



This resource is provided for you from
the Northern Great Lakes Synod
1029 North Third Street, Suite A
Marquette, Michigan 49855
www.nglsynod.org
906-228-2300



A Devotional Booklet to begin Congregational Meetings:
for Councils, Committees, Choirs, Sunday School Teachers,
Quilters, and any group that meets for mission and ministry
in your Congregation.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all...

Blessings be upon you and your leaders as you spend time in scripture, prayer, and dialogue around the topics of Welcome, Witness, and Worship. This resource has been developed through the hands and minds of leaders in the Northern Great Lakes Synod, to whom we give thanks: Pastor Chris Johnson, Pastor Keith Kolstad, Pam Long, Pastor Kristin Rice, and Pastor Katherine Finegan. May this devotional resource be of benefit for your congregation and your congregational leaders as you consider what it is to be a church that welcomes, witnesses, and worships. Let the Spirit guide your conversations and your hearts. It is our hope that this will serve you and your ministry contexts in better living out the call to discipleship here in the Northern Great Lakes Synod and as part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

God is with you, in the name of our Savior Jesus the Christ.

Blessings on the journey!

~the WWW Task Force



Luke 7: 36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.

She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.'

Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?'

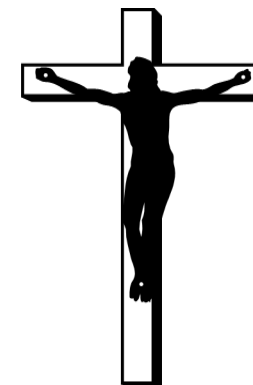
Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, '

Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

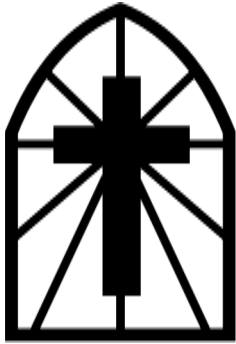
But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'



DECEMBER

... I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.. ~Luke 7:47.



Certainly you may be familiar with this text, but perhaps you are used to seeing it through the lens of forgiveness only. It also has a lot to teach us about welcoming.

Take a few minutes to break into pairs or trios, read Luke 7: 36-50 aloud or to yourselves, and respond to the questions below, (printed on the following page). We will come back together and share our group's reactions.

~In this story there is a difference between Simon inviting Jesus to his house for a meal and being hospitable or showing love to his guest.

~How do we invite people to our church services?

~How do we welcome them?

~When we greet a guest at our Sunday service, to what are we welcoming them?

~Jesus asks Simon "Do you see this woman?" What is he asking Simon to recognize?

~How does this text teach us to see ourselves when welcoming strangers to our Sunday services?

~Does the way we welcome fellow members of the congregation have an effect on strangers coming to services?

Let us pray,
God of welcome,
Help us to move out of our regular circles to see those you would have us see. Help us to invite the person we know will say no, to smile at the person we know will reject us, to talk to the person we know will consider us strange, so that your love will be seen. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

JANUARY

...You are witnesses of these things. ~Luke 24:48

Invite people to respond to the question, "Where were you, what were you doing, what did you witness on 9/11/01?"

Let people answer the question, "Why is this experience so easy to talk about?" (Possible responses: it's personal, a shared experience, emotional impact, collective memory, still processing the experience...)

If we apply the same criteria to our faith, our faith would be easier to share, easier to give a witness to, if we felt it personally, if there was an emotional impact, if we were still trying to figure it out, and if we thought perhaps our listeners also had an experience to share or a story to tell.

~What are the challenges to sharing our faith with others, especially those outside the church?

~Has anyone ever shared their faith with you?

~Have you ever felt like sharing your faith with anyone? What happened?

