



BEAUTY FOR ASHES

A Lenten Devotional by
the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

INTRODUCTION

The Homeless and Justice Network of the ELCA is a coalition of ministries called to serve with those on the margins who are struggling with poverty, homelessness and justice issues. This unique network is a ministry with, rather than for, those experiencing poverty, homelessness and injustice. We in the network believe that all God's children deserve an opportunity to gather and be the church together, inside or outside the church walls. The HJN gathers pastors and leaders of these ministries to connect, refuel, bring new ideas to the table, share stories that ignite passion, and equip each other as leaders from within so that, as we stand on the margins with Jesus, all are included.

Thank you to the remarkable leaders who contributed these beautiful and thoughtful devotions for us to enjoy during this Lenten season. We also thank artist Jibril Bey for sharing these beautiful, evocative pieces. This daily devotional book can be read by individuals or groups and follows the eight principles of the Homeless and Justice Network:

1. Community is vital to all that we do.
2. Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.
3. God loves all people, no matter what.
4. We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.
5. We minister with — not to or for — one another.
6. A church is the people, not the building.
7. Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.
8. We see lives transformed and are transformed ourselves.

Each devotion has everything you need: a verse from the Bible (some are Lenten Scripture whereas others have different themes), a personal reflection from the contributor, a thoughtful quotation, a meditative question and a closing prayer. It's set up so that anyone can experience or lead others through a meaningful time of reflection and conversation.

So ... here we go! Let's take a 40-day deep breath together and focus on what's going on in our hearts and in our communities. From these stories, let us see hope in brokenness and in our hearts receive beauty for ashes. (Isaiah 61:3).

—Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator for Economic Diversity,
blessed to care for the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network

ASH WEDNESDAY

Principle 1: Community is vital to all that we do.



Scripture

Matthew 6:1-6

Principle

Community is vital to all that we do.

Reflection

Ash Wednesday highlights our weakness and our connection. We are dust, but we are dust moved by the tender and purposeful breath of God. The ashes remind us that we belong not to ourselves but to God and each other.

In Matthew, Jesus warns us not to show off our faith. Faith is not a performance but something lived in relationship, and Lent is not a season for being holy or strong. What if we practiced Lent by turning toward our neighbor and what is true? Jesus reminds us that faith means being mutual, embodied, accountable and visible in showing up for one another.

Rooted in the southern African cultures of the Zulu and Xhosa, the word *ubuntu* — “I am because we are” — reminds us that a person becomes a person through other people. It echoes the gospel truth that we meet God not in isolation but in the ways we care for one another.

Ubuntu: I am because we are. No one heals alone. No one is free alone.

If we return to God this season, we also must return to community — not the *idea* of community but the daily work of building and repairing it.

Mutual care: We were made to need one another, to create a community of holy work. A work that makes the mundane, the text, the meal on the porch be a presence, a refuge, a refusal to let anyone disappear.

Common affliction: Love accompanies those who endure hardship. Christ is present in the chilly night, the waiting room, the jail cell. To follow Christ is to be there as well, not as savior but as kin.

Radical belonging:

No one is disposable. Shelter, safety and love are not privileges; they are birthrights. Belonging is not a feeling; it is a promise that no one will be left behind.

Quotation

“Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and their oppression.”

—Audre Lorde

Question

In what part of my life and my community is someone dealing with hardship alone, and what would it look like if I participated as kin instead of as a bystander?

Prayer

God of dust and belonging, you made us for one another. Soften our hearts, steady our compassion and lead us to show up where love is needed. Let no one be left alone. Amen.

—Rev. Imani Olear
Director for Evangelical Mission/A2B
Justice Ministries
ELCA Upstate New York Synod

LENT, WEEK 1

Principle 2: Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.



Scripture

Matthew 4:1-11

Principle

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Reflection

At Salem Lutheran Church, our most important work centers on human beings, made in God's image, who experience life on the margins of society. Though we do serve meals, take teenagers on vocational field trips and share safe-baby items with neighbors, our most significant impact comes when people recognize themselves as being fully alive and having a positive purpose.

Recently, thanks to ELCA World Hunger, we saw two of our leaders, Tina and Trina, present at a national conference. Sometimes, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we glimpse a clear and shining moment when another person sees the good inside themselves. When Tina and Trina stepped up to the podium to talk about the work we all accomplish together, you could see confidence and self-esteem radiate from them.

As a child, I was screamed at and had my favorite toys broken in front of my face. If a teacher noticed me in school, it was for my passive behavior. But in eighth grade, I finally felt really seen when a teacher commented on this really shiny shirt I'd worn. In that moment, a galaxy exploded in my mind, and I had the sudden realization that I could be a person, a somebody. I hadn't known that I'd genuinely felt

like nobody up to that point. Since then, my favorite high has been seeing other people see themselves as somebody. God says that we are each a Somebody, especially if you've felt like "nobody." Are we not lucky to be a church that recognizes and participates in that?

Quotation

"The glory of God is the living human being, and the life of human beings is the vision of God." —St. Irenaeus

Question

Who, besides yourself, is God building up and driving toward greater leadership? Who are you accompanying as they realize themselves to be powerful agents for the good of the gospel?

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the gifts, value and dignity of myself and others. Help me, today and always, to see the good you've provided in others as well as in myself. In a world often seduced by hatred and bigotry, help me to love others and to see them shine for the sake of your good in the world. Amen.

—Rev. Mike Hanck
Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church,
Toledo, Ohio

Salem Lutheran Church is a critical ministry of empowerment and compassion in Toledo's North End neighborhood, which has the highest concentration of people experiencing economic poverty.

Scripture

Matthew 4:1

Principle

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Reflection

Christmas Eve was always a special night in our family, but as a pastor, I sometimes find myself doing last-minute household chores prior to our evening candlelight service. One year, at the end of a hectic day and with only a few hours to prepare for church, I needed to do a load of laundry. I grabbed my laundry basket and headed for the basement, rushing to get everything done on time.

When I got to the fourth step, however, the wood cracked and I stumbled headfirst down the basement stairs and onto the concrete floor. As I fell, I used the laundry basket to protect my head, and there I sat on the basement floor with my head thrust into my own dirty laundry. That laundry literally saved my life.

Sometimes a face-to-face encounter with those things we'd rather not see — the flaws, the mistakes, our own encounters with temptation — can lead to lifesaving transformation. Jesus took everything head-on, and always he stands with us in the struggle. No matter how dirty our laundry gets!

Quotation

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). (Here you might continue with the confession ... but God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.)

Question

What shames you the most? Are you willing to entrust it to God's loving hands?

Prayer

God, shine your light on those hidden places that keep me from being whole. Help me to trust your tender mercy as I stand before you, seeking forgiveness. Amen.

—Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little
Pastor, The Welcome Church,
Philadelphia, Pa.

The Welcome Church is a "church without walls" sharing the good news of a loving and gracious God with all people (but especially in ministry with people living on the streets of Philadelphia).

Scripture

Mathew 4:1

Principle

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Reflection

In the ELCA Nebraska Synod, we are fortunate to have multiple justice teams that engage with people across the synod. This year, more than ever, I have gotten phone calls from people asking: “What can I do?” “How can I help?” “How do I support my immigrant neighbors?” “How do I advocate for my trans friends?” “How do we support the food pantries?”

I’m so grateful to be able to answer those questions, connect people to our network and point people to resources. But I often wonder, did they follow up? And, to be honest, how often do I follow up on my own good intentions? I *want* to engage, and I believe that all must be included in the kingdom of God, but then I get distracted or worried or caught up in my own story.

Our Scripture this week tells the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, which reminds me of how often we are tempted: tempted to stay in our comfort zone, tempted to avoid the margins, tempted to keep our social circles small and comfortable, tempted by the busyness and distractions of our daily lives. Asking the questions above is a good first step. We must act on our thoughts and ideals and not let temptation distract us from our calling, as children of God, to live on the margins.

Quotation

“Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is.
—C.S. Lewis

Question

How do you resist the temptation to stay in your comfort zone rather than live on the margins? How does the church resist that temptation?

Prayer

God, you call us to stand on the margins. Give us the courage to not just ask questions but to be moved to action and accompaniment. Help us to resist the temptations of discomfort, fear and distraction in our daily lives. Amen.

—Gretchen Ahrens
Director for Youth and Justice
Ministries, ELCA Nebraska Synod

Nebraska Synod Justice Ministries provide congregations and individuals with opportunities in education, accompaniment and advocacy as they relate to racial, gender, disability, climate, immigration, hunger, economic and international justice.

Scripture

Matthew 4:8-10

Principle

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Reflection

After he was baptized by John the Baptizer in the Jordan River, Jesus was led into the wilderness. He ate nothing for 40 days. The devil came and tempted Jesus in his severe hunger and thirst, offering him worldly wealth, power and fame if he would worship Satan. Jesus responded by hitting the devil with the words of Scripture: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Luke 4:8).

Jesus represents all humanity. The devil still tempts us today. Let us imitate Jesus’ approach to responding to Satan’s temptations in our lives. Jesus overcomes the devil with the words of God from the Scriptures. As 21st-century disciples of Jesus, we have been given a powerful example by our Savior and Lord. We have the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God to use against the devil. Let’s practice the habit of applying Scripture in times of temptation. Our worship has only one object, which is God alone.

Let us not allow ourselves to fall prey to the temptations of the devil in this world. We do not belong to Satan. We belong to Jesus. He has bought us through his suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection. We owe him our worship and devotion. Let us look to Jesus and his example during this season of Lent.

Quotation

“What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” (Matthew 16:26).

Question

Other than your life, what in this world is most valuable to you?

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, grant me the strength to resist every temptation of the devil. Help me to apply your Scriptures during my days of adversity in this world. Amen.

—Rev. Eric Mollay Allison
Lead Pastor, Trinity Lutheran
Church, Philadelphia, Pa.

Trinity Lutheran Church, a welcoming community called and empowered by God, has worked since 1836 to spread the gospel and share spiritual and social needs with its neighbors in Germantown, Philadelphia, and beyond.

