one of the Ten Commandments. Yet the concept of sabbath can easily be misunderstood, and Jesus often finds himself at odds with the scribes and Pharisees over the meaning and practice of sabbath rest.

Many of us might not be as familiar with Leviticus, a biblical book that carries the concept of sabbath a step further. The writer of Leviticus describes a sabbath for the land that is to take place every seven years, as well as a jubilee year occurring at the conclusion of 49 years. The laws concerning both the weekly pattern of sabbath and the seven-year pattern of land sabbath are both expansive and inclusive. Sabbath is not just for observant men (and women) but also for servants, foreigners and even animals. The jubilee year command for people to return the land to its previous owners makes more sense knowing that, originally, the land was equitably distributed. While misfortune and bad choices may have led to loss, jubilee offers people a chance to start anew. Jubilee means liberty from debt and a return to community. Whether Scriptures are referring to land sabbath or the jubilee year, God’s command offers a definitive break for everyone, and a chance for all to reconsider present patterns. This time for rest includes reconnecting with roots and imagining new possibilities.

**QUILTED RESPITE**

In times and in places where women’s work could be isolating and tedious, quilters’ circles offered a

welcome respite. One quilter I knew, whom I will call “Susan,” remembered her quilters’ circle fondly, though she had not been able to attend for decades.

By the time I met Susan, she was living in a memory care unit in her retirement community. Our conversations followed a predictable pattern that involved memories of quilting with friends. Eventually she would say something like “On Wednesdays, we would quilt from morning until afternoon, and by the end my back was tired.” Then with a slight chuckle, she would add, “Ed was on his own for dinner that night!” In 2021, when Susan died, the other quilters made sure her coffin’s pall was an LWR quilt—a sign of community connection and the service they did together.

During my sabbatical, I enjoyed the precious gift of 13 weeks of rest, and I thought a lot about Susan and other quilters I’ve known. Taking this sabbath time allowed me to reconnect with family and friends, as well as to connect with new communities. With them, I cleaned out the basement, made jam, hiked in the wilderness, visited art museums, took part in hard conversations and shared many jokes. Like Susan, sometimes I had a sore back, and sometimes my husband was on his own for dinner. It was all worth it. Having a sabbatical meant I could reconnect with patterns of family and friendship. These “ties that bind” are important to help rostered leaders weather challenging times in life and ministry.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

9. Share briefly about a great vacation (even if it was a single vacation day). What made it great? Why do we take vacations? How do they change the pattern of our day-to-day lives?
10. How do you observe the sabbath? What do you do to make sure other people in your life—including your pastor—get to

celebrate the sabbath as well?

## A NEW PATTERN

📖 **Read:** John 13:1–17, 34–35

### Share aloud or reflect:

11. Does participating in a Christian community challenge the expected patterns of our society? How?

Maundy Thursday, the night of Jesus' arrest and betrayal, the night before his death on a cross, is an important day in the Bible and on Christian calendars. Three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and the witness of Paul (1 Corinthians) all recount how, on this day, Jesus established the pattern of Holy Communion. John's Gospel uniquely tells the story of Jesus giving his disciples a new commandment (mandatum in Latin) to "love one another." Jesus exemplifies this love by washing the disciples' feet.

Today many churches offer foot-washing as part of the Maundy Thursday liturgy. Lots of people are uncomfortable with having their feet washed, although this feeling connects us to the disciples' experience. They were uncomfortable too! In Jesus' time, only people of lower social standing (people who were enslaved, children or students, like the disciples themselves) were given this unpleasant duty. When Jesus insists on washing his disciples' feet, he changes the pattern of his time, upending power structures that had stood for millennia. Jesus' radical teaching, that masters are no greater than their servants, allows the disciples to imagine a new kind of community. In the early church, everyone could serve and anyone could lead. In this community, people could equally share their gifts and talents, all in the name of love.

While preparing to go on sabbatical, I asked our congregation's quilters to help me envision

a quilting project for the whole congregation. I wanted each church member to donate a piece of fabric that could be sewn together into a community quilt. At first, our expert quilters didn't like this idea. They doubted that the members of the congregation could be trusted to pick fabric that coordinated with their plans. They even suggested I just assign each person a color and be done with it! So I explained that having a variety of colors and patterns was the point of the project. I was sure that somehow their art and skill would bring the quilt together, no matter what was turned in. Well, our congregation's quilters were kind enough to give it a try, with a few reasonable boundaries. For example, they proposed that the many blocks of donated fabric be grouped around a central focus, a cross. (However, they were still nervous about what fabric squares might come in.)

Sure enough, people chose fabrics with all sorts of patterns and colors. Yet when the quilters laid the squares around the central cross, everything came together. Everyone is proud of the community quilt that now hangs in our church entry. A visual symbol, it reminds us of how our individual gifts and talents are gathered into God's great pattern for the church.

It's also a reminder of something Martin Luther taught—that we are part of a "priesthood of all believers." Whether or not we are called to be pastors, each one of us has a mission and ministry to share. Moreover, these roles are equally worthy and valued in God's eyes. Expanding our patterns of leadership and service allows for more gifts to be shared. The end result? A church that is as colorful as any quilt.

### Share aloud or reflect:

12. "What have new worship patterns or experiences helped you learn about God?"
13. What ministry do you think God is

calling you to do? What patterns can you change to live out your ministry more fully?

## CHANGING PATTERNS FOR GOOD

📖 **Read:** Acts 11:1–18

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

14. Have you ever eaten anything others might consider odd, for the sake of hospitality?

Jewish dietary laws served numerous purposes. Historians note that choosing not to eat certain foods may have promoted health or helped people avoid disease. The Bible also makes clear that Jewish dietary laws helped set a pattern that kept Jewish people separate from other groups.

Acts 10 narrates Peter’s vision of a sheet being let down out of heaven. It holds all the animals that Jewish people are not supposed to eat. When the voice of the Lord comes down, commanding him to “kill and eat,” Peter is appalled. We can relate. Escargot might be a perfectly acceptable dish in France, but most Americans turn a little green at the concept of eating snails. Even in his vision, Peter is clear that he’s never eaten that kind of food. Which means, of course, he’s never dined with non-Jewish people.

But God has bigger plans in store. The apostles have just heard that Gentiles—non-Jews—are accepting God’s word. God is establishing a new pattern, and through the vision God lets Peter know about it. Still, it isn’t easy. God sends Peter the same vision three times; the Spirit arranges for Peter to meet with Gentiles; an angel of the Lord gets involved. Then, and only then, does Peter change the pattern of his own dietary practice. In chapter 11 Peter tells this story to a skeptical crowd, and

they too are moved. Finally, we see the apostles and believers giving thanks to God that even outsiders are now to be part of the faith story.

