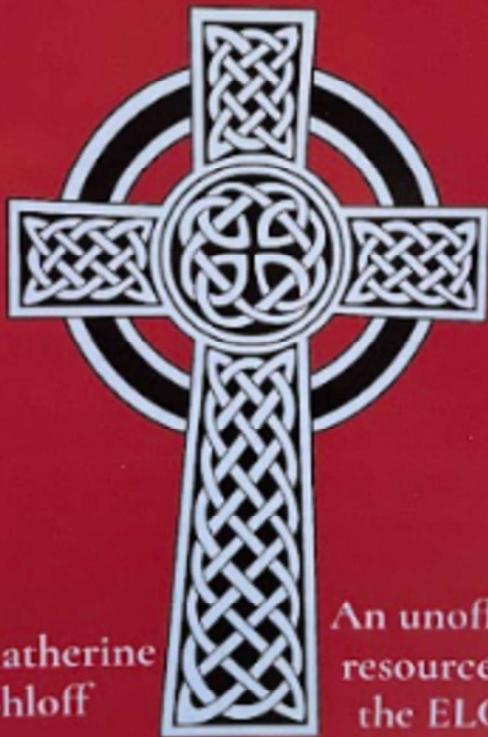




Grace Alone

Lutheran in the
21st Century



Rev. Katherine
Rohloff

An unofficial
resource for
the ELCA

2026 Study



2026 Year Study

Grace Alone - Lutheran in the 21st Century

Rev. Katherine Rohloff

What is our Lutheran identity? Why are we Lutheran? What do we believe? Want to learn more about the church connected to the ELCA? Do you feel like you don't know what questions to ask? Join us on a year-long journey reading "Grace Alone, Lutheran in the 21st Century" by Rev. Katerine Rohloff. Enhance your experience by using our resource booklet, which includes online access to the Small Catechism and a resource to watch or read each week.

This study will guide you as you explore your faith and your faith community, with plenty of time to think (*and pray!*) things over. Each week takes less than an hour to learn about different areas of study, including the Small Catechism, church history and calendar, worship, faith life, and more. There is a reading from scripture, lesson material, and questions that you can do at home with your family or in a small group.

Resources:

Grace Alone - Lutheran in the 21st Century by Rev. Katherine Rohloff

It's All About Love-The Christian Journey: A Lutheran Perspective

 Daniel W. Erlander (<https://danielerlander.com/allaboutlove.html>)

Living Lutheran: Lutheranism 101- Culture or confession

 Kathryn Kleinhans (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/author/kathryn-kleinhans/>)

Links will be provided in E-news and on the FLC website

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2026 Year Study
Grace Alone Lutheran in the 21st Century
Rev. Katherine Rohloff
Schedule

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January 4, 2026 Lutheranism 101 Living Lutheran: Kathryn Kleinhans

Grace Alone

January 11, 2026 Five Solas: Lutheran Basics

Small Catechism: Ten Commandments

January 18, 2026 Why Have Commandments

January 25, 2026 Commandments About God

February 1, 2026 Commandments about Relationships

February 8, 2026 Commandments about Community

Lent Devotional

February 15, 2026- April 5, 2026 Devotional TBD

Small Catechism: Apostles Creed

April 5, 2026 Creator Almighty

April 12, 2026 Jesus Christ

April 19, 2026 Holy Spirit

Small Catechism: Lord's Prayer

April 26, 2026 Teach Us to Pray

May 3, 2026 Addressing God

May 10, 2026 Our Needs

Small Catechism: Sacraments

May 17, 2026 Communion: What God Does

May 24, 2026 Communion: What Do We Do

May 31, 2026 Baptism: What God Does

June 7, 2026 Baptism: What We Do

Church History

June 14, 2026	Early Church to the Great Schism
June 21, 2026	Reformation
June 28, 2026	Lutherans and WWII
July 5, 2026	Slavery and the Bible
July 12, 2026	ELCA History

Faith Structure

July 19, 2026	ELCA Structure & Ministries
July 26, 2026	Career Ministry
August 2, 2026	Other Lutheran Denominations
August 9, 2026	Other Christian Denominations
August 16, 2026	Other Religions

