

Facing our Responsibility in the Freedom of the Gospel

Session

8

GATHERING

Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

Prayer

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth; so that, in your good time, every people and nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, page 79)

HEARING THE WORD

Galatians 6:1–18 • Working for the Good of All!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 117.

CONSIDERING THE WORD

Silence

Discernment

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

Your Task

In earlier sessions, you were introduced to individuals who were faced with making choices or responding to circumstances related to sexuality. Now it is your turn to play a role. As your study group meets for this final session imagine yourselves in the role of the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality. Your assigned task is crafting a social statement that will probe for shared convictions and the boundaries of faithful action. This involves a careful engagement with the variety of viewpoints and concerns abroad in the church, some of which are reflected in the study materials. Then ask yourselves the kind of questions that need to be considered in the development of a social statement: “What should the statement accomplish? What are the crucial theological and ethical convictions that need to be at the core of the statement? What are the issues that must be specifically addressed?”

Task Force Goals

At the start of their work, the members of the Task force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality laid out goals for what it wanted the church to be able to say about the process of studying and discussing matters of sexuality. Here are several of those:

- We have been faithful to the church's call and produced an honest and faithful outcome.
- We have been able to discuss tough issues without undue division.
- We have grown in our understanding of the Bible and its interpretation.
- We have engaged all generations.
- We have grown in a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality in all its dimensions.
- We have been able to chart and celebrate common ground wherever possible.

“...tough situations don't define or dismiss the norms that guide our love for neighbor but, rather, love in the freedom and confidence of the gospel, struggles to find how best to be faithful when the path is not clear.”

The following reflections on the study may prove helpful as you pursue this exercise and prepare to submit your comments to the task force. It might also be helpful to reflect on the goals that the task force adopted for its work. Have these goals been apparent to you in your experience of the study? (See sidebar)

Galatians and Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian"

We have pursued this study in the light of Paul's letter to the Galatians and Luther's treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian." Paul's ringing statement, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1) is echoed by Luther's assertion that, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." These affirmations remind us that we live in the gospel, free in Christ from the condemnation of the law. Freedom, however, is not license. Free from the condemnation of the law, we are free to serve our neighbor as Christ has loved us. Paul makes this plain in Galatians 5:13-14, and Luther does so as well when he gives us these words for the second half of his key statement: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all." It is this grace and faith that shapes our approach to moral deliberation as we seek the truth in love, confident of God's love in Christ and of the ministry of the Spirit in our deliberations.

Galatians 6, which was read at the beginning of this session, makes some judgments and proposals that are appropriate both for our sisters and brothers in this church and for its witness to the world. Paul's words capture the spirit of our journey through the entire letter and echo Luther's treatise on Christian freedom. There is no boasting except in the cross (6:14). In a spirit of gentleness (6:1) we express our concerns for one another. Seeking to fulfill the law of Christ (6:2), the law of love (5:14), we work for the good of all (6:10) in the power of the Spirit.

- ***What difference has the experience of Galatians and Luther's teaching on Christian freedom made in your deliberations?***

One in Christ, but Holding Differing Views

Throughout the study we were reminded that we are united one with another in Christ through the grace of our Baptism and that we share some strong common convictions. At the same time we also had to recognize that matters of ethical judgment are not always obvious, and differences among the faithful can and do arise.

Sometimes the life situations in our fallen world can create terrible conflicts and tough moral choices. The Luther case study presented in Session Two was a powerful illustration of that reality. There we saw Luther trying in the gospel-born spirit of love to sort out a situation which, given the realities of that day, seemed to have no perfect resolution. Luther was not "making up" his ethics as he went along. He realized—as do we—that tough situations don't define or dismiss the norms that guide our love for neighbor. At the same time love, in the freedom and confidence of the gospel, struggles to find how best to be faithful when the path is not clear. Sorting out ethical conflicts in the middle of our world is a common experience for Christians and everyone will not see matters the same way.

- ***What do we need to say to one another about the reality of moral dilemmas and Christian freedom? What dangers might we face in such a discussion? What might we do in our congregations to equip one another to face tough choices?***

Different Lenses

Each of us sees life and matters of sexuality through "lenses" that are fitted by our particular life experiences and by cultural influences. We explored this reality in Session Three. The evidence of these differing lenses is apparent in the different interpretations we looked at in Sessions Four through Seven. These sessions also

presented us with the additional complication that changes in our culture and its institutions and practices often present us with challenges to traditional viewpoints. At least two questions follow.

