

# TRANSFORMED COMMUNITY: FREED AND EMPOWERED FOR RADICAL WELCOME

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*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

—Romans 12:2

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Lutheran Immigration  
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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the adult Bible study *Transformed Community: Freed and Empowered for Radical Welcome*. The ideas of transformation and change originate in the theme verse for this study, quoted on the previous page.

The kind of transformation Paul is talking about, change that requires the “renewing” of minds, is not easily come by. It demands that we not conform to this world but rather live counterculturally. This kind of faithfulness requires a group effort! This study will focus on the nature and character of Christian community—what kind of change it makes in the world and also how it challenges its individual members, even as it sustains them, in the work of living with radical generosity, inclusion, compassion, justice, and forgiveness. This study is designed specifically to engage congregations in conversation about how these practices of radical discipleship might shape their relationships with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in their communities.

The key to the transformation that comes with the “renewing of minds” is in having the “mind of Christ.” This means, in part, to pattern our individual and communal lives according to Jesus’s example of nonconformity to the world’s expectations, adhering to what we discern together as God’s will for us. It also means to trust—in the most radical way, just as Jesus did—that God’s love is without limit, abundant and extravagant, and has a power and wisdom beyond what we can imagine.

This Bible study will assist you to:

- Recognize how transformed understandings of generosity, inclusion, compassion, justice, and forgiveness make Christian community an agent of God’s love;
- Be encouraged in the experience of community and inspired to trust in the countercultural ways of God’s will, especially with regard to the realities of refugees, migrants, and asylum-seekers;
- Commit to engagement and action to energize the community as God’s agent of change in the world with respect to refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers.

This study may be challenging, because the distinction between not conforming to the world and being transformed may make for personally uncomfortable self-reflections. Also, the nature of transformation—any kind of change, really—may be experienced as a bit threatening. Though the focus is on discerning faithful response to the current realities of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, there are political aspects to these realities which cannot be ignored. It is not the intention of this study to become embroiled in partisan political endorsement. It is the intention to ask participants to discern earnestly how their faith is lived in the midst of these political realities. This, too, may cause discomfort. It is not the leaders’ or group’s responsibility to solve “the problem” of discomfort, but you can honor it, help each other find places in the Bible passages where others have felt the same discomfort and threat, open a space for the exploration of reactions, and return to the biblical passages for comfort and encouragement!

Participants in the study will need Bibles and paper or notebooks for noting individual responses to reflection questions. Have chart paper or a whiteboard and markers available for group discussion.

# SESSION 1

## COMING TO TERMS WITH SOME TERMS

### The Mind of Christ

In the middle of the first century, the apostle Paul, author of half of the New Testament writings, sends a letter to the divided Christian community in Rome encouraging its unity. The church is wracked with racial, ethnic, and cultural tensions. There are conflicts between the rich and the poor and between traditionalists and innovators. Some Jews came to faith in Christ by way of their Jewish heritage and are holding fast to traditional practices as necessary expressions of their faith. Many Gentile believers (people who were not Jewish) came to faith in Christ after first converting to Judaism. They too use Jewish texts and symbols to express their faith and belief. Still other Gentiles, like those who came to

Christ because of Paul's preaching, express their faith and belief with Greco-Roman cultural forms and concepts that are very different from the Jewish ones. As a result, there are disagreements about worship, leadership, and behavior. Paul sees the friction as the community's crisis of identity; the problems center on questions of what it means to be Christian and what Christian life ought to look like.

In the first half of his letter to the Christian community in Rome, Paul levels the playing field, demonstrating how Jew and Gentile alike are equal in sinfulness but also equally loved by God and equally worthy of favor. He tells the story of God's purposes, weaving together the histories of Israel and of humankind to show how Israel was chosen to make God's heart known to the rest of creation.

Near the end of the letter, in chapter 12 where the theme verse for *Transformed Community* is found, Paul begins to reconstruct what should be the community's common and shared Christian identity. He calls all of them, Jewish and Gentile Christians together, to "not be conformed to this world," to resist expectations of their present age, and to not conform to familiar social hierarchies or cultural and religious privileges. Rather, he wants them to be transformed by the renewal of their minds—which for Paul means having the "mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16 and Philippians 2:2, 5)—so that they "may discern what is the will of God." Having the mind of Christ, they will be of one mind, with the single communal intention to live in accord with God's purposes, doing "what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Renewing the mind also means to imitate the pattern of Christ highlighted in Paul's letter to the Christian community at Philippi—that like Christ, the community will not exploit its privilege but instead empty itself in service of building up others (Philippians 2:5-8).

Christians will relinquish any claims they might make to worldly measures of status and power in order to establish God's rule of love. Christ's self-emptying—to the point of his death by crucifixion—was radically out of sync with what his followers had hoped for and expected in a leader, a king, a Messiah. And yet his self-emptying was transformed into the means by which God demonstrated power with a love that was stronger than death. A community renewed in the mind of Christ will be similarly nonconforming and radically countercultural to the world's expectations.

Renewing the mind depends on the community sustaining practices that develop the capacity to discern and recognize God's purposes and spiritual truths. Paul continues his letter to the Roman



church by encouraging behavior that will support the community in its changing identity, empowering it to be an agent of change (Romans 12:3-21). With practices of humility, inclusion, prayer, generosity to those in need, and compassion, the community will be recognized for the transforming power of love it unleashes into the world.

- Write down a Bible verse or story you believe is central to your church community's common and shared Christian identity.
- What makes this passage central?
- How does this passage demonstrate "the mind of Christ"?

Share as a group what stories are central to you.

- What composite picture develops of "the mind of Christ"?
- How might this guide your way of living out your faith in your community?

## Conformity and Transformation

Read Roman 12:2 together, then write your definition of *conform* and *transform*.

As a group, discuss your definitions, then compare the group's definitions to the following:

### Conform

- From *con* (together) + *formare* (to form) to make something like another thing.
- Definitions of *conform*: "to give the same shape or contour to"; "to bring into harmony"; "to be obedient or compliant; to act in accordance with prevailing standards or customs."
- Synonyms: cohere, comport, correspond, dovetail, square, align, jibe.

### Transform

- From the Latin word *transformare* to change in shape, metamorphose.
- Definitions of *transform*: "to change in composition or structure"; "to change the outward form or appearance of"; "to change in character or condition."
- Synonyms: alchemize, make over, transfigure, convert, refashion.

Read Romans 12:2 aloud again as a group. Then individually, on paper, try putting Paul's words in your own words.

Consider the classic example of transformation, the butterfly, which begins life as a caterpillar, spins a container, or chrysalis, for itself, completely dies as a caterpillar (completely dissolves into a liquid mash), and then metamorphoses into a beautiful winged insect.

- What is the threat of transformation?
- What is the promise?

Consider your earlier identification of the mind of Christ.

- In what ways might it require not conforming to the world?
- What transformation might it require?
- What are the threat and the promise in this transformation?

## Talking the Talk

To talk about how our faith is lived out in relation to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, we have to talk about people in our communities for whom this is their reality. Having a common understanding of terms is critical. On page 7 are some terms and definitions that are key to understanding the migrant journey and the process of seeking asylum. See which ones you can match properly.

- Which terms are new to you?
- Which ones are different from what you understood?

(Answer key: 1L, 2F, 3J 4P, 5B, 6H, 7D, 8A, 9O, 10S, 11C, 12Q, 13N, 14G, 15E, 16M, 17I, 18R, 19V, 20T, 21K, 22U)

## Stories that Transform

As you begin this faith journey, listen to the beginning of the migrant journey of Jose and Juana (pseudonyms).

