

OPENING HYMN

“O God of Mercy, God of Light”
(ELW 714)

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you have gathered us to study and share deep matters concerning life and death, anger, desire and relationships. May our meditations and conversations, centered in your word, be a source of health and goodness for each of us and for each other. In Christ our Savior’s name we pray. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“You shall not murder.”
(Exodus 20:13)

“You shall not commit adultery.”
(Exodus 20:14)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*
- Paper and pencils, or whiteboard
- (Optional) *The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther 1529: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Fortress Press, 2016); *Luther’s Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*, ed. Joseph Bocko (Augsburg Fortress, 2019); and *Luther’s Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar (The Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders–ELCA, 2019).

The Ten Commandments: Reviving the soul

Session three

The sanctity of life and love
(Commandments 5 and 6)

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

INTRODUCTION

We have come to two of the most famous of the Ten Commandments: *Don’t murder* and *Don’t commit adultery*. In biblical Hebrew, they consist of two words each, without additional comment. They are among the shortest verses in the Bible. They are clear in principle, but far from straightforward in their application.

Let’s begin with the commandment not to murder. Few people think they’ve broken this commandment. Even fewer, however, adhere to a truly “seamless web of life” ethic. Strictly understood, such an ethic might prohibit the use of contraceptives, any type of abortion, personal defense, military service, capital punishment or even end-of-life palliative care (which can hasten death). Faithful people who take the Ten Commandments seriously have differing feelings and ethical arguments concerning all those subjects. When I think of a religion that completely affirms the sanctity of life, I am humbled to remember a Jainist community where I was once shown kind hospitality. Jainism, an ancient religion of India, believes in utter nonviolence. Along with being vegetarian, they won’t even eat root vegetables because of the small living creatures in the earth who might be disturbed or hurt as the vegetables are pulled out. Similarly, Jainists try to

eat before dusk, out of respect for insects, even tiny ones, that might be attracted to the light of a dining table, and inadvertently become consumed. What a beautiful, if extreme, reverence for life! But this is not what the fifth commandment requires.

The commandment not to commit adultery is less complicated. Yet perhaps no other commandment has been so often weaponized. Divorced people have been shamed, marriage covenants among same-sex couples have been prohibited, unrealistic (and largely hypocritical) “purity” standards for teens and singles (especially women) have been imposed, all in the name of the sixth commandment. In reaction, there are many people today who consider the word “adultery” laughable and irrelevant. Can this “word” from God possibly be construed as life-giving or love-affirming for Christians today?

Share aloud or reflect:

1. At first glance, do you feel the way these two commandments have been interpreted has been more a source of help or of hurt to people?

THE FIRST MURDER

■ **Read:** Genesis 1:27, Genesis 4:1–16, and Genesis 9:6

The account of Cain and Abel tells an ancient story of jealousy, intrigue and violence in a pattern nearly as old as humanity itself. It is a pattern that repeats itself in popular TV series and, devastatingly, in real-life acts of hate in neighborhoods at home and around the world.

Much exegetical ink has been spilled over why the Lord preferred Abel’s offering. Was it because Abel brought the “firstlings” of his flock, whereas Cain only brought a more casual-sounding “offering of fruit”? Did one give grudgingly and the other

joyfully? Does God play favorites? Perhaps the Scriptures are purposely silent over the reason for God’s preference. As St. Paul said, thousands of years after Genesis was written, “For we know only in part...” (1 Corinthians 13:9a). Maybe that is the point to remember whenever anger and jealousy raise their demonic heads: Humans know only in part; God alone understands all.

In the third chapter of Genesis, the world becomes broken. Our parents Adam and Eve taste the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. They are banished from Eden, the land of plenty, and the fear of scarcity begins. Jealousy is the natural child of anxiety over “not enough for me.” Adam and Eve bequeathed that fear to their children. Sibling rivalry was born.

The jealousy an older sibling feels over the intrusion of a younger is so common as to be almost comic. My friend shared the story of a family outing to the beach. Out of the blue, her 4-year-old said, ever so casually, “Why doesn’t Abby just swim out into the ocean and never come back?” Then, just in case his mother hadn’t gotten the point, he repeated his bright idea to his grandparents sitting nearby. Should they laugh or should they cry?

