

OPENING HYMN

“Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth”
(ELW 735)

OPENING PRAYER

Merciful God who created us in the diversity of your holy image, we pray that we may experience the world through your vision. We pray to see your holy image in every living being we encounter. We pray that if there is something impeding how we encounter your grace and mercy in the world, it may fall away. Help us to understand that there are multiple ways to encounter the fullness of your love in the world. ...[In] that fullness we continue to profess your grace and love. Amen.

—REV. TUHINA RASCHE, “FAITH LENS,” MARCH 21, 2017, ON BLOGS. ELCA.ORG/FAITHLENS/

FOCUS VERSE

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness...’” (Genesis 1:26a)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

I am worthy.

Session one

I am created in God’s image.
(No matter what anyone else says.)

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite songs is from the all-female, African American singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. The song is titled “There Were No Mirrors in My Nana’s House.” The lyrics tell of the wonder of being at a mirrorless house, where beauty is reflected in a grandmother’s eyes:

“I never knew that my skin was too black. I never knew that my nose was too flat. I never knew that my clothes didn’t fit. I never knew there were things that I’d missed, ‘cause the beauty in everything was in her eyes (like the rising of the sun).”

This song names how we too often seek to discover our worth in the reflections we see outside of ourselves. Some of us have had the blessing of having grandmothers or others whose eyes taught us to see ourselves as precious, worthy and beautiful. Our value came from the simple fact that we were beloved. Even as the rest of the world finds reasons to diminish us, our grandmothers (or others) have named the truth of our beauty.

My own grandmother had a mirror in her house, with the words, “Look who God loves!” painted onto the glass. I’d walk down the hallways of her tiny Nebraska farmhouse, and look critically at my own face with spots of acne and too-big red glasses. But those words reflected a different truth, contradicting all the things I heard from others or myself. “Look who God loves.”

This three-part Bible study begins with Genesis and the creation of humanity as *imago Dei*, meaning

“made in the image of God.” With this understanding of God’s good creation, we’ll examine those images that have sought to undo, contradict or dismiss the goodness, value and leadership of women. Remember that the mirrors of our society, history and even the church often distort the image of women in particular to be less-than, sub-human and wrong. Those are lies told by too many. It’s time to toss out those false mirrors, voices and interpretations. All we need is to see ourselves as reflections of God’s beauty in the world. No matter what anyone else says, you are made in the image of God. And you are good—very good.

Share or reflect:

1. Can you think of someone who has been a “Nana” for you—a person who has reflected back your inherent worth and deep goodness?

IMAGO DEI: THE “NO MATTER WHAT-NESS” OF GOD

📖 Read: Genesis 1: 26-31

Share or reflect:

2. How does this reading make you feel? Which words or phrases evoke this feeling?

God creates humankind in God’s image, according to God’s likeness. We bear a bit of the divine. Within our being is a semblance, a correspondence to God’s goodness. This is true for every human being. God doesn’t say only particular people carry this divine spark, or that only some resemble God. All of us do. No one is a mistake. No one is more than another. No one is less. God created humankind in God’s image, in God’s own likeness.

Father Gregory Doyle talks about this as the “no matter whatness” of God’s love for humanity. Doyle

says that when we “live in a zip code of the eternally disappointing, we need a change of address.” God’s love for us is ours, no matter what. No matter what we’ve done, who we are, what the world says about it. No matter what, God’s love is for us. God made us and called us good.

Share or reflect:

3. When have you lived in a place of doubting your own beloved-ness? Who helped you change your address, and move to a place of knowing God’s “no-matter-what” love?

IMAGO DEI: A PLURAL NOUN

My kids love to do Mad Libs. In this word game, you fill in the blanks of a story with nouns, verbs and adjectives without knowing what the story is actually about. The result is a nonsensical and hilarious narrative. Our favorites are the ones that include the prompt “person in the room” and end with Uncle Brent riding a hamster 400,000 miles to school while it rains hot chocolate.

Beyond just the laughter they bring, Mad Libs have helped my children learn about nouns, verbs and adjectives. Paying attention to the grammar of the biblical text can also lead to a deeper understanding as we study Scripture. For example, as we consider what it means to be made in the *imago Dei*, some small bits of grammar in Genesis 1 point to some big truths.

Do you notice that humanity is plural here (v. 27)? The divine image is not individually bestowed or earned. Humans (plural) are created in God’s (singular) image.

As theologian Walter Brueggeman said: “None is the full image of God alone. Only in the community of humankind is God reflected. God is, according to this bold affirmation, not mirrored as an individual but as a community.” We discover,

nurture, understand and reflect our divine-likeness with others. Alone, we tend to either bury or deny the divine goodness of ourselves or others. We need each other, so that we can see ourselves reflected in them. We can keep expanding our understanding of God through our relationships with others.

Share or reflect:

4. Why is it sometimes hard to conceive of our divinely-given goodness when we are alone?
5. How have you experienced God's image coming alive in a community?

IMAGO DEI: A VERB

Some of my English-teacher friends decry the phenomenon of turning nouns into verbs. But it happens all the time. Text was originally just a noun for words sent via phone, but it has become a verb. "I'll text you!" Friend is another example. It's a noun of course, but now we say that we "friended" someone on a social media site. Language evolves, allowing for new, playful ways to keep communicating.

And, inspired by Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, let me point out that "image" is a legitimate verb, as well as a noun. Hall writes that the *imago Dei* is a quality that grows out of our relationship with God. It's something we reflect, something we do, something we live. We are made to "image" the creator.

This is clear as we look at Genesis 1:28. Immediately after humans are created in God's image, humanity is given a job, a relationship, a responsibility. God entrusts us with the care and keeping of the world. As Walter Brueggemann writes, "The image of God in the human person is a mandate of power and responsibility. But it is power exercised as God exercises power. The image images the creative use of power which invites, evokes, and permits. There is nothing here of coercive or tyrannical power, either for God or for humankind."

As one of God's first acts, God begins a relationship with humanity—a partnership of shared care for the created world. Made in God's likeness, we get to reflect God's way of interrelatedness and interdependence as a part of who we are. Our lives are made to mirror God—a creator who rules by finding partners in that dominion, in self-giving, mutuality and shared responsibility.

Share or reflect:

6. What are some ways that you or your community of faith "image" the Creator in responsibility and care for others and the created world?

In 2021, a theologian named Mick Atencio went viral with their expansive reading of Genesis 1, creation, and God's embrace. Mick, who is non-binary, wrote these words:

God made "day and night." this sounds like a binary, similar to "male and female," right? But that isn't quite all we experience in 24 hours. sunrises and sunsets do not fit into the binary of day or night. Yet God paints the skies with these too.