Scripture

Matthew 4:1-11

Principle

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Reflection

Every Wednesday, I sit in the waiting area of the medical outreach that runs out of the basement of the church. A few weeks ago, a woman came in and headed directly to the bathroom in the clinic. She closed the door and proceeded to cry loudly — wailing. One of the nurses checked on her to see if she needed help. She said she was fine, cleaned herself up, came out of the bathroom, grabbed a couple of small food items that were available, and left.

The temptation we face is to think we are powerful enough to fix things — especially other people and the world. That temptation is real, and it's easy to fall for. We just tell ourselves that we have our stuff in order — that we aren't like that woman in the bathroom, wailing.

Jesus rejects the temptations of the devil in the wilderness so that he can fulfill his real mission — to be present with people where they are. Giving in to temptation means being unable to see the humanity of ourselves and others.

Jesus rejects that temptation: he can always see and hear us. Because we are seen and heard, we know we are not alone, and when we know that, there is hope. Hope gives us a path forward, and we take it together with Jesus —

not because we are more than who we are, but because Jesus comes to us as we are.

Quotation

“I can resist everything except temptation.” —Oscar Wilde

Question

What are the temptations we face daily?

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, you have made us with limitations. You don't call us to be more than who we are, but that temptation to be more is real and grows stronger when we tell ourselves that we are doing so for others. Help us to see our limitations as a blessing, so that we can be fully present where people are, just as Jesus always is. Amen.

—Rev. Matthew Best
Pastor, Christ Lutheran Church,
Harrisburg, Pa.
Executive Director, Christ Lutheran
Health Ministries, Harrisburg, Pa.

Christ Lutheran Church and its Christ Lutheran Health Ministries host three free health clinics that have served their urban community for the last 25 years. Since 2018, there have been more than 100,000 visits to the church and clinics.

Scripture

Matthew 4:11

Principle

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Reflection

Years ago, I took a hiatus from seminary to live in a L'Arche community, which gathers people with and without intellectual disabilities. I had been reading a lot of Henri Nouwen's work, I knew a couple people who had worked at a L'Arche community before, and I was intrigued by their experience. In our community, there was one core member, Katty, whom nobody sought as a companion because of her reputation as a grouch.

I'd seen some of this at the homeless shelter where I used to work, but I was still amazed that among the marginalized, there are marginalized people, like deepening circles of marginalization. Though blind, Katty wasn't marginalized for any "solid" reason; she just annoyed people. I could handle a little annoyance, I figured, so I sought to be her companion, her accompanier.

I learned a lot about blindness from Katty. I learned to look out for bumps in the sidewalk, to watch for dogs that might surprise and scare her, to have people announce themselves and ask permission before touching her. I think many people, especially white people, get into such things to "be like Jesus," but never having been truly good at much, I can't claim that. What I did find, though, was that Katty and

I created a small community and that, in this community, Jesus was present. Katty and I each had a good friend in that community.

Quotation

"If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?" —Matthew 18:12

Question

Instead of seeing ourselves as being Jesus, what does it mean to see Jesus amid us all? Is this a shift in thinking that matters?

Prayer

Loving God, as we walk with others, remind us that you walk with us. We need your grace and care and goodness, and we need it to share with others and to receive the same from others. Lord, we are never above you, and we are never truly above others. We are all together in community with you. Lovingly remind us of this while we walk with you. Remind us of the company and the community and the protection you afford all of us. Amen.

—Rev. Mike Hanck
Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church,
Toledo, Ohio

Salem Lutheran Church is a critical ministry of empowerment and compassion in Toledo's North End neighborhood, which has the highest concentration of people experiencing economic poverty.

Scripture

Matthew 4:1-11

Principle

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Reflection

Depending on where you are from, all of Philadelphia may seem to be wilderness, but one aspect of Philadelphia that I particularly wonder about as wilderness is the outside gathering areas along the Ben Franklin Parkway. The Welcome Church worships along the parkway regularly because it is a place that people call home. Some are left without a sense of anywhere else to go. Others do not want to leave their friends or community. If you're out there, you're pretty much experiencing whatever the elements throw your way. People build community together, but they are cut off from a lot of other places of conversation or business where they may not be allowed to go. The promise that you'll see someone there has to be meant, or there will be absolutely no trust. Real life-or-death choices arise. Where will I sleep? How do I sleep?

At the same time, some of the people who live there are the greatest, strongest examples of people of faith whom you will ever meet. Just as the birds are fed by people on the parkway, people will share testimony that God is making sure each person somehow gets what they need.

Quotation

“Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit.”
—Edward Abbey

Question

What am I going to get by on; what do I need to survive? Do I have value? How do I know? How am I going to proceed in life; how am I going to interact with others?

Prayer

Dear God, help me to be led where I need to go, even if it surprises me sometimes. Help me to rely more heavily on you, because sometimes I pretend that things are all I need. Amen.

—Rev. Schaunel Steinnagel
Associate Pastor, The Welcome Church, Philadelphia, Pa.
Mission Developer, The Well, Philadelphia, Pa.

The Welcome Church is a “church without walls” sharing the good news of a loving and gracious God with all people (but especially in ministry with people living on the streets of Philadelphia). The Well is the community of support, founded by the Welcome Church, for women along the spectrum of homelessness.

LENT, WEEK 2

Principle 3: God loves all people, no matter what.



QIBRIL
3/2/20
Glasgow Rd.

Scripture

John 3:17

Principle

God loves all people, no matter what.

Reflection

People love to have insider and outsider discussions. I've found this to be true in the traditional churches I've served and on the streets. The language is a bit different, but there's a sentiment that there are "some people" who don't belong.

At Church on the Street, these discussions center on the different convictions someone has or a friend from back in the day sharing that they used drugs together. I gently remind folks that I am not a police officer, judge, prison guard or parole officer. I am their pastor, and part of my call is to boldly live and proclaim, "God loves all people, no matter what!" We have restrictions on who can work with children or drive the church van, but all are forgiven, loved and welcome to our worship, meals and pastoral care every time we gather — without exception.

Those who have been around a while pick up on this inclusion that comes from our Savior, who came to save not only us sinners but the whole world (or, in Greek, the whole *cosmos*!). All things are being made new in Christ, and we get to see what that looks like by living the truth that we and God welcome and love all people.

Quotation

"God's love does not love that which is worthy of being loved, but it creates that which is worthy of being loved."

—Martin Luther

Question

Where have you seen the church at its best, welcoming all people? Where are the growing edges of inclusion in your congregation?

Prayer

Creator of all, open my heart to welcome all, as you do. Open my eyes to see your work making the whole cosmos new today. Amen.

—Rev. Chris Matson
Pastor, Church on the Street, Sioux Falls, S.D.

Church on the Street is a ministry with the unhoused, the under-housed and those experiencing poverty in the Sioux Falls area.

Scripture

Psalm 91:4

Principle

God loves all people, no matter what.

Reflection

I grew up in a New York tenement apartment barely big enough for one person, let alone my parents and my four sisters and brothers. By law, the landlord had to turn on the heat when the temperature dropped below a certain level, but there were many nights when there was no heat after we all fell asleep. I would curl up under my blanket, still feeling cold when the radiator stopped hissing. But more than the cold, I remember the blissful feeling of warmth each night as my father returned from his late shift at the post office, came in to check on us and covered me with his heavy, blue jacket. With that jacket over my blanket, I felt warm, protected and loved. For me, that jacket was a picture of the love of God for each of us in whatever places we find ourselves, curled up and shivering. God comes, protects and simply loves.

Quotation

“The Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.”

—Dorothy Day

Question

What experience have you had in your life that has strengthened your empathy for others?

Prayer

We thank you, God, for the way you blanket us with your love. Help us to share the comforting warmth of your love with all people.

—Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little
Pastor, The Welcome Church,
Philadelphia, Pa.

The Welcome Church is a “church without walls” sharing the good news of a loving and gracious God with all people (but especially in ministry with people living on the streets of Philadelphia).

Scripture

John 3:1-17

Principle

God loves all people, no matter what.

Reflection

Many know John 3:16 — but we forget verse 17. Jesus didn't come to condemn us but to save us through love.

God did not save us for himself because he wanted payment or atonement for our sins. He did this out of love for all humankind — you, me, all. This tells us that to believe in God is to know God. In her book *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, historian Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word “believe” comes from *belieben*, the German word for “to like or to fancy.” To believe is not to hold an opinion but to treasure. To hold something beloved. To give our heart over to it without hesitation. To believe in something is to invest it with our love. And God sees us as beloved.

In our food truck ministry, the only question we ask for meals is “How many in your family?” No address, income, religion, explanation. New folks are surprised, but we see our neighbors as God’s beloved — hungry first for food but then for conversation and maybe prayer. Everyone. Served with love. No judgment or condemnation.

When the authors of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament wrote of faithfulness, they were writing about commitment, trust and assurance. To believe in God was to trust in God with their whole hearts, minds and bodies. As Jesus people, we try to do the same. Frequently the food serves far more than we planned for — loaves and fishes multiplying.

Quotation

“Judging others makes us blind, whereas loving others is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.”

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Question

Do you *know* you are beloved by God, not condemned? Have you experienced a time when you trusted God and then were surprised by God’s actions?

Prayer

God of all your beloved, help us to experience that abundant love you give us. Show us opportunities to live out that abundance with all around us. In your name, we pray and try to live. Amen.

—Rev. Amy Beitel schees-Albers
So Much More Ministries, Fort Wayne, Ind.

So Much More Ministries is a street church that operates out of a food truck, feeding people physically and spiritually.

Scripture

John 3:16

Principle

God loves all people, no matter what.

Reflection

Nicodemus — a pharisee, educated, respected yet just a man, an imperfect sinner — slips through the night with questions compelling him to seek Jesus, who meets him not with rebuke but with words hard for the fallible mind to comprehend: “You must be born from above” (John 3:7) and “born of water and Spirit” (5). This is God’s doing, not ours. Nicodemus is perplexed, asking, “How can these things be?” (9). We may also find ourselves seeking Jesus but asking questions. Lent exposes the Pharisee in every heart: broken, proud, fearful, clinging to control.