Church Calendar

August 23, 2026	Seasons of Pentecost Holidays
August 30, 2026	Seasons Related to Christmas
September 6, 2026	Seasons Related to Easter

Faith Life

September 13, 2026	Priesthood of All Believers
September 20, 2026	Spiritual Disciplines
September 27, 2026	Stewardship
October 4, 2026	Worship Whys
October 11, 2026	Special Services

Special Topics

October 18, 2026	Lutherans & The Bible
October 25, 2026	The End of All Things
November 1, 2026	Spiritual Self Defence
November 8, 2026	Oppression in The Bible
November 15, 2026	Science and Faith

The Christian Journey: A Lutheran Perspective Daniel W. Erlander

November 22, 2026	It's All About Love
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Advent Devotional

November 29, 2026 - End of Year Devotional	TBD
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(https://www.mif.elca.org/loans-index?utm_source=Living+Lutheran&utm_medium=Banner&utm_campaign=MIF+Ad+2025#.secwhy-consider)

Living Lutheran

(/home)

Lutheranism 101

Culture or confession?

By Kathryn Kleinhans (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/author/kathryn-kleinhans/>) | May 15, 2007



What does it mean to be Lutheran? For many in the ELCA who've grown up Lutheran, religious identity is intertwined with a sense of family and cultural traditions: beer and brats for some, lefse and lutefisk for others, familiar liturgy and hymns for all. But the shape of Lutheranism is changing.

While the majority of Lutherans worldwide still live in Northern Europe, Lutheranism is growing rapidly in other parts of the world, according to the Lutheran World Federation. Today there are almost as many Lutherans in Asia and the Middle East (7.4 million) as there are in North America (8.1 million), and there are more Lutherans in Africa (15 million) than there are in Germany (13 million).

So what does it mean to be Lutheran, beyond cultural heritage or geographical location?

During the 16th century, Martin Luther challenged the teachings, practices and structures of the Roman Catholic Church. He insisted that the central message of Christianity is the good news that sinners become reconciled to God by grace through faith because of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

It's important to remember that Luther didn't intend to start a new church. He wanted to reform the existing church so the gospel message was communicated clearly and so the life of the church reflected that gospel center. Lutherans organized into a separate church only after the Roman Catholic Church repeatedly rejected Luther's views.

'Lutheran' as insult

The word "Lutheran" actually began as an insult used by Luther's opponents. Luther later tried to discourage his supporters from calling themselves Lutherans since they really follow Jesus Christ, not Martin Luther.

"What is Luther?" he once wrote. "After all, the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone."

It was the gospel message that remained central for Luther, not his leadership. In a sermon preached in Wittenberg shortly after his return from Wartburg Castle, Luther insisted: "I simply taught, preached and wrote God's Word. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

If not "Lutheran," how did Luther and his supporters identify themselves and their reform movement? They tended to use the term "evangelical," which means simply gospel or good news.

As "evangelical" Christians, they understood themselves in light of the gospel, in contrast to "papal" Christians whose identity was rooted in their relationship with church structures and authority centered in Rome, especially the pope.

One important result of this commitment to communicating the gospel clearly was that Lutherans quickly translated the Scriptures and the worship service from the church's official language, Latin, into the language used by the people.

While Luther's ideas and writings were at the heart and core of this evangelical reform movement, Luther worked collaboratively with other pastors and teachers. His views also received support from civic leaders within the German territories who were interested in promoting a Christian church that was German, not Roman.

As the evangelical reform movement grew, certain writings were adopted as essential statements of Lutheranism. One of the most influential documents is the *Augsburg Confession*, which was written by Luther's colleague Philipp Melanchthon and presented at a meeting with the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1530. It was signed by seven territorial rulers and by the mayor and council of two cities.

In 1580, after both Luther's and Melanchthon's deaths, evangelical leaders gathered the statements of faith they considered normative for Lutheran Christians and published them as *The Book of Concord*. This collection was signed by 51 territorial rulers and by 35 city councils.

This act of signing one's name to a statement of faith is called confessional subscription. The phrase may sound odd, but actually the idea of a magazine or newspaper subscription is a helpful comparison. There are many, many periodicals available. The ones we subscribe to are those we want to receive and to be engaged with regularly. To this day, Lutheran pastors and other rostered leaders promise to preach, teach and fulfill their duties in accordance with the Lutheran confessions.