On the second day God separated the sky from water. Seems like another binary. Yet the clouds hold water for us in the sky, the condensation and rain cycle refreshing our earth constantly. The sky, separate from water, contains and releases water.

God also said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." That isn't the full story, either. Consider marshes, swamps, bogs, and fens. Not fully land, not fully waters. There is such glorious variety in God's creation.

[We worship] the God of the marsh, the penguin, the God of the sunrise, the cloud, the supernovae. The God of the nonbinary.

In Genesis 1:27, we read that “God created humans in God’s image, male and female God created them.” Atencio invites us to see humanity as witnesses of the expansive spectrum of God’s creative powers. It’s not just in the marshes and the dusk, but also in the people around us who don’t fit into easy dualities of gender. Every human being is created in God’s divine image. In a time when transgender and nonbinary people face discrimination, exclusion, persecution and cruelty, our creation story reminds us that they are not a mistake outside of creation’s goodness, but a witness to God’s expansive creative powers. They are made in God’s image and called “very good.” A good resource to learn more is *Raising Kids Beyond the Binary* (Broadleaf Books, 2023) by Lutheran writer and speaker Jamie Bruesehoff.

Share or reflect:

7. How do you fit into normative gender binaries? In what ways do you live outside of them? How can you advocate with and for nonbinary siblings?

TEXTS THAT SILENCE AND SHRINK

At most carnivals or fairs, you can find a tent full of funhouse mirrors. Unlike flat plane mirrors, these mirrors are curved in ways that completely mess with the reflection. A person becomes tall and stretched thin or squished to be squat and round. These mirrors are hilarious in their distorted reflections. But many things can trick us into seeing false reflections of ourselves that are not at all funny. Social media, societal expectations, cultural norms and even scripture can alter how we see ourselves until we no longer see that “no-matter-what” love given to us by God. Let’s look at some of the scripture passages that have been made into trick mirrors, deforming the God-given dignity, participation and goodness of women.

📖 Read: 1 Timothy 2:8-12

Share or reflect:

8. How does reading this make you feel? Which words or phrases affected you?
9. Have you ever heard this verse used to dismiss you and your leadership? When have you felt silence in the church or in other places?

I am sorry for having you read that. These passages have often been interpreted by some Christian traditions as a universal and timeless prohibition against women in leadership or teaching roles. Let’s unpack those words to get to the heart of these verses and shatter the trick-mirror ways they’ve devalued and dismissed too many women.

First, a note about epistles, or letters. A big chunk of what we now call the New Testament (or the Second Testament) began as correspondence—letters sent from Paul or Paul’s followers (or Peter, James or John) to faith communities they founded, cared for or led. They address particular people at particular times, in response to particular situations. They were never intended to become universally applied or divinely ordained instructions. I believe them to be God-given—saved, repeated, lifted up and canonized, because they continue to teach us and direct us to follow Jesus. But we need to remember how they began.

Second, not every verse has the same weight of importance in our faith lives. Within the Lutheran Christian tradition, we talk about reading scripture through the lens of Christ. We sift through scripture and when those verses contradict Jesus’ teachings, we recognize that Jesus wins. The verses that align with Jesus take greater weight. We worship Jesus, after all, and not the scripture that points to him. So then, the words of Jesus, who told Mary Magdalene to share the good news of the resurrection are more important than those of the writer of 1 Timothy,

who told (some) women to be quiet.

And third, the early church itself had all kinds of women who were speaking, leading and teaching. Paul writes about “Chloe’s people” (1 Corinthians 11). We also hear about Junia, the apostle; Phoebe the deacon; and Euodia and Syntyche, the church planters. In Galatians, Paul writes that in Christ, “there is no longer Jew or Greek... slave or free... male or female...” (Galatians 3:28). So why would one or two contradictory verses from some Pauline letters become for us church doctrine, limiting and prohibiting half of humanity from speaking, teaching and leading?

Countless biblical scholars and historians have studied these verses and unpacked the cultural realities for the early church and the problems of translation from the original Greek. But for now, if you ever hear these words being used to silence you, or if you ever wonder if you ought to shrink because of your gender, you can say, “I have read those verses too. But I don’t think those texts mean what you think they mean. I know Jesus raised up women as leaders, and Paul trusted them to speak too. I know the Spirit has moved me, and I’ll listen to the Spirit.” (By the way, scripture uses both feminine and masculine metaphors to refer to God’s Spirit. Read Proverbs 8:22-31, Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:35 to learn more about God’s Spirit (“ruach,” a feminine noun in Hebrew) and Divine Wisdom (“Sophia,” a feminine noun in Greek).

MIRRORS THAT HELP US SEE THE TRUTH

I also don’t want to write these verses off, as if they have nothing to teach us about living in faithful communion with one another. All of us can do better at lifting up our holy hands without anger or argument (1 Timothy 2:8), dressing ourselves with good works (1 Timothy 2: 9-10), and not abusing our authority (a better translation of 1 Timothy 2:12). When we take out the gendered divisions (which were written to address a particular conflict at the time of the

original letter), verses 8-10 can point us to the truth of ourselves and how our words or actions can disrupt community or diminish other people.

Verse 12 is often translated as “she is to keep silent.” The Greek word here for silent is *hesuschia*, which actually means stillness or quietness. It’s more to do with a strong kind of peacefulness. *Hesuschia* is about speaking without meddling or clamoring, interrupting or taking over. It’s a way of learning and being in community that allows for many voices (regardless of gender) to listen and learn.

There are two practices that can help us to learn and be in community with this spirit of *hesuschia*. One of them is to keep in mind the acronym “W.A.I.T.” which stands for “Why am I talking?” We can pause and wait before responding. This is particularly true for those among us who carry privilege, or institutional or social power. In order for individuals and our communities to flourish, we can take a sacred pause, and say to ourselves “W.A.I.T.”

The other practice is that of taking and making space. Some of us have a tendency to take space. We are usually the first to answer a question. We can practice making space for others to speak and participate. But for those who tend to remain quiet, their practice is to take space—to risk speaking up.

Share or reflect:

10. Is it your tendency (or privilege) to take space or to make space? How might you practice doing the opposite, so that there can be a sharing of space and the sort of quietness that allows for full participation, listening and learning from others?

TEXTS THAT CONSTRAIN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

📖 Read: Ephesians 5:21-24

Share or reflect:

11. How does reading this make you feel, in your body? Which words or phrases

make you feel this way?

These words do not grow out of the teachings of Jesus, but reflect the Greco-Roman culture in which they were written. These “household codes” were a given in a time when men had unilateral authority—not only over their wives, but over their children and their slaves. Paul cannot escape the culture in which he lived. However, Paul tries to subvert the household codes to create a vision of equality, not just for men and women, but for enslaved people.