Jose: I worked as a bus driver for over twenty-five years but in the last fifteen years things in my country [Guatemala] are less safe because of gangs and their extortion tactics. My coworkers started getting killed, and I went from working full time to seasonal because of safety concerns. I was making enough money to support my family, but then safety became a big concern. Things went from bad to worse in 2016 when I was given a phone by my company, who would check up on me, but gang members would call my phone and remind me when my company needed to give them money in exchange for "protection." I was followed by different gang members on bikes, or I would get a call when I was resting from my route and be told what type of shirt I was wearing, what street I was parked, etc.—they wanted me to know I was being watched. The threats escalated from the company to the drivers ourselves, and then I started being threatened that if I didn't make sure the gangs got their money, they would start coming after my family. I was attacked, left for dead by the gang members because I was covered in blood and my bus crashed, then sent to the hospital, at which point my wife said, "That's it, these men now even know my name and where we live. We are leaving Guatemala."\*

\*Used with permission of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

# TALKING THE TALK: TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Match these terms...

1. Coyote
2. Asylum seeker
3. Asylee
4. Refugee
5. Immigrant
6. Migrant
7. Zero tolerance
8. Alien
9. TPS/temporary protected status
10. CBP/Customs and Border Protection
11. ICE/Immigration and  
including Customs Enforcement
12. Detention
13. Dreamer
14. DACA
15. Northern Triangle
16. Credible fear
17. Deportation
18. Deterrence practice
19. DHS/Homeland Security
20. UAC/unaccompanied alien children
21. Undocumented
22. Sanctuary

with these definitions:

- A. Any person not a citizen or national of the United States.
- B. Any person who leaves their country of origin with plans to establish life in another country.
- C. Office of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which houses enforcement agents and prosecutors in immigration court.
- D. A policy enforcing prosecution of all individuals who enter the United States between ports of entry, having the effect of separating parents from their children.
- E. The countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador.
- F. A person already in the United States who is seeking protection from being sent back to their home country.
- G. Program allowing people the temporary right to live, study, and work in the United States if they were brought to the United States as children without a visa or other documents.
- H. A person who leaves their country of origin to seek residence in another country.
- I. Formal removal of someone from the United States for allegedly violating immigration laws.
- J. A person protected from being returned to their home country and authorized to work and receive other benefits in the United States.
- K. Anyone residing in the United States without legal status, those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid.
- L. A person who illegally transports migrants into another country.
- M. A significant possibility that a person can establish in a full hearing that they have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution or harm because of race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion if returned to their country.
- N. Person protected under DACA.
- O. Temporary benefit given to eligible nationals of designated countries who are present in the United States and where conditions in their home country prevent safe return.
- P. A person unable or unwilling to return to their home country due to past persecution or well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.
- Q. Held in custody.
- R. Any policy intended to discourage immigration.
- S. Agents who apprehend people at the border and detain them.
- T. Persons under the age of 18 who cross into the United States without a parent or legal guardian physically with them.
- U. Practice of walking alongside immigrants in the United States.
- V. Agency of the US government that houses Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).



## Toward Transformation

Reflect on the following questions individually, then discuss them with the group.

- Why are Jose and Juana leaving their home country? What are the “push factors”?
- What fears does Jose express? What frightens you in Jose’s story?
- With what in their story can you identify? What is foreign to you?
- What “push factors” of your faith (what beliefs) are nudging you to become more aware of and involved in the realities of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers?
- What questions do you have as you start this journey? What fears do you have as you approach this study?



## Sending

Close the session with prayer:

*O God of all, with wonderful diversity of languages and cultures you created all people in your image. Free us from prejudice and fear, that we may see your face in the faces of people around the world. (ELW, p. 79)*

Allow silence for individuals to offer petitions.

*Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, but always to your glory and the welfare of your people, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. (ELW, p. 86)*



## SESSION 2

# GENEROSITY TRANSFORMS COMMUNITY

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*God's transformed and transforming community has the mind of Christ and accomplishes God's purposes in at least two ways: through radical acts of generosity, and by resisting conformity to this world's priority of the individual over the community.*

This session's key passage is from the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same person who authored the Gospel of Luke. This book is unlike any other in the New Testament because it was written as a history of the early church, describing how the Christian community took shape in the years just after Jesus's death and resurrection. It is different from the gospel passages that are the focus of the Bible studies for Sessions 3–6; Acts 2 opens a window into a community whose character was formed by Jesus's teachings. The earliest Christian communities were transformed by renewed minds, having the mind of Christ. Seeing how they lived together, our communities can be transformed too.

Acts continues the story of Jesus and his disciples, picking up where Luke's Gospel leaves off. It begins with Jesus's last appearance to his disciples before ascending to heaven and with the dramatic descent of the Holy Spirit upon these disciples, transferring Jesus's power and authority to them. From that point forward, the disciples—now called apostles—preach, teach, baptize, heal, and

forgive sins in the name of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Spirit. Thus, the story in Acts is about how Christ continues to be present in the world through the communities of his followers.

In "real time," this story was written about fifty years after Jesus's death and resurrection. Luke's recounting of the acts of the apostles describes the community that emerged after Jesus's time and in which Luke himself lived decades later. He writes in hindsight, emphasizing what have become the distinctive features of Christian life.

This session's passage comes immediately after Peter and the other apostles, now filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit, are working signs and wonders, making prophetic speeches about God, and preaching repentance for forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47–49). As a result, many people receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and are baptized. Then Luke summarizes what the apostles and all those who join with them are doing, identifying—from Luke's "real time"—the essential



practices that align with Jesus's teachings and sustain the community in life together. These include being devoted to the apostles' teaching, breaking bread together (sharing meals along with the communion meal), and prayer.

There is one other practice to which they are devoted, fellowship; in Greek, *koinonia*, meaning "community" or "communion." *Koinonia* was associated with friendship and was a virtue highly praised in the Greco-Roman world. The Christian community amplifies the generosity of *koinonia* in how they held "all things in common" (Acts 2:44 and 4:32). Being of "one heart and soul" (4:32), and in a very physical and material way, they emptied themselves of the markers of their status, privilege, and power in service of the building up of their friendship.

Describing the community's practices of learning from Jesus, sharing meals, praying, and being devoted to each other in *koinonia*, Luke shows that the Spirit has transformed the community. It was a community of "glad and generous hearts" transformed by minds renewed in Christ, a countercultural community that had the "goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:46-47) and was an agent of change in the first-century Greco-Roman world.

## Friendship and Fellowship

In pairs or small groups, share stories of friendship and fellowship.

- Think of significant friendships in your life. What are the features of a true friendship? How do such friendships develop? What do you expect of a friend? What do you expect of yourself as a friend to another?
- Have you ever befriended someone from a culture different from your own? How do cultural differences affect or shape a friendship?
- When have you experienced fellowship? What does the word fellowship mean to you? What are essential features? In what circumstances or situations can fellowship arise?
- How does fellowship across cultural boundaries differ from *fellowship* in a homogeneous community? What are possible areas of discomfort that may arise in cross-cultural fellowship? How can you prevent the discomfort from becoming an obstacle to being enriched by the fellowship?

Returning to the large group, record features of friendship and of fellowship on chart paper.

## Generosity in Practice

In this session the focus is *generosity* and how it transforms community. The starting point will be a close look at the earliest Christian communities, which were shaped by at least two influences:

- Their origins in Jewish history and heritage
- Jesus's teachings

Divide into four groups. Each small group will read and consider one of the Bible passages below.

### *Jewish Tradition*

1. Deuteronomy 24:17-21 (gleaning laws from the Old Testament). This passage comes from the biblical book that describes the terms of the covenant between God and God's chosen people. It tells us that God expects the people to demonstrate concern for the aliens, the widows, and the orphans by not completely harvesting their crops but instead leaving some grain behind to be gathered, "gleaned," by the needy.
2. Ruth. Here we see Ruth gleaning in the fields and learn that Ruth and her family are provided for by the gleaning laws.

### *Jesus's Teachings*

3. John 15:10-15. Here Jesus talks about his relationship with the disciples, that their relationship will no longer be one of master or servant but rather one of friendship. In this passage, he says that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.
4. John 13:6-8. Jesus teaches that no greater love is shown than in laying down the status of master, to lay down the privilege of that status. Peter vigorously resisted this teaching.

Read the assigned passage and discuss together:

- What practice is being described?
- What is the purpose of the practice?
- In what ways does this practice ensure that all feel safe and welcomed?
- What effect does the practice have on the community?
- What might be impediments to the practice?

When the large group reconvenes, have each small group summarize what they read and discussed. Then, as a large group, take the discussion deeper...

