



**Lutheran
Social Service**
of Minnesota

NOT EVEN ONE NIGHT

Exploring Youth
Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

To help you raise awareness among your congregation about youth homelessness, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota has partnered with Luther Seminary professors to create a five-week Bible study.



Session One: "You've Been Our Home Forever"

Rev. Dr. Rolf Jacobson, Associate Professor of Old Testament

"Wrap your mind around that for a moment! God values human flesh and blood so greatly that God took on human flesh in Jesus Christ and God's Spirit indwells the body of every single Christian."

Session Two: All in the Family of God

Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Biblical Preaching

"What does it mean to be a part of the family of God? What does it mean to be a member of Christian community? There may be no other person more well-equipped to answer these questions than the man born blind who Jesus chooses to heal in John 9:1-10:21."

Session Three: The Kingdom of God is for Children

Rev. Dr. Matthew Skinner, Associate Professor of New Testament

“The kingdom of God belongs, therefore, ‘to such as these’ —to people keenly aware of the precariousness of their existence, to people formed into a new community that recognizes the intrinsic worth of all its members. How should this reality affect how Christians view and support the children around us?”

Session Four: Worship as a Way of Life

Rev. Dr. Dirk G. Lange, Associate Professor of Worship

“Worship marks a faith community not by isolating it or gating it off, separating it or considering it somehow special but by belonging totally to the world around it, by belonging, giving itself to the neighbor in the street”

Session Five: Love Teaches Us Who God Is and Who We Are

Rev. Dr. Eric Barreto, Associate Professor of New Testament

“We answer their calls because we are driven by God’s love for us and for all people, by faith in a God who never leaves us, by a hope that declares boldly that the lives of these young people can be turned around.

Encourage your congregation to engage with the issue of youth homelessness by using this free resource! Feel free to use it creatively – from an adult education hour to confirmation study to a preaching aid. Delve into how God calls us to respond to our young neighbors experiencing homelessness.

SESSION ONE

You've Been Our Home Forever

Rev. Dr. Rolf Jacobson
Associate Professor of Old Testament
Luther Seminary

Text – Psalm 90:1-2 and John 1:14

God, it seems you've been our home forever;
long before the mountains were born,
Long before you brought earth itself to birth,
from "once upon a time" to "kingdom come" – you are God.
(Ps 90:1-2; from *The Message*)

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.
(John 1:14, from *The Message*)

Commentary

You cannot tell the biblical story without thinking deeply about "home" and "place."

Reflect for a moment on a few key scenes from the biblical story.

Scene I: The Home-Place Lost (Genesis 2-3)

In the beginning, God set up a place that was intended to be a shared home for God, human beings, and animals. The intention was for everyone to live together under one roof, or rather, in one garden. But the humans rebelled against God's will. They wanted to be like God, "knowing the difference between good and evil." But knowing the difference between good and evil doesn't mean one has the wisdom or will to choose good instead of evil. So God broke the home, putting us out of the garden, lest we do more damage.

Scene II: The Tabernacle and Temple (Genesis 12, 2 Samuel 7)

But God still loved the rebelling creation. So God chose one nation—Israel, the descendants of Sarah and Abraham—to be a priestly nation that would be "blessed to be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1-3). And God chose to be present in the midst of this people—to "dwell" with them, as it were. So after rescuing the people from Egypt in the Passover, God travelled with the people as they wandered through the wilderness. The "tent" in which the divine presence dwelled during these years was known as the Tabernacle. This didn't mean that God wasn't present throughout creation—it just meant that God had a privileged location of the divine presence, a place where humans could go to seek God out when they specifically wanted to find God.

Later on, Israel built a Temple for God—a more permanent "house" (the Hebrew word for "temple" simply means "house") for the Lord. This was the famous temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem. Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 587 by the Babylonians, who took God's people into exile in Babylon. Following the exile, God's people rebuilt God's house—the so-called "Second Temple."

Scene III: Jesus—God Moving into the Neighborhood

The Second Temple was still standing when God did an amazing, new thing! In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God took on flesh and blood and became a human being. Or, in the words of Eugene's translation, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." Following Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the Holy Spirit was sent upon the church at Pentecost (see Acts 2). The Holy Spirit became God's gift to every Christian. In this light, St. Paul invites Christians to regard their bodies as "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). For that reason, Paul urges people not to join themselves to anything that is unholy.

Wrap your mind around that for a moment! God values human flesh and blood so greatly that God took on human flesh in Jesus Christ and God's Spirit indwells the body of every single Christian.