Core Lutheran themes

What are the most distinctive themes of Lutheran theology?

Justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake

This, for Lutherans, is the heart of the gospel. Stated concisely in the fourth article of the *Augsburg Confession*, it's so central that it has been called "the article by which the church stands or falls."

Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics believed God's grace was essential for salvation, but they had different understandings of the way grace works.

Relying on Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, Luther insisted that faith is key. His understanding of faith isn't primarily intellectual (having the right knowledge about God) or emotional (how hard or how sincerely one believes). Instead, faith is relational: It's a form of trust. We are justified through faith because faith alone trusts God's promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake.

Law and gospel

Lutherans have a distinctive way of reading the Scriptures, based on Luther's insight that God's word comes to us in two forms—law and gospel. The law as command tells people what they should do. The gospel as promise tells us what God in Christ has already done for us.

God's law functions in several ways: It structures human life by protecting and promoting good and limiting and punishing wrong. The law also functions theologically, as a mirror, or as a doctor's diagnosis, to show us our sinfulness and our need for God's grace in Christ.

Abiding Hope Lutheran Church, Littleton, Colo.

Chad Johnson, pastor, pours water over Nicholas Holsan, 11, baptizing him during the Easter Vigil at Abiding Hope Lutheran, a "transformational" congregation of nearly 2,000 members. His brother, Brandon (far left), 13, and his mother, Lynn, were among eight others baptized that night. Looking on are: Mike Chylla (third from left); Doug Hill, a pastor of Abiding Hope; and Sherrill and Chris Chylla.

Sacramental life is basic to this congregation, explained Rick Barger, senior pastor. "But when people start talking about 'Lutheran identity' and the assumption is that we're into club rules, club identity—that's not us. What we tell people is: 'The gifts of God are free. You already are saved. Whatever is cheap, fragmented, crumbling in their lives, it's already been handled by God.' Our Lutheran identity tells how we all are brought into right relationship with God."

See more about how Abiding Hope acts from this identity at www.abidinghopelutheran.org (<http://www.abidinghopelutheran.org>).

Photo removed to honor agreement with photographer.

Because we are sinners, God's law always accuses us; only the gospel frees us. As Luther puts it: "The law says, 'do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done."

Means of grace

The *Augsburg Confession* describes word and sacrament as the "means of grace." The word "means" refers to how things actually happen. We refer to different means of communication, means of transportation, etc. By calling word and sacrament means of grace, we are saying: "This is how and where grace happens." When the good news is preached, when someone is baptized, when we receive the Lord's Supper, grace happens.

This means that worship is vitally important for Lutherans. It forms our identity as Christians. The Augsburg Confession even defines the Christian church as the assembly of believers around gospel and sacrament.

Theology of the cross

The theology of the cross refers not just to the events of Good Friday. It also refers to a cross-centered approach to theology that stands in opposition to a "theology of glory" focused on the power and majesty of God abstracted from God's action in history.

A theology of glory looks up and says, "God's in heaven and all's well with the world." A theology of the cross, in contrast, keeps its feet firmly planted on our broken Earth and says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to God." The incarnation witnesses to a God who puts aside divine characteristics to become human, to suffer and to die.

The God who chooses to come down from heaven chooses not to come down from the cross. The theology of the cross is a constant critique of human expectations. While the cross is a scandal to nonbelievers, Christians confess that God's saving power works precisely through such weakness (1 Corinthians 1:23-25 (<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=13761340>), 2 Corinthians 12:9 (<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=13761361>)).

Saint and sinner

Luther described Christians as "simultaneously saint and sinner." Some religious traditions distinguish between "saints," who obey God's will, and "sinners," who disobey. Lutherans cling to a both/and understanding of Christian identity that redefines the word "saint": a saint is a forgiven sinner.

Our dual identity as saints and sinners reminds us that our righteousness always depends on God's grace, never on our own religious behavior. At the same time, our recognition that sin, while forgiven, remains a powerful force in the world and in ourselves gives us a realistic ability to confront cruelty and evil, confident that God will have the last word.

As Luther once wrote to Melanchthon, "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world."

