



2016 BISHOP'S SERIES:
TRUTH AND LOVE
AT THE CROSSROADS



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NORTHWESTERN MINNESOTA SYNOD

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Bible Passage: Matthew 18: 15-20

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

One of the best-selling books of the 1990s was a slender volume entitled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Author Robert Fulghum wrote: “*Most of what I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten...These are the things I learned:*

- Share everything.*
- Don't hit people.*
- Clean up your own mess.*
- Wash your hands before you eat.*
- Flush.*
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.”*

Why was Fulghum's little book so wildly popular? Answer: he articulated in simple, winsome ways some essential truths we tend to forget.

The church of Jesus Christ “gets” this. We are a community that lives by remembering. And one of the things we're always reminding ourselves of is the intimate, interlocking relationship between truth and love.

Truth and love are not optional for Christ's people. And they dare not be separated from one another, either. Truth by itself turns hard, easily becoming a blunt weapon. Love by itself gets soft and mushy—“sloppy agape,” as some say.

That's why the writer of Ephesians wed them together, “married” them forever:

“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is

equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Our monthly Bible studies for 2016 will focus on the faith practice of **fearlessly and lovingly speaking the truth**—in the face of all our propensities toward denying reality, sidestepping the obvious, and “stuffing” our feelings. The Scriptures are continually revealing truth and love at the crossroads of our life within the body of Christ.

The First Step

Jesus never envisioned a conflict-free church in this world. That's why he offered his followers instructions like those found in Matthew 18: ***If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.*** (Matthew 18:15)

If we could master this one command of Jesus, the church would be utterly transformed. Conflict would no longer suck up so much of the oxygen in our churches. We'd climb out of the ditch and get back on the road again, serving God's mission in the world.

I say this from two+ decades of ministry on two synod staffs. Without a doubt, 90% of the church conflicts that get out of hand—bad enough to call the synod staff for help!—arise in situations where Jesus' wisdom here in Matthew 18 hasn't even been tried.

Notice some things about Jesus' invitation to seek reconciliation whenever conflicts arise:

- **Responsibility rests with the one who is sinned against**, the one who observes a sister or brother caught up in some wrongdoing. If you have a problem with a fellow Christian, it is *your* responsibility to deal with it.
- **Notice that the only verb Jesus uses here is “Go!”** *Go and point out the fault.* (Matthew 18:15) Jesus doesn't say “stew in your own juices” or “nurse that grudge until you have a whole gunny sack of grievances to clobber the other person with” or “gossip about it with your neighbor.”
- **Reconciliation begins in the smallest possible group:** just you and the one who has sinned. Settle things personally, one on one, if at all possible.

The Second Step

But what if you are rebuffed? What if the other person blows you off? Now do you get to stew or climb up on your high horse or gossip about how awful he or she is?

Hardly! If your first attempt at reconciliation is unfruitful, then it's time to get some outside help. But again, start small. *Take one or two others along with you*, says Jesus, *so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.* (Matthew 18:16)

This step concerns a couple of things. First, it's about being open to correction yourself, from others. It's about making sure that you're seeing, hearing, analyzing things correctly. *You* could be wrong—and taking a couple of other persons with you could help you see that. Second, if you're not mistaken, those one or two witnesses can assist you in impressing upon the wrongdoer the gravity of his or her sin. The goal in this second step is still to regain, to win back, your erring brother or your recalcitrant sister.

And that “regaining” is so crucial. “Regain” is a soul-winning verb, an evangelizing verb. Evangelizing isn't just for non-Christians. We're always re-evangelizing *one another* **within** the church of Christ!

The Third Step

OK—so what if the one who hurt you still doesn't listen to you or to the witnesses you bring along? Only now can you tell it to the church. In our way of organizing ourselves in the ELCA, you bring it to the church council.

But that brings us to a big challenge we Lutherans are facing. *We have forgotten how to be a church that exercises a godly, salvation-seeking discipline among ourselves.* It's not even *in* our lived experience. We shudder even to *think* about excommunicating someone from the church.

“No,” we like to say, “we're not like those other, hard-nosed Christians. We're tolerant. We live and let live. We keep our noses out of other persons' business.”

And that's where we get it all wrong. It *is* our business to care about one another within the Body of Christ so deeply that we risk confronting one another. We dare to speak directly to a brother

or sister who is captive to some deep, grievous wrong-doing that is separating him or her from God and God's people.

When All Else Fails

And what if—what if even the whole church is unsuccessful in restoring a fallen member of the Body of Christ? If that happens, says Jesus, *if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.* (Matthew 18:17)

How incredibly serious this process is! It could end in excommunication. This is a clue to us about the gravity of the sin that's under consideration. The reconciliation of which Jesus speaks isn't for trifling offenses—"foxtails and puppy sins," as Luther called them.

No, this is a reconciliation process that involves big-time sinning, flagrantly breaking one of the Ten Commandments, bringing public shame and dishonor upon the Body of Christ.

The end of this process, if it is not the regaining of the lost one in some fashion, involves deep discernment and reluctant separation. The church must occasionally say to one of its own—"*by your actions you have separated yourself from your fellow believers and from your Lord Jesus Christ.*"

And if we do that—what then? Are we finished with this sinner?

Remember what Jesus did with "*Gentiles and tax collectors?*" They were the special objects of his compassion, his seeking and saving work. Separating from someone is when *we start all over again with them*—proclaiming the Good News, praying and working for their salvation, all in the hope of winning them back for Christ and the church.

That whole process is scary to contemplate, though—so scary that we 21st century Lutherans don't touch it with a ten-foot pole. And our inability to do this is one of the things that's hurting us, perhaps even killing us as a church.

Because if a church doesn't take God's Word seriously enough to ever consider disciplining one of its members who have gone astray, how effective will we be at winning persons to Christ in the first place? We Lutherans may be a vanishing species because outsiders wonder whether we take God's Word seriously enough to expect it to transform our lives.

Jesus Takes This Stuff Personally

If you and I don't take this reconciliation business seriously, God in Jesus Christ surely *does*. We see that in crystal clear fashion in Matthew 18:18-20.

- Jesus promises us that God stands behind us in all our efforts to regain lost brothers and erring sisters in Christ. Jesus says: ***whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.***
- Jesus assures us that when we're up to our necks in this messy business of seeking reconciliation—Jesus is up to his neck right there with us. ***For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.***

This is more than just a “general truth” about Jesus’ constant presence with us. When you’re deep in the soup, seeking to regain some wanderer—there, *right there*, Jesus walks with you in the clearest, most profound way. That’s because you are caught up in Jesus’ *own* greatest work—the work of piecing back together this whole creation, one sorry sinner at a time.

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For reflection and discussion:

1. Recall a time when you or your church worked through a conflict using the steps Jesus provides in Matthew 18. As you think back, what made the process “work?”
2. Recall a time when you or your church failed to work through a conflict in a health, life-giving way. Mindful of Jesus’ approach in Matthew 18, what went wrong?
3. How might your congregation grow in its ability to deal with conflict in better ways? What steps could you take to “hardwire” Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 18 into the DNA of your congregation?

4. Take time to learn about *Healthy Congregations*—a family systems approach to helping churches prevent destructive conflict and stay mission-focused. Check out Bishop Wohlrabe’s 2009 Bible Study Series: *Healthy Congregations*.

Bible Passage: *Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

Please read this passage before exploring this Bible study.

If this passage strikes you as being all about tradition or personal hygiene—guess again. Jesus isn't merely tinkering with social mores or the intricacies of "keeping kosher." Rather, he's going to the heart of the matter!

That's why his sparring partners are so unnerved. Jesus is tampering with their moral universe—dismantling their time-honored assumptions about good, evil and how the world is ordered.

Evil Outside Us

In the universe that the scribes and Pharisees cared about, evil was primarily an "out there" problem. God's chosen people had been set apart, made holy by God. But they believed they lived in a dangerous, defiling world. There were all sorts of things and persons and realities "out there" that could invade their neatly ordered lives. These primarily external threats had to be guarded against at all costs.

So, to preserve the set-apartness of God's people, the guardians of the Jewish social order had drawn up a raft of fine-print interpretations of God's commandments, called "the tradition of the elders" here in Mark 7. All these dietary regulations, ritual washings, kosher food rules eventually were codified in the 500 volumes of the Talmud.

This whole well-ordered universe was what Jesus and his followers were threatening, by their cavalier approach to the most elementary of rules and regulations:

- How they conducted themselves.
- How they performed (or failed to perform) the prescribed ritual washings.
- When, where, how and with whom they prepared and ate their food.

"Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"(Mark 7:5) That's the kind of question that comes from persons who fear their carefully-crafted moral universe is starting to crumble.

Lest we assume this was only an issue for first century religious purists, let us acknowledge that sometimes you and I imagine evil to be primarily “out there.” Isn’t that why we warn our children to avoid the “wrong crowd” at school, fretting over the ways others might corrupt our kids? We become nervous when we see so many changes in how our society views what’s right and wrong, what’s proper and improper, who’s “in” and who’s “out.”

Here in Mark 7 the focus was on something as basic as food – how we gain nourishment and with whom we share table fellowship. In our own day, we struggle with “diversity issues”—how can people of so many different races, ethnicities, opinions, religions and sexual identities live together peaceably on the same planet? Fear of “those people” (no matter how we define them) fosters in us the suspicion that evil is mainly something “out there.”

The scribes and Pharisees in Mark 7 had good reason to be concerned! Jesus did, in fact, come to transform their entire moral universe. Jesus came to reverse the flow of things—to disrupt the connection between what’s “out there” and what’s “in here.”

Evil Inside Us

While the scribes and Pharisees focused on evil being an enemy “out there,” Jesus pointed out that the worst, most damaging manifestations of evil aren’t outside of ourselves. Evil works on us from the inside out, according to Jesus. There is nothing evil out there that can get us, unless the rot has already begun deep inside of us, taking over the core of our very being.