God's covenant requires that the people resist conformity to the practice of gathering in the full harvest. This covenant transforms the people's ethos and practice into one that is countercultural to practices of greed and hoarding.

- How are the gleaning laws and generosity related?
- Where do you see traces of observance of the gleaning laws in practice today?
- In what ways do you—as an individual and as a faith community—experience abundance?



The earliest communities were also shaped by Jesus's teachings. These teachings took the Jewish tradition of generosity toward the alien, widow, and orphan even further. Jesus expanded the concept to mean, at least in part, that no greater love is shown than in laying down the status of master, to lay down the privilege of that status.

- What are the challenges in being asked to step out of our hierarchical roles and consider each other as friends?
- How do you react to Peter's resistance to having Jesus no longer be his master and to let Jesus wash his feet?
- In what ways might we see this as a gesture of generosity inspired by Jesus?

## Core Bible Text: Acts 2:41-47, Koinonia

Use the ancient contemplative reading practice of *lectio divina* (divine reading) to examine the core text for this session. Designate one person to read Acts 2:41-47 aloud three times, slowly and deliberately, with a short pause between each reading.

The rest of the group will close their eyes and listen, noting any word, short phrase, or image that stands out to them, that resonates with them, that captures their attention. Before the reading begins, take a few deep breaths, and quiet your mind. Allow for a minute or two of silence.

Take a moment or two after the last reading to sit quietly.

- What word, phrase, or image stood out to you?
- Where did you see or hear connections to the spirit of the covenant found in Deuteronomy or to Jesus's emphasis on friendship?

Next, read Acts 4:32-37 (not as *lectio divina*). Compare and contrast this passage to Acts 2:41-47.

- Are there any words or phrases repeated in the exact wording? Discuss similarities and differences.

## Characteristics of the Early Church Community

Next, list together on chart paper the features of the early Christian community as described by Luke in the Acts passages.

- What are the easiest things to imitate or replicate in your present communities?
- What are the most difficult or challenging to imitate or replicate—and why?

Returning to this session's theme:

- What radical generosity was practiced by the early Christian community?
- How did holding all things in common in the early Christian community transform it?
- How was the early Christian community visible as an agent of change with respect to generosity?



## Comparing Then and Now

Return to the lists of community characteristics found in Acts 2:41-47. The list should include the following:

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| People were baptized          | Selling possessions and goods and distributing proceeds to all as any had need |
| New people join               | Spending much time together in the temple                                      |
| Devoted to apostles' teaching | Breaking bread at home and eating with glad and generous hearts                |
| Devoted to fellowship         | Praising God   |
| Devoted to breaking of bread  | Having the goodwill of the people  |
| Devoted to prayer             |  |
| Being together                |  |
| Holding all things in common  |  |

Reflect on these questions individually, then form pairs or triads to share responses. Afterward, share insights from the conversation with the whole group.

- Where, specifically, do you see these characteristics present in Christian communities today?
- Where, how, and why do Christian communities falter in being transformative with respect to generosity?
- Where do you, personally, serve as an agent of change regarding generosity? Where do you falter?
- How would you describe the difference between generosity that conforms to the world's practices and expectations and generosity that transforms?

## Stories that Transform

"This is the most humbling thing we have ever done." Tears welled up in Pastor Rose Mary's eyes as she said this. She was describing the respite and welcome work of the congregation of Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey in El Paso. For more than two years they have been part of a network of shelters meeting the needs of asylum seekers.

Several days a week, Cristo Rey is able to shelter migrants who have been released from detention and need to get to their sponsors. The small congregation provides showers, clean clothing, and assistance with phoning their sponsors to arrange for bus or plane tickets to the sponsors' location. The church building is not large. But two rooms are now dedicated as dormitories, filled with bunk beds. A third room has mattresses on the floor, which are stacked to allow dual use of the room for an after-school program. All this gives capacity to house twenty people at a time. The kitchen is used to prepare meals with food purchased or donated, and to store donated sandwiches, which are given to the travelers when they leave. Shower rooms were installed. Still another room holds laundry facilities, clothing, and nonperishable food to send with the travelers in string sacks that are also donated. The sanctuary is arranged with tables and folding chairs to allow for in-processing of the migrants and dining and gathering space. In the chancel area, the lay pastor offers counsel and prayer, and volunteer health care providers do medical screening.

Parishioners and other volunteers filter in and out, sorting donated clothes, laundering the clothing the migrants wore when they arrived, distributing clean clothes, preparing meals, packing backpacks for travel, taking overnight shifts, assisting with phone calls to sponsors, accompanying migrants to the bus station and airport to make sure they get on their way safely. The migrants pick up brooms and dish towels and pitch in. Neighbors have noticed the activity and offer assistance as well. One business paid for the entire group one week to have breakfast at the restaurant across the street. The staff at the restaurant welcome the migrants graciously, feeding them amply and offering special treats to the children. In two days, most of the migrants are on their way to get settled with their sponsors and wait for their first asylum hearing. Before Sunday, mattresses are stacked against the wall. Chairs are arranged for worship.

## Toward Transformation

Rooted in scripture and the traditions of the community of faith, consider how you and your congregation might witness to abundance and generosity as you encounter migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in your midst.

Reflect on these questions individually, then discuss them with the group.

- What abundance do you experience?
- What practices in our society aim at “gathering the full harvest” of this abundance without regard for refugees, migrants, or asylum seekers?
- What abundance could immigrants glean in order to live?
- What might be our “pain points” or places of resistance to such gleaning?
- How does our status and power as citizens affect our relationship to refugees, migrants, or asylum seekers?
- What in this dynamic needs to change?
- In what way does the description of Christian community include those who are refugees, migrants, or asylum seekers?
- Where and how does the description of Christian community challenge current attitudes or policies toward refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers?

## Sending

*Leader:* Lord, you send out your Spirit,

*All:* **And renew the face of the earth.**

*Leader:* Look with love on all those you have created,

*All:* **Help us to see your image in the many peoples of this earth.** *Leader:* **Open your hand to fill all your children with good things,** *All:* **Call us to care for all who are hungry and without shelter.**

*Leader:* For families separated at the border,

*All:* **Teach us to provide protection and hope.**

*Leader:* For members of our church and community who suffer fear and isolation,

*All:* **Give us hearts filled with generosity and welcome.**

*Leader:* For refugees who long for home,

*All:* **Fill us with grace to embrace them as sisters and brothers.**

*Leader:* Lord, you send out your Spirit,

*All:* **And renew the face of the earth.**

*Leader:* For all who flee poverty, persecution, war and violence,

*All:* **Let us walk with them as they make new beginnings.**

*Leader:* For all who learn a new language, start a new enterprise, make a new friend,

*All:* **Let us celebrate the many gifts they bring.**

*Leader:* For the whole human family, brought together in your love,

*All:* **We rejoice in the Lord.**

*Leader:* Lord, you send out your Spirit,

*All:* **And renew the face of the earth.\***

\*From "A Litany of Hope," LIRS Migrant and Refugee Sunday resource, used with permission of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.



## SESSION 3

# INCLUSION TRANSFORMS COMMUNITY

*God's transformed and transforming community has the mind of Christ and accomplishes God's purposes in at least two ways: through radical acts of inclusion and by resisting conformity to this world's practices of exclusion and hierarchies of privilege.*

The first-century Mediterranean world in which Jesus, Paul, and Luke lived was ordered according to an honor-shame system. Honor had to do with the value of one's social status, and people considered it a commodity more important to possess than material wealth. If born into a family of prestigious lineage, one came into the world with honor. If one acted courageously, made a generous gesture, or generally met society's expectations of conformity, honor was acquired. All social transactions were conducted with the currency of honor. But it was considered to be of limited supply; one person's acquisition of honor required someone else's loss. There was a definite social hierarchy, and the vast majority of people were nearer to the bottom. They were excluded because they had no honor to trade, having been shamed by lowly birth, poverty, social standing, slave status, or affliction.