This also means that the existence of homelessness is unholy—it is foreign to the will of God. Experiencing homelessness does not make a person unholy. But our collective acceptance of it is. And because human bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit," when a person experiences homelessness God also participates in that homelessness. How can the holy God participate in such unholiness? How can God's "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" sit by as the holy God participates in the homelessness of youth?

Consider that over 4,000 youth each night in Minnesota have no safe place to call home. They sleep wherever they can, at a friend's house, bus depots, under bridges, and even ice-fishing houses. Living every night without a home puts them at greater risk for abuse, engagement in "survival sex" and prostitution or other sex-trafficking, poor health, and suicide. Is this the home our holy God intends for them?

Conclusion: You've Been Our Home Forever

Robert Frost wrote the famous statement that, "Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in."

In terms of the Christian faith, we are God's home and God is our home.

First, *God is our home*. Psalm 90 starts with a powerful picture of who God is: "God it seems you've been our home forever." The picture of God at the start of Psalm 90 is a profound word of promise: the promise of God as the place where we will be taken in. When we turn to God and away from sin, God promises to take us in. When we are broken and desperate, God promises to take us in. When we feel alone and homeless in the world, God promises to take us in.

Second, *we are God's home*. The Gospel of John starts with a powerful picture of what the birth and life of Jesus mean: "The Word. . . moved into the neighborhood." In Jesus Christ, God has moved into our neighborhood. Washed in the waters of baptism, God has made each of our bodies into dwelling places for the Holy Spirit. This is a word of promise of how valuable we are to God.

Yet this is also a word of command.

When God comes to us, we are exhorted, urged, adjured to take God in, too. When God comes to us in the form of a neighbor in need, we are invited to regard that neighbor as a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. As neighbors enter your space, neighbors bring the Holy Spirit with them. We *need* the neighbor to bring God into our lives.

Recall the youth we considered earlier, the youth sleeping under a bridge because she has nowhere else to go. When we encounter her, she brings God's presence into our lives. Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota's programs for at-risk and homeless youth are an embodiment of God's promise of inherent value and belonging to youth in our community.

Prayer

Oh holy Child of Bethlehem, be born in us again. Cast out our sin. Enter in. Lighten our darkness. Heal our diseases and broken hearts. Move into our neighborhoods.

Questions

1. Have you ever felt the need to leave a home or some other space because it wasn't safe? Some people experience homelessness because they lack a safe place to live. Psalm 90 says, "God, it seems you've been our home forever." How can we make this divine promise real to our neighbors?
2. The exile (about 587-539 BCE) refers to the time when the Jerusalem Temple lay in ruins and many of God's people suffered in exile. It is provocative to imagine this period as a time when God experienced homelessness! What does it look like when an entire community or nation opens up the doors to their hearts and welcomes in the living God? What are the visible signs when this sort of welcome happens?
3. Have you ever opened up your home to a neighbor? If it is true that the Holy Spirit dwells in every heart (and it is), then it is also true that we need the neighbor to bring God into lives. As neighbors enter your space, neighbors bring the Holy Spirit with them.

Additional Resources

1. For further reading on Genesis: Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982)
2. For further reading on Psalms: Rolf Jacobson and Karl Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Engagement and Discovery* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013)
3. For further reading on John: Karoline Lewis, *John* (Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014)

About Rev. Dr. Rolf Jacobson

Rolf Jacobson is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary. With Craig Koester, he developed the Narrative Lectionary. His books include *Psalms* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; co-authored with Beth Tanner and Nancy Declaisse-Walford; Eerdmans 2014); *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (co-authored with Karl Jacobson; Baker Academic, 2013); and *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Augsburg Fortress 2008).

His articles have appeared in *Theology Today*, *Word and World*, *Interpretation*, and other places. He is a frequent speaker and preacher, known for his humor and snarkiness. He can be heard weekly on Sermon Brainwave and I Love to Tell the Story (the Narrative Lectionary podcast).

SESSION TWO

All in the Family of God

Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis

Associate Professor of Biblical Preaching
Luther Seminary

Text – John 9:1-10:21

⁹ As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷ saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.

¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I

see.”¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided.¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight¹⁹ and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.”²⁵ He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”²⁷ He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

¹⁰ "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that

do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

¹⁹ Again the Jews were divided because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?” ²¹ Others were saying, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Commentary

What does it mean to be a part of the family of God? What does it mean to be a member of Christian community? There may be no other person more well-equipped to answer these questions than the man born blind who Jesus chooses to heal.

