

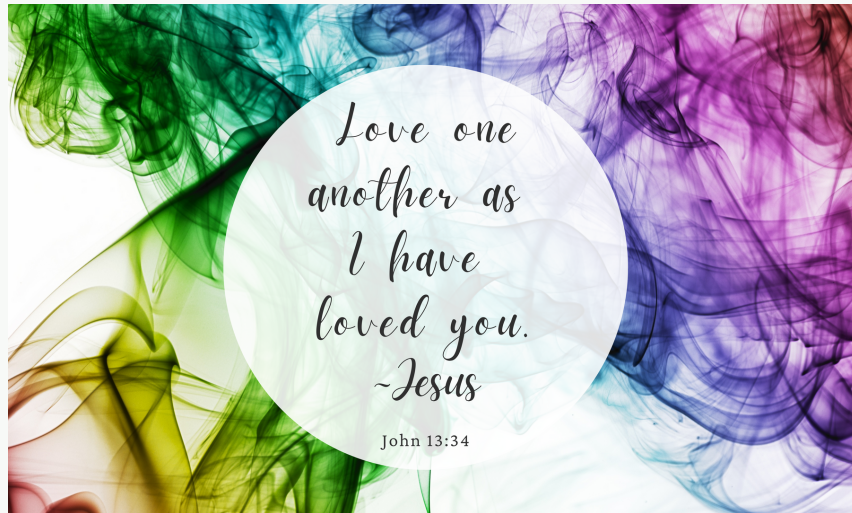
A Journey of Reflection *Welcoming is...*



A Lenten Devotional



A Word of Welcome



Welcome. We are so glad you are here. Here is where you find God speaking to you. God speaks in love, grace, mercy, compassion and forgiveness. God speaks in welcome; welcome to those who are familiar and those who are the stranger in our midst; welcome to the sinner, the broken and those in need of healing; welcome to the joyful, the hopeful and the faithful; welcome to the young and old; the weary and the resilient. You are all these things and you are welcome.

We hope this devotional is a gift that serves you well on your Lenten journey. We pray that this devotional affords you time to pause, to be still and to listen to how God is speaking in your life. We pray this devotional opens your heart, your thoughts and your hands in new ways to be a welcoming presence in the lives of others. Your own stories of welcome and of being welcomed matter in this community of faith! We pray you experience the unconditional love of Christ through Lent and always.



All Are Welcome

The theme hymn for this Lenten devotional is *All Are Welcome*, written by Marty Haugen. The words capture the spirit of this project and of First Lutheran Church. Every Saturday during Lent we will reflect on one of the verses, share reflections from members of the congregation and focus on what it means that we are called to love our neighbors. *(Click the audio button on the bottom of the page to listen to the words of the hymn being sung.)*

Let us build a house where love can dwell, and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive, built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace. Here the love of Christ shall end divisions; All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak and words are strong and true, where all God's children dare to seek, to dream God's reign anew, here the cross shall stand as witness, and a symbol of God's grace. Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus; All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine and wheat, a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet, Here the love of God, through Jesus Is revealed in time and space. As we share in Christ the feast that frees us; All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known. Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face; let us bring an end to fear and danger: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured, taught and claimed, as words within the Word. Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace, let this house proclaim from floor to rafter, All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Songwriters: Paul Tate, Marty Haugen. For non-commercial use only. ELW 641



A Word About This Devotional

This devotional is designed to explore our shared experience of welcoming and being welcomed. Sunday meditations will focus on what it means that we are all created in God's image. Throughout each week, you will learn how members of First Lutheran Church responded to this question and what it means for them. Daily stories of welcoming and being welcomed will be accompanied by Scripture, reflection questions and activities you can do with family members or friends. Saturday devotions will be based on reflections on the hymn, *All Are Welcome*, written by Marty Haugen.

We hope these daily devotionals deepen your faith in a loving God who has created all and welcomes all. We pray that through this deepening of faith the Holy Spirit stirs up in you a desire to reach out, invite, welcome and encourage those seeking a relationship with Christ. As our Welcome Statement reminds us, we seek to create a place where all are welcome, where all are safe, accepted and can be their authentic selves. Let us all be courageously vulnerable in our relationships with others.

The Welcome Statement of First Lutheran Church

Each person is a unique creation of God and, through grace, is a child of God. The people of First Lutheran Church welcome all because God welcomes all, without regard for race or culture, sexual orientation, gender identity or relationship status, physical or mental challenges, imprisonment, addictions, socio-economic circumstances, or anything else that too often divides us. First Lutheran Church is a spiritual community that celebrates the gifts of God that can empower us to engage in the struggles of life, to care for each other, and to serve Christ where we work and live. Our unity is in Christ.



Wednesday, February 22

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6: 16-17

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face."

Reflection

We worship a God of promises. Throughout the gospel readings we are often reminded by the authors that what Jesus was doing in his ministry was to fulfill the words of the prophets. As Christians, we are called upon to be sincere in our faith and to demonstrate integrity between what we profess and what we do. Thus, we refrain from duplicity, manipulation of others and hypocrisy. As the body of Christ, when we welcome others we do so in love, sincerity and respect ensuring that we receive others into our lives, homes and places of worship just as they are - just as God received us.

Welcome Stories

In 2007, our son, Nathan passed away of complications from the flu. In 2010, Greg and I decided to become foster parents who were willing to adopt. Our church family supported us from the lowest of our lows, to the happiness of adopting our two amazing boys, Dakota and Stephen. Members of our congregation even came to the adoption ceremonies and the Couples in Christ group surprised us with a surprise shower during the Christmas holiday.

~Kristi Fisher (51 yrs with First Lutheran)

About 12 years ago I was very depressed after a breakup of a 20-year relationship. I had quit attending church about 30 years ago. I'm not sure why other than I was raised Lutheran and always thought the church building at First Lutheran was interesting. I looked up the phone number and Paster Aaron Erdley answered. I kind of stumbled around not knowing exactly what to say, but gave him a background of my life and



Wednesday, February 22 (cont)

Ash Wednesday

sexual orientation. I had been told several times I was going to hell so why bother going to church. However, in my heart I never felt that way. He invited me to come and speak to him. I really feel he saved my life at that point and most everyone there made me feel welcome too. I became a member of First Lutheran Church.

~Verdell Bohling (11 yrs with First Lutheran)

My first week alone with the girls at First was when Carin was very pregnant with Tate. So, I brought the girls to church. We had not had a church home for a while and being raised Catholic I was taught that I was to worship regularly. I thought I would be judged and not welcomed, but I was embraced by our church. I can never repay that.

~Jim Sandman (15 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Divine Spirit meet us in our grief and sorrow with the love and compassion of a healing presence. Make yourself known to us in our pain and reveal for us a path out of darkness. A path that leads to hope. A path that leads us to you. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

There are times in our lives where loss and heartache might be overwhelming. The love and support others can provide makes the unbearable bearable.

- How have others supported you through a difficult time in your life?
- Do you need the support of others now? Who can you turn to? Who is someone you can trust?

On a piece of paper draw a circle in the middle of the page. Around that circle write names of people you can reach out to for support. Under their name indicate how they may support you or why they are important to you. At the top of the page write, "Circle of Support."



Thursday, February 23

Mark 10: 13 – 16

People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Reflection

I like to think we are all children at heart. We all have a playful and curious nature, even if the years have buried it deep within us. We see it anytime we allow ourselves to express the joy that we feel in our hearts. Jesus recognized this child like nature in those like Thomas who needed to see in order to believe, in Peter who was determined to walk on water and in us when we struggle with the unanswered questions of our life. Jesus welcomes us as a loving parent would welcome their own child, always making time for them, always willing to respond to their needs and reminding them that they are part of the family of God.

