

OPENING HYMN

“All Are Welcome” (ELW 641)

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, by the love of Jesus Christ you draw people to yourself and welcome them into the household of faith. May we show your joy by embracing new brothers and sisters as we bear your creative and redeeming word to all the world. Keep us close together in your Spirit, in the breaking of bread and the prayers, and in service to others, following the example of Jesus Christ, our servant and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 75)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

Serving with zeal

What intergenerational hospitality and creativity have in common

BY SARAH CARSON

In recent years *Gather* has begun a tradition of taking a break from longer, multi-session Bible studies in May for a one-month devotional about intergenerational hospitality.

Those of us who have spent a lot of time in church know that this is a practical topic. If we are committed to following Jesus’ commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), hospitality seems like a natural extension of this mandate, right?

Plus, intergenerational hospitality in particular is important because we have so much to give to and receive from each other with each passing generation. As the mother of a 5-year-old, I know this intimately. I find myself calling my own mother for parenting advice every other day. But I find myself learning from my 5-year-old, too.

It is not always easy to nurture these relationships, though, is it?

In my case, especially, I have never felt very gifted at building relationships. I’m terrible at small talk. And I’m downright terrified of conflict. In fact, most of my life I’ve preferred the company of books—or my own journal and a pen—to people. I’m convinced I was born this way. I just like being in a quiet place alone with my thoughts.

But if we believe what Paul wrote to the Romans (12:4-5), “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another,” then we must believe that each of us has something



important to contribute.

As a person who cannot cook, or plan events, or run a committee, I do have at least one gift that I think can be of help when it comes to intergenerational welcome. I'm a writer, and a writing teacher, and as such, I spend a lot of time reading and thinking about creativity. The more I've learned, the more I've come to believe that creativity has a lot in common with the skills needed to live in community with people who are different from us—whether that means people who are older or younger than us, or people of different races or backgrounds.

Let me explain what I mean.

“DO NOT LAG IN ZEAL”

📖 **Read:** Romans 12

Here is one of the first things I think creativity and living in community have in common: Anyone who has ever tried a new creative hobby knows that one of the hardest parts is getting started. When you look at the blank canvas or the blank page before you, it's hard to know what to do first.

If you're anything like me, getting started can be one of the biggest challenges of getting to know new people, too.

Imagine that a new person shows up at church, or at your book club, or at your quilting group. Let's say this person is much older or younger than you, but perhaps they also have other differences: Maybe you have different first languages. Maybe you live in different parts of town. Maybe the bumper stickers on their car are in direct opposition to yours.

Now maybe you're naturally a people person, and a situation like this wouldn't faze you. But when I think of a situation like this, I freeze. I'd rather stay home.

The science fiction writer Ray Bradbury has this to say to those who worry about how to take the first step: “What can we writers learn from lizards,

lift from birds? In quickness is truth. The faster you blurt, the more swiftly you write, the more honest you are.”

Just do it, Bradbury is saying. Stop thinking so hard and get started. You have the gifts within you to make a difference. Now use them. Stop stalling.

When I look at the passage in Romans 12, I see Paul giving similar advice. Remember, Paul was writing to a church that was still new. People were only just beginning to learn what it meant to follow Christ in community with people from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Conflicts were bubbling up. People were finding it difficult to come together. (Does any of this sound particularly apt for our own modern times?)

So when Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect,” he is speaking to a community that is still trying to learn how best to get along with one another.

Paul reminds the Romans that we each are gifted with skills and talents that not only benefit our community, but that are needed. “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,” he writes. We each have our own unique way to “contribute to the needs of the saints” or to “extend hospitality to strangers.”

Further, he adds this advice: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

How can each member of the body contribute? Look around you, Paul seems to be saying. What do you see that needs to be done? Does someone need a friendly “hello”? Or a chair? Have you been gifted with the ability to provide these things? Then go. Stop thinking about it. “Do not lag in zeal... Serve the Lord.”