An interesting fact – the man born blind never asks to be healed. Jesus just shows up and decides to give him sight. It’s important to remember the obvious – he was born *blind*. That is, he has never been able to see. Not only is he granted his sight, he is invited to *see* who Jesus is – God in the flesh. At the same time, he is invited to see who he needs Jesus to be – the God who grants him sight but also the God who finds him when he has been thrown out of his community.

As the story goes, the man is healed and yet the healing is a relatively short story, a briefly narrated event (9:6-7). The longer story is what it all signifies. All kinds of people are interrogated as to who the man is and what happened to him – the neighbors, his parents, the man himself. Furthermore, Jesus heals the man and then disappears, only to return when he learns of the man’s excommunication (9:35).

In 9:35, Jesus finds the man. In that finding, the man is brought into a new community, a new family. He has been rejected by his neighbors, his parents, and the religious authorities and this three-fold rejection has multiple implications of what it means to be homeless. When Jesus finds the man Jesus then proceeds to explain what all of this intimates, for the man born blind, for the disciples, for all believers in Jesus. To have received sight is, of course, critical. But who the man sees Jesus to be, the God he worships (9:38) means that he is entered into a relationship with Jesus. In addition, the whole point of chapter 10 – note that Jesus does not stop talking in 9:41 – is to create a picture, an image, of what it means to be in the family of God; what it means to be a member of Christian community. The blind man has been thrown out of both. He has been an object of suspect by his neighbors, excluded by his parents, and then finally marginalized by his community. So Jesus needs to tell him, to tell his disciples, “Here’s the thing. I will find you. You are my sheep. I am your shepherd. I will not lose you. I will protect you. I will provide for you pasture, and I will lay down my life for you.” Wow, does the man blind from birth (as do we) ever need to hear these words.

For the man born blind, cast out, he now has been brought into the fold of the Good Shepherd, a new community, a new family, where love and abundant life abound. Essential to entering into the meaning and function of this story is to pause and ask, what would this feel like? How would you describe this sense, this experience, this feeling of radical inclusion? Of life abundant? Of knowing that you will never be alone ever again? Especially if you, or if others you know or have known have experienced these same feelings. Perhaps these feelings have been experienced for different reasons and circumstances, but they are no less critical, important, and they matter, exceedingly so, for your self, your faith, how you orient yourself to the world, and for your relationship with God.

For all intents and purposes, the man born blind has experienced homelessness his entire life. Because of his illness, he was relegated to beg for, and have hope in, the charity of those who might pass by. Seen as less

than, cursed, or even suffering the sins of his ancestors, he has known only despondency, disregard, and dejection his entire life. Moreover, the story narrates a repeated rejection, by the neighbors, even by his parents.

To what extent does this story articulate the realities of and give a perspective on those youth who find themselves equally overlooked? Discarded, deserted, fending for themselves because no one else will? They need Jesus, they need us, to offer abundant life even when they have, like the man born blind, resigned themselves to their circumstances. They need us to see them in their abandonment and offer them the possibility of a new community because Jesus has said, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold... and I must bring them also" (10:16). They need the mission of Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, expressing the love of Christ through service that inspires hope, changes lives and builds community.

They need the hope of LSS that youth homelessness can really, truly be eradicated. They need a physical community to be a part of, a place where they can be in relationship with trusted adults, as well as with other youth. They need us to acknowledge their ability to see when we only perceive in them blindness. They need us to believe that they themselves have seen the brokenness of our communal structures that claim inclusion but only exclude. They see the institutional realities that maintain demands for societal worth. They see the ways in which our cultural claims usurp our religious convictions.

We need their sight that is willing to tell the truth because they have lived the truth. The man born blind lived the truth of his religious, social, ancestral, communal, familial rejection and then said, "I see something different" for the sake of the world God loves (John 3:16).

Prayer

God of Abundant Life, help us to see life and lives through the eyes of community, of belonging, of relationship. Help us to live lives committed to invitation, to finding, to bringing those overlooked into your fold of

grace. Help us to know and feel your abundant love that extends to the world you love so much. Amen.

Questions

1. Imagine yourself as the man born blind. When and why have you been overlooked? Passed by? Taken for granted? Even considered less than for reasons you did not understand?
2. Think about a time in your life that you would describe as that which the blind man experienced in 9:35. What would it feel like to be found? To be brought into a new community? A new family?
3. Why is being a part of a family, a part of a community so important? Why is belonging so essential for what it means to be human and even to experience life abundant?

Additional Resources

1. Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries, Fortress Press, 2014.
2. <http://streetlightusa.org>
3. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek, *Early Christian Families in Context*, Eerdmans, 203.

About Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis

The Rev. Dr. Karoline M. Lewis joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 2007 and holds the Alvin N. Rogness Chair of Homiletics. She has had adjunct faculty positions at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, and Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and is ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

A graduate of Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., Lewis received the M.Div. degree from Luther Seminary and the Ph.D. degree in New Testament Studies from Emory University, Atlanta. She has led conferences, workshops, and retreats throughout the country and Canada and is a regularly featured preacher and presenter at the Festival of Homiletics.

Lewis is the author of the introduction and study notes for the Gospel of John in The Lutheran Study Bible (Augsburg Fortress, 2009), co-author of New Proclamation: Year B, 2009, Easter through Christ the King (Fortress Press, 2009) as well as articles in The Christian Century, Feasting on the Word, Lutheran Forum, Word and World, and for Odyssey Network's ON Scripture. Her most recent book, John, is published in the Fortress Press Biblical Preaching Commentary Series (2014). She is a regular contributing writer for WorkingPreacher and co-host of the site's weekly podcast, Sermon Brainwave. Her blog, OnPreaching, can be found on her website, www.karolinelewis.com and you can follow her on Twitter at [@karoline_lewis](https://twitter.com/karoline_lewis) for weekly reflections on preaching the lectionary texts for the upcoming Sunday.

SESSION THREE

The Kingdom of God is for Children

Rev. Dr. Matthew L. Skinner
Associate Professor of New Testament
Luther Seminary

Text – Luke 18:15-17

¹⁵ People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Commentary

When Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Luke 18:16; see parallels in Mark 10:14 and Matt 19:14), what images spring to mind? Do we think of childlike wonder, expressed in the wide eyes of a kindergartener eagerly attending her first day of school? Do we see a compassionate toddler moving a caterpillar off the sidewalk to protect it from dangerous shoes and bicycle tires? If we do, maybe it’s because our culture tends to romanticize childhood as a state of innocence and humility. Many of us associate childhood with simple, uncomplicated virtue. Why wouldn’t Jesus want angelic youngsters around him?

Except—things were a little different in Jesus’ world.

Jesus' contemporaries regarded the children around them as vulnerable and perhaps even inconsequential creatures. Of course, people in that culture loved and valued children; society knew that its future depended on its next generation, and some scriptures speak of children as blessings from God. But, by and large, children lacked status, which means they lacked access to power, rights, and privileges. They did not matter much in their society. From a legal perspective, they belonged to their fathers, which allowed their fathers to deal with them nearly any way they pleased.[1] They suffered child-mortality rates that were, by comparison to ours, shockingly high. Beyond rural Galilee, out in the broader Roman world, brutal treatment of children was more familiar and even widely accepted, including abandonment, slavery, and sexual exploitation.

When Jesus' disciples reprimand those who would bring small children to him, they likely try to protect his standing as a respected teacher and leader. What could infants, toddlers, or youth possibly contribute to him? He deserves more august company. After all, he has a whole world to fix, doesn't he? It would be better if he devoted his time to influential people, those with the status or resources to get things done.

Then the scene turns: Jesus corrects his disciples, declaring that the kingdom he is inaugurating belongs to children, "such as these." His point goes beyond telling the disciples to muster more compassion for overlooked members of society; rather, he declares—again—that this "kingdom of God" creates a new, overturned social order. In God's kingdom, greater honor and blessing go to those whom social conventions tell us to ignore or despise. Jesus has said it before (see Luke 9:46-48; 18:14): God sees those whom the rest of the world has trained itself to neglect.

Jesus then adds another attention-getting statement: *anyone* who hopes to enter the kingdom of God must "receive" it "as a little child."

What does he mean? There are at least three possibilities. Jesus could be saying that all people must receive the kingdom in the manner that a child in the ancient cultural setting would: enthusiastically or with desperation,

corresponding to the emotions that come with moving from vulnerability to security. Or perhaps Jesus means that a person must receive the kingdom as someone who counts himself to be like a powerless child, someone who can claim no social advantages and can offer nothing but gratitude in return.

However, a third interpretation is most likely the correct one, in light of everything else occurring in this scene. It understands Jesus to say that a person must receive and live in the kingdom in the same manner that she should welcome a child, imitating the behavior that Jesus himself models in this passage (as well as in Luke 9:47-48). Jesus cares not about how the wider culture measures a person's value; social codes for determining who's important and who gets consigned to vulnerability have no standing in God's kingdom. This reality informs everyone's place in Jesus' new world order. Our entrance into the kingdom—as well as our ongoing participation in it—expresses itself in the genuine hospitality we are to show to everyone who makes up the family of God. Jesus' disciples fail at this very thing when they rebuke those who bring children and infants to the Lord. Jesus sets them straight, telling them that life in God's kingdom is truly communal. It's about welcoming. It must involve authentic fellowship and mutual belonging.

