

Introduction: The “Living Faith in the Everyday” Worship Series encourages congregations to celebrate the special Sundays in the month of October while striving to have living faith each day. In order to experience living faith, we must act upon our faith in everyday circumstances by making a daily effort to see all the people.

Week 1 | Living Faith in the Everyday WORSHIP SERIES

NRSV texts, artwork and [Revised Common Lectionary Prayers](#) for this service are available at the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#).

Leccionario en Español, [Leccionario Común Revisado: Consulta Sobre Textos Comunes](#).

Lectionnaire en français, [Le Lectionnaire Œcuménique Révisé](#)

Calendar Notes

September 15–October 15 [Hispanic Heritage Month \(USA\)](#)

October

October 6 [World Communion Sunday](#)

October 13 [Children’s Sabbath](#)

October 14 Indigenous Peoples’ Day

October 20 Laity Sunday (2019 Resources forthcoming)

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October 31 [Reformation Day](#) / Halloween

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November 1 [All Saints Day](#)

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November 10 Organ & Tissue Donor Sunday; International Day of
Prayer for the Persecuted Church

November 11 Veterans’ Day

For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

Our October worship series, “Living Faith in the Everyday,” has a dual meaning. When using the word “living” as an adjective, this series compels us to seek a vibrant faith-life in everyday circumstances. Here, “faith” is the keyword and the emphasis is on having vibrant, living *faith*. When using it as a verb, this series narrows in on the action of “living,” underscoring the messiness of *living out* our stories of faith in this complex world. We believe this series, “Living

Faith in the Everyday,” accentuates both dimensions. In our complex, “everyday” world, in order to have a vibrant *faith*, one must be *living* it out in word and deed.

The first week of our worship series opens on a shared ecumenical observance of living our faith together: World Communion Sunday. While this is a great Sunday to highlight the global nature of the universal church, it also presents a unique opportunity for local ecumenical collaboration. Consider reaching out to your local clergy or lay colleagues in the community and asking them to write a prayer to include in your service. Offer the same in return.

As Jack Seymour discusses in his preaching notes, the lectionary passages speak to the notion of “trying to make sense of things” in the wake of disruption and destruction. Similarly, the observance of World Communion Sunday emerged in between times of international warfare. Brokenness abounds. One response, especially as we see in the Psalm reading for this week, is lament. This juxtaposition of lament with Holy Communion is not a typical connection, but an apt one to explore in this week of the series. We worship a God who understands and absorbs the brokenness of the world—the same God who, in Communion, offers us Christ’s body as nourishment, healing, and as “medicine” even, for our souls and for the life of the world.

Perhaps on this World Communion Sunday, we ought to encourage our congregations to offer their brokenness and the world’s brokenness in an intentional way prior to receiving the bread of life that makes us whole. For smaller congregations, this could be a moment of sharing out loud just after the Invitation to the Table. For medium to larger congregations, parishioners could be invited to write down one or a few areas of brokenness (personally, locally, globally) and place that paper in a communal vessel on their way to receiving the bread and cup.

Additional Resources for this Service

<http://www.umcgiving.org/ministry-articles/world-communion-sunday>

<http://www.textweek.com/festivals/worldcommunion.htm>

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/world-communion-sunday>

https://www.globalministries.org/special_days_wcs_world_communion_sunday_ideas

Written by Jack Seymour, Professor Emeritus of Religious Education, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL

Living Faith in the Everyday
October 6, 2019
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
World Communion Sunday

Texts: [Lamentations 1:1-6](#); [Psalm 137](#); [2 Timothy 1:1-14](#); [Luke 17:5-10](#)

Three special Sunday themes in the Christian year are scheduled during October: World Communion Sunday, Laity Sunday, and Reformation Sunday. As we preach and lead worship, we pay attention to connecting lectionary texts with the emphases of the church.

This first Sunday in October is the celebration of World Communion Sunday. Recognized by several Christian denominations since the late 1930s and early 1940s, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church has designated World Communion Sunday as recognition of the inclusive and global nature of the church's work.¹ World Communion means that people across differences of culture and history join at the table that God sets before us.