In 2019, our congregation’s building underwent a major renovation to ready our space for “whoever comes next.” This meant refreshing some spaces, bringing others up to code and adding elements that might be useful to some people and groups. When the project was complete, we discovered that changing the pattern of our building had opened up possibilities we had not dreamed of.

For example, we thought the pew cuts would allow greater access for folks with wheelchairs, but it turned out people with strollers liked them too. We saw single-stall, gender-neutral bathrooms as good for people who identified as transgender, but it turned out they were also good for elderly people who needed assistance from their spouses and little children who needed a parent’s help. We thought the extra outlets would mostly be used by our homeless guests who shelter in our church Saturday nights, but it turns out quilters like having additional places to plug in sewing machines and irons.

Just as Peter and the disciples discovered, changing patterns can widen the welcome for all.

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

15. Have you ever had to change a beloved tradition in your family or in your worshipping community so that someone new could take part?
16. What is one pattern that has changed for the better in the church in your lifetime?
17. Is there a new pattern you might like to try? Consider naming it to congregational leaders. Next month, share how it goes! 🌿

# *Crafted in Christ*

## Session one

A summer of rest and renewal

BY KATIE HINES-SHAH

Our summer Bible study uses the concept of quilting to explore themes of community and sabbath. Some participants have ample experience as quilters; others simply appreciate the quilts they (or their friends and family) own, or quilts seen on display. Participants unfamiliar with quilting can begin to appreciate the beauty and purpose of quilts.

All metaphors have limitations. Not every type of quilting or quilt will be represented perfectly in this study. Yet quilting concepts and terms will help us delve into the specifics of Christian life and community and reimagine what we may become for Christ. Biblical patterns can help us make changes and discover opportunities. Ultimately, we are empowered by God's grace to choose life-giving patterns for ourselves and our communities.

### INTRODUCTION

Work your way through the ice-breaker questions beforehand. Consider inviting group members to bring a quilt, picture or story about quilting to share during gathering time.

### NOTICING PATTERNS (GENESIS 1:1–2:3)

#### Key takeaways:

1. God establishes patterns for our benefit.
2. God created people as creators. Not only our work projects but our meals, gardens, art and families all qualify as creations. Creating is a way to serve neighbors and share joy in doing things we love.
3. Considering our patterns can help our lives and communities to be crafted in Christ.

Emphasize to participants that Genesis contains two very different creation accounts. Many scholars believe the first five books of the Bible had different authors. They believe the first creation story (included in our study) was authored by a group scholars call the "Priestly" source, or "P," because it reads like a litany that might be used in worship—one of several patterns your group might notice.

### THE PATTERN OF REST (LEVITICUS 25:1-12)

#### Key takeaways:

1. Rest is an important life pattern, intended for all.
2. A weekly sabbath helps us consider other opportunities (sabbaticals, debt forgiveness).

#### Some contemporary connections:

1. According to the U.S. Travel Association, more than 50% of Americans do not take all their vacation (source: <https://tinyurl.com/bnaffj52>).
2. Nerdwallet.com says the average American household debt is \$155,622 (source: <https://tinyurl.com/hholddebt>)

Study participants probably have experiences with both issues. As you read about the biblical concepts of land sabbath and jubilee, group members may wonder about the feasibility of breaking cycles of overwork and debt. Also, there is no evidence that either land sabbath or jubilee actually occurred in ancient times. Yet we can still consider how they might orient us in healthy directions today.

3. Many congregations offer their pastors a 12-week or longer sabbatical after seven years of service. To help cover costs for pastors and churches, organizations like the Lilly Foundation offer sabbatical grants. Your group might talk with lay and clergy leaders about offering a sabbatical for your pastor. Resources are available on the Lilly Endowment website (<https://tinyurl.com/clergysabbatical>).

## A NEW PATTERN (JOHN 13)

### Key takeaways:

1. Liturgy forms us, offering a vision of a changed pattern for life.
2. Jesus upends classical power dynamics, calling disciples into both service and leadership.

Discipleship is intended to change and challenge us. Read the promises confirmands make during the Affirmation of Baptism liturgy (*ELW*, p. 236). Think about ways these promises differ from the call of the world.

### Some contemporary connections:

Discuss ways Jesus' example of service connects us as believers with others, leading to the possibility of love. For example, Redeemer Lutheran, the congregation I serve, hosts a homeless shelter. Over time members have come to see people who are homeless as neighbors and to care for their needs in love.

## PATTERNS FOR GOOD (ACTS 11:1-18)

### Key takeaways:

1. Even the best patterns sometimes need to change. This can be hard at first—Peter struggled to do so!
2. God helps us change patterns so more people can be welcomed to Christ's way of grace.

### Some contemporary connections:

Consider ways God has called your church to make hard changes to patterns. Perhaps your congregation gave up worshipping in German, Swedish or Norwegian to reach more people; extended Holy Communion to younger participants; or became Reconciling in Christ. At the time, these changes probably seemed unthinkable to some members, while for others, they were life-giving ways to welcome people. Maybe some in your group found their hearts and minds changed over time. If time allows, ask volunteers to share a change that was made, and why it became life-giving.

Also note that many have experiences themselves or with friends or family members who have struggled with patterns of addiction and abuse. We know it can be very hard to leave unhealthy patterns behind. If time allows, use a large sheet of paper or a whiteboard to list ways a church community can provide support that helps individuals choose a better pattern for their lives.

## SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Have participants read the entire session introduction before coming to the group.
2. Choosing a pattern: Allow a few minutes for pairs of people to briefly answer only one of the three questions. As a group, read the rest of the section.
3. Continue with "Noticing patterns," but omit the introductory question. Discuss the two reflection questions as a group.
4. Skip ahead to "A new pattern"; omit the introductory question. As a group, discuss the following two questions.
5. Pray the closing prayer.

## A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

Follow the steps above, but for Step 2, invite participants to share answers with the whole group instead of one person. After Step 2, add "The pattern of rest." If time allows, add back in the introductory questions for each session.

**Note:** If your group would like to do the Community Quilt project described in "A new pattern," do a little planning now. Will your group work in cloth or paper or another medium? Can others help with construction? How will you encourage participation? Will your project feature a centerpiece like a cross or another symbol? If you plan during this session, you can work on the project during subsequent gatherings. 🌸



## OPENING HYMN

“All Are Welcome” (ELW 641)

## OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin. Grant that we who are reborn to new life in him may live in righteousness and holiness all our days, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 86)

## FOCUS VERSE

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- *Stopwatch/timer and access to internet search*
- paper and pencils or whiteboard (optional)

## CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, in Christ you make all things new. Help us to embrace healthy limits and boundaries so that we preserve what is most important to you. Give us a vision of the varied and vibrant world you desire, and the courage to mend what sin has torn. May we be people by whom you bless all the families of the earth. Amen.