Rather than smoothing things over with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus spoke a hard truth to them: *“Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”* (Mark 7:14-15)

Jesus, as usual, aims at what matters most, the center inside us all, the human heart. The old prophet Isaiah had it right all along: *“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...”* (Isaiah 29:13, quoted here by Jesus in Mark 7:6)

Hearts! That’s what Jesus places in the forefront of our universe. It’s the heart that Jesus zeroes in on. For the heart is where evil is always seeking to gain a foothold. From the inside, from the heart, comes all the crud and corruption – all the warped behavior, boozing, pilfering, cheapening life, hatching schemes to get what doesn’t belong to us, pining away for the greener grass on the other side of the fence – you name it!

The church has a name for all that. We call it **original sin**—the sinful disposition that none of us had to be taught! Even darling infants, even precious little children pick up this “original sin thing” all on their own.

No human being is exempt from original sin, whether outside the church or inside the church. All of us – old and young, women and men, liberals and conservatives, fighters and pacifists, gay and straight and everyone in between – we’re all 100% sinners. We’re all born with this deadly “heart disease.”

Hearts Made New!

Thanks be to God, though, it’s our hearts that Jesus has come to heal. It’s the sinfulness at our core that Jesus has come to forgive. Jesus goes after our hearts, making them new even as he is making all things new.

The way the scribes’ and Pharisees “constructed” the universe, everything was left at a skin-deep level. But that’s not how Jesus works. We might say Jesus isn’t much of a dermatologist – but he’s a wonderful heart surgeon!

And Jesus’ “specialty” isn’t merely heart *repair*. His specialty is heart transplants, or more accurately, *creating new hearts* within us. (Psalm 51:10).

This isn’t skin-deep, surface-level stuff. No — Jesus goes to the very center of our being. The baptismal water seeps through our pores, the bread and wine of his Supper are made for our stomachs, the Word of forgiveness is designed to rattle our eardrums and resonate deep within our souls. Jesus bores right down to our very heart and soul, fixing us all up—from the inside out.

From the inside out: that’s how Jesus operates. Jesus reclaims us and all things, starting with what’s at the center: our soiled, broken hearts – hearts that are always being made brand new in the image of our Savior.

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For reflection and discussion:

1. As we begin the season of Lent on February 10, a central act of worship is the Confession of Sin (ELW, pp. 252-253).
 1. **For personal reflection:** What part(s) of the prayers of confession speak to your heart?
 2. **For discussion:** How might your congregation embrace more deeply the acts of confession and absolution (forgiveness) during this Lenten season?
2. Recently the issue of *xenophobia* (fear of foreigners or others) has reared its head in our country. How might Christians speak the truth, in love, to neighbors and other fellow citizens who espouse such fear of others?
3. As together we engage in faith formation with our children and youth, what message(s) do we want to convey about how we relate to persons who are different from us?

Bible Passage: II Cor. 5:16-21

“Every day do one thing that scares you.”

Eleanor Roosevelt said that, and it’s good advice, especially for persons who preach the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Preachers should ladle out God’s grace so recklessly that periodically they find themselves wondering, “Can I really say that? Did I just swerve over the center line and say more than I’m authorized to say?”

After writing these words here in II Corinthians 5, did the Apostle Paul ask himself: “Have I finally gone too far?” Did Paul go over the line when he wrote: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God?”* (II Cor. 5:21) Did Paul make a mental note that perhaps he should come back and edit that sentence a bit, dial it back a notch or two?

No. Paul did not hesitate. He just put his head down and barreled ahead and proclaimed this jarring truth: *“For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in [Jesus Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.”*

Paul could have talked about Jesus *carrying* sin, *bearing* sin, or *identifying* himself with us in our sin. Paul could have toned it down. But instead Paul just came out and proclaimed it: *“For our sake he made him to **be** sin who knew no sin...”*

Jesus Became Our Sin

God made Jesus the sinless one into sin itself. Jesus became my pride, your waywardness, our rebellion. Jesus actually became all of that. And it wasn’t some sort of sleight-of hand magic trick, either. This “becoming sin” didn’t happen for just one instant in time.

No. From the moment Jesus showed up among us he started taking on sin, becoming sin, every step of his journey:

- When Jesus lined up with all those sinners who came out to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist preach, he was becoming sin.
- When Jesus went down under the muddy water of the Jordan River to be baptized by John, he was becoming sin.
- When Jesus hung around all the wrong people, he was becoming sin.
- When Jesus healed lepers, fashioned mudpacks for blind eyes, touched dead bodies, he was becoming sin.
- When Jesus brazenly forgave sinners, he was becoming sin.
- When Jesus got under people’s skin—especially good, upright folks who hate sin—he was becoming sin.
- Whenever Jesus seemed to be going soft on sinners, too willing to sit with them, too eager to extend mercy to them, too reckless about inviting them to follow him, he was becoming sin.

And it just kept happening until, on the Cross—for all the world to see—it became fully apparent that Jesus had become sin.

God made the sinless one to be full of sin, to be sin itself. And that’s why Jesus had to die, because we good folks who hate sin, could not allow sin to live any longer. We killed Jesus, this one who had become sin before our eyes. We acted on the assumption that sin could not continue, sin had to go!

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin....” Somebody went too far here in II Cor. 5:21. But it wasn’t Paul, the author of these words. It was God who went too far!

We Become Jesus’ Righteousness

But there’s more: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we **might become the righteousness of God.**”*

Jesus became sin—and as a result of that we became the righteousness of God.

We didn’t just get a little better. Our condition didn’t merely improve a notch or two. We didn’t just put on some nice new clothing to cover up our shame, guilt and grief.

Rather, in the strange economy of God, we beneficiaries of the Cross *became* the righteousness of God. We became the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness that God has always been looking for. In our Baptism into the death-and-resurrection of Christ you and I became the change: God's startling change, worked out on Calvary for us and our salvation.

This incredible transaction that plays out before our faces, reaches its culmination on the Cross where we will all gather later this month, on Good Friday: Jesus becomes our sin, and we become God's righteousness, we become all that God created us to be.

Martin Luther called this the "happy exchange." A later follower of Luther has called it "the sweet swap."¹ In effect Jesus tells us, "*Here, I'm going to become your sin, and you're going to become my righteousness. So what do you think of them apples?*"

We're never, ever going to receive another proposition as sweet as that! This is a game-changer, a life-changer for us and all people.

Have you ever been asked for the date and the hour you were saved?

Whatever you do, please never, never say that it happened when you hit bottom in a seedy motel, a bottle of pills in one hand and a Gideon Bible in the other. No one was ever saved in a Super 8 motel.

But the whole world was saved around the middle of a Friday afternoon, just outside Jerusalem, two thousand years ago. The happy exchange reached its climax when Jesus, the sinless one, fully and completely became sin—so that we who are caught up in Jesus' story might become what we now in fact are: the righteousness of God.

There's nothing we can add to that. Jesus bit the bullet, Jesus did all the lifting here, for us and for our salvation. We can't improve upon any of that.

¹ I first heard the phrase from Dr. Edward H. Schroeder of the Crossings Community, <http://www.crossings.org/default.shtml>

Basking in the Light

All that's left for us is to bask in the light of it, live the rest of our lives in its radiance, and reflect that light as we walk with others toward God's future.

Along that path we will take our cues from Jesus, who always walks ahead of us. Pope Francis talks about us being a "dirty church." Some think Francis is going too far, but I think he's getting it just right.

"I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security....More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: 'Give them something to eat' (Mk 6:37)." (The Joy of the Gospel, par. 49).

A Church, a people of God who are bruised, hurting and dirty—doesn't that sound like the church of One who became sin? Doesn't that sound like the embassy of the One who has worked his "happy exchange" in our lives? Doesn't that sound like the kind of "sweet swap" that's the game-changer for us and all people who have, in the mercy of Christ, become the righteousness of God?

And doesn't that sound exactly like the best way to move from Lent to Holy Week, from Good Friday to Easter?

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For reflection and discussion:

1. When, in your life, did you first become aware of all that Jesus did for you in his saving life, death and resurrection? What happened to you to make the rescuing, redeeming work of Christ become real to you?

2. How in the ministries of your congregation do you focus folks' attention on the Cross and the Empty Tomb? In this Lenten season how is your community of faith drawing attention to what Luther called "the happy exchange?"
3. In what ways is your congregation following Jesus by becoming a "dirty" church (to borrow the words of Pope Francis)? Looking ahead, what is one way your congregation might move beyond (in the words of Pope Francis) "clinging to its own security?"

Key biblical texts are embedded in this study. If you have time, read also I Corinthians 15.

When death intrudes into our lives we often become tongue-tied.

Someone we loved dies, and we don't know what to say. We know we should say something, especially to those who mourn, but words fail us.

Too often we murmur trite comments that reflect a sappy, "greeting card" sentimentality:

- *The Lord only takes the best.*
- *God needed another angel.*
- *Your loved one is still with you, looking down from above.*
- *It's just her body that died—her real self, her soul still lives.*

In our tongue-tied state we rely too often on comments that *sound* consoling but simply are not true. **None of these four oft-repeated comments reflect the deepest witness of Holy Scripture.**

Faithful speech is always *both* loving and true. This month's study suggests some alternatives to the untrue things we find ourselves saying in funeral homes and at gravesides. We'll also draw out some implications of all this for our corporate life in the Body of Christ.

What's Untrue Here?

If you've read this far you may already be offended, because you've not only *said* one of the four comments mentioned above—but you actually *believe* these words. Please take another look at each of these four statements, in the light of our biblical witness:

The Lord only takes the best. Nowhere does the Bible speak in this fashion. If we stop just for a moment and think deeply, this statement *cannot* be true. It is not only "the best" who die. All of us—the best and the worst—die. Moreover, what does such a statement really tell us about the Lord? A Lord who "only takes the best" sounds more like a sadist than a Savior.