Welcome Stories

First Lutheran was the first and only church I visited after relocating to Lincoln. The reverence and dignity of the liturgical service and the quality of sacred music was exactly what I had hoped for. Having been involved in all areas of small community church worship, primarily as organist, I expected an impersonal welcome from a larger church. Joining small group endeavors - prison outreach, Bible study, meal-serving - was the best way for me to meet others. The Bible study group warmly welcomed me even though I was an "out-sider". However, the most rewarding welcome came from our then organist, Bonita, who generously welcomed me to play our beautiful pipe organ giving me immeasurable personal spiritual fulfillment. First Lutheran is very blessed to have a fantastic group of musicians who contribute greatly to our spiritual life.

~Sonia Hixson (8 yrs with First Lutheran)



Thursday, February 23 (cont)

The transition from a farm and small-town high school to Nebraska Wesleyan University was exciting, but felt daunting. What would classes be like? How long before I made friends? Would I fit in? The only person I knew when I arrived on campus was my roommate and I didn't know her that well. I've typically been comfortable meeting new people and finding connections. There were several new student orientation events to welcome students and provide opportunities to meet others on campus. I participated in those activities, mindful I wanted to make others feel welcome as much as I wanted to be accepted. However, it was joining a sorority that cemented my sense of belonging. The upper class women genuinely reached out to help me and other new members feel a part of the sorority. Simple things like saying, "hi", when they saw you on campus, inviting you to join them on study breaks to Goodrich Dairy or late-night talks in the hallways. I developed lasting friendship that remain today. Wesleyan was a very welcoming community. Professors were approachable and contributed to the feeling it was a good fit for me. Being a small campus, it wasn't as big an adjustment as I expected. My group of friends extended beyond my sorority, consisting of students and adults across campus. This positive atmosphere contributed to a wonderful college experience. As I think back on this it reinforces my awareness of how important it is to reach out and welcome others.

~Tera Beermann (25+ yrs with First Lutheran)

I have worked hard to welcome Frank's mom. When the school offered the Backpack program, we asked her if she would find this helpful. She said, "Yes", and we have given her the food we receive. In addition, we have invited her to Frank's swimming lessons, the park to play and out to lunch. She doesn't always show even if she says she's going to come. But, I never stop trying. For example, she was supposed to come to the daytime New Year's Eve party at church. She was two hours late and arrived at the church after everyone had left, but when she called, we met her at a park so she could play with Frank. I know Frank really appreciates seeing her and I know Johannah really appreciates it, too. As a result, we have a pleasant relationship and can work together to help Frank. I am happy things are working out, but the reality of making it work can be very frustrating at times.

~Tracy Way (50 yrs with First Lutheran)



Thursday, February 23 (cont)

Prayer

Heavenly Host, your resounding song fills our hearts as we sing your praises and glorify your name in music and song. Sing to our hearts reminding us that you are always calling our name, calling us to be with you and to experience the everlasting joy of being welcomed into your arms. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- What is something you did as a child that brought you joy? Share this with a young person and invite them to spend time with you.
- How has Jesus been a source of joy in your life?

Pick a sunny day and go for a walk with a young person. Together, pick out places where you see God's presence. Be creative and imaginative. Use all of your senses and see who can come up with the most original, funny, creative or joyful response.



Friday, February 24

Luke 5: 18 – 39

Some men took a man who was not able to move his body to Jesus. He was carried on a bed. They looked for a way to take the man into the house where Jesus was. But they could not find a way to take him in because of so many people. They made a hole in the roof over where Jesus stood. Then they let the bed with the sick man on it down before Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Reflection

Imagine the reaction of the homeowner as men began to pull apart the roof of his home to lower a man into the room below where Jesus was standing. There is no mention whether this was covered by insurance, but rather, only the way in which Jesus received these men and their friend. Moved by their love for their friend and their faith in Jesus' healing, their friend was healed of the sin of affliction that had left him bedridden. He was freed because his friends believed.

Welcome Stories

Following my years of full-time ministry and retiring, I received a phone call asking that I be a transitional minister for the Falun/Salemsborg Lutheran Parish in Lindsborg, Kansas. The previous pastor had served there for seventeen years and was a friend of mine. Pastor Ethan had a very strong and fruitful ministry in this parish which caused me to be a bit hesitant as to whether I could serve them well. Upon arrival and meeting with the Church Council I experienced a very warm and welcoming feeling. After prayer and discernment, I accepted their invitation to serve the congregations. From the first Sunday to my final service a year later, the people looked to me for leadership and spiritual support. Judy and I were included in the activities of the church and social get-togethers. We were invited into their homes and lives. They brought trailers and people to help us move and prepared a dinner for all the movers when we arrived. They were quick to be sure that everything was in working order at the house and responded to any needs that we might have during the time we were there. They delivered a freezer to the garage and filled it with meat. After only a year there they loaded us up again and



Friday, February 24 (cont)

moved us to Lincoln. Since then, we have received numerous cards, calls and financial gifts after I suffered my stroke. We made many friends there who will always be a part of our life. We give thanks for the opportunity to be with them!

~Bill and Judy Petersen (2 years with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Wonderful Healer, how do you know what it is we need? Your ways are mysterious to us in so many ways but you know what we need in the moment. You surround us with your loving presence through those that come into our lives. In their love and support we experience the love and support that you have for us. Thank you, Lord, for loving us into being and being the love that we need. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activities

- How has the love of others made a difference in your life?
- When have you experienced God's healing presence in your life?

Reread the story of the man being lowered on a mat and being healed. Draw a picture, together or individually, of the man being lowered by his friends through the roof to where Jesus stood. You can choose to be historical, something appropriate for the time and place or be outrageous and let your imagination run wild – maybe lowering the man with the help of a crane, perhaps using a laser to cut open the roof and then parachuting in or maybe using a drone to accomplish the task. No matter what kind of creative entry you design, what healing message will it help you remember?



Saturday, February 25

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Composed by Marty Haugen (b. 1950), the lyrics of the hymn begin with, "*Let us build a house, where love can dwell.*" An image of the church comes readily to mind. The church at its best is a place where love for every person lives. The hymn ends by repeating the words, "*All Are Welcome,*" a resounding message to a world searching for connection with God and with one another.

Haugen has composed a number of liturgical settings for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He is a composer-in-residence at Mayflower Community Congregational Church in Minneapolis and continues to compose and travel to speak and teach at worship events around the world.

Love Our Neighbor Reflection

What more comforting words could be heard to offer hope for all whose lives have seen insurmountable problems with addiction, illness, poverty and discrimination. With prayer and faith these obstacles will be made low, days will be filled with hope and the future will be smooth and paths straight. The addict freed from his chains, the ill stand and be healthy, the poor rich in their family, friends with needs met, those discriminated against be made welcome, loved and not judged for who or what they are, as we wait for the coming of our Lord.

~Verdell Bohling (11 years with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Amazing Grace, you pour out upon us your abundant love and call us to go and do likewise. Can there be any gift greater than telling a person lost in sin, disconnected from community, or separated from your love that they belong, they matter, and they have found a home that welcomes them? Help us to live into the fullest meaning and potential of being the welcome place. Amen.



Saturday, February 25 (cont)

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Reflection Questions/Activity

- When is that last time you spoke to your neighbors? How well do you know them?
- How might you share a warm greeting, a kind word, or friendly smile the next time you see them?

Consider baking a batch of brownies, a dozen cookies or purchasing an inexpensive candle for your neighbor. Drop off your gift with a friendly note, wishing them well, letting them know you are glad they are your neighbor, inviting them to church or simply saying, "Hi."



Sunday, February 26

Image of God Scripture: Exodus 3: 13 - 15

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you"'

Reflection

With two words God speaks into the world as the great "I Am". The Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I am all that has ever been and all that will ever be. I am the Father of your ancestors, of your offspring and every generation that follows.

Image of God Reflection

Each of us contains part of the Divine image. When we speak highly of another person, it is a way of honoring a part of the Divine image within that person that we noticed. We may remember how another person treated us well, and cared for us in spite of our behavior, or in some way provided us with a sense of being included, supported, and loved. This, in turn, becomes a model for us of the Divine image to carry forward and share with another person. It can be difficult to see the image of the Divine in every person, but we must trust that God sees it within those persons. There are infinite possibilities in living out the Divine image.