# *Crafted in Christ*

## Session two

Cutting and piecing

BY KATIE HINES-SHAH

## INTRODUCTION

In my living room is the first full-size quilt I ever made: a large lap quilt that began as an experiment but ended up being a touchstone during a global pandemic.

My dive into quilting originated in the spring of 2019, when the congregation I serve, Redeemer Lutheran Church in Hinsdale, Illinois, applied for a Lilly clergy sabbatical grant to fund our “Quilted Community Summer Sabbatical.” The congregation planned a time of rest and renewal for the summer of 2020, as well as a congregational quilting project managed by our able volunteers. I would be able to spend more time with my family and complete my own quilting project. Much to our surprise, we won the grant, but there was just one problem: I didn’t know how to quilt yet.

A local quilting store offered a class for “confident beginners.” So in February 2020, I confidently went to the shop to purchase supplies for the class project, a mid-century modern pattern called “Atomic Starburst” that featured alternating diamonds of fabric and 1960s starbursts. I was delighted to discover that my teacher was a member of another ELCA congregation. For two hours, we mostly worked on cutting and piecing. I learned how to “fussy cut” the diamonds, deliberately selecting a portion of fabric even if it wasn’t the most economical use of yardage. I also learned how to “paper-piece” the starburst patterns, a process so time-consuming that I only finished half of one star during the class.

Where would I find the time to finish this quilt? I had a lot of plans for this sabbatical, with places to go and people to see. And then, of course, COVID happened. During those challenging first weeks of closures and social distancing to contain the spread of the virus, working on this methodical project helped me. After spending the day in my solitary church office, I'd return home and finish one more star or one more row of diamonds. My family would join me around the dining-room table, my kids doing remote schoolwork, my husband working from home. Before I knew it, the quilt was done! The leftover fabric from fussy cutting became my family's first facemasks. And even though my sabbatical was postponed, two of my hopes were met: I was spending more time with my family, and I had completed my first quilt. I hope this Bible study gives you a similar opportunity to make life changes and try something new.

Session one helped us consider the act of quilting as a metaphor for life. We considered how God gives us a healthy, holistic pattern for life that includes time for worship and rest, and encourages us in the way of service and love. Session two will focus on the heart of the quilting metaphor: how we cut the fabric of our lives and piece blocks of our identities together. With guidance from Scripture, support from our communities and Jesus as our teacher, even in challenging times we can construct lives as beautiful and warm as any quilt.

### CUTTING THE FABRIC

Let's start the conversation!

#### Share aloud or reflect:

1. Share an example of a possession you would like to get rid of.
2. Have you ever broken a habit? Describe the process. Why did you want to change?

You can't make a quilt without cutting fabric. For many quilters, this can be a difficult task. Some may love a particular piece of fabric so much they can't imagine cutting it. Ironically, this means that the most beloved piece of cloth doesn't get used. It is only in the cutting that something new and useful can be made.

Likewise, the life of faith calls us to cut some things so we can do others. Saying no, establishing limits, deciding to stop doing something, leaving a place behind and even ending relationships are all important parts of life.

### CUTTING TO PRESERVE WHAT MATTERS MOST

📖 **Read:** Philippians 3:4-9

#### Share aloud or reflect:

3. In this passage, Paul reveals what most people would think are his best attributes and accomplishments. Which of these was Paul born with? Which did he earn? Take a few minutes to write a similar list for yourself. What things on this list are you proudest of?

Paul is a hero of the faith and the author of more than half of the New Testament. Yet we don't know a lot about his background. This brief Philippians passage is one of the few places Paul tells his story. His list is impressive. Paul says he was circumcised on the eighth day, which means he was born Jewish. He is from the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as Israel's first king, Saul (which is also Paul's original name). Paul calls himself a Pharisee, a member of a philosophical branch of Judaism known for being especially well versed in the law. Paul also writes that he was a persecutor of the church—a mark of his prior commitment to his former faith. By most measures, Paul would be the

ideal job candidate, exactly the sort of person you would want to marry your daughter, someone with a successful life story. And then he says this:

*“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss...”* (v. 7)

When Paul became a Christian, his prior list of accomplishments was no longer valuable to him. Now he advocated for Gentiles to be admitted to the faith. Ancestry and tribe no longer mattered. The wisdom of the Pharisees had been supplanted by the foolishness of Christ. The persecution Paul was once so proud of was now a mark of shame. Paul lost everything that had mattered most to him, but he wasn't concerned.

*“I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”* (v. 8)

When I was growing up, my mother's work involved refugee resettlement. We came to know refugees from Ethiopia, Cambodia, Romania, Albania and many other places. Refugees were generally allowed to come to the U.S. with up to two suitcases, but most had fewer possessions. Dishes and clothing, heirlooms and photo albums, art and jewelry were all abandoned in the rush to escape countries where it was no longer safe to live. People left behind loved ones and pets, homes and businesses, traditions and familiar practices. In addition, they had to start over in the U.S. with schooling, learning a language and the journey to citizenship.

Their losses were overwhelming. Yet the refugees were some of the most hardworking, hopeful people I have ever known. As painful as it was to leave their countries of origin, they knew it was their only choice. They knew that family, freedom and faith are more important than any possession, any credential.

Lutheran World Relief was founded in the wake of World War II, when one in nine Lutherans worldwide was a refugee. Lutheran World Relief projects included organizing quilting groups to

provide donations for refugees who had lost everything. More than 50 years later, Lutheran World Relief is still aiding people worldwide and providing thousands of quilts to those who have been displaced. Quilts and aid are a promise of hope: even when all seems lost, life can begin again.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Share a story about your ancestors. Did they travel from another country or state? What do you know or imagine they left behind? What did they take with them? What was most important?
5. What do you think God values most about you?

**CUTTING TO ADD SOMETHING NEW**

📖 **Read:** Genesis 12:1–3; 17:1–27; 22:1–19

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. What gets cut in these stories? What doesn't?

Abraham (Abram) and Sarah (Sarai) cut ties and make big changes to become God's people. They leave behind their families and homeland to follow where God leads (Genesis 12). They change their names. They start new traditions (Genesis 17). When God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham prepares to follow through (Genesis 22). Before Abraham can make this terrible cut, God sends an angel to stay his hand. God's intercession indicates that while discipleship comes at a cost, God does not demand the blood of children.