Look at the dates of its founding – late 1930s and early 1940s. Worldwide Communion was named during a time the world was divided in what became a devastating world war. World Communion Sunday was begun in hope – looking for a time when barriers could be crossed and communities united.

Today, on this Sunday, millions join together to celebrate Holy Communion. United Methodist Church offerings go to empower students for service both in the United States and internationally. Yet, rumors of war are still heard, and barriers dividing people are still being built.

On first glance, the texts for October 6 and the celebration of World Communion do not seem to cohere. Yet, just as World Communion Sunday was initiated in a time of war, the first two lectionary texts for October 6 remember a time of war and devastation for the people of Judah. After a series of tribute payments, conflicts, and uprisings between the Jewish people and their overlords in Babylon, an invading army under King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, devastated its great Temple built by Solomon, and took captives into exile.

The Babylonian exile created a significant problem for the people's religious understandings. They asked: "Why has God let God's people be taken captive (as we know Jeremiah seeks to address that)? How can God be faithfully worshiped without the Temple?"

Looking directly at the devastation of Jerusalem, the writer of Lamentations cries: Even the "roads to Zion mourn" (Lamentations 1:4 NRSV). The Psalm for today reflects the same pain. It appears to have been written in Babylon: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4 NRSV.) It tells of the ways the faith of the exiles was ridiculed. The rabbis in Babylon worked to address that pain – to understand God's continuing presence with the people and God's hopes and expectations for the people.

Compared to the anguish of the exile texts, the messages of the New Testament readings are straightforward and almost simple. The Letter to Timothy (also written during a time of oppression – the Roman oppression of Jews and followers of the Way of Jesus) advises, "Hold on"; be faithful. Luke records a puzzling interaction between Jesus and the disciples about

¹ See <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/world-communion-sunday>.

“increasing faith.” Faith requires moving beyond ordinary expectations of daily life, expectations learned in our culture, to seek more.

Celebrating World Communion Sunday itself offers good news. Our world seems always to be filled with rumors of war. And, personally, in our everyday lives, we face devastation. Both our world and our ordinary lives often call us to lament. We may even feel a similar anger to that of the Judeans imprisoned in Babylon. We fear we have lost faith, that God has turned away, and that hope (new life) is not possible.

The gift of World Communion is that even in the midst of brokenness and despair, God’s vision calls us forward. For Jesus, table fellowship was amazing. He gathered with diverse groups of people, even some who were not welcomed by others (see Mt 11:18-19; Mk 2:15-17; & Lk 7:33-34). Gathering at table sought to embody the vision of Isaiah (a prophet important to Jesus) where God would “wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth” (Isaiah 25:8 NRSV). Through table fellowship, Jesus called his followers to feed one another and build community.

As we eat the bread and share the cup, we remember God’s gifts of a good creation and God’s continuing creation. We remember the gift of Jesus and the way he taught us to live. We remember the continuing presence of the Spirit.

The message of World Communion is not simply hope instead of despair or endurance instead of tears. It calls for work! The vision of God’s banquet calls us to join with others. It calls us to reach out across barriers. It asks us to work with others to make the banquet a reality. Perhaps now Jesus’ response to the apostles’ question, “increase our faith” (Lk 17:5 NRSV), is clearer. The gift of the vision of God’s Table calls us to do more than the ordinary. We are called to live the Table – to join with those who are different from us, to work for healing and build community.

In the next three weeks in October, we will see this advice repeated. In the midst of everyday life, we are called to sing songs of faith and follow God by working to embody the vision of new life that the Table offers us.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are the concerns and “devastations” facing those in your community? Is it fear of gun violence in schools, barriers being built on the border, or exclusion of believers from leadership in the church?
2. Remembering that World Communion Sunday was initiated to cross even warring boundaries, ask yourself what barriers you and your congregation need to cross.
3. Focus on the vision of the Table. Ask, together with members of your congregation, where you can work for this vision.