As author Rachel Held Evans writes:

But with Christ, hierarchal relationships are exposed for the sham that they are, as the last are made first, the first are made last, the poor are blessed, the meek inherit the earth, and the God of the universe takes the form of a slave.

What’s great about the Christian remix of the Greco-Roman household codes is that, when put into practice, it blurs the hierarchal lines between husband and wife, master and slave, adult parent and adult child. If wives submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ (Ephesians 5:24), and if husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25), and if both husbands and wives submit one to another (Ephesians 5:21)—who’s really “in charge” here? No one.

—from *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (Thomas Nelson 2012)

It comes back to the verse which started it all: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). When we see the *imago Dei*, the image of God, in one another, we treat each other with reverence and humility, mutuality and respect. We reflect God’s love in our actions toward our partners, family, and even strangers.

Share or reflect:

- 12.** How have your relationships been shaped by cultural norms or

expectations? In what ways do you practice mutuality and reverence with the people you are close to?

CONCLUSION

Remember the mirror with the words, “Look who God loves!” that I mentioned at the beginning of this session? This is the heart of who we are—people made in God’s image. As we wrap up our time, or later at home, use a blank piece of paper to draw a picture of yourself. What labels have been given to you that distort your true belovedness? Write them down, and cross them out to shatter the lies these tell. Next, consider things you do or ways you speak that diminish or hurt others. Brainstorm ways you can repent (turn away from and change) those things. Now imagine yourself and others in God’s eyes. The beauty in everything is in God’s eyes, after all.

Around the edge of your paper, write something like: “I am made in the image of God. God’s love for me is mine, no matter what—no matter what others say, no matter what I’ve done. No matter what, I am God’s beloved.”

If you want, take a dry-erase marker and write these words on a mirror you look into regularly: “Look who God loves!”

I am worthy.

Session one

I am created in God's image.

(No matter what anyone else says.)

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

Whenever I lead a Bible study, I begin with introductions. Even if people know each other well, asking a simple question helps to deepen our connections with each other. For this study, ask participants: “What things do you admire or love about yourself?” Because we’ve been trained to not talk about ourselves in this kind of positive light, this may be a challenge. But that’s the point of asking this question!

NOTES FOR LEADERS

The goal of this study is for participants to understand how scripture reflects life-giving, affirming messages of our inherent goodness, whereas the negative, diminishing messages that often come from society can deny that God-given goodness.

In many parts of this study, a discussion question will immediately follow a Bible reading. These questions make space for participants to share their own insights before hearing the commentary shared in the study. Noticing our initial thoughts and physical responses to certain words can also help to inform us. The people in your group have wisdom, insights and experiences that can help us hear the ancient words of scripture in new ways—even before you read the words I’ve written.

These moments of reflection and conversation help us to embody the truth that the Holy Spirit works in and through all of us, revealing something about God in Christ. The Spirit helps us to hear and read scripture in expansive ways that can never be captured by one writer, even one with a divinity

degree. As leaders, we can make space for people to explore and share, before we jump in with the study’s commentary.

As you wrap up each Bible study session, I encourage you to find ways to pray together about people’s concerns and joys. You can:

- Ask: “Is there anything people would like to share or bring forward for our prayers today?”
- Read your group’s written prayers aloud. I was part of a mom’s group where we filled a notebook with our prayers and prayer requests. As we wrapped up our morning meetings, our leader would read these prayers aloud.
- Take turns praying for each other. I was once part of a youth group where one person would name a prayer request. Then another person would say, “I’ll pray for her/him.” When it was time to pray, we’d popcorn around, binding up the community in prayer.

STUDY OPTIONS

I am always aware that many leaders need to pick and choose which sessions or elements will be used in their limited time. You can shorten this study or turn it into a special retreat. If you do not have a group with whom to do the study, you can read this study in a contemplative way. Read the scripture verses, then reflect on the questions in your journal or in a quiet time of prayer.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Read “Introduction”
2. Read all the “Imago Dei” sections.
Do Q2 through Q5.
3. Skip to “Funhouse mirrors”
4. Read and discuss “Texts that silence and shrink”
5. Read and discuss “Mirrors that help us see the truth”
6. End with “Conclusion”

LONGER STUDY (60 TO 90 MINUTES)

- Add “Texts that constrain relationships” and the discussion questions.

HALF DAY RETREAT (2-4 HOURS)

Each of the three sessions can easily take two to four hours if you include worship, discussion, breaks and a light meal. 🌿.

OPENING HYMN

“For All the Faithful Women” (ELW 419, verses 1, 5, 6, 9)

OPENING PRAYER

In you, Father all-mighty, we have our preservation and our bliss. In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving. You are our mother, brother, and savior. In you, our Lord the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace. You are our clothing; for love you wrap us and embrace us. You are our maker, our lover, our keeper. Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

I am worthy.

Session two

I am more than one thing.

BY SARA OLSON SMITH

INTRODUCTION

One day during confirmation class, I invited the seventh graders to talk about their identities. They were asked to go around their tables and begin a sentence with “I am . . .” First, they talked about relationships: “I’m a daughter. I’m a brother. I’m a grandkid.” Soon they shifted to hobbies: “I’m a baseball player. I’m a dancer. I’m a reader.” Next, many of them talked about character traits: “I’m funny. I’m kind (most of the time).” Around the circle they went, sharing who they tried to be in the world.

We are, of course, many things. During some seasons, we may lean into a particular part of our identity, such as a profession, a relationship or a responsibility. Yet we are more than just one thing. I might be a pastor, but I’m also a mother. And that’s not all. I am also someone who loves playing in the woods and losing myself in a novel.

In her 2009 TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie names this truth: We all are much more than one thing. When Adichie first came from Nigeria to study at an American university, her U.S. born and raised roommate assumed she couldn’t use a stove. She was also surprised when Adichie pulled out a cassette tape of Mariah Carey’s music. Her roommate had narrowed her understanding about people from Africa to a single story. In her talk, Adichie said, “In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.”

Adichie reminds us that we are intersections of identities, roles and responsibilities. Beyond just the color of our skin or birthplace, we are also a sister, mother, daughter and friend. Not to mention our various vocations, hobbies and joys. When we flatten others or ourselves, we limit our ability to connect and to envision a mutually enriching present and future.

“All of these stories make me who I am,” Adichie explains. “But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

Adichie, who is a writer, says that the way out of this is tell stories, “Stories matter. Many stories matter,” she says. “Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

So, in this session, we are going to tell stories. We’ll complicate the stories we thought we knew. We’ll look to women in scripture and discover that they are so much more than what we’ve been taught. By looking again at these stories, we’ll see not only biblical women, but hopefully others and ourselves in a new light, beyond stereotypes, beyond that flat and dangerous single story.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. When have you been flattened into a single story? When have you caught yourself flattening the stories of others?