God needed another angel. These words tug at our hearts, especially when we say them at the death of a child. But there isn't even a smidgen of scriptural truth in this statement. Nothing in the Bible even implies that you and I are angels-in-waiting. Angels are another order of beings within God's vast creation; we humans are not "promoted" to angelic status when we die. You and I always have been, always are and always will be *human beings*. Created in God's image, beloved by our Maker, redeemed by Christ, we are destined for "the life everlasting" (Apostles' Creed) as resurrected *human beings*.

Your loved one is looking down from above. This statement also taps into our emotions, seeking to bridge the chasm between the living and the blessed dead. But again, this idea of our departed loved ones "looking down" on us is not found in the pages of the Bible. Moreover, given the reality of sin and the complexity of every human relationship, the notion of a deceased relative or friend "watching" from on high may sound anything but comforting to some mourners.

It's just the body that died—the real self is immortal. This comment strikes at the very heart of the biblical witness about the nature of death and the "life of the world to come" (Nicene Creed). Such thinking is rooted more in ancient Greek philosophy than in the history of God's saving deeds in Israel and in Christ. The Bible knows nothing of a disembodied human life—whether in this present age or in the age to come. (For more on that, read carefully Paul's magnificent 15th chapter of I Corinthians.) Truthful, loving speech asserts that God has created us and will one day resurrect us as *whole beings*—a unity of body, mind, and spirit.

What's At Stake Here?

Many of the comments people make when someone dies have no biblical basis. What's worse is that they downplay or even ignore God's death-defying salvation in Jesus Christ. When we say these sorts of things we settle for less—far less!—than what God reveals to us about death, resurrection and the life of the world to come.

So what if we took another run at the whole question of truthful, loving speech in the face of death? What truthful, loving words could we utter when someone we care about dies?

First, don't assume that you have to say anything—at least not right away. Often our desire to say something when a death occurs reflects *our* need (the need of the speaker) than the need of the grieving one with whom we're conversing. It's as if we have to fill the void of grief with

noise rather than live with silence in the face of death. Such noise can even be one of the ways we deny death or avoid pain.

Let us pause and simply embrace those who grieve. Let us not hesitate to allow first words simply to articulate sorrow at the loss that has happened. *“I’m so sorry...this is so sad....we share your grief.”* What a mourner needs first is to know that you are present, walking together on the journey of grief—and that you will continue to be there for them long after the funeral. Our Lord Jesus, in his sobbing at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35) and in his walking with two disciples from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) is our model here. Notice how long Jesus the mysterious stranger simply walks with and listens to the two disciples in the Emmaus story.

Second, when we speak let us seek out words that are most congruent with what we know to be true in the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For example:

- ***Your loved one is in God’s strong, loving embrace.*** It’s hard to top St. Paul’s simple but stirring words: *“If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”* (Romans 14:8)
- ***Our God claimed (name)—and our God plays for keeps.*** Speaking in such a fashion is possible because of our understanding of God’s claim upon us in our Baptism into Christ Jesus. The funeral liturgy (ELW, p. 279ff) is so helpful, especially as it reminds us that *“we have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:4-5)
- ***Nothing, not even death, can separate us from God’s love.*** Such words reflect one of the strongest, clearest promises in the scriptures for a time of grief: *“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:37-39)
- ***God raised up Jesus, and God will raise (name) to new life.*** In the four gospel stories of Jesus’ resurrection we witness how God deals with death. Jesus defeats death—by dying. God defeats death—by raising up the crucified Jesus. On the

last day, God—not death—will have the final word: “*Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.*” (I Corinthians 15:20-22)

Death and Resurrection in the Life of the Church

There is so much more that we could say about how to speak truthfully and lovingly in the face of the encounters with death that are part of our lives. Let us conclude these reflections by pondering the connections between how we think and speak about the death and resurrection of *individuals* and how we reflect on the ongoing experience of death-and-resurrection for Christian *communities*.

The church of Jesus Christ, of course, will never die. Jesus promised that “the gates of Hades will not prevail against [his church].” (Matthew 16:18) But this stirring promise does not mean that the church will not experience death-and-resurrection in the dynamics of *how* it lives and works within the vagaries of space and time. This is particularly true with respect to patterns for how the church organizes itself to serve God’s mission in the world.

The church may not die, but certain ways of “doing church” will come and go. We are often reluctant to recognize this, though. We tend to associate certain forms or patterns or structures or programs of the church with the very existence of the church.

Our denial of death—our discomfort in speaking about death—carries over into how we “do church.” In fact, our fear of the death of the “church as we have known it” is one of the things that’s killing us. **What if we regularly proclaimed that when one way of “doing church” dies, we expect the God who raised Jesus to *raise up* fresh pathways for being church on the next leg of our journey?**

What we believe and proclaim about death can re-root our Christian communities in God’s resurrecting action. After all, we believe in the God who promises: “*See, I am making all things new.*” (Revelation 21:5)

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For reflection and/or discussion:

1. What are your earliest memories of a death of someone who had been part of your life? What feelings did you experience? What questions did you have? What words of hope did you hear?
2. The study mentions four comments that persons sometimes make to those who are in grief. What other “trite-and-untrue” things have you heard (or said) when someone dies? What other language have you heard (or said) that witnesses faithfully to God’s truth about death and resurrection?
3. What in the life of your present congregation reflects a fear of death (the death of some structure or program or way of organizing for mission) that prevents your congregation from being open to God’s gift of fresh pathways to “being church?”

May: The Doctor Is In

In preparation for this Bible study please read Mark 10:17-27.

The hardest thing for me about this story in Mark 10 is the fact that when the man walked away, grieving—Jesus simply let him go. Why didn't Jesus run after this man, try to reason with him and turn him around?

It's because Jesus wasn't a "recovering people pleaser." Jesus didn't shy away from speaking hard truths—loving others in bracing ways.

The man in this story couldn't stick around any longer because Jesus had struck a nerve. Jesus focused on the only thing standing between this man and the Kingdom of God: his obsession with possessions.

The Doctor Is In

Imagine, for a moment, that you're in your doctor's office, lying down on the exam table, and she's probing your abdomen. Things are going fine until she finds a spot that makes you jump. And rather than going back over all the parts of your body that are OK – your doctor keeps returning to that one painful spot, having you hold your breath and then let it out, listening with her stethoscope, asking annoying questions like: *"On a scale of 1 to 10, how bad is the pain when I press right HERE?"*

Jesus, here in Mark 10, is like such a physician. He probes the man's life, searching relentlessly for what ails him.

At first, it doesn't seem like there's much wrong with this man. He's kept all the commandments since he was a wee little lad: no murder rap, no extra-marital affair, no "dissing" of his parents, no petty theft—nothing like that. Jesus probes and prods, and the man is feeling no pain.

Until—until Jesus discovers one touchy area. When Dr. Jesus finds that vulnerable spot, he announces his diagnosis: *"You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."*

And all at once, things turn south for this man—he hurts like the dickens. His pain (on a scale of 1 to 10) is at about 17, *“for he had many possessions.”*

But instead of pursuing the remedy that would cure him—the man just got up and left. Jesus got too close for comfort. So the man departed, shocked and grieving...

...And Jesus let him go.

Jesus apparently loved the guy enough to trust that the truth Jesus had just spoken would still work on him—would soften him up and finally bring him to that day when this man would become small enough, poor enough, empty enough to enter God’s Kingdom (not unlike a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle!)

“We Never Talk About Money in Our Congregation”

In too many of our congregations a wall goes up whenever the topic of money is even mentioned. *“We don’t talk about money or stewardship in this church! And we surely don’t believe in pledging!”*

Such statements, however, simply are not true. **Every** congregation communicates about money—especially when persons SAY they don’t believe in talking about money.

The power of such statements doesn’t come from the fact that they’re embedded in our church constitutions – nor have congregations passed a motion never to talk about money in this church.

Rather: certain “bearers of the tradition” in the congregation speak up first and loudly proclaim that “our church never talks about money.” In the face of such proclamations, no one else musters up the gumption to ask: “Since when?” or “Says who?”

I believe that some church members loudly insist that “our church never talks about money” because, like Jesus’ encounter with the rich man in Mark 10, it’s a way of **denying the reality that our attitudes toward money and possessions is making us spiritually ill**. We think that by denying the reality we can ignore the pain.

Three Ways to “Break the Silence” About Money

Let me suggest three ways congregations can move past their reluctance to confront the crucial reality of money in the church:

1. **Talk about money when your congregation is NOT asking members for money.** Begin the conversation at a time in the year when you are not also conducting the annual stewardship emphasis or when you’re not about to launch a big capital campaign. “Normalize” conversations about money. Pay attention to the many things Jesus said about money and our relationship with it—a topic Jesus broached far more often than he taught about prayer. If you’ve never done it before, invite all member of your church to compose a simple, one-page “money autobiography” that describes the persons, forces and experiences that have shaped their relationship with money. Take time to share these stories in conversational settings. Pray about your relationship with money and possessions.
2. **Rather than griping when your pastor talks about money or stewardship, expect your pastor to do precisely that sort of thing—regularly.** Ask your pastor to preach and teach about money—as naturally as he or she addresses other profoundly spiritual matters. Expect your pastor to converse with you about your own attitudes toward money and your engagement in the faith practice of generous giving. Don’t be surprised if your pastor knows how much you, or your household, are contributing to the congregation. (A pastor who “pleads ignorance” about the giving patterns of all the members of the congregation is like a physician who says she doesn’t want to know anything about her patients’ blood pressure, pulse rate, or lab results.)
3. **Invite some Synod Mission Interpreters (usually two trained lay persons) to visit with your congregation council**—or with your whole congregation on a Sunday morning—about how our synod and ELCA put mission support offerings from congregations to work, serving God’s mission in the world. Pastor Keith Zeh, our synod’s Director for Evangelical Mission, tells me that since autumn of 2014 he has helped train 44 synod mission interpreters (38 lay persons, 6 pastors), facilitating council visits as well as other opportunities for engaging in this ministry with congregations and pastors. Over the last two years these folks have visited 93 church councils in our synod—contributing to a noticeable uptick in mission support giving across our synod.