The Rev. Dr. Jack Seymour (jack.seymour@garrett.edu) is professor emeritus at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, where he taught for 30 years. He is an ordained elder in the

Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church. Jack is the author of **Teaching Biblical Faith: Leading Small Group Bible Studies** (Abingdon, 2015) and **Teaching the Way of Jesus: Educating Christians for Faithful Living** (Abingdon, 2014). He has retired in Nashville, TN, where he is active writing and teaching in the church.

Week 2 | Living Faith in the Everyday WORSHIP SERIES

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

This week is one of those great moments when there is harmony between the United Methodist programming and worship calendar with the Revised Common Lectionary. On October 13, many United Methodist congregations honor “Children’s Sabbath” Sunday. Not to be confused with Children’s Sunday or Youth Sunday, Children’s Sabbath “engages places of worship across the country in focusing prayers, worship, education programs, and action on learning more about the

urgent problems facing our nation’s children exploring sacred texts and teachings that call us to love and protect children, responding with outreach and advocacy.”²

The scripture passage from Jeremiah implores the Israelites to “seek the welfare of the city,” even though the city in which they are situated is within Babylon. One of the key takeaways from this passage is that we are called to serve our surrounding locales, even if we might not appreciate the situation we are in. God’s expectation for us to serve God and neighbor is intimately connected with seeking the welfare of the city.

As a response to the worship service, consider a partnership with the General Board of Church and Society in advocating for a particular issue. Explore their website, and in particular their “Take Action” Initiatives: umcjustice.org/what-you-can-do/advocacy/take-action. Consider having computers set up in the narthex for people to take tangible action in seeking “the welfare of the city” through legislative advocacy. If the use of technology seems prohibitive for your congregation, encourage a letter-writing campaign that addresses a local or national issue.

The prophet Jeremiah’s call to seek the welfare of the city makes a great connection to Children’s Sabbath. Adding the advocacy work as a response forges a strong connection between worship and mission, and ultimately demonstrates what it means to embody “Living Faith in the Everyday.”

Additional Resources for this Service

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/why-united-methodists-observe-childrens-sabbath>

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/church-civic-holidays/childrens-sabbath1>

<https://www.childrensdefense.org/programs/faith-based/childrens-sabbath-celebration/>

Living Faith in the Everyday October 13, 2019 Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Texts: [Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7](#); [Psalm 66:1-12](#); [2 Timothy 2:8-15](#); [Luke 17: 11-19](#)

The text from Jeremiah is a message sent to community leaders in the midst of the captivity of the people of Judah in Babylon. Jeremiah advises them how to live.

² <https://www.childrensdefense.org/programs/faith-based/childrens-sabbath-celebration/>

Jeremiah's history as a prophet was long-lived. His prophecy spans from the religious reformation of Josiah to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem as well as the years the people were exiled in Babylon. His reflections directly engaged the difficult questions the people were asking in exile: "Has God abandoned us? What does God require of us?"

Look particularly at the advice given to the people:

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:5-7 NRSV).

Jeremiah expects that the people will live in Babylon for at least two generations. There they are to build a community in the midst of their captors. They are to live life in this strange world. And then, we hear shocking, and probably disturbing advice, "seek the welfare of the city." Normally, the people would pray for the welfare of Jerusalem; yet, this prophecy tells them to seek the welfare of their captors' city.

"What?" is all the people could say. Jeremiah's answer to the troubling questions listed above is clear. God expects/requires them to fulfill the covenant daily, over and over. Or simply put, God expects them to live the expectations requested in the daily prayer recited by Jewish believers, the *Shema Yisrael*: Love God and Love neighbor. In fact, for Jeremiah, the people had not been seeking the welfare of their home in Judah. They had not been loving God or neighbor. Instead, they were creating social barriers, oppressing their own people, seeking solace in military power, and ignoring the love God expected of them. For Jeremiah, that is why they got in trouble! That is why they were defeated, broken, and captive! God expected them to love and to do all they could to build up the community's vitality, yet they did not.