The kingdom of God belongs, therefore, “to such as these” — to people keenly aware of the precariousness of their existence, to people formed into a new community that recognizes the intrinsic worth of all its members. How should this reality affect how Christians view and support the children around us?

This passage from Luke asks the church to consider the plight of children and to welcome them as Jesus would. Doing so makes us reconsider whether the differences between children in Jesus' world and children in our modern times are not so great after all. Young people remain vulnerable in many ways. Societies continue to treat them as insignificant. Perhaps American culture romanticizes happy, rosy-cheeked childhood and admires children's virtues because we're trying to distract ourselves

from all the ways in which we and our world full of grown-up problems have let children down and left them facing peril.

The troubles young people must navigate aren't only half a world away in famine-stricken lands or theaters of war featuring child soldiers. They reside here at home, too. Consider just a few ways in which our society puts children at risk:

- About a quarter of all children in the USA live below the poverty line, and about a tenth of the nation's childhood population lives in extreme poverty.
- The country's current joblessness crisis debilitates teenagers who seek to work: the employment-to-population ratio for American teens has taken a beating over the last six-plus years.
- Sex traffickers target teenagers and find success in entrapping especially children who have suffered already from poverty, homelessness, and child abuse or neglect.
- In comparison to the wider adolescent population, youth who experience homelessness suffer higher risks of mental-health problems, suicide attempts, and traumatic-stress disorders.
- Nearly half of Minnesota's homeless population is age 21 or younger.

Caring for children is the church's work, because the gospel Jesus announced and embodied utterly rejects any assumptions or value systems that allow us to consider children as unworthy, insignificant, or expendable.

Caring for children is the church's work, because belonging to God's family enlists us to follow the self-giving acceptance that Jesus modeled. We are the church, and we can express this acceptance in our personal lives, in our congregations, and in organizations and programs we support such as Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota..

Caring for children has always been the church's work, as we learn from other New Testament books, additional ancient Christian writings, and even non-Christian authors reacting to Christian communities in the Roman world. These sources all indicate that our spiritual ancestors devoted substantial effort to caring for children (as well as women, especially widows) who had found themselves abandoned or otherwise abused by social systems, economic misfortune, predatory adults, or cruel twists of fate.^[2]

Caring for children connects us to Jesus himself. When Christian groups such as LSS welcome, support, empower, and advocate for young people, they follow our Lord's model. Return to the scene from Luke's Gospel and consider why people brought children to Jesus in the first place, hoping he would touch them. Something about his reputation and his priorities must have convinced observers of his commitment to these young ones. He held them in high regard. He calls us to do likewise.

[1] See Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," in *The Child in Christian Thought* (ed. Marcia J. Bunge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 31–36.

[2] See Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

Prayer

We thank you, merciful God, that no one is invisible to you; no life and no person is negligible in your sight. Give us eyes to see the humanity we share in common with children who suffer violence and injustice. Give us the will to fix our broken systems, which keep our young people from flourishing, from experiencing the love of Christ, and from enjoying the benefits of your promised kingdom now and forever. Amen.

Study Questions

1. The Gospel of Luke does not explain what motivated people to bring children and infants to Jesus, nor does it tell why the disciples initially forbade them. Given how children were considered as essentially statusless in this ancient setting, how would you explain those actions?
2. If you could change one thing about your congregation's priorities and practices to help create an environment that was truly welcoming and accepting of children—all children—what would you do? What exactly would you hope for this change to accomplish?
3. Since so many factors contribute to putting today's young people at risk of exploitation and harm, it's difficult for those who want to help children to know where to begin. How can churches best use their resources to help? What gives you reason for hope as you look at situations like these, situations that may seem beyond our ability to fix?

Additional Resources

1. Bunge, Marcia J., Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds. *The Child in the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.
2. González, Justo L. *Luke*. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
3. MacDonald, Margaret Y. *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014.
4. Ringe, Sharon H. *Luke*. *Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

About Rev. Dr. Matthew Skinner

Matthew L. Skinner is a native Californian who now braves Minnesota winters, serving as Associate Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul. His research interests focus on the Gospels and the book of Acts, the cultural world reflected in the New Testament, and the Bible's potential for shaping the theological imaginations of its readers. Sought-after nationally as a teacher for conferences and congregations, he helped create the free site EnterTheBible.org and contributes frequently to WorkingPreacher.org. He's part of the team that produces Sermon Brainwave, a free weekly podcast for preachers and others exploring the biblical texts assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary.