Apparently, talking about money is a good thing in congregations that have learned to tear down the walls that hold us back from living openly in the generosity of God. Apparently it's healthier to speak the truth in love about possessions than to deny reality and pretend that money doesn't matter.

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For reflection and/or discussion:

1. What experiences in your life have shaped the way you think, believe or make decisions about money?
2. Does your congregation welcome conversation about money and possessions? Why or why not?
3. Which of the three suggestions for “breaking the silence” might be most helpful in your congregation?

In preparation for this Bible study please read John 20:19-31.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”

Psalm 22:1-2

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

1 Corinthians 13:12

“In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me — of God not being God — of God not existing.”

Blessed Teresa of Kolkata, written in 1959, describing her long “dark night of the soul.” She will be canonized a saint in the Roman Catholic Church on September 4, 2016.

In her wonderful new book, *Outlaw Christian: Finding Authentic Faith by Breaking the “Rules,”* author Jacqueline A. Bussie of Concordia College, Moorhead, lists and responds to six unwritten rules or “laws” that many North American Christians simply take for granted. Law #3 reads as follows: **Don’t doubt. Doubt is faith’s opposite, and is therefore sinful.**²

Many of us have tacitly absorbed Law #3. It may or may not have been taught to us, explicitly, in Sunday School or confirmation class—but we have acquired this “law” with our mother’s milk. And it is killing us. That’s why we need to realize that Law #3 simply is not true. How do we know that? ***The Bible tells us so***—again, and again, and again.

A Post-Resurrection Pattern

When we explore the post-Resurrection accounts in the four gospels we notice a four-fold pattern: 1) on the first Easter morning Jesus’ tomb turns out to be empty and persons encounter

² Jacqueline A. Bussie, *Outlaw Christian: Finding Authentic Faith by Breaking the “Rules”* (Nelson Books, 2016), p. 39.

him in the flesh³, alive again; 2) these persons eagerly tell others this amazing news; 3) the “others” doubt this news; and 4) the Risen Christ embraces and addresses these doubts—opening eyes, minds and hearts to believe that he is indeed risen.

One of the most familiar, beloved post-Resurrection stories is found in John 20:19-31. It is so central to the Church that we ponder it every year on the Second Sunday of Easter. And *doubt* is at the heart of this narrative.

The Risen Jesus Deals With Doubters (John 20:19-31)

This entire passage is about doubters. First there are those ten men, huddled together behind locked doors in a “safe house” on that first Easter. They have walked miles with Jesus—heard him teach, seen him do wonders.

But on this first Easter evening they have yet to believe the first reports about Jesus being raised. They have their doubts, probably because this seems like news too good to be true.

So, fearful that Jesus’ fate might befall them as well, these ten disciples pulled the shades, locked the doors, and hid. They were at this point not-yet-believers.

Despite their doubts, Jesus comes to these ten little lost lambs. Although the doors are locked, Jesus stands among them and gives them—not a stern lecture about the dangers of doubting—but a word of gentle peace.

“Shalom!” Jesus utters. And then, so that they will know that although he was killed on the cross he is truly risen from the dead, Jesus shows them the scars of his crucifixion. Then, and only then, do the disciples rejoice, in giddy recognition of their risen Lord.

But Jesus is after more than **faith** in his followers. He immediately gives them **work** to do along with **power** to do it: “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*” (v. 22-23)

What does Jesus do with these ten, knee-knocking doubters? Rather than shaming them for their doubts he gives them the gift of faith and immediately drafts them for his service, makes them

³ But this is so much more than the resuscitation of Jesus’ “old” body. St Paul declares that the Risen Christ has a *spiritual body*, i.e. a *resurrection* body—a body appropriate for the life of the world to come (see [I Corinthians 15](#)).

his ambassadors, catches them up in his own work of piecing back together the whole creation—*one doubter at a time.*

Thomas the Doubter Becomes Thomas the Shouter

But one of the disciples is missing on that first Easter evening. And when the other ten disciples told him what had happened, Thomas was slow to believe it. He had his doubts.

That may simply have been the way Thomas was put together. In the gospels he is portrayed as the kind of fellow who never got snookered, who took absolutely nothing at face value, accepted no wooden nickels, bought no cut-rate swampland in Florida.

Although Thomas is mentioned in all four gospels, he only speaks in John's Gospel. Thomas has four brief "lines" in John's script—and he always speaks with the voice of cold, hard realism.

- In John, chapter 11, when Jesus tells his disciples that his friend Lazarus has died and they must go to him, Thomas—always Mr. Sunshine!—glumly responds: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."
- In John 14, just after Jesus tells his disciples that they know the way to the place where he is going, Thomas the Realist begs to differ: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"
- And then, here in John chapter 20, we see Thomas in all his skeptical glory. Demanding certified proof—visual and tactile evidence—that Jesus is really alive again.

You've got to love Thomas—unvarnished skeptic that he is. And you've got to love the fact that his story didn't get edited out of the Scriptures! His story didn't wind up on the cutting-room floor.

There is good news in that, good news for doubters like you and like me—folks who can go head to head, toe to toe with Thomas in his dark desire for reasons to believe. **Because there is room for doubters like Thomas in the Bible, there is room enough in God's story for doubters like you and me as well.**

But the scriptures don't simply make us feel at home with all the doubters who dot its pages. God isn't looking to make us more healthy, well-adjusted doubters. The scriptural witness also tells us what God does with doubters, how God deals with the skeptical and the questioning ones.

One week after the first Easter Jesus does for Thomas exactly what Thomas needed him to do. Jesus graciously, lavishly gives Thomas the grounds he needs to become a believer. "*Put your finger here, Thomas...Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*" (v. 27)

What does Jesus do for Thomas? He makes it possible for Thomas, kneeling at Christ's feet, to utter the very best line in the whole Gospel of St John: "*My Lord and my God!*" (v. 28)

This narrative about the ten disciples and Thomas illustrates how God embraces doubters and gives them reasons to believe. The Bible is replete with similar stories, because God does not shun doubters or punish them for their questions. Doubt always accompanies faith; the Word of God is boldly honest about that—offering one of the most powerful testimonies to the authenticity of the Bible!

Rather than "outlawing" doubt, people of the Word are honest about doubt and bold to bring their questions and even their complaints to God. As Jacqueline Bussie puts it: "***God is not afraid of your questions.***"⁴

Doubt Can Be Good for the Life of Faith

Although I commend to you the entire third chapter of *Outlaw Christian*, I want to close this Bible study with Dr. Bussie's six reasons⁵ why doubt is actually good for the life of faith:

1. **Doubt Acknowledges Ambiguity:** "*Ambiguity...means... 'having multiple meanings or interpretations, being uncertain and difficult to comprehend.' ...For example the sun, which feels so magnificent as it caresses your face, gives you cancer while doing so. Our beautiful country, which was built on the backs of slaves, exalts freedom....The people who love us best also hurt us the most.*"
2. **Doubt Admits Paradox as the Truth About the World:** "*What is to be done with a world as wrecked and redeemed as this one? Each story—the gospel's*

⁴ Bussie, p. 78.

⁵ Bussie, pp. 50-67.

promises and CBS News' sadness—makes us doubt the truth of the other. But the outlaw Christian holds on to the truth of both, refusing to choose between them. It's not an either/or, but a both/and."

3. **Doubt Signals Authenticity:** *"To have doubt means to understand God rightly—that is, as the divine Infinite and Complete who can never fully be understood by the finite, incomplete human person...."*
4. **Doubt Breeds Creativity and Openness:** *"People who doubt are seekers. Certainty's pitfall is that it can close us off from the views of other people, sometimes even to the point of being unable to listen to them....Outlaw Christians live by two important truths: (1) Understanding and agreement are not the same thing. I can understand you even though I disagree with you, even though the law of our culture teaches us that this is impossible. And (2) because I am a broken person, my views and my actions may very well be wrong."*
5. **Doubt Builds Community and Interconnectedness:** *"Doubt...says, 'I do not know everything. You hold insights I need. God and you both have things you have not yet shown me, but maybe someday will if I am lucky and listen closely enough.'"*
6. **Doubt Drives Activism:** *"The opposite of doubt is not faith but resignation and its favorite cloak, passivity. People who accept the status quo are those who do not doubt that everything in the world is just as it should be....People who doubt, on the other hand, ask tough questions of themselves and of people in power, and these questions drive their activism."*

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For reflection and/or discussion:

1. When you were growing up, what were you taught, at home or at church, about the role doubt plays in the life of faith?
2. Why are we so reluctant to accept the fact that every human being has doubts—even doubts about the truths we confess in church?
3. Tell about someone you know who demonstrates that doubt can co-exist with and even enrich faith.

4. At our synod assembly in May 2016, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber talked about the way her congregation, House for all Sinners and Saints in Denver, engages in intercessory prayer during weekly worship. The pastor offers a brief (10-minute) homily on one of the scripture readings, relating the Bible to things happening in the congregation and the community. Next the worshipers reflect on the Word and discuss it with one another for another 10 minutes. During this time worshipers write the prayers of intercession for the liturgy. These prayers focus on the struggles, hurts and doubts people are wrestling with. Instead of praying “canned” petitions (prepared before the worship service even begins) the people pray out of their aching, longing hearts. If your congregation tried an approach like that, how might your worship life be transformed?