MARY: MORE THAN A PASSIVE, VIRGIN VESSEL

📖 Read: Luke 2:41-51

Share aloud or reflect:

2. What does this story tell you about Mary? Who is she?

In the Apostles’ Creed, we confess that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary.” For many, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was simply the virgin who gave birth to Jesus. Her (lack of) sexuality became the defining feature, so much so that within the Roman Catholic church her virginity is perpetual. The primary story we often get about Mary is that she was a pure, untarnished vessel into which God placed the Savior of the world.

Throughout history, women’s bodies, desire and sexuality have been controlled and defined by men, with women frequently squeezed into one of two boxes: virgins or whores. Mary is the prototypical pure vessel, often portrayed as simply a passive recipient in God’s saving work in Jesus.

The biblical narrative tells us so much more about her! After actively voicing her consent to become the mother of Jesus, “Let it be with me according to your will,” Mary runs to her cousin Elizabeth. Mary then sings her Magnificat, a song full of themes that are echoed in Jesus’ ministry. Mary’s song is proof that she knows her baby boy will someday do miraculous and world-saving things. When all the multitudes have left him, Mary stands at the foot of the cross, accompanying her beloved child and her Savior in suffering. From Jesus’ birth to death to resurrection, she is there, actively supporting and participating in God’s saving work.

In Luke 2, when Jesus gets lost and found in the temple, we get to see some of the wonderfully complex parts of Mary. We read that she is a practitioner of her faith, making the yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover with her family and neighbors. Far from meek and mild, Mary finds Jesus at the temple and disciplines him. We read that he went home “and was obedient to them.” We hear that Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

There's something so very human in this story, even as it reveals the divinity of Jesus. It is evident that the leader Jesus became is due in large part to the mother who raised him in faith and shaped him in both obedience and care. Mary is so much more than a virgin vessel.

Many of us who are mothers or who show maternal care to others might find ourselves sometimes feeling like mere vessels, or as though the title of mother limits us somehow. But Mary reminds us that God will work through the moments of panic and discipline, even when our bursts of anger expose our fear and imperfections. Mary is a mother, and so much more. She is a teacher, a former of faith, a revolutionary, a believer. So are you.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. What is the story you've been told about Mary? What is the single story you've been told about being a mother (or a daughter, or a grandmother)? How do you fit into this story? How are you so much more?

RUTH: (NOT) JUST A FOREIGNER

📖 Read: Ruth 2:1-13 (If you have time, on your own, read all 4 chapters of Ruth.)

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Who is Ruth? How would you describe her?

Some of us may be familiar with the words of Ruth 1:16, "Where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people." These words were first spoken at a time of desperation. Having moved to Moab because of famine, Naomi's sons marry Moabite

women before dying and leaving their wives and mother alone. With nothing and no one except her Moabite daughters-in-law, Naomi puts her hope on returning home. One Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses to leave her. The two widows return to Naomi's homeland, hungry, grieving, carrying only sorrow and fear. This story of two women left vulnerable, who find strength in relationship and faith, is a story lived by many women across generations and geography.

It is not hard to figure out what the "one story" about Ruth would be. The writer repeatedly calls her "Ruth the Moabite." It is a constant reminder that this woman is a foreigner—someone from a rival and enemy land of the people of Israel. Everywhere Ruth went, because of this one story, she would have been labeled, stereotyped and excluded.

Ruth's situation is not unfamiliar to us today. Through racial profiling and countless other means, immigrants and refugees in our country face hate and unjust systems. They experience not only the challenges of building a new life in a new country, often with very little resources, but countless other threats.

As we read chapter 2, we see that the way to find hope and flourish is for people to choose relationships and care. Naomi and Ruth move toward one another, committing to stick together through whatever challenges lay ahead.

In the end, the gracious and faithful Boaz marries Ruth, and she has a baby boy, the infant embodiment of new beginnings and hope. Placed in the arms of his grandmother Naomi, he grows up to become the grandfather of King David. Ruth's "one story" has expanded. She is now a matriarch, a woman listed in the genealogy of Jesus (see Matthew 1:5).

Consider the way our acts of charity and our work for justice with immigrants and refugees grows so much richer, transformative and sustaining when these efforts grow into and through

relationships. It's no longer "Ruth the Moabite," but "my friend Ruth." In my congregation, I see this lived out with Sharon, an elderly widow, and Rebecca, a high schooler raised in a refugee camp in Kenya. They sit together at church, delighting each other with their stories. Together, they've become so much more than just a widow or just a refugee. Mutual flourishing and new life happen when we open not just our pantries, but our hearts to each other. Ruth's story invites us to share in the promise of this blessing.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. How have you been blessed by relationships with people of a different place or a different background from you?

ESTHER: (NOT) JUST A PRETTY FACE

📖 Read: Esther 4:9-17

6. Who is Esther? How would you describe her?

Esther was beautiful. She was also a Jewish woman, orphaned and raised by her cousin Mordecai at a time when the Jewish community was exiled in Persia, after the Babylonian captivity. When Esther was taken into King Xerxes' harem, she hid her Jewish identity for her own safety, due to the precarity of her status. Eventually, she chose to become the queen.

Later in Esther's story, one of the king's advisors, Haman, makes a genocidal decree, seeking to annihilate all Jewish people throughout the Persian empire. Mordecai begs Esther to use her position to sway the king to stop this decree. Mordecai tells her: "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (v. 14).

Esther, having hid her religious identity (and likely her intelligence as well), would have been seen as just

a beautiful woman. When one is underestimated by many, it's easy to also underestimate oneself. But when Esther's community needs her, she risks all her privilege for the sake of her siblings in faith.

Esther chooses to reveal herself, but she doesn't do so alone. She asks her community to pray for her, and to fast. With their support, she says, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). She has courage to act, though she is afraid and the outcome is unknown, because of the supportive scaffold of praying people.

Our connection to a larger community keeps us from believing in limiting stories. Esther's uncle reminds her that she is not just a pretty face, not just an orphan. She has tremendous power. He refuses to let her hide part of herself or be diminished.

With the community praying for her, Esther claims her own power—a power that comes from her multitude of identities: queen, orphan, beautiful woman, niece, and bold woman of God.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. Who are some people who push you out of your comfort zone?
8. What is a part of yourself that you keep hidden? Why? Where is a place you can let it out and integrate it into your whole self, so that you and others can flourish?

ANNA: (NOT) JUST AN OLD LADY

Share aloud or reflect:

9. Who is Anna? How would you describe her?

In 1961, Jenny Joseph wrote a poem called "Warning" that celebrates the liberation of aging.

It begins: “When I am an old woman I shall wear purple, with a red hat that doesn’t go and doesn’t suit me.”