Don’t I get jealous over a coworker who I feel has been favored over me? Or the boss who posts photos of his latest Hawaiian holiday, while I labor away in my windowless office? Jealousy seems to know no age bounds; my elderly friend lives in a retirement home where there is fierce competition over who gets assigned the closest parking spot and who gets the most visits from family. Do we dare admit the whispers in our own thoughts about how “life would be more pleasant if so-and-so just swam out into the ocean”?

There will always be better and worse reasons for fear, jealousy and anger. In Genesis 4, the focus is on Cain’s reaction. Whatever the reason for God’s preference of Abel’s gift, Cain was “very angry, and his countenance fell” (v. 6). The Lord’s response to

Cain's hurt feelings? "Sin is lurking... you must master it" (v. 7). The image is that of a crouching lion waiting to pounce.

Cain does not master his anger. He allows it to swallow him whole. He kills his brother, thinking there are no witnesses. It turns out his brother's blood itself has a voice, and God is the witness.

And yet the Lord does not kill Cain. It's a puzzle for me: Why doesn't God smite the murderers of the land and teach everyone a lesson? Why is murder allowed to continue? With the psalmist we long for safety and justice, and we cry out, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1). Instead of exacting vengeance, God gives Cain a mysterious mark of protection. Human bodies are holy to God—even the body of the murderer, Cain.

Later, as part of the covenant God makes with Noah in Genesis (much earlier than the Ten Commandments), a general prohibition against consuming blood appears. Even the blood of animals is holy to God, but especially holy is the lifeblood of humans, who are made as images of the living God.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Share a time you experienced or observed jealousy or sibling rivalry. How did you or others grow out of or "master" it?
3. These passages have been used *against* the death penalty (since God did not exact life from Cain for the murder of his brother) and *for* the death penalty (given Genesis 9:6). What other arguments for or against the death penalty are you aware of as a Christian?

A CONSPIRACY OF LIFE

📖 **Read:** Exodus 1:8–10, 15–17 and 2:1–10

It was jealousy that turned Pharaoh into a murderer, as well as racist fear that the Israelite families were more fertile and stronger than the Egyptians.

In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther teaches that God commands us not only to avoid violence, but also to actively protect and support life:

This commandment is violated not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbors and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury but fail to do so.... If you see anyone who is condemned to death or in similar peril and do not save her although you have means and ways to do so, you have killed her. It will be of no help for you to use the excuse that you did not assist their deaths by word or deed, for you have withheld your love from them and robbed them of the kindness by means of which their lives might have been saved.

— *The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther 1529: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, p. 329.

We see a positive fulfillment of the fifth commandment in the five women who conspired to serve the God of life, rather than the gods of fear and death. Shiphrah and Puah are much less famous than Pharaoh or Moses, yet their names are preserved in Scripture as guardians of life. They fear and love God more than Pharaoh's decrees. For millennia, they have given people of faith a shining example of the courage to commit civil disobedience when lives are at stake.

Another keeper of life is Moses' mother, who sees that her child is beautiful and uses her faith and wit to craft him a lifeboat of sorts. Then there is the sister who watches over her little brother and cleverly volunteers to find a Hebrew wetnurse for the child. That the Hebrew wetnurse turns out to be the baby's own mother is a lovely divine detail to the story! And fifth and most unexpectedly, we see

the Egyptian princess, who takes pity on a fragile life, one that her own father had declared an alien and an enemy. Pharaoh's daughter paid attention, not unlike the Good Samaritan whom Jesus would teach about many years later. She noticed. She acted. Together, these five women formed a conspiracy of life for Moses, the savior of the Hebrew people. As a Christian, I can't help but think how alike they are to the women who protected and nourished Jesus, the Savior of all nations.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. What do you know about the role of midwives today, especially in under-resourced parts of our country?
5. Do you remember being cared for by older siblings, or having responsibilities for younger siblings? Share one memory from that time.
6. What is the church's role in speaking up for or actively caring for refugee families escaping persecution or death in their home countries? (See Eva Nguyen's story in "A recipe for welcome," January/February 2023 *Gather*.)

A LESS FAMOUS MURDER

📖 **Read:** Exodus 2:11–15a

People are sometimes surprised to learn what the Bible makes clear: Our so-called biblical "heroes" were deeply flawed—some shockingly so. After his own life had been saved, but before God had called him to save the lives of his people, Moses murdered an Egyptian in what was clearly a premeditated act ("He looked this way and that," v. 12). It helps me to remember that the only true "biblical hero" is God.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. Was this a justified killing? Why or why not?