My goodness what an amazing summer this has been. Joy and I can't remember a summer as verdant in all the years we've lived in northern Minnesota. Traversing the synod I've been stunned by the sheer beauty of the roadsides and crops that are starting to ripen, even earlier than usual.

Though we dwell in God's creation 365 days of the year, we are often most *attuned* to the creation during summer. We can be outdoors almost every day. The luxury of leisure time (a gift not all people on our planet enjoy) lets us pause, ponder and simply *be* in the bosom of God's achingly beautiful creation. Summer also affords us opportunities to rest in God's Word, which says much about the creation that enfolds our lives. In this study I invite you to consider ten "loving truths" about God's amazing creation.

Loving Truth #1: "Creation" Implies a Creator

The starting point for the whole biblical witness is that nothing and no one exists by accident. "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth....*" ([Genesis 1:1](#)) is how the story starts. The Hebrew word translated "created" is only used to describe God's creative work⁶ --not the making, manufacturing or building that human beings may do. Whenever anyone—even an unbeliever—says the word "creation" he/she is uttering a confession of faith. Saying "creation" without implying a "Creator" simply makes no sense.

Loving Truth #2: Creation > "Nature"

Getting our language straight always matters. Often we inadvertently equate "creation" with "nature." But the biblical witness reveals that "*creation*" *encompasses more than* "*nature*." Creation also includes the products of human imagination and industry—as well as the heavenly realm that can't be seen with the naked eye. That's why the Nicene Creed confesses God as Maker "of all that is, seen and *unseen*."⁷

⁶ "The verb was retained exclusively to designate the divine creative activity....It means a creative activity, which on principle is without analogy. It is correct to say that the verb *bara*', 'create,' contains the idea both of complete effortlessness and creation *ex nihilo*, since it is never connected with any statement of the material." Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Westminster, 1972 revised edition) p. 49.]

⁷ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 104.]

Loving Truth #3: Everything Belongs To God

The world's religions offer varying perspectives on the notion of creation. Christians declare: "*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it...*" (Psalm 24:1). Although Genesis 1-2 sets forth the primal testimonies to God's creative action, creation is not a "once upon a time" reality. God, who *initiated* the creation of all things, *continues* to create and remains passionately *involved* with the creation as the rightful Owner of all that exists.

Loving Truth #4: Humans Are Integral to the Creation

Some environmentalists portray human beings as interlopers or aliens in the natural world.⁸ Such notions, though understandable in light of the ways human beings have damaged the natural world, are far afield from the biblical witness regarding creation. In the Bible the creation of humanity represents the climax of God's creative work. Both of the creation stories in Genesis (Genesis 1:1-2:4 and Genesis 2:5-25) depict the creation of man and woman as the Creator's crowning achievement. Only human beings are assigned the unique roles of *reflecting* ("imagining") the Creator and *having dominion* over the creation (Genesis 1:26-31). Creation would be incomplete without us.

Loving Truth #5: Dominion = Loving Care

The mere mention of "dominion," however, opens up a can of worms. For centuries this key term from Genesis 1 has been misinterpreted to mean "domination"—even though a better translation would be "loving care." To "have dominion" in God's creation is to act as just and faithful caretakers of what belongs to Someone else.

"The world's oldest profession" isn't prostitution (as the old adage goes). The world's oldest profession is *farming*. In Genesis God creates a lush garden and then fashions unique creatures—humans—to tend that garden. Persons who till the soil remember things like: *This land doesn't finally belong to me; I'm charged with taking care of it for a time. Though I make my living from*

⁸ Several years ago I read Alan Weisman's compelling book, *The World Without Us* (2007, St Martin's Press). This literary "thought experiment" described what would happen to the earth if the human race suddenly vanished. The implication of the book—and others like it—seemed to be that this world would be better off without us.

farming, I have a responsibility to respect the farmland so it can continue to bear fruit for future generations. Don't treat soil like dirt!

Loving Truth #6: Sin Makes Creation Groan

Misinterpreting “dominion” to mean “domination” signals a reluctance to live within the limits of our nature as creatures. The serpent’s wily promise to our first parents is that they could “*be like God*” (Genesis 3:5). Believing this false promise was an act of rebellion that has infected the human race ever since—fracturing our relationships with God, with one another, and with creation itself (Genesis 3:17-18).⁹ Centuries after the book of Genesis was written, the Apostle Paul continued this theme when he wrote: “*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...*” (Romans 8:19-22)

Loving Truth #7: Vulnerable, Yet Resilient

Human sinfulness, described by Martin Luther as being “turned in on oneself,” inflicts real damage—even to the earth itself. One of the most sobering contemporary examples of this is climate change. According to NASA, “*ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities, and most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position.*”¹⁰

Despite this overwhelming consensus, the human family has been slow to address global climate change. That’s because having the facts is never enough. As the late theologian Joseph Sittler wryly observed: “*There is sufficient evidence that men are quite capable of marching steadily into disaster fully equipped with the facts.*”¹¹

The vulnerability of the creation to threats like climate change, need not paralyze us into inaction, though. For God’s creation is also amazingly resilient-- with wondrous capacity for restoration and renewal. That’s not by accident. God our Creator has firmly promised never to

⁹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood* (Augsburg, 1969), p. 89. In this book Fretheim declares: “Man’s sin does not only affect himself, his relationship with God and with others, but it also affects the natural order

¹⁰ <http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>

¹¹ Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Fortress, 1972), p. 118.

abandon the creation: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” (Genesis 8:22)

Loving Truth #8: For God So Loved The *Cosmos*...

The best proof of God’s unshakeable commitment to creation is Jesus Christ! That’s why we always confess the First Article of the Creed (creation) right alongside the Second Article of the Creed (redemption). The Gospel writer John inextricably links Christ to the creation when he declares, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*” (John 1:1-3)

John’s wide-angle perspective on the amazingly redemptive work of Christ carries through in the beloved gospel-in-a-nutshell: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” (John 3:16) The Greek word translated “world” is *cosmos*! According to the New Testament scholar N.T.

Wright, “*What has happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ...is by no means limited to its effects on those human beings who believe the gospel and thereby find new life here and hereafter. It resonates out, in ways we can’t fully see or understand, into the vast recesses of the universe.*”¹²

Loving Truth #9: Christ Holds Everything Together

God’s initial act of creating the universe continues in God’s ongoing creative activity. So also God’s redemption of us decisively at the Cross of Jesus Christ keeps rippling out through space and time. The Letter to the Colossians proclaims, regarding Christ: “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” (Colossians 1:15-20)

Loving Truth #10: Not Escape From Creation, But New Creation

¹² N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008), p. 97.

Where is this whole amazing story of ongoing creation and redemption leading? Christian hope looks ahead to a culmination when Christ “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” (Nicene Creed)

In trying to describe this future hope Christians have sometimes talked about *escaping* from this transient home on earth to an eternal, spiritual heaven—leaving the creation behind. But look again at that crucial passage from Romans 8, about the whole creation “groaning.” This isn’t the groaning of someone on their deathbed. This is the groaning of a mother in labor, about to give birth.

God’s final goal is not to abandon the creation, but to fashion a new creation. N.T. Wright sums it up beautifully: “*The New Testament image of the future hope of the whole cosmos, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, gives as coherent a picture as we need or could have of the future that is promised to the whole world, a future in which, under the sovereign and wise rule of the creator God, decay and death will be done away with an a new creation born, to which the present one will stand as mother to child...What creation needs is neither abandonment nor evolution but rather redemption and renewal; and this is both promised and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what the whole world’s waiting for.*”¹³

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For reflection and/or discussion:

1. Which of these “loving truths” about creation was new to you? Which one still puzzles you? Which one would you like to explore or discuss further?
2. How might living in the hope that God is renewing the whole creation in Jesus Christ change the ways we think about and interact with the creation right now?
3. What are some ways you and your congregation could express loving care for the creation right now? Explore some of the organizations dedicated to “creation care” at http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Lutheran_Creation_Care_Organizations_And_Resources.pdf?_ga=1.132150926.1811891998.1469622024

¹³ Wright, p. 107.

*“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”* Matthew 16:13-20

Does the church have a future? If so, what does that future look like?

Questions like these are asked quite often nowadays, usually in the face of statistics that suggest the church is a lost cause: losing members, losing purpose, losing energy, losing ground. The future of the church seems to be in doubt.

But like most vital questions, we need to parse this question thoughtfully in order to respond to it truthfully. So let me suggest a paradoxical twofold response:

- The Church will live forever, because it is the Church of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ—indeed, it is the very Body of Christ, who has death behind him.
- The church in all of its institutional forms and historical manifestations has always been and will always be dying and rising again (i.e. changing!)—in order to serve God’s mission in every time and place

The Church That Cannot Be Destroyed

When we find ourselves fretting about the future of the Church, we best remember first that we have Christ’s own rock-solid promise that “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18). Our Lutheran church also clearly teaches that “one holy church will remain forever.” (Augsburg Confession, Article VII)¹⁴

What exactly is this indestructible Church? Martin Luther, in one of his most tender phrases, wrote: “God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and ‘the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.’” (Smalcald Articles, part 3, section 12, “Concerning the Church”). The same article of the Augsburg Confession quoted above goes on to declare: “The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the

¹⁴ References to the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and the Smalcald Articles of 1537 are from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.”

The Church that will endure forever is, at its core, the gathering of believers who hear God’s Word, celebrate Baptism, are fed at the Table, and sent out for witness and service in the world. We might say that the indestructible Church is the Church viewed from the vantage point of its bare essentials: Word, water, bread, wine and a community of believers that regularly gather in order to be scattered in the world.

When I was growing up I learned to spell this Church with a capital “C.” I was taught that this is the Church that cuts across all time and space, encompassing all sorts of Christian gatherings, assemblies and groupings.