She names how she must, for now, wear respectable clothes and set a good example for the children, but that someday, she’ll abandon all the limitations of expectation and just be herself. There are now “Red Hat Societies” where women gather to connect and get the most out of life.

Too often, women are dismissed, silenced and sidelined as they age. But Anna is a witness to a liberated, joyful life of faith and daily prayer, even while carrying her own griefs and traumas. She is named a prophetess, the only woman in the New Testament given this title. When she meets the infant Jesus, she praises God, then goes and tells everyone all about him.

Perhaps she is dismissed as the “crazy old lady,” but I like to think that she is listened to as the wise woman she is. Maybe she wears a red hat, not caring what anyone else thinks. Anna, an older woman, announces fearlessly the truth she knows of God’s great love for her and for her people, a truth she sees embodied in Jesus.

Share aloud or reflect:

10. What are some of the gifts of aging?
11. Who are the older women in your community you turn to as you seek to grow in faith and freedom?

MARY MAGDALENE: (NOT) WHAT THEY CALLED HER

Share aloud or reflect:

12. What have you been taught about Mary Magdalene? Who is she?

Perhaps no woman in scripture has been flattened

into a single (and false) story as much as Mary Magdalene. She is most commonly known as a repentant prostitute. But really, nothing in scripture points to this being a part of her biography. Quite the opposite, as we’ll see. In the first centuries of the early church, Mary Magdalene was seen as a leader among the followers of Jesus, a witness to the resurrection, and a teacher of faith. But as the church linked up with the Roman Empire and power became consolidated in a few men, her presence contradicted their desire to limit women in leadership. So, they used the power of the pulpit and paintings to tell a false story that continues to shape the ways we see Mary Magdalene, and ourselves as women.

If Mary Magdalene was not a transformed sex worker, who was she? Why does she remain a necessary, important witness for us as followers of Jesus? While there are lots of writings about (and attributed to) her from the early church, we’ll focus this Bible study on the parts of the Bible that hold her story. Let’s let the Bible tell us about Mary Magdalene.

MARY MAGDALENE: FAITHFUL TO JESUS FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE END

📖 Read: Matthew 27:55-56, 61, and Mark 15:40-41, 47

The writers of Matthew and Mark wait until the crucifixion to introduce us to Mary Magdalene. She is a part of a group of women who follow Jesus and minister to him. They are there throughout Jesus’ ministry. They are there at the cross when he dies. Judas had already betrayed Jesus. Peter denies him around the fire, as the rooster crows. But the women, Mary Magdalene among them, stay with him, showing courage, vulnerability and deep commitment to Jesus amid their own deep grief and heartbreak.

These verses tell us that the followers of Jesus aren’t just those 12 male disciples. Women are also

part of the first community of Jesus-followers. Mary Magdalene gives of herself, and whatever resources she has, to support Jesus' ministry. She is no shrinking violet. Mary Magdalene sticks with Jesus through thick and thin, even as he dies, caring for his body after his death.

Share aloud or reflect:

13. Did you know that Mary and other women were part of Jesus' ministry? What does this tell you about Jesus? What does this tell you about your own participation in the work of the church?
14. Who are the people who have stuck with you when things have gotten hard? How can you be that for other people?

MARY MAGDALENE: MADE WHOLE BY JESUS

📖 Read: Luke 8:1-3

Luke also introduces Mary Magdalene as part of a group of women who support and participate in the ministry of Jesus. But Luke gives us a little more information about her. Mary Magdalene is named as being cured of "seven evil spirits and infirmities." We cannot know what these spirits or infirmities were, but nowhere does it say she repented of a life of sexual promiscuity, nor that she was healed of licentiousness. Perhaps it was some sickness or injury that was cured, or maybe Jesus healed her of the traumas and harms that come from mental illness. The biblical writers didn't include a code with a specific diagnosis, as is used in modern-day insurance billings. They didn't need to. What matters here is that Mary Magdalene is healed and made whole by Jesus. And that once Mary experiences that healing, she stays with him, along with other women.

MARY MAGDALENE: FIRST TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL

📖 Read: John 20: 1-2, 11-18

(optional additional readings: Matthew: 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, and Luke 24: 1-10).

Share aloud or reflect:

15. What does this story tell us about Mary Magdalene?

In all four gospel accounts, Mary Magdalene is named as the first to see and know the life-changing, world-altering news of Jesus' resurrection. She is also directed to go and share this good news with Jesus' friends. For this reason, Thomas Aquinas, in the 13th century, called Mary Magdalene the "apostle to the apostles." Mary Magdalene is the one sent to the ones who would be sent out into the world.

John's gospel shares an intimate account of the moment when Mary is unable to identify Jesus until he says her name, "Mary!" When Jesus speaks her name aloud, Mary recognizes him. In doing so, he calls and invites her to be the one to tell others about him. The Risen Christ chooses to show up to Mary Magdalene. He picks her to proclaim his resurrection to his followers. Even though the male disciples think it an "idle tale and did not believe them" (Luke 24:11), Mary Magdalene proclaims, "I have seen the Lord," telling her friends about what she has experienced, turning the world upside down.

The biblical stories about Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb hold great value to me. In the times when I doubted the legitimacy of my call, or when others questioned if I, as a woman, should be preaching, I anchored myself in Mary Magdalene's story.

I often turn to the story of these women, who were burdened by grief, who headed to the tomb ready to find death and impossibilities. Instead, they

(and we) find an empty tomb, Christ’s shattering of the power of death, and a purpose, a call.

Share aloud or reflect:

16. Who are the women who shared the good news of Jesus with you?
17. How are you a witness to the resurrection in your life?


THE PRACTICE OF CURIOSITY

I am convinced that the practice of curiosity is essential for faithful living. When we allow ourselves to be curious about other people; when we learn about their stories, their joys, their fears, their families and their commitments; they become full, whole humans to us. In these times of deep distrust, curiosity can begin to undo the quick judgments that pull us away from each other.

I try to turn to curiosity in those moments when I get angry and judgmental about people I know and care about. When someone says something that I disagree with or may even find wrong, I pause. Then I ask something like, “Tell me about what that means

to you. Why are you making that choice? Why do you care so much about that?” I find that my quick judgments slowly unravel as the conversation continues.

There is so much more to people than what we first see. As the poet Walt Whitman once said: “I contain multitudes.” We all do. We see this in the stories of women in scripture. I pray that together we become more curious, so much so that we find the surprising, beautiful multitudes within others too. 🌿




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I am worthy.

Session two

I am more than one thing.

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

Inspired by the Women of the ELCA 2026 Triennial Convention & Gathering theme, “I am worthy,” this three-session study helps us explore our individual and collective identities. Session 1 begins with the core understanding that we are made in God’s image. Session 2 (this month) looks at how our identity encompasses our experiences, values, relationships and social location. The stories we tell about ourselves and others help to shape who we are, how we flourish, and the way we live, love and follow Jesus.