Let us pray,
Gracious God, you know our challenges. You know where we falter. And yet you send us to be witnesses of THE most important event in the history of the universe. Send your Spirit to bolster our courage, give us the words, give us all that we need to be authentic and believable witnesses to the resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and be able to share how he makes a difference to us and to the world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



FEBRUARY ...*On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. ~Acts 15:11*

~What do you think of when you think of welcome? (Some possible responses: Welcome mat, offering a beverage, a seat, smiling,...Welcome home: yellow ribbons, flowers, a crowd of well-wishers gathered, parade, ...)

~What do we do to offer welcome at our church? (Possibilities may include ushers, greeters, a decent bulletin, communion directions, hymn board, children's message, signs to restrooms, nursery, office...)

~Say...."It's a curious thing, there is not much said about welcome in the early church, and there's very little about welcoming people into the assembly, rather it's all about the people to whom we should bring the message. Folks then were far more concerned with whom they should bring the message to. Hospitality, once people came, was assumed. Far more explicit, is who should be invited, or who should be the target audience.

In Acts 15:1-21, there is much discussion and concern over whether or not the non-Jewish Gentiles can become Christian without adhering to the same practices that Jewish Christians had.

~What are the spoken and unspoken expectations that we have of people who attend our worship services: (Possible responses may include the following: That they'll know how to behave in church? When to sit and stand? That they'll understand how to use the hymnal and the bulletin? That they will introduce themselves? That they will sit with us at coffee? That they'll know there is coffee?)

Let us pray,
Gracious God, help us to offer welcome, both in our church and outside of it, in a way that others need to be welcomed. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

WELCOME

NOVEMBER ...*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. ~Psalm 100: 1*

We may worship God in different settings, but most of the time we use the word "worship" we are talking about our Sunday Assembly. As Lutherans we define worship as receiving God's gifts through Word and Sacrament and responding to the gifts with praise and thanksgiving.

The service that most of us use in our Sunday Assembly is influenced by centuries of liturgy developed by the Roman Catholic church and modified by Martin Luther and others. It includes statements of belief (creeds) written many centuries ago, and some hymns and liturgical music written many years ago. Sometimes this is familiar and comforting to us, but most of it is very foreign to an unchurched person visiting our Sunday Assemblies. We do, however, have many choices available to us that may be used in our worship services from time to time or on a longer basis.

As you answer the following questions, also think about what changes you would like to see.

~How has the physical set up of our church sanctuaries changed over the past 50 years? Why have those changes happened?

~How do church members take an active part in your regular worship service (assistant ministers, prayer writers, prayer readers, lesson readers, cantors, etc)?

~Do you sometimes find yourself automatically reciting the words of the Lord's Prayer or the Creed without thinking about them at all?

~Is there real joy in your regular worship services?

~Do you have fun during your worship service? Do you think it's wrong to have fun at worship?

~If there was only one thing you could change about your worship service what would it be?

Let us pray. Gracious God, Sometimes we forgot just what worship is about, that it is about you, all for you. Thank you for the gift of your presence through Christ our Lord, Amen.



OCTOBER

...He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ~Acts 10: 42

Just as the original followers of Jesus Christ, we are the witnesses, and just like witnesses in a courtroom, we are called to stand up and testify about what we know. We are to tell everyone the good news that God sent his only Son to die for us so that our sins are forgiven and we may dwell in the house of God forever. Unlike in the courtroom, however, nobody forces us to do it. That's too bad because even though we want to share the good news about the One who died for all with everyone, we just don't know how.

We aren't comfortable knocking on a stranger's door and asking them to come to church with us, almost all of our friends already go to church, and we don't know our neighbors or passing acquaintances well enough to ask them to go anywhere with us. Even if we had the opportunity we wouldn't know what to say. How can we spread the good news? It saddens and frustrates us that we don't know what to do.



We may not be able to solve the problem, but perhaps we can think of some things that just might work.

Talk about your faith with your fellow church members now before you try to talk to strangers about it.

~Was there a time in your life that you doubted God's love for you? Was there a time in your life that you didn't think it was important to attend worship? Can you talk about it with your friends in Christ now?