Share aloud or reflect:

1. How do you feel about the idea of getting

to know someone of a different generation? What benefits could you see? What challenges? Does the idea scare you? Excite you? Give you mixed feelings? Why?

2. What gifts do you have that may be of use to someone who is older or younger than you? What gifts might someone of another generation have to offer you?

“I HAVE NOTHING...”

📖 **Read:** 1 Kings 17:7–16

OK, so we know now we each have our own unique gifts to contribute, and that Paul advises us to put them to use—with zeal. With that in mind, put yourself in the shoes of the woman in Zarephath in this passage from 1 Kings.

We learn from the story that God has told Elijah to go find this woman. God says, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” But if God also sent this message to the woman Elijah meets, it doesn’t seem as if she received it, does it?



When Elijah asks her for something to eat, she replies: “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”

She does not sound as if she’s been waiting for a visitor, does she? In fact, she sounds more like me on a Friday night—ready for some sweatpants and peace and quiet. But what happens instead is something that has likely happened to a lot of us: She already has a plan. She’s already exhausted and hungry. And now here comes someone asking for help.

You’ve been here, right? You’ve had a hard week, and you just wanted to sit in a pew in worship—not teach the newer, younger church member how to make the coffee. Or you were planning to spend a weekend at home, tackling your list of chores, but an older person from church calls and needs your help.

To be sure, we can’t always help everyone. And there are times when we need to maintain boundaries to keep our own emotional wellness or safety. But look what happens when the widow decides to help.

“She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail.”

I don’t think anyone would have blamed the woman if she turned Elijah down, but she didn’t. She saw a need, and she met it. She did not lag. She shared the tiny bit of food she had, and what was the result? Abundance—not just for Elijah but for the widow and her son. What little she had was multiplied and everyone had enough.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Have you ever been asked to help or

serve at a moment when you didn't feel equipped? What did you do?

4. There are certainly times when we have to set boundaries with others, but as Christians there are also times when sacrifice might be in order. How do you know the difference in your own life? How will you know whether or not you, like the widow, should give even if you don't feel like you have enough?

GIVING OUR BEST

📖 **Read:** Luke 19

This story from Luke is a classic Sunday school tale of hospitality, right? Jesus enters Jericho and sees Zacchaeus, who is known by those in the crowd as a “sinner.” Most people in town want to stay as far away from Zacchaeus as possible, but not Jesus. Jesus tells Zacchaeus to come down and join him for dinner. Those of us who are familiar with the story know this is an example of the way we're called to act.

When I look at this story through the lens of hospitality, though, it's not Jesus that I relate to.

The text says, “All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’” This is where I more naturally see myself. How many times have I seen someone in need of my help, but have not stopped to act because I was busy, or tired, or sure I was not the best available person?

Even worse, there have been times when I've seen someone else acting like Jesus, and instead of joining them, I sat and grumbled, “Well, isn't she just so perfect—always doing the right thing?”

Here's another piece of creative advice I think can help when we get grumbly. Poet and songwriter Patti Smith says, “I have to work very hard at all

the things that I do in order that they might be of worth. That's what I think of myself as, a worker.”

It takes effort to become good at something: writing, baking, painting—and living among each other. We are not promised that our efforts will always go well. Sometimes it might take more than one try to connect with someone new. We may even disagree sometimes. Does that mean we should go stand in the crowd and complain?

No, we're called to act as Jesus does in this story—to see a need and act with love and compassion. We are called not to try once, but to keep trying.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Where do you see yourself in the story of Jesus, Zacchaeus and the crowd? Have there been times in your life where you've been in each position—as the one in need, as the one who welcomes and as the one who grumbles?
6. Can you think of a time you hesitated to extend welcome to someone in need? What might you do differently next time?

FACING OUR FEARS

📖 **Read:** Matthew 6:25–34

We know that we are called to embrace one another regardless of our age or background, but what often gets in the way?