Sometimes this Church was referred to as the “Invisible Church.” Later when I was in seminary, I was invited to think of this Church not as invisible/visible, but rather as **hidden/revealed**. Something that is invisible cannot be seen—and that is not the case with God’s indestructible Church. Although often hidden from our eyes (in all its fullness), this Church does regularly make an appearance, i.e. it is revealed to us in moments when we see, hear, taste and feel the Body of Christ among us: through Word, water, bread, wine and the faces of fellow believers.

All of which is to say that the Church that will endure forever is—like God and the Gospel itself—an **object of faith**. This is not to diminish the reality of the Church—far from it! To confess that we “believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church” (Nicene Creed) is to declare that this Church is “realer than real,” because in Christ, faith “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1)

We can scarcely imagine how astonishingly vast this Church is. It gathers up all believers in space and time. One of the ways we sometimes talk about that is to refer to Church as both “militant” and “triumphant.” The Church Militant is the collection of sinner/saints who are alive on earth right now; the Church Triumphant includes all the sinner/saints who have died and now live in the fullness of God’s own life. Whether or not we’re aware of it, we experience that whenever we come to Holy Communion acknowledging that we do so in deep fellowship with “the church on earth and the hosts of heaven” who are forever singing: “Holy, holy holy...!”

The Church That Is Continually Being Made New

Given the ways I’ve been describing the indestructible Church of Jesus Christ, you might well wonder why it is so easy to have doubts about the church’s **unity** (“one”), **sanctity** (“holy”), **universality** (“catholic”) and **faithfulness in serving God’s mission** (“apostolic”).

The most basic reason is that the church that we experience on a daily basis (spelled with a lower-case “C”) is just chock full of sinners! Again we turn to the Augsburg Confession: “Although the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints and those who truly believe,

nevertheless...in this life many hypocrites and evil people are mixed in with them..." (Article VIII).

In truth, **all** members of the church that we see "in this life" are, in Luther's famous formula, *simul justus et peccator*, i.e. "at the same time saints and sinners." Another way of saying this is that church is always both a *finished project* (because of God's dependable promises) and a *work-in-progress* (because of God's unflagging work of calling, gathering and sanctifying the church).

One of the things our sinfulness does to us is to stunt our vision—leading us to focus on just one part or one aspect of the church. When that happens we get distracted by elements of the church that are not at its foundational core (the Word, sacraments and gathered/scattered Christian community). In fact, I find that most "church fights" or conflicts are about non-essentials like how the church is *structured* or *governed* or *deployed* for witness and service in the world.

To the degree that this happens, we reveal how far afield we have come from our biblical and Lutheran confessional center as the people of God. Part of the genius of our Lutheran way of being Christian is that we focus tightly on the essentials while granting broad freedom in non-essentials. Lutherans at their best know how to "travel light."

Not that our history as Lutherans always bears that out. Several years ago—when some of our congregations were considering disaffiliation from the ELCA—a lay leader told me he had discovered that there are 37 different Lutheran church bodies in North America! How could that be, given the fact that all of those Lutheran groups claim to be centered in gatherings of believers, around the Word and sacraments? Although there certainly have been doctrinal disputes among Lutherans, much of what divides us involves issues of ethnicity, the mother-tongues of our forebears, styles of worship, ways of reading and applying the Bible, opinions on moral or political issues, modes of governing the church, attitudes toward the service of both men and women in the church-- not to mention differences in culture and even cuisine.

Why should we care about all of this? The main reason is that **misunderstanding the differences between essentials and non-essentials in the church can hold us back from serving God faithfully and fruitfully in today's world.**

Right now in our Northwestern Minnesota Synod I regularly engage with

- Congregations reluctant to cooperate with neighboring congregations;
- Multi-point parishes unraveling because of silly spats among neighbors;
- Faith communities focused so tightly on "gathering" that they virtually neglect "scattering" in witness and service;
- Local churches that have long passed the point of institutional viability but are unwilling even to discuss the possibility of closing—saying 'mission accomplished!'

In my experience, most of these sorts of situations involve, to one degree or another, a misunderstanding of what the Church actually is and a tendency to equate some part or aspect of the local church with the totality of the Church.

My dear friends, it is God's good pleasure to give us the *gift* of the Church. Within this one holy catholic apostolic Church the Holy Spirit is forever *calling, gathering, enlightening, sanctifying and sending* sinner-saints out into the world for the sake of God's mission. Although it can be fearful or painful to lose some part or aspect of the Church that we have known and cherished, let us remember (in the words of hymnwriter Fred Pratt Green, ELW #729)

***The church of Christ, in ev'ry age
Beset by change, but Spirit-led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.***

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

For reflection and/or discussion:

1. What in this Bible study do you find comforting? Troubling? Challenging?
2. Why is it so easy to confuse one part or aspect of the church with the totality of the Church? In your congregation, what misunderstandings of "Church" hold you back from serving God's mission more faithfully and fruitfully?
3. Our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is involved in a visioning process entitled *Called Forward Together in Christ*. Learn more about this process by reading the *paper on the future directions of the ELCA* downloadable at <http://www.elca.org/future> Take time to discuss this paper with others and respond to the **survey** on the webpage.

Please read Matthew 13:24-30 before engaging with this Bible study.

Knowing something about farming always helps us understand the scriptures better. That's because the Bible emerged out of ancient Near Eastern agrarian cultures. So we who are surrounded by fields, pastures and livestock have a leg up on interpreting the Bible. Did you know that?

Take this parable from Matthew 13, one of my all-time favorites. I simply cannot read this story without remembering my own upbringing on a crop farm in southern Minnesota.

Sowing Seeds

First, this parable speaks of *planting seeds*. But the planting process here in Matthew 13 looks nothing like planting on the farm where I grew up.

In fact, when farmers in our synod hear this parable it may drive them a little nuts. In this parable there are entirely too many seeds being flung around willy-nilly, "broadcast" hither and yon, a real hit-and-miss farming operation.

My father farmed for over thirty years in southern Minnesota, and he was a stickler for not wasting any seed. He adjusted and readjusted the old John Deere planter to deliver each kernel into the soil, not too close, but also not too far away from the next kernel, each precious treasure deposited at just the right depth. It was both an art and a science, to trust the seed so painstakingly, so stingily to the well-tilled soil.

But not so in Matthew chapter 13. Whole handfuls of seed are flung with wild abandon all across the un-cultivated landscape. The sower believes he must not skimp on the seed!

In short, the Word of God is meant to be applied *liberally*. Slather it on, overdo it, don't hold back. The Word is not some precious spice to be sprinkled parsimoniously here and there—just a pinch, just a dash. No! Let it fly! Fling it as far and as fast as you can!

The seed of God's Word is sown so liberally, so generously, because it carries tremendous power:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

Dealing With Weeds

Maybe the sower in Jesus' parable is so generous with his seeds because he knows he has competition. As the parable unfolds we learn that after dark his enemy slinks through the same field, just as lavishly sprinkling *weed-seed*, to germinate alongside and choke out the wheat seed.

Farmers know that death and taxes aren't the only "inevitables" in life. There are always weeds to contend with, too. On our family farm there was a small acreage just south of the barn that was always over-run with weeds. Why? Because decades before it had been the feedlot where generations of livestock had eaten their feed and spread their own manure—all of it laden with weed-seeds.

Knowing that the seed in this parable represents God's Word, how might we understand the weeds? Dr. David Lose of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia observes:

In recent years, the presence and influence of the Christian story in contemporary culture has shrunk considerably. The proliferation of different and competing stories about reality—some of which are religious, while many more are about material wealth, nationalism, or ethnicity—has occupied more and more of our attention.

We may see these stories proclaimed on the front covers of magazines or more subtly hidden in the logo of a powerhouse brand, but they are all around us, each inviting us to subscribe to a particular understanding and worldview about what is good, beautiful, and true. Taken as a whole, the proliferation of all these different worldviews has crowded out the biblical story as the narrative by which to make sense of all others and rendered it just one among a multitude of stories.¹⁵

Messiness for the Sake of Mission

My father subscribed to the notion that *farming is a spectator sport*.¹⁶ Many summer evenings, after our workday had ended, our family climbed into the old Chevy to go inspecting the fields—both our fields and our neighbors' fields.

My dad loved rows that were straight and houndstooth clean of weeds. He was a lot like the farmhands in this parable. When they realize their enemy has sowed weed-seed on their turf, they're eager to do a little separating of the wheat from the weed, while it is still growing...

....but the farmer in the parable will have none of that. ***“Let both of them grow together until the harvest.”*** (Matthew 13:30) Compared to his own farmhands, this farmer is much less interested in “appearances,” less enamored with “purity” in his fields.

¹⁵ David Lose, “Stewardship in the Age of Digital Pluralism,” in *Rethinking Stewardship* (Word and World, Supplement Series 6, copyright 2010), p. 112.

¹⁶ I first heard this line in a Garrison Keillor monologue on the radio.

But why? To what end? Why does the farmer in the parable tolerate such weeds-among-the-wheat messiness on his farm?

It's because he always has his eyes on the goal: *the harvest*. The farmer doesn't want to lose one single stalk of wheat, one solitary sheaf. If I didn't know better, I'd think that this crazy farmer even imagines that some of those *weeds* might—when day is done—turn out to be *wheat* after all!