The God Jeremiah understood, though, was a forgiving God. God restores community. While God had not lost love for them, God expected them to be faithful and fruitful. What they had not been doing in Judah, they were now called to do in Babylon: "Seek the welfare of the city."

Love God and love neighbor are not prayer requests to be taken lightly, to engage when convenient. They are expectations. They are the hope of all of life. In fact, when one lives a life of community building and seeks the welfare of the stranger, one is witnessing to the power of love that God has injected in creation. As the Psalmist proclaims: "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth" (Ps 66:1 NRSV). God acted for the Hebrew people, freeing them from captivity in Egypt (Ps 66:6), but God's vision is all encompassing. God keeps "watch on the nations" (Ps. 66: 7).

In the gospel reading, Jesus' actions also point to the building of community. He healed a group of lepers, whose illness had isolated them and separated them from community. He tells them

to “go and show yourselves to the priests” (Luke 17: 14 NRSV). That action would allow them to re-enter the community. In fact, for Jesus, acts of healing, feeding, and forgiving always rebuild community. They were signs of the “realm of God.” Jesus expected his followers to engage in healing, feeding, forgiving, and rebuilding community.

Perhaps, today’s worship and preaching can focus on the surprise answer to the question of whose welfare we are called to seek. The advice to the exiles is amazing. In last week’s texts, we saw the pain and anger of the exiles. They were quite lost. They even prayed for extreme punishment of their captors (Ps 137:9). Yet, the answer to their prayers and pain comes in a shocking way – with advice to settle down, live life, and seek the welfare of Babylon.

The Jewish daily *Shema* prayer is so simple, yet so difficult. Its power is amazing, but we ignore it again and again. Jesus would have prayed it daily. Jesus reminded all who asked about the greatest commandments: “Love God and love neighbor.” Honestly, that is the same as the advice of Jeremiah to the captives in Babylon. Healing comes as we work to restore community. Life is enriched as we build community, as we love God and neighbor.

“Shout joyfully to God, all the earth! Sing praises to the glory of God’s name!” (Ps 66:1-2 CEB). We indeed make God’s name “glorious” when our lives and action witness. Isn’t that at the heart of today’s texts? Jeremiah is clear: “Seek the welfare of the city.” Jesus calls: rebuild community.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Think about the impact of the words, “seek the welfare of the city” on the captives in Babylon. What would be the impact of that advice for us, our neighbors, communities, and cities?
2. We all struggle with questions of illness, loss, and separation. The pain of the people in exile was profound. The “lepers” Jesus met were excluded from their communities. Sometimes these questions consume us. What questions are consuming those around you?
3. An amazingly big question is: “Where do these texts call us and those around us to work for healing?”

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

It is Laity Sunday in The United Methodist Church, which usually has three different responses from congregations: (1) ignoring this week and continuing on with business as usual, (2) having your church's lay leader or a certified lay speaker deliver a sermon, or (3) having multiple speakers offer mini-sermons or testimonies. For this week, we are hoping you consider options two and three.

The lectionary passages discuss how we are to make sense of our "living" in this world. How are we to be faithful to God in our everyday lives? What is our "calling?" What is our vocation? By virtue of our baptisms, we are all called and equipped to do the work of ministry – be it ministry as laity or ministry as clergy. How do we live out that ministry in our daily lives? In the preaching notes for this week, Jack Seymour poses the following question to us: how are we—in living out our everyday faith—embodying the light of God?

Consider using this as a framing question for a time of shared testimony. Instead of having a “traditional” sermon, encourage a few key leaders (with intentionality regarding diversity in all forms) to answer that question and to share from their own experience how they embody the light of God in the world. Because this is a time of testimony sharing, this service of worship could also be conducted as a Love Feast (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-love-feast>). While it is good practice to have a few people ready with prepared remarks, please also consider making space for others to share their testimonies as the Spirit moves them.