~Carol Olson (3 yrs with First Lutheran)

We do not know what the face of God looks like; there is nobody alive that has seen the "physical image" of God directly. However, we have all seen our neighbors, our families, and others we meet around us all of the time, anywhere in the world. No matter the color of their or our skin, rich or impoverished, carrying the presence of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, they are there to help us through each day, every day - whether we notice them or not. God's presence is always with us - the three in one God.

~ Connie & Jim Kissling (16 yrs with First Lutheran)



Sunday, February 26 (cont)

Prayer

Honor, respect, dignity – these are foundational qualities to any relationship. They are often thought of as the rights of every person. We honor God when we extend these gifts to one another, when we pause, think before speaking and allow our love of God to supersede our anger toward our neighbor. May the image of God be revealed in the way we treat one another. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- When you see the image of God what comes to mind for you?
- Do you see the white-haired man on the mountain top?
- Do you see the kids playing tag on a summer's day, laughing and giggling?
- Do you see the couple sitting quietly on the park bench holding hands?

Take some time this week to look for the image of God in your life. Expect the unexpected as you seek out God's presence in unique and unusual places.



Week 1: February 27-March 3

Luke 2: 16 - 20

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Reflection

Mary seems to me to be the epitome of a gracious host. Having recently given birth, still recovering and bonding with her newborn son, she is thrust into the center of attention as shepherds and perhaps others came to see the Christ Child. Her response to these unannounced visitors was to treasure all these experiences in her heart. Being present in the moment helps us to seize the opportunity to be welcoming.

Welcome Stories

The Sunday afternoon drive from my family's farm southwest of Stanton, Iowa, to our grandparents' farm east of Essex always seemed like a tedious trek to the four kids who were elbowing each another in the back seat of our 1959 Chevy Impala. We challenged each other to competitions that involved spotting tractors, farm animals or landmarks to make the 15 mile drive more tolerable. We kids, separated in age by anywhere from 2 to 9 years, looked forward to homemade sugar cookies, Kool Aid poured from a glass pitcher, and games like Rook, Old Maid and Hi-Q. Grandpa and Grandma Patterson's house had a screened-in front porch, a front yard filled with pine cones, a pump organ in our mom's old bedroom and grassy spaces where kids could play while the grown-ups talked. But, more than all of this, etched into my memory is the image of the particular way my grandmother welcomed us. Clearly, she was waiting for our car to pull into the short driveway because she appeared at the screen door immediately to make sure that it was flung as far open as it could go. Grandma always seemed to wear a flowered dress with an apron tied at her waist. She was a kind and gentle person who



Week 1: February 27-March 3 (cont)

loved children. Her wiry gray hair framed a face that nearly always had a smile. She adored each of her grandchildren in the gentle, matter of fact, not-gushy way that love shows up in people with Swedish roots. The childhood welcome story I remember most, a snapshot embedded with sound that I can bring to life at any time, is my Grandma Patterson's expression of pure delight and the lilt of her voice when we arrived at her door. For me, it was as simple as this: When she saw me, with arms wide, my beaming Grandma excitedly called my name, "*Barbara!*" I can hear it to this day. It was more than enough to last me for a lifetime. No one could convince me that God's welcome, whether now or for eternity, is anything less.

~Barbara Johnson Frank (50 yrs with First Lutheran)

Adult Choir was immediately welcoming for me. I had sung in church choirs since I was 7 years old. I had been attending and singing in a choir in another congregation soon after I arrived in Lincoln. The opportunity to sing in a mass choir for a synod gathering was offered. I went and First's music minister, Bonita Johnsen, directed. She personally was welcoming and open in that role. As I found a home at First, I always had a "family" to sit with each Sunday.

~Susan Myren (36 yrs with First Lutheran)

Soon after Linda and I moved back to Lincoln so that I could begin graduate school at the University of Nebraska (late 1970s), Linda's sister-in-law, Janie, called me to "*Welcome me to the family*". Janie and I had never met, she only knew me by name only, yet she went out of her way to extend a welcome to me. While I was very appreciate of her gesture, I was also somewhat taken aback because I already had a family, my own, which was located primarily in and around Lincoln at that time. Yet, over the years, I've come to appreciate what Janie did because she was being welcoming to someone she did not know, but whom she trusted as one who could and would be a new valued member of her existing family simply because of my relationship with her sister-in-law.

~Les Carlson (21 yrs with First Lutheran)



Week 1: February 27-March 3 (cont)

When I first moved to Lincoln, I had just gone through a painful divorce. My family lived far from Lincoln and the only people I knew were those I worked with. My initial visit to First Lutheran Church was a lonely one. I didn't know anyone and I sat alone among many strangers. I'm sure many people greeted me that day, but it was the familiar liturgy and hymns that truly welcomed me. The choir's anthem welcomed me. It was the music that put its arms around me and said, *"Welcome home."* The very next week, as I sat and sang with the choir, I knew I was home.

~Carla Joy Osberg (20 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Loving Spirit, Your "welcome" is music to our ears. A tune we never grow tired of hearing. A song that says to us, *"You are home and you belong."* May we never stop singing this song into the lives of others and may we always remember how we felt when we heard this song sung to us. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activities

- Besides your own home, was there or is there a place that feels like home for you? What is it about that space that contributes to these feelings?
- How might you help others feel at home when they spend time with you?

Invite someone to your home or invite them to join you in a place that gives you the feeling of home. Spend time with this person, be present to them, and let them know how much they mean to you.



Saturday, March 4

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Hymn 641 - Verse 1

Let us build a house, where love can dwell, and all can safely live. A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace. Here the love of Christ shall end divisions; all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

(Click the audio play button on the bottom of the page to listen to the first verse of the hymn.)

Reflection

Historically, it was not uncommon in our country for communities, families and neighbors to assist one another in building homes, raising barns and bringing in the harvest. These communal activities connected the community in a deep and loving way - each person looking out for the welfare and well-being of the others. A place where hearts were connected, joy was shared and forgiveness was granted.

Love Our Neighbor Reflection

I think when we encounter someone, we should strive to treat them with respect and dignity and try to see and accept them for who they are, not who we would like them to be.

~David Pitts (13 yrs with First Lutheran)

Loving my neighbor is complicated. It's messy. It means showing up when they are hurting and it's inconvenient. It makes me angry. It makes me sad. It means accepting help when I need it and I don't want to. But it's also beautiful and holy. There is something absolutely truly lovely about seeing my sweet Kaitlyn being loved and nurtured and cared for by the people of First Lutheran. Watching her being coached to be an usher at this current stage of her faith formation by people who are patient, kind, loving, tender (but also sometimes stern) is what community is all about. I get emotional just thinking about it. There is a picture I have from when we first joined First Lutheran about 6 years ago. Kaitlyn was three and she loved Vicar Kelsey. She



Saturday, March 4 (cont)

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

wanted to come to church just to see her. At the Easter egg hunt that year we got a picture with the two of them, her beloved Vicar Kelsey and Princess Kate (as Kelsey called her). Kaitlyn has all her eggs and is so proud of herself. She just couldn't wait to show them to her. In that moment, Vicar Kelsey was a best loving neighbor to my sweet girl. I've had the opportunity to be a neighbor in First Lutheran in various ways - from bringing casseroles to people who have had surgery, to providing food to people who just got out of prison (like my brother had been at one point- hoping that someone in Pennsylvania would do the same for him), singing in church, leading conversations about women in the church, leading a call committee search for an Associate Pastor and being a greeter and teaching FaithTrek. Being a neighbor means to me - doing what needs to be done, in the community I'm in, when it needs it, and it matches my gifts.

~Dawn Brock (7 yrs with First Lutheran)

We are to help our neighbors. That means anyone who is in need, not just those who are physically living around us, in their times of weakness or need. They might come to us as a stranger, they might be on the other side of the world in a moment of need. We can help in some way possible and we do this because this is how we show our love for Christ. We love and care for our neighbors because Jesus loves and care for us freely - no strings attached.