- *If we agree that we do indeed see things through a variety of lenses, is the “gospel lens” suggested in Session Three—whether or not a given view enhances our freedom in Christ to serve the neighbor in love—sufficient to make discerning judgments in a “spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1)? How might such a gospel lens find expression in a social statement?*
- *Looking through the gospel lens at the issues of cultural challenges presented in Sessions Four–Seven, is it possible that Christian sexual ethics may need to undergo some new interpretations in order to be faithful to the true spirit of Christian love in today’s world? Why or why not? What might be some of the issues in which this is the case?*

Justice and Sexual Ethics

There is an element of concern for justice in all aspects of sexual ethics. Love seeks justice in all relationships by actively recognizing and protecting the equality and integrity of the other and by treating all fairly. Session Seven raises the question of justice in a special way, however. It asks whether the economic disparities of our culture promote disparities in sexual ethics that call for understanding and appreciation. It raises the further question of economic justice and its impact on sexual morality.

- *Does society have an obligation to promote the sort of economic conditions conducive to Christian ideals of sexual morality? Should the ELCA connect the concerns of its social statement on economic life (Sufficient, Sustainable, Livelihood for All) to this social statement on human sexuality? Why or why not? In what issues might these connections be made?*

More Common Ground

All these reflections and the questions raised are the stuff of the moral deliberation this study is designed to promote. Here are some excerpts from ELCA documents that speak of moral deliberation and the formation of social statements that may serve to underscore a few important points about our deliberation and its purpose.

The first of these excerpts expresses a caution that the study has sought to convey: as we face the influences and challenges the culture of our society presents, it is important neither to glorify or demonize our culture, nor simply accept it.

The church must participate in social structures critically. Not only God but also sin is at work in the world. Social structures and processes combine life-giving and life-destroying dynamics in complex mixtures and in varying degrees. The church, therefore, must unite realism and vision, wisdom and courage, in its social responsibility. It needs constantly to discern when to support and when to confront society’s cultural patterns, values, and powers. (*Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*)

The differences we discover among ourselves in matters of sexuality and sexual ethics can be deep and serious. The study materials take note of this in various ways as we have seen. The study also operates with the understanding that differing views, when held in good conscience and in respect for God’s Word, need not divide us; they are not matters of salvation. This is the clear implication of Paul’s argument in Galatians.

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Christians fulfill their vocation diversely and are rich in the variety of the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, they often disagree passionately on the kind of responses they make to social questions. United with Christ and all believers in baptism, Christians welcome and celebrate their diversity. Because they share common convictions of faith, they are free, indeed obligated, to deliberate together on the challenges they face in the world. (*Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*)

This understanding is consistent with one key function of social statements. They are teaching documents designed as a resource and guide for further reflection and discussion among members of the church.

Church members are called upon to give social statements serious consideration as they form their own judgments. In their use as teaching documents, their authority is persuasive, not coercive. Their teaching function builds upon and seeks to nurture the freedom of Christians to decide and act responsibly. Social statements help shape the conscience of Christians by appealing to their faith, moral convictions, and reason. (*Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Statements*)

- ***Reflect on your experience in your discussion group's effort at moral deliberation in this study process?***
- ***Are you comfortable with the conviction that we can disagree on matters of sexuality and sexual ethics without being divided over it? If not, why not?***

Invited to Respond

The study guide has raised a number of important contemporary issues of human sexuality in addition to matters previously addressed in *Journey Together Faithfully Part One: "A Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions."* and *Journey Together Faithfully Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality.* However, it is not possible to cover all the areas of concern. A common feature of social statements is a series of *implementing resolutions*. Such resolutions provide an opportunity to commit the church to the development of additional resources or programs relevant to the concerns of the social statement. This process, then, is an opportunity to direct the church's attention to questions the study and/or the statement was unable to address.

- ***What topics not covered in the study might be important for the implementing resolutions to address? What suggestions might you have as to the sort of action that would be most helpful in addressing those topics?***
- ***If you were a member of the ELCA Task Force on Sexuality, what one or two things might you want to be sure were communicated to the church through a social statement on sexuality?***

Now turn to the Response Form on p. 73, and provide as many answers as possible.

CLOSING

Prayer

O loving God, to turn away from you is to fall, to turn toward you is to rise, and to stand before you is to abide forever. Grant us, dear God, in all our duties your help; in all our uncertainties your guidance; in all our dangers your protection; and in all our sorrows your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, page 87)

Dismissal

Leader: Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

All: Thanks be to God.