The cost of discipleship is balanced with promises. God promises to make Abram “a great nation” and “a blessing” (12:2), an “ancestor of a multitude

of nations” (17:5) who will have the land of Canaan as “an everlasting covenant” (17:7). God promises to make Abraham’s descendants “as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (22:17). It is clear that Abraham’s faith will be met with benefits that far exceed his investment.

During COVID-related closures and quarantines, many people decided to change jobs or drop activities, to focus on what really mattered to them. Others took up new projects or hobbies or became part of new communities. I joined the Modern Quilt Guild’s Chicago branch, first attending virtually and later in person. I was not the only newcomer. During the pandemic, the guild’s membership increased fourfold. Many of those forced to “cut” most human contact for a time were eager to deepen existing relationships and invest in new ones.

As for churches, many saw worship attendance initially increase due to online video streaming, although since then, fewer people have returned to in-person worship services.

Abraham and Sarah waited many years for the birth of Isaac and did not live to see the land of promise. Yet they and the generations that followed believed in God’s faithfulness. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are just the beginning of a promise given us in baptism that ends in eternal life.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Abraham and Sarah left behind their homes, families, names and traditions to follow God. Have you ever given up any of these? Why? Did you benefit? How?
8. Since the start of the pandemic, what activities, relationships or places have you cut? What have you added?
9. Discipleship leads toward abundant life.

Are the most precious things in your life life-giving? If not, what might you cut or change?

**PIECING OUR LIVES**

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. Turn to a partner. In 60 seconds, try to name all your identities and roles. (For example: “I am a mother, wife, friend, sister, member of a church, alumna of a college, runner, choir member, quilter, etc.”) After 60 seconds, switch roles.
11. In one sentence, describe a major project you accomplished with the help of others. In one word, describe how you felt about this accomplishment.

The real fun of quilting is sewing together individual strips, squares, and triangles. Working with color is an art form. Even garish or unusual patterns can be just what’s needed to make a quilt pop. In many quilts contrasting colors are key. If there is no diversity or difference between fabrics, a quilt can look dull or muted. The quilter starts the work by connecting smaller pieces together, sometimes repurposing old fabric in new ways. Over time quilters have come up with ingenious ways of constructing blocks to save time and fabric. Through repetition, the design of the quilt is revealed. The process takes skill. Sometimes seams need to be ripped out and individual pieces retired.

All of us play a variety of roles in our lives. We are workers, volunteers, artists, members, parents, children, neighbors, friends, etc. These roles, in turn, connect us to a variety of communities. How we interact at the gym may be different from how we interact at a PTA meeting. The people we encounter at the office may look different than the people we

meet at church. Our persona on social media may differ from that in our families. In this part of our study we reflect on these aspects of our lives, how God might work through us in different contexts, and the role of reconciliation and forgiveness in maintaining community.

 **Read:** Acts 8:26–40

**Share aloud or reflect:**

- 12.** What gifts do you imagine the Ethiopian official could offer the church?

The Ethiopian official lacks every attribute Paul describes in Philippians 3. The official is a foreigner, uneducated in the Scriptures and, as a eunuch, unable to enter the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1). What is to prevent him from being baptized? Everything—except the will of the Holy Spirit.

The Ethiopian official has everything to offer the infant church! He's influential: He's in charge of the entire treasury of the Candace of Ethiopia. He's educated: In a time when most people were illiterate, he can read a scroll. He's wealthy: He owns a scroll and a chariot (a luxury possession at that time) and even can afford to hire a driver. (You can't read a scroll and drive!)

All of these qualities can benefit the church, but we know that God values what the world does not. Perhaps the Ethiopian official's greatest gifts are his curiosity and his tenacity. He asks about scripture's meaning before Philip can testify. It is he who suggests conversion, not the disciple before him. It makes me wonder: Who is the missionary here? Christian tradition holds that the Ethiopian church is one of the oldest in the world. Perhaps the Ethiopian official was the church's founder!

I finally did start that sabbatical in June 2021. At the last moment, I snagged a spot in a string piecing quilting workshop at the John C. Campbell

Folk School taught by master quilter Laurel Horton. Because of my late registration and my daughter's softball schedule, I had only an hour to shop for fabric. Whatever I could find at the local hobby store in an hour would have to do.

I found myself gravitating toward black, white, gray and blue colors. The fabric I chose was printed with newspaper clippings, Bible verses and a Jane Austen manuscript penned in cursive. (I do read a lot.) There were selections of maps and canceled post cards. (I do like to travel.) I picked out pieces printed with music, kitchen implements and photographs. (These represented some of my favorite hobbies.) I couldn't resist a print of rings from coffee cups. Finally, I picked what seemed like an entirely random pattern—a group of women looking out into the future. I was done.

My eight classmates and the instructor, Laurel, helped me immensely. Over the week, I probably put 60-plus hours into sewing. Everything came together—home and work, faith and life, adventure and the day-to-day, the blue of baptism, and a cloud of sisters who had gone before, who are with me now, and who will come after—all bound together with lots of coffee. I was amazed at how well everything fit. My teacher said, "This is your story. You should hang it in your office." Which is exactly what I did.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

- 13.** Consider the Ethiopian official: How do you think baptism changed the quilt of his life? Now imagine that your life is a quilt. What would your blocks look like? Are all they all the same, or do they differ? Are there any pieces that don't fit? Do you wish some parts were more varied? How does your faith make its mark?

## PIECING TOGETHER WHAT WAS TORN

📖 **Read:** 2 Corinthians 5:16–6:12

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

14. What is new in you because of Christ?

In 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul writes to a church in crisis. Some people are getting drunk at the Lord's table while others are going hungry (1 Corinthians 11:17–24). Some people are engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior (1 Corinthians 6:12–20). Some people were bringing lawsuits against each other (1 Corinthians 6:1–11). The Corinthians have even managed to turn spiritual gifts into a problem, bragging about gifts they have and belittling those who have different ones (1 Corinthians 12:11–14:40). The heart of the problem seems to lie in the Corinthians' inability to give up Roman social hierarchies that value people based on social rank, ethnicity and education (1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21).

It's a mess. And it's all so familiar...

I don't know if anyone would have blamed Paul if he'd just walked away from the church in Corinth. Instead, Paul presents what comes to be known as his "ministry of reconciliation." He explains that in Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18), so Christians ought to look at each other in a new light. Everything is new in Christ. Old values and habits no longer have power over us. Paul urges the Corinthians and all Christians to embrace the new creation made possible in Christ and be reconciled to God. Like Paul, we, too, can open our hearts to God and seek forgiveness from God and one another.

The Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA) is dedicated to making quilts that tell a story and send a message. These memory quilts lift up stories of lives stolen through racial or domestic violence, hate crimes, police brutality, gender discrimination,

disappearances of Indigenous women, and community violence. SJSA founder Sara Trail wanted to make something beautiful for survivors to appreciate, something to help voice their frustrations, hopes and challenges.

SJSA volunteers consult with surviving family members, and then incorporate special clothing, treasured images and favorite colors into quilts for the family. The process is comforting and healing. Seeing their loved ones' lives valued in art gives survivors hope for justice. Some have even found a way to forgiveness.

Another effort, the SJSA's community quilt project, offers workshops where youth can channel their feelings in a way that can be remembered and responded to. Volunteers teach youth to make blocks that represent their lives and challenges. As their individual blocks come together to form a complete quilt, this shows the power of solidarity and building empathy through truth-telling.

With both projects—memory quilts and community quilts, fabric pieces are sewn together as a symbol of hope and healing. Violence is not forgotten, and loved ones still mourn lives taken too soon. Yet there is also a new vision. These quilts are visible signs of the new creation Paul references—a promise of restitution and reconciliation for our broken world.

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

15. Which is easier for you: saying you are sorry or forgiving someone?
16. During a worship service, at what points do we ask for or receive forgiveness? Why do you think confession and forgiveness is such an important part of liturgical worship? 🌿

# Crafted in Christ

## Session two

### Cutting and piecing

BY KATIE HINES-SHAH

#### INTRODUCTION

As your group gathers, review the first session.

Did participants notice patterns in their lives and in their world? Did anyone try to change or add a pattern? Did anyone embrace the pattern of sabbath and rest? What was the result?

People who don't quilt may not realize how involved the quilting process can be. To help your group lean into the quilting metaphor used by this study, consider letting participants view the links below ahead of time, or during the session on a laptop:

[www.quiltingdaily.com/top-ten-fussy-cutting-tips/](http://www.quiltingdaily.com/top-ten-fussy-cutting-tips/)  
[www.quiltingdaily.com/10-tips-for-paper-piecing/](http://www.quiltingdaily.com/10-tips-for-paper-piecing/)

#### CUTTING THE FABRIC

Your group can use the icebreaker questions to consider how letting go of things or habits can be a good exercise. Many people struggle with clutter and lives that are too busy. It may be new for some participants to see faith as not just one more "to do," but a way by which we can prioritize.

#### Key takeaways:

1. We all are blessed with a variety of attributes and accomplishments. While Paul's list in Philippians might differ from our own, we can see parallels.
2. When Paul comes to know Christ, his values change. Does our faith change what we value most about ourselves?
3. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians while he was in prison, near the end of his life. How might

age, experience or weathering challenge/disaster help clarify what really matters in life?

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and Lutheran World Relief (LWR) are two agencies that work with refugees. Does your congregation have a history of assisting refugees? Many people have misconceptions about refugees. Share this fact sheet with participants: <https://lwr.org/blog/2013/nine-facts-about-refugees>

#### CUTTING TO ADD SOMETHING NEW

(GENESIS 12:1-3; 17:1-27; 22:1-19)

#### Key takeaways:

1. While discipleship is costly, it is also life-giving. After loss and change, can there be blessings as well?
2. As much as God asks of Abraham and Sarah, God is also bound in this new covenant. In Genesis, we hear how God chooses to work through one family to bless the world. It's worth noting that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all see Abraham and Sarah as their ancestors!

Some group members may have stories of cutting ties like Sarah and Abraham did; some stories may be easier to share than others. Invite those who are comfortable sharing to do so. Acknowledge that the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac is challenging for all readers. Lean into the ending: God does not demand that Isaac die. While discipleship isn't easy, it points toward greater life and hope.

#### PIECING OUR LIVES (ACTS 8:26-40)

Jesus' first followers assumed that all members of the church would be like them, following Jewish laws and traditions. When the Holy Spirit started calling Gentiles, early church leaders thought the new members would also have to keep kosher, and those who were men would need to be circumcised—not an easy surgery in an era before anesthesia and antibiotics! Leaders may wish to note that,

while giving up circumcision to expand the church may seem an obvious step to modern Christians, circumcision was the sign of covenant promise given to Abraham. This was a big issue for Jewish people.

The Ethiopian official is the opposite of every stereotype they had of a follower of Christ, yet the Holy Spirit calls him. Help participants imagine how the Ethiopian official might expand the church. Remind them that the gifts God sees in us are not the same things the world values.

Just as the concept of piecing applies to our lives, it also makes a difference to our church. A Pew Research study found that two Lutheran church bodies, the ELCA and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, are among the most racially homogeneous religious denominations in the U.S. Even Hindus, Jews and the African Methodist Episcopal Church are more diverse. See: [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/). How could you promote diversity in your own congregation?

### **PIECING TOGETHER WHAT WAS TORN (2 CORINTHIANS 5:16–6:12)**

Review the story of dysfunction in the church at Corinth. Paul established this church and then moved on in his missionary journey. While in Ephesus, Paul wrote several letters to the struggling community. These letters were pieced together into 1 and 2 Corinthians. Some may be surprised to hear that the early church was not perfect; others might be comforted. Challenges we face in our congregations are not new to God’s people. The point of this passage is that faith is supposed to change us, and not the other way around. As author Anne Lamott writes, “You can safely assume you have created God in your own image when God hates all the same people you do.”

Polarization has been the challenge in recent years, with empathy in short supply. Many people have discovered that their experience differs greatly

from that of others. Individuals and groups that seek to offer a window into diverse perspectives include the Social Justice Sewing Academy ([www.sjsacademy.org](http://www.sjsacademy.org)). Experiences depicted on their website may differ from the experiences of your group. If you peruse them, do so with an open mind. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, God wants us to see the world differently because of our faith.

In our Sunday liturgy, repentance and forgiveness come up in places that include the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness, the Creed, the Peace, the Words of Institution, and the Lord’s Prayer. Repentance and forgiveness are vital to community life. They open us up to new life and possibility.

### **SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)**

“Cutting the fabric” — Starting the conversation: Have each participant turn to another person and answer one of the two questions. Reconvene the group. Read the two introductory paragraphs.

Continue with “Cutting to preserve what matters most.” Skip the introductory question. As a group, discuss one of the two concluding questions.

“Piecing our lives” — Starting the conversation: Do the “Turn to a partner” exercise. Bring the group back together. Read the next two paragraphs.