~Connie & Jim Kissling (16 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Lord, do we see you as a neighbor? Do we take time to greet you throughout our busy day? When was the last time we invited you into our home? Would we take time to prepare a meal for you, shovel your walkway or offer a helping hand when needed? Lord, help us to see you in our neighbors and by loving our neighbor love you as well. Amen.



Saturday, March 4 (cont)

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Reflection Questions/Activity

- How do you think you are seen by your neighbors?
- Does it mirror how you see yourself?
- What small steps might you take to ensure others see you as you see yourself?

In the coming months, write a note to one of your neighbors, perhaps around a particular holiday or simply just because. In the note, introduce yourself if that seems appropriate, or thank them for something they have done for you or for being your neighbor. Invite them to join you at church. Perhaps you can simply wish them a good holiday if your note coincides with a holiday. Simply let them know you were thinking of them and keeping them in your prayers.



Sunday, March 5

Image of God Scripture: Matthew 25: 37 - 46

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Reflection

God comes to us in our struggles, in our desperate moments, and when we simply cannot fight any longer God comes to us in abundance, doing what God does best. God is an image of comfort, compassion and caring coming to us in the same way that a mother tends to the needs of her child. It is a familiar image to each of us who has ever experienced the nurturing touch, the supportive voice and the unconditional love of a devoted parent.

Image of God Reflection

Makayla fought many, many battles in her almost 12 years of life. She wasn't supposed to survive the first week of her life. With the help of feeding tubes and several months in a neonatal intensive care unit she proved early on she was a fighter. When influenza came calling a few years later, because of her ongoing compromised immune system, the doctors pronounced once again things didn't look good. Yet, once again, Makayla



Sunday, March 5 (cont)

proved her life's work wasn't done. Recently, just inside of a month of her 12th birthday, death came calling once again. Only this time, Makayla ran out of fight. Or, maybe, her work here was done? You see, despite her health issues and her cognitive deficiencies, Makayla was a light in the darkness. She took special care of all parts of the world around her. She paid special attention to all creatures great and small. From the insects she discovered crawling around in her yard, to the birds that sang to her from the trees to her favorite butterflies, Makayla was always looking for a way to help make life easier for all things around her, even as she toiled to make her way through her own. When asked what she wanted for her birthday dinner her pick was her brother's favorite, not hers. When jobs were passed out at home, Makayla's job was to serve as the official hugger. Her tasks were to make sure everyone else was taken care of. Makayla's life surely wasn't long enough. At the same time, despite all of her trials and tribulations, she made the most of her time on this earth. And now she gets to rest easy after a life well lived. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

~Sherri & Gene Cotter (27 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Loving Spirit, strengthen us in the darkness of this life. Come to us as a mother responds to the voice of her child. Hear us when we turn to you in prayer. Stand beside us in our suffering and hear our voice of anguish when the pain of life is simply too deep to bear. Hear our voice as we express our joys and sorrows and make your presence known to us. Help us to live in faith and surround us with the love of your creation. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- How do you understand what it means to be perfectly made in Christ and still acknowledge your shortcomings and imperfections?
- In what ways do you see beauty in your imperfections?
- How might you see God working through these imperfections and shortcomings to bring you into a closer relationship with God?



Sunday, March 5 (cont)

Spend some time this month in nature. Take a walk in the woods, around a lake or in the park. Notice the parts of God's creation that strike you as beautiful and wonderfully made. Then notice those things that may not be perfectly made but reflect God's image. Admire the imperfections and recognize the beauty in all things God has created. How might you see these aspects of nature in a new way, through a new lens that reminds you of God's beauty in all things?



Week 2: March 6-10

Matthew 14: 15-19

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

Reflection

Jesus does not simply understand our spiritual needs, but recognizes and empathizes with our human needs. Jesus is a nurturer of the mind, body and spirit. He reminds his disciples that their calling is one of intentional engagement with others, meeting them where they are seeking to serve them in love and compassion. When we gather around the dinner table, we pray that the Spirit of God will be made known to us as we welcome one another.

Welcome Story

The summer before my 9th grade year, just starting high school, we moved to a new town. I was pretty nervous. Our next door neighbor was a retired teacher. She invited two girls my age to come to her house for a “tea” to meet me. They were excited about starting high school and sharing that experience with me. My anxiety left me and I looked forward to the experience.

~Joan Carlson (46 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Nurturing God, you set a banquet table of abundant grace before us and invite us to partake. May we approach you with a hunger that only you can satisfy. May we walk from your table satisfied in the salvation of the Lord, extending this invitation to others. Amen.



Week 2: March 6-10 (cont)

Reflection Questions/Activities

- When we welcome one another we feed the soul and our shared need for connection. What might you do this week to feed someone physically, emotionally, spiritually?
- What small step might you take this week to feed and nurture yourself?

Take time this week to reflect on the ways God has fed you. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and speak to God in prayer about the ways God has blessed you. Give thanks that God has provided for you and have faith that God is providing for you right now. Take time to breathe in the Spirit of the Lord.



Saturday, March 11

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Hymn 641 - Verse 2

Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true. Where all God's children dare to seek to dream God's reign anew. Here the cross shall stand as witness and symbol of God's grace. Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus; all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

(Click the audio play button on the bottom of the page to listen to the second verse of the hymn.)

Reflection

On August 28, 1963, millions witnessed one man share his dream for America. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, looking out over a sea of diversity and proclaimed a gospel truth - a vision of a unified country in which race, creed, color of skin were no longer dividing factors, but a unifying force. The rock of faith that this dream was built upon still stands in Christ Jesus, but the grace by which Jesus loves each of us has yet to find its way into every person's heart and has yet to be extended to one another. One day perhaps the love of Christ will end all divisions.

Love of Neighbor Reflection

We need to live in peace with all humankind.

~Kent Hardel (5 yrs with First Lutheran)

Donate money and items, but mostly ourselves to those who are struggling.

~Laura Gaulty (27 yrs with First Lutheran)

I think it means to love your neighbor in the good times when it's easy, but also to remember compassion for them even in the times when you might not be very fond of them.

~Shelby Riedman (Granddaughter of Lee & Kay Rockwell)



Saturday, March 11 (cont)

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Prayer

Pour out upon us, Heavenly Spirit, a love that ends all divisions, a unifying love that stops us from expressing hate, division and divisiveness, and a love that transforms our hearts to reflect the love that you have for all of your creation. How loving you are to us and how loving we can be to one another if we trust in the God who gives love and life to all! Let us be united in making this dream a reality. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- What is the dream you hold for the world around you?
- How might you lean into the love of God to bring your dream into reality?
- How might Jesus be calling you to extend love into the life of another?

Who are the young people in your life? Think about your own children, your nieces, nephews, cousins and neighbors. What is something special you can do for one of them to reinforce God's love in their life? Consider writing them a note, giving a special treat or simply taking time to ask them about their day and telling them how you appreciate them just for being themselves.



Sunday, March 12

Image of God Scripture: John 10: 11; 14-15

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Reflection

There is an intimacy to this passage revealing a level of familiarity between the shepherd and the sheep that can only result from spending hours upon hours with one another. The trusting bond of dependence that the sheep have for the shepherd comes from the sacrifices the shepherd makes on behalf of the sheep.

Image of God Reflection

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! (Psalm 133, Verse 1). As in Genesis 1:26-27, God does not discriminate by indicating which race the original humans were. The creation story makes it clear that all are welcome regardless of race, sex, sexual orientation, disability or any other circumstance or characteristic. Psalm 133 verse 1 shows that we are to live together in unity.

~Verdel Bohling (11 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Divine Shepherd, give each of us refuge within your protective hand and watchful eye.

Call us each by name to come closer into relationship with you. Help us to see one another as a beloved member of your flock and help us to act accordingly toward one another. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activities

- Some people struggle with the idea that we are created in God's image; that we are all welcomed members of Jesus' flock. Where have you struggled in accepting others?
- How has the "good shepherd" been calling you into deeper relationship?