But the profound good news is this: “God so loved the world” (16) — not the worthy, the pious nor the powerful but the whole world, broken, rebellious, wandering in the night. God is love, and the words “everyone who believes” are the key. The cross carries no asterisk; it is the mission. Christ was crucified not to condemn us but to redeem us, to seek and save the lost, from hidden Nicodemuses to open prodigals. Lent calls us to die with Jesus — die to self-justification, die to exclusion — and rise reborn, bearers of the same reckless love. God loves all people, no matter what. In the shadow of the cross, that love becomes our mission too: to lift high the Son so that the world may see, believe and live.

Quotation

“[John 3:16] is ‘the gospel in miniature.’ If you want to find God, then inscribe these words in your heart. Don’t sleep, but be vigilant. Learn and ponder these words diligently.”

—Martin Luther

Question

Nicodemus went to Christ with questions and wrestled with the answers. How often do we go to Christ with questions, supplications or concerns only to grumble when God does not work on our time frame, or to wrestle with his divine answer. Can the Lenten season help us “return to the Lord our God” in trust?

Prayer

God our Redeemer, in our imperfection, help us to seek you out as Nicodemus did. Teach us to rely not on our own understanding but on your truth, and strengthen us to be your hands and feet to share the good news, that the world may come to believe and share in the resurrection, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

—Rev. Harold W. Rinker Jr.
Lead Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church,
Renovo, Pa.

Scripture

John 3:17

Principle

God loves all people, no matter what.

Reflection

Curious and cautious, Nicodemus approached Jesus at night. Perhaps he approached in the dark because he feared what others might think or because he wasn't ready for his questions to be seen in the light. At the end of their conversation in the darkness, Jesus tells him, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). These words reveal a God whose love does not sort people into categories of good and bad, worthy and unworthy. God's love reaches everyone.

Recently I was at a local park. In front of me were a toddler, his family and a gentleman walking his dog. The child and dog did not belong to each other, but soon the child saw the dog and began to run toward it with his arms open wide and a big smile on his face. The dog saw him approaching and prepared to meet its new best friend. Pure love between them.

It was like one of Jesus' parables. Love running toward another simply because that's what love does. No qualifications. No merit. Simply welcome. In a world that too often divides, Jesus shows us a God who meets Nicodemus, curious and cautious, and offers grace without judgment because this love has come to light in Jesus. May God's love come to light in each of us.

Quotation

"We are not loved because we are good; we are good because we are loved." —Henri Nouwen

Question

How can we, as individuals or as a community, reflect God's all-consuming love toward people who are different from us?

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for a love that embraces all people without condition, no matter what. Help me to see others, and myself, with the same wide, saving grace you offer. Amen.

—Rev. Emily Wiles
Manager, ELCA New Ministry
Development and Evangelism

Scripture

John 3:16

Principle

God loves all people, no matter what.

Reflection

Theologian Paul Tillich saw “church” not as organized religion but as “a group of people who express a new reality by which they have been grasped.”

In this well-known verse from the Gospel of John, we know that the Divine reached with both hands into humanity to grasp each of us with a love so tender and strong that part of God’s very self was to be sacrificed.

Not long ago, I heard a story of this overwhelming love. The story centers on a plant that grew at the bottom of a mine. This type of plant normally grew only about 6 inches tall, but to reach the light, this plant rose to a height of 120 feet!

For most of us living in the Northern Hemisphere, winter is a season of shorter days and longer nights. For many, this is a time of fatigue, depression and hopelessness. In fact, these feelings are so prevalent that we have given them a name — seasonal affective disorder (SAD). During this season, pre-Christian folks would try to convince the sun to return by stopping their work, taking a wheel off their wagons and decorating the wheel with greens and candles — a tradition Christians adapted with the Advent wreath. We use this symbol of light to speak of the hopeful return of Jesus,

the light of the world. The plant story is a powerful example of how much we need light to survive. The light of God seeks out each of us, grasping us and causing us to grow in God’s love.

God is on a mission, and that mission is simply to love and bring wholeness to the world.

Quotation

“O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” (Isaiah 2:5).

Question

Where have you seen the light of God?
Where have you been the light of God?

Prayer

Holy God, guide me with the goodness of your love, that your holy light might be seen by all I say and do. Amen.

—Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little
Pastor, The Welcome Church,
Philadelphia, Pa.

The Welcome Church is a “church without walls” sharing the good news of a loving and gracious God with all people (but especially in ministry with people living on the streets of Philadelphia).

Scripture

John 3:1-17

Principle

God loves all people, no matter what.

Reflection

Jesus said it himself: God did not send him here to condemn the world. But our world sure does seem condemnable. There are people, places and things all around us that seem so lost and broken that we may as well just give up on them — like my friend H. After being unhoused for many years, she is getting ready to move into an apartment. “I’m a screwup,” she said to me. “Every time I’ve gotten myself put together again, every time I’ve gotten a place and fixed my life up, I’ve messed it up again.” She was both excited and terrified about getting an apartment. “But no matter how many times I mess up, I know that I can come here and I will be loved by the people here and by God.”

H reminded me about the unbelievable, illogical love of God. In a world that seems as if it should be condemned, instead Jesus is here to save the world, to bring new life, to bring a new birth. Nicodemus couldn’t believe it either. “How can these things be?” he asked. Many who have received God’s grace, over and over again, ask, “How can God still love me? How can God still give me another chance?”

The answer, as Jesus says, is that he did not come here to condemn the world but to save it.

Quotation

“I have always been delighted at the prospect of a new day, a fresh try, one more start, with perhaps a bit of magic waiting somewhere behind the morning.” —J.B. Priestley

Question

Have you ever been both excited and terrified by an opportunity to try something again, to have a second (or third or fourth) chance?

Prayer

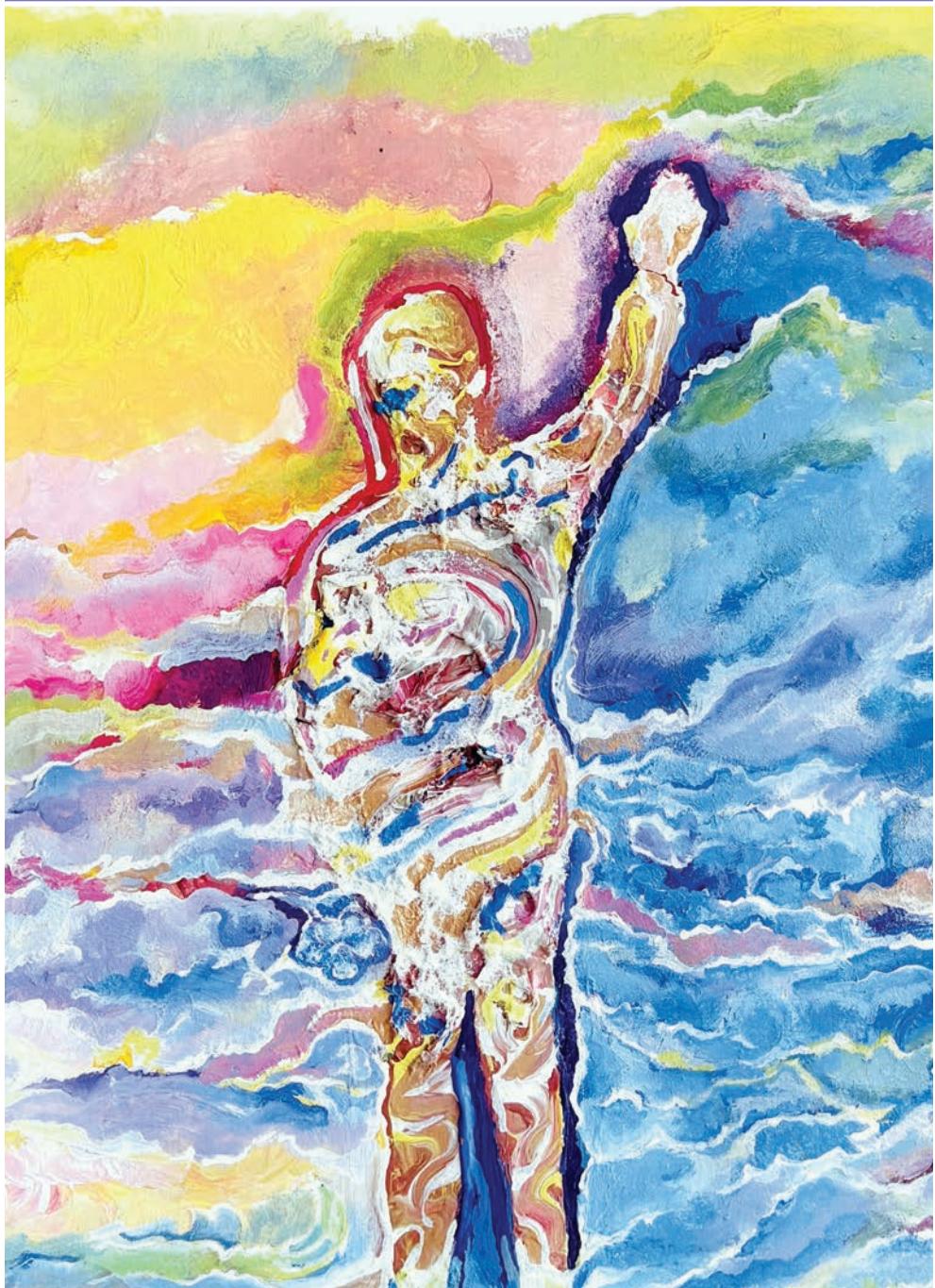
Creator, you give us the breath of life and promise us new beginnings. Free us from our guilt and fear of condemnation so that we may live in the freedom of your grace. Bring us to new life in you. Amen.

—Rev. Birgitte Simpson
Pastor, Mission Developer and
Executive Director, Peoples Church,
Bemidji, Minn.

Peoples Church, a worshiping community and Indigenous ministry, operates a year-round, overnight emergency shelter and community meal site in Bemidji, Minn.

LENT, WEEK 3

**Principle 4: Unconditional respect for the dignity
and value of all people.**



Scripture

John 4:5-42

Principle

We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.

Reflection

On a beautiful Wednesday morning, I found a mother sitting on the church steps, reading to the 4-year-old daughter nestled in her arms. They were reading about the birth of Jesus and reflecting on how he was their savior.