Meals provided especially good opportunities to both flaunt one's honor and to secure it by inviting guests of high status. In this session's Bible story from Luke 14, Jesus is a dinner guest at the home of a Pharisee when he tells the parable of the wedding banquet. As leaders in the religious community, Pharisees studied the scriptures and taught the people how they should be applied in daily life. Jesus is invited to a meal with Pharisees, showing that while often portrayed as antagonistic toward Jesus, the Pharisees actually recognized him as a worthy interpreter of the scriptures and as having some status among the people.

The first half of the parable (Luke 14:7-10) perfectly illustrates how the honor-shame system works. In fact, Jesus even seems to be giving the Pharisees some very good advice for how best to navigate the honor-shame system, suggesting they make calculated gestures of lowliness for the sake of securing a measure of honor.

That is, until verse 11, where instead of encouraging conformity to the social system, Jesus upends it by speaking instead of *humility* and *exaltation*. Immediately we hear echoes of Paul's letter to the Philippian Christians—Jesus *humbled* himself in obedience unto death, and then is highly *exalted* as Lord of all (Philippians 2:8-9). When Jesus explains his parable with these particular words, the currency of social transactions based on honor at the expense of others is transformed to self-emptying love for the benefit of others.

This parable is not just a cautionary tale about thinking too highly of ourselves, lest we be publicly put in our place, nor is it establishing a new rule of Christian etiquette. Instead, Jesus is challenging the religious community's conformity to the world's hierarchies of privilege, which by nature are exclusive, and calling it to be transformed in God's system of love, which by nature is inclusive. Jesus challenges the religious community to see itself—and all human relationships—through God's eyes and with renewed minds ("the mind of Christ").

This is clear in the last half of the parable (vv. 12-14). Jesus turns his attention to the host who has honor to allocate and who has calculated what more he can acquire with a guest list of high-status invitees. Jesus asks the host to relinquish his claim to honor, to voluntarily disengage from a system designed to secure his own standing, and to be an agent of change. Jesus asks him to spend his

honor instead on those with no capacity to return it, inviting into his circle and celebratory banquet those who have no social capital for repayment— “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (v. 12). Emptying himself of his coffers of honor and humbling himself in the honor-shame system, the host will be exalted in the economy of God.

The Christian community is one that does not conform itself to the world’s hierarchies of status and privilege but rather transforms itself in loving inclusion of all. And when people see such a community active in the world, they are witnessing a community transformed with the mind of Christ.

## Being a Party Planner

Take a few moments to reflect on the following questions, writing some notes if you wish.

- Imagine you are planning a big party for a very special occasion; who is on the guest list?
- As you imagine planning the party—menus, beverages, party favors, music—what kinds of things are you thinking about as you make your decisions? What do you want to communicate to your guests in your choices?
- Have you ever forgotten to include someone that should have been invited? Had an invitation go missing in the mail? Heard about an event you thought you should have been invited to but weren’t? What are the feelings associated with these situations? How did you or the other person respond?

Break into groups of two or three and share your answers.

## Biblical Images

Before reading the parable of the wedding banquet, there are several other passages in the Bible to look at first. These passages provide important images and phrases that will also be found in the parable; being familiar with their sources will deepen your understanding of the parable. Being able to hear the echoes of the other passages will make reading the parable more meaningful—and fun!

The first passage is from Isaiah, whose prophecies significantly influenced the spiritual imaginations of Jesus, the Gospel writer Luke, and the apostle Paul. Isaiah writes at a time when many leaders of Israel had been exiled for years in the country of Babylon. While in exile, the Israelites’ religious beliefs and practices drew many non-Israelites to faith in God. The prophet also saw how “the nations” were also God’s instruments and servants. Isaiah’s prophecies celebrate God’s freedom to embrace all people as God’s people.

In these prophecies Isaiah challenges Israel’s belief that it was to be the sole recipient of God’s favor and paints a new picture of God’s plan for salvation as intended for all people—for Israel, yes, but also for the rest of humanity.

In small groups (two or three people) read the following passages and consider the questions:

- Isaiah 58:2-12 (the fast God chooses)
- Isaiah 56:1-8 (inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs)
- Isaiah 25:6-9 (a feast for all people)

- How do Isaiah's prophecies challenge Israel's identity of being God's chosen people?
- How do the prophecies challenge beliefs about who are the intended recipients of God's favor?
- What are some of the key descriptors that paint the new picture of God's plan for salvation?

Come back together as a whole group and make a summary list on a whiteboard or chart paper.

The Gospel writer Luke has a very specific idea of how people could know for sure that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God. He makes it plain at a point in the Gospel when the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus directly if he, Jesus, is the Messiah. Jesus answers with a list of things they should look for, things that will be "signs of the Messiah," of God's anointed one.

Read Luke 7:18-23.

- According to Jesus (and Luke), how will people recognize the Messiah, God's anointed one?

Write the responses on a whiteboard or chart paper. Be on the lookout for these signs as you work through the rest of this session's study.

Read Philippians 2:5-11. This passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians is key to understanding what Paul means when he calls people to have a renewed mind—that is, they are to have the mind of Christ.

In verses 6-8, Jesus humbles himself unto death. In the second part, verses 9-11, Jesus turns things upside down.

Write the words *humbled* and *exalted* on the chart paper.





## Core Bible Text: Luke 14:7-14

Read Luke 14:7-14. Listen for echoes from Isaiah (descriptions of the feast), from Jesus in Luke's account (signs of the Messiah), and from Paul (words about humbling and exaltation). Record these on chart paper, then discuss the following questions:

- What echoes do you hear of Isaiah's descriptions of the feast?
- What did it represent in Isaiah?
- What does it represent in Jesus's parable?
- What echoes do you hear of Jesus's signs of the Messiah?
- What do Jesus and Luke communicate with the "second" guest list, composed as it is of those people said to reveal the Messiah?
- What words do you hear from the Philippians passage?
- When Paul talks about Jesus "emptying" himself, what does he mean?
- Of what does Jesus empty himself?

## Honor and Shame in the First Century

Take another look at the following paragraph from the first section of this session:

The first-century Mediterranean world in which Jesus, Paul, and Luke lived was ordered according to an honor-shame system. Honor had to do with the value of one's social status, and people considered it a commodity more important to

possess than material wealth. If born into a family of prestigious lineage, one came into the world with honor. If one acted courageously, made a generous gesture, or generally met society's expectations of conformity, honor was acquired. All social transactions were conducted with the currency of honor. But it was considered to be of limited supply; one person's acquisition of honor required someone else's loss.

There was a definite social hierarchy, and the vast majority of people were nearer to the bottom. They were excluded because they had no honor to trade, shamed by lowly birth, poverty, social standing, slave status, or affliction.

Then discuss:

- What are the markers of the first-century honor-shame system in the wedding banquet parable?
- How does Jesus challenge this system?
- Look carefully at Luke 14:11. Notice how Jesus changes the terms of engagement from honor and shame to humility and being exalted. How is Jesus transforming the system?

## Comparing Then and Now

Honor served as the social currency of the first-century Mediterranean world. Think about social currency in today's world and discuss these questions as group. If your group is large, break into smaller groups.

- Today what things serve as markers of our place in society?
- On what do we rely for our sense of value?
- Where, how, and why do Christian communities falter in being transformative with respect to inclusion?
- Consider where you, personally, serve as an agent of change regarding inclusion and where you falter.

## Stories that Transform

Wilmot Collins fled the civil war in Liberia. He lost two brothers to the war and was separated from his wife and infant daughter for two years. In 1994, he arrived in Helena, Montana, where he was reunited with his family. Not much in Montana resembles Liberia, not the landscape, not the climate, not the ethnicity of the residents. But it was safe from the ravages of civil war. He made it home, considering it his second chance at life.

Wilmot began his life in America working at a home for abused children and as a school janitor. He served Montana and the nation in the National Guard, US Army Reserve, and the US Navy Reserve for over twenty years. He worked as a teacher, at various organizations that helped troubled or at-risk youth, the VA at Fort Harrison, the Department of Homeland Security, and as a child protection specialist at the State of Montana. Wilmot made it his life's mission to serve the people that worked so hard to give him and his family a chance.