NOTES FOR LEADERS

At the beginning of this session, take some time to get to know each other. Consider playing a game that my confirmation students enjoyed. Go around the table or room and take turns finishing this sentence: “I am ... ,” with a noun that describes an identity you have (ex: a bird-watcher, an optician, a runner, a swimmer, a niece, a bookworm, a scientist, an artist, a jazz lover, etc.) For a greater challenge, do more than three rounds and tell participants not to repeat an identity someone else has already named!

You’ll notice that many of the Session 2 Bible readings are followed by a question to help spark our curiosity about the women in these readings. We’ll explore what the Bible actually says about these women (not what has been taught to us). These remarkable women of Scripture were often flattened by generations of church patriarchy.

Like the women of scripture, we are many things and have many identities. Sometimes those

identities conflict with one another. Musician Amy Grant has a song from the 1980s called Hats. Listening to it can instantly transport you to the days of neon legwarmers. The lyrics also confront the challenge of living as a person with multiple hats or vocations (mother, partner, employee, congregational leader or gardener).

Sometimes we must choose the hats we wear, letting other hats hang on the rack for a while. We can’t be everything, for everyone. Perhaps this study is an opportunity to think about our many identities and to make intentional choices about which ones, for now, will take priority.

If you have time, I encourage you to watch “The Danger of a Single Story,” an online TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozi. Just search it up, as my kids say. It’s easy to find.

STUDY OPTIONS

Here are some suggestions for how to make this session fit into various lengths of time.


Short study (30 minutes)

- Read “Introduction”
- Read and discuss Mary (the mother of Jesus)
- Skip ahead to Mary Magdalene and the last sections.
- Read “Conclusion”

A little longer (45 to 60 minutes)

- Add Ruth

Even longer: (60 to 90 minutes)

- Add Esther and Anna 

OPENING HYMN

“Will You Let Me Be Your Servant”
(ELW 659)

OPENING PRAYER

Merciful God, you have called us from all nations, tongues, and tribes to be your holy people. You have given to us in abundance; we know it is not right that some of us should have only crumbs. Fill our hearts with the love that looks past our differences and the peace that destroys distrust, O God. Let no hatred or bitterness divide us from each other or from the world in which we live. Give us loving spirits, O God. Above all things, make us confident in the hope that is in you, O God. Build us up and give us hope. Amen!

—A prayer by Inez Torres Davis, excerpted from a 2016 Women of the ELCA anti-racism Bible study

FOCUS VERSE

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

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Hymnals
Evangelical Lutheran Worship

I am worthy.

Session three

I am because you are.

BY SARA OLSON SMITH

INTRODUCTION

These *Gather* Bible study sessions have all explored identity and faith. We began by considering our individual identities and how we are all made in God’s image. Each one of us has our own fabulousness and our own quirks. But identity is not just an individual thing. Who we are is always tied up in community, in others, in our mutual dependence and our interconnectedness.

One way to understand this shared identity is through the South African understanding of *Ubuntu*. Ubuntu is a worldview shaped by the Xhosa saying, “Umntu ngumtu ngabantu,” which means, “A person is a person through other persons.” Or, as many have come to understand it: “I am because you are.” We are never solitary. We can only exist—and we can only thrive—in and through our connection to other humans.

Pastor, political leader and visionary Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote about it this way:

Ubuntu is the essence of being human. It speaks of how my humanity is caught up and bound up inextricably with yours. It says, not as Descartes did, “I think, therefore I am” but rather, “I am because I belong.” I need other human beings in order to be human. The completely self-sufficient human being is subhuman. I can be me only if you are fully you. I am because we are, for we are made for togetherness, for family. We are made for complementarity. We are created for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence with our fellow human beings, with the rest of creation.

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian and Other Provocations* (Harper Collins 2011), pp. 21-24.

Archbishop Tutu both practiced and taught Ubuntu, which is more than just a great saying. Ubuntu is a theology—a way of understanding God and ourselves. Ubuntu is also a practice, a way to live and orient ourselves in the world. Ubuntu shapes how we understand ourselves and how we act in the world.

My first sentence as a toddler was “Do it me-self!” And I can do it myself. My independent streak has served me well in many ways. However, it’s made it hard for me to ask for help or receive care from others. In the U.S., independence is not just a day in July, but a cultural value. We take pride in self-reliance, but this has its limitations. It denies the reality that we do need one another, and that none of us have ever become who we are entirely through our own actions.

We don’t have to live a “do it me-self” kind of life. Instead, we can lean into the joy that comes from mutuality, shared identity and community. In this third and final Bible study session, we’ll look at the scriptural foundations of Ubuntu and how our lives are shaped by our shared humanity, deep interdependence and mutual flourishing.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. With whom are you interdependent? Who relies on you? Who do you depend on?

VINE AND BRANCHES: MUTUALITY AND DEPENDENCE

📖 Read: John 15:1-11

I love gardening, although I’m not the most skilled gardener. I mostly know how to tell a weed from a

flower. I try to water regularly. But if gardening was graded, I’d give myself a solid C-, except for tomatoes. With tomatoes, I’d be on the honor roll. Maybe it’s the Iowa sunshine, our compost or plain luck, but our tomatoes flourish every year. The vines grow with abandon, making it nearly impossible to tell which vine comes from which tomato plant. The result? One big, green, beautifully smelling pile of tomato vines.

Jesus says that as his followers, we are to be like vines and branches. Jesus invites his friends to abide in him, to stick with him, and to stay connected to each other through it all. Just as a flowering plant has xylem and phloem to carry water, minerals and sugars (food) to nourish the entire plant, the Spirit nourishes us. Together, we can soak up the goodness of Jesus, share that goodness with one another, and support one another in our growth.

It’s important to know that when Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” the “you” is plural. Christian life is not something we can do alone. We are all branches together. A tomato cannot grow alone. A grape never happens by itself. Christian life is not singular, but something that happens by abiding in Jesus, and abiding in community.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. What is a place or community where you abide, that also gives you nourishment, hope and meaning?

ONE BODY, MANY PARTS

📖 Read: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26

Share aloud or reflect:

3. How do you think of yourself as part of the body of Christ? What “body part” might you be? What do you bring to your community? What do you receive?

A sculpture called *The Body of Christ* is permanently installed on a wall at the congregation I serve. Shaped as a relief, it shows life-sized people of different ages and abilities making music together as a community. Thirty or so years ago, an artist came to our church and made plaster casts of our congregation's members—their arms, legs, and faces. To make the artwork, the artist put together various body parts. Every person in the sculpture is made up of the plaster cast parts of at least five different people. A skinny kid's leg rests next to the strong leg of an older athlete. One person's long arm and another person's shorter arm are part of the same torso, which was topped with the face of yet another person. If anyone were to point out their leg to a friend, they couldn't say, "That's me." It would have to be, "That's us."

