

Resource #1

Year III Called to Listen, Called to Live Listen: What is Jesus asking of us?

We have heard Jesus' words so many times in familiar language that it is easy to miss the radical message that he teaches as the godly way to live. One way to hear Jesus' words in a new way is to read a different translation of the bible. I recommend Eugene Peterson's The Message, a paraphrase of scripture. Here are two examples of passages that can surprise us into renewed listening.

Luke 12: 29 – 31

New Revised Standard Version

And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

The Message

What I am trying to do here is to get you to relax, not to be so preoccupied with *getting* so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself.

Matthew 5:38-42

New Revised Standard Version

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat; give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

The Message

Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all'. If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat. Live generously.

These are hard sayings which are often disregarded as unrealistic in our everyday, human lives. But Jesus gave them to us, and we are called to listen. Try using The Message to dig more deeply into the meaning of what Jesus is asking of us and talk together about what we are called to do as individuals and communities of faith in response to his words.

Bishop Margaret G. Payne – 10/19/09

Resource #2

Year III Called to Listen, Called to Live Listen: What is Jesus asking of us?

Jesus asks us to **Give Extravagantly**. Unlike Jesus, who talked more about money and our relationship with it than any other topic except the Kingdom of God, we do not talk easily about money. The following are excellent resources to begin a conversation that will open us to hear God's call to steward the blessings that have been entrusted to us:

Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life by Mark Allan Powell. Powell presents stewardship as an act of worship, an expression of faith, and a discipline for spiritual growth. Very accessible to all interested persons, this book includes discussion questions at the end of each chapter that make it a good resource for congregational use. Powell was keynote speaker at the 2009 fall Bishop's Convocation. (Publisher: Wm. B. Eerdmans)

Prodigal Sons and Material Girls: How Not to Be Your Child's ATM by Nathan Dungan. An insightful and sometimes alarming look at the world in which our children live and grow. Dungan offers practical advice for reordering our financial priorities by sharing first, saving next, and spending later, so that we can enjoy healthy financial practices and pass them on to our children. Easy to read and use. (Publisher: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)

Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal by Anne Basye. In the words of Water Bruggemann, "this book ... is a candid, faith-filled reflection on being alert, disciplined and free in the 'stuff capital' of the world." This journal is an accessible read for everyone. (Publisher: ELCA).

The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Comes of Age by Douglas John Hall. The classic study of what Hall considers "the best biblical metaphor for the human condition." Published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, this book is unfortunately out of print, but it is still available on Amazon. Most useful for someone with theological training and/or interest.

Greed: Economics and Ethics in Conflict by James M. Childs Jr. An insightful look at the effect on our lives of our unwillingness to accept the limits inherent in our status as steward creatures. Dealing with contemporary issues such as downsizing, health care and global economic disparities, this book offers discussion questions at the end of each chapter to facilitate conversation. Most useful for a committed book discussion group. (Publisher: Fortress Press)

Resource #3

Year III Called to Listen, Called to Live

Listen: What is Jesus asking of us?

In Year III of “Called to Listen, Called to Live,” we are encouraged to think about extravagant giving. One of the places where we experience this kind of giving as Lutherans is in the liturgy. Although we might not think of our weekly worship as an experience of God’s giving, and our response to it, the words and liturgical actions point us toward that extravagance every time we gather for worship. Consider each of the following paragraphs as a topic for discussion about the ways in which our liturgy guides us into a deepening understanding of God’s gifts and the many ways that we can respond to them.

1) Grace – “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” begins the greeting which the presiding minister shares with us as we gather in the name of the Triune God. Grace is the free gift of God’s favor that is ours through faith in Jesus. God’s extravagant gift in becoming flesh among us and giving his life in love for the world is beyond imitation. In what ways have you been surprised by God’s grace in worship? What aspect of our worship empowers you most to be gracious to your neighbor?

2) Gospel – Gospel is a term we hear a lot in worship. The good news of the salvation of the world through God’s self-giving in Jesus is the center of all we believe, but also how we live as believers. In what ways do you receive God’s good news as extravagant giving?

3) Scripture – Scripture teaches us that the risen Jesus intercedes for us continually – extravagantly, one might say. How does God’s love in Word and Sacrament move you to intercede unceasingly, extravagantly, within the Christian community and individually? How might your personal prayer life live in God’s extravagant love so that it overflows in service to God and your neighbor?

4) Extravagance – God’s extravagant offering of self in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is enfleshed in the proclamation of the Word and the sharing of the Eucharistic meal. Having received abundantly, Jesus asks us to give back to God and others extravagantly in response. In what ways have you given extravagantly of your money, your time, and your talents for the sake of Christ and others? What are obstacles to such giving in your life?