Additional Resources for this Service

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-laity-sunday>

<https://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/laity/HISTORY OF LAITY SUNDAY THEMES.pdf>

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/glossary-laity-sunday>

<https://chuckknowschurch.com/archive/89laity-sunday>

Living Faith in the Everyday October 20, 2019 Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Laity Sunday

Texts: [Jeremiah 31:27-34](#); [Psalm 119:97-104](#) or [Psalm 19](#); [2 Timothy 3:14-4:5](#); [Luke 18:1-8](#)

Laity Sunday has been a part of the church calendar since the late 1920s and 1930s. It honors the baptismal call of all Christians to ministries of teaching the faith, reaching into the community, witnessing to the gospel, and working to transform lives. For 2019, the theme for United Methodists is “Purpose: Growing in faith through participation in the means of grace.”³

The lectionary texts for this Sunday cohere with the question of purpose, or, to use another word, the question of vocation. We ask, as people of God, what is our vocation? How is God calling us to faithfulness? Too often, in the popular mind, vocation is simply understood as a job, but actually its meaning is much deeper. The word *vocation* is drawn from the Latin word, *vocare*, to call. To what am I called in my life? Vocation includes all of my actions to answer God’s call on my life.

³ See the UMC Discipleship Ministries brochure *Tools for Ministry: H.O.P.E.*

In fact, my vocation is the life I reflect into the world. What is it that others see when they look at me? What commitments and hopes do I reflect? A passage from Isaiah clearly defines the vocation of each believer: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). God’s new life, God’s hope, God’s salvation is to be seen through our lives.

We seek out our “purposes” so that our lives reflect the light of God. Or as the *Tools for Ministry: H.O.P.E* brochure says for Laity Sunday: “One finds a sense of **purpose** in life as a disciple by learning what it means to live out one’s belief through acts of piety and acts of mercy, sharing one’s faith, being nurtured in the faith, and engaging in service.”

The lectionary texts all focus on what it means to search for and live vocation. For example, the Psalm for the day proclaims, “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. . . . Through your precepts I get understanding” (Ps. 119: 97; 104 NRSV). For the Jewish believers who uttered this praise, the law was not a burden; it was a gift. God’s law was a guide for living. Or, as Jeremiah proclaims to the people in captivity in Babylon: God will write God’s law on your heart (Jeremiah 31:33 NRSV). The law was not simply a set of prohibitions. Rather, it provided the people with a vision of how they could interact productively and be faithful. A modern example might be laws that state which side of the street we are to drive (right in the U.S.; left in Great Britain). These laws provide for a safe flow of traffic. They facilitate living together.

Timothy’s letter continues this theme. He argues the teachings of the faith are “training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy: 3:16-17 NRSV). That instruction, as well as the affirmation of the law, has always been important for Methodists. The Methodist movement was rooted in discipline. Wesley taught that we supported one another in disciplines of study and living so that our lives witnessed to the God we proclaimed with our words. It was that “method” that resulted in the name “Methodists.”

Let’s focus on the Luke text. An intriguing portrait of vocation is given here. Jesus tells an amazing parable. A judge, someone who is expected to be fair and righteous, is not. This judge could not be trusted to adjudicate differences because he “neither feared God nor had respect for people” (Luke 18:2 NRSV). His life witnessed against justice and not for it. Reading between the lines, don’t you expect the people who heard this parable prayed they did not have to answer to this judge?

But a widow subjected to his judgment would not give up. Over and over, she “kept coming to him.” She endured. She was persistent and insistent: “Grant me justice” (Luke 18:3 NRSV). Those who heard the parable were probably surprised with her efforts, for they knew it would do no good. In fact, the surprise in the parable, a surprise that would delight the hearers, was the judge’s exasperated sigh: “I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming” (Luke 18: 5).

By rehearsing the parable, Luke reminds his readers of both God's gift of justice and the vocation of the widow. She confronts the disrespectful judge, over and over; she called for justice. The widow witnesses through her actions.