~Was there a time in your life or a particular event that caused you to turn back to God? What action did you take and how did that work out?

Since most of us don't want to disturb folks by walking up to their house and knocking on their door, how else can we have chance to talk to them?

~Can you think of a project, event, or celebration that you can plan where you could comfortably ask people to join you in church, perhaps for a specific reason?

~What resources or materials would you have to prepare for that?

Let us pray,
God of new life, create in us clean hearts, a new spirit, and courageous hearts. Give us the words to say. Open our eyes to see the opportunities to share our faith, to be witnesses, and to gather people in.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

MARCH

*...When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.
~Matthew*

Even the disciples, who could see Jesus, watch him eat, hold his hand, hear his voice, even they doubted their own eyes, their own experience.

It would seem that worship and doubt go hand in hand. We gather for worship in trust that the one we worship exists, and receives our worship with joy.

We worship in trust that we receive what we need for the challenges ahead, both for our efforts in ministry, and for the difficulties that life surely throws in our path.

We worship in trust that the promises of God, to be present, to be with us, to respond to our prayers, are trustworthy and true.

And we worship in response to all that we experience of God, in the world, in our lives, in the stories we hear from others, in the strength we receive from our community of faith.

We worship as God's people, believers in the risen Lord, the first born from the dead, the one who guides us in this life, and will shepherd us into the next.

We take comfort in the rituals of worship, the motions, that will carry us through even when our hearts are empty, even when our spirits are too weighed down. We gather with others who will pray when we cannot, who will sing when our voices are choked with grief or pain. We are blessed when in worship, our brothers and sisters in Christ, carry us through, and support us in difficulty, until the day comes again when we can join in the singing, and lift our voices and hearts in prayers of thankfulness and hymns of praise.

Let us pray. Gracious God,
When doubts drive us to our knees, call us to worship. In the midst of the sanctuary, with our neighbors and friends, may our hearts be strengthened, and our faith renewed. And from worship, send us, equipped and ready, to be the presence of Christ in the world, and make a difference in His name. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



APRIL ...I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ~Romans 12:1

To present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God – this is what St. Paul calls “spiritual worship.” Perhaps we can also call this “spiritual worship” witnessing too.

What did this mean in Paul’s day? It meant staying away from Pagan festivals replete with all sorts of debauchery. It meant staying faithful to one’s husband or wife and not seeking other pleasures. It meant avoiding the local magical trinket store because you knew that God was far more powerful and alive than some enchanted stone with scribble on it.

In our day and age, what is the Christian’s response? How is our body to be used as a “living sacrifice?” How is our body a living sacrifice that witnesses to the Lord who claimed us through the Water and the Word? When television and movies and the internet witness to “Do what feels right,” do we not, as people of faith, have something *different* to say?

Our lives as Christians are not just spiritual; our lives as Christians are profoundly physical too.

How our bodies are used (or abused) witnesses to that which we believe in. How we talk about our bodies and care

for our bodies witnesses to that which we believe and trust in.

As Martin Luther notes in the *Large Catechism*: “A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need...Anything on which your heart relies and depends, that is really your God.”

~What are those other “gods” in our community that prevent faith formation?

~What are those “gods” in our lives that are so hard to name?

~How is it that our church members witness with their bodies, with the decisions that they make in how their body is presented as a “living sacrifice”?

~How do we talk about this call to be a “living sacrifice” to our young people? To our older people? To every age?

Let us pray.

Gracious God, inspire us to serve you and you alone. Help the light of Christ to shine through us, in what we say, what we do, how we live.

In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.



SEPTEMBER ...So he told them this parable: ‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ~Luke 15:3

You have to wonder about that shepherd. Who leaves 99 good sheep in order to find one that’s lost? It says he was prepared to search until he found it. How long might that take? What kind of shepherd does that?

Then Jesus says that this shepherd throws a party when he finally finds the lost sheep. You have to wonder about a shepherd who throws a party when a lost sheep is found. And who would attend such a party? “Sure, I’ll come!” Yeah, right.