When I ask myself what stops me from acting quickly or from giving my best, my answer usually boils down to a fear of something—a fear of rejection or a fear of doing the wrong thing. And all of these fears, of course, have nothing to do with the person who needs me, and everything to do with preserving myself, with not feeling uncomfortable

or uncool.

Here's an example: I am the white, straight-haired mother of a beautiful, mixed-race, curly-haired girl. Having no previous experience caring for curls, though, I needed help. I read articles. I watched videos. But no combinations of shampoos or products or combs were a match for her tangles and knots.

Then a friend of mine recommended a salon that specializes in curly hair—and in braiding hair, in particular. I'd never had my hair braided, and the thought of walking into a salon where I didn't know anyone and didn't look like most of the other clientele scared me. I was also scared I'd look silly, having been unable to figure out my child's hair-care regimen on my own.

But my daughter needed me. And when she saw the pictures of smiling girls with braids and pink beads, she would not be deterred. So we made an appointment. The woman with whom we were scheduled was also a mother—and an older and much more experienced one. If she looked at my daughter's tangled curls and thought ill of me, she didn't say so. She was patient. She shared her knowledge. And her own teenage daughter, who was working in the salon, took time to talk to my daughter about caring for her hair. It was a wonderful, intergenerational experience that wouldn't have happened if I'd succumbed to my fears and stayed home.

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus reminds us that our worrying does not protect us. “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” he says.

Our worrying, in fact, works against us. It keeps us separate from one another. Like creativity, reaching out to others can be a risk. Engaging with someone who knows more than you, or who is less

experienced than you, or who has different interests, or a different culture, or different beliefs can be scary. But the alternative is worse. Living separated from one another and not passing on what we know to one another is a kind of death.

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” Jesus says. “... Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

Share aloud or reflect:

7. What might be keeping you from engaging with someone younger, older or otherwise different than you? Do you have a fear of failure? Or of being misunderstood? Can you name what scares you?
8. Now that you've identified what's holding you back, can you identify reasons that facing your fears might be worth the risk? What's the worst that could happen if you try? What's the worst that could happen if you don't?

I turned 38 years old this year. In many congregations, 38 is fairly young compared to other members. I certainly still feel fairly young—even if a young man at the community pool recently asked if I was my daughter's grandmother.

“No, I'm her mom,” I explained.

“Oh, well you look old,” he replied.

It was a reminder of exactly where I am in life—smack dab in the middle. I have 38 years' worth of experiences and skills I can share with others, but I also still have plenty to learn.

Then again, nothing is promised, is it? I recently felt this all the more acutely when I stumbled upon a poem called “A Cottony Fate,” by Jane Hirschfield. In it, Hirschfield reflects on a piece of advice she received when she was younger, about avoiding the

word “or.” The trouble with this word, the poem implies, is that it can make us nervous about choosing. Just choose, the poem seems to say. It ends:

“Now I too am sixty.

There was no other life.”

Wow. “There was no other life.” This poem illustrates one final thing I think creativity and hospitality have in common. They both have the capacity to stir us—and to present us with the truth.

Whether it’s a song or a poem or an interaction with a new person, our eyes can be opened. But we only get this opportunity when someone is willing to risk sharing of themselves, to risk being open and honest about who they are and what they’ve seen.

Reaching out to one another can be scary. It can be challenging. But who would we be without each other? We need the gifts others have, and others need what we have.

So run fast. Work hard. There is no other life.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Have there been times in your life when you’ve let fear keep you from trying something new? What happened? Do you wish you had done something differently?

10. If you were going to give a piece of advice about life to someone younger than you, what would it be? What about advice to someone older than you?

11. What questions would you like to ask of someone of a different generation?

12. What steps can you take next to embrace the entire community around you—including those younger, older or different than you?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of grace, you meet us in our fears and worries. You understand what we’ve been through and why we might be afraid. Yet you call us to keep trying to connect with one another. Be with us as we face our trepidations and engage in the necessary work of building community and ensuring that your will is done on earth. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“Healer of Our Every Ill,” (*ELW* 612) 🌿