Vocation

The term “vocation” literally means “calling.” Until Luther’s time it was used primarily to refer to those with a special religious calling to be a priest, monk or nun. Luther expanded the idea to include all Christians.

First, Luther affirmed that all Christians are priests. This “priesthood of all believers” doesn’t mean that we each have an individual pipeline to God but that we all have a responsibility to teach and to pray for others.

Second, Luther affirmed that all human work is a calling from God if done in faith and for the service of neighbor. According to Luther, God doesn’t need our good works, but people do. Christian faith, then, should express itself in how we live in our professions, in our family relationships and as citizens, since these are all arenas for the service of neighbor.

Contextual theology

The Greek word *diakonos*, often translated in the New Testament as “minister” or “servant,” can also refer to a waiter. This image reminds us how essential it is for the food to reach the hungry diners at the table. No matter how exquisite the chef or the food, it’s no good if the meal stays in the kitchen. Similarly, the church needs to deliver the goods.

In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther insists that it’s not enough simply to acknowledge that Christ is Christ. Instead, the purpose of preaching is to make the connection, to deliver the goods so Christ may “be Christ for you and me.”

From the beginning the Reformation was committed to delivering the goods, to continuing the work of Pentecost by allowing people to hear the good news firsthand. Luther was fluent in several languages. Even more important, he had fluency with several different populations: He wrote in Latin to reach academics and church leaders, but he wrote in German to reach regular people.

Already during Luther’s lifetime, Lutheranism spread to the Scandinavian countries. Just as Luther had translated the Scriptures and the worship service into German, Scandinavian evangelicals translated these—along with Luther’s *Small Catechism*—into their languages.

As Lutherans came to North America, they faced several significant challenges. One was the transition away from the European model of a state-supported church. The idea of individual freedom of religion is relatively modern. After the Reformation, church and state were still integrated: The difference was that some states remained Roman Catholic while others were now Protestant.

In places where the Lutheran confession of faith was embraced, churches became national churches rather than regional branches of the Roman church.

The pluralism of the American denominational context challenged Lutherans who were used to being part of an established church. While more recent denominations like Baptists and United Methodists grew through evangelism, Lutheran church growth was largely the result of new waves of immigration from Germany and Scandinavia.

Another challenge was the issue of cultural translation. Lutherans in the U.S. organized according to shared language and culture but soon found themselves asking, “What does it mean to be an American Lutheran?” What’s the relationship between Lutheran confession and culture? This question shaped the self-understanding of individual communities but also affected their relationships with other Lutherans.

American Lutherans eventually overcame most of the cultural, structural and practical issues that separated them. The ELCA is the result of a process of focusing increasingly on what the *Augsburg Confession* identifies as the core criteria for the church and its unity: the assembly of believers around word and sacrament. It’s not the beer and brats or the lefse and lutefisk that unites us or divides us—it’s the good news of God’s grace for us in word, in water, and in bread and wine.

This focus on the core also shapes our ecumenical relationships with other Christian denominations. We aren’t abandoning our identity as Lutherans. Rather, rooted in our common understanding of the gospel we are free to worship and work together with other Christians.

Unfortunately, while American Lutherans have moved beyond our ethnocentrism, we haven’t been as successful in overcoming the legacy of our state-church heritage. Lutheran church membership in the U.S. is in a slow decline. Ironically, a church that was born “evangelical” hasn’t been as intentional or effective as other denominations about actual evangelism.

We can learn much from Lutherans in other cultures. What are the Lutheran churches in Tanzania and Ethiopia and elsewhere doing right? Their astonishing growth suggests they’re communicating the gospel message persuasively rather than perpetuating the northern European subcultures we’ve too often equated with the name “Lutheran.”

Lutherans should welcome the opportunity to be multilingual and multicultural, to reach out actively and clearly to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that invite other people to hear, trust and respond to the same promise that we have received.