In 2017, Wilmot was elected the first black mayor of any city in Montana since statehood, defeating a sixteen-year incumbent in a state where less than one percent of the population is black. He gained the confidence of the people by knocking on doors and listening to individuals. In turn, people came to know him as part of their community.

## Toward Transformation

*"The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Reflect on these questions individually, then discuss them with the group.

- In what ways is your vision of "the perfect church" getting in the way of actually being an example of true Christian community?
- Who are the "others" around your church community? How might you embody God's love for those in your community often regarded as other?

- Where does the honor-shame dynamic come into play in how the others around you tend to be regarded?
- In what ways are you or your church challenged to be humbled with respect to migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers?
- In what ways could your community be visible as an agent of change with respect to inclusion of migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers?
- What would be signs the community has been or is being transformed by inclusion?

## Sending

Close the session with the following litany and adapted prayer from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 220, 222):

**All: O God of justice and love, we give thanks to you:**

*(allow time for people to offer petitions of thanks)*

**All: You illumine our way through life with the words of your Son:**

*(allow time for people to lift up words of Jesus)*

**All: Give us the light we need, awaken us to the needs of others:**

*(allow time for petitions for those in need)*

**All: Renew our faith, increase our hope:**

*(allow time for people to announce signs of hope)*

**All: Deepen our love for the sake of the world:**

*(allow time for people to lift up the needs of the world)*

**All: And at the end bring all the world to your feast.**

**Leader:** Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**All: Thanks be to God. Amen. Amen.**



## SESSION 4

# COMPASSION TRANSFORMS COMMUNITY

*God's transformed and transforming community has the mind of Christ and accomplishes God's purposes in at least two ways: through radical acts of compassion and by resisting conformity to this world's narrow definition of neighbor.*

One of Luke's primary purposes in writing his Gospel is to show how God's loving purposes and compassion have always and forever been intended for the healing and wholeness of all humanity and all creation. Luke celebrates that God was made known in the history of the people of Israel, but then explains that Israel was intended to be a light that illuminated God for all others. And so, Luke says, while God's favor seemed, initially, to be granted through Israel, all human beings are conduits for God's compassion.

People today might not fully appreciate the task Luke sets before himself, fifteen years or so after Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple. In the later part of the first century CE, the Jesus movement is no longer recognized as an expression of Judaism but is now seen as something quite separate and distinct—and there is confusion and conflict about who's who and who belongs where. Writing to a Christian community now composed mostly of Gentile believers, Luke tries to answer these questions: How is it that a Jewish Messiah expected by the people of ancient Israel is a savior to the Gentiles too? How are we to understand that the God of Israel is also God of all creation?

Luke answers the questions with stories of relentless nonconformity and boundary breaking, stories of Jesus and the earliest Christian community *extending* God's love to the most surprising people in the most unexpected places and transforming them in the process. But perhaps just as important are the stories of Christians who *discover* love and compassion in the most surprising people and in the most unexpected places and are themselves transformed.

Our twenty-first-century eyes and ears do not necessarily recognize how radical the challenges were that Jesus made to his followers, to people who bumped up against the limits society wanted to place on God's infinite compassion. Tax collectors and lepers? Surely, Jesus, you don't mean them too? Samaritans, Jesus? Surely you don't mean God's embrace holds these enemies of the Jews!

Although Samaritans and the Jews of Jesus's time both trace their lineage to the origins of Israel and base their beliefs on the first five books of the Old Testament, differences in interpretation of scripture, marked differences about holy sites and the importance of Jerusalem, and centuries of varying political circumstances created a deep and fierce animosity between them. They viewed each other with suspicion, they treated each other with hostility and violence. Today we see the "good" Samaritan's goodness in his compassionate assistance to the man beaten on the roadside, in stark contrast to the priest's and Levite's apparent disregard. But we may not understand how utterly impossible it would have been for Jesus's followers to fathom that a Samaritan could be this "good," that a Samaritan, of all people, would be the one to extend care and compassion to a Jew.

To inherit eternal life, Jesus says to the lawyer who asked (v. 25), you must love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (v. 27). The lawyer asks, "And who is my neighbor?" (v. 29).



Answer: It is the unlikely Samaritan who transforms the definition of neighbor with his acts of compassion, and by seeing the beaten man as his neighbor without regard for that man's character, class, or religion. And now the lawyer must recognize the Samaritan as his own neighbor too. In the parable and in the Gospel, the Samaritans become neighbors to the lawyer, because Jesus has transformed the category of neighbor—no longer distinguished by role, race, ethnicity, history, who is in the neighborhood, who is in the tribe of shared religious beliefs and practices—but rather now in terms of who lives, acts, and serves in the world as a conduit of God's mercy and compassionate purposes.

## Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Think about one of your neighbors (currently or from childhood) or a story about your neighborhood. Share these stories as a group, making observations about how we determine who qualifies as a neighbor.

Make a list of observations about the character or primary features of relationships with neighbors (for example, close proximity; similar life circumstances, such as income level or housing; shared social concerns; children or grandchildren in the same schools).

## Core Bible Text: Luke 10:25-37

Read aloud the Bible story from Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the good Samaritan. Then discuss:

- Where do you see yourself in the story? Why do you see yourself there? What effect does it have on how you relate to the story?

Read the story again. Put yourself in a different place.

- How does that affect the impact of the story on you?



## The Great Commandment

These words from Luke 10:27, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . and your neighbor as yourself,” also appear in the Gospel of Matthew. Both Matthew and Luke place special emphasis on these commandments from God, found in two Old Testament passages.

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:17-18, and Matthew 22:34-40 aloud.

Compare the version in Luke with the version in Matthew. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus himself says that on these two commandments “hang all the law and the prophets” (v. 40) basically meaning that all the other commandments and prophetic exhortations boil down to loving God and loving neighbor. And these two commandments share the single command to love—to show mercy, to show compassion.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus makes it plain that obedience to these commands to love is the key to eternal life—*eternal* not meaning infinite time but rather suggesting a quality of fullness of life.

Luke’s young lawyer recites the two commandments and then asks Jesus a clarifying question: “Who is my neighbor?” (vv. 27, 29). Jesus, picking up on the term *neighbor*, begins the parable. Note how Luke’s Jesus concludes the parable with a similar question, “Which of these three...was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v. 36).

- How does Jesus, in Luke’s Gospel, identify who a neighbor is?
- How do you understand the relationship between loving one’s neighbor and having eternal, or fullness of, life?
- How does the Old Testament background to Jesus’s statements about the great commandments influence your understanding of Luke’s purposes with this story?
- How does compassion transform community in the parable of the good Samaritan?

## Someone Else in the Neighborhood

Read the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman from John 4:3-42. Next read the story of Zacchaeus from Luke 19:1-10. Then discuss these questions together:

- Where are the traditional ideas of neighbor challenged?
- Where is radical compassion at work?
- What transformation happens in individuals because of this compassion?
- What transformation happens in communities because of this compassion?

## Comparing Then and Now

In small groups, rewrite one of the stories above (the parable of the good Samaritan, Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus) in a contemporary context, relating specifically to refugees, migrants, or asylum seekers. Then share the stories with the entire group.



Discuss:

- What are the challenges or hard truths raised in rewriting the parable?
- How have migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers—those often considered “other”—transformed the Christian communities you are part of, teaching you about what compassion looks like?
- Where, how, and why do Christian communities falter in being transformative with regard to radical compassion and beliefs about migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker as neighbor?
- Where do you, personally, serve as an agent of change with radical compassion toward immigrant neighbors, and where do you falter?
- How would you describe the difference between compassion that conforms to the world’s practices and expectations, and compassion that transforms?

## Stories that Transform

Alejandro (a pseudonym) arrived at the border shelter in Guatemala with his wife, three children, brother, sister-in-law, niece, and a neighbor with a child. Three of the children were infants or toddlers. They had left their home in Honduras at midnight, arriving at the shelter at 6:00 a.m.

Why had they left their home in Honduras? Alejandro had witnessed a crime.