Sunday, March 12 (cont)

As a family or with loved ones, draw images of the good shepherd taking care of his sheep. Imagine that you are the shepherd. Who are the sheep that immediately come to mind that you would want to take care of and protect (e.g., mom, dad, siblings, close friends)? Who are the sheep that you may want to exclude from your flock? How might you grow in your understanding of Jesus as the good shepherd?



Week 3: March 13-17

Matthew 21: 7 – 11 & Leviticus 19: 33-34

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Reflection

The enthusiasm of the crowd must have been exciting to the disciples and those who had been with Jesus from the beginning. The reception Jesus received entering Jerusalem was in stark contrast to how he would leave Jerusalem. We sometimes find ourselves filled with anxiety as we enter an unfamiliar situation. Our minds can be filled with worries and fear as we take that first step into our uncertain world. We can feel like an alien in a foreign land. We are grateful to those who extend hospitality to us.

Welcome Stories

In October of 2015, I launched my own company which, today, is still going strong. The mission of my company is to train and coach professionals and volunteers in best practices for delaying the onset of risky behaviors (e.g. substance use, bullying and early sexual activity) with adolescents. Working in the field of substance use prevention and youth empowerment is a passionate career I have had for 36+ years.

Over the years, my work has taken me to all 50 states and other countries. But, in September of 2018, I received a call requesting me to train in a location I had yet to



Week 3: March 13-17 (cont)

travel to. The call was from the Puerto Rican government asking me to come to their island to train for four days and to deliver the entire training in Spanish. Never before had I experienced anxiety from a training request like I experienced with this one. My anxiety was the result of one clear fact - I don't speak Spanish.

I tried my best to convince them to not have me come in person to deliver the training, but rather allow me to hire a Spanish-speaking person who would record the training in Spanish for them to do as a self-paced course. Instead, they were insistent on me coming in-person. So, I was confirmed to travel to San Juan, Puerto Rico, the first week of February in 2019.

I spent five months translating all the program and training materials into Spanish and hired a translator to be by my side during the training. But, none of this seemed to ease my anxiety. Instead, as time got closer to leaving, my anxiety and concerns increased. I was worried about a lot of things. I worried about going to a new place I knew very little about. I worried about how the group would perceive me as an English-speaking Midwestern white woman. I worried about how they perceived people from the states, in general. I worried about not speaking their language and whether I would be able to effectively communicate with the trainees. I worried about the flow of the training as everything I said would be translated back to them by the translator. I worried about the group being two times larger than I usually work with. I worried about my stamina throughout the 4-day training – twice as many days than I usually train.

The day came for me to leave and I had to talk myself on to the plane to go. At one point I even thought, *"If there was ever a time I would welcome a training to be cancelled at the last minute, this would be the one."* But, the call to cancel never came and my trip to San Juan proceeded forward.

I arrived at the training site on the first day 45 minutes early. I took a deep breath, said a short prayer, opened the door and walked into a room that was full of people all speaking Spanish and with a lot of energy! My first thought was, *"Oh my gosh! Am I late?"*



Week 3: March 13-17 (cont)

I NEVER have my training participants arrive early – let alone before me. I also NEVER have a group with this much energy at the start of a training.

I tend to have a good sense of my training groups by the end of my first day with them. But I had a good sense of the group in Puerto Rico almost immediately. This good sense just kept getting stronger as each day passed, and by the end of the fourth day, it was obvious this training group was special.

How were they special?

- They were patient with the language barrier between us despite me being able to have a conversation in English with only three of the 28 individuals.
- They were committed and respectful. Every day, for four consecutive days, many of them would travel 2-3+ hours to and from the training. This means they were getting up at 3:30-4:00 am and not getting home until 6:30-7:30 pm each evening. And, yet, they would arrive every morning not just on time, but up to 30 minutes to an hour early and stay to the very end. The drive alone would have given them good reason to not want to be there, or at the least, be exhausted and lack energy and attention by the day's end. But, no. They were fully engaged all day, every day, for four days.
- They were a joyful group. The same joy they would start the day with was still there at the end. We had many good interruptions of laughter, salsa dancing and singing.
- They were an optimistic and hopeful group. Their challenges with kids, parents and their community were like other training groups I've had, but also different. They didn't speak negatively about who they work with and their challenges. Instead, their positive attitudes about and compassion and care for those they serve was genuine and unshakeable.
- Their love of Puerto Rico was genuine. Their stories of life on the island, especially following Hurricane Maria, made them some of the most resilient people I have ever met. It made me wonder if I could survive a year without power and still have such a positive attitude.



Week 3: March 13-17 (cont)

- There was a sense of community among them. Their respect and love for each other was so apparent and they were in the trenches of their work and life with one another. They had each other's backs.
- They were grateful and they expressed it. They showered me with so many gifts I thought I would have to buy an extra suitcase to get them all home.

When it was time for me to leave Puerto Rico I had so many different thoughts and feelings that it was hard for me to make sense of it all. It took me several days upon returning home to process my experience. Here is what I now know about my time in Puerto Rico...

I left Puerto Rico professionally and personally inspired and changed. I may have been the person with the title of “trainer”, but they trained me also. They modeled what it means to welcome, respect, love, accompany and value another person. They accepted a Midwest American girl, who couldn’t speak or understand their language and of whom they had met just four days earlier, and welcomed her into their community. They modeled what God instructs all of us to do - to take in a stranger and treat them and love them as if they are one of us. They modeled what God’s welcome and love for EVERYONE should feel like, sound like and look like.

They will be one of those training groups I will never forget because they challenged me to be a better trainer, a better person and a better Christian. *"Muchas Gracias, my Puerto Rican friends, for accompanying me, welcoming me and transforming me."*

~Kathleen Simley (35 yrs with First Lutheran)

When I first came to Bethany Christian Trust in Edinburgh, Scotland, I felt so welcomed by everyone. There were the obvious ways - like making sure I was settled and giving grace while I was learning what to do in my new role. It was all very much appreciated. It made me feel at home just knowing everyone was so open and kind. However, there were also little things people did to make me feel fully accepted into the group. It made the difference between just being here and feeling like I was right where I belonged.

~Shelby Reidman



Week 3: March 13-17 (cont)

This example of being welcomed highlights how attention to details can make a big difference to how one is received in an unfamiliar situation. On a trip with my Mom to Europe a few years ago, near the end of our pilgrimage to Benedictine monasteries, we arrived at a women's monastery in the heart of Cologne, Germany. The sisters themselves did not speak English well, so they appointed one of their Oblates with the best English skills to greet us. We had been invited to celebrate Mass with them and there wasn't much time before it started. This woman directed us to where we needed to go. Recognizing that some of us may need a bathroom first, she gave us instructions for bathrooms depending on our mobility needs. Their chapel was very small, our tour bus was full (about 40 people) and we were directed through a side entrance. She told us not to worry about passing through a small side chapel where people may be seated and told us where to find the prayer books. The level of care, concern and details that she gave us were shared in a loving manner. It felt like we always visited there on Sundays for Mass! The worship service itself was also well thought out: hymns were sung in German and English, to include us in their celebration. They invited people from our group to help in the service; one to read an English scripture and one to help lead an English singing part of the liturgy. We were seated very close together, surrounding even the altar in the chapel! Afterwards, we were invited to join them for lunch with ice cream for dessert. Turns out, the ice cream was made by the sisters themselves, from the cows they kept in the back of their monastery property! There were 6 or 7 flavors and we were invited to try as many as we liked. We were invited to sit with members of their community, as well as their Oblates, to get to know each other. This welcoming felt so very complete, so sincere and warmly shared with us. I have often thought back on that memory with love and fondness. It's a model that I rely on for planning gatherings; the level of attention to detail and thoughtfulness really makes a difference and is time worth spending.