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IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE*

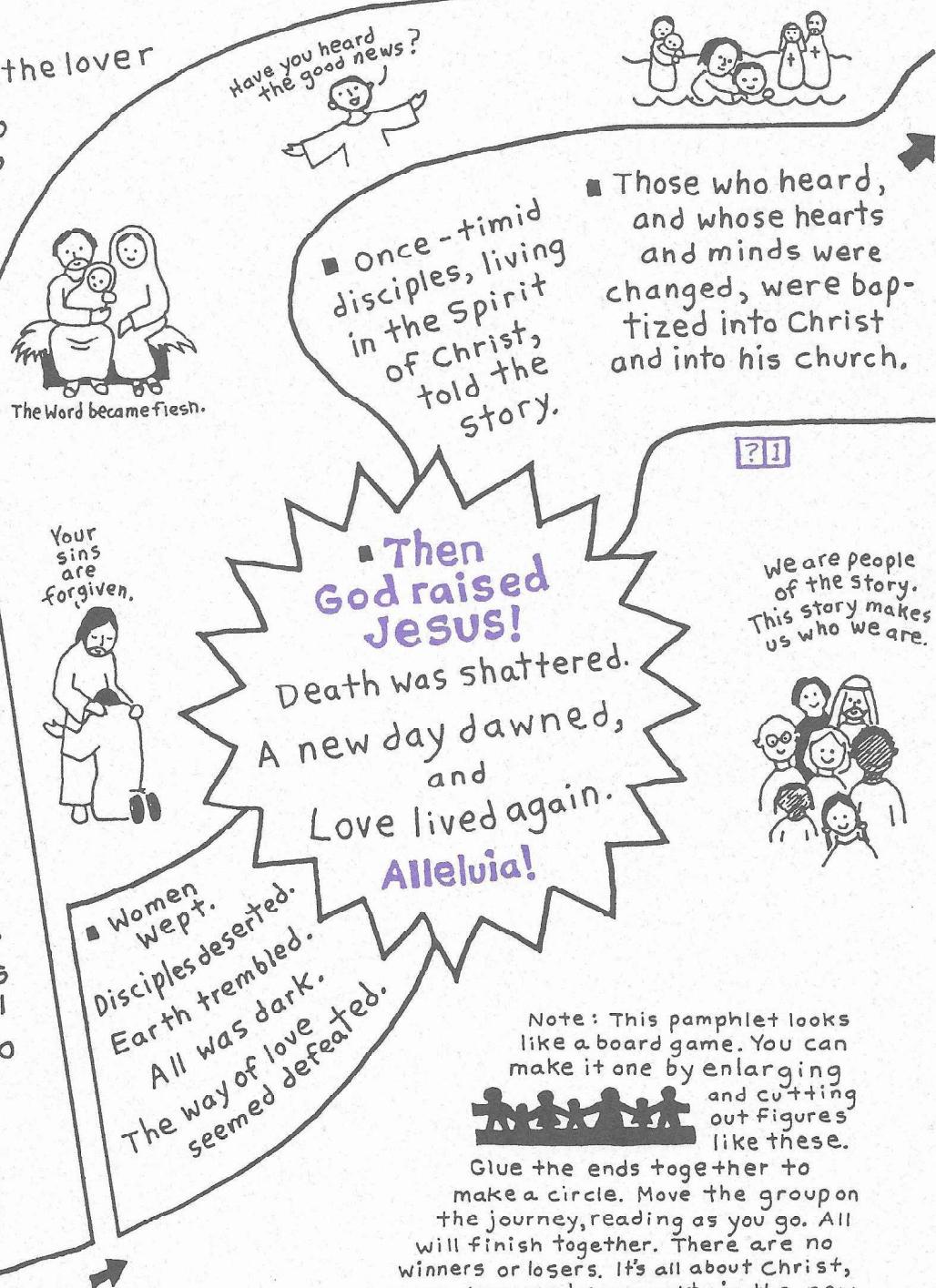
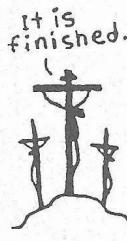
The Christian Journey: a Lutheran Perspective

■ It's all about love - God the lover creating the universe, calling Sarah and Abraham, freeing the slaves, gathering a covenant people to model love, and becoming one of us.

Jesus, revealer of God's love, reached out to all - the poor, the outcast, and those told they were not worthy of God's love.

Such love threatened the powerful. They nailed him to a cross. There God showed a heart of love. There God bore the sin and violence of humanity. On the cross Jesus revealed God's will to love even unto death...

and there Jesus died.