Yet, such a party is being thrown by just such a shepherd week after week in our places of worship. This shepherd doesn’t care what people think, whether this party is socially acceptable or not. This shepherd doesn’t care because this shepherd is overwhelmed with joy for having found the lost sheep, like us.

So, this weekly celebration is being held in our honor in light of Easter and our baptism and Christ risen from the dead. It is certainly a birthday party of sorts being held for us every single week. Think of our shepherd sending out the invitations saying, “Through the cross and the resurrection, I found (insert your name here). Please join in my celebration.”

Who comes to such a party?

Well, certainly those for whom this party is being held, which are all the invitees. And we don’t stay away because the balloons weren’t the right color or we needed to mend our socks that day. We go because, hey, this party is being held in our honor, to celebrate how we’ve been found. We go to say thank you to the one throwing the party; the one who found us in the first place; this wonderful and loving good shepherd.

~ How does worship in your congregation echo this party and celebration? How does it feel to think and imagine worship as a time of celebration?

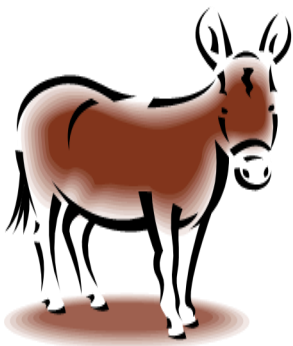
Let us pray, God our shepherd, Give us hearts that celebrate you, voices that declare your praise, and hands that serve you that our joy in you will be evident, and our worship of you will both fill us and please you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.



AUGUST ...Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' ~Luke 10:37

Jesus told this parable because Jews and Samaritans were not welcoming to one another. We could fairly compare them to the famous Hatfields and McCoys. For the Jews, there was no such thing as a "Good Samaritan," and certainly vice versa was true as well. That's what makes the acts of welcome so powerful in this parable.

Notice how the Samaritan welcomed the man in the ditch. He sacrificed his time. In an age without motor vehicles, stopping would take precious time. He sacrificed his treasures of oil, wine, and money for the sake of an enemy. A denarius was a day's wage. Who would sacrifice two days wages for a stranger, and promise more if needed? He sacrificed being ritually clean by touching the bloody wounds of this enemy stranger. He also sacrificed his security. We know why we don't stop and help. Things weren't that different back then.



It's important to note that the man in the ditch was also welcoming. Sure, it was out of need that he welcomed the enemy Samaritan,

but we also know that sometimes accepting help is difficult. And yet, it is an important way to be welcoming.

The innkeeper was welcoming too. Yes, it was the innkeeper's job, but let's keep in mind that the innkeeper was either Jewish or a Samaritan. One of the two was an enemy to him. The willingness to make sacrifices for others is a key aspect of being truly welcoming.

~ What sacrifices are we willing to make in order to welcome the stranger?

~In your congregation and community, what fears do you need to sacrifice in order to welcome people as they are and receive them fully?

Let us pray,
Lord, we get so used to doing things the same way. We don't always see what could be changed or improved. Help us to see ourselves through the eyes of the stranger, that we can better meet their needs, and welcome them to your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

MAY ... Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ~I Peter 4: 10

Imagine that,! Hospitality without grumbling! Every pastor's dream church has this as a requirement. But, just like 2000 years ago, today we grumble and pine and moan about hospitality. Maybe we're tired. Maybe we're content with our church and don't want to welcome anyone else. Maybe we just would rather be left alone.

Fellowship, greeting, visiting, knowing, talking, and stepping out of our comfort zone for the sake of making someone else comfortable are aspects of hospitality that some churches do quite well and others, quite frankly, are terrible at it.

Granted, not all people have this gift. Some greeters probably should not be greeters. Some ushers probably should not be ushers. Some fellowship hosts (or whatever you call this person who gets everything ready for Sunday morning) probably should not be hosts. The right people need to be in place.