PUT AWAY YOUR SWORDS

📖 **Read:** 1 Samuel 18:6–11 and 24:1–7, Isaiah 9:6–7 and Matthew 26:51–53

How jealous King Saul must have been to hear these songs in praise of David. Since forever, people have equated military success with divine favor, the right to rule and even sex appeal! Small wonder Saul attempted to kill David numerous times (see the following chapters of 1 Samuel). Yet when David has the opportunity to end Saul's threats for good, he doesn't do it. David will not murder his king.

The prophets had long foretold that the Messiah would come from David's line. And although Isaiah calls the Messiah the Prince of Peace, there was much speculation about the Messiah's military might. If King Saul killed his thousands, and King David killed his ten thousands, then wouldn't the Messiah King come and wipe out *all* of Israel's enemies? It made for bitter disappointment, then, in first-century Palestine, that Jesus, the one they thought would conquer, was himself defeated (according to human understanding), led off for crucifixion at the hands of the Roman occupiers. Some say it was a growing disillusionment with Jesus' peaceful ways that caused Judas to betray him. It was certainly a last-ditch, heroic effort for one of Jesus' disciples to pick up a sword to defend his teacher. But rather than appreciating the effort, Jesus practically laughs at this misunderstanding of the way of God. "Don't you realize I have legions of angels at my command?" he asks. For Christ, the deep power of God comes only by way of the cross.

📖 **Read:** Ecclesiastes 3:1–3a

For some 300 years, Christians took Jesus' words about putting away the sword literally, and they refused to serve in any armed forces. Only when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion did the church begin to warm up to the idea that Christians could serve honorably as soldiers. Perhaps there is "a time to kill"?

The commentators writing in *Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections* capture the tension between wholeheartedly following God's commandment not to kill and living in a world where some people of faith feel the need and even the call to defend and protect community or country, potentially through violent means:

According to this commandment, we humans have no right to take the life of any other human being—period! This is, of course, not to say that we do not do it—and fearfully often—but rather than gloat about it or shout that we are doing God's work when we do it, we ought to weep, since it is a sign that once again we have fallen short of the world that God has in mind for us.

— *Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*, p. 21.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. Share an example of a Christian you respect who is a pacifist. Is there someone you equally respect who is an officer of the law or a member of the armed forces?

JESUS AND MURDERS OF THE HEART

📖 **Read:** Matthew 5:21–24 and Luke 6:27–31

Jesus does not let us off the hook when it comes to following the fifth commandment; in fact, he

intensifies it. As God is my witness, I've never killed anyone physically, but in my heart?

For decades I spent my vacations in Door County, Wisconsin, where Pastor Bruce Foster always concluded the prayers of the church in such a memorable way that I asked him if I could use his words for this *Gather* study. Pastor Foster told me he composed the prayer just after 9/11, as a reflection of the tension between Christian ethics of military service (the "just war" theory) and Christ's call to love our enemy. Pastor Foster used this prayer until his retirement. Sadly, as conflicts have not ceased, the prayer has never sounded out of date:

At this time of war and conflict, we pray for all the members of the American military and foreign service in danger anywhere in the world. Allow them to accomplish their missions and come home safely to us. We pray for all those innocently caught up in the conflicts. And because our Lord Jesus commanded us to pray for our enemies and those who persecute us, we ask you, Lord, to always remind us that you created them in your image, that Christ died for them, that they are just like us, so that we might with sincerity pray: Lord, have mercy on them.

— Rev. Bruce Foster

Similarly, if an atheist or an agnostic or a child swears using God's name, this won't do nearly the damage done by one so-called Christian saying they are a follower of Jesus Christ and then spoiling that name by not acting Christ-like. As St. Paul says to the Romans: "For as it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Romans 2:24).

Share aloud or reflect:

9. How often have you broken the fifth commandment lately, according to Jesus' definition of it?

10. How do you feel about praying for your enemy? How does this keep the fifth commandment in a positive sense?

ADULTERY AND THE ONE-FLESH PARTNERSHIP

📖 **Read:** Exodus 20:14, Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5b

The sixth commandment is less ambiguous than the fifth. There is no season for committing adultery. The time to refrain from embracing is when either partner is already committed to someone else. And although at one point in time adultery referred only to a married woman having sexual relations with someone other than her husband, the creation story in Genesis suggests that adultery has little to do with gender but, rather, with the unique bond sexual intimacy confers within a covenanted relationship.

Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections interprets it bluntly and comprehensively:

We should be so respectful and in awe of God that we do not commit any act of adultery, whether we call it cheating, infidelity, misconduct, two-timing, or unfaithfulness. ...Having any intimate encounter with someone who is already in an intimate committed relationship is prohibited.

— *Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*, p. 23.

📖 **Read:** Genesis 2:18–25, Matthew 19:3–9

The story of the first human partnership makes major claims about humanity, loneliness and marriage. First and foremost, it is not good for the human to be alone in the world. In the Hebrew language, the word “human” (*adam*) is not a gendered word, nor does the Hebrew word “helper”

(*ezer*) imply some sort of inferior being. In fact, the person most often referred to as helper (*ezer*) in the Hebrew Scriptures is God! Everyone needs the close company of community; not everyone needs to be married.

A second point made in both the Genesis story and Jesus' teaching is the frank reference to the “one flesh” of marriage. Sexual intimacy was created as part of the goodness of creation, as a uniquely powerful uniting force. Walter Trobisch, a Lutheran missionary pastor and international speaker, used to illustrate this in a memorable way: He would glue two pieces of paper together, wait a few minutes, then pull them apart. Inevitably, one or both pieces of paper would tear. People who've gone through an affair or a divorce often refer to that sense of tearing and fracture of self.

A third point to be made is that responsibility for sexual faithfulness does not depend on one's gender. An elderly parishioner who grew up on a Wisconsin farm described putting the old aluminum milk cans out for pick-up by the big dairies. Farmers were required to certify their milk as being *unadulterated*. This meant that no water had been added to extend it, and no formaldehyde had been added to preserve it (an occasional practice in American farms of the 1800s!). It was pure.

Today, purity is considered essential for milk and food, but has gotten a bad name in matters of sex. This is understandable, considering the pernicious “purity culture” promoted among certain conservative Christians and others. Jesus, however, teaches that God's positive intention for marriage is lifelong faithfulness (purity) in sexual expression between two people. Such purity will preclude the many ways in which human bodies (often but not only the bodies of underprivileged young women and girls) are treated as objects for consumption, with many risks and little economic benefit for the women themselves. The ELCA Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders states:

Christian teachings on the sixth commandment in Asia will not be complete without addressing such issues [as] prostitution, rape, concubinage, temple prostitution, sexual slavery and exploitation, and human trafficking. Some Asian countries are tolerant of sex tourism and sex industry because of its economic benefits at the expense of their own people. Underage sex trafficking is one of the most pernicious practices in Asian societies, as is the case in other parts of the world.

— *Luther's Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures*, p. 30.

Share aloud or reflect:

11. What words and expressions would you use to describe a positive understanding of God's intention in creating sex?

GOD, THE JILTED LOVER

📖 **Read:** Hosea 1:2, 3:1

One of the strangest books in the Bible is that of the prophet Hosea. God weirdly commands Hosea to marry a known philanderer. What an honest portrayal of the fierce pull of sexual and romantic love that leads some people to go against all common sense (or the good advice of their families) and hook up with someone clearly unsuitable. Yet God commands Hosea to enter just such a relationship in order to portray God's passionate love for the people of Israel. God knows the pain of betrayal, the tearing of trust, the agony of being lied to. Adultery makes it onto the list of the "big ten" commandments because marriage vows and sexual intimacy are a way to deeply understand God's weird, wonderful, passionately irrational, faithful love for Israel—and for us.

Share aloud or reflect:

12. In what ways can you or your church community accompany and care for those going through romantic grief or divorce?

JESUS AND MARRIAGE

📖 **Read:** John 2:1–11 and 8:1–11

I never tire of hearing the story of Jesus' first miracle. The story has many layers, but one of them surely is that God can bring delicious and unexpected joy to replenish and celebrate the human marriage bond.

In my first parish I saw how Georgine and Tom, an older couple, loved and honored each other. They danced at the Firemen's Picnic, played bridge on Friday nights, taught second-grade Sunday school class—always together. Then Georgine was diagnosed with advanced colon cancer. Even as her body was ravaged and she lay dying in her hospice bed, Tom still called her "Gorgeous George" as he brushed her thin head of hair. When I met with Tom and family members to prepare for the funeral, I asked how long they'd been married.

"Ten wonderful years," he said.

Looking at his adult children (and not always the master of diplomacy), I said, "Oh, so you were married before?"

Tom looked at me. "Five times, pastor."

WHAT?

"Five times, pastor. I busted each of them marriages up myself. Gorgeous George is the one that the Lord used to teach me how to go and sin no more."