Skip ahead to “Piecing together what was torn.” Skip the introductory question. Answer one of the two concluding questions.

Close in prayer.

### **A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)**

Answer the Starting the Conversation questions as a large group, rather than in pairs. As a group, also answer the concluding questions in each section.

Optional: Separate study into two parts (45 minutes each)

Consider doing this Bible Study in two parts, focusing one session on “Cutting” and another on “Piecing.” 🌿



### OPENING HYMN

“Blest Be the Tie That Binds”  
(ELW 656)

### OPENING PRAYER

Most high and holy God, pour out upon us your one and unifying Spirit, and awaken in every confession of the whole church a holy hunger and thirst for unity in you; though Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.  
(ELW, p. 73)

### FOCUS VERSE

“You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”  
John 15:16

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- Stopwatch/timer and access to internet search
- paper and pencils or whiteboard (optional)

### CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you call us in truth and that nothing can separate us from your love. By the witness and example of Jesus, help us to care for our neighbor and for all creation. Bind us together by your grace, and lead us to be signs of your abundant love to a world in need. Amen.

# Crafted in Christ

## Session three

Ties that bind

BY KATIE HINES-SHAH

### INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite things to do on my day off is visit my local art museum, the Art Institute of Chicago. It has a fine collection of quilts, including one of my favorites: *Friendship Quilt*.

*Friendship Quilt* dates to 1842 and is comprised of 85 intricate hand-stitched squares. At a size of 104 by 107 inches, it is larger than most modern king-size quilts. The quilt is inscribed, “To Ella Maria Deacon.” Many of the squares are signed. The institute’s website carries this description: “Made in an era when communication and travel required significant time and effort, the quilt may have served as a farewell gift on the eve of the recipient’s marriage and ensuing move.” Some of the squares do include short poems or notes about friendship and remembrance. Again, from the website: “These clever, succinctly rendered compositions add a metaphorical layer of coziness to the quilt and allowed Deacon to keep those dear always near.”

*Friendship Quilt* represents the ties created over time. It marks a pledge that friends and family members will remain connected despite change and distance. A wedding quilt also represents the hope that individuals joined together in marriage will find their life together to be warm, useful and irrevocably intertwined.

My pastor’s wife, Gordeen Gorder, makes wedding quilts. While she machine-pieces the quilt top, she almost always hand-quilts the backing, batting and top together. When she was working on her daughter Letta’s wedding quilt, she would

sometimes accidentally stab herself with the needle. “That’s one for Letta,” she would say, later following with “That’s one for Chris,” alternating the names of her daughter and son-in-law-to-be. It’s a good reminder that binding lives and communities is at times a painful process!

Yet binding lives and communities is also a lovely thing. Each life event ... memory ... phone call ... cup of coffee ... argument resolved ... embrace shared ... is another stitch bringing us together. The more stitches involved, the more likely that the quilt of our lives and communities will hold together for good.

This third and final session of the “Crafted in Christ” Bible study focuses on the final stage of the quilting process: binding the quilt together. Our first session dealt with choosing and following a pattern. Session two considered cutting and piecing a quilt top. Now in session three, we explore the quilt’s assembly, where a top is attached to batting and backing. A quilt can simply be tied at this point (like many LWR quilts) or it can be sewn together with intricate or simple patterns. This is the “quilting” part of the process. We can finish the quilt with a fabric edging or a binding. Upon completion, a quilt is not easy to take apart. With care, it can last more than 100 years.

Keeping in mind our “Crafted in Christ” metaphor and the hymn “Blessed Be the Tie that Binds,” let’s simply call this final part of the quilting process “binding.” Choosing our life’s pattern, cutting out some parts, and piecing things together now lead us to consider how we bind ourselves to this new way. Like a quilt, lives and communities that are bound together are beautiful, useful and warm.

## **BOUND TO GOD**

Let’s start the conversation!

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

1. Do you have a symbol of a cherished commitment with you now (a piece of jewelry, something kept in your wallet or even a tattoo)? Why do you carry this symbol with you?
2. What are some ways we show our commitment to faith?

📖 **Read:** Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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

3. If you had a personal mission statement, what would it be?

For Jewish people, the most important Bible verses may be these:

*Hear, O Israel: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).*

These two verses are called the *Shema* (derived from the Hebrew word meaning “to hear”). Observant Jewish people recite these words at least twice a day. Orthodox Jewish men sometimes wear *tefillin*, small boxes containing the Shema, held in place with leather straps on their arms and foreheads. Some Jewish homes include a *mezuzah*, a small oblong container holding the Shema, mounted on the doorframe. This literal interpretation of being bound to God emphasizes the gravity of being committed to a life of faith. With the Shema all around, one can hardly help but talk

about it with children, at home and away, in the morning and at night.

Though only a few words in Hebrew, the Shema is deeply meaningful. The command to recite the Shema aloud makes it a public witness of faith. It is a communal experience—the prayer is said to “our” God. At the same time, God is not many things, but “one,” stressing the unity of divinity. That God should be loved with “all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” includes all aspects of human life. No part is left out of this commitment.

While the Deuteronomy passage promises blessing in verse 3, Jewish scholars are quick to point out that one does not recite the Shema to be rewarded. One recites it because it is true. The traditional prayers said around the Shema praise God, who is with the people from the beginning of creation, who is with people now through God’s presence in Scripture, and who is with generations to come, since God is eternal. God’s covenant with God’s people binds us into a new kind of relationship, where all we can do is respond with our whole being.

Melinda Halom is an ordained Lutheran pastor and a liturgical fabric artist in Wisconsin. Through her “Quilted with Prayer” business, Halom makes banners, paraments and stoles. For Lutheran Christians, stoles represent the vows a pastor makes in ordination. Shaped like a yoke, they symbolize the work a pastor does, but also Jesus’ promise, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). Halom uses quilting techniques to make beautiful stoles with intricate patterns in all the colors of the liturgical year. She also utilizes other themes that resonate with local Wisconsin churches. For example, she makes camo green and camo orange stoles for fall Sundays when hunters are blessed. She has designed stoles in all the colors of the rainbow for Reconciling in Christ congregations who celebrate the lives and ministries of LGBTQIA+ people. After years of resisting the idea, Halom

made stoles with Green Bay Packers fabric. In a PBS interview, Halom said that she finally decided to do so since most football games occur during the green season of Pentecost (and green is the Packers’ color). Some congregations have made the occasion of their pastor wearing a football-themed stole an opportunity to raise funds to support local and international charities. Others might wonder if these “unique” stoles cross a line of decorum. Perhaps it would be better to imagine that they represent how faith is involved in all aspects of our lives. Our covenant with God binds us to faith in all that we are, no matter the season.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Look up the Lord’s Prayer in your ELW. In what ways is the Lord’s Prayer similar to the Shema?
5. Ask your pastor: What do your stoles mean to you? Which stole do you like best and why?