I cautiously approached this beautiful scene and introduced myself. The woman explained that they were sitting in the sunshine, reading, because her home reminded her of death, of the lack of food, of poor choices, of loss. I asked if they needed anything. The woman lowered her eyes and said, “This morning I fed my daughter, but I haven’t eaten in two days.”

I told her that this was unacceptable, that she was a beloved child of God who needed to eat and be strong for her children. I welcomed her into our pantry, where she shopped for necessary items including food and toiletries. Her daughter clung to a box of macaroni and cheese as if it were gold. As they left with books and needed items, she hugged me, saying, “Jesus is our savior, and today it came true.”

Quotation

“Food is a gift of God given to all creatures for the purposes of life’s nurture, sharing, and celebration. When it is done in the name of God, eating is the earthly realization of God’s eternal communion-building love.”

—Norman Wirzba

Question

How do we, as baptized children of God, reflect the love, grace and forgiveness of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, to our neighbors and a hurting world?

Prayer

Good and gracious God, thank you for your abundance and for allowing us to see our neighbors and their gifts and needs. May we be strengthened and encouraged by our baptisms, by your holy meals, by your word and by living in community to offer your hope to a hurting world.

—Rev Giselle Coutinho
Bridge of Peace Community Church,
Camden, N.J.

*Bridge of Peace Community Church,
a Reconciling in Christ congregation,
welcomes and affirms all God’s
children, committing itself to advocacy,
anti-racism and seeking justice.*

Scripture

1 Peter 1:22-23

Principle

We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.

Reflection

Peace Lutheran Church in Billings is known as a church that will help its neighbors in any way it can. Foremost in its public-facing ministry is the Peace Lutheran Food Pantry. Food distributions occur three times a week. The food pantry is a no-barrier service, requiring no proof of identity, income or residence. All the volunteers request is contact information so the pantry can reach out to patrons if necessary.

Though food is necessary, what keeps people coming back is the relationships between volunteers and patrons. One woman, Ruby, is a regular patron at the Thursday-morning distribution. She arrives as much as an hour early, sitting in her car and welcoming people as they arrive at the church for Bible study and food pantry. Though older and living on a fixed income, Ruby helps the pantry by collecting plastic grocery bags from people in her apartment block, to be used by pantry patrons.

In her love and gratitude, Ruby helps make the Peace Lutheran Food Pantry more than an experiment in food distribution. She helps volunteers and patrons recognize the dignity of all people who find themselves at the pantry. She reminds folks that even the seemingly insignificant contributions are welcome and necessary. The deep love St. Peter references in his letter is

on display at the Peace Food Pantry, through people such as Ruby, sharing life together in many and various ways.

Quotation

“Helping others is a good effort to instill human dignity.”

—Gift Gugu Mona

Question

How do you or your community lift up the dignity of all people?

Prayer

Gracious God, you have created each person in your image, bestowing upon us a sacred dignity that no power can erase. Fill us with compassion, that we might honor one another with kindness, justice and care, bearing witness to your love in all our relationships. By your Spirit, make us a community that reflects Christ's mercy and lifts up the worth of every human life. Amen.

—Rev. Seth Rumage
Pastor, Peace Lutheran Church,
Billings, Mont.

Peace Lutheran Church is a congregational ministry whose food pantry served 33,148 pounds of food to 6,592 people in its community in 2024.

Scripture

Matthew 25:35

Principle

We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.

Reflection

Last winter, as temperatures dropped, we opened our doors every night to neighbors with nowhere else to go. What began as an emergency plan quickly became a sacred rhythm: blankets spread across the floor, hot chocolate in hand, soup in abundance, neighbors talking late into the night.

One evening, I overheard someone whisper, “This is the first time I’ve slept without fear in months.” That moment reminded me that shelter is never just four walls and a roof. It is safety, dignity and knowing you are not forgotten. It is realizing you are not alone in the night and that someone has thought about your well-being enough to make a place for you.

Hospitality such as this changes everyone involved. Those who arrive in need become friends and teachers. Those who offer space and care find themselves welcomed into a deeper experience of God’s kingdom. It is never one-sided. True welcome is mutual and transforming, reshaping both the giver and the receiver, binding people together in ways that cannot easily be undone.

This is the call of the gospel: to create spaces of safety and belonging where fear is lifted, dignity is restored and lives are made new. Whenever people

open their doors and their hearts to one another, whether in a shelter, a kitchen or a sanctuary, Christ’s love becomes visible and community is born.

Quotation

“Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.”

—Henri Nouwen

Question

How have you been transformed by welcoming or being welcomed, and where might God be inviting you into that transformation again?

Prayer

God of shelter, thank you for welcoming us when we are weary. Teach us to open our doors, our churches and our hearts so that all may find rest, belonging and peace. Amen.

—Rev. Emily Harkins,
Lead Pastor, Founding Developer,
The Dwelling, Winston Salem, N.C.

The Dwelling is a community where the lines between guest and host, neighbor and stranger, housed and unhoused are blurred by God’s grace. In worship and at the table, in showers and shelter, in stories and song, we learn again and again that we belong to one another.

Scripture

John 4:5-42

Principle

We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.

Reflection

I was recently able to travel with the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network leadership team to Mexico City to learn from an organization called Amextra. Through community-led programs, education and microfinancing, Amextra empowers folks to grow and become stable.

I visited a shop that was similar to a Home Depot except that it occupied a small house on a residential street in rural Mexico. The gal who ran her business there was kind enough to show us around. She had hot pink extension cords, and I remember wishing I could take those home.

Through Amextra microfinancing, she was able to start her own business and support her family. She became part of a microfinancing community group whose members supported each other temporarily if someone couldn't make their payments. They were in the process of purchasing a vehicle so they could transport heavy material without hiring someone. This shop owner dreamed of growing her business enough that she could take off afternoons to spend time with her toddler.

The folks at Amextra provide seed money and support, but it's the individual who has the dream, runs with it and changes her life and the community around her.

Quotation

"You don't give people dignity, you affirm it." —John M. Perkins

Question

What does the concept of dignity have in common with the above reflection? When was the last time someone saw potential in you?

Prayer

God, you have created every human with love and care, in your image. Give us hearts of kindness, inclusion and hospitality, and teach us to see all people the way you see them. Amen.

—Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator for
Economic Diversity
Coordinator, ELCA Homeless
and Justice Network

Scripture

John 4:5-42

Principle

We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.

Reflection

Cafe Esperanza serves a beautifully diverse stream of people: younger and older, housed and unhoused, working people and those without employment — all of whom like good food, served with a warm welcome. Staff and volunteers know it is important both to prepare food with care and to greet customers with warmth and respect. This means getting to know folks and building relationships with them. At Cafe Esperanza, everyone feels seen.

Jordan, who lives in a tent, has been coming to the café for several months. At first, she was reluctant to engage. Then she began to trust that she was not being judged, and she shared her story. Soon she was helping in the kitchen and greeting others warmly. One day, she asked for a ride to the store. She came out bearing gifts of bread and juice for the café, purchased with her SNAP benefits. At the café, Jordan experiences being a part of a community of hope and giving a taste of hope to others.

When Jesus met the woman at the well, he *saw* her. He got to know her. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done” (John 4:29). Jesus offered her water, gushing up to eternal life.

By getting to know the people we meet, seeking out folks with different life experiences and showing our respect, we too can be part of Jesus’ mission to bring the hope that is living water to a thirsty world.

Quotation

“A fundamental concern for others in our individual and community lives would go a long way in making the world the better place we so passionately dream of.”

—Nelson Mandela

Question

Where can you spend time with people who are not from your own comfortable group and get to know their hopes and dreams?

Prayer

God of overflowing grace, make us vessels to carry your hope into the world. Help us to see and surmount the barriers between people, bearing your living water to a thirsty world.

—Rev. Mary E. Wolfe
Pastor, Hope Lutheran Church,
Reading, Pa.
Cafe Esperanza, Reading, Pa.

Cafe Esperanza is a pay-what-you-can café, creating community across socioeconomic lines by serving healthy delicious meals to all, regardless of their ability to pay. For those unable to contribute financially, the cafe offers the opportunity to volunteer. Everyone has something to offer, and when everyone contributes, there is an abundance to share.

Scripture

John 4:5-42

Principle

We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.

Reflection

Recently we welcomed to our congregation a new member who is gifted at machinery, farming and animal husbandry. In his mid-60s, he is unable to read or write. As he pounded stakes into the ground, installing Stations of the Cross on the meditation trails in the church woodland, he shared with me that though he wishes he could read, he is not ashamed: “My mom always used to tell me, ‘God gave everybody a purpose. You might not be able to read, and someone else might not be able to fix tractors like you can, but everybody has a purpose. God has made sure of that.’”

I love that the story in John 4 ends with the Samaritan woman running from the well, alive with good news to share. Her encounter with Jesus gives her purpose. At the baptismal font, this is one of God’s promises to us: the flame of the baptismal candle flickers with the truth that our purpose is gifted to us by God. The love of God frees us from shame regarding our shortcomings so that we can instead lean into sharing the gifts we do have for the sake of others.

Quotation

“If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.” —Brene Brown

Question

Whose love has helped you see your gifts rather than focus on your shortcomings?

Prayer

Empowering God, you give many gifts to your people so that we may serve in a variety of ways. Give us a gentle spirit, able to recognize each other’s gifts, so that your love is incarnate in our communities. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

—Rev. Inge Williams
Friedens Lutheran Church,
Shartlesville, Pa.

Friedens Church has been serving Shartlesville and the surrounding community since 1870. It is a vibrant congregation, rooted in tradition, and celebrates that God’s Spirit is with and among us.

Scripture

John 4:39

Principle

We respect the dignity and value of all people, without condition.

Reflection

Whenever I read this story, I am blown away by the bravery of the woman at the well. She understands her place in the world — a Samaritan, a woman, unmarried — and all the complexities that come with it. She knows that the world wants her to be unseen and unheard, basically invisible. Instead, after meeting Jesus, she is so full of the Spirit that she tells everyone about him. Many years ago, I learned the Greek word *Theotokos*, which means God-bearer. This word is usually used only to talk about Jesus' mother, Mary. But when I learned it, I was told that the woman at the well is a *Theotokos*. She brings God to a whole people. She tells everyone about this man even though the world wants her to be silent.