He told no one. But he was seen by the gang members who committed the crime. And so they waited for him to come home, and as he approached his house they fired shots. They fired sixteen shots toward Alejandro and his house. Five of the bullets hit Alejandro in his abdomen. Several others barely missed his wife and daughter in the house. Lying in the hospital after surgery, he knew he and his family would never be safe in their home. He knew they had to leave. He would not chance leaving anyone behind—not his young brother, nor his sister-in-law and her toddler—no family member was safe.

Three months later, though not fully healed, they set out on a journey to New York, where family members live. As they prepared to leave, his neighbor was evicted and faced living on the street. So he invited her and her toddler to join them.

That first night they had been schemed out of money by people who promised to guide them but whose route he decided was too dangerous. They had continued on their own, with just enough money left for the bus tickets to get to the Guatemala-Mexico border. After that, they would need to travel through Mexico, cross the US border, and ask for asylum. They plan to stay together. “We are a team. It is dangerous, but we would rather die trying to get to safety than die from being shot at home.”\*

\*Used with permission of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

## Toward Transformation

*"We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all life's needs."*

—Martin Luther's Small Catechism, explanation of the Fifth Commandment

Reflect on these questions individually, then discuss them with the group.

- In what ways is your Christian community visible as an agent of change with respect to compassion?
- What are signs the community has been transformed by its compassion?
- What is one way your own church (or other community or community organization) could make or is already making a gesture of compassion toward migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker neighbors? What will make such a gesture transformative?

## Sending

Close the session with prayers of compassion and the Lord's Prayer. Have ready three containers marked as follows:

1. Things done that harm our immigrant neighbors or put them in danger...
2. Things done that support the needs of our immigrant neighbors...
3. Things that widen our understanding of neighbor...

Each person needs three slips of paper and writes something to put into each container. Close with the following prayer, with a leader reading from each container as indicated.

*Leader:* The Lord be with you.

*Group:* **And also with you.**

*Leader:* God of compassion, forgive us for those things we do that harm or put in danger those you would have us consider as neighbor: [read from container 1]. God of compassion,

*Group:* **Hear us and forgive us.**

*Leader:* God of compassion, we offer thanks for the ways in which the life of our neighbors is supported: [read from container 2]. God of compassion,

*Group:* **Hear us and inspire compassion in us.**

*Leader:* God of compassion, open our eyes and our hearts to see the face of our neighbor in [read from container 3]. God of compassion,

*Group:* **Hear us and widen our vision to see our neighbor in hidden or unfamiliar places.**

*Leader:* We offer these and all our prayers in the name of Christ who taught us to pray . . .

*All:* **Our Father...**

# SESSION 5

## JUSTICE TRANSFORMS COMMUNITY



*God's transformed and transforming community has the mind of Christ and accomplishes God's purposes in at least two ways: through radical acts of justice and by resisting conformity to this world's definitions of fairness and equity.*

Matthew is the only Gospel writer to include the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, suggesting that it had particular significance for him and also for us. Writing to a Christian community some ten years after the destruction of Jerusalem, in the late first century CE, he addresses a situation in which followers of Jesus were living in a world where Roman power had been newly asserted. (Jesus had been crucified by Rome about fifty years earlier.) Despite the devastation of city and Temple and Rome's oppressive presence, Matthew reassures his community that God is still faithful to them, that God has not abandoned them. He does this, in part, by emphasizing Jesus's proclamations about the "kingdom of heaven," which continually reorient them to God's reign, God's system of rule, established and in force, if only they will have eyes to see it (Matthew 13:14-16).

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard offers a picture of God's system of rule, of the kingdom of heaven, in a riddle about different laborers who work different amounts of time in the vineyard but who all receive the same wage at the end of the day. The laborers who worked all day complain about receiving the same wage as those who worked an hour; they expect the system to be fair, to reward each laborer with wages proportionate to time served. The parable seems to say, "Not so! What you think is *fair* does not align with what God thinks is *just*."

In Matthew's time, Jews and Jewish Christians would have seen themselves as the all-day laborers, unable to accept that Gentiles too received God's grace without having "put in the time," without having participated in Israel's

long history, without having been in covenant with God from the beginning.

It is hard not to be sympathetic to the grumbling laborers in their frustration; we want to shout out with them that this just isn't fair! Then the parable invites us to see ourselves in them, and how our grouching might be a marker of our conformity to the world's system of fairness. The parable forces a shift in perspective—perhaps it is not right or fair that having been given what we were promised, we are unable or unwilling to be glad for the gifts also given to our fellow laborers who are in need. The parable renews in us the mind of Christ, transforming our otherwise small and calculating spirits.

If we imagine ourselves as the latecomers to the vineyard, acknowledging the depth of our poverty and need, there is only gratitude in finding ourselves the recipients of God's abundance. Then the parable contrasts the misdirected human concern for calculating what's fair with God's concern to be gracious to all. Our line of sight shifts away from the ledgers we keep and toward the gifts God is bestowing, and as a result the mind of Christ is renewed in us.

There are traces in this parable of Matthew's (and probably Jesus's) deeply biblical understanding of justice in terms of God's jubilee year; the jubilee being the year when land and wealth are redistributed, economic imbalances are redressed, and everyone gets an opportunity to start over. Perhaps the parable is not simply highlighting that God's justice is different from ours, but also challenging our community to transform its idea of justice in light of the character of



God's justice. God's jubilee justice occurs in a larger context of repentance, forgiveness, and new beginnings. No longer can justice be measured merely as the distribution of goods on the basis of merit, but rather requires the restoration of possibility to all, a redressing of the imbalance in all the human systems. Jubilee justice in a community reflects minds renewed in Christ, the voluntary self-emptying of privileges to be redistributed so that new life is extended to all.

It has been said that justice is what love looks like in public. With minds renewed in Christ, our ideas about what's just are transformed by love.

## Core Bible Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Read together Matthew 20:1-16, the central Bible text for the session.

Read it a second time, this time focus your attention on the landowner. Then answer these questions.

- What about his behavior would you cheer (or what do you imagine some other people might find to cheer about)?
- What would you jeer (or what do you imagine some other people might find to jeer at)?

After the second reading, write the cheers and jeers on chart paper.

Read the passage a third time. This time have half of the group focus on the laborers first hired and the other half on the laborers last hired. Again, consider what you would cheer and jeer and record them on chart paper.

Look at the list of cheers and jeers for words that suggest some similarity to or have a connotation of wise or foolish, smart or stupid. (It is okay if there aren't any.)

Then discuss:

- Where in the story is grace found?
- What hinders people from recognizing or receiving it?
- What enables people to recognize or receive it?

## Wisdom and Folly from Paul

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; 2:6-16.

Here the apostle Paul writes about the relationship between God's wisdom and human folly: what is wise in God's eyes will appear to foolish to a human being; what is wise according to human standards is folly or foolishness from God's perspective. Jesus's death on the cross seems, by human standards, to be a foolish way to demonstrate power and might. And yet, it is the way the power of God's life and love is most clearly shown.

Looking back at the "cheers and jeers," identify if (or how) the cheers or the jeers illuminate Paul's perspective. How do the cheers and jeers conform to human wisdom?

## From the Old Testament

Ask for volunteers to read some Old and New Testament passages that reflect the theme in order to expand the understanding of God's perspective on justice and fairness:

Leviticus 25, especially verses 1-10 (This is about the jubilee year, where land and resources are redistributed equally among the people and the land is allowed to rest.)  
Isaiah 58 (what it takes to restore peace, repair breach)  
Micah 6:6-8 (justice, mercy, humbling)  
1 Corinthians 1:18-31 (foolishness)

## Justice Is Love Made Public

Read Matthew 5:43-48 (rain and sun on the just and the unjust).

Consider how verse 45 relates to wisdom and folly. (Note that this Bible verse is located in a larger section of verses about loving one's enemy.)

- How are justice and love related here?
- If justice is love made public, what does Matthew 5 add to the description?

Considering all these verses, list the characteristics and features of a biblical concept of justice or God's system of justice.

## Comparing Then and Now

Look at the list of features of the biblical presentation of God's system of justice and reflect on the following questions individually. Then form pair or triads to share responses.

Afterward, share insights from the conversation with the whole group.