5) The Great Thanksgiving – Having heard God speak to us in Scripture and sermon, we celebrate the church’s Great Thanksgiving. How do you experience your reception of Holy Communion as extravagant thanksgiving? How does such thanksgiving motivate you to live an extravagantly thankful life?

6) The Dismissal – Our worship together ends with the “dismissal.” To be dismissed from the Christian assembly does not mean our worship is over. It means (from the Latin) that we are “sent,” dismissed to share the extravagant love of God with our neighbor and give extravagantly of our selves and our resources. How does what you heard and received in worship empower you to share God’s love and give extravagantly? How does giving extravagantly in your daily life urge you back to the Eucharistic table week after week?

Resource #4

Year III Called to Listen, Called to Live Listen: What is Jesus asking of us?

In Year III, Bishop Payne asks us to listen to what Jesus asks of us in relation to the importance of giving as the central activity of the life of the church. GIVE EXTRAVAGANTLY, a component of our synod's vision, calls us to ponder Christ's own extravagant gift, his life. How we respond to this gift becomes part of our witness to others. What is seen and known about God, in you, in us, will make a difference in the lives of others.

When is the last time you had a chance to speak about the ways Christ changes your life, especially your spirit of generosity? a chance to listen to others share their faith practices?

Invite your Congregation Council or another congregational group to read Paul's letter to the Philippians often called the "epistle of joy." A good letter is best read in its entirety. Later there are parts to go back and savor again and again. You might ask participants to read Philippians ahead of time, though its brevity lends itself to an easy ten minute quiet read at the beginning of a meeting after which you may ask the following:

1. From this letter of the early church, find one example of the radical, joyful experience of discipleship. How does it relate to extravagant giving? What does it mean to be extravagant?
2. Ask each person to tell a story of radical, joyful discipleship from their own lives and then also, one from the life of the congregation.
3. Lead a discussion on how membership in the church, the body of Christ, differs from membership in the church, as a congregation.
4. Discuss the word "membership". What are its implications for a church in mission?

This is plenty for one session. A second session might delve deeper:

1. List 10 modest expectations of congregational membership. Go back and rewrite them to reflect extravagance. (You might review what extravagant means.)
2. How does membership in a congregation enhance our lives as disciples in the world? How does membership in a congregation inhibit our lives as disciples in the world?
3. List five NEW ways you could be extravagant in your giving? Think radical. Think joyful. Think personal. Think congregational.

Recommended resource: For Lutherans, the thought of EVANGELISM is radical and not so joyful! A helpful 10-page assessment tool is available free from the ELCA at www.elca.org/evangelism/assessments/ or by calling 800.328.4648. It helps your congregation look through the lenses of prayer, starting and renewing congregations and making disciples.

Resource #5

Year III Called to Listen, Called to Live Listen: What is Jesus asking of us?

What Does Jesus Ask of Us? Jesus Asks Us to GO!

Break into at least three small groups and have each group read one of the following passages. Explore together in small groups the questions below and then report back to the large group. Discuss the relevance of each passage to the outward trajectory of Jesus' mission – and ours.

Matthew 28:16-20

Luke 10:25-37

Matthew 22:1-10

Small Group Questions:

What is Jesus' command in this passage?

To what purpose are followers of Jesus asked to "go"?

What are we asked to do as we go out?

Who are we to relate to as we go? To whom is the good news directed?

Report Back to the Large Group; write down answers on newsprint.

Then consider the following questions together:

How are these passages relevant to the shape of the ministry and mission of our congregation?

In what ways does our church focus on those who are not yet here?

In what ways could we strengthen our outreach to those not yet here?

It is often true that we would be more comfortable if those to whom we are sent, or those with whom we are in ministry are as much like us as possible: the same race, the same class, the same values, the same goals, the same shared experiences. In Dave Gibbon's new book (The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church *Zondervon, Leadership Network Innovation Series, 2009*), he challenges church leaders to re-think this position. He writes: "Embracing a life of discomfort means venturing into places we don't feel like going, doing things we don't wish to do, being with people we don't feel comfortable with, serving them, loving them, helping them—all of which demonstrates a not-of-this-world brand of love that is irresistible to all people in all places." Jesus' way of being in the world was to identify with the misfits and the outcasts; those on the margins looking in—"those whom most people of his day felt uncomfortable being around and justified in ignoring."

One of the things Jesus asks of us is to go to those who aren't yet in our churches; to go and connect with those who need a place to seek and to find experiences of God. We need churches that continue to be unlikely communities where generations interact, where people cross the lines that separate us in other settings; where the "we" of our congregations is always expanding beyond the more homogeneous expressions that so often characterize others aspects of culture and often our churches.

What does Jesus ask of us? Jesus asks us to GO! Thanks be to God!