Many of my friends at Peoples Church are people whom the world dismisses as invisible —homeless, disabled, mentally ill, struggling with substance abuse. But their love for one another, their commitment to community, their care for the sick and elderly among them remind me daily of the love of God. They become a *Theotokos* for me.

Quotation

“Love comes from the most unexpected places.” —Dave Ellingson and Kim Carnes, “Love Comes From Unexpected Places”

Question

Who has been a *Theotokos* — a God-bearer — teaching you or reflecting for you the love of God? Did this *Theotokos* arrive from an unexpected place?

Prayer

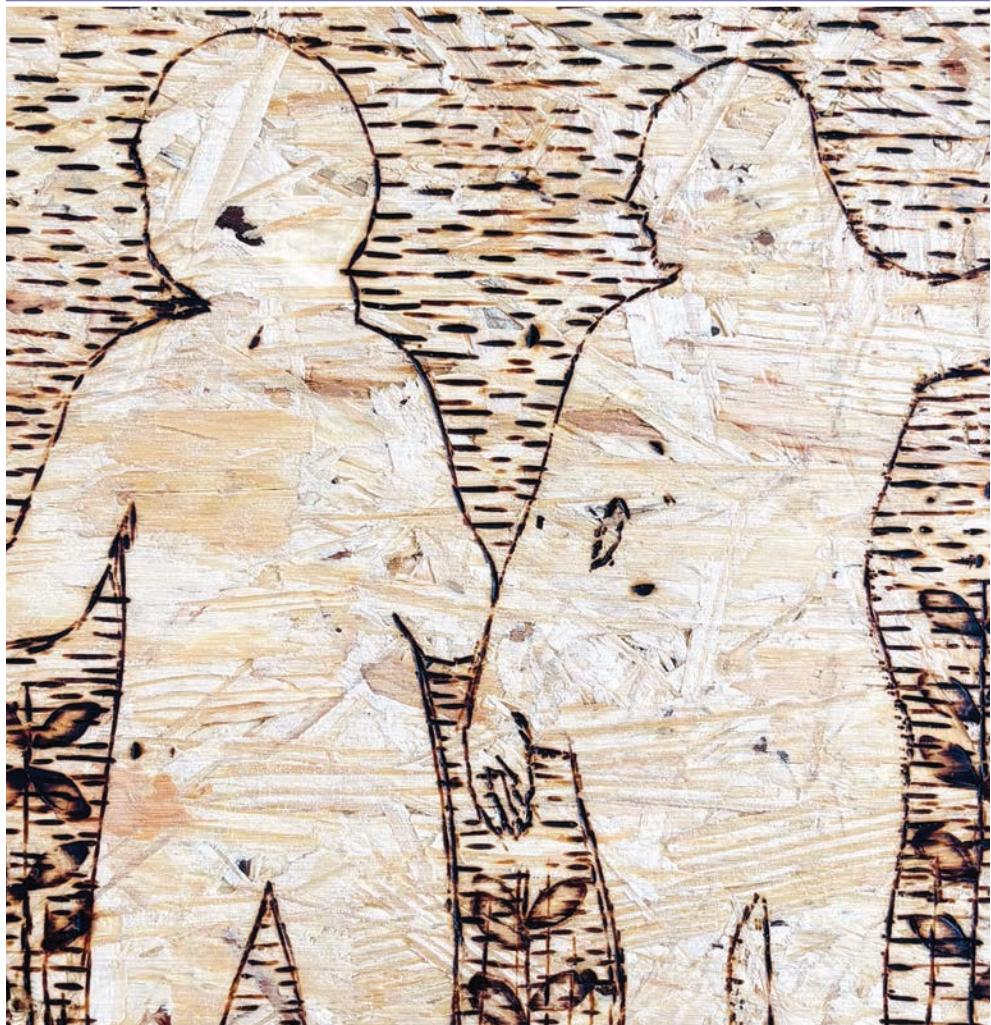
Creator, when we feel invisible, give us courage to proclaim your love to all the world. May we be God-bearers. When your love is proclaimed from an unexpected place, give us ears to hear. May we see your God-bearers all around us. Amen.

—Rev. Birgitte Simpson
Pastor, Mission Developer and
Executive Director, Peoples Church,
Bemidji, Minn.

Peoples Church, a worshiping community and Indigenous ministry, operates a year-round, overnight emergency shelter and community meal site in Bemidji, Minn.

LENT, WEEK 4

**Principle 5: We minister *with* — not *to* or
for — one another.**



Scripture

John 9:1-41

Principle

We minister *with* — not *to* or *for* — one another.

Reflection

Before I was diagnosed with dyslexia in college, I used my intelligence and coping skills to function, yet the constant struggle left me feeling incompetent, exhausted, broken and frustrated. The world viewed me as lacking the skills and vision needed to succeed. I was accepted to highly competitive colleges, yet still there was something wrong.

My diagnosis explained the challenge and freed me to see how I could achieve my goals. I am still dyslexic, and there are days when the children and adults at church must read for their pastor. In those moments, we become the true body of Christ in our brokenness and in our gifts.

One of my favorite songs is “Open the Eyes of My Heart.” Such vision allows our community to welcome children with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiant disorder, and adults struggling with vision impairment, mental illness and victimization. Each of us uses their gifts to become the person God has called them to be and to serve our neighbors in all life’s needs. We believe in the Son of Man, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has opened the eyes of our hearts to help us see clearly that he is our hope and salvation.

Quotation

“Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes doesn’t mean he lacks vision.”
—Stevie Wonder.

Question

If you feel comfortable, express what has been a challenge for you and how you have received help in addressing that challenge. Have you found support and encouragement in your community of faith? What more do you need? What do others in your community need if they are to become what God has called them to be?

Prayer

Healing Savior, open the eyes of our hearts so that we might see our needs, our gifts and the needs and gifts of others. Give us a heart of love and advocacy so that we might see you in the faces of all our neighbors. May our personal and community healing come in seeing and loving ourselves and others, just as you see us as your precious children. Amen.

—Rev. Giselle Coutinho
Bridge of Peace Community Church,
Camden, N.J.

*Bridge of Peace Community Church,
a Reconciling in Christ congregation,
welcomes and affirms all God’s
children, committing itself to advocacy,
anti-racism and seeking justice.*

Scripture

Psalm 136:1-3

Principle

We minister *with* — not *to* or *for* — one another.

Reflection

At the Church of Steadfast Love, community is vital to all we do. We actively look for ways to engage with the larger community. To feel whole, human and of value, everyone needs a chance to give back. Some of our favorite projects include:

1. Camp Lutherwood: Battling blackberries, chopping and stacking wood, weeding, pruning trees, demolition (a particular area of expertise) and building bridges.
2. Lutheran World Relief (LWR): Quilt-tying and ingathering, which involves loading lots of boxes into semis.

We are known throughout the synod for our church gear and can-do attitude. We participate in our synod assembly and once had a member speak to a memorial about his time in prison. He was so grateful that he was heard and his experience valued. But the most impactful thing we do is to gather as community for worship, where we hear God's words, remembering that our sins are forgiven and we are loved. In fact, we are so valued that we are sought out. We are hungry for the good news, which we find in the word, music, meal and each other.

Quotation

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:23-25).

Question

What communities are you part of, and how does each enrich your life?

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the many gifts with which we have been blessed, for each other and for the ways in which, together, we become the body of Christ. Amen.

—Rev. Kristy Daniels
Pastor, Church of Steadfast Love,
Seattle, Wash.

The Church of Steadfast Love is a congregation that meets in Seattle's Compass Center. We worship in Spanish and English, welcoming adults from all walks of life and from all over the world. Many in the congregation experience or have experienced homelessness.

Scripture

John 9:1-41

Principle

We minister *with* — not *to* or *for* — one another.

Reflection

I will never forget the love and support my family received when the father of my son Jaidyn was murdered, a few months after Jaidyn had lost his grandfather. Jaidyn had fallen out with his father years ago, and his father and I weren't speaking, but his family showed love and support for us during the funeral. My son's father was not part of our congregation, but our pastor allowed us to hold the ceremony in our church, and my sister performed a praise dance. Jaidyn's father had worked at his last job for only a couple months, yet his boss paid for the funeral service and cremation, provided the pizza for the repast and even gave Jaidyn \$1,000 for support and to honor his father's legacy. The woman who had been his father's fiancée reached out to my son, giving him some jewelry that his father had given to her. People from church who didn't even know Jaidyn's father gave us so much — good wishes, sympathy cards, money, support and love — that it filled up our church that day. I will never forget it and will always appreciate those who still uplift my son during this hard time. I love every single one of them.

Always be there to support someone in pain because we all know how it feels to lose someone we love.

Quotation

"No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another." — Charles Dickens

Question

Has there been a time when someone walked alongside you during a rough moment in your life? What would it look like for a church community to do this *with* someone as opposed to *for* someone?

Prayer

Dear Lord, gather us together as a community to support those who have lost someone that we loved dearly. No one should have to endure this battle alone, and we all know what it feels like to lose someone we love. Keep us together and strengthen our love so that we might embrace each other during the hard times. We pray to you, O Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen.

—Deanna Branch
Member, Hephaatha Lutheran
Church, Milwaukee, Wis.

Hephaatha began in 1913 as a neighborhood congregation formed by German immigrants. We have been a neighborhood church our entire history, serving God and others on the north side of Milwaukee for 108 years.

Scripture

John 9:27

Principle

We minister *with* — not *to* or *for* — one another.

Reflection

In an earlier reflection, I wrote about my experience in a L'Arche community, which gathers people with and without intellectual disabilities. That same community had a rule, when you first arrived, that you were to do nothing for the first couple weeks. I took that very literally, so much so that they thought me to be a real dud of an assistant. Looking back, I can't blame them, and I find it humorous.

The point, however, was that we do things *with* people and not *for* them. Eventually I grasped what they meant. Try doing absolutely nothing with someone. It's dreadfully boring. Eventually you will be forced to ask them, "Well, what do you want to do?"