~Carol Olson (3 yrs with First Lutheran)



Week 3: March 13-17 (cont)

Prayer

Wonderful Redeemer, you invite us into new spaces and new places. You challenge us to grow in new and different ways. How grateful we are knowing that you abide with us in the midst of our excitement, our fear, our joy and our uncertainty. Thank you for surrounding us with a community of support, reminding us that you are ever present. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- Think about times when you have travelled to other countries or cultures. How did those around you welcome you, extend hospitality to you and assure your needs were considered?
- Have you ever welcomed someone from another country or culture or hosted them in your home? What did you do to ensure they felt welcomed?

Consider ways you might spend time with someone from another culture or country. If you know of someone, perhaps you can invite them to dinner, coffee or something else. Perhaps you can share something from your culture or upbringing with them and invite them to tell you more about their life experiences.



Saturday, March 18

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Hymn 641 - Verse 3

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine, and wheat. A banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet. Here the love of God, through Jesus is revealed in time and space as we share in Christ the feast that frees us; all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

(Click the audio play button on the bottom of the page to listen to the third verse of the hymn.)

Reflection

In ancient times prophets were often persecuted for speaking God's truth, a truth that did not always align with the will or wants of the people. However, despite these threats the prophets continued to proclaim this truth, knowing that God's reign could not be denied. May we find strength through Christ Jesus to proclaim the Gospel truth in the world around us.

Love of Neighbor Reflection

Allowing someone to be themselves and appreciated for who they are. That means learning to expand to not include those barriers we may have found necessary to build at some point in our lives.

~Susan Myren (36 yrs with First Lutheran)

We mimic how Christ manifests his love for us in how we accept, welcome, and be of help and assistance to others. As is mentioned below we do not have to earn Christ's love, it's extended to us because we are part of God's creation. We, as neighbors in this creation, therefore are to grant freely grant others our love and trust without expecting that they be earned.

~Les Carlson (21 yrs with First Lutheran)



Saturday, March 18 (cont)

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

All people, no matter where they live, what they believe, what language they speak, or what choices they make in their personal lives are God's children and my neighbors. To love our neighbors means to put others and their needs before our own. God has put no criteria or limitations on who we are to love, forgive, and care for as we travel down the road of life.

~Carla Joy Osberg (20 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, instill in us the courage of the prophets. Courage that overcomes our fears. Courage that stirs up in us the words to speak in the face of injustice, in the face of "isms" that divide, in the face of hate that robs the world of your love. Give us courage, give us your protection and give us your love. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- How might you express your voice in love of God's creation and your neighbors? Perhaps your voice is best expressed in spoken word. Maybe it comes to you in poetry, music, art, or simply random acts of kindness.
- How can you speak so that others hear, are not defensive, or judged, but instead know that you speak with care, compassion, and grace from a place of love, dignity, and respect?

Consider drawing a picture, writing a poem or creating something to be admired. Invite others to contribute - maybe you can display your works for one another, create a talent show, art exhibit, or skit together to share your creative voices as you seek to love your neighbors.



Sunday, March 19

Image of God Scripture: John 4: 7-10; 13-14

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'

Reflection

Water flows to the place of least resistance, the lowest terrain, seeping into the depths of the soil and then it brings forth life. It quenches the thirst of the parched earth and helps life spring from dust. We can imagine Jesus as the water of life coming to us in much the same way. Seeping into the recesses of our soul, washing away our sin and bringing forth new life. All with the promise that we will never thirst again.

Image of God Reflection

God created a universe that demonstrates infinite variety in its life forms, calls our attention to fascinating details, stuns us with breathtaking beauty and amazes us with its mathematical patterns and interdependence. That we are created in the image of God tells me that human beings are meant to be imaginative creatures also, living in connection with one another, at work for the well-being of all. Each element of Creation carries a spark of the Divine, a gentle fingerprint of God.

~Barb Johnson Frank (50 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Gracious Lord, you come to us like an everlasting spring flowing over us, through us and all around us. You bring us into a world of diversity and then challenge us to be a part of your creation, in harmony with what you have created. Help us to experience the beauty of what you share with others and to be awake to the life that is within us. Amen.



Sunday, March 19 (cont)

Reflection Questions/Activity

- In baptism God comes to us as an everlasting spring. What is your baptism story?
- What does it mean to you that you are a baptized child of God?

The next time you wash your hands, give your child a bath, run through the sprinkler or drink a glass of water consider the waters of baptism flowing over you and through you. Take time to talk with someone close to you about the promises of baptism and what this means for the life you are living. Do you know someone thinking about being baptized? Invite them into conversation and encourage them on this path.



Week 4: March 20-24

Luke 7: 37-38

And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

Reflection

At the heart of welcoming is receiving, a willingness to receive both the person and all that the person brings, the essence of who they are. To receive we must humble ourselves. We cannot fully receive if we harbor a hidden thought that this person has nothing to offer me, has no merit or is not worthy of my time. Instead, we welcome when we say, "Come, be with me, I am grateful for this time together."

Welcome Stories

Almost 50 years ago Linda and I were starting a new chapter in our lives. We were young and I was starting my first chiropractic practice. We decided to seek out a church that would complement our Lutheran upbringings, so we attended St. Andrew's Church in Hickory, North Carolina. I remember that day very well as we were welcomed to worship by Oren and Martha Cline. At the time, we did not know very many people, so our original fears were lessened by the Clines' gesture of kindness. As time progressed, we became active in St. Andrew's and the Clines treated us like part of their family. We appreciated that a great deal! When our first daughter, Melissa, was born Oren and Martha became her godparents.

~Tim Maack (40 yrs with First Lutheran)

My son and I have been members of First Lutheran since July of 1985. My parents and siblings were already members so joining was a given. My son grew up in this church and the church didn't just watch, but nurtured. Fast forward to 2008, as a family we found ourselves navigating the Nebraska correctional system. With no knowledge or understanding we tried to traverse all the barriers that a loved one, my son, and our



Week 4: March 20-24 (cont)

family faced in that system. It took almost 6 months for us to once again worship as a family at First Lutheran. I cannot begin to share the depth of emotion that happened on that first worship day. This family of believers rejoiced with us from the minute we walked through the door, welcoming a child of First Lutheran home. The love, the support, the welcoming was overwhelming. There was no judgement, only unconditional love from our church family.

~Karen Statham (38 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

We give thanks for the times when we have been received in love by others. When we have been welcomed in unfamiliar spaces and greeted in familiar ways. Thank you for bestowing upon us a loving spirit and giving us the courage to bestow this same spirit upon others. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- How does Jesus welcome you?
- How have you felt God's love welcoming you?

Is there someone you would like to thank for welcoming you? Take time this week to send a card, write a note or place a phone call to someone you would like to thank.



Saturday, March 25

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Hymn 641 - Verse 4

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known. Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face; let us bring an end to fear and danger: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

(Click the audio play button on the bottom of the page to listen to the fourth verse of the hymn.)

This verse contains very simple yet challenging and potentially difficult tasks to attempt. For some, going to church includes presenting your 'best' self: in dress, behavior, and always, to be 'nice' and greet others with a quick smile and offering a brief response. That in itself isn't a bad thing, but it is an incomplete view of hospitality. Our tendency is to filter and suppress our individual realities of life and to miss the needs of others, offering only a very superficial welcome. If we are to follow Christ and listen to the suggestions in this verse, we must do more to listen and to learn from others, to really know how to welcome them. We must release our own bias and expectations and be able to see the 'image of God's face' in the outcast and the stranger. Embodying the love of God, we welcome all even as we ourselves may feel vulnerable and unsure of how to accomplish this task. The concept of hospitality requires that we acknowledge that we bear the image of God and they do as well. It is from this recognition that we continue the flow of the love of God to others. This can be difficult, as we may feel as if we are stumbling in our attempts to know others so we can respond to their needs. This is inevitable. Our task is to demonstrate the image of God through our behavior and support of others, even as we are looking for the same image in others. In the words of Mary Streufert, *"we have needy hearts and clamoring minds; our spirits search for the comfort of being truly known and loved."* Isn't that what we all truly desire?