- Where specifically do you see these characteristics present in how Christian communities today order their economic practices?
- Where is there a need for reordering our practices toward refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants?
- What would jubilee look like for refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers?
- What justice measures for refugees, migrants, asylum seekers might be considered folly? How might they also be wise?
- What do you think is "the mind of Christ" with respect to justice for immigrants in our world today?
- How would you describe the difference between justice for immigrants that conforms to the world's practices and expectations and the justice that transforms?
- Where, how, and why do Christian communities falter in being transformative with respect to justice for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees?

## Stories that Transform

Juana (from the story in Session 1): It hurt my heart to leave our country. We caught up with the Migrant Caravan after we crossed into Chiapas, Mexico. We asked around town directions to travel north and some townspeople told us it would be safer to travel with the Caravan. Thank God we encountered so many good Mexican people who helped us—a young teenage lady as we traveled by bus helped us from being questioned by Mexican immigration officers, telling us to pretend to have a conversation with her so they would think we were locals, and thankfully we weren't detained. Other bus drivers helped us with directions, knowing we were looking to join the Caravan, and others would let us get on the bus without charging us. There were a few cities in other states where the government banned giving migrant rides, so we had to walk during those parts.

In Mexico City we were welcomed by a crowd of people and even saw traditional Mexican dances and mariachi music as we entered the city. There was a politician's wife who started dancing and inviting all of us from the caravan to dance with her. She kept telling us, "Keep going, don't give up!" The love that many Mexican people showed us as we traveled was evident. That was motivation for us to keep moving forward. The remote areas where we had to walk were hard because we sometimes lacked water, or if we were given water, we were so tired from walking under the hot sun, we could hardly carry our own things. The sun beat our face and we would close our eyes, close to passing out from the heat. We saw many people fall from the top of the trailers they were riding on due to the heat. It was tragic to see.

Our experience traveling through Mexico was a good one though—we encountered more people who helped than those who didn't want us or complained about us being in Mexico with the caravan. We were pointed to shelters, sometimes lodged for free, we were fed; in that aspect I can see what a blessed country Mexico is. There were some people in Tijuana who were upset about the arrival of all of us, and during a protest some of them started throwing rocks at our group. My family and I dodged the rocks, but there were a few people who were struck by the rocks and hurt. When that happened other Mexicans who were supporting us got in the middle to protect us and apologized to us, telling us those who threw the rocks were not representing the Mexican people well—that it wasn't who the Mexican people are.

We crossed the (US) border toward San Ysidro, and I started to cry. Immigration officers from the United States told me, "Don't worry ma'am, you and your family are going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay." I know that God put people in our path, including the officers who treated us justly. We were told if we followed the instructions we were given, shared our story [to the immigration judge] of why we came, and attended all the immigration court appointments, we should be okay. God was in control the entire time, even while we were with the immigration officers.

The pastor from the Matthew25 group we met at the Barretal shelter a week before got called by one of the officers, and shortly thereafter we were let go and picked up by the pastor. We arrived right before Christmas Eve and were welcomed in by the pastor's family and church. Our kids all received gifts for Christmas. We were so happy! The pastor and your group [Matthew25] have helped us so much during our case, getting us to check in with ICE. We have found a Spanish-speaking church where we attend service almost daily and met someone from that church that offered us a place to stay with a family with kids close to my kids' ages. We are so blessed by the people we have met here in the United States as well. We are still checking in with immigration court regularly, and an immigration officer comes by every week to check in. We were told this week that before the end of March our [monitoring] ankle bracelets are going to come off because we have been attending every single appointment and our case is going



well. We have an attorney that Matthew<sup>25</sup> helped us find for our asylum case, so we are just waiting for that to continue. We are hopeful we can get our work permits and be able to find work to support our family, be able to buy my children the things they need.\*

## Toward Transformation

Reflect on these questions individually, then discuss them with the group.

- What do you think is a critical justice issue for migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers?
- What are some signs that communities are being transformed by God's radical justice?
- What is one way your own church (or other community or community organization) could make or is already making a gesture of justice? What makes such an act transformative in that context?

## Sending

Close with prayers for justice and concern for our neighbors. Each participant may write a petition of their own or select prayers from pages 72-79 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Then gather and offer the petitions together.

Between each petition, say or sing together the refrain of the hymn "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying" (ELW 752).



\*Used with permission of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

## SESSION 6

# FORGIVENESS TRANSFORMS COMMUNITY

*God's transformed and transforming community has the mind of Christ and accomplishes God's purposes in at least two ways: through radical acts of forgiveness and by resisting conformity to this world's inclination to withhold forgiveness in favor of meting out punishment.*

This session's story about the healing of the paralyzed man appears early in Mark's Gospel, which moves at record pace, with episode after episode piling up one right after the other. The first chapter alone is dense with evidence for one of Mark's central claims: that Jesus is the son of God, with power to exorcise demons and to heal.

In just one chapter, Jesus arrives on the scene and is baptized by John, at which time the sky is torn apart, releasing the Holy Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness. After forty days of torment by Satan, Jesus emerges proclaiming God's kingdom. He gathers around himself a small band of followers and heals a disciple's mother-in-law. He teaches in the synagogue, drives out an unclean spirit, and travels the countryside curing others of disease, casting out more demons, and healing people with leprosy.

Having established Jesus as one with power over disease and demons, Mark opens the second chapter with a story that extends and expands the reach of that power: *Jesus can also forgive sin.*

At first, this appears to be another healing story, but the real drama is around the question of who has *the authority* to forgive sin. The scribes are scandalized when Jesus offers forgiveness to the paralyzed man (v. 7). They can accept that one human being has the power to heal another, but they are certain that the authority to forgive sin is reserved for God alone. When Jesus forgives the sin of another, the scribes accuse him of blasphemy, of claiming to be God.

In Jesus's day, many people believed that a person's physical afflictions were the result of that person's sin. Jesus says, "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home" (vv. 10-11). How we are to understand the title "Son of Man"? Some scholars think it refers to a divine figure, while others think it could simply mean a human being. If Jesus is saying that human beings have the authority to forgive sins, then his question in verse 9 "Which is easier, to say . . . 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?" might just be challenging the scribes' (and our) unwillingness to do the easier thing, to forgive each other our sins.

When the paralyzed man gets up and walks, Mark tells us that the people present were amazed, they glorified God, and they said, "We have never seen anything like this!" These kinds of reactions tell us that for a brief moment, the people saw the situation through God's eyes, that they apprehended it with minds renewed in Christ.

The New Testament bears witness to the reality that our knowledge of God's love is given to us and most fully experienced in the forgiveness of our sin. Forgiveness is God's love made real in our broken lives. When we read this session's story from Mark 2 with the mind of Christ, we see that sin—our transgressions, our regrets, our remorse, our guilt—binds us, incapacitates us, paralyzes us. Forgiveness—both being forgiven and forgiving others—unleashes the full healing power of God, and releases us to move again in our world, with purpose and in love.

## What Forgiveness Looks Like

Before reading the core text for this session, read, in the form of readers' theater, Luke 7:36-50. Assign parts: the narrator, Jesus, the Pharisee, the woman (the woman doesn't speak but should be represented and can communicate through gestures).

Discuss these questions:

- What do you notice about the woman's behavior toward Jesus?
- What does it suggest to you about the experience of being forgiven?

## Salvation Is Space to Move

At the end of the story of the woman forgiven of her sin, Jesus says to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50).

Note Jesus's use of "saved." In the Hebrew language, the root of the word translated as "salvation" actually means "to make space" or "to create a wide path, or a wide way." So, we might say forgiveness = salvation = giving a person space to move again.

- How does the idea of being given "space to move" relate to your experiences of forgiveness?

Jesus makes this very same statement in the stories of Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:48) and the ten men with leprosy (Luke 17:19), but in those stories his statement is translated, "Your faith has made you well," or "Your faith has healed you." The Greek word *sōzō*, translated with the words "saved" and "healed," has a wide range of meanings: to save, to keep safe and sound, to rescue from destruction, and also "to save a suffering one from disease, to make well, heal, restore to health."

- In what ways do the words *salvation*, *forgiveness*, and *healing* each describe or define the other words? How is forgiving or being forgiven experienced as healing? How does being healed offer salvation?