He holds degrees from Brown University and Princeton Theological Seminary and is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). His most recent book is *The Trial Narratives: Conflict, Power, and Identity in the New Testament*. For more information and other things to read, visit MatthewSkinner.org.

SESSION FOUR

Worship as a Way of Life

Rev. Dr. Dirk G. Lange
Associate Professor of Worship
Luther Seminary

Text - Romans 12:1-13

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 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.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Commentary

In many Christian communities, people gather regularly for “praise and worship,” on Sunday morning or Saturday evening or even during the week. Coming together, they express thanks for the way things are going in their lives. Perhaps they gather to connect to something “spiritual” or sometimes simply to be with other people, see some friends. They listen to praise music and maybe even join in singing. “Praise and worship” becomes part of a routine in their daily lives, a time to re-energize.

Throughout the Bible, however, the act of praise and worship point believers in a surprising different direction. Rather than encouraging a therapeutic, “good-for-one’s-soul” approach, praise and worship always directs a faith community beyond its walls, to open its doors, outwards towards the neighbor, both familiar and unfamiliar, into the street to welcome the stranger.

A survey of the many biblical texts that expand the scope of worship in this outward direction is not possible here. One text from the Old Testament may suffice thanks to its clarity. Through the prophet Amos, God complains about the worship, festivals and solemn gatherings that the people practice. Songs, even worship songs that are self-satisfying are dismissed. “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:23-24). Worship is re-directed towards justice, flowing forth and refreshing the world.

At the conclusion of his letter to the Romans, Paul turns to worship. He does more than just summarize what he had to say about faith in the preceding chapters, where he had argued that the Holy Spirit, through faith, makes the heart glad and free (particularly in chapters 1-8). For Paul, faith fulfills all things for the believer but this faith is always a visible reality. He uses “worship” to describe this faith in action.

Faith always produces good fruits! Faith flows forth unrestrained in good works, as Martin Luther noted. Faith emerges through the many gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to the faith community. Here is the whole point of these concluding chapters, beginning with chapter 12 and Paul's assertion, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

What this "sacrifice" means, what "our spiritual worship" entails, is defined in the following verses. Faith is a way of life. It is our worship. Everyone in the faith community has received gifts or charismas from the Holy Spirit. These include specific ministries in the community from administration to teaching to care for others. No distinction of value is made between these gifts and no gift is simply a private or individual affair. Whatever the gift in a faith community, it is always offered for the other, for the neighbor. Our bodies – that is, our whole being as a community – is given generously.

By using the act of worship as his focal point, Paul engages the whole community in a common service that is characterized by a radically new way of being with others. In a society that values financial success, individual achievement, self-promotion and status, Paul proposes humility – regarding others more worthy than one's self – as a way of life. This humility begins in the recognition that God has given to all and not just to an elite or a privileged group.

This recognition of God's generosity is at the heart of worship. Worship weaves our lives together in a community where everyone is welcomed, valued, supported, encouraged. This worship marks a faith community not by isolating it or gating it off, separating it or considering it somehow special but by belonging totally to the world around it, by belonging, giving itself to the neighbor in the street. It is worship that listens to the demands of the present day.

The characteristics of this community and worship, as listed by Paul in these verses, may sound like an ethical code of conduct but it is exactly the opposite. The list of actions that Paul enumerates in rapid succession speaks to the spontaneity and freedom of this worship lived for others. Love does not follow any command. It does not measure itself according to a moral code. Love spontaneously engages the neighbor. It rejoices in hope, it is patient in suffering and it perseveres in prayers (v.12). This joy, patience and perseverance is rendered visible in contributions to the needs of the saints and in hospitality towards strangers (v.13).

The faith community is called to live its worship in a world so deeply in need. And that need is very visible in the streets of our cities. For example, the majority of young people in Minnesota experiencing homelessness have been abused or neglected as children. In addition, over 60% of these youth have a parent who has been incarcerated.

(<http://www.wilder.org/Wilder-Research/Publications/Studies/Homelessness%20in%20Minnesota%202012%20Study/Homelessness%20in%20Minnesota%20-%20Findings%20from%20the%202012%20Statewide%20Homeless%20Study.pdf>) They come from broken homes, from families where they have never experienced care, being honored, generosity, mutual affection, or compassion.