* **Love** has a special meaning in the Bible. Love is God's unconditional and never ending desire, work, and suffering for the good of all humans and all creation. Love is God's action to bring us into abundant life - reconciled to God, each other, and all creation... and loving as God loves.



Why an infant? Isn't God's family for everybody?

■ In our baptism (as infants, youth, or adults) God gave us new life and brought us into the community of Jesus. All was a gift of love - even the faith which grows out of God's unconditional acceptance.

???

■ The greatest gift of baptism is our union with Christ. We now live IN CHRIST.

■ United to Christ we are **JUSTIFIED***. We are declared beloved children of God. This is our identity for life! We know who we are and whose we are.

Does God really love me and receive me just as I am? YES!



■ In baptism we were transferred from an old world to a new world, from an old reality to a new reality.

???



■ In the new world of abundant grace we are free for **loving!**

■ a change so great it's like dying and rising.

■ a change so great it's like being born anew.

■ In the new world of abundant grace we are free for **loving!**

■ In the new world of abundant grace we are free for **loving!**

- In the new reality there are no... points or pointkeepers.
- big deals.
- people of greater value and people of lesser value.
- levels of importance based on achievement.

■ The Spirit gathers us into CHURCH, the community of very human "saints/sinner" who are called to...

- worship
- love one another
- love the world.



■ **NO**
... because it's all about love.

■ A question
Are there rules for this life?

The two ways



1. Love so amazing, so divine,
2. demands my soul, my life, my all.

* "Justified" - to be validated, accepted, shown to be of great value, not because of our sincerity, achievements, or intentions, but because of Christ. Justification is a free gift received by faith. "Faith" = trusting God and God's promises.

? 4

The crucified and risen Christ, present in all creation, is with us (the church) in two special ways...

Word and Sacrament.

1. "Word" is the living Christ "addressing" US...

through
 • the Bible
 • preaching
 • an event
 • the voice of a friend.

This living Word...
 • exposes us so we see our need, our stupidity, our self-centeredness.

Luther called this LAW and GOSPEL



In Sacraments God comes to us in the very ordinary.



given and shed for you...

• declares that the God of mercy loves us, forgives us, and raises us to new life.

Note: This declaration has no conditions. It is not based on what we do but on who God is.

We are SENT from Word and meal to live as followers of Christ

The Holy Communion Meal
 After ENTRY, WORD, and PRAYER, we offer gifts, give THANKS, and then Share the MEAL of bread and cup. The risen Christ is with US forgiving, healing, uniting, nourishing.*

We gather for two sacraments
BAPTISM (see discussion on p.2) and
HOLY COMMUNION

2. "Sacrament"

is a drama/event in the faith community which...

- is commanded by Christ.
- uses an earthly element.
- is connected to a promise.

? 5

In the love relationship we are free...

from the law, from keeping rules in order to be thought of as "good."

from perfectionism. Loved as we are, we do not have to strive to be perfect in order to be acceptable.

from fear of death. Eternally Safe in God's arms, the power of death is Shattered.

from absolutes. We need not always be right or unquestioning. Doubt and struggle are part of the life of trust.

from domination. In God's embrace we don't have to judge others so we look better. We don't have to be above others or control others to feel worthy.

from deception. We need not fake it. We can be honest about nation, culture, race, school, church, and ourselves. We are Saints and Sinners.

* The meal also pictures the dream of God - a world of unity where all have enough, all share, and where all creation lives in peace.



The opposite
is any way to be
religious, spiritual,
"Christian" without
dying.

It is
Cruciform,
life in the shape
of the cross

What is the shape
of the free life
in Christ?

Now our life
energy can be used
to live joyfully in
creation, loving
God and serving
the neighbor.*

Now we can enter
fully into life
knowing there is
forgiveness when
we fail.

You
don't
need
points!

from sin.
Loving
God, we are
free from self-
centeredness
and idolatry.

Idolatry is
trusting anything
other than God for
worth and well-being
(youth, beauty, success,
security, winning, cars,
clothes, ideology, nation,
popularity, status, wealth).

■ meaning a daily return to baptism,
dying to the
old self,
rising to the
new self,
rising to love, to serve, to
follow the way of the cross.