**BOUND THROUGH CHRIST**

📖 **Read:** Romans 8:31–35; 37–39

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. Is there a time in your life when you felt particularly close to God? Share the story.

Nowhere in Scripture do we read that life is going to be easy, that faith will solve all our problems or bring us wealth and happiness, a sound marriage or obedient children. We remember that Jesus Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith, did not lead a life of success, power, wealth and glory—at least as far as the world is concerned.

Christ chose a humble life and even died on the cross so that we could be sure there is nothing Christ would not do, and no place Christ would not go, to come close to us.

Separation is a real issue in human life. As finite beings, we are forced to choose between activities, events, organizations and relationships. Even natural and joyful events like growing up or getting married mean that some things end. You can't become an adult without leaving childhood behind. And this is the easy part. We all know the pain of loss and grief. The people that we love fail us; they move away; they die. This is why Paul's words in Romans are so important.

Though everything might change and all else might fail, nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. Jesus' willingness to share our human life and to die a human death binds us to God in a new way. We who share in Jesus' baptism are confident that we will share in his resurrection. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from God's love.

My first quilting mentor was Candy Simonen, a member of Shepherd of the Hills, the first congregation I served as an ordained minister. Candy founded the congregation's handicraft group and enjoyed the occasional quilting project herself. When my family moved to follow my husband's job, I resigned my call. In my last sermon, I preached that since we are all interconnected in Christ, there are no permanent goodbyes. But I did wonder, this side of heaven, would I see Candy and my other church friends again?

A few summers later, the Simonens invited my family to join them for a week at their summer home in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. There were no TVs and plenty of mosquitos, but there was a lake and Candy's mother-in-law's treadle sewing machine. While the kids played in the great outdoors and my husband caught up on his reading, Candy made a quilted potholder with

me. We laughed and talked about what was on our hearts and minds, both the good things and the hard things. Sewing was really just an excuse to be together. Sharing this time reminded us both that relationships can last, despite change and distance. Even though I am no longer Candy's pastor, we are still united in the sisterhood of Christ as friends.

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

7. Look over the list of things (in the Romans passage) that Paul says threaten to divide us from God. What do you think is the biggest threat to faith: success or hardship?
8. Share a story about someone you have remained in relationship with for many years. How do you maintain your friendship? What keeps you together?

### **BOUND TO OUR NEIGHBOR**

📖 **Read:** Micah 6:6–8

📖 **Read:** Matthew 25:31–46

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

9. In what ways does your congregation serve? Why do you think service is important to our faith?

The prophet Micah's words come during a successful and prosperous time for the land of Israel. The temple is booming. People are busily engaged in the proper religious rituals required. Yet something is missing. The passage we read leans into hyperbole. While a whole calf might be a normal sort of offering, "thousands of rams" and "ten thousand rivers of oil" is over the top, and still certainly

insufficient. What could one ever offer God that would be enough?

Micah is adamant that what God wants isn't sacrifice, but service. In other words: Justice. Lovingkindness. Humility. This is what God wants from us. These values, by definition, cannot be lived without connection to our neighbors. We cannot "do justice" without working to remedy inequality. We cannot "love kindness" without reaching out to meet our neighbor's need. We cannot "walk humbly with God" without listening to and serving the ones God loves best: "the least of these."

Which leads us to Matthew's judgment parable. This is the last of a series of warnings to those who would claim to follow Jesus, but whose lives fail to reflect his grace. All the nations call Jesus "Lord" when gathered before the throne, and yet none of them recognize Jesus during his time on earth. In the moment of judgment, both the "sheep" and the "goats" are surprised to hear that it was when they cared for "the least of these" that they served—or failed to serve—Christ.

Jesus became fully human to connect human-kind with God. In Matthew, Jesus takes this connection one step further. Jesus, by locating himself among the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and imprisoned, the stranger and the naked, works to connect human beings to each other. In other words, we cannot be bound to Christ without being bound to our neighbor in need.

It can seem frightening to hear these words of judgment, and yet, we do well to remember that this is not the end depicted, but the ways of the world that separate and harm. As God's people, we have an opportunity to turn to Christ in our neighbor and embrace the life God wants for us. It isn't just for our neighbor's sake that we do this. Human lives are interconnected. Our health and well-being are predicated on the health and well-being of our neighbors. In caring for "the least of these," we care for ourselves. In calling us to service, Jesus calls us

to abundant life that is as warm and as useful as any quilt.

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I am writing this passage from a cruising altitude of 32,000 feet on a cross-country flight. Looking out the window at the Midwest flying by, I am struck by how much it looks like a quilt. Field and forest, crop lands, towns and the occasional city make up colorful squares. Rivers, streams and roads crisscross like a running stitch. Soon we will come to the Rockies, and later the Pacific Ocean, borders or bindings if ever I saw them.

It isn't always so lovely. Last summer, on a return flight from a visit to my family in the Pacific Northwest, I could see forest fires burning in Montana and Idaho. The smoke billowed for hundreds of miles, undaunted. Generally, one doesn't see state or national borders from a plane. While politics and policies may differ, what happens in one place affects another.

The Micah and Matthew passages remind us that our lives are bound to the well-being of our neighbor and our planet as well. Animal and plant species, forest and field, river, stream and ocean, mountain and valley, desert and plain are all part of the same quilt that is our world. Caring for creation honors God, serves our neighbor and blesses us as well.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. Share a story about volunteering. Many people say they get more out of serving than they think they give. Is that true for you? Why do you think that is?
11. Tell about a favorite place of yours in creation. What do you do to take care of it?

### **BOUND TOGETHER FOR GOOD**

Experts say that sabbaticals are beneficial to long pastorates, but as our summer was coming to an end, I wondered: Did I really want to go back to church? I had gotten used to family dinners at home, reading books that weren't theological and, of course, having time to finish my quilting projects. In my darker moments I worried whether my congregation would want me back. I imagined they had gotten used to fewer meetings, a varied preaching schedule and a less busy summer. The idea of being bound to the day-to-day of church again was a little stressful.

But as soon as I walked through the sanctuary doors, all that stress and concern melted away. Seeing all the people I love, hearing and proclaiming the gospel in their midst, sharing the sacraments, catching up on all the good work they did in my absence (and sharing my own stories too), I was reminded of our connection. One summer apart could not cut those “ties that bind.” In some ways, taking time for rest and renewal made those bonds between pastor and people even stronger. It proved to us all that whether we are together or apart, God is still working in us and through us.