But “our spiritual worship” envisions a world in which neighbors and strangers are not simply statistics or people on the outside of our well-defined circles. The neighbor, the stranger, is the one crying out to be heard, to be welcomed, to be offered hospitality. The young people in our streets are not scary children; they are *sacred* children. Each one has gifts and a place in the community, a place of dignity and safety and one of hope. Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota’s programs for homeless youth provide gathering places not just for young people reaching out for support, but also for our faith communities living out worship. Together, in community with LSS and with the thousands of young people who

experience homelessness in Minnesota, we can see justice roll down like waters.

They are, as Jesus, asking for water to drink (John 4). When the Samaritan woman, not knowing or recognizing Jesus, counters and asks why a stranger would ask her for a drink, Jesus replies, “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.” Commenting on this passage, Martin Luther writes that God comes to us “in the guise of a poor beggar asking for bread.” God places flesh and blood before our door with a plea, “Give me a drink!” (Luther Works 22).

God is waiting in the street, not up behind our altars! Our worship takes us out into the street and there, with all those seeking a new life, waiting for a good future, we rejoice and weep together, creating a trust-worthy world.

Prayer

God of our cities and streets and dwellings, you gather us all under your wings, in your immeasurable goodness. Open our eyes and ears that we may see and hear the cry of our neighbor, our companion on this journey. Throw wide open the doors of our buildings and hearts to welcome all. Let our love be genuine. Give us an ardent spirit for justice, for dignity and safety for all. Direct us to each other that we may all rejoice together in a shared hope. We ask this all in the name of Jesus, our Savior and Lord.

Questions

1. What are the demands of the present day in your neighborhood? How are they lifted up in worship? What does it mean to be sent out from worship?
2. How are gifts valued *in* your community and *by* your community in the neighborhood?
3. What does it mean for you to persevere in prayer?

Additional Resources

1. Andrea Bieler, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread and Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
2. Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).
3. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

About Rev. Dr. Dirk G. Lange

The Rev. Dr. Dirk G. Lange serves as Associate Professor of Worship at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. An ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, he received his PhD in theology from Emory University. Working in the area of constructive liturgical theology, Lange re-reads classic theological texts through the lens of liturgy, trauma theory and post-structuralist literary theory.

He is currently working on a literary analysis of liturgy as disruptive force in the theology of Martin Luther. Having himself witnessed and been involved in the Eastern European underground resistance in the 1980's, he is interested in the ways liturgical disruption can rewrite ecclesiology and ecumenism.

SESSION FIVE

Love Teaches Us Who God Is and Who We Are

Rev. Dr. Eric D. Barreto
Associate Professor of New Testament
Luther Seminary

Text – 1 Corinthians 13:13

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Commentary

The Corinthian community sometimes resembles the cast of a soap opera more than a church. There was scandal. There was unrest. There was confusion. There was destructive behavior. There were broken relationships. At first glimpse, the Corinthian church is the last place we want to turn to look for an ideal church. Then again, our churches may resemble Corinth a bit more than we care to admit.

Paul's letter to these Corinthian Christians begins with a number of corrections and exhortations. Expel a member who refuses to repent. Be kind to the weak when it comes to meat sacrificed to idols. And on and on.

All these admonitions are summarized beautifully in 1 Corinthians 13. If you've been to a wedding, you've heard this passage. The chapter contains a beautiful and stirring account of the meaning and purpose of love. But because we so often hear this passage at weddings, we don't often remember the messy relationships and broken community that inspired Paul to voice this reflection on love. Usually, we neglect the preceding

chapters and the descriptions of a troubled community that litter the early parts of this letter.

The message of 1 Corinthians 13 for us today is not simply that the idea of love is a beautiful matter but that love is the one force in this world which energizes our lives with God's power.

Take a quick look at 1 Corinthians 12. There, Paul outlines a variety of spiritual gifts and stresses the importance of each. Prophecy, healing, working miracles, speaking in tongues: these are all gifts from God for the sake of God's peoples. To help us understand these gifts, Paul compares them to the human body. An arm, he says, can't tell a leg to get lost. An eye can't reject the help of an ear. And so he observes that no one gift can encompass all the others.

That is, one spiritual gift is never enough in a community. A community and we as individuals need the gifts of others to be whole. It is only in the cooperation of gifts that the vastness of every talent can be enjoyed, appreciated, and practiced.

In 1 Corinthians 13 then, Paul turns the tables. Instead of stressing the importance of each particular gift or celebrating how wonderful each is, he suggests that the specific gifts are themselves ultimately unimportant! They don't matter in and of themselves, for it is love and love alone which allows our talents to speak to one another, to reveal a glimpse of who God is.