Share aloud or reflect:

13. How does your congregation participate

in honoring and caring for those contemplating marriage and those celebrating weddings and anniversaries?

14. Think of examples of second marriages that have been witnesses of God's forgiveness and new grace.

CLOSING HYMN

"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (*ELW* 588)

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and, through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth; so that, in your good time, every people and nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. 🌿

The Ten Commandments: Reviving the soul

Session three

The sanctity of life and love

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

OVERVIEW

Commandments five and six involve some of the most significant and controversial subjects we deal with as human beings and as Christians. Murder and adultery are both loaded terms and may bring up painful issues and fierce opinions. In this Bible study we will equip ourselves with stories and vocabulary of Scripture, knowing there are so many more texts that relate to human life and sexuality than we can possibly cover in one session. Take a moment for personal prayer as a leader, to thank God for this holy task of shepherding and sharing. It is a privilege to consider and discuss such matters within our own church community. None of us is a true expert, except insofar as we are centered in Christ's own humble, compassionate and self-emptying love. Even if you have only a short time together, acknowledge the complexity of the subject material, and start and end this session with group prayer. You will also find beauty and wisdom in using either or both hymn selections, which emphasize God's wide, wide mercy. May you experience truth, laughter and grace along the way!

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Invite and welcome new and regular participants alike. If time allows, you might ask participants bring a "show and tell" object or photo that represents either:

- a way in which you are (or have been) involved in health or healing for others (as a positive way of keeping the fifth commandment), or
- a photo or symbol from your own or a loved one's wedding or anniversary (as a positive way of keeping the sixth commandment)

Using this or another type of icebreaker is an old educator's trick—if people hear their own voice at the beginning of the session, they are often more willing to speak up later in the study too! Don't forget to snap a photo or two and ask permission to share and promote your Gather Bible study group.

2. If this study is part of a longer retreat (or if your congregation is looking for an adult education class to offer), consider inviting and involving a guest who can speak to positive ways of keeping the fifth and sixth commandments:

- Someone from a Christian pacifist tradition, such as Mennonite, Amish or Quaker, could share their understanding of pacifism and active peacemaking.
- A military chaplain might talk about a Christian understanding of military service in light of the fifth commandment and Jesus' teachings.
- A medical educator or practitioner from your congregation could give a presentation in their area of expertise relating to physical health.

— A marriage counselor could share their perspective on what makes for a solid marriage, and how a church community might support and strengthen marriages and/or those going through separation and divorce.

3. Point out the ELCA Social Statements, downloadable free at www.elca/socialstatementse. Several of these relate to the fifth and sixth commandments. Note especially the Death Penalty Social Statement, summarized here: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8ynaav>.

Our worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, is a wonderful resource for prayers on topics related to keeping the Ten Commandments in a positive sense, including prayers titled “Our enemies” (p. 80), “Marriage” (p. 82), “Those whose marriage has ended” (p. 82) and “Health care providers” (p. 85). These might be just the right words to pray with a family member or neighbor going through challenging times, or to share in a handwritten card.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. **Introduction** – Read this section. (Skip Q1.)
2. **The first murder** – Read the entire section. Read Q2, but invite participants to think about the question silently for a minute rather than inviting discussion. (Skip Q3.)
3. (Skip **A confederacy of life**, including Qs 4, 5, 6.)
4. **A less famous murder** — Do the whole section, including Q7.
5. (Skip **Put away your sword**, including Q8.)
6. **Jesus and murders of the heart** – Do the whole section, including (briefly!) Qs 9 & 10.
7. **Adultery and the one-flesh partnership** – Read only the first set of Scripture readings and the first paragraphs, then skip to the next section. (Skip Q11.)
8. **God, the jilted lover** – Read this section and do Q12.

9. **Jesus and marriage** – Read only John 2:1–11, then read the whole section and end with Q13. (Skip Q14.)

A LITTLE LONGER (45–60 minutes)

As above, but add the Confederacy of life section back in, including discussion on Qs 4, 5, 6.

CLOSING

Given the many expressed and unexpressed feelings and experiences related to murder and adultery, take a moment at the end of your session to again thank participants for making time to study the Word of God together, and for their gentleness with each other. You might brainstorm ways you can enhance or highlight practical ministries of the congregation in light of today’s session. In any case, end with the beautiful second prayer entitled “The Human Family,” from *ELW*, p. 79. 🌿