Reflection

In the time of Jesus and before the cross was a symbol of intimidation, the Roman empire used threats of crucifixion to suppress opposition, to intimidate those who



Saturday, March 25

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Hymn 641 - Verse 4

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known. Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face; let us bring an end to fear and danger: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

(Click the audio play button on the bottom of the page to listen to the fourth verse of the hymn.)

This verse contains very simple yet challenging and potentially difficult tasks to attempt. For some, going to church includes presenting your 'best' self: in dress, behavior, and always, to be 'nice' and greet others with a quick smile and offering a brief response. That in itself isn't a bad thing, but it is an incomplete view of hospitality. Our tendency is to filter and suppress our individual realities of life and to miss the needs of others, offering only a very superficial welcome. If we are to follow Christ and listen to the suggestions in this verse, we must do more to listen and to learn from others, to really know how to welcome them. We must release our own bias and expectations and be able to see the 'image of God's face' in the outcast and the stranger. Embodying the love of God, we welcome all even as we ourselves may feel vulnerable and unsure of how to accomplish this task. The concept of hospitality requires that we acknowledge that we bear the image of God and they do as well. It is from this recognition that we continue the flow of the love of God to others. This can be difficult, as we may feel as if we are stumbling in our attempts to know others so we can respond to their needs. This is inevitable. Our task is to demonstrate the image of God through our behavior and support of others, even as we are looking for the same image in others. In the words of Mary Streufert, *"we have needy hearts and clamoring minds; our spirits search for the comfort of being truly known and loved."* Isn't that what we all truly desire?

Reflection

In the time of Jesus and before the cross was a symbol of intimidation, the Roman empire used threats of crucifixion to suppress opposition, to intimidate those who



Saturday, March 25 (cont)

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we often feel incomplete and separate from you, but in our minds we know that we are loved by you. Listen to our struggles as we learn and inevitably stumble in our attempts to see your image in others. Guide us in our loving support of others with Christ's example set before us. Give us the comfort of being truly known and loved as we offer that comfort to others. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- What gets in the way of you showing your authentic self to others? How might you do that in a way that is also safe for you?
- How can you contribute to a culture of seeing the image of God in others as well as embodying it yourself? What would First Lutheran Church look like if we all supported that culture?

Find an activity or event in your community that might challenge you to experience a different culture, a different language or introduce yourself to people who may not look like you. Attend a PRIDE parade event, volunteer in a prison ministry or go to a Native American Pow Wow. Find something you can do with your family or others as a way of supporting you and introducing others to a new experience.



Sunday, March 26

Image of God Scripture: Matthew 16: 13-17

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Reflection

Back in 1995 there was a popular song, *What If God Was One of Us?*, by Joan Osborn. She posed this question as a reflection on the humanness of Jesus. Jesus did something similar in Matthew 25 as the one who was thirsty, hungry, a stranger, sick and in prison. Jesus comes to us in our humanness but Jesus also comes to us in God's glory, the Messiah, Son of the living God. We can be grateful that in both his humanity and divinity God comes to us.

Image of God Reflection

We are understood by God even though we do not understand. Moreover, since we are created in the image of God our purpose is to be "Godlike" in our interactions with God's creation which includes how we relate to others, believers as well as nonbelievers. Thus, that purpose means to me that we are welcoming and of aid to others.

~Les Carlson (21 yrs with First Lutheran)

To me this passage means that God in his awesome omnipotence created us in his own image, providing us with both his unconditional grace and love, yet also the opportunity and responsibility of living out that gift in the world we live in.

~Beverly DeGeorge (10 yrs with First Lutheran)



Sunday, March 26 (cont)

Prayer

Great Divine, come to us in your glory and then meet us in the messiness of our humanity. Raise for us the image of your radiance upon a hill and then lie down with us in the gutter of our despair. Draw us out of our darkness through the light of your resurrection and illuminate our lives through the cross of your crucifixion. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- In what ways does the divinity and humanity of God comfort you?
- Do you struggle with either image? The divine image of God or the human incarnation of God? Why or why not?
- Are there things you can say to God knowing God comes to us as both divine and human that you could not say to a strictly divine God?

Use your imagination and create an image of a divine God and of a human God. Draw a picture, write a poem, perform a skit or compose a song that captures this idea of divinity and humanity in one person.



Week 5: March 27-31

John 13: 3-5

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

Reflection

When Jesus humbled himself to wash the feet of the disciples he was modeling humility for his disciples. In this humility we make ourselves vulnerable to one another. There is an intimacy in our vulnerability that reinforces our dependency upon each other. Jesus shows us a love that seeps into us and transforms our hearts.

Welcome Stories

I once participated in a Native American sweat lodge ceremony at Rosebud reservation. The organizers of the ceremony constructed the lodge with branches covered with tarps. They carried heated stones inside the tent with shovels and poured water over the stones to create the effect of a sauna. We were cautioned that it would be quite hot inside the lodge. One of the hosts joshed to his friends that they would teach their visitors "some humility." We were led into the sweat lodge and seated on the ground. It was totally dark inside the tent. I knew that the organizers of the event would take care of their guests, but I also wondered, "Exactly how hot is it going to get?" The hosts began chanting loudly in the dark. I do not speak Dakota, so I did not understand what they were singing, but I did recognize the word "koda," which means friend. That one word made all of the difference for me.

~Pastor Greg Gabriel (1 yr with First Lutheran)

In an earlier time of life after first moving to Lincoln, we hosted weekly meals in our home for unattached members of our church community. We provided food and open invitation for informal sharing and conversations about people's lives, struggles and hopes. This formed the basis for some of our closest relationships that have lasted through decades.

~Scott Seebohm (6 yrs with First Lutheran)



Week 5: March 27-31 (cont)

As a member of St. John's Lutheran Church in Sacramento, one of our associate pastors and I secured a booth and organized, for the very first time, St. John's participation in Sacramento's Gay Pride Festival held each year outdoors on the Capitol Mall. Beforehand, the church purchased three hundred give-away sunglasses with St. John's name and logo stamped on the side. There were many organizations, retailers, etc., that had secured a booth, including a few other churches. Even the US Army recruiter and the Sacramento Police Department had a booth. When the day came, I was somewhat anxious not knowing what to expect. Pastor Leslie, on the other hand, was truly excited and confident as anyone could be. She gave me the inspiration and confidence I needed. It didn't take long before I felt at ease in speaking to festival goers about St. John's and how we welcomed people who identify as LGBTQ. Sadly, I spoke with a fair number of people (young and old) who had grown up attending church only to feel abandoned once people became aware of their sexual orientation. I said a short prayer for each and every one of them as I handed them a pair of sunglasses. I also prayed that sooner or later they would see the name St. John's printed on the side and know they would be welcomed. Four years later, I handed my role as part organizer to a young seminary student and St. John's member before relocating to Lincoln. I regard those years and my participation in the festival on behalf of St. John's as an amazing blessing.

~Gordon Wolfe (4 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Gracious Lord, humble us before others so that we might be present to what they can teach us, ways they can enrich our lives, and how they can love us. May we be gracious in our receiving and generous in our giving. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activities

- When did someone surprise you through hospitality?
- How have you experienced radical hospitality?



Week 5: March 27-31 (cont)

Think about someone in your life you would like to shower with radical hospitality. Make it an experience in which you anticipate, prepare and carry out an outpouring of hospitality, love and caring for this person. Whether it is preparing this person a dinner, washing their car or spending the day with them – consider the intimacy of humbling yourself in radical hospitality toward others.



Saturday, April 1

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

Hymn 641 Verse 5a

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured, taught and claimed, as words within the Word.

Reflection

In worship we gather as one body in Christ. We are called into community beginning with an affirmation of our baptism, water poured over us to cleanse us of our sins. We hear the promises of this baptism, eternal salvation with our Lord and the forgiveness of our sins. Having confessed our sins we gather together around the altar to receive the body and blood of Christ, affirming God's love, forgiveness and promise of salvation.