Try noticing how, when you and others talk, how much of time you hear "me" or "I." So often, our own needs, victories, struggles and wants are what matters most—even at the expense of other people. We tend to see ourselves as separate, as if our actions don't impact other people, as if we are not dependent on the actions of others. The Apostle Paul noticed how this way of self-understanding was creeping into the community of believers at Corinth. A focus on self above others had led to hierarchies and divisions. Not only were the Corinthians separated from one another, but some believed they were better than others because of ethnic identity, abilities or wealth.

Paul responded by writing a letter that invites them to think of themselves not as individuals who are ranked and divided, but as a community of people with a wide variety of abilities, all of which are needed for the functioning of their community. Paul uses the metaphor of the body, sharing that every part of the body matters, from the eye to the elbow. Not one part is more important than another. All are needed for both the community and the individual to function and flourish. As Paul wrote a few verses earlier, we're given our various gifts "for the common good."

We are one body in Christ. We cannot discount another person. Nor can we remove ourselves and think we'll be okay without others. We need each other. When you feel insignificant, try thinking about a thyroid, white blood cells or other parts that are small, but make the whole body function. When you think that you are making it just fine on your own, pause and start to notice all the people upon whom you depend.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. What do you bring to your community? What do you receive?

(NOT) GOING TO THE PARTY

📖 Read: Luke 14:16-24

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Where do you see yourself in this parable? Why?

The other day, I overheard a conversation at a coffee shop. A woman told her friend how much she hates to talk to strangers. So much so that she has created a life where she doesn't have to. She has groceries delivered and left on her stoop. She orders her coffee on an app to ensure it's waiting for her on the counter. Prescriptions come to her mailbox. With pride, she told her friend that she no longer needs to talk to anyone she doesn't like or doesn't know.

After a delightful conversation with the barista about their tattoos and a shared chuckle as someone teased me about putting lots of sugar in my coffee, I couldn't help but pity the woman who was creating a small, isolated world for herself. She didn't know how much she was missing by avoiding all the simple, profound interactions that come from opening ourselves to strangers.

We often read this parable as a lesson about the great wide, inclusive embrace of God and how we can reflect this in our own lives. But this parable is about more than the blessings that come from being gracious inviters. Jesus also names how often people say no to God's invitation to be drawn into the joy of community and relationships.

It is quite easy to live an isolated life. It might appear to be more efficient. But it is far from the life Jesus envisions for us, the life of proximity that is at the heart of our Christian faith. Even small everyday interactions can connect us with others, expanding our sense of self, our capacity to love and our understanding of God.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. In what ways can you see your proximity to people who are different from you?
7. How might you say "yes" to the Spirit's invitation to deepen your relationships with people who are different from you?

EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF FAMILY

📖 Read: Matthew 12:46-51

Share aloud or reflect:

8. How do you think Jesus' mother felt upon hearing this? What about his friends?

Families are important. At their best, families can be the first place we learn the joy of loving attachments and freedom. But as Jesus reminds us in this exchange, our immediate families are not the only ones to whom we belong. For Jesus, our "family" is made up of others who commit to this life of faith—regardless of their bloodlines or backgrounds.

Jesus erases lines that can keep our circles of care very small. In Jesus' day, everything from responsibility, honor and opportunity to economic and social stability was bound up in family and kinship ties. Reframing this certainly shakes things up, but by doing so, Jesus creates new circles of kinship and care, particularly for those separated from their own families by distance or discord.

When we follow Jesus' lead and expand our understanding of responsibility, our values and choices may change. This means that, as a parent, I try to make decisions about schools and how we use our resources in ways that benefit not just my two children, but all children, especially those children who are most vulnerable. This means that, as a daughter, I try to shape and influence systems in ways that will serve not only my mother, but all people as they age. When we trust Jesus' big vision of family, we see that our responsibility is not only to relations who share our name, but to those who are relations in Christ.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. How might a narrow definition of family perpetuate systems of separation, segregation and distance? Make a list of new joys that could emerge if we expand those circles.

PLENTY OF PIE TO GO AROUND

📖 Read: Matthew 20: 1-16

Share aloud or reflect:

10. Where do you see yourself in this parable?

One thing that impedes our living with a spirit of Ubuntu is having a sense of scarcity—of there not

being enough to go around. Like the workers in the vineyard that Jesus describes, we too fall into the trap of thinking that if others get more than we think they should, this means we're getting less, even if we are getting what we were promised from the beginning. So often in our society, we've been told that there are only so many pieces of pie.

The zero-sum way of thinking has perpetuated harmful, even racist policies and falsely put people who should be allies into opposition with each other. Here are some examples of zero-sum lies: *If we put too much into "those schools," well, then, "my kid's school" won't get what it needs. If we allow "that group" of people to have access to one thing or another, this will ruin it for "me."*

We are often pitted against each other with lies of limited resources, and lies that only some people "deserve" the resources. No one, except those at the very top, stands to benefit from this zero-sum way of thinking. The myth of scarcity harms us all by pulling us apart. Instead of working together for our mutual benefit, we turn against each other, like mice fighting over scraps, while the fat cats run away with the whole fish.

But God is generous. We can see how this parable may be inviting us to cling a bit less to our zero-sum ways of thinking. What happens when we discover that the flourishing of one leads to the flourishing of all? As the saying goes, "a rising tide lifts all boats."

Imagine if the workers in Jesus' parable were to replace their grumbling with gratitude for God's generosity. This story would be flipped on its head! The antidote for our pervasive feelings of scarcity is practicing gratitude. When we notice the actual abundance in our lives, God liberates us from the fear and isolation that scarcity brings. Gratitude pulls us into deeper connection to our generous God, and to others.

Share aloud or reflect:

11. When do you get caught in the myth of scarcity? How might a practice of gratitude break you from that?

THE FIRST CHURCH POTLUCK

■ Read: Acts 2:32-35

There is nothing better than a potluck. Everyone brings what they can. Everyone takes what they need. Everyone is filled with enough. The first followers lived with a potluck understanding of their entire lives. *The Message* translation of this biblical passage reads: "Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met."

There was a beautiful mutuality in the early church. It wasn't that some were givers, and some were takers. They all gave, and they all received. For many, their decision to follow Jesus meant being cut off from family and removed from their work. They had nothing but the safety net found in their community of faith. This mutuality of care seems as miraculous as any other wonder done in Christ's name. And mutual aid, a relational way of caring, is still lived out in many parts of our church and our neighborhoods.

