

Rev. Lynne Ogren
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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
6th Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 5:17-37

Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will through Christ our Lord. Amen

Today we wrap up our look at our model of Faith Formation with the practice of Guided Learning. The logo we created as an image of all four components of faith formation is a good start, but it is still an incomplete representation of how faith is planted and nurtured and grown. Maybe a labyrinth would have been a better symbol.

I especially like walking a labyrinth when others are there too, because we pass by one another at unexpected times. Just when you think you are heading toward the center of the labyrinth's path you might find yourself on the edge. And the person you expected to see coming toward you has turned and someone else passes by.

The four practices of faith formation are like that, too. We live in relationship with other believers, hearing one another's stories and perspectives about life and faith. One day we might be participating in a spiritual practice like worship or prayer with someone, and then we find we are working in faith-filled service with others. Faith formation practices overlap one another as we live and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Guided Learning is probably the most common way we think about how our faith is formed. Guided learning might make us think about structured programs like Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and Bible studies for adults.

According to the model we have adopted from the document we found in the ELCA's resources, "Guided Learning happens when we visit and revisit Biblical stories, or hear and share each other's faith stories, with a sense of wonder and discovery."¹

I love that guided learning moves us from the Bible to our own stories of faith. Even as we know God's word to be found in the Holy Scriptures, we also recognize God's word to be present in preaching and teaching by faithful leaders of the church, in Christ's presence in the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, and in the mutual care and conversation of fellow believers.

Guided learning in any part of our growth and development involves different kinds of learning. There's the learning of skills to perform certain tasks. We can learn life lessons to help us be better people. Or we can study history, philosophy, sciences and the arts to open our minds to new concepts and ideas.

I once had a member of my extended family who told me he had read the Bible from cover to cover but didn't understand the need for religion. When we engage in guided learning for faith formation it is not just for the sake of learning ABOUT God. Our faith formation

¹https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCAfaithformation.pdf?_ga=2.96023839.2015857457.1581703989-457640613.1579401210

model also says, “Guided learning is not simply about garnering knowledge, but also about wrestling with how to live faithfully each day.”

Our aim in the guided learning we want to emphasize in this congregation is a faith-forming practice that brings us into fuller relationship with God AND, as our gospel today teaches, with each other.

As part of the guided learning God prepared for the people of Israel, during their time in the wilderness with Moses, God gave them the Law and Commandments.

This was a combination of technical learning as well as relational learning. The Law provided the dos and don'ts of how they were to structure their life together. The Commandments were meant to lead them into respectful relationships with one another, based on their relationship with their faithful God.

Today Jesus begins our gospel reading by announcing that he came “not to abolish [the law] but to fulfill [it].” Jesus came to put flesh on the laws that had come to be used as weapons to determine who was in and who was out. These laws still held value, but Jesus came to fill them out, to bring us into fuller understanding of the law, SO THAT we would live into God's deeper intention for the law.

Every commandment Jesus addresses today is taught in a way that is meant to build relationships based on respect, mutual support, and integrity.

But if the initial commandments given by God through Moses were easily followed, Jesus would not have needed to expand on them centuries later. And we know that Jesus' words continue to be necessary for our world and our lives today.

We still need to be reminded that murder is the reaction of anger and conflict with others. We still need to be reminded not to covet—to want people or things that belong to someone else. We still need to be reminded that marriage is a serious commitment—as are other relationships based on trust. Friendships, work relationships, and the commitments we make to our community God means to be faithful and honorable.

We still need to be reminded that our word needs to be reliable to others. We must mean what we say and know our limits and honor our obligations. This is God's intention and expectation for us, so that the world would be influenced and changed by our love and dedication.

We still need to be reminded of all these things because sin and brokenness lure us from God's good purposes for us. We are in need of a Savior to teach us and lead us and empower us to live as God's faithful people in the world.

Woven together with respectful relationships and guided learning for faith formation are our spiritual practices. Here—in this time set apart to rest in God's presence, to hear God's voice, and to be nurtured in God's grace—here in this time of worship we are fed with Christ's power to live according to these expanded teachings Jesus presents to us today.

The children and I talked about the Sharing of the Peace already, where we get to practice reconciling actions with our neighbors—even if those neighbors are the people we live with. Here, we bring before God and one another our gifts—our selves, our time, our possessions—offered to God with the prayer that God would receive these gifts and use them—and us—to feed the world with God’s love.

Guided learning is not just about checking off the boxes of what the Lord—or the church—requires of us. Guided Learning opens our hearts and minds to recognize and embrace God’s love for us.

Guided Learning helps us trust in God’s presence and activity in our lives that transform us into God’s instruments of love and grace and healing.

Guided learning leads us to live in respectful relationships and engage in faith-filled service to our neighbors and all of creation.

How might we engage in Guided Learning that leads us to live into the kingdom of God? This week I invite you to ponder these questions:

- Where have you participated in faith-forming Guided Learning in the past?
- How do you participate in Guided Learning now?
- Who have been important teachers of the faith for you?
- Who might be those that you could teach or mentor?
- Who might you invite into a time of learning with you?

Our faith is formed in the setting of respectful relationships, through spiritual practices, guided learning, and faith-filled acts of service. These practices are not mutually exclusive but are interwoven with one another.

These are the ways God has given those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness”² the opportunities to learn and grow as disciples of Jesus, so that others will be drawn to the light of God’s love and grace for them.

Let us pray.

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

² Matthew 5:6

Prayers of Intercession

Trusting that God hears us, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

Shepherding God, you protect and guide us with your word. Lead your church into ever closer relationship with you, that we might better know your commands, hold fast to your teachings, and live in your law. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of the cosmos, heaven and earth bear witness to the splendor of all you have created. Bless the ground, trees, waterways, and skies with abundant life. Bring relief and renewal to places where flooding, tornadoes and other winter storms threaten life. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of peace, you show solidarity with all who suffer. Bring an end to violence, war, discrimination, and all other forms of deadly hate, that we may experience your love through the power of justice. Give relief to those in the path of the coronavirus, and help doctors and scientists curb its spreading. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of hope, you provide bountifully for all people. Use our lives to share our hope in you with those who are hurting and despairing, especially... Kathie, Kyle, Jessie, Ed
Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, we give you thanks for our forebears in the faith who now rest in your eternal grace and love. As they have guided us in our faith and learning, so make us teachers and leaders for the neighbors you have given us to love. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Confident that you are able to accomplish more than we even dare to ask, we bring these prayers before you, believing in your saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.