## God's Forgiveness

The prophets and the psalms give insights to the nature and character of forgiveness in their praise of God's forgiveness. Ask for volunteers to read the following three passages from the Old Testament:

Psalms 103:1-14 (God heals, redeems, and removes transgressions)

Isaiah 43:18-25 (the Lord is doing a new thing; not remembering sins)

Micah 7:18-20 (God delights in showing forgiveness)

## Core Bible Text: Mark 2:1-12

Read this session's central Bible passage, Mark 2:1-12. Then discuss these questions together.

- What images or words stayed with you, impressed you, or "claimed" you?
- What similarities and differences do you see between the story of the paralyzed man and the story of the forgiven woman?



- How would you characterize the perspectives of the scribes and the Pharisees in the stories? Can you find any points of agreement with their perspectives?
- If the forgiven woman and the healed man were actually meant to represent a group or community in the Gospel writer's world, who might those groups be?
- How does forgiveness bring healing to the woman? From what does the paralyzed man's healing "save" him?
- Who might the woman and the paralyzed man represent in our world today?
- Where do you see yourself or your congregation in these stories? In what ways are you in need of healing and forgiveness? In what ways are you agents of God's healing and forgiveness?

## Comparing Then and Now

Break into small groups.

Consider what you know or have learned about the realities of migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. Write a contemporary story in which a community acts in a way of radical generosity, inclusion, compassion, or justice in relation to them.

- Where is the paralysis of sin a hindrance to the radical action?
- What healing needs to occur?
- In what way might forgiveness or healing come?
- What capacity emerges when forgiveness creates space for radical welcome?

Share the stories with the entire group. Then discuss these questions:

- How would you describe the difference between forgiveness that conforms to the world's practices and expectations and the forgiveness that transforms?
- Where, how, and why do Christian communities falter in living into their forgiveness by being transformative?

## Stories that Transform

ELCA AMMPARO welcoming congregations accompany migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in their communities in a variety of ways. (The acronym AMMPARO stands for Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation, and Opportunities.) These congregations, like Cristo Rey in El Paso, (1) provide assistance to migrant families released from ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) custody as they move into their new communities; (2) accompany migrants to ICE check-ins; and (3) help migrants find resources for health care, education, and housing in their community.

Members of La Iglesia Luterana Salvadorena (a Lutheran congregation in El Salvador) had a cousin detained in Louisiana. Knowing how lonely he was, they contacted AMMPARO staff in hopes of finding someone who could offer spiritual accompaniment. The pastor of Mesa Abierta

in New Orleans offered to make the several hour journey to the facility where he was detained in order to provide pastoral care to him. The pastor arrived and found him in great despair. That day he had been to court and his bond was denied. Her pastoral accompaniment was so important to him. When the visit ended, he sent a message to his cousins in El Salvador, letting them know how much he appreciated the visit. The cousins relayed the message to the AMMPARO staff. The pastor received the message of thanks before she completed her drive home.

On a conference call of some members of welcoming congregations, a member from a Nevada congregation spoke up. "I need help," he told the group. He went on to explain that one of the migrants in Nevada was scheduled to appear in court in Minnesota. They did not want him to be alone through this, but had no one in Nevada who could go with him. Also on the call was a member of a welcoming congregation in Minnesota. She offered her cell phone number. "Call me." The Minnesota congregation arranged to provide him with housing, hospitality, and transportation and accompanied him to his court hearing.

Several welcoming congregations host regular visits from staff of the Mexican and Honduran consulates to assist migrants with securing the documentation they need for their asylum process. "Know Your Rights" presentations and legal clinics take place at a variety of congregations across the ELCA, accompanied by private legal consultations with attorneys.

Two newly trained Guardian Angels in Boston arrived at the courtroom for their first experience of accompaniment. They talked with the people waiting for their time before the judge. When the judge finished the calendar for the day, the Guardian Angels noticed a young man still in the hall. They approached him and asked why he was still there. He explained that he was waiting for his hearing.

Concerned that there was some confusion, the Guardian Angels went inside to talk with the clerk. Looking up his case, the clerk explained his case had been up in the morning and a deportation order had been issued. The young man explained that he had been told he was to be there in the afternoon. The clerk then went in search of the judge, who was putting on her coat to leave. She put her robes back on and came to see the young man. She asked him to explain what had happened. Hearing him, she vacated the removal order and arranged a new court date.\*

## Toward Transformation

*"Responsible ethical action has more to do with moral formation than decision making, because the goal is participation in the divine reality that Christ reveals God's love reconciles and transforms us so that we begin living like Christ."*

—Rev. Fritz Folz, "Frontline Study" blog, discussing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*

\*Used with permission of ELCA AMMPARO.

Return to the Bible passages you selected in Session 1 (under the heading “The Mind of Christ”). As you reflect on the texts, consider the questions below, then discuss them with the group.

- What effect has your experience in this six-session study had on your understanding of those passages?
- How can this help form you to act with “the mind of Christ”?
- In what ways might those passages contribute to your understanding of radical generosity, inclusion, compassion, justice, and forgiveness?
- How can the passages sustain you to be an agent of God’s transformative presence, especially with respect to the immigrant neighbors in your community?
- What are the next steps for you and your community?
- What have you heard that especially burns in your heart to learn more about?
- Who else can you invite to join you in this journey?
- What resources will you need to continue?
- What are your first steps?
- Who can hold you accountable to continue?
- Who can you count on to pray or offer counsel?

Considering what you will build on from this study, where you sense the Spirit calling you, compose a petition for a closing prayer.





## Sending

Pray together:

*Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin. Grant that we who are reborn to new life in him may live in righteousness and holiness all our days. (ELW, p. 86)*

Allow time for individuals to offer the petitions they have composed, if they wish. Then say responsively (ELW, p. 86):

**Group 1:** Into your hands, almighty God, we place ourselves:

**Group 2:** **Our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, our wills to serve you, for we are yours.**

**Group 1:** Into your hands, incarnate Savior, we place ourselves:

**Group 2:** **Receive us and draw us after you, that we may follow your steps; abide in us and enliven us by the power of your indwelling.**

**Group 1:** Into your hands, O hovering Spirit, we place ourselves:

**Group 2:** **Take us and fashion us after your image; let your comfort strengthen, your grace renew, and your fire cleanse us, soul and body, in life and in death, in this world of shadows and in your changeless world of light eternal, now and forever.**

**All:** Amen.

Close with the hymn "All Are Welcome" (ELW 641) or another hymn.

# AFTERWORD (AFTER WRESTLING WITH THE WORD)

## Resources for Moving Forward in Transformation

ELCA talking points on what it means to become a sanctuary denomination. Go to the Sanctuary Denomination page at the ELCA website (<https://www.elca.org/SanctuaryChurch>) and click on the “Talking Points” link.

ELCA AMMPARO strategy (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities) resources. Visit their website, <https://www.elca.org/ampparo>.

UN High Commissioner for Refugee fact sheets:

- Figures at a Glance, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.
- US Resettlement Facts, <https://www.unhcr.org/us-refugee-resettlement-facts.html>.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service congregational resources. See <https://www.lirs.org/congregational-resources>.

“Entertaining Angels: Engaging and Equipping Congregations for Ministries of Welcome” is an LIRS initiative gathering regional cohorts of congregations for a one-day training, exploring new ways to bear witness to the welcoming grace of God in their specific setting. For more information contact Sharon Baglyos ([sbaglyos@lirs.org](mailto:sbaglyos@lirs.org)).

ELCA advocacy resources, see <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Advocacy>

Criteria for asylum or refugee status in the United States:

To establish eligibility for asylum or refugee status under U.S. law (8 U.S.C. §1158), you must prove that you meet the definition of a refugee (under 8 U.S.C. §1101). In brief, this means showing that you are either the victim of past persecution or you have a well-founded fear of future persecution. In the case of past persecution, you must prove that you were persecuted in your home country or last country of residence. The persecution must have been based on at least one of five grounds, either your:

- race
- religion
- nationality
- political opinion or
- membership in a particular social group.