In Jesus' day, people regularly saw unjust judges. The Romans, who were in control, made fun of Jewish religious beliefs. The Romans claimed privileges for themselves. They kept a tight leash on the people and forced some leaders to comply with their wishes. Certainly, the Romans were disrespectful judges. But Jesus revealed that Roman injustice was not the only reality. He taught that in acts of healing, feeding, forgiving, and freeing, the realm of God was breaking through Roman power and control and offering experiences of community.

Vocation? God hopes that people's lives witness and are light to the nations. The image of the persistent and insistent widow is profound. Her challenge of the unjust judge was her witness. We, too, are called by our baptisms to ministry — to work for justice continually. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and redeemer" (Ps 19:14 NRSV).

Questions for Reflection:

1. It is Laity Sunday. Think about the multiple ways that people in your congregation, through their work and their broader vocations, embody the light of God.
2. Think about the persistent and insistent widow. What are some of the ways that the people of God in your community call for justice over and over? How does your congregation join with the community in this work?
3. The Wesleys talked about "means of grace." Means of grace included regular prayer, study, and service by which people's lives were formed in faithful ways. How do you highlight some of the means of grace in today's worship?

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For Your Planning Team

Planning for This Service

Many United Methodists around the world acknowledge this Sunday's commemoration and celebration of the Reformation. The Reformation often seems to be "too heady" to discuss on a Sunday morning or even "irrelevant" to our everyday lives of faith. One way to approach Reformation Sunday is through the lens of unity. "Unity" may seem to be an odd approach because in the last 500 years, the DNA of the Reformation can be characterized by fracturing and splintering. So why focus on unity?

The lectionary texts from Joel and Luke invite us to break down the barriers of "us versus them" and "either/or" thinking. This polarized thinking infiltrates our political structures, the universal Church, and our United Methodist denomination. Yet, as Joel prophesies, the Spirit is poured out upon ALL flesh. In a time of immense division, what if we were to (1) acknowledge the fractures among us, and (2) embody unity in visual form for this service of worship?

If you serve a congregation that offers a “Joys and Concerns” or similar time of prayer requests, consider framing this time as an *acknowledgement of fracturing*. Invite parishioners to articulate some of the areas they have been witness to fracturing in the world, in the nation, in their local communities, and/or within their personal spheres. It will be important to acknowledge that we are not here to “solve” our fractures, but that we serve a God who meets us in these ruptures and divisions to offer hope for new realities.

For an act of closing (and sending), encourage your congregation to make a physical, embodied sign of unity. Smaller congregations may form a circle and larger congregations may hold their neighbor’s hand or link arms. Profess the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed together, signifying that we can find unity in faith, even in the midst of our own divisions. Rejoice in the God whose Spirit is poured out upon all flesh, breaking down the barriers that would otherwise divide us.

Additional Resources for this Service

<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-reformation-day>
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/reformation-day-what-why-and-resources-for-worship>
<http://www.interpretermagazine.org/topics/the-reformation-and-the-wesleys-a-complex-relationship>

Living Faith in the Everyday October 27, 2019 Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost Reformation Sunday

Texts: [Joel 2:23-32](#); [Psalm 65](#); [2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18](#); [Luke 18:9-14](#)

The theme for Sunday remembers the events surrounding the Protestant Reformation. United Methodists officially celebrate Reformation Sunday “with a sense of moving toward unity and community.”⁴ Honestly, we must admit that this theme of searching for unity and community seems ironic with the current conflict and division in the United Methodist family. In worship, we cannot engage Reformation Sunday without acknowledging the brokenness in the wider church and our brokenness.

Looking back at the Reformation is always conflictual. We see sincere efforts at renewal that happened in Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. Yet, in contrast, we also see the extraordinary pain that this severing of the church caused. Europe, for example, was thrown into a Thirty Years’ War as civil authorities took sides. A result was millions of deaths though military action and civil disruption.

⁴ See <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-reformation-day>.