But the whole people of God has this responsibility too.

Ask yourselves...

~Would a visitor return to our congregation without being noticed?

~For the smaller churches: Would I worship here if I wasn't related to half of the congregation?



~Is there a central entrance? Or will visitors be confused about which door to come in?

~Do we have a "welcoming committee" that is intentionally inviting to others?

~Does our pastor follow up with visitors? Should that be his/her job or someone else's?

~Do people sit with visitors during coffee or tend to gather with old friends?

Let us pray,
Gracious God, Open our eyes and our hearts to be welcoming, in our church, and in the community. Help us to offer wide welcome, not only in our church, but out in the world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

JUNE...*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe for indeed our God is a consuming fire. ~Hebrews 12:28-29*



What is “acceptable worship?” Is it accompanied with organs, pianos, clarinets, and harps? Or drums and guitars (bass, acoustic, electric, etc.)? Or are

those words, “acceptable worship,” about something else entirely?

Often when committees, councils, pastors, and people think about worship they often think about external forms; instruments, singers, genres of music, what the church down the street is doing that is pulling in the young people, and so on. Seldom do we critically think about what worship means, does, and is. Is worship about us or about God? Is worship for us or what we owe and do for God? Is worship about being entertained in a culture that has short-attention spans, or is worship something more? Is worship a simply display of public devotion to our Lord or is there something more going on here too?

Or we can be even more specific: Why do we do what we do in our congregation? What is the “method behind the madness?” Why the creeds? Why the hymns? Why the pulpit? Why the font? Perhaps part of our “acceptable worship” to/for

our God is not simply going through the motions and expecting others to do the same but it is recapturing the reverence and awe we have for a God who is a consuming fire – fire that purifies, fire that melts the hardest hearts.

~With the rhythms of worship that often are set for years on end, what does it mean to reflect on the hows and whys of your particular worship service(s) in your congregation?

~Is the direction of our worship more horizontal or more vertical? In other words, how does your community worship reflect who you are - including traditions, history, current community identity? How does your community worship reflect who God is - including elements of praise and lament

~How is our time of worship subject to change by the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Let us pray,
Heavenly Father, send your Spirit to enliven our worship. Guide our planning and our participation, so that in worshipping you, we are equipped and filled to serve. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

JULY

...Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; ~John 13: 11

When we witness, we express to someone else what we have heard or seen. The disciples, in that upper room, saw their Lord and Teacher bending down to wash their feet. Then they heard him say, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Our mission of witness is born out of this, that we love one another as Jesus loved us; that we love by washing the feet of others.

Think of the feet that Jesus washed that night. He washed the feet of Judas who was about to betray him. He also washed the feet of Peter, who, that very night, would deny knowing Jesus three times. As he washed all of their feet, he washed the feet of the least, the last, the lost, and the losers. And he said, “Love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” This is how we witness.

Too often we think that our witness is all about making the sale; getting someone to sign on the dotted line; somehow getting someone to commit to weekly worship and a tithe. We don’t hear or see this in what Jesus does that night he’s betrayed.

Instead, we see an act of compassion and love with a simple call to do likewise.

That’s it. That’s our witness. We are to love as he loved. We are to wash the feet of those who are least, or last, or lost, or losers.

~What does it mean for your community of faith to witness without using words to make a sale? How does what you do reflect and reveal Jesus Christ in your larger community?

~This story speaks to a lot of the senses that provide an experience with Jesus - watching Jesus wash others’ feet, smelling the aroma of cleanliness, listening to Jesus’ words to love one another, feeling the hands of the Teacher on your feet. What senses do you engage in witnessing to the love of God in your life? How might you engage more of these senses as you imagine being a witness and sharing that story with others?

Let us pray,
Lord, make us servant leaders. Help us to be willing to be last. Open our eyes to see the least among us, and be the voice for those who are forgotten, overlooked, and unheard.
In Jesus’ name
we pray, Amen.