Because of my literal take on their introductory rule, I was bored and had to ask that question of the person I was assigned to accompany each day. Gene loved the TV series *Smallville*, and though the executive leadership wanted us to always keep him active, we would take time to watch *Smallville* together. Katty wanted to eat good food; it was one of her major joys in life. So we'd take a long walk (to get that "mandatory" exercise in), then eat crabcake eggs benedict. This didn't look like much then and probably doesn't sound like much now, but for those adults living with developmental

disabilities and myself, it provided the basis for a decent relationship. They had a caretaker, I got to know a person better, and we fulfilled the mission of L'Arche, to create community. It's about seeing people as people first.

Quotation

"If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." —Lilla Watson

Question

Does our "serving table" include people around it, or does it function as a "severing table," with some people on one side and other people on the opposite side?

Prayer

God, we dwell lovingly with you and the other beautiful people whom you have made. Let us be together and enjoy one another's company. Free us from the bonds of competition, insecurity, superiority, racism, sexism, ableism and heterosexism. Free us from our social labels so that we can be people with one another again. Only you can accomplish this, Lord. You have promised to liberate us from our sin and set us free. We thank you for this promise and long for its fulfillment in our lives. Amen.

—Rev. Mike Hanck
Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church,
Toledo, Ohio

Salem Lutheran Church is a critical ministry of empowerment and compassion in Toledo's North End neighborhood, which has the highest concentration of people experiencing economic poverty.

Scripture

John 9:1-41

Principle

We minister *with* — not *to* or *for* — one another.

Reflection

The bubble pops, and there she is. “It’s good to see me, isn’t it!” says Glinda.

We’re big *Wicked* fans in my house, and I love Glinda and Elphaba’s journey and story arc as they navigate through Oz. In the opening scene, Glinda wows the crowd in a flying bubble and fancy pink dress. But they aren’t real. The bubble isn’t her own magic, and the story she tells isn’t the true story. She’s reciting a narrative that she has convinced herself is for the good of the people.

This happens in real life all the time, and often in the church. Howard Thurman (*Jesus and the Disinherited*) writes, “It is certainly to the glory of Christianity that it has been most insistent on the point of responsibility to others whose claim upon one is the height and depth of their need. ... It is the sin of pride and arrogance that has tended to vitiate the missionary impulse and to make it an instrument of self-righteousness.”

This is the mindset shift I have learned during my time with the Homeless and Justice Network. Giving out of abundance and charity can be wonderful but often leaves the recipients out of the decision-making and keeps the “givers” in power: “It’s good to see me, isn’t it?”

Ministry *with* is an equalizer. Ministry *with* means that everyone is receiving, growing and changing for good.

Quotation

“I’ve heard it said / That people come into our lives for a reason / Bringing something we must learn / And we are led / To those who help us most to grow / If we let them / And we help them in return ... Because I knew you / I have been changed / For good.” —Stephen Schwartz, “For Good,” from *Wicked*

Question

Has a relationship with someone ever changed you “for good”?

Prayer

God, help us to see that the real magic is in building relationships, sharing moments of joy and abundance, and working together to help this world become a more equitable and peaceful place. Amen.

—Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator for
Economic Diversity
Coordinator, ELCA Homeless
and Justice Network

Scripture

Matthew 4:8-10

Principle

We minister *with* — not *to* or *for* — one another.

Reflection

For me, Church on the Street was a godsend, a divine intervention. Church on the Street is my family. Its members took me under their wings when I was at a turning point in my life. I needed people that I could trust, people who would listen and point me in the right direction. The members didn't judge me; I got enough of that from the world. They embraced my differences and called me good, just as Jesus does. I was appointed as one of their lay leaders, so I get to lead and represent the ministry and to work with the pastor and leaders. We help the congregation fulfill its mission, which includes taking the church to people of the community who normally wouldn't step into a church. Church on the Street has been there for me when no one else was, and I will be there for the church for as long as I'm able. I cherish all the relationships I've made over the years, and I look forward to the future ones.

Quotation

“Compassion can be put into practice if one recognizes the fact that every human being is a member of humanity” His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV

Question

When have you experienced a welcome that embraced you just as you are?

Prayer

Lord, give me the courage to get out of these physical walls, to go out to the nations to share the good news and salvation of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

—Dra Hayes, Lay Leader
Church on the Street,
Sioux Falls, S.D.

Church on the Street is a ministry with the unhoused, the under-housed and those experiencing poverty in the Sioux Falls area.

Scripture

John 9:13-17

Principle

We minister *with* — not *to* or *for* — one another.

Reflection

A couple years ago, I made the drive from the Chicago suburbs up to Milwaukee, Wis., to visit my dear friends at Hephatha Lutheran Church. With me, I brought my husband and two kids, ages 4 and 10 at the time.

The moment we walked in the door, we were greeted with radical welcome and joy. We were able to celebrate the safe-baby sanctuary and the work that the folks there were (and still are) doing to help make Milwaukee lead-free.

Based on other times in my life when I've visited churches, I expected to happily sit and listen to the service in the pews. But from the start of the service, we were immersed in the community-centered worship and were even included in serving communion. My daughter and I went up to serve communion, but the minute my daughter was handed the loaf of bread, she dropped it, and it rolled across the floor. She was embarrassed, but the pastor said, "Don't worry! We have more bread." My daughter calmed right down, and we had the special experience of serving communion together.

This is an example of ministry "with." A beautiful, sometimes messy, but joyful and empowering experience where everyone, even visitors, has something to offer.

Quotation

"You are never too small to make a difference." —Greta Thunberg

Question

What is the difference between doing something *with* someone and doing something *for* someone?

Prayer

Dear God, help us to be radical welcomers. Help us to deepen our desires to include and empower because doing life and ministry with our neighbors allows for everyone's lights to shine. Amen.

—Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator for
Economic Diversity
Coordinator, ELCA Homeless
and Justice Network

LENT, WEEK 5

Principle 6: A church is the people, not the building.



Scripture

John 11:25

Principle

A church is the people, not the building.

Reflection

Teresa is a pillar of our congregation. She puts her faith into action and cares about the community. But there was a time in her life when she hit rock bottom. “As long as I can remember, I have believed in God,” she says. “My trust in God came a lot later. In my mid-40s, I was homeless and struggling to rebuild the life I had discarded. I was angry and felt betrayed by God. I could not see an end to the situation I was in and felt like giving up.

“Unexpectedly, I was given my young grandchildren to raise. My focus was now more on them and less on me. I felt overwhelmed but now had assistance from Child Protective Services and the Department of Social and Health Services to lift me out of the hole I had been sitting in. My immediate response was to thank God. I felt a strong desire to return to church, reunite with God and give my grandchildren the chance to know God as well.

“Peace Lutheran Church was near our house. Our family was welcomed, and I felt supported and thankful for the community and friendship I had there. My grandkids enjoyed Sunday school, summer programs, baptism, confirmation and many leadership roles. I was invited to lead our holiday bazaar and community Thanksgiving

meal every year and to join the women’s Bible study. Through our church, I was empowered to serve in other community roles. Since getting the grandkids, I have bought a house, received a car, been president of the local Parent Teacher Association, and served on our church council, community center board and synod outreach board.

“I have had struggles, but I have learned to trust that God has my best interests in his plans. Peace Lutheran Church is my co-parent, there to share my joys and grieve my sorrows. My trust in God has grown immensely. Through God, my church has blessed me and my family. My hope is that these blessings will reach others and that my trust in God can inspire others to trust as well.”

I leave you with this poem by Brendan Nelson, director of community engagement for Peace Lutheran Church:

When the world says, “It’s over,” God says, “I’m just getting started.”
When the spirit feels like it’s fading, the Living One leans close and says, “Breathe again.”

For he is not the God of the dead, but of every heartbeat that dares to believe.

He walks Hilltop streets and holy ground alike, where prayers rise from cracked sidewalks and faith hums in quiet kitchens.

He is the God of laughter after loss, the God of grace in the grind, the God of mornings that come after nights we thought would never end.

For our hope is not buried, it’s breathing.

Our faith is not finished, it’s rising.

And the God who was, and is, and is to
come is not done with us yet.
So we stand firm. We hold fast. We
live, because he lives.

Quotation

“I have felt the power of God
transforming the fatigue of despair
into the buoyancy of hope.”
—Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Question

When have you experienced the
buoyancy of hope from God helping
you rise?

Prayer

God of resurrection and life, when we
can't see an end to the situation we're
in, when we feel like giving up, remind
us that you're just getting started.
Transform the fatigue of our despair
into the buoyancy of hope. Give us
breath and new life in you so we might
rise and help others rise, in the name
of the crucified and risen one, Jesus.
Amen.

—Rev. John Stroegh
**Pastor, Peace Lutheran Church,
Tacoma, Wash.**

*Peace Lutheran Church is a
multiethnic, economically diverse
congregation in the Hilltop
neighborhood of Tacoma, journeying
toward God's vision of a diverse
community of faith that is Spirit-filled,
compassionate, healthy, reconciled
and just.*

Scripture

John 11:1-45

Principle

A church is the people, not the building.

Reflection

“Church on the Street.” That sounds really cool. People often ask, “But where is your church?” Whether I am speaking in a congregation or in a public space, this can be a challenging concept to grasp.

I often reply, “Well, it’s everywhere.” Knowing that this is inadequate for most people, I will go into greater depth. Sometimes our church is at the laundromat, when we gather for Laundry with Love. Sometimes it’s at our pantry, where we distribute food, hygiene items and household items. Sometimes it’s at a local shelter where we gather for pastoral care time. Sometimes it’s in the park or the Lutheran Social Services Multi-Cultural Center when we gather for worship. And yes, sometimes it’s on the street, when we are doing street ministry or meeting people in whatever place they currently call home.

Wherever we become church, we are reminded that Christ meets us where we are, giving us new life, new breath and a new identity as beloved children of God. In moments of hardship and despair,

amid oppressive systems, we trust in the promise that Christ goes with us, guiding our lives. We live out our faith as one body — no longer bound to the world but freed to encounter Christ in all spaces and places.

Quotation

“Being wounded, suffering, and dying are the quickest and most sure paths to truly living.” —Richard Rohr

Question

When have you experienced the church as new life, found in unlikely places?

Prayer

God of new life, your love transforms our hearts and minds to live in new life with you and everyone we meet. Remind us of your love and mercy that was and is and will be forever. Amen.

—Deacon Mara Stillson
Church on the Street,
Sioux Falls, S.D.