In 2017, The Lutheran World Federation and the The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity produced a common document, the result of years of conversations: ***From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017***.⁵ This document is both historical reflection as well as statement of “ecumenical imperatives.” It acknowledges that “Repeatedly, we have stood in the way of the good news of the mercy of God.” It hopes that study will result in a “deeper communion of all Christians.”⁶

In fact, the document calls on churches to work “from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division.” Differences are to be acknowledged and common commitments named, but, more important, the “experience, encouragement, and critique” of the other is honored. What profound advice! Seeking unity, listening respectfully, honoring another’s experiences, and joining in “service to the world” witnesses “to the mercy of God.”⁷

In the midst of the admissions and hopes of this document, let’s turn to the lectionary texts, focusing on the Joel and Luke readings. Joel is looking out at the devastation of the land. The vision before him is as if locusts have eaten and destroyed everything. Probably a post-exilic prophet, Joel sees brokenness everywhere. Yet he also sees possibilities for new life. Joel writes: “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame” (Joel 2: 27 NRSV).

Joel, as all prophets, advocates for the people to turn back to God who is “gracious and compassionate” (Joel 2: 13 NRSV). The prophets were disgusted when the people took advantage of one another and broke community. They knew God expected more – faithfulness and care for the least.

In many Jewish communities, Joel is read as the prophetic text (the *Haftarah*) the week before the great celebration of *Yom Kippur* (or the days of atonement). The rabbis who shaped Jewish patterns of worship (Torah and Prophetic readings) believed that Joel’s themes of “repentance, lamentation, divine forgiveness, and restoration” provided a fitting prelude to seeking the renewal of community through *Yom Kippur*.⁸ Living in community is always difficult. People will never see eye to eye, but efforts to seek the best for others and to build relationships are expected.

The Luke text is another amazing parable. Luke sets the parable in the context of “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18: 9

⁵ It is available on both Lutheran and Roman Catholic websites:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html and <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion%20EN.pdf>).

⁶ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

⁸ *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1167.

NRSV). What a challenge, both in Jesus' time and today! Can community ever be built with those who regard others with contempt?

Typically, we have heard the parable interpreted as a contrast between the self-righteous religious leader and the unworthy sinner. That interpretation does fit so much of Jesus' ministry as he reached out to those who were excluded. Yet, a commentary by the Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine offers additional insight. In Jesus' day, the hearers of the parable would know that Pharisees were exemplary. Pharisees worked hard to live faithfully. They were respected in contrast to others who colluded with Rome. Some of the colluders included tax collectors. Tax collectors served Rome garnering the tribute Rome expected. In addition, they often took advantage of the weak for their own personal gain.

All parables have a surprise, and this one is no different. Dr. Levine writes: "Perhaps the Jews who first heard this parable understood the Pharisee's merit positively to have impacted the tax collector. This would be the parable's shock; not only that the agent of Rome is justified but that the Pharisee's own good works helped the justification."⁹ Just as the sin of taking advantage of one's neighbors breaks community, efforts to live faithfully and witness to the grace of God restores community. What a surprise! What a challenge for the hearers of the parable who regarded others with contempt.

Efforts, all efforts, to embody and live God's love and grace can miraculously build relationships. Similarly, *From Conflict to Community* advises us to honor "each other's experience, encouragement, and critique" and keep "service to the world" paramount.¹⁰ The effects can be surprising.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Remember, Reformation Sunday is not simply a celebration of heroes; it is a prayer for unity and community. How can you highlight the theme of building community?
2. Research on the sense of community suggests that uniformity is not the key factor in building community; rather, common projects and common efforts build community. Working together for a goal builds community. In what efforts in your community can you engage, even with people with whom you disagree? What projects call you to work together?
3. Looking at the parable: if efforts at living faithfully and openly do have an effect on others, how might we work to honor "each other's experience, encouragement, and critique"?

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⁹ Amy Jill-Levine, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 138.

¹⁰ *From Conflict to Communion*, 87-88.

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