My sign is a reminder
that sometimes the way of
Christ's love is very clear,
and often it is not. We need
help - from our church family,
pastors, scriptures, prayer,
good reasoning, and the
wisdom of the past.



■ By grace we are
LIBERATED
from a tiresome
and joyless religious
life of earning points,
keeping score,
justifying
ourselves,
and
looking
good.

Does this
mean I don't
have to buy all
the right things
to have worth
and dignity?

I think it does.

That's
freedom!

■ As people
of the cross,
living joyfully in
creation, we ...

1. worship God with
the family of faith.
2. pray.

3. love our neighbors,
especially the lowly,
vulnerable and outsider.

4. see work (student,
nurse, plumber, etc.) and
our family life (daughter,
son, mother, etc.) as a calling
from God to love and serve.

5. reject violence, forgiving
our enemies and working
for peace and reconciliation.

6. see our bodies, our
sexuality, our talents,
our gender as beautiful
gifts to be used for the
glory of God.

7. involve ourselves in
the community, nation,
and world for the good of all, not
some (This is working for God's "justice").

8. release from our abundance money
and things for the good of others,
especially the poor and hungry.

9. say **YES** to creation, tenderly caring
for it, seeing God in it, and responding
with awe, wonder, and gratitude;
and we say **NO** to all that would harm
God's creation. ㊂㊂㊂㊂㊂㊂

10. tell the story of God's love and
invite others to share the journey.

We also
enjoy rest,
parties,
re-creation.

grace, grace, grace

Instead
of
got-f
we
get-f

Note: These
are not rules.
They are ways
that emerge
when Christ's
Spirit dwells
in us. They are
"what we
do when we
don't have to
do anything."

Inspired by
Gerhard For

* "Neighbor" means anyone in need.

■ In the midst of the joy, we humans and all of creation need continued mending. History witnesses to human frailty, futility, violence, stupidity, and the human need to be big deals, to be in control.

How often we fail in our loving at the expense of each other and all creation.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

■ This is...

- abundant life.
- life as a great banquet.
- life lived in the extravagance of God's grace.
- partnership with God in loving the world.

■ Nevertheless, God does not give up on us. God meets us where we are...

- in our joy and sorrow.
- in our weakness and our failure.
- in the deepest reality of our lives — our pain, our suffering, and our death.

God in Christ meets us on the cross.

Here God is passionately involved. Here God shares our humanity.

Here God whispers...

?"
10
I'm getting it! The faith journey is not about moving to a higher spiritual level. It's about becoming more deeply human. Wow!

...and "human" comes from "humus" of the soil.

ALLE LUIA

■ When we near our death we will not cling to our good deeds, our points, or a triumphant self-confidence. We will remember our baptism and cling to a promise: "Nothing will separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

ROMANS 8:38-39

■ In this love is our hope. Here is the power to make us new. Here is the power that ushers in a whole new creation.

"I love you."

We give thanks to you, O God of love and mercy, for raising us to free and abundant life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Study Questions

Use these questions to prompt further conversation:

- ? 1** When do you first remember being aware of God's love?
- ? 2** What do you know about your Baptism? How is your life different because of this event?
- ? 3** If you were baptized as an infant, how would you respond if someone told you that you must "accept Jesus as your Savior" and be baptized as an adult?
- ? 4** Some say they are closest to God when they are alone in nature. Why do we need church, Christian community, worship, Scripture, Baptism, and Holy Communion?
- ? 5** Lutherans have a living way of seeing the Bible—God comes to us through Scripture with judgment and grace. Was there a time in your life when God encountered you through the Bible? You may also share a time when God encountered you through a sermon, a hymn, Holy Communion, a relationship, or an event.
- ? 6** The following seven boxes tell about common bondages. Which is most likely to seduce you? Which bondage prevails in the society that surrounds you?
- ? 7** What is the difference between the Christian life as "What I must do and what I must not do" and "What I am free from and what I am free for"?
- ? 8** From among the ten freedoms listed, which one is very special to you?
- ? 9** How can you tell the story (your story and God's story)? Also, how do you invite others to join the journey?
- ? 10** How does God meet you in your joy and in your sorrow?
- ? 11** What are your reasons for ALLELUIA, for praising God?

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