Church on the Street is a ministry with the unhoused, the under-housed and those experiencing poverty in the Sioux Falls area.

Scripture

John 11: 3-4, 9

Principle

A church is the people, not the building.

Reflection

Growing up in the Midwest, I lived the children's rhyme "Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people." The church community was inside and easily identified as a crowd on Sundays. We had a large, engaged congregation with fingers in many faith-building activities.

As times have changed, we may be startled that the crowds are gone. We have scattered. Is it an illness and maybe death?

Jesus said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. ... Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world" (John 11:4, 9).

Or is it a new understanding of the community of believers? They no longer reside inside as a recognizable group. Maybe they are now identified as the sons and daughters and friends of the Sunday-goers. The goal may be not to fill up the church but to invite those whom we are close to, to join us differently, not to be inside but to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked and, important in these times, to house the homeless. Through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, we see the light of this world.

Quotation

"[British theologian and author] Lesslie Newbigin famously said the church is meant to be 'a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste' of God's reign. Mission is not about recruitment or institutional growth, but about being sent, listening, and helping life flourish." —Clint Schnekloth, "The Mission of Simply Being Here," Substack, Sept. 6, 2025

Question

How might our congregations create new communities that aren't already inside our church buildings and that we jointly send out to be "the light of this world"?

Prayer

Gracious God, we have dedicated our church buildings as sacred places in your name. Inspire us with new insights to redefine, reimagine and rededicate ourselves to your holy mission to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

—Debra Elstad
Member, Mount Tabor Lutheran
Church, Salt Lake City, Utah
Member, Circle of Hope + One

Circle of Hope + One is a new ministry that both redefines our understanding of our building and property possibilities and expands our hunger and homelessness service community through new ways of inviting our friends and family to join us.

Scripture

John 11:28-44

Principle

A church is the people, not the building.

Reflection

When I was a music student, I attended a friend's senior recital. She was a stunningly beautiful pianist, and you would not believe how fast her fingers could fly across the keys.

During her main piece, she stopped about halfway through. She went back a few measures and tried again. Same thing — silence. She had forgotten what came next and was unable to finish. She bowed over the piano, took a deep sigh, then walked offstage.

A reception had been set up for her, and while people were grazing the dessert table, I saw my friend sitting in the corner, devastated. But she wasn't alone. Her best friends surrounded her, and though no one said a word, they held her hand, sat with her and cried.

In the story of Lazarus, Jesus does something human before doing anything miraculous: he weeps. Before speaking a word, he honors the pain of the community. This emotional moment reminds us that God's work in the world is always grounded in a compassion that stops to recognize suffering. Jesus does not shame Mary and Martha's grief, questions or disappointment. Instead he sits with them. God joins us in our tears and invites us to do the same for others.

Quotation

"Piglet sidled up to Pooh... 'Pooh?' he whispered. 'Yes, Piglet?' 'Nothing,' said Piglet, taking Pooh's hand. **'I just wanted to be sure of you'.**"

—A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*

Question

Has anyone ever sat with you in times of despair? What would it look like for the church to do this for the community?

Prayer

Thank you for sitting with us during our greatest moments of sadness. We know there is always life and light ahead, but help us to comfort those around us, even if that means holding their hand and crying for a moment.

Amen.

—Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator for
Economic Diversity
Coordinator, ELCA Homeless
and Justice Network

Scripture

John 11:38-44

Principle

A church is the people, not the building.

Reflection

At my church, I direct a children's choir and a children's musical theater, open to the community. When the kids graduate from the program in fifth grade, many of them come back as junior directors to help me lead rehearsals. Seeing them become leaders and watching their joy and excitement as their own ideas and leadership come to life is one of the biggest honors and joys of my life. Often they have better ideas than I could come up with, and they are adored by the younger kids. I suppose I could lead the choirs on my own, but inviting the older kids to be partners in creating art and leading others brings a wholeness and beauty to the work and impacts everyone involved.

When Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, he invites others to participate. He tells the folks around him, “Unbind him, and let him go” (John 11:44). In this story, resurrection is not only an act of divine power but a communal calling. God’s healing in the world shows up through human hands, unwrapping the “grave clothes” that keep people trapped, whether those bindings are fear, injustice, shame or systems that deny people their dignity. This is a moment of co-creation: God initiates liberation, and we respond by helping free one another.

Quotation

“Being in the same room with people and creating something together is a good thing.” —Robin Williams

Question

Have you ever made something from nothing in a group setting? Reflect on a time when you have been involved in creating something with others.

Prayer

God, you have created us to commune with others and work together for good things in this world. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to be co-leaders and participants with you. May we hear that call in our own lives, and may we take part in unbinding others from the injustices around us. Amen.

—Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator for
Economic Diversity
Coordinator, ELCA Homeless
and Justice Network

Scripture

John 11:25-26

Principle

A church is the people, not the building.

Reflection

This is the final reflection from my time in a L'Arche community, which gathers people with and without intellectual disabilities. Being clumsy and sometimes lacking common sense, I wasn't the best assistant in L'Arche. I could feel how awkwardly I transitioned people from wheelchair to couch; through our gripped hands, I could sense my lack of skill grinding down their bones.

Yet that was a holy time for me. The core members of the community were patient with my steep learning curve. My housemates accepted my imperfections. My boss, Sister Betty Jeane, became a lifelong friend, even though, on many days, I must have caused her significant hair loss. They needed an assistant, and unfortunately, they got me; I needed a good community, and fortunately, I got them.

However, I don't think back fondly on the physical properties. I don't recall all the rooms in Grateful House. I barely remember Sunflower House. I can no longer remember Lori's office, but I do recall the time when she and Joy and I shared cups of kopi luwak — one of the most expensive coffees in the world, a gift courtesy of my Indonesian Lutheran friends — and the joy we had in that moment. I recall them driving from Florida to Ohio for my ordination. I recall how then-Bishop Lohrmann

allowed Joy to drape the stole over my shoulders, and how proud she was to do that. Without other people, the church, the discipleship, it is nearly nothing.

Quotation

“Community is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another.”

—Henri Nouwen

Question

Imagine the church without people. Imagine practicing discipleship with no other people around in any capacity. What is it like?

Prayer

Loving God, you have given us one another. Help us to see others as the treasures that you have made. Remind us that all else is temporary, that on the last day, you will raise up human beings, not buildings or possessions or status symbols. Help us to value other people most of all. It would be good if you sent more kopi luwak from Indonesia too. Amen.

—Rev. Mike Hanck
Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church,
Toledo, Ohio

Salem Lutheran Church is a critical ministry of empowerment and compassion in Toledo's North End neighborhood, which has the highest concentration of people experiencing economic poverty.

HOLY WEEK

Principle 7: Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.



Scripture

Matthew 21: 1-11

Principle

Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.

Reflection

The Passover holiday brought families and friends together to celebrate, much as holidays do in our time. We gather around tables to share meals and stories. But there are those in our communities who have nowhere to gather and no one to gather with.

My time with Chippewa Valley Street Ministry reminds me of this often. Many of our neighbors experiencing homelessness are shunned by family or choose to stay away so they're not seen as a problem. As I enter into relationships with these neighbors, they often share stories of their families — their parents, siblings and children — now distant.

For those who are housed after being “on the street” for a time, one of the most difficult things is to feel like part of a community. Many are still unable to connect with family but have left behind their friends from the street. This can be lonely, overwhelming at times. Being connected to others is vitally important for all of us.

Many entered Jerusalem with Jesus. Some were followers, some were pilgrims gathering for the holiday, and others were opponents. As we gather to celebrate, may we make room at our tables to include everyone, all beloved children of God.

Quotation

“We will all profit from a more diverse, inclusive society, understanding, accommodating, even celebrating our differences, while pulling together for the common good.” —Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Question

Are you a good listener? Have you found yourself changed by listening to someone else’s story?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you bring us together with grace, forgiveness and inclusion. Remind us to reach out to others in the same manner. Amen.

—Michelle Pride
Street Pastor, Chippewa Valley Street
Ministry, Eau Claire, Wis.
Racial Justice Task Force, ELCA
Northwest Synod of Wisconsin

Chippewa Valley Street Ministry seeks to meet the needs of those who are not able to find housing, clothing and other various needs to survive.

Scripture

John 12:1-11

Principle

Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.

Reflection

On the eve of Palm Sunday and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, mere days before his crucifixion on the cross and the tomb being found empty, Jesus gathers with a beloved community to share a meal after raising Lazarus from the dead. John tells us the meal was "for him," though whether he's referring to Jesus or Lazarus isn't clear. Regardless, this must have been a festive gathering for this group of core followers who had sat at Jesus' feet.

Yet Mary must have sensed that this gathering was different. Unlike many of the male disciples, perhaps she indeed believed what Jesus had been saying about his coming death and resurrection. Maybe she was just more intuitive than the others and understood that this was a particular moment. But to pour out what she had to offer — not just the expensive perfume to anoint Jesus but her heart and love and faith — was a tremendous gift.

Her act of devotion and selflessness, giving of herself to anoint Jesus for his final days, makes this community whole. This story would not be complete without her faith, and it helps us remember that we all bring something to our own beloved communities with the whole of who we are.

Quotation

"Ubuntu ... speaks of the very essence of being human. [We] say ... 'Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.'" —Desmond Tutu

Question

What particular gift do you bring to your beloved community to make it whole?

Prayer

Gracious and abundant God, thank you for the gifts you have given to each of us, for the unique and beloved ways you equip us to show up and serve one another in community. Help me to be generous and abundant, that I might pour myself out for my neighbor. Amen.

—Rev. Ed Kay
Senior Director, ELCA Discipleship
and Inclusive Communities

Scripture

John 12:20-36

Principle

Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.

Reflection

In the Bible, “Son of Man” initially meant the human creature, weak before the immense forces confronting it, unable to do anything alone. We all rely on each other. You and I, we are not the first or the most important.

As associate pastor of the Welcome Church, I’ve become acquainted with an unhoused man who has never seemed shy. Frequently, if I am handing out socks, he will ask why he can’t have two pairs.