Love of Neighbor Reflection

We should want the best for our neighbors and should work to bring health, safety, justice, peace, love and flourishing to all humans, whether it's the family next door or someone on the other side of the world.

~Scott Seebohm (6 yrs with First Lutheran)

Since every person on this planet is our neighbor, we are commanded to love all just as we love ourselves ... the good and the bad (in our opinion). Examples of the "bad" would likely include people who oppress the poor and disenfranchised and those that commit unspeakable crimes against others. Needless to say, humanly speaking, it's very difficult to love some people. Only when we see what God sees in a person can we love all without prejudice.

~Gordon Wolfe (4 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Divine Spirit create in us a humility that bends our knees, opens our hands, and prepares us to receive your divine spirit into our lives. May we never be too proud to think we can go through this life alone, that we can live freely within a fortress of



Saturday, April 1 (cont)

All Are Welcome - Hymn 641

pride and vanity. Our freedom and salvation come from you and you alone. Amen.

Reflection Questions/Activity

- How does your relationship with Jesus feed your soul, your heart, your body? In what ways does God nourish you?
- How have you hungered for God to speak into your life? Are you able to put this hunger into prayer, asking God to provide relief?

Is there a ministry that you or you and your family can participate in with a focus on feeding others? Perhaps you can join the First Lutheran team at Matt Talbot. Perhaps you can make a donation to the local food pantry. Use money normally spent on eating out and give it to an organization that feeds the working poor.



Sunday, April 2

Image of God Scripture: Hosea 11:4

I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

Image of God Reflection

The title to this section of Hosea reads “God’s Compassion Despite Israel’s Ingratitude”. The Love of God continues to flow regardless of how humans behave or respond. This verse offers a very concrete, embodied expression of the love of God for humans. Picture a scene of a family gathering, perhaps a baptism for an infant. All are gathered: parents and grandparents, extended family and friends all beam at the sight of a brand-new fragile human, their soft skin, tiny fingers and toes, and that wonderful baby smell. Everyone is in awe, smiling, pointing out family traits of the baby, as they await patiently for their turn to hold them. However, only the mother can nurse the infant. When the baby shows it is hungry by crying or fussing, the mother tenderly picks up the infant and leans closer to nurse it. The baby doesn’t have to do anything but receive the nourishment and loving affection that grows every day and helps them grow in stature. This verse from the Old Testament introduces us to a new image, God as Mother. For many of us, we were taught that God was distant, ‘up there’ in heaven, and typically thought of in a masculine way. However, God as Mother provides for us all we need for nourishment, affection, and love. As the human infant in the story, we receive what is given; we do not have to earn either the love or the nourishment from God. All is given as grace.

Prayer

Mothering God, help us to relax into your loving embrace, knowing that we are always held close and loved by You. Help us to look for Your presence in our daily lives, being open to your guidance and learning to love others as You love us. Amen.



Sunday, April 2 (cont)

Reflection Questions/Activities

- What stirs within you?
- When have you encountered another person who embodied God as Mother?
- What were they like? How did you feel when you were near them?

Reflect on what it may feel like from the infant's perspective in this verse from Hosea. Imagine what it feels like in your body to be tucked in a blanket while being lovingly cuddled by someone you love. You might notice a sense of changing temperature or muscle tension in your body; a memory may arise where you were the one holding an infant, or even a memory of yourself as an infant being held. Carry these moments with you over the next few days. When you find yourself being upset, recall this image of God as Mother as well as the physical sensations you notice. You may also reflect on God's perspective using the same prompts as above.

~Carol Olson (First Lutheran member)



Week 6: April 3-7

1 John 4:16

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Reflection

Imagine a pebble being dropped in a calm and quiet lake. The waves and ripples continue in a circle around where the pebble landed and radiate in all directions, bouncing off the nearby rocks and landing by the shore, reverberating and starting a new ripple in the reverse direction. The process seems to never end and even the calmest water has some motion present. Now imagine the smallest effort of loving behavior toward our own body or toward another person: like the ripples it finds a way to expand and continue to affect many others. As humans, we tend to withhold our best self for those that are most like us; it is often easier to interact with people that already understand us and that we know well. More difficult is to release our expectations of who 'deserves' the best support and love, and let the ripples touch people, creatures, and nature in ways we never imagined. That is an example of how to abide (or live) in love. The core of welcoming is to receive the love that the Divine has already (and constantly) given to us, and to pass it along. We don't need to control or limit where that love flows; we just pass it along, just as we also savor this Loving Presence for our own self.

Welcome Stories

We were two parents in new jobs and two teenagers in new schools, in a townhouse new to us in the Washington, DC, suburbs, having left a home and work and friends and neighbors and schools in a medium-sized Midwestern town that we had (mostly) cherished for the previous eight years. We went to worship at Saint Luke Lutheran Church, up the street from the downtown area of Silver Spring, Maryland. There we found instant welcome. I was given a room to live in when our townhouse was not quite yet ours. Rosemary was welcomed into an adult Sunday school program. Our daughters were embraced by the youth of the church. I was taken with enthusiasm into the choir.



Week 6: April 3-7 (cont)

In all these ways we experienced acceptance. It made us feel instantly at home, amid all the alien dimensions of a challenging move.

~Fred Ohles (15 yrs with First Lutheran)

My husband and I were living in Davenport, IA, and attending a Missouri Synod church when we got divorced. We both continued to worship there, but too often we ended up at the communion rail near or even next to each other. Meanwhile, I had begun to worship also at the LCA church across town where I knew the pastor from when he was a chaplain at the college where I taught and he gave wonderful sermons. So, I decided to get better acquainted there and was invited to join a Koinonia group. They reached out to me with comfort and understanding. They welcomed me into the group and into the church. They became my friends.

~Elaine Kruse (member of First Lutheran)

Every school day for 20 years, I stood by the arrival driveway at the elementary school where I was principal. I welcomed every student and parent coming into school. We high-fived, bumped fists and exchanged greetings on Marvelous Monday, Terrific Tuesday, Wonderful Wednesday, Thoughtful Thursday and Fabulous Friday. This connection carried through the entire day as I saw children in their learning environment and carried through over the years with parents who knew their children were known, safe, and cared for in our school. The connections with those children and families continue today as I see these adult "children" and their parents around town. The connections give meaning and purpose and depth to our lives. We matter to one another. We all matter to our community.

~Wendy Bonaiuto (27 yrs with First Lutheran)

Prayer

Gracious and Loving God, teach us how to live within your love and to share that love with everyone we meet, other creatures and our Earth. Amen.



Week 6: April 3-7 (cont)

Reflection Questions/Activity

- What does it mean for you to 'live in love' toward yourself? Toward others?
- What does it feel like in your body to know that the Divine is constantly loving you?

This week practice random acts of kindness with your family and friends. Invite them to come up with acts of kindness they can do at work, school, in the home and in the community. Pay for someone's coffee. Help a neighbor sweep out their garage. Make a card for a nursing home resident. Be ripples on the surface of the water allowing the goodness that is in you to benefit the people around you.



Sunday, April 9 - Easter Sunday

Scripture: Matthw 28:5-9a

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!"

Reflection

We have heard many wonderful stories of welcome over these weeks of Lent. But today, Easter Sunday, we all hear the same one. We all share the same one. Because we are welcomed by the same Lord Jesus Christ: God made flesh for our sake. God crucified on a cross for our sake. God raised from the dead for our sake.

"Jesus was born as a fully flesh-and-blood human. A real person whose blood poured out. He's a real savior whose outstretched hand pulls us to himself, whose shoulders carry our burdens, and whose arms are unceasingly available for a welcoming, loving embrace." (Margaret Pope, Daily Grace)

So, today, hear it once again. And rest in this truth: In Christ Jesus, God welcomes you, arms wide open.

~Pastor Erin Heidelberger

ALLELUIA! HE IS RISEN



**HAPPY EASTER
FROM
FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH**