Acts of charity are beautiful. Yet these often pull us out of relationship with others when they become a one-way system that separates the givers from the receivers. Mutual aid is about community cooperation, mutual giving and receiving. Everyone supports each other. As adrienne marie brown writes: "Mutual aid is not a new thing. It is what people have done forever to survive. It is not just about resources—it is about relationships, about interdependence, about shifting from scarcity to solidarity. Mutual aid teaches us how to be human with each other in the deepest way."

Share aloud or reflect:

12. What do you bring to your community?
What do you receive?
13. Look to find mutual aid organizations
in your community. How can you
participate?

UBUNTU LIFE: A TO-DO LIST

📖 Read: Romans 12:9-21

Paul wasn't just a theologian; he was a pastor. He cared about his community. With a pastoral heart, he helped people learn how to live as Christ's body. At the beginning of Romans 12, Paul writes again about how the community of Christ is a body, all working together in mutuality, equality, and shared connection. Then he goes on to share specific ways we can live as Christ's body. None of these practices and actions are particularly easy. Yet these practices and actions draw us into deeper community, reminding us that we are not separate beings, but one body, held together. Paul is not one to let us off easy. Paul reminds us that we are bound up together not just with people we like, but also with our enemies. (Nobody likes to hear this, but we know it's true.)

Share aloud or reflect:

14. Which one of these ways of being is easiest for you? Which is hardest?

CONCLUSION

To expand our moral imagination, we can consider ways to place ourselves in relationship with other people. Sometimes this involves geographic proximity. Sometimes this involves understanding our deep connection with others, even those different from us, even strangers, even people we are unlikely to ever meet.

Jesus uses the image of vines and branches. Paul compares us to a body with many parts. I like to think about the reign of God as an enormous potluck. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of how, like a blanket or a garment, we are woven together. As he put it:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.

We can all agree that the Bible and Jesus' teachings shape not only our understanding of identity, but our spiritual, moral, economic, political and emotional lives.

I am worthy.

Session three

I am because you are.

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

BEGINNING AND ENDING

Before you begin, even if you are familiar with one another, take some time to deepen your connections. For this session, ask: “Who is someone upon whom you are dependent?” “Who is someone who is dependent on you?”

As you end this session, spend time prayerfully and intentionally, thanking God. When we name the people, creatures, places and communities for whom we give thanks, this prayer practice opens us up to them. Regularly leaning into gratitude reminds us that we are all interdependent. As you pray, together or alone, name those for whom you are grateful, starting with the people closest to you, then expanding out to name other people, places, creatures and communities who bless your life.

STORIES OF MUTUALITY, INTERDEPENDENCE

Jesus often told stories. Stories are a great way to teach. Stories can also help us to make sense of concepts, such as ubuntu, a South African term meaning, “I am because we are.”

There’s a wonderful story about mutuality and interdependence in *The Serviceberry*, a book written by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Part of a community that lives in the Brazilian rainforest, a hunter brought home a big kill, which would produce way more meat than his family could eat. Daniel Everett, a linguist visiting this community, asked the man how he would store the extra. Would he smoke the meat? Dry it? But Robin Wall Kimmerer writes:

The hunter was puzzled by the question—store the meat? Why would he do that? Instead, he sent out an invitation to a feast, and soon the neighboring families were gathered around his fire, until every last morsel was consumed. This visiting linguist asked again: given the uncertainty of meat in the forest, why didn’t he store the meat for himself? “Store my meat? I store my meat in the belly of my brother,” replied the hunter.”

A PRAYER PRACTICE FOR UBUNTU

When I began a very long labor with my firstborn child, my friend Annie lit a votive candle. The candle burned for hours as she prayed for me, holding me in her heart. Over the years, Annie lit similar candles for others who gave birth, had surgeries and sat with parents in hospice. Many votives were lit for families after school shootings, for Palestinian people and Israeli hostages after the October 7 attacks, and for communities located near forest fires.

For many of us in the U.S., our privilege insulates us from much of the suffering experienced by other people around the world, and even people who live in (or near) our own zip code. The broken heart of a war widow in Ukraine does not actually cause physical pain in our chests. The rumbling belly of the child down the street doesn’t bring emptiness to our own stomachs. While we might not actually feel the suffering of others, our faith urges us to notice and care for others who are suffering and struggling.

My friend Annie’s candles did not let her forget. When she saw that candle, she’d remember, pay attention and offer a bit of herself to me and to others. This way of seeing our interconnectedness is an act of moral imagination, pulling us into the lives of others who may seem far away, but are nonetheless bound up with us.

I know of other people who keep prayer lists in their journals, or who post a map of the world on their wall, with little notes of prayer for places and people.

THE SONGS WE SING

Last fall, our family traveled to Tanzania, experiencing the welcome of siblings in faith across the world. Along with hundreds of Tanzanian Lutherans, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Pare Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania. As we gathered, church members sang a hymn that I know as “Listen, God is Calling.” My son leaned over and said, “Mom, we sing this one, too!”

The songs we sing pull us into community with people and places we may never visit, though together we are one body in Christ. Singing music from around the world reminds us that we are not separate, but part of each other. Our hymnals contain music from Christian musicians and songwriters around the world and throughout the centuries. Sometimes it’s a struggle to learn a new hymn for worship, but it helps to remember that every familiar song was once new to us. Our singing pulls us into one body, united in melodies, words and breath, reminding us of that spirit of Ubuntu.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY

Empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathy shows concern for another who is suffering, while we remain at a safe distance. Empathy pulls us into connecting with another person’s struggles or joys, allowing us to listen deeply and be changed by their stories and experiences. When we live with empathy, it’s nearly impossible to turn our backs on each other.

When the musician Common won a Golden Globe for the music he composed for the movie *Selma*, he said in his acceptance speech, “As I got to know the people of the Civil Rights Movement, I realized I am the hopeful black woman who was denied her right to vote. I am the caring white supporter killed on the front lines of freedom. I am the unarmed black kid who maybe needed a hand, but instead was given a bullet. I am the two fallen police officers murdered in the line of duty.”

When we can see ourselves in the other, it opens us up to love, responsiveness, and a deep mutuality of care.

AND A POEM...

In “No Man is an Island,” poet John Donne wrote:

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less . . .*

A clod is lump of earth, but as Donne reminds us, the clod’s value to the entire continent is significant. It is less without it. None of us are an island. We need each other.

STUDY OPTIONS

Short Study (30 Minutes)

- Read “Introduction”
- Skip to “One body, many parts.”
- Skip to “Plenty of pie to go around.”
- Do “The First Church Potluck.”
- Do “A to-do list for Ubuntu life.”

A little longer (45-60 minutes)

- Add “(Not) going to the party”
- Add “Expanding our understanding of family”

Even longer: (60-90 minutes)

- Add “The vine and the branches” 🌿