Once I was talking to someone from a suburban church that works to alleviate hunger and homelessness in Philadelphia. This person told me that she and her group were going into the city, where, on a certain street corner, she was to meet a certain man who always helped the group unload and distribute their goods. This turned out to be my acquaintance from the Welcome Church. The next time I saw him, I asked if he had been helping this other church. He blushed, mumbling that he was grateful for everything he had received. I don’t know if I busted his tough-guy image, but this is what he had been doing.

Quotation

“Love is the greatest force in the universe.” —Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Question

How does accepting our weaknesses, instead of pretending to be in control, force us to rely on a source greater than ourselves or assist us in really meeting people?

Prayer

Dear God, help me to create the space to receive the gifts of every person. Help me to experience and know the wholeness of your body.

—Rev. Schaunel Steinnagel
Associate Pastor, The Welcome Church, Philadelphia, Pa.
Mission Developer, The Well, Philadelphia, Pa.

The Welcome Church is a “church without walls” sharing the good news of a loving and gracious God with all people (but especially in ministry with people living on the streets of Philadelphia). The Well is the community of support, founded by the Welcome Church, for women along the spectrum of homelessness.

Scripture

John 13:23-24

Principle

Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.

Reflection

Joseph came every Sunday to do his job, making the coffee. He was possibly the worst coffee maker you could find. He lived in a group home and walked over a mile to be with us every week. He was nonverbal and lived with physical and mental health concerns. Joseph found it difficult to carry the heavy coffeepots and filled them only halfway so he could carry them over to the serving area. When he was done with his job, the area was a mess, coffee grounds spilled all over the counter and floor.

Another volunteer, Brian, was critical of Joseph. He asked if he could make the coffee since Joseph did a lousy job. I asked Brian why he came every week. He told me that he looked forward to worship and enjoyed the good food. The work gave him purpose and responsibility and made him feel needed.

I thought for a moment and asked why he thought Joseph came every week, suggesting it was for the same reasons: Joseph felt needed and had a job he took pride in doing. Without Joseph, I explained, Brian would not have his new job, filling the coffeepots the rest of the way and cleaning up the mess Joseph had left behind. Everyone brings something to the community,

and the community wouldn't be the same without them.

Quotation

“The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.” —Alcoholics Anonymous

Question

Who is missing in your community?

Prayer

Gracious God, help us to remember that we are your beloved, and so are those people we are challenged to love. Let us always remember that all are welcome in your house. Amen.

**—Rev. Tom Scornavacchi
Pastor, Mission Developer, Common
Ground Recovery Community,
Wyomissing, Pa.**

Common Ground Recovery Community, in ministry with people living on the margins, believes that everyone has something to offer.

Scripture

John 13:14

Principle

Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.

Reflection

Darren spent most nights sleeping under the train station bridge. The severe neuropathy he suffered in his lower legs made his feet so numb that, on one particularly cold winter night, he didn't realize that frostbite had set in. To save his life, a doctor had to amputate three of Darren's toes. I visited Darren in the hospital weeks before Easter and shared news about our upcoming services, including our foot-washing in the park on Maundy Thursday.

He said that, with the amputation, he was too ashamed to show anyone his feet ever again. I invited him just to show up, assuring him he did not have to bare his feet. Darren did show up and listened to the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. Something happened, because when the invitation came for the foot-washing, Darren was the first to volunteer. I washed his feet, gently pouring water over the raw yet healing skin where his toes had once been, then Darren took the basin and towel from me, put on his socks and one open shoe, and began washing my feet and the feet of others in our circle in the park. Years later, Darren would die from the disease that had haunted him under the bridge; but on that night, Darren and all who were with him felt the healing power of Jesus.

Quotation

"Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive." —His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV

Question

When was the last time you made yourself vulnerable enough to receive the help of another?

Prayer

God of all grace and compassion, break open our hearts, that we might have the courage to love and be loved.

—Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little
Pastor, The Welcome Church,
Philadelphia, Pa.

The Welcome Church is a "church without walls" sharing the good news of a loving and gracious God with all people (but especially in ministry with people living on the streets of Philadelphia).

Scripture

John 18:1-19:42

Principle

Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.

Reflection

No one person or culture can claim a monopoly on God's revelation; the view of one can enhance the other, and vice versa. Therefore, we need each other to grow and be whole.

This lesson became real to me through an experience in California. I had been preparing a primarily white congregation to welcome Latiné people into the church. At the same time, I had been engaging with Latiné families to learn about the Lutheran church and its commitment to serve the neighbor. After about a year of building relationships, the time had come to invite our Latiné neighbors for a Sunday worship service.

It was a festive occasion with children everywhere, lots of music and a liturgy in both English and Spanish. Evaluating the experience, several Latiné leaders said: "All is good, except there is no cross on the altar." I was surprised: behind the altar, from ceiling to floor, hung a large tapestry in the shape of a cross. They said, "But we miss the cross with Jesus on it." Oh, you mean a crucifix, I said. They all agreed.

Jesus on the cross, bleeding, dying, in pain, yet loving us all to the end. People shared how important it is that Christ understands what injustice is

like, what life is like when people live in fear, bullied, dehumanized, always at risk yet clinging to hope, with a faith in a better tomorrow. Nobody denied the Easter side of the story, but their reality connected more with Jesus' experience on Good Friday.

The Anglo side of the congregation took time to learn from the Lenten and life journey of the immigrants, and Lutheran theology. So, I gathered Latiné and Anglo leaders, and we drove across the border into Mexico to find a crucifix for our church.

A cross with Jesus on it. A lesson learned, two cultures teaching each other, needing each other to be whole.

Quotation

"Unless there is Good Friday in your life, there can be no Easter Sunday."

—Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

Question

In my larger, diverse community, who can deepen my understanding of what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus mean for us all?

Prayer

God of all nations, increase in us the desire to listen to and learn with people of many cultures and various spiritual journeys, that all may grow in our understanding of Christ's sacrificial work on behalf of all people and creation. Amen.

—Rev. Ruben Duran
Retired Pastor

Former Senior Director, ELCA
Multiethnic Ministries

Scripture

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it”. 1 Corinthians 12:21–22, 27.

Principle

Everyone has something to offer, and we need every person if we are to be whole.

Reflection

“Shhh!!” I would tell the other kids as I passed out maracas, jingle bells and those fake, plastic tambourines.

When I was a kid (a pastor’s kid, I should add), it was my job to drag a bin of instruments around before the Easter Vigil service and hand them out to the other kids. But the sanctuary was dark, Jesus was dead, and we were supposed to enter in silence. Have you ever tried handing out tambourines in silence? Of course, the power went to my head and I felt as if I were boss of all the other kids, so I would scold them if they made any noise.

The service would start quietly, but by the end, Jesus had risen and it was time for the great commotion. If you had an instrument (expertly distributed at the start of the service), you would oblige, and even if you didn’t, you could take out your keys and shake them. No keys? You could clap your hands, wave them in the air and shout. Everyone has something to offer the risen Christ,

and we need everyone to be whole. The bigger, the better. Jesus is risen!

Quotation

“A single thread in a tapestry / Though its color brightly shines / Can never see its purpose / In the pattern of the grand design.” —Brian Stokes Mitchell, “Through Heaven’s Eyes” from *The Prince of Egypt*.

Question

Is there a time when you were made to feel important or special? Think about your community. How are the members of your community vital and important?

Prayer

God, thank you for the gift of a community all around us where each individual reflects a different aspect of you and your greatness. Help us to include everyone so that we can more accurately represent your fullness. Amen.

—Rebeca Malmgren
ELCA Coordinator of
Economic Diversity
Coordinator, ELCA Homeless
and Justice Network

EASTER SUNDAY

Principle 8: We see lives transformed and are transformed ourselves.



Scripture

Matthew 28:1-10

Principle

We see lives transformed and are transformed ourselves.

Reflection

Resurrection wasn't first proclaimed from a pulpit. It wasn't preached by the powerful or published by the priests. It was whispered by women, breathless and trembling, who had stood at the foot of the cross when others ran. It was preached by two women whose names and testimonies would have been dismissed by the systems around them. Yet God chose them — not as a footnote but as a headline.

This is no accident. It's gospel.

At the Dwelling, we see this divine pattern alive and well. The people our world pushes to the margins — people who are unhoused, living with addiction or impacted by the criminal justice system — are often the first to proclaim new life. Not with perfect words but with lives that refuse to stay buried.

They've survived systems designed to break them. They've wept in the dark and still shown up to serve the meal. They've lost everything and still made room for someone else.

When we say everyone has something to offer, we mean this: Resurrection needs every voice. Wholeness demands every witness. That's why their voices are sacred. That's why they get to preach it: because resurrection should

always be proclaimed first by those who know what death tastes like.

If we want to hear the good news in its truest form, we must turn our ears to the margins. That's where God spoke first — and where God is still speaking.

Quotation

"Life cannot ultimately be conquered by death. ... Such is the glad surprise. This is what Easter means in the experience of the human race."

—Howard Thurman, "The Glad Surprise," from *Meditations of the Heart*

Question

When have you witnessed resurrection in someone the world tried to forget?

Prayer

God of trembling joy and broken chains, thank you for choosing the margins to preach your power. Teach us to listen, to believe and to follow those who've lived resurrection. Let their witness make us whole. Amen.

—Deacon Brooke De Jong
Deacon for Advocacy, Education, and
Development, The Dwelling

The Dwelling is a community where the lines between guest and host, neighbor and stranger, housed and unhoused are blurred by God's grace. In worship and at the table, in showers and shelter, in stories and song, we learn again and again that we belong to one another.

We are deeply thankful for the wonderful contributions to this devotional by artist Jibril Bey.

Bey draws inspiration from his hometown of Philadelphia, Pa., and captures the essence of those living in the area. His art has been displayed in galleries throughout Pennsylvania and Maryland.

Bey graduated from the Hussian School of Art in Philadelphia in 1984. He was able to obtain two notable internships during his time at college. Later, he moved from student to teacher and taught folks of all ages and abilities.

Against many odds and barriers, including homelessness and mental health issues, Bey continues his time in the studio creating artwork as an extension of his thoughts and feelings. It's been said that he creates "therapeutic art," not art therapy. His artwork encompasses hope, happiness and determination.

"My artwork has reached the spiritual level as an extension of myself," Bey said. "I want to share that with those around me as a reminder to continue your path as the purpose will be revealed in time."



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