Such wishful thinking, such patient willingness to err on the side of grace is God's preferred way of dealing with us and the whole human family. What appears to be a shocking tolerance of messiness is actually God's fierce determination to "*show forth [God's] almighty power chiefly by reaching out to us in mercy.*"¹⁷

A Zone of Evangelical Freedom

Let me suggest two ways today's church embraces God's willingness to tolerate "messiness for the sake of mission:"

First, opening the doors of our churches as widely as Christ would open them, we do well to remember the wisdom expressed in Article VIII of the Augsburg Confession of 1530: "*Although the Christian church is, properly speaking, nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints,... in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even public sinners remain among the righteous...*"¹⁸ The old Latin formula for this reality is *corpus mixtum*, i.e. the church on earth is always a "mixed bag." Christians are sometimes tempted to make like the eager-beaver farmhands in the parable—just itching to grub out the "weeds" among the "wheat." Such pursuit of purity doesn't seem to be God's strategy, though: "***Let both of them grow together until the harvest.***"

Especially in this era, when so many persons are genuinely seeking God and searching for a spiritual path worth following, we may be wise to allow for more messiness than usual. I will never forget Transfiguration Lutheran Church in Bhimavaram, India (in our companion synod)—a congregations whose doors are intentionally kept open seven days a week, so that both members and spiritual seekers can enter anytime they want to read the Bible, pray or simply observe silence in the midst of the noisy, Indian society. On Sundays at Transfiguration Church an estimated 30% of those in the church building are not members of the congregation—but persons of other faiths or no faith, overhearing the Gospel and "trying on" the Christian way of life. How might we engage in similar, imaginative openness to questioners and seekers in our midst?

Second, I urge us to entertain more "evangelical messiness" in how we dream, plan and organize for ministries of witness and service in our communities. Too often I hear of congregations that

¹⁷ Prayer of the Day for Lectionary 32, Year B, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 52.

¹⁸ The Augsburg Confession, Article VIII, p. 42 in Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress, 2000).

are all hung up on matters that are neither commanded nor condemned in Scripture (i.e. *adiaphora* or “indifferent things.”) Once again our chief Lutheran confession, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, keeps us from falling into a quagmire: “*Concerning church regulations made by human beings, it is taught to keep those that may be kept without sin and that serve to maintain peace and good order in the church, such as specific celebrations, festivals, etc. However, people are also instructed not to burden consciences with them as if such things were necessary for salvation.*”¹⁹

Although the word *adiaphora* is often translated “indifferent things,” I prefer to think of *adiaphora* as **a wide zone of evangelical freedom in which we can exercise our Christ-shaped reason, common sense and imagination to serve the Gospel best in this time and place.**

Some examples of *adiaphora* about which we can exercise evangelical freedom:

- Whether our congregation offers the community a Bach concert inside the church building or a Beer and Hymns event at a local pub (*both of which happened in one community of our synod the evening before I finished this Bible study*);
- Whether the camels should be positioned on the right side or the left side of the manger scene (*a member of one of our congregations actually called a synod staff person to settle this intra-parish squabble!*)
- Whether our congregation owns its own building or leases a suitable meeting space or shares a building with another church;
- Whether the decorating committee chooses green carpet or red carpet for the sanctuary;
- Whether our congregation has its own youth ministry program or “does youth ministry” with one or more neighboring churches;
- Whether we use projection screens or a detailed paper bulletin to guide us in worship;
- Whether our community gathers for worship on Sunday mornings, Wednesday evenings, or other days/times;
- Whether we reserve use of our church building for “members only” or make our building available for community events and purposes.

These might seem like non-essential judgment calls, and **that’s precisely my point.** If we have **God’s Word, Holy Baptism, the Lord’s Supper**—surrounded by a **community of believers** gathered and scattered for witness and service in the world—that is enough! Everything else is up for grabs under the guidance of the Holy Spirit--subject to wherever the discernment of the community might lead.

If all of this sounds like a formula for messiness in the church, **well and good!** The church, after all, was never meant to be a dust-free, neat-as-a-pin spiritual museum. The church is more like a M.A.S.H. unit (mobile army surgical hospital) in a deeply troubled, divinely loved world.

¹⁹ The Augsburg Confession, Article XV, p. 48 in *The Book of Concord*.

For reflection and/or discussion:

1. What in the parable (Matthew 13:24-30) encourages you? What challenges you?
2. Think about a time when your congregation squabbled about some non-essential matter. How did the conflict begin, and how did it end?
3. What is one area in your congregation's life where folks need to exercise their evangelical freedom and do some fresh thinking/imagining?

November: Two “Takes” on Power

Please read Matthew 10:35-45 before engaging with this Bible study.

This month we mark two days that focus our attention on how power is exercised in the world.

On Tuesday, November 8, voters will go to the polls to choose a new U.S. President as well as a host of other elected officials across our land. In our democracy, citizens choose their leaders who in turn exercise political power on behalf of the common good.

On Sunday, November 20, another church year will end with the festival of Christ the King, to whom God has given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18).

God’s Two Hands

Martin Luther taught that God, who holds all the power in the universe, exercises that power using two hands. With God’s “left hand” the forces of evil are restrained and civil society is formed to help all citizens enjoy “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” (U.S. Declaration of Independence)

God’s “left handed power” in the world is usually *hidden* from plain sight. God rules the world through constitutions and laws, police and military forces, legislators and rulers. For God’s “left handed” rule to succeed, human actors—all of them sinners!—must strive for peace and justice for all.

Alas, this goal is never achieved perfectly in our world. Democracies always fall short. Checks-and-balances must be put into place to keep political power channeled toward appropriate ends.

Worse yet, too many people on this planet live under tyrannical governments or in “failed states” where lawlessness runs amok. Even in dire situations like these God is still at work, seeking to restrain evil and preserve the creation. Sometimes God’s power emerges in the most unlikely of ways. In his Large Catechism, Luther exclaimed: “*Because everyone robs and steals from everyone else, God has mastered the art of punishing one thief by means of another.*” 1

Alongside God’s “left handed” use of power, God has another way of using power. Luther referred to this as God’s “right hand” of power—the power of the Gospel, which produces trust and enables persons to follow Christ in lives of faith, hope and love.

Sometimes with God’s “left hand” raw, brute force is unleashed to restrain evil and compel persons to do the right thing among their neighbors. But God’s “right hand” of power in Jesus Christ employs radically different means: the Word proclaimed, baptismal water poured out, bread and wine served up as the Body and Blood of the Savior who emptied himself out, for all sinners, on the Cross. God’s right hand is *revealed* to the eyes of faith.

The Dilemma of Power in the Church

No wonder that we in the church have mixed feelings about the very idea of power! When the topic of power in the church is raised, we tend either to avoid the topic entirely, or else we uncritically adopt this world's attitude toward power as sheer force—hook, line and sinker!

In Mark 10:35-45 the issue of power rears its head in the form of a demand made by two of Jesus' disciples, James and John: "*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*" (v. 37)

The sheer arrogance of this request by the sons of Zebedee takes our breath away, and the angry response of the other ten disciples reveals that they were thinking along the same lines. James and John just beat the other ten disciples to the punch.

Jesus resolutely refuses simply to adopt this world's notions about power: "*It is not so among you.*" (v.43)

Just because the "Jesus Movement" refuses to adopt the natural human "take" on power as sheer force—grab it and use it to control others—doesn't mean that he and his followers seek to avoid the power question entirely.

The choice isn't between grabbing power or having nothing to do with power. Rather, the question is what kind of power will Jesus wield? What is the nature of the power that Jesus's followers will exercise?

An old fable tells about a time when the Wind and the Sun were arguing over which of them was the mightiest. Spotting a man trudging down a lonely road the two challenged each other to a contest: who could get the man to take off his coat?

The Wind tried first, buffeting the traveler with his cold, biting wind—trying to blow the coat right off the man's back. But the harder the Wind blew, the more tightly the man wrapped his coat around himself!

Next the Sun gave it a try. As the man trudged onward, the sky grew brighter, the air calmer. The Sun shone, warmer and warmer—so that shortly the man started to perspire, unbuttoned his coat and soon took it off.

The old fable illustrates two types of power. There is raw, brute force—exemplified by the Wind. And there is a seemingly weaker, gentler type of power—epitomized by the Sun.

Gentile Way Vs. Jesus Way

Here in Mark 10 Jesus describes two ways of exercising power. We can think of them as the Gentile way and the Jesus way.

The Gentile way represents how power usually gets exercised in this old world. The powerless seek to gain power. The powerful cling to it for dear life. Gentile power makes the world go

around—it's how we assert ourselves, accomplish our goals, persuade or even bend others to do our will.

The Gentle way is about power over others, whether through force or persuasion. It's an ends-justify-the-means game, with winners and losers, no one willing to be at the end of the line or the bottom of the heap.

The request of James and John exemplified the Gentile way—the “default position” we all have when it comes to power.

But Jesus will have none of it! Not that Jesus avoids power, but that Jesus has a radically different “take” on power.

Jesus' power is a power unlike anything that we know in this world. If the Gentile way is to exercise power over others, the Jesus way is a power under, a power with, a power alongside.

If the Gentile way is about grabbing and hanging onto power for dear life, the Jesus way is about letting go, giving up, tossing away your life, refusing to control others for your own sake, but seeking to fulfill others for their sake.

Jesus knew full well the Gentile way. But this was never his way: *“it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”* (vv. 43-44)

It is not so among you! Jesus didn't say: “I sure hope I can persuade you to see things my way.”

No. Jesus announces a change that is already coming over us, simply because Jesus is the one standing before us, speaking to us, and we now belong to him: *“it is not so among you.”*

Jesus imprints his topsy-turvy power upon us. Jesus does that by living his “downwardly mobile” way of having and holding power, coming down from heaven, squeezing himself into Mary's womb, being born in the crudest of surroundings, walking among the poorest of the poor, giving himself away at every turn, and finally allowing this Gentile-way-world to edge him out of it, up onto a cross *“for us and for our salvation.”* (Nicene Creed)

Where the Gentile way says: “go, gain advantage, grab, hang on to power for dear life,” the Jesus way counters by saying “follow, be vulnerable, let go of life, give yourself away for the sake of others—to help them be the human beings God created them to be.” That is Jesus' way of exercising power—power demonstrated chiefly in showing mercy.