Love! So simple a matter and yet so complex. Why is it so hard to define the word "love?" Try it for a moment. In one sentence, how would you define "love?" This is not an easy task, for we experience love in so many different ways. From the very start, we know love as that attachment we have with those who take care of us. Whether it is parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, or uncles, we know what it is to be cared for, to be nurtured. We know what it is like to have someone put our needs in front of theirs.

We also know the love of good friends, friends that become like family. Friends who help us move from home to home, friends who remain unruffled by a late night phone call. Though we may not share a single drop of blood, friendship can make siblings of us all.

We know the love of human compassion. When we encounter those in need, our hearts reach out and cross the boundary of language and culture. When complete strangers help us at our worst moments, we taste love at its purest. In those singular moments when we are far away from home, helping others or being helped, we find out something vitally important about love. We find out that love knows no bounds. Love never runs out. Love never tires. Love is infinitely patient.

As daughters and sons of God, we are wired for love; if we inherit anything from God, it is this central characteristic. And so, maybe the challenge for us today is that we are simply incapable of reducing love to a single sentence, that love, if it's God defining characteristic, is far beyond our comprehension, a gift we receive and give without really understanding it.

In this way, we discover anew that without love, we forget who we are: God's children.

Now, it's sometimes hard enough to love those close to us. But one of the critical parts of love and one of the hardest to embrace is loving the stranger, that neighbor we have never met or that "other" who strikes our heart with anxiety and fear. Harder still is figuring out how to love people who are invisible to us.

To many of us, the more than 4,000 youth experiencing homelessness each night in Minnesota are unseen, hidden in plain sight. Their pain, their struggle, their suffering is invisible within our warm homes and our comfortable lives. What does it mean to love these children and young people? What does that love have to do with our faith?

Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota is driven by the call of the gospel to love all people in the name of Christ. We reach out to youth experiencing homelessness not just because it is the neighborly thing to do and not just because we feel terribly that young people would find themselves without the shelter of a loving home, not just because it makes us feel good to help others and not just because such help is a civic good that will help the state.

Yes, these are all excellent, commendable reasons for our work among youth experiencing homelessness. But our faith leads us to an even more powerful impulse.

We answer their calls for help because we are driven by God's love for us and for all people, by faith in a God who never leaves us, by a hope that declares boldly that the lives of these young people can be turned around. LSS' Homeless Youth Services provide a continuum of services from housing to health care to help staying in school and finding employment that make that turn around possible for hundreds of young people each year.

We love because we can't do otherwise. We love because God's love is inexhaustible.

We love because it is who we are as God's children. We love because God loved us first.

We love because a lonely teenager needs to hear those healing words today: you are seen and you are loved. We love because our help will accompany those words with action representing the grace of God in their lives.

Prayer

God, your love is inexhaustible. Your promises sustain us. Your grace frees us from our fears and fills us with your love. For this love, for these promises, for your grace, we give you thanks. Lead us onto your holy paths, roads that lead to places we would rather avoid and people we

would rather not encounter. Help us see our sisters and brothers as you see them: beloved children. Teach us to love. Teach us to hope. Teach us to trust. In your Jesus' blessed name, amen.

Study Questions

1. What are your spiritual gifts? That is, what gifts has God given you in order that you might serve your neighbors? How are your spiritual gifts enhanced by the spiritual gifts of others?
2. In your life, when have you felt most loved? How do you love others? What do these answers teach you about love?
3. How do we love our "invisible" neighbors, those people whose plight we usually can't see?

Additional Resources

1. Block, Peter. *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009.
2. Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996.
3. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-eric-d-barreto/when-people-you-dont-much-like-receive-gods-love_b_2813275.html
4. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=72
5. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=550

About Rev. Dr. Eric Barreto

The Rev. Dr. Eric D. Barreto is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. He was ordained by Peachtree Baptist Church (CBF) in 2006. After completing a bachelor of arts degree in religion at Oklahoma Baptist University and a master of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, he earned a doctoral degree in New Testament from Emory University.

His research interests range from the Acts of the Apostles to ancient and contemporary questions about race and ethnicity. In 2010, he published his first book, "Ethnic Negotiations: The Function of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16." He is also a regular contributor to WorkingPreacher.org and EnterTheBible.org.



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This LSS of MN small group study joins our other free resources - an [“Abundant Aging” book study](#) and the “My Neighbor is Muslim” small group study on the Muslim faith. LSS of MN will continue to serve as a resource for our church and community, offering materials that come from our experience in supporting and serving our neighbors on behalf of the 1,200 Lutheran congregations in Minnesota.

LSS staff and volunteers are always available to preach or speak in your congregation or community group. Please let us know how else we might be helpful by contacting congregations@lssmn.org.

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