When I got to my office, there it was—the community quilt the congregation had completed during our sabbatical. At the center was the cross. Surrounding it were successive squares of blocks, each square representing a person or family in the congregation. It was bound in a pattern of intertwining leaves, bordered with the blue of baptism. The finished quilt now hangs in our narthex, representing who we are as a community. Redeemer Lutheran is a congregation that follows the pattern of Christian faith. Each of us may be cut from different fabrics, but together God pieces us in new and vibrant ways. Bound together in Christ, we seek to serve the world.

It's comforting to know we are not alone. Our connection extends beyond our walls. Other

congregations, other gatherings, are quilted communities too. Centered in Christ, I was privileged to experience many quilted communities on my sabbatical—the quilt shop, the John C. Campbell Folk School, the Art Institute. The sabbatical offered me time to reconnect with family and friends through God's call to service, working for justice and appreciating and preserving the wonder of creation. As this Bible study ends, I hope you, too, feel a part of the quilted community that is the body of Christ. May the quilt of our lives and of our congregations be useful, beautiful and warm! 🌸

# Crafted in Christ

## Session three

Ties that bind

BY KATIE HINES-SHAH

Previously, we discussed what we can learn about faithful living from choosing quilt patterns and cutting and piecing fabric. We talked about choosing aspects of our lives to emphasize or reduce, knowing that God's vision of what is truly important often differs from our first impulse. We looked at how our lives and communities are pieced together, placing special emphasis on diversity and forgiveness. Now we'll consider how we are bound in God through Christ for the sake of our neighbor in need (and for our own sake as well).

### INTRODUCTION

If you meet monthly (rather than holding one summer retreat) and time allows, review the last session. Did anyone seek to make changes in their lives to preserve what really matters? Does anyone have a new story about forgiveness or reconciliation?

The stories of *Friendship Quilt* and Gordeen Gorder's quilting can help group members think about the ways in which we bind our lives to the lives of others. View *Friendship Quilt* via the Art Institute of Chicago's website: [www.artic.edu/art-works/54071/friendship-quilt](http://www.artic.edu/art-works/54071/friendship-quilt). Participants might wish to share stories of significant wedding gifts or the blessing (and pain) of being in relationships. Nearly everyone will have a symbol of a commitment with them—no need to ask them to bring one ahead of time. Examples may include a wedding ring, an organ donor card (often as part of a driver's license), an AA chip, a cross necklace or a special tattoo. As always, invite participants to share, but

do not insist that they do.

### BOUND TO GOD

#### Key takeaways:

1. The Shema is the most important confession in the Jewish faith, centering the believer's entire life in the love of God. Listen to it sung in Hebrew here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=3&v=pKQFM9-6IE&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=pKQFM9-6IE&feature=emb_logo). You can note that there are many important Jewish traditions surrounding the Shema that don't fit into a brief study such as ours. A little internet research, or better yet, conversation with a Jewish friend, will give you better insight into what this Scripture passage means to modern Jewish people.
2. Group participants may find parallels between the Shema and the Lord's Prayer. For example, both are said in many times and circumstances, refer to God as "our" (God/Father) and make evident God's involvement in the whole of human life—from daily bread to the time of judgment.

You can watch a short (5 minutes) PBS interview with Melinda Halom here: [www.pbs.org/video/clergy-cloth-ksofda/](http://www.pbs.org/video/clergy-cloth-ksofda/). She told me that recently, stories that tell a pastor's faith story have become popular. One pastor asked her to make him a stole using as many different fabrics as possible so that everyone in his congregation could feel represented in it.

### BOUND THROUGH CHRIST

#### Key takeaways:

1. Jesus became human so that nothing could separate us from God's love. This passage from Romans is a staple of funeral services, yet it also says so much about the trials and tribulations of day-to-day living.
2. Sharing treasured stories of feeling God's presence can be powerful and affirming. As a leader, take care to assure people who have not had

mystical experiences that their faith is not deficient. God moves in our lives in a variety of ways.

3. Your group might be surprised to hear that prosperity seems to have a detrimental effect on faith. Church attendance isn't the only marker of faith. A 2009 study found that the wealthier the community, the less likely community residents are to be religious: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poor-est-nations.aspx>. Why would this be the case? Is it perhaps easier for human beings to think they don't need God when they have so many resources at hand?
4. Many people have had relationships shift during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during the most recent election cycle. What has separated us? What efforts do we make to maintain relationships? What relationships do we need to walk away from? How can our faith help us bridge gaps and deal with challenges?

## **BOUND TO OUR NEIGHBOR**

### **Key takeaways:**

1. "What does God want us to do?" is a key question for Christian people. Micah and Matthew direct believers to care for the neediest. In our increasingly connected world, caring for our neighbor and our planet is a way of caring for ourselves. The full life God intends for us is lived in community. When we care for the least of these, Jesus will be there.
2. Because Lutheran theology holds that we are saved by faith alone (through grace alone, by Christ alone), we may be quick to decry "works righteousness" (the idea that we could be saved by doing good things to earn God's good favor). Tell participants that Martin Luther wrote that a Christian should instead serve out of gratitude to God for God's saving grace and in response to a neighbor's need. Service is a necessary product of faithful Christian practice. Participants in this study can be encouraged in the work their church does for the sake of the world.

3. Prayers for creation are a regular part of Sunday worship. You can use the Prayers of the People prepared by Sundays and Seasons ([www.augsburg-fortress.com](http://www.augsburg-fortress.com)), or share your own creation-related petitions. For starters, how would you write one specific to your geographic area?

### **SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)**

1. Have participants read the introduction before coming to the group.
2. Skip the "Bound to God" section.
3. Continue with "Bound through Christ." Read the Romans passage, do the introductory question and read the study aloud. When you reach the end of the section, ask people to partner with one another to answer one of the two final questions.
4. Continue with "Bound to our neighbor." Skip the intro question. Read the passages and the rest of the section aloud. Have participants again form pairs to answer one of the final two questions.
5. Read the conclusion together.
6. Close in prayer.

### **A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)**

Read the introduction aloud. Look up "Friendship Quilt" online. Answer the introductory question. If your group would enjoy more conversation time, consider answering the questions as a large group rather than in pairs.

If your congregation or group decided to do a Quilted Community Project, consider how you would like to have your quilt bound. Will a volunteer quilt it? Will you send it out to be quilted by a professional? Will your group tie the quilt together? All ways have merit and symbolize your connection to each other and to your community. 🌿