An Exemplar of the Jesus Way

But what about us, Jesus' followers? Can we even come close to following Jesus in his single-minded focus on exercising power under, power with, power alongside others? What would that look like?

Since 2013 we have beheld someone on the world stage who, it seems to me, is trying to walk the Jesus Way before the eyes of this world. Pope Francis, leader of the largest branch of the Christian family, has been demonstrating Jesus's “take” on power ever since he was elected pope.

Instead of being caught up in a cloud of hangers-on and Vatican handlers, Pope Francis keeps breaking away, stepping out of his humble car, meeting folks who reach out to him from behind crowd-control barriers. (The pope must give members of his security detail fits!)

Rather than taking up residence in the Papal Palace, Francis has opted for the modest quarters of a guesthouse, where he lives among others. He says mass weekly for and with all the servants who look after his needs.

When Francis came to our country last year he addressed a joint session of Congress. Then, after leaving the Capitol building, he dined with down-and-outers in a homeless shelter in Washington DC.

“I prefer a Church,” wrote Francis, *“which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”* (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*, par 49.)

Francis is a living exemplar of the Jesus Way. Observing him we may start to say to ourselves: “I could try living like that. I could turn aside from the Gentile way of power over. I could embrace the Jesus way of power under.”

Let us pray: *“Almighty and ever-living God, you anointed your beloved Son to be priest and sovereign forever. Grant that all the people of the earth, now divided by the power of sin, may be united by the glorious and gentle rule of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”* (Prayer for Christ the King Sunday, ELW, p. 53).

For reflection and/or discussion:

1. Describe the last time you experienced God’s “left handed” power in daily life.
2. Describe the last time you experienced God’s “right handed” power in daily life.
3. How does your congregation deal with “power issues” that sometimes arise among church members? What insights from this Bible study could help you deal with power dynamics in your faith community?

Please read [Isaiah 35:1-10](#); [Matthew 11:2-11](#) before engaging with this Bible study.

So, what are you waiting for?

Ask that question of all the little ones in our lives, and you know what the answer will be: they're waiting for Christmas, waiting to rip open all those presents under the Christmas tree.

When I was a wee little lad, each December I was regularly encouraged not to get my hopes up too high. It was the last thing I wanted to hear, because my expectations were already sky-high, having spent weeks with my nose in the *Sears Wishbook*.

"Son, just don't get your hopes set too high." I can still hear my mom murmuring those words.

And they were wise words, for a little guy to hear. Santa's sleigh is only so big after all, and money doesn't grow on trees.

The problem with being told not to get your hopes too high is that, over time, you take that to heart about everything. We slowly set aside all their great expectations in favor of more modest hopes, more measured anticipations. Eventually life gets flattened out, the highs canceling the lows. We put our heads down and keep our noses to the grindstone.

As one wag put it: "If you don't expect much, and you'll never be disappointed."

John the Baptist's Disappointment

But it's disappointment that we run into in this lesson from [Matthew 11](#). John the Baptist, languishing in King Herod's prison, is taking stock of his life. John thought Jesus might have been the One, but now he's not so sure. Things just don't seem to be turning out the way John thought they would. So he sends a couple of his followers to ask Jesus, point blank: "Are you or aren't you the One we've been waiting for?"

Here's a good question, though: Did John the Baptist wonder that because he was expecting *too much* of Jesus?

It's not hard to imagine John responding like this: "I'm waiting for a little divine 'payback.' I'm waiting for these occupiers, these rotten Roman scoundrels to be given the boot. I'm waiting for folks to start taking their responsibilities seriously—I'm waiting for my people Israel to act like they're truly the chosen ones of God."

But none of that seemed to be happening. John, in his narrow prison cell was wondering if his expectations of Jesus had been a tad too high.

So he sent messengers to ask: "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" And fortunately Jesus didn't answer with a simple Yes or No.

Instead, Jesus let his actions do the talking. Presbyterian preacher Frederick Buechner paraphrases Jesus' response this way: "Tell [John] there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. Tell him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of dead-beats are living it up for the first time in their lives."²⁰

John wasn't flirting with disappointment because he expected too much from Jesus.

No. John's problem was that he expected too little. His hopes weren't high enough, deep enough or "thick" enough. So Jesus re-sets John's hope in soaring language borrowed from the prophets of old.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Well: sit up and take notice, Jesus answers. People are "coming to their senses"—literally! The blind are now dazzled by light, the deaf have started tapping their toes to the music, the dead refuse to stay put where we buried them.

It's as if Jesus is pleading with us to please ratchet up our hopes as high as we might imagine. "Watch me exceed those hopes," dares Jesus, "whatever they might be!"

Think on that! What if our moms and dads got it all wrong? What if instead of tamping down our hopes and moderating our expectations, they had told us: "Don't hold back, don't expect too little, don't cultivate modest anticipations, don't low-ball God."

We Lutherans of the upper Midwest—God's frozen chosen—we've got "safe" and "modest" and "realistic" down pat. We are paragons of moderation!

But what if all along we've been aiming too low, when we could be shooting the moon? That's a good question to ponder, not just for us as individuals, but for our congregations. If it's true that God "*is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,*" (Ephesians 3:20) what great expectations could we conceive of and cultivate for our church?

The Over-flowing-ness of Isaiah's Prophecy

There is an excess, an over-flowing-ness in the Word of God that is always catching us up short. Take our other reading, from Isaiah 35, for example. It's about the wilderness—the dry, parched places of life where we feel utterly cut-off, bereft of all hope.

But this wilderness is turning lush and verdant, as God renews the whole creation. "*It shall blossom*"—not just a little bit, not just "enough"—but "*abundantly*" (v. 2).

And the lame don't just limber up—they aren't merely content with hobbling around—no, "*they leap like a deer!*" (v. 6) The speechless manage to do much more than croak out a few syllables—rather, "*they sing for joy.*" (v. 7) The dry land doesn't just show a few hints of greenery—it becomes like a northern Minnesota wetland in midsummer, teeming with life.

²⁰ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*.

And right through the middle of this barren, God-forsaken “dead man’s gulch”—the kind of place any sane person would avoid at all cost—we behold not just a narrow rocky trail, but a wide highway, the Holy Way, the way back home for God’s exiled people.

Isaiah 35 invites us to set our hopes too high for a change—trusting that we can never out-hope the goodness and grace of God. God is chomping at the bit to exceed our hopes.

So, let me ask you again: what are you waiting for? What is your congregation hoping for now, and in the New Year that’s just around the corner.

Are you waiting for a little peace and quiet, a break in the relentless routine? Is your congregation hoping to do as good as it did last year? Are you waiting for a ruined relationship to be knit back together? Is your church hoping for an increase in generosity and involvement by your members? Are you waiting for the economy to turn around, the country to come back together, the world to settle down? Are you waiting for a way through your wilderness—whatever that wilderness might be?

Whatever you are waiting for, please consider ratcheting up your hopes. Toss moderation out the window. God wants to give you more than you can ask or imagine. That’s why God sent us the baby Jesus, that’s why God keeps showing up in Water and Wine and Word, that’s why God will send us Jesus one last time, to set all things to rights.

Whatever you’re waiting for, whatever you’re hoping for—hope for more. God will give you even more than what you hope for. That’s the only way God knows how to give!

Boundless Hope Breaking Through

It’s what this season of Advent, and the Christmas holy days just around the corner, are all about. We may not think about that every waking minute of every cold day in December, but such boundless hope keeps breaking through, especially in the great songs of this season. Listen for it!

*Our **hope and expectation**,
O Jesus, now appear;
Arise, O Sun so longed for,
O’er this benighted sphere.
With hearts and hands uplifted,
We plead, O Lord, to see
The day of earth’s redemption
That sets your people free!²¹*

Even we lumpy, pasty, pale, shy Midwestern Lutherans—even we paragons of moderation know how to sing those words in Advent in four-part harmony! Perhaps we even believe them!

²¹ “Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers” #25 in *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

Tune your ears to such music. Perk up your ears to hear the humming hope of the world, being ratcheted up, because God in Jesus Christ is renewing the whole creation.

God is exceeding all expectations, in the Baby born for us in Bethlehem.

God in Jesus Christ is restoring our senses, reclaiming every wilderness, depriving death of its terror-filled hold on us, bringing us home. God is making all things new in the life, death and resurrection of his Beloved Son.

If the future belongs to this God, who is setting all things aright, what are we waiting for right now? Why bide our time until God wraps it all up?

We have God's permission to start living in this very moment as if our Lord's preferred future had already arrived. What if we leaned forward into the Kingdom that is coming toward us, giving ourselves away recklessly, waging peace relentlessly, pursuing justice obsessively, letting God's abundance flow through our pocketbooks effortlessly, befriending everyone whom God places in our path—voicing the hope that is in us?

There's nothing stopping us. We can live like that, even before the Kingdom comes in all its Final-Advent fullness. There's nothing holding us back.

So, what are you waiting for?

Let us pray: Stir up the wills of all who look to you, Lord God, and strengthen our faith in your coming, that, transformed by grace, we may walk in your way; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.²²

For reflection and/or discussion:

1. Recall (a) a time when your personal expectations were exceeded, and (b) a time when the members of your congregation accepted a challenge, based on their hope in God.
2. If it's true that *we have God's permission to start living in this very moment as if our Lord's preferred future had already arrived* (quoted from the Bible study), what is one risk you'd like to see your congregation take, in service to God's mission in 2017?
3. Think of someone you know who could use a "boost" of new hope. Write a personal note in a Christmas card to him/her, witnessing to the hope that God gives us in Jesus Christ. (You could do this as an individual—or members of your council could take time during your December meeting to send "cheer & hope cards" to folks who've suffered losses this past year.)

²² Prayer of the Day for the Third Sunday of Advent, Year A, ELW, p. 19